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Contents

2022 | Volume 11

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EDITORS

SUBSCRIPTIONS

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Contents

Foreword

This theme issue of the *Canadian-American Theological Review* contains a series of papers originally presented at two panel discussions responding to J. Richard Middleton's book, *Abraham's Silence: The Binding of Isaac, the Suffering of Job, and How to Talk Back to God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021). The papers engage different aspects of the argument of the book.

The papers by Brian Walsh, Susan Haddox, Paul Cho, and Marvin Sweeney were given at a meeting of the Eastern Great Lakes Biblical Society, hosted online by the Methodist Theological School in Ohio, on March 17, 2022. The papers by Brittany Kim, Rachel Adelman, Rebekah Eklund, Carmen Imes, and Shai Held were given at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, held in Denver, Colorado, on November 21, 2022, in a session co-sponsored by the Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures and the National Association of Professors of Hebrew. Marvin Sweeney presented a revised version of his paper at the Denver panel. Besides the diversity of viewpoints in the papers, the panelists differ on how they refer to God, whether (and how) they transliterate Hebrew, and how they cite *Abraham's Silence*. We have allowed the differences to stand.

Framing this theme issue is a particularly lucid book review of *Abraham's Silence* by David Neville, which gives an overview of the book's structure and argument, and thus serves as a fitting introduction to the nine response papers. The final piece is Middleton's response to his respondents.

Christopher Zoccali,
Editor-in-Chief

Trusting Complaint: A Book Review of Middleton, *Abraham's Silence*

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Abstract

J. Richard Middleton's book *Abraham's Silence: The Binding of Isaac, the Suffering of Job, and How to Talk Back to God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021) challenges traditional interpretations of the Aqedah (the binding of Isaac) by questioning whether Abraham's silent attempt to sacrifice Isaac was what God intended. This book review interacts with Middleton's work. It was originally published in *St. Mark's Review*, no. 260 (June/July 2022) 79–84 and is reproduced here with permission of the publisher.

J. Richard Middleton is Professor of Biblical Worldview and Exegesis at Northeastern Seminary in Rochester, New York, and the author of two widely acclaimed books, *The Liberating Image* (Brazos Press, 2005) and *A New Heaven and a New Earth* (Baker Academic, 2014). This most recent book is likely to enhance Middleton's reputation as a careful biblical exegete, responsible scriptural interpreter, and honest theological thinker. Deeply grounded in meticulous scholarship, *Abraham's Silence* also arises from the depths of the author's own experience of the silence of God, as he explains in his introduction.

Ordinarily a reviewer's threefold task is to provide readers with a good sense of the contents of a book, to identify reasons why (or why not) any particular book deserves the attention of readers, and to offer a critical assessment of a book's strengths and weaknesses. In the case of this book, however, that is not such a straightforward task, not only because no less a scholar than Walter Brueggemann has declared that "this [book by Middleton] is interpretation at its most daring and at its best" but also because I have some history with this book, at least for a short time during its gestation. For the first half of October 2016, the author was my neighbour at St Mark's in Canberra, during which time I witnessed him present a seminar paper that was subsequently published as the lead article in *St Mark's Review* (No. 239, March 2017), which in turn served as the basis for chapter 4 in this book. At a personal level, moreover, that fortnight lives on in my memory as

a time of candid and enriching conversation with Middleton, during which time we discovered some shared scholarly interests and mutual interpretive concerns. Ever since I learned of this book project, I have been waiting with bated breath for its publication. The book does not disappoint. Indeed, if anything, the final scope of *Abraham's Silence* took me by surprise. I already knew that, by means of a fresh reading of the book of Job, this book would interrogate Abraham's mute compliance when commanded to sacrifice his son, Isaac. In this respect, the book offers profound food for thought. But *Abraham's Silence* is also a much larger project than an inner-biblical dialogue between traditions associated with Abraham and Job. Integral to Middleton's project is the value of lament psalms for honest engagement with the God of Israel, as well as the significance of speaking back to God in the prophetic tradition stretching back to the figure of Moses. Thus, Middleton ranges across the Tanakh, constructing something along the lines of a biblical theology of complaint or, perhaps better, the biblical basis for a gritty theology of prayer.

The book proceeds in three movements: part 1 explores the existential significance of the biblical tradition of lament, especially in the lament psalms, and the prophetic tradition of intercession—interfering with God's plans to punish Israel; part 2 homes in on Job; and in part 3 Middleton trespasses onto the troubling terrain associated with the Aqedah.

Part 1, entitled "Models of Vigorous Prayer in the Bible," comprises two chapters, the first of which documents the experiential honesty of the Psalms. Focusing on Psalms 30 and 39, the first a thanksgiving psalm and the second a psalm of lament, Middleton provides a helpful analysis of their similarities and differences. From this discussion, one learns much about the Hebrew psalter as whole, but Middleton's purpose is to document the power of honest speech in the Psalms, especially in psalms of lament, which he dubs "supplication with an edge" (p. 35).[1] For Middleton, "Prayers of lament are radical acts of faith and hope because they *refuse*, even in the midst of suffering, to give up on God" (p. 35). As such, moreover, the biblical psalms of lament model a mode of processing pain and suffering, both individual and corporate. One might add that they also facilitate the articulation of traumatic experiences when people are incapable of expressing their pain to God.

In his second chapter, Middleton turns from psalms of lament to a detailed discussion of the story of Moses interceding with God for the people of Israel after their idolatry while Moses communed with God on Mount Sinai. This attentive reading of Exodus 32–34 illumes at various levels, not only shedding light on dialogic details of Moses' intercession with God on behalf of God's people but

1 References to *Abraham's Silence* will be given in parentheses within the text of this article.

also making the exegetical case that God's change of mind in response to Moses' intercession is an expression of God's steadfast character. "This is a God of overflowing love, who desires, and actively invites, vigorous, honest prayer on the part of the human covenant partner" (p. 52). Middleton also shows how the memory of Moses' intercessory audacity echoes down through the Bible, especially in the prophetic tradition but also in later midrashic and rabbinic traditions. Equally interesting is Middleton's brief reflection on Elijah as a prophetic figure who fails to follow in Moses' intercessory footsteps. Looking both backward and forward, chapter 2 ends with these words: "Whether it is lament psalms, prophetic intercession, or Job's passionate protests about his suffering, Scripture affirms in multiple ways that the God of Abraham positively desires vigorous dialogue partners" (p. 63).

As with part 1 of this book, part 2 also comprises two chapters, albeit focused on the book of Job. Chapter 3 is Middleton's reading guide for making sense of the book. Along with an overview of Job, focusing on the poetic human speeches, Middleton encourages readers to see the book as something of a thought experiment in Israelite wisdom, focusing on this perplex: confronted with overwhelming suffering, how should a wise or righteous person respond, especially with respect to God? In his own words, "One way to understand the book of Job … is as a wisdom treatise that raises the question of what constitutes true fear of God—specifically, what sort of speech vis-à-vis God (either to or about God) exhibits such fear" (p. 77). Middleton proceeds to show that once the question of appropriate speech in relation to innocent suffering is identified as the focal theme of Job, the book's literary arrangement and movement are more discernible and meaningful. By surveying the progression of the various human speeches, including Job's, Middleton identifies seven different responses to the experience of suffering, two of which are protest against God and complaint to God.

Middleton's decisive fourth chapter homes in on God's response to Job from the whirlwind—in two speeches. Although these speeches are often read as divine responses that effectively put Job in his place, Middleton carefully and creatively constructs a different interpretation in which God both affirms Job as an active (rather than passive and submissive) conversation partner and approves of his honest complaint. "Although it goes against the grain of much traditional Joban scholarship," Middleton writes, "I am impelled to explore the wild possibility that God's speeches might cohere with the explicit approval Job receives in the epilogue to the book" (pp. 106–107). This exploration is conducted by focusing on God's second speech from the whirlwind (Job 40–41), as well as by addressing the question of the reason for a second speech. Although Middleton makes no claim to resolve definitively the meaning of the book of Job, this is a rich and nuanced discussion, with profound insights into the depths of divine delight in the

created order and also with significant implications for theological anthropology. Chapter 4 is the central chapter of this book, not only numerically but also functionally because it serves as a thematic fulcrum for considering Abraham's silence in Genesis 22.

In his final three chapters, Middleton turns his attention to Genesis 22, in which Abraham silently acquiesces to God's command to sacrifice his son, Isaac. In Jewish tradition, this story is known as the Aqedah or Binding of Isaac. Middleton's subtitle for part 3 of his book, "Unbinding the Aqedah from the Straitjacket of Tradition," signals his concern to "wrestle a blessing" from a challenging biblical text and its longstanding history of reception in Jewish and Christian tradition. He opens chapter 5 by articulating three considerations on the basis of which he recoils from merely accepting Abraham's response—or lack thereof—when instructed by God to sacrifice his son: the first is his own understanding of God, though more might have been said about the bases for his view of God (perhaps something along the lines of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience?); the second is biblical precedent for voicing protest to God, as explored in the first two parts of his book; and the third is Abraham's earlier challenging of God's punitive plans in Genesis 18.

Despite these considerations, Middleton first confronts the warnings of two contemporary scholars, Jon Levenson (Jewish) and Walter Moberly (Christian), against offering negatively critical interpretations of the Aqedah, especially this story's depictions of God and Abraham. Levenson considers that the story of the binding of Isaac reflects a period in Israelite religion when ritual sacrifice of the firstborn was customary, although the end of the story might also reflect a subsequent stage when the life of a firstborn could be spared by substitution. Moreover, both Levenson and Moberly's interpretive engagements with the Aqedah discern continuing relevance in Abraham's attitude of devotion and dedication to God. In Middleton's view, "The attempt by Moberly and Levenson to deflect such criticisms [of God and/or Abraham in Genesis 22] seems to assume that there are only two possible stances toward the Aqedah—either one accepts some version of the traditional interpretation that Abraham is praiseworthy for his obedience or one rejects the authority of the biblical text by standing outside the text and the biblical tradition" (p. 141). By contrast, Middleton's own interpretive engagement with Genesis 22 composes a form of intrabiblical critique—pushing back from a vantage point represented within and informed by the biblical tradition itself. Indeed, he points to a minority pre-modern tradition that problematizes meek acceptance of the Aqedah. "Yet even in the tradition that legitimates protest," according to Middleton, "we do not find any significant questioning of either God's command to Abraham or of Abraham's response to God in Genesis 22" (p. 150). Nevertheless, engaging the rich Jewish tradition of midrash, he suggests that

many midrashim on the Aqedah may be understood as interpretive efforts to grapple with two basic questions: "Why would God ask this terrible thing of his faithful servant? and Why didn't Abraham protest or intercede for his son?" (p. 152).

Chapters 6 and 7 present Middleton's own interpretive wrestling with the text of Genesis 22, a close and careful reading attentive to rhetorical subtleties and narrative dynamics but also informed by intertextual resonances with the book of Job. In the first part of chapter 6, the author initially provides his own fairly literal translation of Genesis 22:1–19, after which he lingers over rhetorical signals easily bypassed on a hasty or superficial reading of this text. Although one might quibble over occasional interpretive judgments—Middleton's view on donkeys, for example, doesn't match my own experience with them—most readers will almost certainly find themselves alerted to dimensions of the story of the binding of Isaac hitherto unnoticed. Patient, attentive exegesis of biblical texts is invariably rewarding—and is certainly so in this case.

After carefully probing "a range of rhetorical signals left by the narrator that complicate a simple reading of the Aqedah" (p. 167), Middleton devotes the second main part of chapter 6 to thematic and intertextual connections between Abraham and Job. Having learned the value of reading biblical texts in counterpoint, so to speak, I consider this chapter to be especially eye-opening. In Middleton's words, "It is fascinating that the book of Job contains numerous thematic and intertextual links with the Aqedah and the wider Abraham story, which suggest that the author of Job was gesturing toward the Abraham story, inviting a comparison (and especially a contrast) between the two patriarchs—one gentile, the other the father of the Jewish nation" (p. 183). For the author, the book of Job composes an "implicit critique" (p. 189) of Abraham's silence when confronted with the divine command to sacrifice his son. More than this, however, time spent with both the book of Job and the Aqedah within the larger framework of the story of Abraham as a whole gradually led Middleton to countenance the possibility that the Aqedah itself might also affirm the value and validity of contesting the command of God. The result of that dawning realization is recorded in chapter 7, entitled "Did Abraham Pass the Test?"

Although the Aqedah is often read as a test of Abraham's loyalty and obedience to God, Middleton's contextual exegetical engagement with Genesis 22 leads him to envisage Abraham's test in different terms. Rather than testing Abraham's obedience, God's command to sacrifice Isaac may be read, according to Middleton, as a probing test of Abraham's insight into the character of God, especially God's mercy and compassion. The author supports this alternative interpretation of the Aqedah by examining several important features of Abraham's story as a whole, including narrative indications of Abraham's greater attachment to Ishmael than to Isaac, signals of Abraham's developing relationship with God, the

crucial story in Genesis 18 of Abraham's intercession on behalf of Sodom, and what may be inferred about the impact upon Isaac (and through Isaac, Jacob!) of the experience of being bound for sacrifice by his father. This is bounteous exegetical and interpretive fare, and Middleton refuses to shy away from textual details that initially seem problematic to his thesis, as articulated in these words: "I am inclined to think that Abraham did not pass the test in Genesis 22. His silent obedience indicated that he did not discern God's merciful character (until the angel called off the sacrifice); and he did not show love for his son by interceding on his behalf" (p. 223).

Middleton concludes his book by focusing on what he describes as "the gritty spirituality of lament" (p. 227). Here he reflects on reasons for the resurgence of interest in lament and identifies several of his own grounds for affirming the value of lament. For Middleton, lament is psychologically and morally important, and his reflections in these respects are noteworthy. In line with the central thrust of his book, however, perhaps the central significance of lament is theological: "The sine qua non [essential condition] of lament is thus a discernment of the character of God as one who desires and welcomes honesty, even abrasive and audacious honesty" (p. 237).

Abraham's Silence is a book to read, to ponder, and to return to, careful attending to the wide range of biblical texts discussed. Middleton characterizes this book as his own lament in Abraham's stead, "my grappling with God about Abraham's resounding silence" (p. 240). Perhaps readers will at times come to see things differently from Middleton himself, but it is difficult to imagine anyone reading this book attentively and coming away without their biblical knowledge deepened, their interpretive horizons stretched, and their theological understanding enhanced.

Taking Abraham to Highway 61

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Abstract

J. Richard Middleton's book *Abraham's Silence: The Binding of Isaac, the Suffering of Job, and How to Talk Back to God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021) challenges traditional interpretations of the Aqedah (the binding of Isaac) by questioning whether Abraham's silent attempt to sacrifice Isaac was what God intended. This article interacts with Middleton's work. It was originally presented at a panel discussion on *Abraham's Silence* at a virtual meeting of the Eastern Great Lakes Biblical Society, March 17, 2022.

Here's how Bob Dylan tells the story:

> God said to Abraham, "Kill me a son"
> Abe say, "Man, you must be puttin' me on"
> God say, "No, "Abe say, "What?"
> God say, "You can do what you want Abe, but
> Next time you see me comin', you better run"
>
> Abe said, "Where do you want this killin' done?"
> God said, "Out on Highway 61"[1]

With a siren whistle announcing danger and crisis, this opening verse of Bob Dylan's "Highway 61 Revisited" gives voice, in beat poet cadences, to the perennial problem of the Aqedah. The binding of Isaac has put us in a bind for millennia.

The difference between Dylan's midrash and the biblical narrative is slight. While the command to offer a son remains, the nature of the son, the response of the father, and outcome are different. Dylan's God calls for a son. Abraham's God is more specific, "Take your son, your only one, whom you love—Isaac" (Gen 22:2 in Middleton's translation, p. 167).[2] But while the biblical Abraham is silent before the request, Dylan's Abraham talks back. Surely God can't be serious.

1 Bob Dylan, "Highway 61 Revisited," on the album *Highway 61 Revisited* (Columbia Records, 1965).

2 References to *Abraham's Silence* will be given in parentheses within the text of this article.

Surely this is a sick joke. "Man, you must be puttin' me on." And when God says, "No," this is no joke, Abe replies, "What?" This is not what we would call a full out argument, nor an appeal to God's better judgement, or indeed an argument based on the character of God, or the trajectory of this God/Abraham narrative, but there is at least some push back.

When God replies, "You can do what you want, Abe, but, 'Next time you see me comin' you better run,'" Abraham, called to bind his son, is himself in a bind. And so he appears to acquiesce. "Where you want this killing done?" "Out on Highway 61." And Dylan leaves the story hanging there. All through the song the invitation is to Highway 61, and while no one in the song ever goes there, it is consistently a site of murder, sorrow, betrayal, even of a third world war. This is the blues highway, where Robert Johnson made his bargain with the Devil; the route up the Mississippi from New Orleans to Chicago for African American migration, and from Duluth to the blues for Bob Dylan.

While the biblical Abraham takes the knife and the kindling and climbs that mountain with his son, Dylan doesn't take the story to a killing on the highway. But even in his weak protest, Dylan's Abraham comes to know that this story is on its way to the blues, on its way to lament, on its way to vigorous, abrasive prayer.

Maybe Richard Middleton's *Abraham's Silence* can be interpreted as an invitation to Highway 61, in all of its sadness and suffering, while also an invitation to the honesty, sorrow, and hope offered by the blues. Richard tells us that the exegetical exploration of this book "has a definite theological—even pastoral—aim" (p. 9). I want to attend to the theological and pastoral implications of this book, but I want to get there through some hermeneutical reflections.[3]

Early in the book, Richard makes the bold hermeneutical claim that his reading will challenge the standard opinion of Abraham's exemplary response to God, "by trying to understand the story *on its own terms*, rather than from an extrinsic perspective" (p. 12). This re-reading of the Aqedah is exegesis, not ideological criticism. Anticipating the important critique of Moberly and Levenson, Richard insists that he is not simply imposing his 21st century moral sensibilities on to a revered and very ancient text. This is not a hermeneutics of suspicion, nor is it a reading "against the grain" of the text (p. 191), even if it is against the grain of the dominant Jewish and Christian interpretive traditions.

We need to be clear, however, that the co-author of *Truth is Stranger than it Used to be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age*, is not promoting an objectivistic reading from nowhere.[4] Later in *Abraham's Silence* Richard acknowledges that

3 I have also written a separate review of this book: "Abraham's Silence Revisited," *Christian Courier* (April 27, 2022).

4 J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth is Stranger than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995).

"no one comes to any text traditionless. Every reader is shaped by a whole series of prior readings and assumptions—and I am certainly no different" (p. 223). And to come totally clean on the contextuality of his own interpretation, Richard is candid about reading from the perspective of pain, loss, doubt, and struggle that is both deeply personal, and emerges out of his own pastoral experiences. It seems to me that the corollary to Liberation Theology's preferential option for the poor is what I would call the hermeneutical and epistemological privileging of suffering, precisely because "radical sensitivity to suffering pervades the biblical narrative."[5] Richard rightly assumes that the experience of suffering—both one's own and that of others—is not extrinsic to a reading of the Aqedah but intrinsic to any faithful reading.

No wonder the book begins with "Models of Vigorous Prayer in the Bible." No wonder we are invited into hearing the abrasive voice from the jagged edge. No wonder we are called to pay attention to Moses's loyal opposition and stunning boldness of argument with Yahweh on Sinai. Voiced pain and honest argument with the covenantal God are the hermeneutical entry, the access point, into biblical faith in general, and the Aqedah in particular. Richard writes: "I believe that the lament psalms provide an *alternative* protocol for addressing suffering, a protocol that is both existentially healing and deeply rooted in the redemptive sweep of the biblical narrative" (p. 20).

The redemptive sweep of the biblical narrative. Before we can attend to the rhetorical clues in both the Abraham narrative as a whole, and Genesis 22 in particular, we need to come to the Aqedah from the perspective of the redemptive sweep of the biblical narrative. This is a crucial hermeneutical claim. We can't even begin to ask questions of the Aqedah without placing this story within the context of the broader scope of the biblical narrative. Richard is engaging in a biblical theology that assumes certain things about the shape of the biblical metanarrative.

While not expounding that metanarrative in any detail in this book, he nonetheless will place his reading of the Aqedah in the context of the lament psalms, Moses's loyal opposition on Sinai, and, crucially, a reading of Job that rejects a narrowly act-consequence cosmology with its micromanaging god, in favor of a creational wisdom in which a deeply engaged God both delights in the uncontrollable freedom of creation and invites the human creature into vigorous covenantal dialogue.

So I come back to the question of reading the story of the Aqedah "on its own terms." What exactly is being claimed here?

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5 Middleton and Walsh, *Truth is Stranger than It Used to Be*, 87.

That the story provides its own rhetorical clues that suggest that not all is right here? Yes.

That Abraham's silence in Genesis 22 is out of step with his voiced questions, and even argument, earlier in the narrative? Undoubtedly.

That the testing of Job, together with his honest protest in the face of his suffering, might well be a counter-testimony to Abraham's silence in the face of his own testing, and therefore compels us to reconsider Abraham's so-called exemplary obedience in Genesis 22? I'm convinced.

That both the psalms of lament and the intercessions of Moses provide us with an intratextual context for raising new questions about the Aqedah? Yes.

All of these, Richard is arguing, play a crucial role in reading this story "on its own terms." He summarizes his point well: "Whether it is lament psalms, prophetic intercession, or Job's passionate protests about his suffering, Scripture affirms in multiple ways that the God of Abraham positively desires vigorous dialogue partners" (p. 63). But when Abraham should have been most vigorous, he was silent. In Genesis 22, the relational arc of question and response, doubt and answer that has characterized the Abraham narrative comes to a crushing halt. And so Richard argues that "Abraham was being tested not for his unquestioning obedience (that is not something that God wants) but rather for his *discernment of God's character*" (p. 197).

Yes, the issue is trust in God, but trust is not blind obedience. "Rather, trust in God requires knowledge or discernment of what sort of God this is" (p. 197). Abraham, Richard argues, reduced God to one of the pagan deities who required child sacrifice, rather than Yahweh of mercy, love and covenantal promise. And one wonders whether it is precisely this covenantal Yahweh who is eclipsed in the traditional reading of the Aqedah. Yahweh is traded in for a god of eternal immutability and sovereign omnipotence who demands absolute and uncompromising obedience. Child sacrifice will never be far behind.

No exegesis is traditionless, and readers of *Abraham's Silence* should know that its author stands in a tradition that refuses to be bound by the binary categories of form/matter, eternal/temporal, immutable/mutable, and soul/body. The Hellenistic categories that have held the church captive, the tradition of Neoplatonism that has bound both Christian and Jewish exegesis, leave us with a God with whom there can be no argument. Throughout his career, Richard has passionately argued that one can only discern rightly the God of biblical faith if one is set free from the straightjacket of such extrinsic philosophical perspectives.

The God that Richard discerns in the sweep of redemptive narrative, the God before whom laments can be raised, arguments mounted, protest cried, is a God in the fray of human history, a God who can be held to account by God's covenantal partners, a God who will repent, change, mutate (if you will), if that is what

covenantal faithfulness requires. That is part of the radical theological import of *Abraham's Silence*. And it is here that this book profoundly and beautifully serves a decidedly pastoral purpose.

I confess that reading Richard's interpretation of Job produced the kind of jaw-dropping, spiritually liberating "aha" moment that he and I have both seen in the lives of students over the years. We can both bear witness to how lives were radically changed, set free for deeper discipleship, through a reading of God's repentance in the dialogue with Moses on Sinai.

Abraham's Silence is a book that unbinds us from the straightjacket of the traditional interpretations of the binding of Isaac. And by unbinding us on Genesis 22, Middleton continues to offer readings of Scripture that fulfill the pastoral calling of the biblical scholar, to open the text, to invite folks into a story of healing and hope, and to give permission to the expression of pain and doubt.

At the end of his mostly positive review of *Abraham's Silence* Stephen Kamm raises the pastoral significance of the Aqedah: ". . . even if [Middleton's] argument is compelling, it may not be entirely convincing if it requires discarding Abraham as a companion for people of faith today as they see him trudging alone up a dusty hill, his faith an agony of doubt, trusting in God's goodness when obedience seems absurd, hoping that, in the end, a different sacrifice will save him."[6]

Genesis 22 offers no evidence of Abraham's agony, nor of a hope that a different sacrifice might be provided, and Abraham certainly wasn't alone (remember Isaac? He was there!). Kamm's question is nonetheless important. If the Abraham of the dominant tradition, the Abraham who is silent, the Abraham of uncompromising obedience, can no longer be a companion for people of faith, then how does the Abraham we meet in Richard's book accompany us? What do we do with a father like Abraham?

The Abraham narrative does not offer us an archetypal hero, or a mythical figure of purity and holiness, but a flawed, broken, duplicitous father of a broken and deeply dysfunctional family. Abraham's silence is not a model for us to follow, but an invitation to gird up our loins (to recall Job) and speak. We are called to discern better than Abraham in Genesis 22. We are called out of this story, set in the redemptive sweep of Scripture, attending to its own rhetorical clues, to a covenantal relationship of sometimes harsh and abrasive dialogue.

Moreover, given the dysfunctionality, brokenness, harm, trauma, and deceit of our own family stories, of our own faith traditions and institutions, we can dare to trust that this covenant God can bring blessing out of a cursed past, can bring forth healing out of deep brokenness, and will accompany us in our lament, especially when it takes us to Highway 61.

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6 Stephen Kamm, review of *Abraham's Silence,* by Richard Middleton, *The Englewood Review of Books* (March 3, 2022): https://englewoodreview.org/richard-middleton-abrahams-silence-feature-review/.

A Masculinity Studies Perspective on *Abraham's Silence*

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Abstract

J. Richard Middleton's book *Abraham's Silence: The Binding of Isaac, the Suffering of Job, and How to Talk Back to God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021) challenges traditional interpretations of the Aqedah (the binding of Isaac) by questioning whether Abraham's silent attempt to sacrifice Isaac was what God intended. This article interacts with Middleton's work. It was originally presented at a panel discussion on *Abraham's Silence* at a virtual meeting of the Eastern Great Lakes Biblical Society, March 17, 2022.

Abraham's Silence not only provides an insightful perspective on the nature of silence, lament, and dialogue throughout the Bible, but it is also clearly written in an engaging personal style that does not water down the academic depth. While there are many productive angles to explore with this fascinating study, I want to put some of the themes related to appropriate speech and discernment in conversation with a discussion of Abraham's masculinity, which I have explored in a couple of prior papers.

Masculinity is a complex concept comprising several culturally contextual characteristics. I have found that a cluster of four characteristics can provide a reasonably well-balanced analysis of masculinity in many of the Hebrew Bible texts, especially those in Genesis. These characteristics include potency, protection, honor, and persuasiveness.[1] In this response I will focus on the aspect of persuasiveness and some of the ways it interweaves with protection and honor. Persuasiveness is the ability of a man to draw others to his cause, based not only on words but on the characteristics of honor, which include hospitality, honesty, integrity, and agency, as well as demonstrated wisdom. While there is often a tension in the texts between the values of masculinity in the culture at large and

1 See Susan E. Haddox, "Favoured Sons and Subordinate Masculinities," in Ovidiu Creangă, ed., *Men and Masculinities in the Hebrew Bible and Beyond*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2010), 2–19.

the imperative in the biblical texts for the people to submit to God, Middleton's explication of vigorous prayer and dialogue provides a way to mediate these tensions and define an appropriate masculine position with respect to God.

One of the significant contributions of Middleton's work is the idea that both Job and Abraham, or "Jobraham," explore the issue of appropriate speech. In a general sense, appropriate speech demonstrates components of wisdom and honor. A person must discern the nature of the relationship, the status of the parties involved in dialogue, the context of the situation, and the required response. In the case of speech with God, the issues of status and relationship are ratcheted up a notch. Middleton traces some interpretive traditions that hold that the only appropriate speech to God is passive acceptance. Yet he asserts that the Bible models several kinds of speech before God that are appropriate, with some reflecting a more robust relationship with God and a clearer discernment of God's character and identity.

Middleton argues that a major purpose of the book of Job is to explore the appropriateness of different types of speech. I might quibble with his dismissal of the idea that Job's purpose is to address theodicy. After all, addressing theodicy does not require solving the problem, which I agree it does not do. Nevertheless, he makes a persuasive case that the issue of speech is a central theme. Within Job, Middleton identifies the following as types of appropriate speech: blessing God, lamenting about God, and lamenting to God, the latter of which is the most appropriate in the circumstances. Inappropriate speech includes that of the friends who defend God at the expense of the victim and cursing God, as suggested by Job's wife.

Although it is only two verses, the exchange between Job and his wife is revealing. The wife says, "Are you still maintaining your integrity? Curse God and die," following the usual assumption that the literal wording "bless God" is a euphemism. While some scholars have considered the implications of understanding her words as literal, perhaps expressing comfort to Job and wishing his suffering to end, based on Job's response, most assume the euphemism.[2] Middleton agrees, noting that Job identifies the wife's suggestion as that of a *nebaloth* or fool, the opposite of appropriate speech. I am also interested in her use of the word "integrity," which reflects on his sense of honor. This word is only used once outside of Job in the biblical texts, in Proverbs, referring to the qualities of the upright. Job uses it a few times to refer to his innocence in the face of unjust suffering. God uses it in Job 2:3 when telling ha-Satan that Job has persisted in his integrity despite God having been incited to destroy him for no reason. Innocence and integrity appear to be components of honor and honesty and thus of

2 For a positive reading of the wife, see C.L. Seow, "Job's Wife," in Linda Day and Carolyn Pressler, eds., *Engaging the Bible in a Gendered World* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 141–50.

masculinity. Job lost masculine status by not being able to protect his children, his wealth, or his body, but he does have his integrity. His rejection of his wife's advice thus acts a defense of his threatened masculinity through avoiding inappropriate speech, which neither curses God nor condemns himself.

Although he does not follow his wife's advice and curse God directly, her words seem to prompt him to explore the limits of appropriate speech. When he next opens his mouth, he curses the day of his birth and wishes he were dead. Her words perhaps stir him into lament, moving from a silent to a vocal defense of his integrity. His friends do not think that his words are appropriate speech and chastise him. They instead encourage repentance—pro forma repentance if necessary, since they argue that next to God no humans are innocent. Job again insists on his integrity and his right to speak before God, even though he does not think God will show up to be held to account. But God does show up.

Middleton offers a refreshing and insightful interpretation of God's speeches. While there has been considerable debate about the nature of Job's responses to God's speeches, God's speeches themselves have generally been understood according to the "bullying Job" model, or at least to be emphasizing God's power. Even though God's praise of Job's speech in the epilogue indicates to me that God approves of his standing up for his innocence in the face of his friends, I have had difficulty reconciling that praise with the divine speeches, other than saying they redirect Job to other questions and concerns than himself. I find compelling Middleton's suggestion that the first speech provides a corrective to Job's desire to uncreate the world, as well as showing God's care but not micromanagement of creation. Still, all the second person questions give the speech a harsh tone. It is perhaps not surprising that Job backs down, even if it is into silence rather than recanting. Middleton interprets the second speech as inviting Job back into dialogue, encouraging him to be like Leviathan and Behemoth with their unrestrained mouths. In this way God marks off an appropriate masculinity for Job. He explicitly tells Job to gird his loins like a man—here the word is *geber* or mighty man or warrior. He is to speak up and declare to God. He is to be masculine but not dominant; lower than God but not debased by God. Vigorous speech is lauded. In the end the other elements of Job's masculinity are restored—honor, progeny, provision for and protection of others, including his friends.

Middleton then compares Job's speech with that of Abraham, who is found to be lacking. Likewise, I have noted in previous studies that Abraham's masculinity is conflicted.[3] At the beginning of his story, he shows strong masculine characteristics in all of the elements except for producing progeny. As he gains offspring, he gives up other aspects of masculinity. One of these aspects is a loss of

3 Susan E. Haddox, "The Desolation of Abraham: Go from Your Kindred," in *Conversations with the Biblical World* 40 (2020) 1–19.

persuasiveness. In Middleton's analysis, Abraham's various speaking encounters with God are an exercise in discerning God's character. In Gen 15 Abram confronts God with his lack of offspring and God promises him progeny that will number as the stars. Middleton notes that God responds honestly and openly to Abram's questions and doubts. When God speaks again to Abraham in Gen 17, promising offspring through Sarah, God responds to his request for Ishmael to find favor in his sight. Although Ishmael is not the primary heir, God promises a good future for him as well. Such receptiveness should encourage Abraham's speech. In Gen 18 Abraham speaks little in the scene with God and the two angels, but God responds to Sarah's protest, not letting her feign silence—her laughter is acknowledged, if questioned, and her perspective sought, if not offered.

Finally at the end of the chapter, Abraham has his most extensive dialogue with God. Abraham significantly avoids voicing the request that most directly concerns him. In arguing for the possible innocents in Sodom, Abraham never mentions his desire to protect his nephew Lot. He bargains God down from saving Sodom for the sake of fifty righteous people to ten. As Middleton observes, Abraham is not actually bargaining with God, because God never makes a counter-offer. Instead, God just agrees to whatever number Abraham names, just as he had agreed to Abraham's previous requests. With no resistance to him, Middleton raises the question of why Abraham stopped at ten. He proposes that God wanted him to ask for more, to recognize the mercy in God's character.

Abraham is persuasive here but stops short of what he could have done. He has often acted as a protector of Lot in the past, but here gives up that role, instead keeping his request on a more general ethical level, not mentioning Lot's name. Yet God responds to the unasked request and saves Lot anyway. It is not clear that Abraham knows this, however, because he arises early in the morning and sees only the smoking plain. It seems a tragic case of miscommunication. Middleton notes that Abraham did not seem to discern God's character sufficiently from the episode, but it is also true that though God saved Lot because he remembered Abraham, he forgot to tell Abraham about it.

The next time Abraham talks to God in Gen 21 after Sarah orders him to send Ishmael away, he is upset, but again he does not make a direct request. The text merely says he was distressed on account of Ishmael. God supports Sarah's position, but comforts Abraham and reaffirms the promise of a future for Ishmael. Abraham then casts out Hagar and Ishmael, providing his son with minimal provisions, leaving his life at risk. Finally in Gen 22, Abraham hardly speaks at all. He only answers "Here I am" to God's call to him at the beginning, when God tells him to sacrifice Isaac. He does not protest vigorously, as he had for Sodom, though not directly for Lot, nor express distress, as he had for Ishmael, though again stopping short of asking for him to be saved, but instead just silently goes

about obeying God. Middleton points out the repetition of the introduction of divine speech, "then God said," and proposes this as a pause expecting a response from Abraham that was not there. Abraham's persuasiveness decreases with each encounter with God because he does not employ it. As he speaks less, he protects his family less, giving up his masculine responsibilities. God is left to save Lot, to rescue Ishmael in the wilderness, and finally to stop Abraham from killing Isaac.

Middleton argues that because Abraham did not correctly discern God's character in his previous interactions, especially the destruction of Sodom in Gen 18-19, he retreats into an understanding of a god who must be obeyed without question and does not plead for Isaac. In this process, Abraham's masculinity is reduced. He gives up his protective role, his agency, and his persuasive voice. His lack of discernment has led him to blind faith and obedience. Middleton notes that obedience is not a bad thing—God acknowledges that Abraham fears God and is willing to give God everything—but it is not the full relationship that God most wanted. God wanted a dialogue partner, a man who stands up for the well-being of the innocent and the cause of justice. (As the mini-dialogue with Sarah suggests, God also wants such woman partners.) God invites Abraham into a faithful masculinity, not competing with God or dominating others, but full of wisdom and discernment, a benefactor of others, speaking persuasively with people and with God. Abraham did not quite pass the test, but God continued to extend mercy, multiplying his offspring to keep trying in the future. Israel, after all, means wrestling with God. *Abraham's Silence* embodies its central theme of vigorous speech, bringing a fresh perspective to the Akedah, Job, and lament. I have enjoyed the opportunity to engage in dialogue with it.

Lament, Job, and the Aqedah: A Critical Response to Middleton, *Abraham's Silence*

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Abstract

J. Richard Middleton's book *Abraham's Silence: The Binding of Isaac, the Suffering of Job, and How to Talk Back to God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021) challenges traditional interpretations of the Aqedah (the binding of Isaac) by questioning whether Abraham's silent attempt to sacrifice Isaac was what God intended. This article interacts with Middleton's work. It was originally presented at a panel discussion on *Abraham's Silence* at a virtual meeting of the Eastern Great Lakes Biblical Society, March 17, 2022.

J. Richard Middleton wrote *Abraham's Silence* "to help people of faith recover the value of lament prayer as a way to process our pain (and the pain of the world) with the God of heaven and earth" (p. 9).[1] Middleton's book and the biblical traditions he points to teach us lessons fit for times past and present, that it is good and right to lament and protest "genuine evil" before God. If for this reason alone, I hope and trust that *Abraham's Silence* will be widely read and appreciated by "people of faith" and others.

It would not be difficult for me to continue in a mode of gratitude and praise, especially since I've written in agreement on several passages and positions Middleton takes up in the book. However, it would be unworthy of the author and his work and unbecoming of the review genre for me to do so. Thus, so as to advance the conversation and sharpen our understanding of the important topics raised *Abraham's Silence*, I would like to devote the remainder of the review to make three points thematized around the motif of praise.

In Praise of Lament *In Se*

The first point is a critique of the drift toward narrativization of lament that I see in the book. I agree with the book's claim that engaging in lament can have salutary

1 References to *Abraham's Silence* will be given in parentheses within the text of this article.

effects. For example, I agree that lament can begin to reawaken and deepen one's own faith (p. 4), that lament can lead "to a fresh discernment of the character of God" (pp. 237–38), and that lament "can be the beginning of a journey of ethical transformation" that steers us clear of both the Scylla of ethical paralysis and despair and the Charybdis of anger and violence (p. 239). To boot, the psalmic lament, which Middleton characterizes as "half of a thanksgiving genre" (p. 28), and the entire Psalter, which moves from the predominance of lament in the beginning to praise at the end, provide small and large-scale biblical models in which lament moves toward praise. That is, there are sound exegetical, psychological, and theological reasons to agree with Middleton's narrativization of lament as "the hinge—even the fulcrum—between bondage and deliverance" (36, cf. 39) and between suffering and healing.

However, I would be remiss not to lodge my protest that this is not always the case, that lament does not necessarily move us toward redemption—not in the Bible, not in the lived realities of Jews and Christians, nor in lived experience generally. There is a need to safeguard lament not only as a mode of expression but as a mode of being, not only as a bridge from despair to hope but also a place, perhaps even a sacred space, in itself.

Shelley Rambo, in meditating on a sermon by Hans Urs von Balthasar, argues for the recovery of the theological profundity of Holy Saturday in which "death is final" and when death "is not experienced as some segue into life or as a temporary pause in a master plan."[2] With Rambo, I believe that there is a need to resist the temptation to narrativize the experience of evil (and so also its expression) within a comedic structure of fall, despair, and recovery and to acknowledge that "the powerful reality of death as human beings experience it . . . [may be] a closing with no hope of reopening . . . a total end."[3]

Balthasar and Rambo operate within a Christian framework in which Holy Saturday exists between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Thus, they cannot altogether avoid the drift toward narrativization. In *Abraham's Silence*, Middleton too identifies multiple biblical stories with a U-shaped plot of fall and redemption, in which he locates and thus narrativizes lament (pp. 36–39). However, the narrativization of laments as "the hinge—even the fulcrum—between bondage and deliverance" structurally parallels explanations of evil as the necessary step before the coming of a greater good. Middleton argues against the greater good explanation of evil (pp. 20–26). The narrativization of lament within a comedic structure of fall and recovery warrants a similar critique.

2 Shelley Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 73.

3 Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 73.

Does God Praise Job?

I would like to begin the discussion of Job by noting that I have written in agreement with key positions that Middleton defends in his book. I agree that God showing up to address Job confers honor on Job (p. 128) but add that God showing up and not condemning Job is tantamount to God declaring Job righteous, just as Job has claimed he is.[4] I also agree that, in the first divine speech, "God is correcting Job's theology, his assumptions about . . . the world . . . and the nature of God's relationship to that world" (p. 118) and that, in the second speech, God is affirming that Job is "more powerful than he thinks" in saying that God made Behemoth "as I made you[, O Job]" (Job 40:15) (p. 112).[5] Finally, I also agree that God's characterization of what Job said to his friends as "what is right [נכונה]" is an important interpretive datum (Job 42:8).[6] That is, I agree with Middleton that God thinks highly of Job, and so also of humanity, and lets that be known. That said, I find Middleton's central argument that God praises Job in the divine speeches and seeks to make of Job "a worthy conversation partner" unconvincing.

In the chapter entitled "Does God Come to Bury Job or to Praise Him?" Middleton argues that "God . . . has unintentionally overpowered Job" into silence with the first speech and that, in the second, God seeks to encourage Job to speak up because what God desires is a "worthy dialogue partner" (pp. 120–21).

Now, if one thinks that the first divine speech is overwhelming and browbeats Job into terrified silence (as Middleton and others argue), I find it difficult to see how the second is any less so. Yes, God expresses divine delight concerning the mythic creatures, Behemoth and Leviathan, and almost under his breathe likens Job to them. But the overall rhetorical force, it seems to me, is meant to humble (though not necessarily to humiliate) Job. The point of the speech is that Job lacks the sufficient power to subdue the mythic creatures. The only one who can is God, who nevertheless chooses not to.

Furthermore, even if one were to agree that God means to encourage Job to speak up and engage in more honest talk in the second divine speech, Job's second response to God can hardly be characterized as the speech of a "worthy dialogue partner" to God, especially in comparison to the bold daring of Job's dialogue with his friends. If God meant for his second speech to encourage and embolden Job, we must conclude that God fails. For Job does not revel in his newly revealed likeness to Behemoth but rather gives expressions to the limits of his wisdom: "I

4 Paul K.-K. Cho, "Job the Penitent: Whether and Why Job Repents (Job 42:6)," in *Landscapes of Korean/Korean-American Biblical Interpretation*, International Voices in Biblical Studies 10, ed. by John Ahn (Atlanta: SBL, 2019), 145–74.

5 Paul K.-K. Cho, "'I Have Become a Brother of Jackals': Evolutionary Psychology and Suicide in the Book of Job," *Biblical Interpretation* 27 (2019) 208–34.

6 Cho, "Job the Penitent."

have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know" (Job 42:3). Instead of entering into dialogue with God, Job bows out by repenting of what he has said about "dust and ashes," that is, about humanity (Job 42:6; cf. Gen. 18:27).

In conclusion, I agree that God does not come to bury Job. But neither does God come to praise Job, at least not in the divine speeches out of whirlwind. Rather, God comes to lead Job toward a more correct apprehension of God, creation, and Job's relationship to both. And correct understanding for Job is two sided. On the one hand, God reveals to Job the divine delight in all creation, including Job. God lets it be known that creation is more beautiful and more full of life than Job can imagine after his traumatic experiences. On the other hand, God teaches Job that humanity is not the center of the world and that Job is not the pinnacle of creation. That is, God rebukes Job for his hubristic estimation of himself and firmly, but also lovingly, leads Job toward repentance.[7]

This critique modifies but does not argue against Middleton's main point that "the book of Job . . . models an alternative to silent obedience in the face of terrible circumstances" (p. 189). God calls "right" all of Job's laments, complaints, protests, and calls for explanation and justice—but God also calls Job to account for his hubris.

Does God Not Praise Abraham?

My final point is hermeneutical and concerns the book's highest and also most controversial achievement. Middleton argues that the God, the angels, and the narrator of Genesis 22 disapprove of Abraham's unquestioning and silent obedience of God's command to sacrifice his son, his only son, Isaac, whom he loves and attempts to do so while staying "close to the text itself," that is, by offering not a midrash but a peshat (p. 165). And one of the pleasures of reading *Abraham's Silence* are the many learned, creative, and often insightful interpretations of the finer details of the Aqedah and the surrounding narratives.

Now, at the same time Middleton pursues a close reading of the text, he also takes advantage of what Erich Auerbach memorably called the fraught background of Genesis 22 (p. 166). That is, while attentive to the givens of the text, Middleton also reconstructs out of the silences of the text interpretive bricks that inevitably build toward his conclusion that Abraham fails the test because he does not protest God's "command [to sacrifice Isaac] and intercede for his son's life" (p. 206). (The thesis that Abraham fails the test requires the reinterpretation of the test, not as a test of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac, but of Abraham's ability to discern the character of God as precisely a God who would not require

7 Cho, "Job the Penitent."

such a sacrifice [pp. 204–206].) And the reason that I cannot agree with Middleton that Abraham fails the text in Genesis 22 is that, contrary to Middleton's rhetorical promises, the reading of the biblical text that Middleton provides is more a midrash than a peshat.

Erich Auerbach draws our attention to the fraught background of Genesis to argue that the unexpressed background gives the biblical narrative a palpable unity and its characters an admirable depth superior to those of Homeric epics.[8] That is to say, the unexpressed, submerged background, for Auerbach, belonged to Abraham and his time in an intimate and organic manner—so that the foregrounded text and the fraught background together present to the reader a unified reality.[9] The world the biblical text expresses and equally what it leaves unexpressed make up an indivisible whole. The hermeneutic implied by Auerbach's assessment of the representation of reality in biblical narratives is not one that is hostile to interpretive play but also one that demands that we take seriously the unity of the text and its world and their essential belonging to each other.

Unfortunately, what often happens when we confront the unexpressed and often mysterious depth of biblical literature, contrary to what Auerbach gestures toward, is that we empty the fraught background, then stuff it with images and meaning taken from our more familiar world. This imposition of the reader and his world on the text effectively severs the text from its own background and transplants it in alien soil. And the result of such imposition and transposition is the transformation of the alienation of the text from itself, for, as hermeneuts have taught us, context matters in the interpretation of texts.

Middleton set out to offer "an intrinsic reading" of the Aqedah with reference to the charge by scholars like Jon D. Levenson and Walter Moberly to avoid readings that "tend to be arbitrary and . . . based on modern assumptions or predilections of the interpreter, which are simply juxtaposed with the ancient text" (pp. 8, 191). However, against his own stated commitment to a peshat reading of Genesis 22, what Middleton ultimately offers is a midrash. It is a creative and daring midrash that builds on neglected aspects of the rich history of interpretation. Nevertheless, Middleton's interpretation is more a reading of the issues and concerns of the contemporary world into the unexpressed background of the Aqedah than a wrestling with the received text and its fraught and difficult background.

In conclusion, I want to thank Middleton once again for gifting communities of learning and of faith a provocative reading of important biblical texts and for reminding us once again of the vital importance of being earnest, especially when it comes to expressions of grief and sorrow that accompany human existence.

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8 Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 12.

9 Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 15.

Talking Back with J. Richard Middleton after the Shoah: A Review of Middleton's *Abraham's Silence*

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Abstract

J. Richard Middleton's book *Abraham's Silence: The Binding of Isaac, the Suffering of Job, and How to Talk Back to God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021) challenges traditional interpretations of the Aqedah (the binding of Isaac) by questioning whether Abraham's silent attempt to sacrifice Isaac was what God intended. This article interacts with Middleton's work. It was originally presented at a panel discussion on *Abraham's Silence* at a virtual meeting of the Eastern Great Lakes Biblical Society, March 17, 2022. A revised version was presented at a panel discussion on *Abraham's Silence* at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in Denver, Colorado, November 21, 2022.

One of the reasons that I published my 2008 study, *Reading the Hebrew Bible after the Shoah: Engaging Holocaust Theology*, was because the field of biblical theology had taken little notice of the theological significance of the Shoah or Holocaust.[1] There were many studies on the Shoah in modern Jewish thought and some in modern Christian thought, but very few biblical scholars, whether Jewish or Christian, had spent much time on asking what the German genocide against the Jews meant for the interpretation of the Bible. My own *Doktor GrossVater*, Gerhard von Rad, could say practically nothing about the Book of Esther, a book, read in synagogue on Purim, that took up the issue of a government's attempt to exterminate its Jewish population, because G-d is not mentioned in the Hebrew form of the book.[2]

As a Jewish biblical theologian, I felt compelled to bring this issue to the

1 Marvin A. Sweeney, *Reading the Hebrew Bible after the Shoah: Engaging Holocaust Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008).

2 In the two volumes of Gerhard von Rad's *Old Testament Theology*, he cited Esther only once (in a footnote). See von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1, trans. D. M. G. Stalker (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 92 n. 19.

attention of both Jewish and Christian biblical scholars, and Fortress, a well-respected Lutheran publishing arm, appeared to be one of the best places to reach that audience. Fortunately, the situation is now changing as many biblical scholars are asking questions about how to consider the fact that G-d has been known to hide the divine face in times of crisis and that the person best able to act in G-d's absence might be a non-observant Jewish girl.[3]

J. Richard Middleton is a Christian biblical theologian who has recognized that the Shoah just might be an important—if not crucial—issue in Christian biblical theology, and that the question of silence, both on the part of Abraham and on the part of religious communities in general, might be a problem. Coming from a conservative Christian background, his study on *Abraham's Silence: The Binding of Isaac, the Suffering of Job, and How to Talk Back to G-d*, appropriately challenges long-held notions concerning the role of the Bible as the infallible word of G-d that demands the unquestioning acceptance by its human audience of its divinely-based authority and obedience to its teachings. This is not to say that Middleton has become an atheist or that he is unwilling to listen to what the Bible has to say. Rather, he is a faithful Christian interpreter, who has learned to listen to what the Bible actually says and who is prepared to act upon its teachings. Furthermore, he has learned to listen to Jewish teachings, and he does not allow the New Testament to silence—or trump—the Old Testament as many Christian interpreters are wont to do.

Middleton recognizes that one major teaching is that the Bible demands that its human audience "talk back," a term employed by Carleen R. Mandolfo in her penetrating study of the book of Lamentations,[4] which is read in synagogue on Tisha b'Av. Middleton's understanding of the term, "talk back," is that it calls for "vigorous dialogue" with G-d and with the Bible, and that the appearance of Abraham's silence, when he is called upon by G-d to sacrifice his own son, Isaac, demands our close attention and response.

Middleton opens his study by asking the question, "Does Abraham's Silence Matter?" As one might guess, he thinks it does. He finds Abraham's silence to be puzzling, as any parent of a child whom G-d might ask to kill would certainly feel. But he always notes the role that unquestioning silence so often plays in religious contexts in which believers assume that it is their role to remain silent and accept suffering as an obligation of one's faith and fealty to G-d.[5] But he notes that when

3 Sweeney, *Reading the Hebrew Bible after the Shoah*, 219–22; idem, *Tanak: A Theological and Critical Introduction to the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 441–44.

4 Carleen R. Mandolfo, *Daughter Zion Talks Back to the Prophets: A Dialogic Theology of the Book of Lamentations*, Semeia Studies 58 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007).

5 Amos N. Guiora, *The Crime of Complicity: The Bystander in the Holocaust* (Chicago: Ankerwycke, 2017) discusses the legal implications of silence in the face of crime and its application to the Shoah.

one reads the Bible, one finds a very different message, such as that articulated in the laments of the book of Psalms. Fully one third of the Psalms are laments, which portray human worshippers posing existential questions and statements to G-d. Psalm 88, for example charges, "You have put me in the depths of the Pit, in regions dark and deep. Your wrath lies heavy upon me, and you overwhelm me with all your waves. You have caused my companions to shun me; you have made me a thing of horror to them" (Ps 88:6–8). When one sees statements like this in the Psalms, and reads statements from Job asking G-d why he has been condemned to suffer, Middleton observes that Abraham's silence before G-d when asked to sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac, makes little sense. It is not Abraham's role to suffer in silence any more than it is Isaac's role to die in silence. Instead, Psalms and Job call upon the believer to say something and to examine the issue in dialogue with G-d and with other human beings in an attempt to understand what G-d is trying to do when imposing suffering upon us. Such a scenario calls for a theology of prayer in which humans will address G-d in times of suffering and release Genesis 22, the Aqedah or Binding of Isaac, from its theological straitjacket.

Part 1 of his study, "Voices from the Ragged Edge," examines models of vigorous prayer in the Bible, especially in the Psalms of Lament and the Intercessory Prayers and actions of the Prophets. In a tradition that believes in a loving and sovereign G-d, the reality of human suffering poses a fundamental problem in understanding G-d. Middleton observes that an important attempt to address this issue is the contention that human suffering serves a greater good or some divine purpose. He cites C. S. Lewis's change of mind about this argument, when he recognized that pain can become so absolutely desperate that the door slammed in the face of the one suffering becomes absolutely unacceptable. Lewis does not provide an example, at least not in Middleton's quotation from his work, but the Shoah would be one of those times, not to mention the suffering of China and Korea under Japanese occupation or the Laotian Civil War (1959–1975), in which the Pathet Lao overthrew the Laotian monarchy, among others. But the Psalms of Lament, and other texts, such as the Exodus or Jesus's teaching on prayer, provide models by which human beings are authorized—and even expected—to address G-d to demand relief or explanation for the suffering at hand. Such vigorous prayer provides a means for processing pain. Here, Middleton has found a clue to what the Bible demands of its readers. He is correct to point to the need to pray as a necessary first step, but he might push the issue further in pointing to models of human beings taking action, especially when G-d is absent or does not act. Esther comes to mind as a model here; she may not pray, but she takes action as the only one in the world who can prevent a Persian (Seleucid) genocide against the Jewish people, despite the fact that she is not religious or observant. She could be any one of us, women and men included. Middleton essentially points to the fact that

humans have responsibility to address suffering, but it does not stop at just prayer; it demands action as well.

Chapter 2, "G-d's Loyal Opposition," takes up the model of talking back to G-d, not simply by offering prayer to point out suffering and ask for relief, but to point out to G-d how G-d might be wrong. The example of Moses at Sinai during the Golden Calf Episode—and one may think of the aftermath of the Spy Narrative as well—provide examples of a righteous human who tells G-d that what G-d proposes to do is wrong. When G-d proposes to kill all Israel and to make a new nation out of Moses, Moses tells G-d that G-d is wrong. There is a covenant to consider; there is G-d's reputation to consider; in short, it would be a crime, and G-d is just as forbidden to commit murder as human beings are. Here, we see Moses taking risks—just as Esther does—to confront G-d with a potential crime. There are other examples as well, but Moses was right to stand up to G-d, the greatest authority and power in the universe. Such an example calls for analogous action when justice is threatened. What would have happened had more people stood up to Hitler in the Shoah? Unfortunately, the Shoah happened because too many people agreed with its goals, and too many refused to say, "No!"

Part 2 of Middleton's study, "Making Sense of the Book of Job," examines Job's dialogue with his friends and with G-d as to why he, an allegedly righteous man, should suffer. All too many interpreters miss the point when they scour the book of Job to find sins with which they can charge him, arrogance in talking back to G-d of course is one of them. But the fact of the matter is that the Bible uses the example of Job talking back to G-d as a means to endorse such efforts. The Satan figure, i.e., the Accuser, who has not yet developed into the persona of Beelzebub or the Devil, makes an argument to G-d that Job should suffer in an effort to demonstrate that Job is not as pious as G-d might think. Job shows his loyalty to G-d by blessing G-d before he raises his questions about the justice of his suffering. The friends try to convince him that he has sinned, and he must confess his sins even if he doesn't know what they are in order to find relief. Middleton points out that Job does not seek revenge against those who have mistreated him—including G-d. In the end, G-d tells Job that he is right to raise these questions, and G-d then acts to restore all that Job has lost.

Middleton considers Job 42:6 in which Job allegedly says, "I despise myself, Hebrew, 'em'as, and repent in dust and ashes," as most modern translations understand it. But there are questions about this translation. Middleton argues that Hebrew, 'em'as, may well mean, "I reject," and that the verse should be translated, "therefore I retract and am comforted about dust and ashes," that is, Job retracted his accusations against G-d's management of the universe or his earlier silence before G-d and accepts the fragile nature of his human condition, to which G-d responds that Job was right, whereas his friends were not. One must therefore ask,

does Job accept his human condition as justification or explanation for his suffering? Or does Job point out G-d's inability to control creation fully, thereby leaving humans vulnerable, which G-d then acknowledges? In short, Job points out G-d's own vulnerability in relation to a chaotic creation that G-d must continuously struggle to control. My own experience in writing a commentary on Jeremiah demonstrates this issue throughout as well as why Lurianic Kabbalah had to posit the principle of divine vulnerability and why Abraham Joshua Heschel had to posit his view of divine pathos in reaching out to humankind to find a partner who could help to complete and sanctify a chaotic world of creation.[6]

And there is another issue. At the end, G-d restores Job's dead children. But anyone who is a parent can tell you that such a solution is no solution at all to a dead child, let alone ten of them. Emil Fackenheim points this out,[7] and it would be wise for Middleton to consider his comments on this point. Job's losses are not restored, although he did get his day in court, and perhaps he was vindicated.

Finally, we come to Part 3, "Unbinding the Aqedah From the Straitjacket of Tradition," in which Middleton provides a thorough examination of Abraham's silence in Genesis 22 when he is asked to sacrifice his beloved and long-awaited son, Isaac. Middleton states his presuppositions: 1) He does not believe that G-d would call for the sacrifice of a life of another to prove faithfulness or that G-d requires blind faithfulness; 2) There is precedent for humans standing up to G-d in the face of injustice, even if it comes from G-d; and 3) the example of Jesus asking G-d to "remove this cup" and asking, "My G-d, my G-d, why have you forsaken me?" He presents a lengthy discussion of Jon Levenson's and Walter Moberly's understandings of the Aqedah in which Levenson argues that the Aqedah represents a model for Jews to submit to the divine will in observance of the Torah and Moberly argues that the test is to prove Abraham's/Israel's allegiance and obedience to G-d. He also brings Immanuel Kant to the party who raises doubts as to whether the demand actually comes from G-d.

Although Middleton is correct to raise these questions, I wonder if he has overlooked some of the finer points. First, his presuppositions about G-d. If one wants to see G-d calling for the sacrifice of innocents to prove faithfulness, one might consider Isaiah 6 in which G-d tells Isaiah that generations of Israelites will die so that G-d's glory may be recognized throughout the world. This is an example of teleological ethics coming into conflict with ontological ethics. Readers frequently accept all too easily that "this people" in Isaiah 6 is entirely sinful, but the wanton sacrifice of entire generations for the sake of G-d's glory breaks

6 Marvin A. Sweeney, *Jeremiah* (Illuminations; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, forthcoming); Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Perennial Classics, 2001), 285–632.

7 Emil L. Fackenheim, *The Jewish Bible after the Holocaust: A Re-reading* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 71–99.

ontological credibility when the criterion of the end justifies the means is applied. And unlike Moses—and Abraham and Amos and Jeremiah and others—Isaiah does not object, which perhaps helps to explain why the book of Isaiah does not realize its ideal of peace among the nations and the corpses of the dead lie scattered about at the end of the book.

But we may also ask for closer consideration of the literary gap that allows for Abraham's silence. Meir Sternberg correctly argues that literary gaps offer the opportunity for readers to inject meaning into a narrative; the problem is that readers can often miss something.[8] Middleton correctly observes that Abraham has in fact been a loyal servant of G-d throughout the Abraham narratives, but the gap may call for something more than Abraham's recognition that G-d might be wrong. Push the point a little further and one comes to the recognition that G-d does not need to test Abraham, but Abraham has cause to test G-d. Middleton seems implicitly to recognize this, but the point must be made explicit. And in the end, G-d passes the test—or does G-d actually pass it? Rabbinic interpretation notes that Isaac does not come down from the mountain with Abraham. Instead, Isaac was sacrificed, made a Heikhalot style journey to appear before G-d in the heavens, and was afterward returned to life for the rest of his appearances in the book of Genesis.[9] But Sarah notices that her son does not return and thinks that he is dead, which causes her to die in grief when she thinks that she will never see Isaac again. After this, Abraham never speaks to G-d again in the Genesis narrative. Did G-d pass the test? Maybe not. And did Abraham then abandon G-d? Maybe not, even though they do not speak further. There may be cause for tension in the relationship between human beings and G-d, even though both may recognize that they still need each other, as argued by Abraham Joshua Heschel.[10]

And in the end, Middleton appropriately asks what would have happened had Abraham not remained silent? We will never know any more than if we would ask what would have happened had Isaiah not remained silent?[11] But without the example of Abraham or Isaiah, we may make the demand the next time we encounter wrong in the world, and that may well be the answer.

Many thanks to J. Richard Middleton for a probing and provocative study that shows how an interpreter may pose critical questions to the Bible and to G-d and still remain faithful.

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8 Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Reading and the Drama of Narrative* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 186–229.

9 Pirqei d' R. Eliezer 31.

10 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (Northvale, NJ, and London: Jason Aronson, 1987).

11 Sweeney, *Reading the Hebrew Bible after the Shoah*, 84–103.

Alternatives to *Abraham's Silence*: Protest or Lament?

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Abstract

J. Richard Middleton's book *Abraham's Silence: The Binding of Isaac, the Suffering of Job, and How to Talk Back to God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021) challenges traditional interpretations of the Aqedah (the binding of Isaac) by questioning whether Abraham's silent attempt to sacrifice Isaac was what God intended. This article interacts with Middleton's work. It was originally presented at a panel discussion on *Abraham's Silence* at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in Denver, Colorado, November 21, 2022.

I want to express my delight in reading Richard Middleton's book. It felt like a very *Jewish* book, in wrestling with faith in God on the question of trial, lauding the power of lament and Job's protests, and expressing outrage at Abraham's silence. There is a passion behind his interpretation, a sincere moral investment in how we read, that I rarely see in scholarship and I deeply appreciate. At a slant, the book addresses the age-old question of theodicy—"how to justify of the ways of God to man"—or, in Harold Kushner's famous formulation: how should we respond "when bad things happen to good people."[1]

Middleton, however, does not answer it directly. The focus is not on the theology, the nature of God *per se*. Rather, the author centers his argument on the nature of the *relationship* between God and his lauded servants—Moses, Job, Abraham, and the author(s) of Psalms. They all serve as models for a human response to suffering. Their speech (and silence) are subject to an ethical litmus test: Do they address unjust suffering by calling upon God to demonstrate the divine way of doing what is "right and just [*tzedaqah u'mishpat*]" (Gen 18:19; cf. v. 25)? The question is not: "how could God *try* Job" with such undeserved suffering? Or "how could God demand that Abraham sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac?" but whether the *human* responses were appropriate. In Middleton's thesis, Job is a hero because he railed against God and Abraham failed the test because

1 Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Schocken Books, 1981).

he remained silent. In the end, Middleton offers a homiletical answer that any preacher or Rabbi would embrace. God does not want silent submission or acquiescence to suffering, but rather, beckons "holy *ḥutzpah*," righteous outrage and the call for divine compassion.

Middleton holds up lament as the appropriate response to unjust suffering. My problem is that the *post facto* response to suffering through lament (as in Psalm 88, or Psalm 39, or Job's cursing the day of his birth in Job 3) is quite different from the genre of "prayers of intercession" (as in Moses' response to the sin of the Golden Calf, Exod 32–34; or Abraham pleading for Sodom and Gomorrah in Gen 18). Middleton seems to conflate the two as effective forms of protest. Intercession, *at the outset*, is meant to turn aside God's harsh judgment, move the divine from the prosecutor's seat to the defense, from *midat ha-din* (attribute of justice) to *midat ha-raḥamim* (attribute of mercy). Lament, on the other hand, is a response in the wake of suffering, when God has already, so to speak, swept away the innocent with the guilty.

Middleton's selection of lament from the Book of Psalms in his first chapter, "Voices from the Ragged Edge" is telling. He analyzes Psalm 39, in depth, alongside lines from Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me [*Eli, Eli, lamah 'azavtani*]?!??"—quoted by Jesus on the cross, Matt 27:46 and Mark 15:34—yet excludes Jeremiah's laments and the Book of Lamentations (Eicha) altogether. Where the laments in the Book of Psalms are resolved with words of solace, God never directly answers Job's lament, such as his cursing the day he was born (ch. 3), or Jeremiah's lament (as in 11:18–20, 21–23; 12:1–6; 15:10–21), at least not with any reassurance. Is lament, as a genre, really a form protest? When the consequences are enslavement, plague, violent death, or exile, can you really read Lamentations, for example, as a call for justice? Drawing from the shift in C.S. Lewis' work (*The Problem of Pain*, written in 1940, to *A Grief Observed*, in 1961), and Eli Weisel's memoir, *Night* (originally published in French 1958), Middleton beautifully demonstrates how lament, as a genre, continues to speak through modern voices. But does sincere lament *really* lead to "genuine thanksgiving for the grace of God…"—as those in Psalms do (p. 39)?[2] Certainly, this follows scholarly understanding of lament as a genre (Baumgartner 1987), and perhaps, more broadly, a Christian understanding of suffering. In Middleton's words, through lament we come to realize that "it matters to God. Indeed, it matters so much that [Jesus] bore it in his own body on the tree" (p. 39). Would Jeremiah or Job agree?

His study of prophetic intercession in ch. 2 resonated more clearly for me as a response to suffering. The purpose of the protest is to *prevent* any further or undue

2 References to *Abraham's Silence* will be given in parentheses within the text of this article.

suffering, rather than address the problem of suffering *per se* (attributed to an omnipotent, benevolent God who allows the innocent to suffer). Moses, in pleading for God to forgive the people after the Sin of the Golden Calf (Exod 32–34), plays the role of "The king's loyal opposition" (George Coats's term). This same paradigm for prophetic intercession is explored by Yochanan Muffs, in his foundational essay: "Who Will Stand in the Breach?"[3] Interestingly, Middleton excludes Abraham's plea for Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18:17–32), as a cogent example of holy *ḥutzpah* or prophetic intercession, because Abraham *does not go far enough;* he stops at ten when God might have spared the city for even one righteous person. And the patriarch does not plead directly for Lot and his family. Yet, it seems to me, the whole point of that "last divine soliloquy" (Gen 18:17–19), was to set Abraham up for the supposed bargaining, and demonstrate *why* God chose Abraham: to "teach his children and household after him, the way of the LORD, by doing righteousness and justice [*tzedaqah u'mishpat*]" (v. 19). (Why stop at ten? As Middleton points out, God was like a bad used car salesman who would have *given* the car away). Essentially, Abraham argues for a universal principle of justice, "not to destroy the righteous with the wicked" (as Abraham echoes in vv. 23 and 25). In this message, through Abraham, all the families of the earth will be blessed (12:3 and 22:18). To make the claim for Lot and his family obviates the very notion of a universal moral basis for justice. In Middleton's reading, "Abraham has *not* quite learned what God wanted to teach him—even though Lot and his family have been saved…" (p. 204). His reading is consistent with depicting Abraham's misconception of God as demanding loyalty at the expense of his intimate relationships—with the first *Lekh lekha* from his father's house (12:1), to pawning his wife off as his sister (chs. 12:10–20 and 20:1–18), to his severance from Lot (ch. 13), Hagar and Ishmael (ch. 21), and finally from his own son (ch. 22). Yet God *does* make these demands of the patriarch, indirectly or directly—and sometimes Abraham objects (as in the case of Ishmael's displacement or banishment, Gen 17:18, 21:11).

Now how do we reconcile Abraham's claim that God uphold "righteousness and justice [*tzedaqah u'mishpat*]" (18:19, 25) with the Aqedah? Middleton's reading of Genesis18 as a "failed teaching moment" dovetails with his understanding of Abraham's response to God's command in the Aqedah. The close reading of both rabbinic texts (ch. 6) and the biblical text (ch. 7) was really stupendous in breadth. He confronts the challenge of Jon D. Levenson and Walter

3 See Yochanan Muffs, "Who Will Stand in the Breach?", in *Love and Joy: Law, Language, and Religion in Ancient Israel* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America; Distributed by Harvard University Press 1992), 9–48.

Moberly to take the plain meaning (*peshat*) of the text seriously.[4] If we see Abraham as having "failed the test," how do we understand the two statements by the Angel of YHWH, seemingly in praise of Abraham for his willingness to sacrifice his son (v. 12; vv. 16–18)? Middleton compares the demand of *ha-elohim* (generic term for deity): "to take your son, your only son *whom you love*, Isaac" (22:1) to the Angel of YHWH's statement: "Now I know that you are God-fearing [*yar'ei Elohim*] since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me" (v. 12, cf. v. 16). Though Isaac is spared, Abraham has sacrificed the love of his son. And, he never returns to Sarah; in midrashic tradition the matriarch dies of news of the Aqedah. The second speech (vv. 16–18), then, is a way of "righting" the patriarch's failure. On oath God swears, "*By myself* I have sworn," to renew the covenant "and *by your offspring*" (not by Abraham) "will all the nations of the world be blessed" (v. 18). In Middleton's audacious reading, "YHWH needs to uphold the promises *by his own oath* precisely because they *cannot* be sustained by Abraham's less-than-fully-faithful response, evident in the Aqedah" (p. 217).

By remaining silent, Abraham has bequeathed to his son only the "fear/awe" of God (called "Isaac's fear [*paḥad Yitzḥak*]" by Jacob in Gen 31:42, 53). Subsequent generations in Genesis devolve into broken relationships and dysfunctional families. In the words of Haim Guri: "Isaac's heirs, are born 'with a knife in their hearts [*ma'akhelet be-libam*]'" (quoted in Middleton, p. 211).

By contrast, Job represents the right response to unjust suffering. Judy Klitsner, as well as André Neher and the aggadic tradition (b. Baba Bathra 15b–16a; Gen. Rab. 57:4), read the trial of Job as a "subversive sequel" to the Aqedah. Where Abraham's relationship with God ends in silence, Job takes up the response to God's trial with voluble protest and lament. Middleton traces many of the intertextual clues between Genesis and the Book of Job—both are deemed "God-fearing [*yar'ei 'elohim*]" (Gen 22:12; Job 1:1, 8; 2:3), both refer to their mortal status as "dust and ash" (Gen 18:27; Job 30:18, 42:6), the resonances with the names *Uz* (Gen 22:21; Job 1:1) and *Buz* (Gen 22:21; Job 32:2), and the motif of intercession for others, as well as the exorbitant cost of their respective trials.

The midrashic reading is based on the sequel to the Aqedah—"after these things [*'aharei ha-devarim ha-'eleh*]…"—which introduces the genealogy of Nahor (Abraham's brother) and the birth announcement of Rebekah, destined to become Isaac's wife (Gen 20:20–23). According to Genesis Rabbah, an exegetical midrash (5th c. CE, Palestine), the auspicious words "after these things/words [*devarim*]" hint to qualms [*hirhurim*] on Abraham's part (Gen. Rab. 57:4). The

4 Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995) and Walter L. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith: A Study of Abraham and Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

patriarch, anxious that all might have been lost had Isaac been slaughtered on the altar, is reassured with the declaration of Rebekah's birth. The lineage comes as a guarantee of continuity. In a second (anonymous) opinion in the midrash, the list of Nahor's descendants assures Abraham that he would not be tried again, for God had found his successor in Job:

> Another Interpretation: Abraham was afraid of further afflictions [*nitya'reh min ha-yissurin*]. The Holy One, blessed be He, said: You need no longer fear since the one to receive them [i.e. the afflictions] has already been born, "Uz [*utz*] the firstborn, Buz his brother…" (Gen 22:21). When did Job (live)? Resh Lakish in the name of bar Kapparah said: in the time of Abraham, as it says "Uz [*utz*], the first-born" (Gen 22:21), and it is written: "There was once a man in the land of Uz [*utz*] whose name was Job" (Job 1:1).[5]

Not only, as Resh Lakish argues, does Job live during the lifetime of Abraham, but he takes up where the patriarch left off as the recipient of God's trials and afflictions [*yissurin*].

The modern French philosopher, André Neher, poetically elaborates upon this midrash:

> It was after these words that Abraham locked himself in vertical silence and God accompanied him within that silence. It was after these words that Abraham . . . chose and obtained silence in order to devote himself to works. And if he obtained it, it was because God had just discovered Abraham's successor, it was because at the very moment when Abraham had chosen works, a man was born to whom God was to transfer all the trials of the combat, "it was after these Words [*devarim*]," it was after this tempest in the mind that Abraham was told: "Milcah also has borne children, to your brother Nahor: Uz the firstborn . . . ." (Gen 22:20–21). Now Uz was Job (Bereishit Rab-bah 57:3), as it is written, "There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job . . . ." (Job 1:1)[6]

Neher suggests that the silence between God and Abraham originates with the patriarch. He closes the apertures—turning away from prophecy and God's mission in order to commit himself to "works," which is to say "good deeds."

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5 Genesis Rabbah 57:4 (ed. Theodor-Albeck [Berlin, 1912–31, reprint. Jerusalem: Wahrmann Books, 1965]), 614–615, author's translation. See the parallels in Midrash Tanḥuma Yelammedenu *Shelach* 42:14, 27, Numbers Rabbah 17:2, and b. Baba Bathra 15a.

6 André Neher, *The Exile of the Word: from the Silence of the Bible to the Silence of Auschwitz* (in French: *L'Exile de la Parole*, 1970), trans. David Maisel (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1981), 191.

Abraham simply gets on with life—finding a burial spot for Sarah (ch. 23), marrying off his son, Isaac (ch. 24), and occupying himself with his own re-marriage (25:1–4). Silence (and perhaps relief) now reign. Job then takes up the gauntlet. Yet Job's response to the trial is *not* silence. He does not acquiesce meekly in the disputations, which form the core of the book (chs. 3–37), despite the pious assertions of the folktale frame (1:21–22 and 2:10), and the Christian tradition on "the patient Job" (James 5:11). Instead, as Judy Klitsner points out, when "Job's life is unjustly shattered, the hero rejects all attempts to accept God's actions as justified and instead demands answers from God with ever-increasing audacity."[7]

Middleton reads the folktale frame in the Book of Job (chs. 1–2 and 42) in harmony with the disputations (ch. 3–37) and God's revelation in the Whirlwind (chs. 39–41). Despite the unreasonable or arbitrary nature of his suffering, Job remains, throughout the trial, a "man of integrity, upright, God fearing, who shuns evil" (1:1; 2:3), and does not "curse" God (almost). As I have come to read the book,[8] Job's speeches present a poignant critique of retributive justice in contrast to the friends. I don't think Middleton's argument fundamentally disagrees; but he adds nuance in his discussion of "appropriate" and "inappropriate" speech. In chapter 3, he identifies seven types of response to suffering: 1) blessing God (as Job does in 1:21);[9] 2) cursing God (as the Adversary supposed he would do, and his wife urges him to do); 3) passive acceptance of suffering; 4) nonverbal mourning, followed by silence; 5) protest/complaint about suffering; 6) defending God and explaining suffering (as represented by the friends); 7) and direct protest/complaint to God. Middleton praises this seventh type of response as the most appropriate speech, in line with the genre of lament psalms (p. 89).

In the end, Job is vindicated; God comes to praise rather than bully him. Middleton presents an innovative reading of Job's first and second responses, in addressing the question, why were there two distinct speeches in the Revelation in the Whirlwind? He reads Job's first response as a failure, where Job proclaims his insignificance in the face of God as Creator; and admits to not understanding the divine way, retreating into "abased silence" (40:3–5). On the other hand, the second response, "the supposed confession," in response to the display of God's power in Leviathan and Behemoth, is laudable (42:2–6). Middleton offers this

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7 Judy Klitsner, *Subversive Sequels in the Bible* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2009) xxiixxiii. See also Rachel Adelman, "Abraham and Job: Variations of 'Yes' to Silence," in *Search for Meaning*, eds. David Birnbaum and Martin S. Cohen (New York: New Paradigm Matrix Publishing, 2018), 127–52.

8 See Moshe Greenberg, "Job," *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, eds. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 285–305.

9 Here, on the word *tiflah*—"In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrongdoing [*tiflah,* לא נתן תפלה לאלהים]" (Job 1:22 NRSV; alt. "reproach" NJPS), or "speak irreverently of God" (Clines), Middleton radically rereads *tiflah* as related to the root *p.l.l.,* "to pray or appeal", and faults Job for *not* responding to God in prayer or supplication (Middleton, 79).

translation: "therefore I retract and am comforted about dust and ashes [*'al ken 'em'as ve-niḥamti 'al 'afar va-'efer*]*"* (p. 123). Contrast this to Greenstein's translation, "that is why I am *fed up*; I take pity on dust and ashes." In Greenstein's reading, God has bullied Job into submission.[10] The phrase "dust and ash" alludes to the mortal state, a phrase invoked only by Job (30:19, 42:6), and Abraham (18:27), expressing both humility and audacity in the face of God's omnipotence. In the end, Job is vindicated but God's justice remains questionable. In contrast to the claims of the friends, who in one way or another imply that Job must have sinned, that God ultimately rewards the good and punishes the guilty, Job knows himself to be a man of integrity. And God affirms this. Addressing Eliphaz (as representative of all three), God upbraids the friends: "My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right [*nekhonah*], as my servant Job has" (42:7).

Ultimately, Middleton criticizes Abraham's silence and sides with Job as the voice of complaint and protest directly addressed to God. The lament, while perhaps not effective in averting the wrath of God (as prophetic intercession does), advocates ultimately for a moral universe. I end with a quote from Middleton: "One of the lasting impacts of lament is an ethical sensibility. Not only can the practice of lament strengthen our sense of self (Brueggemann's point), it may open us up to empathy for others in their suffering" (p. 238). This, indeed, is the way one might teach and demonstrate the divine way of doing what is "right and just [*tzedaqah u'mishpat*]" (Gen 18:19).

10 Edward L. Greenstein, *Job: A New Translation* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2019), 185.

J. Richard Middleton's *Abraham's Silence* and Further Intertextual Connections

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Abstract

J. Richard Middleton's book *Abraham's Silence: The Binding of Isaac, the Suffering of Job, and How to Talk Back to God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021) challenges traditional interpretations of the Aqedah (the binding of Isaac) by questioning whether Abraham's silent attempt to sacrifice Isaac was what God intended. This article interacts with Middleton's work. It was originally presented at a panel discussion on *Abraham's Silence* at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in Denver, Colorado, November 21, 2022.

I deeply appreciate the opportunity to interact publicly with the work of a scholar whom I hold in the greatest esteem and whom I count as a friend. I have been deeply formed both by the content of Richard Middleton's exegetical work and by his interpretive approach, which is at once reverent, faithful, penetrating, holistic, authentic, and daring.[1] With a keen eye for textual details and a penchant for asking new questions of the text, Middleton consistently invites audiences to consider broader horizons of interpretive possibility. These traits are particularly evident in his latest book, *Abraham's Silence,* in which he reframes the Aqedah by reading it in light of his own experience of suffering, the biblical emphasis on lament, the message of the book of Job, and the larger narrative of Abraham's growing understanding of God's character.

The Purpose of Job

I want to begin with some reflections on Middleton's interpretation of Job, which he understands as focusing not on theodicy or "disinterested allegiance" but on "appropriate speech" in the face of suffering.[2] I find this perspective quite helpful

1 See especially J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005) and his *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014).

2 J. Richard Middleton, *Abraham's Silence: The Binding of Isaac, the Suffering of Job, and How to Talk Back to God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 74–76.

since it draws together the *satan*'s claim in the prologue that Job will "curse" God if he loses God's blessings (Job 1:11)[3] with God's evaluation of who speaks rightly in the epilogue (42:7). It also explains the focus on proper speech throughout, and particularly the friends' frequent contention that Job's speech is beyond the pale (e.g., 8:2; 11:2–3; 15:2–6; 18:2).

I also appreciate Middleton's view that God's speeches are intended not to reduce Job to silence but to invite him to be "a vigorous conversation partner—one who bracingly faces his Creator, in accordance with his royal calling," embodying a similar boldness to Behemoth and Leviathan.[4] Both Job and God seek dialogue with one another,[5] though what Job ultimately receives from it is not the vindication he had originally desired. Our understanding of what Job receives depends largely on our translation of 42:6, which poses a couple of major interpretive difficulties.

First, אמאס is typically translated as "I despise myself" (see, e.g., the NIV, NRSV, ESV), but as Middleton observes, it has no direct object and never takes that meaning elsewhere.[6] The verb more likely means something like "I retract" (see the NASB), and Middleton notes briefly in a footnote that it may be used in a similar way as in 31:13.[7] I would like to build on his suggestion by highlighting the similarities between the situation Job describes in 31:13 and his status before God. That verse comes in the middle of Job's lengthy defense of his innocence, where he declares that he would embrace his punishment if he were guilty of any of the crimes he lists. In v. 13, he implicitly denies that he has "rejected (מאס) the claim (משׁפט) of [his] male servant (עבד) or female servant when they contended (ריב) with" him.[8] Similarly, Job is described in the book as God's "servant" (עבד; 1:8; 2:3; 42:7–8), who has "contended" (ריב) with God (9:3; 40:2; see also 33:13) and "prepared [a] claim" (משׁפט) against him" (13:18; cf. 9:32; 23:4; 27:2). Like Job, God never explicitly rejects his servant's claim, but he does challenge Job's sense of his (in)justice, "Will you annul my justice (משׁפט)? Will you condemn me so that you may be justified?" (40:8). And ultimately, Job retracts his claim.[9]

The second major interpretive difficulty in 42:6 concerns נחמתי, which has

3 The text literally says that Job will "bless" God, but it is obviously used euphemistically (see further Middleton, *Abraham's Silence*, 76).

4 Middleton, *Abraham's Silence*, 120; also 111–13.

5 Note the emphasis on the words "call" (קרא) and "answer" (ענה) in the speeches of Job and God (e.g., 9:3, 14–16, 32; 12:4; 13:22; 14:15; 19:7; 23:5; 30:20; 31:35; 40:2; 40:5; cf. "make known" [*hiphil* ידע] in 38:3; 40:7; 42:4).

6 Middleton, *Abraham's Silence*, 123–24.

7 Middleton, *Abraham's Silence*, 124 n. 59.

8 All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

9 Middleton also suggests that Job may be "retracting his inappropriate, passive response to God after the first speech" (*Abraham's Silence*, 124).

traditionally been translated as "I repent" (see the NRSV, NIV, NASB, ESV). As Middleton points out, however, it makes more sense to understand it as "comfort," which is what it means everywhere else in the book.[10] Initially, Job's friends comfort him when they sit with him in silence (2:11). But once they open their mouths, comfort is nowhere to be found. In the first speech cycle, Job laments that his bed cannot comfort him because of his terrible dreams (7:13). And in the second speech cycle, he twice castigates his friends for their failure to comfort him (16:2; 21:34). After that, he seems to give up on any hope of comfort, though he does observe in 29:25 that he used to bring comfort to those who were mourning. But after God speaks, Job is finally "comforted concerning dust and ashes," that is, concerning his human frailty, which makes him "like dust and ashes" (see 30:19).[11]

But what leads to Job's comfort? His words suggest that comfort comes both through an increase in knowledge (42:3) and his experience of God (v. 5). On the former point, God first confronts Job with the words, "Who is this who darkens counsel by words [מלין] without knowledge [דעת בבלי]?" (38:2) Elsewhere מלין and דעת בבלי appear together only in Elihu's speech, where he condemns Job for "multiply[ing] words without knowledge" (35:16).[12] So God initially seems to affirm Elihu's judgment of Job. But ultimately, God vindicates Job and condemns the friends because they "have not spoken about (or to)[13] [God] what is right" (42:7).[14] So in the end, it is Job's friends who persist in "darken[ing] counsel by words without knowledge." By contrast, Job follows God's invitation into a deeper understanding of the "wonderful things" [נפלאות] at the heart of the cosmos (42:3), which Middleton understands as the idea "that God celebrates the wildness of creation, giving untamable creatures [including Job] great freedom to be themselves."[15] Understood in this way, then, the book of Job invites us to speak rightly by approaching God boldly and honestly with our complaints, leading to transformative encounter with him.

The Aqedah

Evaluation of Abraham and the Nature of God's Test

Turning to Middleton's reading of the Aqedah, I appreciate his observations on the passage's intertextual connections with Job and how he reads it in light of Abraham's journey and particularly Abraham's conversation with God about Sodom

10 Middleton, *Abraham's Silence*, 124.
11 See further Middleton, *Abraham's Silence*, 125.
12 דעת בבלי also appears without מלין in 36:12 and 42:3.
13 Middleton observes that אל is probably more accurately translated as "to," so perhaps part of the problem with the friends' speech is that they only talk about God and never address him to see whether he might challenge their understanding (Middleton, *Abraham's Silence*, 126).
14 The focus here is on Eliphaz and his two friends, Bildad and Zophar. Elihu is not mentioned.
15 Middleton, *Abraham's Silence*, 122.

and Gomorrah (Gen 18:22–33). Before engaging with his interpretation, I had always glossed over Abraham's silence in response to God's command to sacrifice Isaac, but now that silence feels conspicuous. However, I am not sure I am ready to follow Middleton all the way to the end. At this point, I think I agree with what he affirms but not with what he denies. In my view, he has presented a persuasive argument that protest based in God's character and/or promises would have been a faithful response for Abraham. Protest grounded in God's character would have demonstrated that he had grown in his understanding that YHWH was not like the other gods in desiring child sacrifice.[16] And protest rooted in God's promises would have reflected trust in God's faithfulness to his covenant, which he had already declared would pass down to Isaac (17:19).

As Middleton observes, Moses protests on both of those grounds when he intercedes on behalf of Israel after the incident with the golden calf in Exodus 32 (see vv. 11–13) and after the people refuse to enter into the promised land in Numbers 13 (see 14:13–19).[17] And Abraham had already engaged in protest when he pleaded on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18:22–33). So there is biblical warrant for Abraham to talk back to God. And since in Genesis 18, Abraham had not "fully plumbed the depths of divine mercy," as Middleton puts it,[18] this test could have given him an opportunity to do that.

But at the same time, I am not (yet) convinced that the traditional interpretation, which valorizes Abraham's response, is wrong. I still cannot quite reconcile the perspective that Abraham "*just barely* passed the test," as Middleton suggests,[19] with the words spoken by the angel of YHWH in vv. 12 and 15–18. I grant Middleton's point that "because you have listened to my voice" in v. 18 is ambiguous. While interpreters have generally assumed that it refers to Abraham obeying God's command to sacrifice his son, it could just as easily denote him heeding the angel's command to stop.[20]

But the angel's statement in 22:12 that Abraham has demonstrated "the fear of God" (ירא אלהים) recalls Abraham's concern that there was "no fear of God (יראת אלהים) in" Gerar (20:11).[21] Of course, the irony of that story is that it is the pagan king Abimelech who reveals that he fears God, not Abraham. Even when Abraham knows that the promised heir is expected through Sarah within the year, he does not trust God to protect him and Sarah from the men of Gerar.

16 It would also have reflected an understanding that human life is sacred because God created people in his image (see Gen 9:6) in contrast to the more negative perspectives of humanity found in other ANE creation accounts, like the Atrahasis Epic and Enuma Elish.

17 Middleton, *Abraham's Silence*, 46–47, 53, and 197 n. 13.

18 Middleton, *Abraham's Silence*, 203.

19 Middleton, *Abraham's Silence*, 223.

20 See Middleton, *Abraham's Silence*, 218.

21 The only other passage in Genesis that speaks about fearing God is when Joseph says that he fears God in Gen 42:18.

Instead, he engages in subterfuge, passing off Sarah as his sister, even though that ruse has already led to disastrous results in Egypt (12:10–20).[22] By contrast, Abimelech responds immediately to God's dream and after calling Abraham to account for doing "things that should not be done" (20:9), he treats Abraham and Sarah with extraordinary grace and mercy.[23] Perhaps at that point Abimelech knows a bit more about "doing righteousness and justice" (see 18:19) than Abraham. But now the angel declares that Abraham's test has revealed that he too fears God. Even if, as Middleton suggests, "the fear of YHWH is the *beginning* of wisdom or knowledge . . . rather than its culmination,"[24] the identification of Abraham as a God-fearer seems quite positive, highlighting the growth in his character.

The language that the angel of the YHWH uses to describe Abraham's action—"Because . . . you have not withheld your son, your only one, from me" (22:12)[25]—points in the same direction. If the angel had said, "Because you tried to sacrifice your son," that would be more ambiguous. On the one hand, God commanded Abraham to do so, but on the other hand, God later makes it clear that he does not desire child sacrifice (Lev 20:2–5; Deut 12:31; 18:10). But the way the action is characterized suggests a more positive evaluation—should anyone withhold something from God?[26]

Finally, in my view, "because you have done this thing" in v. 16 more naturally forms the basis for the blessing that follows (see Gen 3:14) than for God's preceding oath ("By myself I have sworn"). In that reading, the content of God's oath includes everything that follows. If "because you have done this thing" instead functions as the grounds for God's oath, then it creates a strange break between the oath and its content—"I will surely bless you . . ." (v. 17).

My Reading	Middleton's Reading
By myself I have sworn, declares YHWH, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only one, I will surely bless you…	By myself I have sworn, declares YHWH, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only one, {I will surely bless you…

22 For a helpful discussion of what Abraham may have been thinking when he adopted this ruse, see Matthew Newkirk, "Pimps or Protectors?: A Reexamination of the Wife-Sister Deceptions," *JETS* 64 (2021) 45–57. However, the fact that it had failed once should have kept him from trying it again.

23 By contrast with Pharaoh in 12:10–20, Abimelech gave Abraham gifts of animals and slaves *after* finding out that Sarah was his wife, allowed Abraham and Sarah to remain in his land, and paid a hefty price to publicly vindicate Sarah.

24 Middleton, *Abraham's Silence*, 185.

25 This statement is repeated in v. 15 without "from me."

26 No one else is said to "withhold" or not "withhold" (חשׂך) something from God in the HB.

For these reasons, I still view the angel's words as offering a positive evaluation of Abraham's actions.[27] But I would like to propose a reading that draws on both the traditional interpretation and Middleton's approach. What if God was not specifically testing either Abraham's "unquestioning obedience" or "his *discernment of God's character*"?[28] What if instead God was more broadly testing what kind of posture Abraham would take toward him when threatened with the loss of the promise that had finally been fulfilled after so many years of struggle? What if seeking to obey God and protesting would *both* have been faithful responses (a high pass) because both would reflect a posture of leaning into God, rather than turning away?[29] Perhaps the lesson of the narrative is that whatever challenge God's people face, *any* response that demonstrates a desire to turn toward God is a faithful response. We may not always have a perfect understanding of God or his ways. But when we incline ourselves toward him, he can correct our lack of knowledge, just as he did with Job (concerning his governance of the cosmos) and with Abraham (concerning his desire for child sacrifice).

Abraham and His Family

Of course, my both-and approach does not fully resolve the issue of the trauma Isaac would have experienced from this event. Middleton's observations on that point deserve further reflection.[30] But one final point I would like to consider is how the Aqedah fits into the larger narrative of Abraham's relationships with his family. In a non-cultic sense, Abraham has already sacrificed everyone close to him, except for Lot. By passing Sarah off as his sister in order to save his own skin rather than trusting in God's protection, he left her vulnerable to the appetites of

27 As a canonical Christian reader, I am also influenced by the NT evaluations of Genesis. Concerning the author of Hebrews' contention that Abraham believed God could raise Isaac from the dead (Heb 11:17), Middleton argues that "the explicit doctrine of resurrection did not arise until after the exile" (*Abraham's* Silence, 214 n. 59). While I agree, the HB contains earlier narratives about a few individual people being raised from the dead (e.g., 1 Kgs 17:17–24; 2 Kgs 4:18–37; 13:20–21). Although these come from after the time of Abraham, they do suggest that belief in the possibility that an individual could be raised from the dead in this life would not necessarily require a developed doctrine of resurrection. In my view, the author of Hebrews may simply have been offering his own interpretation of Abraham's statement to his servants that both he and Isaac would return to them (Gen 22:5), rather than giving a clear revelation about Abraham's thought process. Yet both Heb 11:17–19 and Jas 2:21–23 hold up Abraham's willingness to offer his son as a paradigm example of faith, which is in significant tension with Middleton's evaluation of Abraham.

28 The former represents the traditional interpretation and the latter Middleton's (*Abraham's Silence*, 197).

29 Middleton suggests in a footnote at the end that some may want to take his "critical interpretation of the Aqedah not as a simple replacement for a traditional pious interpretation but as a viable alternative reading," which would then "suggest that the meaning of this paradigmatic text is to some degree open-ended, capable of moving in different directions" (*Abraham's Silence*, 225). Rather than taking the text as "open-ended," I am suggesting that God's test was open-ended.

30 See *Abraham's Silence*, 206–12.

first Pharaoh and then Abimelech.[31] Although the text takes great pains to clarify that Abimelech never slept with her (20:6, 16), no similar statement is made concerning Pharaoh.[32] When Lot was carried off by the four kings who had ravaged the whole region around Abraham, he gave little thought to his safety but immediately took off in pursuit (Gen 14). By contrast, when Sarah was taken by Pharaoh and later by Abimelech, Abraham did nothing to get her back.[33] She was returned to him only after God intervened.

And in my view, Abraham's behavior toward Hagar and Ishmael paralleled his treatment of Sarah. Middleton rightly observes that Abraham demonstrated concern for Ishmael when he asked for God to make Ishmael his covenant heir (17:18) and when he was upset about Sarah's demand that he send Hagar and Ishmael away (21:11).[34] But in the latter case, the passage gives no indication that Abraham sought God about it.[35] And when God told him to listen to Sarah, Abraham did so without further question, sending his wife and child away shockingly ill-prepared for life in the wilderness (vv. 13–14). Although Abraham had a household teeming with slaves and animals,[36] he gave Hagar and Ishmael no household help or beast of burden to ease their journey. That lack is heightened when the account is compared with ch. 22, which as several interpreters have noted, shares significant parallels with ch. 21.[37] In both Abraham rose early (**יַשְׁכֵּם**) to carry out God's instruction (21:14; 22:3). But whereas in ch. 22 he saddled a donkey and took two servants for a week-long trip, in ch. 21 he gave Hagar and Ishmael only a loaf of bread and a skin of water to sustain them in their exile. Perhaps he trusted God to take care of them according to his promise (21:13). Yet Abraham's lack of provision is still striking, particularly since it led to Hagar weeping in the

31 Terence Fretheim asks, "Might it be that the endangerment of the son is understood to be a consequence of the endangerment of his mother?" (*Abraham: Trials of Family and Faith* [Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2007], 119).

32 That could be because that detail is less central to the narrative in 12:10–20. If Abimelech had slept with Sarah, then that would have led to questions about Isaac's paternity. But that concern does not apply to the earlier narrative with Pharaoh. However, it is also quite likely that no parallel statement is found in 12:10–20 because Pharaoh did in fact have sexual relations with Sarah.

33 See Fretheim, *Abraham*, 49.

34 He contrasts this with the lack of textual evidence that Abraham loved Isaac (*Abraham's Silence*, 194–96).

35 Middleton raises the possibility that God's speech to Abraham about this issue came in response to prayer but observes that no prayer is described in the text (*Abraham's Silence*, 199 n. 18).

36 Note the livestock and slaves that he obtained from Pharaoh in 12:16 and the 318 men that he was able to muster for battle from his own household in 14:14.

37 See especially Il-Seung Chung, "Hagar and Ishmael in Light of Abraham and Isaac: Reading Gen. 21:8–21 and Gen. 22:1–19 as a Dialogue," *ExTim* 128 (2017), 573–82; Susan M. Pigott, "Hagar: The M/Other Patriarch," *Review & Expositor* 115 (2018), 524–28; David J. Zuker, "Ishmael and Isaac: Parallel, not Conflictual Lives," *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 26 (2012), 1–11. Middleton also notes several of these parallels (*Abraham's Silence*, 195 n. 9).

wilderness as she waited for Ishmael to die of thirst until the angel of YHWH showed up (vv. 15–19).[38]

Perhaps in some sense, God's command for Abraham to sacrifice Isaac was intended to make him confront what he had done to Ishmael. Maybe if he had responded with protest, God would have made that point to him in dialogue: "Abraham, you're loathe to sacrifice Isaac, but that's essentially the same thing you did to Ishmael when you sent him away nearly empty-handed." But by deciding to obey God's command, Abraham instead found himself in a similar situation as Hagar, coming face to face with the loss of his son.[39] In both accounts, when the death of the son was imminent, God intervened. And only these two passages in the HB describe an "angel [מלְאָך] of God/YHWH call[ing] [קרא] from heaven [22:11 ;21:17) "[מן השׁמים; also 22:15). Significantly, the angel's call led to both Hagar and Abraham seeing that the means of salvation for their son had already been provided.[40] If Abraham failed in some way, I would see it here—in the fact that he did not notice God's provision of the ram until after the angel confronted him,[41] despite his suggestive words to Isaac, "God himself will see to the lamb for the burnt offering, my son" (22:8).[42]

Wherever we ultimately come to land on this passage (if indeed we ever do), reading Middleton's incisive questions and careful attention to exegetical details will ensure that we not remain satisfied with a flat reading or be bound by the "straitjacket" of interpretive tradition, unable to consider other possibilities.[43] Even if, in the end, we agree with the majority interpretation that Abraham passed the test with flying colors—whatever we understand that test to be—we cannot unsee what Middleton reveals, nor would we want to. His penetrating analysis invites us

38 Chung observes that "It is ironical that Abraham, who takes a donkey for his journey to Moriah (Gen. 22:3), does not give such a donkey to Hagar and Ishmael. He just gives the bread and the water that are essential for their life—nothing more" ("Hagar and Ishmael," 578). But he does not acknowledge the fact that such paltry provisions would not preserve their lives for long (see Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993], 27–28; Phyllis Trible, "Ominous Beginnings for a Promise of Blessing," in *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives*, ed. Phyllis Trible and Letty M. Russell [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006], 47). Citing *Exod. Rab*. 1:1, Aryeh Cohen comments that "this scene embarrasses the rabbis" ("Hagar and Ishmael: A Commentary," *Interpretation* 68 [2014]: 251).

39 Chung states that "Hagar and Abraham are narratively bound together as *parents* who have to see the life-threatening trial of their sons" ("Hagar and Ishmael," 581). However, rather than seeing an element of judgment against Abraham implicit in God's call for him to sacrifice Isaac, he contends that both narratives "are stories of God testing Abraham by commanding that he sacrifice his two treasured sons."

40 Genesis 21:19 states that "God opened [Hagar's] eyes, and she saw (ראה) a well of water." And Gen 22:13 says, "Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked (ראה), and behold a ram with its horns caught in a thicket behind [him]."

41 See Middleton's discussion of the ram in *Abraham's Silence*, 219–22.

42 As Middleton observes, however, there is ambiguity about whether "my son" should be read as a vocative or as in apposition to "burnt offering" (*Abraham's Silence*, 179–82).

43 See Middleton, *Abraham's Silence*, 224.

into a deeper wrestling with the text and with the God of the text so that we, like Job, may be transformed.

Between Two Truths: Lament, Trust, and Wrestling with an Inscrutable God

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Abstract

J. Richard Middleton's book *Abraham's Silence: The Binding of Isaac, the Suffering of Job, and How to Talk Back to God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021) challenges traditional interpretations of the Aqedah (the binding of Isaac) by questioning whether Abraham's silent attempt to sacrifice Isaac was what God intended. This article interacts with Middleton's work. It was originally presented at a panel discussion on *Abraham's Silence* at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in Denver, Colorado, November 21, 2022.

Richard Middleton states his purpose at the beginning of his book: "ultimately to help people of faith recover the value of lament prayer as a way to process our pain (and the pain of the world) with the God of heaven and earth—for the healing both of ourselves and our world" (p. 9). I am wholeheartedly in favor of this purpose and have tried in my own small way to contribute to it. I confess that I have never considered the Akedah in light of that purpose—nor have I ever read the Akedah in light of Job—and I am profoundly grateful to Middleton for prompting me to do both.

He has helped me to see many things that I never noticed before, in his close and careful reading. For example, I noticed for the first time that Abraham rises early in the morning three times in Genesis. The first time, in Gen 19:27, Abraham goes early in the morning to the place where he had stood before the Lord and tried to persuade God to spare the city of Sodom. What he sees is the smoke of the city's destruction. I wondered what to make of this detail: is Abraham to learn that God's justice cannot ultimately be thwarted? Does he believe that his petitions to spare the city have failed? Or is he meant to see that he should have been more insistent and asked God to spare the city even if it contained only one righteous man?

The second instance is Gen 21:14, when Abraham rises early in the morning to send Hagar and Ishmael out into the wilderness with only bread and a skin of

water—a text in which he is implicated in the near-death of one of his sons, and an angel intervenes to save that son—two details that echo forward into the Akedah. And the third occurrence is Gen 22:3, when Abraham rises early in the morning to take his other son (provocatively called "his only son") to be sacrificed.

It is a small thread that binds all three stories together, but in a way that is evocative rather than obvious. I have been milling it over ever since Middleton drew my attention to it, and I am still not sure what to make of it. This indeterminacy appears to be a common feature of the Genesis narratives, including the Akedah.

In the footnote at the end of his exegesis of the Akedah, Middleton says that he does not intend his reading to be "a simple replacement for a traditional pious interpretation" but instead "a viable alternative reading." This text, he writes, "is to some degree open-ended, capable of moving in different directions" (p. 225 n. 89).

I completely agree with this, and it is Middleton who convinced me of this in relation to this particular text. At the same time, I do not think Middleton would be unhappy to set aside the traditional interpretation altogether. Calling tradition a "straitjacket" is one clue to this; despite his caveats that he did not mean this to sound like an insult, I think it ultimately undercuts the thoughtfulness of the argument that he is making.

I would like to wrestle a little more with the value of the traditional reading alongside Middleton's evocative suggestions about an alternative—indeed, to lean even more into the ambiguity of this text, with a bit of help from Erich Auerbach, whom Middleton cites (p. 166). Here are Auerbach's comments at greater length:

In the story of Isaac, it is not only God's intervention at the beginning and the end, but even the factual and psychological elements which come between, that are mysterious, merely touched upon, fraught with background; and therefore they require subtle investigation and interpretation, they demand them. Since so much in the story is dark and incomplete, and since the reader knows that God is a hidden God, his effort to interpret it constantly finds something new to feed upon.[1]

I wonder whether this "dark and incomplete" story asks us to stand in the tension between two truths in Scripture: the good of trust in an often hidden God, and the good of vigorous lament (I am borrowing the language of "between two truths" from one of my mentors, Klyne Snodgrass). Middleton has done all of us a great

1 Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (50th Anniversary Edition; trans. Willard R. Trask; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 15.

service by highlighting the second truth, which I take to be an indispensable part of a life of faith.

But is not the first also an integral part of faith? For example, although Middleton tends to position the "anti-protest" tradition as external to Scripture (p. 147–49), this tradition has its seeds in biblical texts. Middleton draws on the work of Dov Weiss when he writes that the "anti-protest tradition seems to have been generated by learned pagan and gnostic critiques of the God of the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible in the first centuries of the Common Era" (p. 148). This is certainly true of the rabbinic literature and the early Christian literature discussed by Weiss.

At the same time, other scholars like Richard Bautch, Rodney Werline, and William Morrow have noted that the seeds of the anti-protest tradition arose long before the first century CE and are present in Scripture in the form of the penitential laments. Not all these scholars agree on exactly when the shift in lament began to happen, but they often point to a similar set of texts that display a shift in lament away from protest and toward penitence (e.g., 2 Chr 30:10–30; Ezra 9:6–15; Neh 9:6–37; Isa 63:7–64:11; Dan 4; Dan 9:18–19; 1 Macc 6; 2 Macc 9). Samuel Balentine also suggests that we can see evidence of this turn toward penitential lament in Elihu's speech in the book of Job.[2]

In this respect, as in so many others, biblical texts do not speak with only one voice. Lament is deeply interwoven into Scripture, into both Old and New Testaments (I wrote a book insisting on this point in relation to the New Testament[3]). And there are other texts that commend a deep trust in the inscrutable purposes of God, and an obedience that leaps into the dark on the basis of that trust—that goes forth to a land yet unknown (Gen 12:1; 22:2).

As Middleton writes, "Scripture affirms in multiple ways that the God of Abraham positively desires vigorous dialogue partners" (p. 63). And, Scripture also affirms the importance of exclusive loyalty and obedience to God, of loving God with our whole heart and strength, of following God even when the way is unclear or difficult.

Middleton admits to being "a bit suspicious of any religious commitment that is 'absolute and uncompromising'" (p. 196 n.10). I'm a Gospels scholar, so this made me think of Jesus's absolute and uncompromising statements about

2 Samuel E. Balentine, *Job* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2006), 554. See also Balentine, "I Was Ready to Be Sought Out By Those Who Did Not Ask," pages 1–20 in *Seeking the Favor of God* (ed. Mark J. Boda, Daniel K. Falk, and Rodney A. Werline; Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006); Richard J. Bautch, *Developments in Genre between Post-Exilic Penitential Prayers and the Psalms of Communal Lament* (Academia Biblica, 7; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003); William S. Morrow, *Protest Against God* (Hebrew Bible Monographs, 4; Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007); Rodney Werline, *Penitential Prayer in Second Temple Judaism* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998).

3 Rebekah Eklund, *Jesus Wept: The Significance of Jesus' Laments in the New Testament* (Library of New Testament Studies; London: T&T Clark, 2015).

discipleship in the Gospels: Take up your cross and follow me. Deny yourself. Lose your life for my sake (Matt 16:24–26; Mark 8:34–37; Luke 9:23–24; John 12:25). "If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26; see also Matt 10:37–38). You cannot go home first to say goodbye to your family or bury your father or get married. Just drop everything and follow.

To be sure, Middleton's book is about Abraham, not the Gospels, but in my view profoundly uncompromising commitment is part of the witness of Scripture, and it is even part of the story of Abraham. When God calls Abram, he calls him to go to a place "that I will show you" (Gen 12:2), a command that is repeated when God instructs Abraham to take Isaac and offer him as a burnt offering in "a place I will show you" (Gen 22:2). In both cases, Abraham must leave home and set out on the path before he knows exactly where he is going.[4]

Might not the Akedah stand at the uneasy or tensive relationship between those two truths: it is good for Abraham to obey and trust God, and it is also good for Abraham to engage in an active, mutual relationship with this God. Lament itself, of course, stands at the intersection of these two truths, since lament is typically grounded in a trust that God is a God who hears, even if that trust is faint or fading or wounded.

Jesus prays, "Take this cup from me," and also "But not my will but yours" (Luke 22:42). Jesus prays, "My God, why have you forsaken me" (Matt 27:46), and also "Into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46). The God of Scripture who invites vigorous debate is also a holy God, a wholly other God, a zealous God. If Abraham's debate with God over Sodom represents the first truth, perhaps the Akedah points toward the second. Dov Weiss argues that the "early rabbinic voices of opposition to confronting God stand in stark contrast to the Hebrew Bible and Second Temple literature, where theological protest is not foreclosed as a legitimate response to suffering or unethical divine behavior"; but even Weiss takes the Akedah as an instance of "radical submission to the divine will."[5]

I have not yet said anything about Job, which is obviously a centerpiece of this marvelous book. I am largely in agreement with Middleton's understanding of

4 Jon Levenson, with whom Middleton deeply engages in his book, notes the parallels between Gen 12:2 and Gen 22:2—the command to "go forth"; and the "step effect" of the terms "from your native land, from your kinsmen, and from your father's house" in chapter 12 and "your son, your favored one, the one whom you love" in chapter 22. In both cases, "Abraham begins his trek without knowing where it is to end." Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 128.

5 Dov Weiss, "The Sin of Protesting God in Rabbinic and Patristic Literature," *AJS Review* 39:2 (November 2015): 371.

Job, and I found it wonderfully generative to think of these two stories in relation to one another.

Both Job and Abraham, of course, are tested. The narrator of Job explains why Job is being tested: to see if he will still love God after all of God's blessings are removed from him. But the narrator in Genesis does not give an explanation. It is unclear in Genesis *why* God feels compelled to test Abraham. It seems that Abraham is being asked to sacrifice Isaac *for no reason*, at least not for any reason provided in the text. This parallels the equally meaningless or inexplicable suffering of Job, who is afflicted "for no reason" (*ḥinnām*) in Job 2:3.[6] Perhaps it is because of Gen 21:12: God tells Abraham that it is through Isaac, not Ishmael, that Abraham's offspring "will be reckoned."

This is a slender clue, but it is the clue noticed by the book of Hebrews when Hebrews narrates Abraham's test (Heb 11:18). Will Abraham still trust God to fulfill the covenant even if the son through whom Abraham's offspring will be reckoned is no more? In other words, like Job, will Abraham still love or trust or fear God if God takes away the blessing of Abraham's son?

Middleton rejects this as a possibility, and at one point suggests that God could *not* continue the covenant if Isaac dies: "Simply put, if Abraham had not desisted from the sacrifice when the angel called from heaven, there would be no offspring by which the nations could bless themselves" (p. 218). This made me wonder if God's purpose is really defeated so easily. Can a human thwart God's plan?[7] Surely if Abraham has learned anything about this God at this point, it is that God can bring forth life in the most unexpected of ways, including from a womb long past child-bearing age.

God, remarkably, learns something from Abraham's decision not to spare his son: "Now I know that you fear God" (Gen 22:12). Middleton compares this to a professor saying "Now I know that you are a C student" (p. 197), but "fearing God" is not a C, is it? It is a good, even if it is not the only good.

There is one other aspect of the tradition regarding Isaac that I think is worth considering, and it is the Jewish and Christian impulse to connect Isaac to martyrdom. Middleton makes a tentative connection between a positive reading of the Akedah, child abuse, and martyrdom (p. 142–44). I do not want to minimize the terror of families choosing to kill one another or to offer themselves up for martyrdom. At the same time, if one had a choice to be violently killed along with their children by a Crusader, or to recite the Shema and then to die under one's

6 Balentine writes, "The report that God has set about to destroy Job for no reason, like a nefarious sinner who ambushes the innocent [Prov 1:10–12], is in my judgment perhaps the single most disturbing admission in the Old Testament, if not in all scripture" (Balentine, *Job*, 60).

7 Elsewhere, Middleton writes, "Indeed, it is not too much to say that if Moses had not interceded for Israel, there would no longer have been an Israel" (p. 53). Could not God have found another prophet to intercede, or pursued him until he does (as God does with Jonah)?

own agency, I can see how that latter choice reorients what kind of a death one has chosen to die—not a meaningless, violent death but as a faithful witness, an offering to God. I can see the power and the defiance in choosing to take agency away from one's killers and reframe the meaning of one's death. Therefore, I hesitate both to equate the traditional reading of the Akedah with child abuse, or to undermine the positive function and value of martyrdom accounts.

The Christian tradition, of course, found in Isaac's story elements of Christ's story—the only son, the beloved son, sacrificed by a father. To be sure, the analogy is imperfect—Christ is willing, whereas Isaac does not seem to know what is happening to him, at least not in the biblical narrative. And while Isaac's death is averted—in fact, Isaac's death does not seem to be at all the goal of the Akedah—Christ plays the role of both Isaac and the ram caught in the thicket. Perhaps as a New Testament scholar, I read Isaac's story too much through the lens of Hebrews 11, which emphasizes Abraham's daring faith—but it is also part of the tradition I would not want to set aside too quickly.[8]

At one point, Middleton invokes William Brown's delightful phrase "reading with wonder" (p. 165). In the circuitous way my mind works, this brought me back to Job, who after his encounter with God declares that he has spoken "things too wonderful for me that I did not know" (Job 42:3). This phrase, "too wonderful for me," occurs only one other time in Scripture, in Psalm 131: "I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me" (Ps 131:1). This psalm has always been a great comfort to me—that after a long day or night of wrestling with God in the whirlwind, I can simply rest with God, the way that a child rests with her mother (Ps 131:2).

I do not know why God might have approved of Abraham's willingness (if indeed God does) when it flies so profoundly in the face of our own moral judgments. I do not always understand the zeal of God or the hidden God as much as I understand the God who hears laments and laments along with God's people.

When I was writing a book on the Beatitudes, people often asked me what I thought the Beatitudes meant. I usually said they mean many things, which satisfied exactly nobody. But the more I studied them, the more I wondered if one of the main functions of the Beatitudes is to make us wonder about them—to move us to talk to one another about them and what they mean and how we might live them out in our own lives.[9]

I like to think that I have Origen on my side in this respect. Origen proposed that God deliberately spoke some of the truths of Scripture in enigmas and parables and problems.[10] As Stephen and Martin Westerholm explain, for Origen "the

8 Although I take Middleton's point that Jephthah is also in Hebrews 11 (p. 214 n. 59)!
9 Rebekah Eklund, *The Beatitudes through the Ages* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021), 287–90.
10 Origen, *Cels.* 3.45; see also *Hom. Num.* 27.1.7.

presence of mysteries in the divine text is hardly accidental: . . . the struggle to understand them is one of the divinely appointed means for bringing believers to maturity."[11]

Carol Newsom points out that even Job does not tell us substantively what he learned from his encounter with God. She says, "The author doesn't want Job to do our work for us. . . . This is a story which doesn't want to spell it all out for us."[12] Job never says another word in the epilogue—and neither does Abraham immediately after the Akedah. As Newsom writes, "[Job] says he has understood something transformative in the divine speeches, yet he refuses to play the role of hermeneut for the audience, for he never makes clear exactly what he has understood. Consequently, we bystanders begin to argue among ourselves."[13]

My fellow panelists and I were given the opportunity to be such bystanders, arguing among ourselves about Job and Abraham and suffering, and I am grateful to Richard Middleton for prompting this wondering, wonder-full, and important argument.

11 Stephen Westerholm and Martin Westerholm, *Reading Sacred Scripture: Voices from the History of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 79.

12 Carol Newsom, interview on The Two Testaments podcast, March 16, 2022.

13 Carol A. Newsom, *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2003), 235. Likewise, Balentine writes of Job: "When it comes to suffering 'for no reason' [Job 2:3], this book seems intent on reminding us that questions about the world, human existence, and God necessarily remain open ended. To settle for anything less is to deny the pain that punctuates every faith assertion with a question mark" (Balentine, *Job*, 33).

Reading Between, Reading Alongside, and Remaining Open: A Review of Middleton, *Abraham's Silence*

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Abstract

J. Richard Middleton's book *Abraham's Silence: The Binding of Isaac, the Suffering of Job, and How to Talk Back to God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021) challenges traditional interpretations of the Aqedah (the binding of Isaac) by questioning whether Abraham's silent attempt to sacrifice Isaac was what God intended. This article interacts with Middleton's work. It was originally presented at a panel discussion on *Abraham's Silence* at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in Denver, Colorado, November 21, 2022.

In *Abraham's Silence*, J. Richard Middleton explores the troubling story of God's test of Abraham in Genesis 22 and suggests a different interpretation to the traditional one which sees it as a triumph of Abraham's faithfulness and obedience. His book is divided into three parts: the first explores the lament psalms and Moses's intercession on behalf of Israel at Sinai in response to the golden calf, followed by prophetic intercession in the tradition of Moses. Middleton explains, "The existence of these prayers [of protest] in Scripture suggests that God approves of, even desires, such vigorous interaction on behalf of the human covenant partner."[1]

The second part of the book examines God's answer to Job from the whirlwind, where Middleton sees God first correcting Job's understanding of how the cosmos is governed and then delighting in the wild creatures that are most like Job—Behemoth and Leviathan—in order to honor his complaint as right speech. Middleton concludes, "Job's vocal complaint to God functions as an implicit critique of Abraham's lack of protest on behalf of Isaac in Genesis 22. The book of Job thus models an alternative to silent obedience in the face of terrible circumstances."[2] Job, together with psalms of lament and prophetic intercession, suggests that God desires—even welcomes—vigorous prayer.

1 J. Richard Middleton, *Abraham's Silence: The Binding of Isaac, the Suffering of Job, and How to Talk Back to God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 5.
2 Middleton, *Abraham's Silence*, 189.

Part three returns to Genesis 22 with these texts in mind, examining the place of the Aqedah in the context of the Abraham story as a whole—both what comes before and the fallout of that fateful test. Based on this contextual reading, Middleton concludes that Abraham failed the test. Although he demonstrated obedience to God, he failed to plumb the depths of God's mercy. Abraham demonstrated that he did not know God well because he did not protest an instruction that was out of keeping with God's character and intercede for the life of his son.

I teach an upper-division Biblical Theology Seminar at Biola University in which Genesis 22 is our case study. We read the work of five interpreters of Genesis 22 who exemplify each of the five types of biblical theology described in Edward Klink and Darian Lockett's *Understanding Biblical Theology*.[3] Our conversation partners are John Walton, Gerhard von Rad, Walter Moberly, Brevard Childs, and Rusty Reno. After reading these scholars with my students, I returned to read Middleton's book a second time. Two things in particular struck me: (1) how readers attribute different motives and emotions to Abraham based on the gaps in the biblical text, (2) the implications of reading the text in conversation with other biblical texts or narrative patterns. I'll address these two issues in turn.

Reading Between the Lines

We would love to know what Abraham is thinking and feeling, but Genesis 22 only shows us his actions without commenting on his inner life. And while Middleton himself says that "we should be reluctant to decisively fill in the gaps in this narrative,"[4] he ventures into that territory with the help of some exegetical clues. He claims, "just because we are not explicitly told about a character's mental or emotional state does not mean that we are prohibited from making reasonable inferences from clues the narrator gives us."[5] His proposals along these lines diverge remarkably from other interpreters, making this an ideal test case for the role of readers in negotiating the meaning of a narrative. As an example, I will raise just two readerly questions for which these interpreters propose diverse answers.

Why didn't Abraham argue with God? In Childs's exposition of this passage for *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, he says remarkably little about Abraham's lack of protest, simply stating that "no motivation is given."[6]

John Walton avers that Abraham did not argue because child sacrifice was familiar to him.[7] Von Rad concludes the opposite, saying, "For Abraham, God's

3 Edward W. Klink III and Darian R. Lockett, *Understanding Biblical Theology: A Comparison of Theory and Practice* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012).
4 Middleton, *Abraham's Silence*, 181.
5 Middleton, *Abraham's Silence*, 166.
6 Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 327.
7 John H. Walton, *Genesis*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2001), 510.

command is completely incomprehensible," though he does not consider why Abraham is silent.[8] Was child sacrifice just a matter of course? Or was it incomprehensible to Abraham? It cannot be both.

Rusty Reno suggests that Abraham's actions in verse 9 display a "cold, unquestioning efficiency."[9] And while these may not seem commendable qualities, Reno goes on to say that Abraham's lack of petition and "self-involved grief and lamentation" is admirable to God.[10] Similarly, according to Middleton, Jon Levenson views this story as a paradigm for self-surrender.[11] That is, the lack of protest exhibits precisely that characteristic we should all seek to develop as a response to divine command.

As already noted, Middleton feels Abraham's silence is suspicious, given his prior protest in Genesis 18 regarding Sodom and Gomorrah.[12] If Abraham is not averse to arguing with God, then why does he stop short of doing so here?

Clearly, this narrative gap calls for speculation, and various readers draw very different conclusions, depending on whether they rely on historical (Walton), theological (von Rad, Levenson, and Reno), or canonical (Middleton) considerations. Of these interpreters, only Childs refuses to fill in the gap. This brings us to our second question for consideration.

How does Abraham feel toward Isaac? Von Rad reads the phrase "whom you love" in verse 2 at face value, saying that God's awareness of Abraham's love for Isaac sharpens his demand.[13] He sees the elongated telling of the preparations for and arrival at Mt. Moriah as indicating Abraham's "agonies."[14] For von Rad, verse 6 shows "Abraham's attentive love for the child in the division of the burdens" because Abraham carries the most dangerous implements himself.[15] He sees "tender love" in Abraham's response to Isaac's puzzlement over the lack of sacrificial lamb.[16]

Middleton, on the other hand, notes that the word ʾahab ("love"; v. 2) "tends to signal trouble" in Genesis, denoting sibling rivalry.[17] He wonders whether this is a test to see if Abraham really does love Isaac, as opposed to Ishmael. Middleton also considers a whole list of possible ways to understand the sequencing of actions in verse 3.[18] Does he rise early to avoid Sarah or others? Because he

8 Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, rev. ed., OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), 239.
9 R. R. Reno, *Genesis*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2010), 198.
10 Reno, *Genesis*, 205.
11 Middleton, *Abraham's Silence*, 137.
12 Middleton, *Abraham's Silence*, 134.
13 von Rad, *Genesis*, 239.
14 von Rad, *Genesis*, 240.
15 von Rad, *Genesis*, 240.
16 von Rad, *Genesis*, 241.
17 Middleton, *Abraham's Silence*, 172.
18 Middleton, *Abraham's Silence*, 174–75.

couldn't sleep? Because he's enthusiastic? Or because he's numb with shock? Does he chop his own wood after saddling the donkey because he's confused? Hyper-focused? Is this a delay tactic? I wonder whether he does not want anyone else to bear either the guilt or the honor of the terrible task he is about to undertake.

The laconic nature of the narrative naturally raises these questions. It invites us to consider any and every possibility. To do so is to take the text seriously.

Remarkably, none of the other interpreters I surveyed took time to consider Abraham's deep sense of connection with Ishmael, about which we do not have to guess. Genesis 21:11 says explicitly that Sarah's request to banish Hagar and Ishmael "distressed Abraham greatly because it concerned his son," a response that God rebuked.

Genesis 22 begins with "Some time later God tested Abraham." It seems to me that "some time later" should drive us backward to read this story of Ishmael first as the stated background to the testing of Abraham. Why might God need to test Abraham? Because he is tempted to prefer Ishmael over Isaac. His affections are set on the son of Hagar. This strengthens the possibility that God is testing whether Abraham truly loves Isaac—that is, whether he is committed to Isaac's flourishing and whether he sees him as the son of the promise. On this reading, his silence is indeed suspicious. Middleton is right to wonder why Abraham expresses no outward distress. It seems to confirm that Abraham has not yet transferred loyalty from Ishmael to Isaac.

Reading in Canonical Context

Methodologically, Middleton's approach is most like Childs's in his insistence that other canonical texts provide the necessary context for understanding Genesis 22.[19] Strikingly, however, Middleton and Childs point to different texts, which yield dramatically different readings. Here we will consider the implications of choosing texts as conversations partners.

Middleton finds the most compelling canonical influences for Genesis 22 in the prophetic intercession of Moses, the lament psalms, and the protests of Job—especially noting the lexical links between the Abraham stories and the text of Job ("dust and ashes," intercession, the revelation of God's plans, and the loss of children). These provide a foil for Abraham's silence.

Childs, on the other hand, links Genesis 22 with Leviticus 8–9 and 16 (where "appeared," ram, and burnt offering are also present), concluding that we are meant to link Abraham's episode with Israel's future public worship.[20] Childs also

19 This makes it an example of Biblical Theology 4, using Klink and Lockett's taxonomy, although Middleton does not exhibit a Christological focus that is common to most proponents of BT4.

20 Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, 327.

suggests that the statement "YHWH sees" in verse 14 points back to verse 8 and forward to future theophanies in order to "guarantee . . . God's continual presence among his people."[21]

Tim Mackie, co-founder of the Bible Project, proposes yet another set of canonical partners. For this I am drawing on a series of two podcasts, one in which he interviewed me about Israel's test at Mt. Sinai (whether to ascend the mountain or not).[22] In that conversation I brought Middleton's book to Mackie's attention because it complicated his approach to the "test" theme in Scripture. The second podcast is the Exodus Q&R episode in which Mackie and Jon Collins followed up on our conversation after reading *Abraham's Silence*.[23]

Mackie deeply appreciated Middleton's book but feels it is crucial to read Genesis 22 in light of the test of Genesis 3, where Adam and Eve were asked to trust God's command, even though it seemed counterintuitive and not in their best interest. If Abraham had questioned God, it would have placed him in the role of the serpent, doubting God's good purposes.[24]

Whose Canon?

As I have shared about *Abraham's Silence* with others, the most common response has been to question whether Middleton's view takes seriously the testimony of Heb 11:17–19 or Jas 2:21–23 about this passage. And while I am hesitant to allow the New Testament to drown out the unique testimony of the Hebrew Bible, I think it is fair to say that these New Testament texts could have used more than a footnote. On what basis does the author of Hebrews conclude that Abraham trusted God to raise Isaac from the dead? How does James conclude that Abraham's obedience at Mount Moriah proves he is righteous? Are there clues in Genesis on which they base their assessments?

The literary design of Genesis 22 may provide support for these New Testament readings. While Middleton's sensitivity to repeated words and narrative

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21 Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, 327.

22 "Two Takes on the Test at Mount Sinai — Feat. Carmen Imes," *BibleProject* podcast, May 23, 2022. https://podcasts.google.com/feed/aHR0cHM6Ly9mZWVkcy5zaW1wbGVjYXN0LmNvbS8zTlZtVVdaTw/episode/ZWY0MjY2YzMtNTkxZC00MjRjLTgxOTUtOGQ2NDI3NTRlNTFk?sa=X&ved=0CAUQkfYCahcKEwjQmdPBu9b7AhUAAAAAHQAAAAAQOw

23 "Did God Try to Kill Moses? – Exodus Q+R," *BibleProject* podcast, June 22, 2022. https://podcasts.google.com/feed/aHR0cHM6Ly9mZWVkcy5zaW1wbGVjYXN0LmNvbS8zTlZtVVdaTw/episode/ZjNjZjY0MmMtNjI4YS00ZDI5LThiNDQtZjk5ODZjOTU4ZjAw?sa=X&ved=0CAUQkfYCahcKEwjQmdPBu9b7AhUAAAAAHQAAAAAQOw

24 Mackie notes that the death of the first born by the hand of God is another common occurrence in the Torah, which should prepare us for this incident (Judah's sons in Gen 38; Egyptian sons in Exod 11-12; Levi's sons in Lev 10). Perhaps most controversially, Mackie considers the test in Genesis 22 to be a form of judgment for Abraham and Sarah's mistreatment of Hagar, which Mackie calls sexual abuse and abandonment. As a result of their mistreatment, they lost both of their sons. Since Abraham demonstrated appropriate trust, God returned his son Isaac to him and provides a substitute sacrifice. This interpretation seems to lack exegetical support.

framing is exemplary, one area that could use more development is the threefold repetition of *hinnēnî* ("Here I am!"). We hear this expression in response in verses 1, 7, and 11 to God's summons, to Isaac's question (though it is obscured in English translation), and to the angel of the LORD, respectively. Although Middleton notes that Abraham responds to God and to his son with the same indication of readiness to listen and respond—*hinnēnî*—Brueggemann treats this sequence of *hinnēnî*s as the structural center point of the narrative, since they create a threefold series of summon-response-command. The center conversation between Abraham and Isaac augments the pattern by adding a fourth element, Abraham's statement in verse 8: "God himself will see to the lamb for the burnt offering, my son."

For Brueggemann, this statement "stands utterly alone as the point of stress, violating the normal pattern of the three parts."[25] Its function is to move the plot from "test" (v. 1) to "now I know" (v. 12) and from "take" (v. 2) to "you have not withheld" (v. 12).[26] Brueggemann insists that test and provision are two aspects of biblical faith that cannot be separated, as much as we would like to do so.[27]

The centrality of Abraham's confession of faith in verse 8 seems to justify the perspective of Heb 11:19, which does its own sort of gap-filling by claiming that "Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead." Abraham had testified to God's ability to reconcile promise and command. Abraham did not see obedience as a dead end. God would see to it—*somehow*.

Remaining Open

I wonder whether the symmetry in Abraham's responses indicated that his attentiveness to God did not close him off to his son. In spite of the difficulty of God's request, Abraham remained open and responsive to Isaac, and his openness to Isaac did not make him less attentive to the LORD.

This is the crux of faith-full parenting, whenever our commitment to obeying God impacts our children in ways that seem less than ideal. Do I entrust my children to God when responding to a vocational call? How do I remain attentive and obedient to God and at the same time open to my children?

I was already convinced of the need to read Scripture in community with diverse interpreters. Middleton's work illustrates the value of doing so. As a self-identified Jamericadian, Dr. Middleton brings a unique perspective that is not chained to traditional readings of the text in Euro-American settings. At the same time, Middleton's deep commitment to a close reading of the text makes his work exegetically defensible and pastorally rich.

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25 Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, Interpetation (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 186.
26 Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 187.
27 Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 192–93.

Not only does a diverse community impact the way we read emotions and motivations into gaps in the text, but it expands the range of other texts that we might consider alongside Genesis 22. The binding of Isaac takes on different hues depending on whether we put it side-by-side with Genesis 3, Genesis 21, Leviticus, or Job.

Middleton has helpfully drawn our attention to Abraham's silence and wondered whether he should have argued with God. Can we have it both ways? Could it be that Abraham's obedience was exemplary but that it was not the only possible way of honoring God? Given the Bible's clear invitation to protest and lament, Abraham had other options available to him. His obedience was one way to faithfully respond, but protest was another faithful possibility.

Perhaps Abraham truly was ambivalent about Isaac, as Genesis 21 seems to say, and God designed this test to help Abraham release his grip on doing things his own way so that he could truly trust God. One way or another, Abraham would recognize Isaac as the son of promise and God as the only one who could ensure the delivery of that promise.

Response to J. Richard Middleton, *Abraham's Silence*

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Abstract

J. Richard Middleton's book *Abraham's Silence: The Binding of Isaac, the Suffering of Job, and How to Talk Back to God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021) challenges traditional interpretations of the Aqedah (the binding of Isaac) by questioning whether Abraham's silent attempt to sacrifice Isaac was what God intended. This article interacts with Middleton's work. It was originally presented at a panel discussion on *Abraham's Silence* at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in Denver, Colorado on November 21, 2022.

Abraham's Silence is nothing if not ambitious. With remarkable boldness, Richard Middleton seeks to overturn conventional interpretations of two of the most foundational—and to most readers, two of the most disturbing—texts in the biblical canon. Is the lesson of the book of Job, as many have thought, that the religious ideal is to bear one's sufferings submissively? On the contrary. As Middleton sees them, God's speeches from the whirlwind are a "positive affirmation" of Job's protest; interpretations that suggest otherwise, no matter how widespread and deeply rooted in tradition, represent "a fundamental misreading" of the book (p. 7).[1] Is the Aqedah a story of Abraham's spiritual heroism, valorizing his willingness to do whatever God asks of him? Hardly. Abraham, Middleton says, should have remonstrated with God; the fact that he did not do so means that he "did not pass the test" that God had placed before him (p. 223). Turning traditional readings on their head, Middleton insists that Job's protest of his suffering was good and praiseworthy, and that Abraham's *lack* of protest in the face of God's command that he sacrifice his son was problematic at best, and a miserable failure at worst.

Crucially, Middleton wants to read *with* the grain of the text rather than against it. Speaking of the Aqedah, Middleton tells us that what he will offer is not midrash but something closer to peshat. In presenting "a nuanced literary or rhetorical reading of textual details" (p. 165), he is engaged, he writes, not in "ideological

1 References to *Abraham's Silence* will be given in parentheses within the text of this article.

criticism" but in "exegesis" of the text of Genesis 22 (p. 191). In other words, as Middleton sees it, the critique of Abraham that he offers is intrinsic to the text, not imposed upon it from the outside. Unbeknownst to them, readers who are troubled by Abraham's response to God's command are in fact echoing a perspective held by the author of the text itself.

Abraham's Silence is vintage Middleton. As he has so often in earlier works, Middleton brings together meticulous attention to textual detail, sophisticated philosophical and theological sensibilities, and profound moral and religious passion. I should perhaps lay my proverbial cards on the table: I read *Abraham's Silence* wanting to be convinced. Far better, from my perspective, to be horrified *with* the text rather than horrified *at* it. But for all the power of Middleton's truly important book, I am unfortunately not (yet?) persuaded by his interpretation of the Aqedah.

I obviously cannot hope to do justice to the full range of arguments and interpretations Middleton presents in the short time that I have. So instead let me offer just a few examples of where, despite being tempted, I cannot quite follow Middleton.

In Gen 22:2 God commands Abraham to take "your son, your only one, whom you love—Isaac." Focusing on the last of the three descriptions of Isaac, Middleton notes that "this reference to Abraham's love for Isaac is not actually stated as a fact by the narrator . . . but occurs as what is effectively a parenthetical description of Isaac in God's instructions to Abraham" and then leaps—without sufficient warrant, it seems to me—to the conclusion that "We could take the phrase 'whom you love' to have the rhetorical force of 'You love him, don't you?'" (pp. 172–73). Since Abraham's love for Isaac is in question, God's terrifying command gives him a chance "to prove his love" for his younger son (p. 195). If he argues—prays, laments—it will become clear that he does in fact love his youngest son; if he silently obeys, though, we will know that he does not. It is surely significant, Middleton avers, that after Abraham binds him upon the altar, Isaac is described as "your son, your only one" (Gen 22:12, 16). "Given that Abraham has just attempted to sacrifice Isaac," Middleton writes, "it makes sense that this God-fearing obedience would not qualify as love for him. And so that phrase ["whom you love"] is omitted" (p. 196).

Middleton offers some intriguing arguments for why we might doubt Abraham's love for Isaac (pp. 194–96), but let us stay with his interpretation of 22:2. "Your son" is a simple, factual description of Isaac; "your only one"[2] is a description of Isaac that makes sense, albeit painful sense, given that Ishmael has just

2 Some, like the NJPS, take *yehidka* to mean "your favored one." Middleton rejects this (p. 171, n15).

been sent away.[3] It seems odd to me to interpret the third descriptor, "whom you love," as somehow asking a question rather than making a statement. There is no linguistic cue to suggest that "whom you love" should be heard in a different register than "your son" and "your only one." The phrase should therefore be taken as a straightforward report (from the mouth of God, no less): Abraham loves his son Isaac.

As it unfolds, the story itself evokes the love and intimacy shared by father and son. Consider the dialogue between Abraham and Isaac in 22:7–8. As Jonathan Grossman observes, Abraham addresses Isaac with an "endearing" "my son" each time he speaks. Note also that the first half of verse 7, "Isaac said to Abraham his father and he said: 'My father!' And he said, 'Here I am, my son,'" adds no new content or substance to the story; its "sole purpose," as Grossman writes, is "the emphasis on the father-son relationship." And, of course, Abraham responds to his son as he had responded to God, with the word *hinneni*, "here I am." Much of the power of the story lies precisely here: "Abraham is not a cold-hearted father who is indifferent to the fate of his son." On the contrary, Abraham has two loves, two commitments, that have now been placed in impossible, unbearable tension and conflict.[4] To take that away—to imagine that Abraham does not really love his son—is, I think, to miss something utterly essential to the story as it is told.

Middleton wants us to notice what he refers to as "rhetorical signals that complicate a simple reading of the Aqedah" (p. 167), but the question, I think, is what kind of complication some of these signals point to. Picking up on an interpretation put forward by Jonathan Jacobs,[5] Middleton wonders why Abraham stops to cut wood before leaving on the three-day journey (Gen 22:3); presumably, father and son could have collected wood along the way, or even at the site of the sacrifice. Perhaps, Middleton suggests, cutting the wood is a "delaying tactic" on Abraham's part. Middleton further observes, again following Jacobs, that the sequence of actions Abraham undertakes is strange. Instead of cutting the wood and then saddling the donkey, Abraham saddles the donkey first. Given that donkeys are impatient animals, this is anomalous behavior. "Perhaps," Middleton writes, "Abraham is under such stress and emotional turmoil that he is not thinking clearly; but then [, he adds,] who would be, in such a situation?" (p. 175).

Abraham's behavior *is* unusual. But in my estimation the actions that Abraham undertakes do not bolster Middleton's argument; they do nothing to suggest that

3 Another possible interpretation is that Isaac is "that special son in whom all his God-promised hopes for the future are centered." Robert Davidson, *Genesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1979), 96. See also, e.g., James McKeown, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 118.

4 Jonathan Grossman, *Abram to Abraham: A Literary Analysis of the Abraham Narrative*, An Outline of Old Testament Dialogue 11 (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2016), 474–75.

5 Jonathan Jacobs, "Willing Obedience with Doubts: Abraham at the Binding of Isaac," *Vetus Testamentum* 60 (2010), 546–59.

God wants Abraham to resist God's command, or to argue and intercede on behalf of Isaac. Instead, I think, the text wants to gesture at Abraham's profound "apprehensiveness"[6] in the face of God's terrifying command. He is not a robot but a father who loves his son, and he likely finds the divine command unfathomable. But he nevertheless sets out to fulfill God's word. And disturbing as this may be, from the text's own perspective that is a sign of his greatness rather than his failure. Strikingly, Jacobs looks at the same evidence and arrives at a radically different—and I think more convincing—conclusion than Middleton. "Abraham is presented," he writes, "as a great figure who chooses to fulfill God's word even where this entails waging a difficult inner battle."[7] Middleton is right to draw our attention to the ways the textual signals he focuses on "suggest tension, stress, and perhaps internal confusion on Abraham's part" (p. 181). But I remain skeptical that the point of these signals is to question "the validity of Abraham's response to God" (p. 182). More likely, I think, these signals are meant to evoke Abraham's humanity—even and especially in the impossible situation in which he finds himself.

At the end of the day, I find it hard to get around the fact that the two angelic speeches in Genesis 22 praise Abraham and bless him. "Now I know," the angel first declares, "that you are a God-fearer, since you have not withheld your son, your only one, from me" (Gen 22:12). One of Middleton's strategies for deflecting—or perhaps better, softening—this divine praise of Abraham is to note "the prominent thematic statement that the fear of YHWH is the *beginning* of wisdom or knowledge rather than its culmination" and to wonder whether this "suggest[s] that in order to achieve mature wisdom, both Abraham and Job needed to move from their initial, somewhat immature fear of God to a position where godly fear is not antithetical to, but undergirds, vigorous interaction with the divine covenant partner" (pp. 185–86). Despite Middleton's intentions, this feels homiletical to me. (When I was a young rabbi I once asked in a sermon whether Abraham is described as a God-fearer rather than a God-lover because a God-lover would have refused God's command. Although I was convinced at the time that this might be a plausible peshat interpretation of the text, it now seems obviously homiletical to me.) I should emphasize that I do not mean "homiletical" in a pejorative sense. Quite the contrary: homilies are a significant part of how Jews and Christians alike make meaning in interacting with the biblical text. But

6 Jacobs, "Willing Obedience," 559.

7 Jacobs, "Willing Obedience," 559. Jacobs writes: "Abraham is presented as a complex, human figure who is torn between his personal and family needs and the desire to fulfill God's command. His decision to fulfill God's word although it conflicts so painfully with his own needs, illuminates the patriarch of the Israelite nation not as someone who fulfilled God's command in a mechanical fashion, devoid of thought or independent will, but rather as a great figure who chooses to fulfill God's word even where this entails waging a difficult inner battle."

homiletics is explicitly *not* what Middleton intends to be doing here. I do not see anything in what has frequently been called the "motto" of the book of Proverbs to suggest that the fear of God it describes is something that must eventually be surpassed or outgrown. On the contrary, as Bruce Waltke writes in explaining Proverbs 1:7, "The temporally first step in this case is not on a horizontal axis that can be left behind but on a vertical axis on which all else rests."[8]

The second angelic speech blesses Abraham:

> By myself I have sworn, declares YHWH: Because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only one, I will certainly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your offspring like the stars of the heavens and like the sand that is on the seashore, and your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies. And by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves, because you have listened to my voice" (Gen 22:16–18).

Commenting on God's oath (*bi nishbati*, "by myself I have sworn"), Middleton suggests that "YHWH needs to uphold the promises *by his own oath* precisely because they *cannot* be sustained by Abraham's less than fully faithful response, evident in the Aqedah. The oath, in other words, is not a sign of approval of Abraham's actions, but is meant to compensate for the deficiency of his actions" (p. 217). This is extremely provocative, but unless we can find other hints of disapproval in God's words, it also seems like a stretch to me. More plausible, it seems to me, is the interpretation offered by Rabbi David Kimhi (Radak, 1160–235), who comments that God's self-reference means to say that God's promise will be as enduring as God's very self. John Goldingay suggests two additional possibilities. First, Goldingay writes: "Human beings swear by someone or something other than themselves, which acts as a guarantor of their oath, asking God, in particular, to note the oath and to act against them in case of default. YHWH is saying, 'It is as if I will punish myself if I fail to do as I say.'" Second, Goldingay suggests, quoting Martin Luther, that God is in effect declaring: "If I do not keep My promises, I shall no longer be who I am." All of this points in the direction of a kind of assurance or guarantee on God's part: These promises will indeed be fulfilled. As Goldingay notes, the additional phrase "declares YHWH" (*ne'um YHWH*) so familiar from the prophets, is a way of saying "This really is YHWH speaking and therefore it really is going to happen."[9] Whichever of these three possibilities we choose, to me at least they all seem more likely to be the peshat than Middleton's suggestion.

Middleton places great emphasis on the fact that at the end of the story, Isaac

8 Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs 1–15* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 181.
9 John Goldingay, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2020), 357.

seems to go missing: "So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beersheba; and Abraham lived at Beersheba" (Gen 22:19). Although Jon Levenson warns that "too much should not be made of the omission of Isaac,"[10] I am inclined to agree with Middleton that Isaac's absence is at the very least suggestive. As Abraham and Isaac head toward the land of Moriah, the text repeatedly tells us that "the two of them went together" (Gen 22:6, 8). Verse 19 employs the same phrase, "went together" (*vayelkhu yahdav*), but this time to refer to Abraham and his servants; there is no mention of Isaac. As Middleton notes, "Abraham went, together with others, but . . . no longer with his son" (p. 182).

The separation between father and son is amplified by what transpires later. When Abraham's servant brings Rebekah to Isaac, we learn that the latter was living in Beer-lahai roi (Gen 24:62)—but Abraham, as we have seen, was living in Beersheba (Gen 22:19). Although Levenson again warns us not to make too much of the fact that in the wake of the Aqedah Abraham and Isaac never speak again—after all, they never speak before the Aqedah either[11]—their geographical separation is perhaps suggestive of alienation or existential disconnection between them.

Abraham's separation from Isaac is seemingly accompanied by another one, from Sarah. As Middleton notes, the next time we hear about Sarah after the Aqedah is when she dies, and we are told that Abraham travels to Hebron to mourn for her (23:2). But recall again that Abraham has been living in Beersheba. "It does not seem," Middleton writes, "that [Abraham and Sarah] have been living together, at least if we attend to the geographical references in Genesis." Middleton wonders: "Did Abraham's attempt to sacrifice Isaac result also in Sarah's alienation?" What we do know with some certainty, Middleton suggests, is that "we clearly have a broken family" living apart from one another (p. 208).

I agree with all this, and also share Middleton's impression that Isaac's diminished stature in comparison with his father Abraham and his son Jacob may stem from the trauma of the Aqedah (pp. 211–12). And yet I am still not sure that this means that, from the text's perspective, Abraham failed the test of the Aqedah. Perhaps we can say that Genesis 22 was a tragedy (and, as Middleton is right to note again and again, not only for Abraham), but I remain skeptical that from Genesis's perspective this means that it was a failure.

It is striking, I think, that Middleton effectively aims to "solve" the problem of the Aqedah. God's command is distressing, but God intended all along for

10 Jon D. Levenson, "Genesis," in Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 47.

11 Jon D. Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton, 2012), 85–86.

Abraham to refuse it. Abraham's response is perplexing, but the narrator finds it just as perplexing as we do. For all of Middleton's misgivings about theodicy, *Abraham's Silence* offers a theodicy of sorts: if we understand God, and God's motivations, correctly, we'll see that we've been interpreting God wrong all along.[12] God would never do what so many faithful believers have been distressed to think that God did.

As I have stated, I wish I could go along with Middleton. But moved as I am by his project and by many of his interpretations, I am not sold on his reading. This leaves me more or less where I started: disturbed, unsettled, even horrified by the text and by God's command. And so, like countless faithful readers before me, I plan to go on wrestling.

12 I am grateful to Gerry Janzen for our discussion of this point.

Interpreting Job, Lament, and the Aqedah: A Response to My Respondents

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Abstract

J. Richard Middleton's book *Abraham's Silence: The Binding of Isaac, the Suffering of Job, and How to Talk Back to God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021) challenges traditional interpretations of the Aqedah (the binding of Isaac) by questioning whether Abraham's silent attempt to sacrifice Isaac was what God intended. This article is an expanded version of the author's responses to two panel discussions of *Abraham's Silence*, the first at a virtual meeting of the Eastern Great Lakes Biblical Society, March 17, 2022, the second at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, Denver, Colorado, November 21, 2022.

I am grateful for the interaction of each of our nine panelists with *Abraham's Silence*. I am particularly gratified that all the panelists have understood and affirmed the basic impetus of the book, even if they end up objecting to some aspect of my interpretation of lament, Job, or (especially) the Aqedah.

Brian Walsh (my compatriot and coauthor of two books and a number of articles) puts my reading of the Aqedah into dialogue with Bob Dylan's "Highway 61 Revisited." Given that Dylan's Abraham questions God (even though it is relatively "weak protest," compared to that of Job, Moses, and the psalmists), "Highway 61 Revisited" reads the Aqedah as a story "on its way to the blues, on its way to lament, on its way to vigorous, abrasive prayer." Walsh understands that underlying my analysis of Abraham's less than adequate response in Genesis 22 is an invitation to trust in the "covenant God [who] can bring blessing out of a cursed past, can bring forth healing out of deep brokenness, and will accompany us in our lament, especially when it takes us to Highway 61."

Susan Haddox gives a most helpful and illuminating analysis of Abraham through the lens of masculinity studies. She suggests that in Genesis 22 Abraham "retreats into an understanding of a god who must be obeyed without question and does not plead for Isaac. In this process, Abraham's masculinity is reduced. He

gives up his protective role, his agency, and his persuasive voice. His lack of discernment has led him to blind faith and obedience." By contrast, Abraham's "faithful masculinity" vis-à-vis God would have included wise discernment, appropriate speech, and advocacy on behalf of others (particularly, Isaac).

Paul Cho affirms the importance of lament and protest before God that is at the heart of *Abraham's Silence* and he is appreciative of my "provocative reading of important biblical texts." Even though Cho doesn't quite agree with all my readings, I am gratified that he values my bringing these texts into conversation with "expressions of grief and sorrow that accompany human existence."

Marvin Sweeney begins his thoughtful response by highlighting the importance of Jewish and Christian reflection on the Shoah. I am honored to be cited as one of those biblical scholars who think that the Shoah (along with other situations of great suffering and injustice) is definitive for biblical interpretation. For many years now, I have been unable to think about God, my faith, and the Scriptures apart from this contemporary "world of pain and fire and steel," as the Canadian singer-songwriter Bruce Cockburn puts it.[1] I am also grateful to Sweeney for pointing out that verbal lament or protest in the face of injustice is not enough; we must be prepared to move from prayer to action, to address matters of suffering in the real world. Although this point wasn't central to the main exegetical chapters of *Abraham's Silence*, it is emphasized in my Conclusion, "The Gritty Spirituality of Lament," when I addressed the implications of lament prayer for ethical transformation.

I am delighted that Rachel Adelman finds *Abraham's Silence* to be a very Jewish book. This may be partially due to my Jewish heritage. Being born of a Jewish mother (although she wasn't raised in a distinctively Jewish tradition, either religiously or culturally) made me aware of the importance of Judaism. But it was my later attempt to understand how the Old Testament/Tanakh functioned as the living Scriptures and formative tradition for Jesus and the early church that led me to see how deeply the Christian faith is indebted to Judaism. Indeed, what later came to be called *Christianity* began as one Jewish renewal movement among others in the first century. Through my studies, I have come to love the Old Testament and, indeed, I find my primary spirituality there. My intellectual grappling with lament, Job, and the Aqedah thus cannot be separated from my own lived faith in the God of Israel.

This latter confession may put me in some tension with those Christians who elevate the New Testament over the Old. This does not apply to Brittany Kim,

1 Bruce Cockburn, "Broken Wheel," from the album *Inner City Front* (1981). For an analysis of the profound theology of this song, see J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, "Theology at the Rim of a Broken Wheel: Bruce Cockburn and Christian Faith in a Postmodern World," *Grail: An Ecumenical Journal* 9, no. 2 (June 1993) 15–39.

Rebekah Eklund, and Carmen Imes, even though all three raise (legitimate) questions about my hasty treatment of the New Testament's valorization of Abraham's response to God in Genesis 22 (which I relegate to a footnote).

Kim, Eklund, and Imes are stellar biblical scholars—two in the field of Old Testament, one in New Testament. Beyond being a valued faculty colleague at Northeastern Seminary and co-founder of Every Voice for Kingdom Diversity (an organization to lift up minoritized and Majority World scholars and students in biblical studies), Kim's work on the use of metaphor to portray the transformation of Zion in the book of Isaiah is a wonderful example of faith-filled literary reading of Scripture.[2] Eklund's study of lament in the New Testament has been eminently helpful to me, and she has deepened her vision in a later meditation on lament written during the COVID-19 lockdown.[3] And among Imes's prolific writing is her important study *Bearing Yhwh's Name at Sinai*, which won the R. B. Y. Scott award for best book in Hebrew Bible and/or the Ancient Near East from the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies.[4] Imes's popularized version of that volume as well as her more recent work on humanity as *imago Dei* have made her work in biblical interpretation available to a wide audience of Christian readers.[5]

Yet, while affirming the validity of my reading of the Aqedah (in that it would have been good if Abraham had protested the command to sacrifice his son), Kim, Eklund, and Imes also affirm the ongoing importance of the traditional reading (Abraham's silent obedience was also a faithful response to God). The test of the Aqedah, in other words, was open-ended.

Finally, what does one say about Shai Held—Jewish philosopher, ethicist, and exegete par excellence? Ever since I became acquainted with Held's work through my participation in Yeshivat Hadar, I have had the utmost respect for his unique blend of scholarly excellence and commitment to historically rich Jewish education. That was why I organized a panel discussion on his two-volume work *The Heart of Torah* at the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) in 2019. Held returned the favor in suggesting the panel on *Abraham's Silence* at the 2022 SBL. Although Held affirms that he would like to follow me in my interpretation of the Aqedah,

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2 Brittany Kim, *"Lengthen Your Tent-Cords": The Metaphorical World of Israel's Household in the Book of Isaiah*, Siphrut 23 (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2018).

3 Rebekah Eklund, *Jesus Wept: The Significance of Jesus' Laments in the New Testament*, Library of New Testament Studies 515 (New York: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2015); Eklund, *Practicing Lament*, Cascade Companions (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2021).

4 Carmen Joy Imes, *Bearing Yhwh's Name at Sinai: A Reexamination of the Name Command of the Decalogue*, Bulletin for Biblical Research Supp 19 (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2018). I had the honor of presenting Carmen Imes with this award in 2019 when I was vice-president of the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies.

5 *Bearing God's Name: Why Sinai Still Matters* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019); *Being God's Image: Why Creation Still Matters* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2023). I had the honor of writing the Foreword to *Being God's Image*.

he admits that he is unable to read the text as I do. Perhaps more than any other panelist, Held raises specific criticisms of my reading of the Aqedah.

I am profoundly honored by the attention paid to my work by each panelist. And given the probing questions they have raised about my interpretation of the text, I am also challenged. In what follows, I am going to begin by addressing questions raised about my approach to lament prayer and the book of Job. Then I will focus on the Aqedah, both clarifying my general hermeneutical approach in the book and examining in some detail various exegetical questions raised by the panelists. Although I don't expect my responses to change anyone's mind, this gives me a chance to firm up my interpretation with further considerations, beyond what I wrote in *Abraham's Silence*. I will close with a summary of what I think Abraham *should* have said to God—or perhaps what Abraham *might* have said, in an alternative timeline.

Lament Prayer

Let me start with some of the objections (or qualifications) about my discussion of lament prayer raised by some of my respondents. Paul Cho notices a "drift towards narrativization of lament" in the book, whereby I place lament prayer on an overall storyline that moves from crisis to resolution. While acknowledging that this is the pattern of the Psalter (and also the pattern of the Christian liturgical calendar of Good Friday to Easter Sunday), Cho lodges the objection that lament isn't always resolved in the real world—something I am in total agreement with. This is a point I often make in teaching, where I discuss lament as one of the resources for enabling us to live "between the times," when the eschatological vision of new creation is unrealized. Since I did not express this clearly enough in the book, I applaud Cho for making this point explicit.

Cho goes on to suggest that there is a structural parallel between the shift from crisis to deliverance via lament (which I affirm) and the necessity of evil as a stage in the coming of a greater good (which I critique). Given that that I object to greater good theodicies, he suggests that I ought to be likewise critical of understanding lament within a narrative arc of suffering and healing. I admit that there is a structural similarity here; but in contrast to greater good theodicies, neither suffering nor lament is in any sense logically necessary for shalom. To say that God will eschatologically bring resolution and healing to the suffering of creation is conceptually quite distinct from seeing suffering in necessary for the

greater good of the world. The details are so different that the contrast overshadows the relatively superficial parallel.[6]

Rachel Adelman suggests that it might be important to distinguish prophetic intercession from lament, since prophetic intercession comes prior to suffering in an attempt to stave it off, while lament is a response to suffering that has already been experienced. I agree that there is a difference here and perhaps I should have been clearer about that. However, my focus was on what prophetic intercession and lament have in common as models of "vigorous prayer": they are both motivated by a holy dissatisfaction with the status quo and so refuse to accept suffering as normal. They also have in common petition or supplication—the forthright request (even demand) that God do something about the (impending or experienced) suffering. It is perhaps telling, in light of these commonalities, that Adelman herself often goes against the contrast voiced in her subtitle, "Protest or Lament," by using the term *protest* for both intercession and lament at various points.

The Book of Job

When it comes to my interpretation of Job, Paul Cho dissents on a number of points. First, while acknowledging my claim that God validates Job's protests as right speech (in contrast to the speech of his friends; Job 42:6–7), Cho nevertheless denies that God actually praises Job in the second speech from the whirlwind; rather, he thinks (in agreement with the traditional interpretation) that God browbeats Job even more thoroughly than in the first speech. However, since I gave a detailed argument for reading the speeches differently, simply restating the traditional reading in juxtaposition to my own position doesn't actually show me how my reading is mistaken.

Second, in response to my claim that God's second speech was intended to get Job to respond as a worthy dialogue partner, Cho avers that Job does not rise to the challenge, but rather acknowledges the limits of his wisdom (Job 42:3) and submissively repents [*nāḥam*] of what he has previously said about "dust and ashes," that is, humanity (Job 42:6). Since I made a contextual argument for translating the verb *nāḥam* as *comfort* or *consolation* rather than *repentance*, I would need an alternative argument to be convinced that I was wrong beyond Cho's counter-*claim* that Job repents. Indeed, Brittany Kim gives further evidence in support of my translation of *nāḥam*.

Cho does, however, propose evidence for his claim that Job's response to the

6 My own journey from philosophy to biblical studies was marked by an attempt to sharpen the contrast between lament prayer and greater good arguments. See Middleton, "Why the 'Greater Good' Isn't a Defense: Classical Theodicy in Light of the Biblical Genre of Lament," *Koinonia* 9, nos. 1&2 (1997) 81–113.

second speech is submission rather than vigorous prayer by citing Job 42:3 ("I have uttered what I did not understand, / things too wonderful for me, which I did not know"). However, this misreads the structure of Job's response in 42:1–6. I agree that after God's first speech (which was intended to correct Job's theology), Job was (unintentionally) battered into submission and thus refused to answer (40:3–5); this was part of my argument. However, Job's response after God's second speech is different. He does not immediately respond to that speech, but first rearticulates his response to the first speech (42:2–3); it is in *this* response that we find the line that he uttered what he didn't understand. Only then does Job respond to God's second speech (42:4–6).

I admit that my exposition of these verses was a bit brief, so allow me to expand my analysis here, with the use of a chart for clarification. It is widely recognized that Job quotes lines from YHWH's two speeches. "Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?" (42:3a) is nearly identical to what YHWH says at the start of the first speech (Job 38:2). This quote shows that Job understands the point of the first speech, namely, that it was intended to correct his deficient theology.

The second quote, "I will question you, and you shall declare to me" (42:4b), is identical to what YHWH says at the start of the second speech (Job 40:7). God also said this at the start of the first speech (38:3). The repetition was necessary since Job did not adequately rise to the challenge of answering God's bracing questions in the first speech. God was not satisfied with Job's passive submissiveness, and so repeats the challenge at the start of the second speech.

Job's Final Answer to Both of YHWH's Speeches (Job 42:1–6)

Job's Three-Part Response	Job's Response to YHWH's First Speech	Job's Response to YHWH's Second Speech
Opening Statement	I know that you can do all things, / and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. (42:2)	Hear, and I will speak. (42:4a)
Quoting what YHWH Said	Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge? (42:3a)	I will question you, and you shall declare to me. (42:4b)
Concluding Statement	Therefore, I have uttered what I did not understand, / things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. (42:3b)	I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, / but now my eye sees you; Therefore, I retract / and am comforted about dust and ashes. (42:5–6)

At the end of the second speech, Job does, indeed, rise to the challenge. First, he gives an new, updated response to the first speech. Instead of refusing to answer (which had been his original response), he explains that he now understands the point of the first speech, namely, that God was correcting his deficient theology of God's cosmic governance (42:2–3).

Only then does Job give his response to the second speech (42:4–6). As I noted in *Abraham's Silence*, almost all modern translations take Job's opening statement "Hear, and I will speak" (42:4a) to be part of the quotation from YHWH. But this is a misreading for two reasons. Not only does this not correspond to anything God says, it doesn't fit the structure of Job's response to the first speech, which begins with Job's own opening statement. I believe it is absolutely significant that Job begins his response to the second speech with "Hear, and *I will speak*" (42:4a). In other words, he now understands that God actually desires not silent submission, but a responsive dialogue partner. And so Job concludes by explaining that he *retracts* (either his accusation of God's injustice or, more likely, his prior silence) and is appropriately *comforted* or *consoled* about his status of being "dust and ashes" (42:5–6).

There is one more point about Job that needs addressing, since it surfaces in many commentaries on the book. Marvin Sweeney asks whether my brief statement about the restoration of Job's fortunes at the end of the book is too simplistic. Yes, God gives Job twice as many livestock as he had lost and also ten new children (42:10–13). But, citing Emil Fackenheim about the children, Sweeney notes that "anyone who is a parent can tell you that such a solution is no solution at all to a dead child, let alone ten of them." He concludes: "Job's losses are not restored."

Sweeney is right that Job's losses, particularly his children, aren't restored. But I don't think (as many interpreters do) that the epilogue intended to suggest a quick fix to Job's suffering (a Hollywood ending). J. Gerald Janzen notes that God's speeches had already reframed the essential question of the book from a zero sum game of winners and losers (which both Job and his friends had assumed) to a vision of creation overflowing with generosity and *ḥesed* rooted in God's freedom. So rather than taking the epilogue as part of a calculus of compensation for Job's losses, I follow Janzen by understanding the epilogue as a new beginning for Job, which "does not erase Job's grief" over his losses. "Such grief as he has undergone never leaves the heart. . . . But it is possible for the bitterness of the grief to undergo, in time, a sea change from bitterness to something else—a precious, tender treasuring still of what was lost . . . and working a widening of one's capacity for compassion and primal sympathy with others."[7] This sea change,

7 J. Gerald Janzen, *At the Scent of Water: The Ground of Hope in the Book of Job* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 106.

with the widening of his capacity for compassion, is what allows Job to intercede for his friends, instead of vilifying them for their previous attitudes towards him.

Janzen ends his analysis of the epilogue by recounting the story of a young Jewish man who was the only one in his family to survive the Shoah. He came to the USA and married another survivor of the camps and lived a beautiful and meaningful life, raising a family and volunteering with young people in his free time. Janzen suggests: "To know the story of this man is to be in a position to read the epilogue in a new way." Just as this young man's later life did not compensate for his earlier losses, so the epilogue does not "fix" anything. But this does not detract from the possibility of newness and joy that is to be embraced "even though from now on life is *even more* unfathomable than Job and his friends could previously have imagined."[8]

The Aqedah: Context, Context, Context

There is more that could be said about both lament prayer and the book of Job. But it is time to turn to the main topic of contention—the Aqedah.

They say that there are three important things to look for in buying a house: *location, location, location*. The equivalent in biblical interpretation would be: *context, context, context*. Admittedly, the layout and construction of the house are also important; and in biblical interpretation the details of the text are crucial to its meaning. But (as Carmen Imes notes) the other texts that an interpreter takes as relevant context certainly inform the interpretation of the text in question. In *Abraham's Silence*, I attempted to read the Aqedah in a number of different contexts, with a view to clarifying what the test was about and to gain some insight into whether Abraham's response to God was exemplary.

The broadest context that I investigated was the model of vigorous prayer found in the Bible. I highlighted the lament psalms, Moses's intercession at the Golden Calf (and the pattern of prophetic intercession that followed from that), along with the protests of Job (and I touched on lament prayer in the New Testament). When read against this background, Abraham's silence stood out to me like a sore thumb. But the book of Job was so prominent in my analysis that this could be considered another, more specific context for reading the Aqedah; the intertextuality of Job and Abraham generated all sorts of questions for me about Genesis 22.

A narrower, even more specific context was the Abraham story as a whole, where I considered the traditional narrative arc of the promise of an heir, and proposed instead the narrative arc of Abraham's growing (and declining) understanding of God; I noted that the story prior to Genesis 22 gave no indication that Abraham had any sort of attachment to Isaac such that giving him up would be a

8 Janzen, *At the Scent of Water*, 110 (emphasis added).

significant test (precisely the opposite).[9] And I considered the fallout of the Moriah episode for Abraham's family, especially for Isaac.

I also gestured towards my own experience of God, which is another context that certainly impacts the sort of questions I bring to the text.

But one context that I want to foreground here, since it decisively impacts our reading of the Aqedah, is the history of interpretation. The prominence of this history, which takes Abraham's response to God as exemplary, can hardly be overstated. This is why I entitled the final section of the book: "Unbinding the Aqedah from the Straitjacket of Tradition." And I had no illusions that this unbinding would be easy.

I find that most of the objections to my reading of the Aqedah derive from the pressure of the traditional paradigm on the interpreter. I judge that just about every case in which an interpreter objects to some aspect of my interpretation (whether our esteemed panelists, book reviewers, or readers who have emailed me), the issue is whether my reading deviates from or conforms to the traditional paradigm. Instead of convincing me that my exegesis is wrong (on internal grounds), most of the objections propose some version of the traditional reading as obviously what the text means (or, at least, as more obvious than my reading).

This is especially the case concerning the meaning of the angel speeches at the end of the Aqedah narrative; but it also applies to the initial command (or request) that God gives Abraham (both of these points are raised by Shai Held). So let me touch on both of these.[10]

"Whom You Love": Did Abraham Love Isaac?

A basic assumption of the traditional reading is that Abraham's love for (or attachment to) Isaac is being tested; if he didn't love Isaac, the rationale for the test begins to crumble.

I gave evidence in the book that Abraham was attached to *Ishmael*, such that he was genuinely distressed at Ishmael being sent away, but that he shows no such attachment to Isaac; indeed, he wasn't interested in having another son after Ishmael and passes Sarah off as his sister to the king of Gerar while she might have been pregnant with Isaac.

One episode that I did not mention is recorded in Gen 21:9, when Sarah sees

9 The interpretation of the Aqedah as a test of Abraham's dedication to God in contrast to his love for Isaac (which has become a staple of traditional interpretation) goes back to the book of Jubilees 17:16, where Prince Mastema (the Satan figure) suggests that Abraham loves Isaac more than God (the entire account is found in Jubilees 17:15–18:19).

10 The third point that Held makes is that the various "rhetorical signals" I noted in Genesis 22 don't actually lead to my interpretation of Abraham. I agree fully. To clarify, these signals were my starting point, which suggested that the text is complicated; they forced me to reflect on the possible inner turmoil of Abraham. However, they do not obviously lead to either the traditional interpretation or to my own reading.

Ishmael "laughing" or "playing" (the LXX adds "with Isaac her son"). The Hebrew verb is *ṣāhaq*, the verbal root of Isaac's name, *Yiṣḥāq*. So when the text says that "Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, *məṣaḥēq*," we don't need to take it to mean that Ishmael was *taunting* or *scorning* Isaac (as some scholars propose). Rather, from Sarah's perspective, he was "Isaacing." That is, she saw him as if he were taking Isaac's place. Given Abraham's attachment to Ishmael (which Sarah was well aware of), Sarah was worried that Ishmael would displace Isaac in receiving the inheritance. Tammi Schneider notes that "Abraham has shown no intention of carrying out the Deity's wish for Isaac to inherit" (and Sarah realizes this).[11] So she insists that Abraham banish Hagar and Ishmael.

That's context; now for syntax. There is the question of how to interpret "whom you love" in the sequence of what God says to Abraham: "Take, please, your son, your only one, *whom you love*, Isaac" (Gen 22:2). Held objects to my point that this phrase indicates a suggestion or question, rather than a statement of fact. "It seems odd to me to interpret the third descriptor, 'whom you love,' as somehow asking a question rather than making a statement. There is no linguistic cue to suggest that 'whom you love' should be heard in a different register than 'your son' and 'your only one.'"

On the contrary, "whom you love" stands out syntactically from the other items in the sequence. Here we have three direct objects, *binkā* (your son), *yəhidəkā* (your only one), and *Yiṣḥāq* (Isaac), each prefaced with the direct object marker *'et*. But sandwiched between the second and third direct objects is the relative clause *'ăsher-'āhabtā* (whom you love). It would be entirely possible to express this with another direct object, the passive participle of the verb for love (*'āhab*) with a pronominal suffix attached: *'et-'ăhûbkā*. God could have said, "Take your son, your only one, *'et-'ăhûbkā* (your beloved/ the one you love), Isaac."

Instead, we have a syntactic shift with *'ăsher-'āhabtā* ("whom you love"), which stands out stylistically. Given the confluence of this stylistic shift with the indication from the earlier narrative that Abraham is attached to *Ishmael*, not Isaac, I believe it is entirely plausible to take "whom you love" not as a statement of fact, but as a *suggestion* to Abraham that he might love Isaac or perhaps as a *question* about whether he does, in fact, love him. I believe it has the rhetorical force of, *you love him—right?* And Abraham could prove his love for Isaac by interceding for him.

Does this syntax prove my interpretation? No. Syntax (like philology) by itself rarely decides meaning. Context is just as crucial, if not more so.

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11 Tammi J. Schneider, *Mothers of Promise: Women in the Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 34. See also Schneider, *Sarah: Mother of Nations* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 93–94.

The First Angel Speech: "Now I know that you are a God-fearer"

Then we come to the angel speeches. I noted that the statement "Now I know that you are a God-fearer" in the first angel speech specifies what was *discovered* from the test, not necessarily what was being tested. I thought I gave a pretty strong contextual argument for thinking that the test was primarily one of Abraham's discernment of God's character and secondarily a test of Abraham's love for Isaac, since interceding for him might strengthen their tenuous relationship.

I did not actually conclude that that there is something wrong with the fear of God, as if it is inferior to love for God. At least, I did not intend to say that (authors often say more than they intend). Rather, my primary point was that while there may be an initial, naive fear of God (which is not to be decried), there is also a more mature fear of God that can be combined with the requisite boldness to protest or challenge God—as Job did, and as Abraham did in Genesis 18 (though he backed down from that).

The Second Angel Speech: God's Oath to Bless *because* of Abraham's Actions

But, of course, the most contentious interpretation I proposed is my reading of the second angel speech, where God declares (by oath) that he will bless Abraham, multiply his descendants, and cause all the nations to attain blessing through his descendants *because of what Abraham has done* in attempting to sacrifice Isaac—not withholding his son, his only one (though the angel leaves out "whom you love"—both here and in the first angel speech—since attempting to sacrifice Isaac clearly shows that Abraham does not love him).

The traditional interpretation—proposed by just about every interpreter—is that this affirmation of blessing is a reward for (or consequence of) Abraham's exemplary obedience in response to the test. If there is anywhere that one could object to my reading, this is the place.

Isn't it *obvious* that God is rewarding Abraham for his actions?

My analysis of the second angel speech was just about the last thing I wrote prior to my concluding chapter. As I noted in the book, I had originally thought I was going to use Job as a foil for (and alternative to) the perspective of the author of Genesis 22. In my original idea for the book, the Job material was going to come after the Abraham material. The original title of the book was *The Silence of Abraham, the Passion of Job*.

But near the end of the writing, I came to see that it was possible to read the angel speeches (and thus the perspective of the narrator) as also critical of Abraham.

But having written this section of the book last, I didn't have time to allow it to sit and marinate as I did for pretty much everything else in the book. My

writing process has been to come back—again and again—to what I wrote earlier, honing it, clarifying what seemed obscure, rearranging text (and even chapters), until I was satisfied that the finished work articulated my thoughts as best it could.

If I had been able to do that with what I wrote about the second angel speech, I would have nuanced my discussion in a few ways.

A More Explicit Challenge to the Reader about the Power of the Traditional Paradigm

First, I would have explicitly challenged the reader to reflect on the tremendous pressure of over two thousand years of interpretation, which take the angel speeches as valorizing Abraham's response to God. I would have stated more emphatically than I did that reading the angel speeches differently is *almost impossible* to do.

Almost; but not quite. But it does require us to come to grips with how our interpretation has *already been shaped* by what I called the "straitjacket" of tradition. I would have warned the reader (more clearly than I did) about the difficulty of the hermeneutical "unbinding" I am proposing. I would have posted *Caveat lector!* all over the chapter.

A Clearer Discussion of the Shift from Conditional to Unconditional Blessing in Genesis 22

The well-nigh universal presumption that the second angel speech is a validation of Abraham (and it is a presumption) has often been linked to the idea that there is a significant shift in the nature of God's promises of blessing to Abraham. The traditional view (articulated by both Jon Levenson and Walter Moberly) is as follows: Whereas these promises had previously been unconditional, an act of pure grace on God's part (as stated in Genesis 12), here the blessing is articulated as a consequence of Abraham's exemplary response to the test; it flows somehow from Abraham's actions. And this is radically new.

However, it may be that the presumption that Abraham is being validated in Genesis 22 has led to a significant blind spot at this point. I should have perhaps noted this blind spot more clearly in my exposition.

A careful reading of the way the blessing is articulated in Genesis 18 indicates that it is in *that chapter* (not in chapter 22) that God first intends the blessing to be conditional on Abraham's actions.

In Gen 18:17, God asks: "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?" (18:17) And God decides not to; the reason is given in verse 19: "For I have chosen him, *that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of YHWH by doing righteousness and justice,* ***so that YHWH may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him***." (18:19) The "so that" is crucial.

The actual promises are specified in verse 18—namely, that "Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and that all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him." The point of God's revelation of his plans for Sodom was for Abraham to interrogate God, imploring him to save the city (for the sake of Lot and his family), and so learn of God's merciful character. And the point of learning of God's character was so that Abraham could teach this to his children and household.

In *Abraham's Silence* I noted (briefly), when discussing the second angel speech, the significant parallel between Genesis 18 and Exodus 32. Whereas God reveals his plans to Abraham in Genesis 18 in order to get him to intercede for Sodom, in Exodus 32 God gives Moses an opening to intercede for Israel after the Golden Calf. The result of Moses's intercession is that God relented in his plans for judgment and revealed the meaning of the divine name (that is, the divine character) as essentially compassionate. That revelation in chapter 34 became the basis for discerning the thirteen *midot* or attributes of God in *Chazal* (the Jewish interpretive tradition).[12]

The whole point of the Sodom episode in Genesis 18 was for Abraham to learn the depths of God's mercy through his intercession. God had desired Abraham to come to know, and as a consequence, to charge his children and household to keep *derek YHWH* (the way of the LORD) by doing *ṣedeqâ ûmišpat* (righteousness and justice). And the purpose of having this exemplary community modeling God's righteousness (a righteousness characterized by compassion), was *so that* God could bring about for Abraham what he had previously promised. God wanted the previously promised blessings to flow from the way of life embodied by the Abrahamic community.

But Abraham stopped short in his intercession in Genesis 18; and so God intervened by sending angels to rescue Lot and his family—something Abraham had not thought to ask for.

I therefore view the Aqedah as God trying again to teach Abraham. But instead of the destruction of the city in which his nephew lives, God tells Abraham to sacrifice his own son. If anything would cause Abraham to protest and engage in passionate intercession, this would be it. But Abraham silently goes about preparations for the sacrifice. And has to be stopped by an angel.

It is because Abraham hasn't learned the lesson of God's merciful character, and so isn't able to pass this on to his children and household, that God swears that he will compensate for Abraham's deficiency by personally guaranteeing the blessing. In Genesis 22, the blessing thus *reverts* to unconditional (as it was in Genesis 12). On my reading, it is not that the previously gratuitous promises of

12 *Chazal* is an acronym for **Ḥ**akhameinu **Z**ikhronam **L**iv'raka ("Our sages, may their memory be blessed").

blessing are now, in Genesis 22, consequent on Abraham's exemplary actions, *but precisely the opposite*.[13]

The Shift in Genesis 22 is Not Unprecedented in Scripture.

The final nuance I would make to my argument is to show more clearly than I did that this shift between Genesis 18 and 22 isn't unprecedented in Scripture. Although I addressed the Golden Calf episode in chapter 2 of the book, readers may not have had my discussion of that episode clearly in their minds at this point in chapter 7. It would have been helpful, therefore, to highlight, precisely in my discussion of the second angel speech, the parallel between God placing the Sinai covenant on unconditional footing in Exodus 34, due to Israel's massive fail in Exodus 32, and God compensating for Abraham's less than adequate response in the Aqedah.

But beyond the Golden Calf episode, I would highlight three other places in the Bible where a similar shift shows up—in Deuteronomy, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. In *Abraham's Silence*, I only touched on these in a footnote; but it may be helpful to be more explicit here.

In Deut 10:16, God commands the Israelites: "Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer." The symbol of heart circumcision suggests an indelible mark of dedication to YHWH inscribed in the will.

But by the time we get to Deuteronomy 29, it is clear that Israel has not been able to accomplish this internal circumcision, and so exile is described as the final outcome of their recalcitrance. Yet after exile, in the very next chapter we find the promise of restoration (30:1–10). And in the midst of this promise (in 30:6) comes a new reference to heart circumcision: "Moreover, *the LORD your God* will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live" (Deut 30:6)

Another such parallel can be found in Jeremiah. Here the contrast is between Israel's failure to be faithful to the Sinai covenant, noted in Jeremiah 11, and the announcement of a new covenant in Jeremiah 31. In Jeremiah 11, God tells Israel, "Cursed be anyone who does not heed the words of this covenant, which I commanded your ancestors when I brought them out of the land of Egypt" (11:3). However, says YHWH, "the house of Israel and the house of Judah have broken

13 Here I should note that I agree with Brittany Kim that "because you have done this thing" is the basis for God's promise to bless. I never intended to say that it was the basis for the oath *separate from the promise*. In both the traditional interpretation and my alternative reading, the promise to bless is the consequence of what Abraham has done. The question is: What is the substance of the relationship between what Abraham has done and the promise (which happens to be backed up by God's oath)? Is the promise a reward or validation of Abraham's action or does it compensate for a lack on Abraham's part?

the covenant that I made with their ancestors" (11:10). And so the coming disaster of exile is proclaimed (11:11–23).

But then in Jeremiah 31 we have the promise of a time when God "will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah" (31:31), which will not be like the Sinai covenant, "which they broke" (31:32). Rather, says the LORD, "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (31:33).

The parallel in Ezekiel is the contrast between the *exhortation* in Ezekiel 18 for Israel to return to God and be transformed internally and the *promise* that after the exile God will accomplish this internal transformation for Israel.

In Ezekiel 18 God challenges the people: "Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves *a new heart and a new spirit*! Why will you die, O house of Israel?" (18:31). But in chapter 36, after describing the ingathering of Israel from the nations (36:24), God promises: "*A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you*; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances." (36:26–27).

So the shift I am proposing between Genesis 18 and Genesis 22 is not unusual in the Bible. In each case, this shift is based on the failure of God's people, such that God has to step in, in order to accomplish the divine purpose.

What About the New Testament's Validation of Abraham in the Aqedah?

The final point that I would like to touch on is the most common question that I get from Christian readers: What about Hebrews 11, which views Abraham's response in the Aqedah positively? This question is raised by Brittany Kim, Rebekah Eklund, and Carmen Imes. There is also the positive affirmation of Abraham in Jas 2:21–23, which combines references to Genesis 15 and 22.

I did touch on Hebrews 11 in passing in a footnote; but this was clearly not enough. I had intended to write a mini essay on the subject of the New Testament's references to the Aqedah (both explicit citations and possible allusions). I had thought this could be an appendix to the book, along with other appendices—addressing topics such as the lament tradition in the New Testament, the dating of the book of Job, and other matters. But the publisher had already advertised the length of the book I couldn't go beyond that. Hence the footnote.

To show how tight space was, the endorsement from Irving (Yitz) Greenberg on the back cover was really only an abbreviated version of his full-page endorsement. At my request (with his permission) this would have been a Foreword to the book. But there was not even space for that. Pages in published books are grouped

in signatures of 8, 16, or 32 pages (16 in the case of this book). And another signature would need to be added to accommodate the Foreword.[14]

I am hoping that if there is a second edition of *Abraham's Silence*, we could add that Foreword as well as some appendices, along with an expanded analysis of the second angel speech (and a few other places where it seems to me that my argument is a bit compressed).

There isn't space here to address the hermeneutics of Hebrews 11 (and other relevant New Testament texts). In lieu of that, I will make some general points about hermeneutics applicable to how the New Testament interacts with the Old Testament. To begin with, I don't take any New Testament references to the Old Testament as straightforward exegesis, which either explains its true meaning or enhances its meaning in light of later events. Rather, just as is the case of inner-biblical exegesis within the Tanakh, the New Testament authors use the Old Testament to exegete their own contemporary situation. What they are doing is more homiletical than exegetical. There are analogies here to Rabbinic midrash.

Sometimes, as with Paul's reference to the rock that followed Israel in the wilderness, he is drawing explicitly on Rabbinic midrash, while putting a Christian spin on it. Jewish interpretation had already noticed Moses getting water from a rock at the beginning and end of the wilderness journey and concluded that the same rock must have miraculously followed Israel on the trip. The (homiletical) point is that God cared for Israel on their journey. Paul simply gives us a Christological version of this when he writes that "they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ" (1 Cor 10:4.) It wouldn't be appropriate to take Paul's statement here as a guide to exegesis of either of the rock episodes in Exodus (at the start of the journey) or in Numbers (at the end).

Then there is Jude's quotation of 1 Enoch 1:9 as prophecy, in reference to God's eschatological judgment (Jude vv. 14–15). Jude also seems to assume that this post-exilic book (in the Pseudepigrapha) was written by the Enoch mentioned in Genesis 5. Does this mean that Christians should treat 1 Enoch as part of the canon of Scripture (and view it as written by the Enoch of Genesis 5)? Jude also refers to a legend in the *Assumption* (or *Testament*) *of Moses* (again a book in the Pseudepigrapha), about the archangel Michael disputing with the devil about the body of Moses (Jude v. 9). Should we therefore include the *Assumption/ Testament of Moses* in the biblical canon?

The point is that when New Testament authors cite the Old Testament (or the Pseudepigrapha), they are not doing exegesis but drawing out some point of relevance for their readers. They are seeing resonances in the ancient text with some event or issue that they wish to elucidate for their contemporary audience. That is

14 For the full text of Greenberg's endorsement, see https://jrichardmiddleton.files.wordpress.com/2023/06/yitz-greenberg-endorsement-of-abrahams-silence-july-2021.pdf

why I don't take Hebrews 11 (or James 2) as determinative for my exegesis of the Aqedah.

But since we are on the topic of Hebrews, I note that the writer of this epistle affirms the significant role of lament in the life of Jesus. In chapter 5, he (or she[15]) notes that: "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence." (Heb 5:7) This is the sort of reverence or fear of God that is fully compatible with vigorous grappling.

And the author of Hebrew encourages the reader with these words: "Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." (Heb 4:16) So, however we take the positive affirmation of Abraham in Hebrews 11, this is not an epistle that endorses silent submission to God.

I'm sure that my brief comments here won't be sufficient for Christian readers of the Aqedah. Given how many emails I have received from readers asking about Hebrews 11, I will definitely need to write an essay that more fully addresses the topic of the New Testament's references to the Aqedah (whether or not there is a second edition of *Abraham's Silence*).

I recognize that I haven't responded to all the points raised by the panelists. Yet I am profoundly grateful for their generous and pointed engagement with my work.

What Abraham *Might* Have Said—In an Alternative Timeline

Let me close with an imaginative suggestion of what Abraham *might* have said, in an alternative timeline.[16] If you listen carefully, you may notice allusions to Moses's intercession in Exodus 32.

* *

After these things, God tested Abraham. He said, "Abraham."

His faithful servant answered, "Here I am."

"Take your son," said the LORD, "your only one—whom you love—Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him up as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I will show you."

And Abraham was dumbfounded.

Was this *God* speaking? The God he had come to know?

Abraham knew there were many gods, as many as the peoples of all the lands he had traveled through—from Ur in Mesopotamia to Haran in Aram, to the

15 There is a reputable scholarly opinion that the author of Hebrews might be Priscilla.

16 My thanks to Bill Brown of Columbia Theological Seminary for suggesting that I write this imaginative script. It can be downloaded as a separate document from: https://jrichardmiddleton.files.wordpress.com/2022/11/middleton-what-abraham-might-have-said-genesis-22-1.pdf

towns and cities of Canaan. And many of them required child sacrifice as a sign of devotion.

But could his God be asking this too? He thought he had been coming to know the character of the one called El Shaddai—that this One was different from the gods of the nations.

Could God really mean for him to kill his own son? Why? What would it prove? How could this be God's will?

Abraham was shell shocked—and silent for a time.

But then he plucked up his courage and with the *chutzpah* that would come to be recognized as emblematic of the later people descended from him, Abraham spoke up. At first his voice was quavering.

Ah, Lord God, he said.

Are you really asking me to kill this young, innocent lad?

Do you really want me to live with the everlasting memory of his blood on my hands? Do you want to subject me to a lifetime of nightmares and flashbacks of me taking a knife to his young neck? Do you really want to do *this* to me?

Have mercy, Lord.

I know that I have not been close to this boy, not nearly as close as to my first-born, Ishmael. *That* boy I loved, and you forced me to send him away.

Now you want me to kill the only son I have left.

Isaac was always Sarah's favorite. Do you know what this will do to her? She will die too—if not physically, then she will die inside.

She and I already have problems between us, because of Hagar and Ishmael. I know it was her idea; but it backfired. Sarah is already distant from me. Do you want to drive us further apart?

But if you don't have pity on me or my wife, Lord, have pity on the boy! He has done nothing to deserve this. Why should *his* life be cut short just to show *my* dedication to you?

Do you want his last memory to be of me, his father, tying him down like a sheep for slaughter and then taking a butcher knife to his neck?

You can't want that, Lord!

Are you angry with me? Why does your wrath burn hot against me, the one you brought out of Ur of the Chaldees and out of Haran, to this land? (Exod 32:11) What have I done to so offend you, Master of the Universe?

Plus, you made a promise to me and to Sarah, that through this boy, our descendants would become a great nation. What will become of your promise then?

No—I am going to hold you to your word, Lord. I have told many of the peoples of this land, whom I have met, of what you pledged to do through the line of Isaac.

But if they hear of this, that you have commanded his death—for whatever reason—do you know how that will look? It will reflect badly on you.

The Philistines and the Egyptians (whose kings I deceived that Sarah was my sister) will hear of it and they will think that it was with evil intent that you gave me this boy—only to kill him on the mountains and to consume him from the face of the earth. (Exod 32:12a)

Lord, I know I am far from innocent.

Take me instead of my son. But, whatever you do, do not kill this innocent boy.

I plead with you, Master: change your mind. Turn from your fierce wrath and do not bring this evil upon your chosen one! (Exod 32:12b)

And the LORD changed his mind about the evil he was about to bring on Isaac. (Exod 32:14)

And God spoke from heaven, saying:

Well done, good and faithful servant. (Matt 25:23)

You have understood that I am, indeed, a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, showing love to thousands. (Exod 34:6-7a)

Indeed, I desire mercy and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings. (Hos 6:6; Matt 9:13)

But what good would it do to just *tell* you that? What would those mere words mean to you?

But by your bold intercession for your son you have attained true knowledge of the God you serve.

Indeed, you dared to call on me to be faithful to my promise. *That* demonstrated your trust in me. And trust is far better than blind submission.

So, yes, Abraham, I have granted your request. Isaac is redeemed by your prayer.

Go in peace and enjoy life with your wife, Sarah, and your son, whom you are beginning to love.

And then God departed from his servant Abraham.

It wasn't clear *before* Abraham's intercession that he had much love for Isaac. But now, having stood up for him, defending him against God's seeming desire to slay him, a few sparks of love began to flow between father and son.

And Abraham began to nurture that love and fan the sparks into a fire—with the hope that his family might be healed.

And Abraham's taught his children and his household the way of the LORD. (Gen 18:19) His descendants were known from then on for their surpassing mercy and generosity to all the families of the earth. Indeed, they were a blessing to all nations. (Gen 12:3)

REVIEWS

Douglas D. Webster. *The Parables: Jesus's Friendly Subversive Speech.* Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2021. Pp. 347. ISBN 978-0-8254-4690-0. $22.99 (USD) paper.

The Parables of Jesus remain some of the most influential religious short stories in the world. They intrigue, baffle, inspire, anger, provoke, and encourage, and yet remain highly mysterious in their original meaning as much as in their contemporary significance. "On the surface," writes Douglas Webster in *The Parables,* "parables may appear to be quaint moral stories designed to make people nicer, but Jesus worked their obvious hiddenness to open up the secrets of the gospel. He used the common stuff of daily life to teach the extraordinary truths and subversive message of the gospel. He challenged his hearers to interpret the metaphors, to look beyond the surface meaning" (20).

Strangely, then, Webster's work terminates in a summary of theological readings that look far more like the Sunday-school stereotypes he initially seems to avoid. The theological lens the author brings to the text of the Gospels is incredibly thick, simplistic and reductionistic. Readers are told, for example, that "Parables rescue us from the chaos of social media by providing a simple and compelling picture of Christian discipleship" (24). Many, of course, have not interpreted the parables to be primarily about discipleship. Elsewhere, we learn that "The gospel of Jesus Christ ends all religions" (232), the meaning of which is not entirely clear. One must also apparently assume there is a "Christ figure" in each of the parables to unlock their meaning. For example, "The Christ figure in the parable [of Luke 21] is Lazarus" (221), and "If there is a Christ figure in this parable [of Luke 18], it is the widow" (238), etc. Contrary to what others contend about Jewish apocalyptic literature versus the literal end of the space time continuum, readers are presented with a category of stories entitled "The Sermon on the End of the World" (311), which again, answers fundamental questions before they are even asked. In short, the entire framework of interpretation for the parables is uncritical—unaware of its own theological assumptions and expectations.

While the words of Jesus may be a bit coy and hidden, Webster's certainly aren't. One regularly comes across such statements as, "We can assent to a few ideas about Jesus and then go on about our life as if nothing has changed, but

there's literal hell to pay" (330). Similarly, one reads that "We [are] … admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ … Unlike the silly bridesmaids" (330-31). Nevertheless, for those who haven't been raised on a steady diet of Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology* and C. S. Lewis (the latter is cited much throughout, alongside other popular authors), much of what is meant to clarify in *The Parables* may actually confuse. God is presented as a demanding landlord and coercive king (a traditional interpretation), requiring total self-sacrifice (chapter 18-19; "Like a disgruntled employee, it is possible to quit but not leave … in the body of Christ" (280); William Herzog II, Dorothy Soelle, and other liberation scholars on Jesus are rolling in their graves by framing God as an employer this way!), while the same God presents a pure "gospel of grace" and concern for "others." At one point, readers are encouraged to embrace the contradiction not as a matter of the author's own opinion, but as a constituent part of one's personal relationship to God:

> We accept God's unconditional, sovereign control and election of all people *and* we affirm the freedom and responsibility of each individual to respond to God. We believe in God's salvation for the elect through Christ's atoning sacrifice on the cross *and* we believe in the universal invitation of the gospel, that whosoever may come. We believe in the irresistible grace of God *and* in the freedom of choice to reject as well as to accept the gospel. We believe in the perseverance of the saints *and* we strive to remain faithful to the end. We hold these truths in tension because of our commitment to Christ and his word (276).

The trouble with this common framework of theologizing is numerous. First is failing to identify the "we"; it is obviously a very select subgroup of those who identify as "Christian," and it might be helpful if the author either said who this is or didn't use the second person plural at all. Second, as already mentioned, it swaps the author's opinion on specific theological debates with "commitment to Christ," with no concession on the part of the author that this is what is happening. This puts needless pressure on readers to adopt the author's opinionated views. Third, this type of framework never identifies when the theologian or student of scripture is permitted to capitulate to total mystery and when to break down into theological dogmatisms—which the book is noticeably saturated in. How can we trust that Webster is right when trying to harmonize seemingly contradictory assertions and also right when legitimizing the impossibility of harmonizing? Finally, it also treats the Bible like a systematic theology, which the Bible is not. It ignores the interpretative element in the Gospel authors' writing and experience, and also

ignores the possibility that the parables may not be about timeless, infallible "eternal truths" or "spiritual ideas," as much as, well, "subversive speech."

Speaking of subversive speech, while there is much talk about the "world's values" (259) and the parables' counter-cultural approach, it is painfully unclear what that really means today. For example, Thieleke is quoted, "Here is the root of all of Israel's hostility to the prophets and here too is the root of all the fanaticism and radicalism of modern anti-Christians . . ." (303), and then provides an example of the Third Reich. Webster responds, "The great paradox confronting the church is that this gospel of peace in Christ, which is designed to destroy the walls of hostility actually provokes hostility. The old paganisms and the new messianisms fight against the church with everything they have" (303, cf. p. 327). Those faithful to the teachings of Jesus today might immediately think of the Christian Nationalist insurrection of January 6, 2021, where evangelicals, delusional about a "stolen election," broke in the Capitol while citing Bible verses, carrying Bibles, wielding Christian symbols, and consecrating each area with prayer. Or they might think of President Trump's misogynist and racist tirades, platformed from the pulpit of First Baptist Church in Dallas. Or, one might think of the Southern Baptist Convention and other religious institutions that have habitually, systematically, and secretly covered up the sexual assault of hundreds (officially, but likely tens of thousands) of members and clergy within their congregations—all of which the leadership sought to protect in the name of prioritizing the "preaching of the gospel." Webster is quick to interpret Jesus' words as threats of eternal hellfire and the need for religious obedience (towards the right gospel and God)—but dangerously does not identify what might be the "Pharisees" of today, or what it might look like. What if Webster and his audience aren't actually on the right side of Jesus' parables and condemnatory speech? Isn't the possibility precisely the point of many of the parables to begin with—that our religious, and socio-economic security is not actually what we thought it was?

Thus, far from being "subversive," *The Parables* come across as quite ordinary and self-affirming. It does not address Herzog's fundamental question about how they would ever lead Jesus to be killed by the civic/Roman authorities. Similarly, the book is not (as I expected) a work accurately published under an "Academic" imprint. The writing is 8th grade level (which in itself is not a criticism) and written under the first person. *The Parables,* in short, is a high-school Bible Study. Readers are directly asked to ponder questions like, "Have you ever bought bookshelves or a cabinet from IKEA?" (22), etc.

In conclusion, *The Parables* is a popular synthesis of previous evangelical reflections about the parables. It may be helpful for youth groups and college

undergraduates attending conservative schools.[1] But it desperately needed critical engagement from contemporary scholars outside of the theological bubble in which it is situated—both from biblical studies and theological studies; less theologizing, and more cultural situating. While this won't make it less unoriginal, it would at least provide readers with an awareness that there are far more interpretive options than presented.

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Matthew H. Patton and Frederic Clarke Putnam. *Basics of Hebrew Discourse: A Guide to Working with Hebrew Prose and Poetry.* Zondervan Languages Basics. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2019. Pp. 288. ISBN 978-0-3105-3576-8. $26.57 (CDN) $18.69 (USD) paper.

While mastering the fundamentals of phonology/morphology and ensuring one is intentionally and proactively involved in sustained vocabulary acquisition, retention, and the like are all vitally necessary components (among other things) to effective biblical interpretation, exegesis, exegesis, and (still more) exegesis is the only way of truly wresting the full meaning of Scripture. That being said, however, without the right tools (and reliable guides) one can sometimes be at a loss as to how to move ahead effectively. Enter Matthew H. Patton and Frederic Clarke Putnam, authors of *Basics of Hebrew Discourse: A Guide to Working with Hebrew Prose and Poetry*.

Basics of Hebrew Discourse (BHD) introduces intermediate Hebrew students to the "principles and exegetical benefits of discourse analysis (text linguistics) when applied to biblical Hebrew prose and poetry" (back cover). Specifically, Patton and Putnam claim:

> Where standard Hebrew reference grammars have traditionally worked to describe the relationships between words and phrases within discrete clauses (micro-syntax), discourse analysis works to describe the relationships that exists between clauses and texts (macro-syntax) ... making clear the relationships between clauses, paragraphs, and larger units of text in [biblical] Hebrew prose and poetry (back cover).

To put things differently, "*Basics of Hebrew Discourse* has been constructed and designed in order to provide students of the Hebrew Bible [Old Testament] with a functional introduction to the use and application of discourse analysis as a necessary component to textual analysis and the exegetical process" (11).

1 I believe the word "perquisites" (p. 243) should be "prerequisites."

Aside from a one-page table of grammatical terms, two highly detailed table of contents, and a fine introduction (written by Miles V. Van Pelt), *Basics of Hebrew Discourse* is comprised of two main parts: (1) Working with Biblical Hebrew Prose (Patton) and (2) Working with Biblical Hebrew Poetry (Putnam). Three indices (Scripture/Subject/Author) and two brief appendices (*The Question of Meter* and *Gloss, Meaning, and Translation*) round out the volume.

For prose narrative, BHD does not treat *waw* as a discourse marker unto itself. To be clear, Patton contends: "the seemingly endless functions of *waw* are actually not so much functions of *waw* alone but of the larger clausal and supra-clausal structures of which *waw* is a part" (60). In a related way, Patton clarifies that biblical Hebrew also uses sequences of verbs in certain forms and in a certain order in order to communicate discourse relationships. For instance, a *waw* + *yiqtol* after an imperative usually communicates purposes ("so that") despite the absence of any particular discourse marker (see p. 61). Patton further explicates that there are two levels of meaning for verbal forms (see below). NB: Patton maintains each verbal form (*qatal*, *yiqtol*, etc.) has its own "'default' meaning in terms of tense, aspect, and mood, but . . . these defaults can be overridden based on discourse considerations" (64). The two levels are:

> Level 1: Tense, Aspect, and Mood: the first level is what people often mean when they speak of 'verbal semantics.' Every verbal form (*wayyitol*, *weqatal*, etc.) communicates something about how the verbal action or state relates to time (tense and aspect) and reality (mood). This level focuses on the action or state that the verb represents *a single unit*.
>
> Level 2: Discourse relationships: in addition to the verbal semantics in level 1, verbal forms can also communicate something about how a clause relates to the others around it (62 — all emphases original).

The process for discourse analysis (Hebrew prose) is comprised of three main steps: (1) separate the text by clauses (giving each clause its own box in a table while also indenting subordinate phrases/clauses showing how they relate to the main clause), (2) analyse each clause (noting both its key factors and how the clause relates to the previous clauses), (3) reassess your analysis (ensuring one has accounted for *all* elements comprised therein and that one did not contravene the typical uses of discourse markers, verbal sequences, word order, etc. in order for it to fit comprehensibly with the context). Part One concludes with four examples of discourse analysis: (1) Jonah 1:4A–6B (narrative), (2) 1 Kings 20:23–25 (narrative containing direct speech), (3) Exodus 12:21C–23F (non-narrative), (4) 1 Samuel 9:26–10:13 (a larger pericope of narrative).

With respect to biblical Hebrew poetry, Putnam argues "a poetic line consists of a single clause: one clause per line and one line per clause" and (most distinctly) line *length* (as opposed to rhyme or meter, for example) is a "discourse-level device that the biblical poets used to organize their poems" (164). Uniquely, Putnam also opines that parallelism is "neither unique nor necessary to biblical poetry. It is a cohesive feature of biblical poems, a linguistic resource that helps to make biblical poems examples of *patterned language*" (155 — emphases original). The process for discourse analysis (Hebrew poetry) is comprised of several steps (see p. 262): (1) list all nouns/verbs, (2) parse verbs, (3) gloss the text, (4) determine the length (number of words) and structure (syntax) of each line, (5) analyze the morphology of predicates, (6) describe the type of each clause and its syntax, (7) look for semantic cohesion (semantic analysis, chiasm, ellipses, participant tracking) and logical cohesion (kinds of information/interlinear relationships).

Part Two concludes with two examples: (1) Psalm 13 and (2) Proverbs 15:31–33.

Concerning Appendix 1, the author's (rightly) note that attempts to discover and/or define meter in biblical poetry through, for instance, syllable counting (irrespective of the specific method employed) is ill-founded and that emending the text for metrical reasons is also equally illegitimate (pp. 271–72). Appendix 2 clarifies that while the glosses listed in lexicons do reflect how words are often translated, they do not constitute the word's "'basic' or 'central' or 'real' meaning. Words have ranges of meaning and … may have more than one gloss" (273).

Despite the (relatively speaking) complex nature of the information being presented, Patton and Putnam admirably match their writing style with their intended audience. They consistently pitch things just right while also ensuring academic responsibility by means of sustained engagement with the academy at large and, as necessary, some rather content-heavy footnotes.

Typographically speaking, there are sufficient margins, effective bold face type, a good use of white space, and (for the most part) clear headings/subheadings. Almost all Hebrew characters are pointed and (usually) the accents are also included. Students are sure to appreciate the copious examples provided in the text itself while instructors will note that the book itself is not too unwieldy with respect to its overall length, thus enabling them to easily assign additional texts/supplementary reading. Educators are also sure to welcome the different 'notes to teachers' sections (see, for example, p. 157). Would, however, that the authors had published a separate work-book-style volume for students to sharpen their new-found skills!

To critique, as a basic introduction to the subject from within a confessional, evangelical perspective, one would be hard-pressed to find a more accessible,

up-to-date, and linguistically informed and sophisticated guide to discourse analysis of Hebrew prose and poetry. While many experts will (most likely) quibble at the author's terminology and/or labeling in certain places (see, for instance, pp. 38–39, 52, 62, 77–78, 81, 88, 90, 95, 98) and though there are also not a few matters concerning Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) that could (should?) have been leveraged by the authors in an introductory work such as this, Miles V. Van Pelt rightly states:

> The authors of this book understand that there are a number of different models and methods for engaging discourse analysis and they do not claim to have provided the final or definite word on the matter. On the contrary, it is hoped that the construction and use of a practical introduction for the beginning student will advance, refine, and strengthen the field of study, especially as it is applied to our understanding of the biblical text (13).

In sum, modern linguistic theories, as a whole, can be ignored only to one's peril. Veritably, "discourse analysis provides the stimulus and foundation for further literary, historical, and theological study" (31). Students and educators alike, however, must discern for themselves whether or not appropriating Patton's and Putnam's specific methodologies as laid out in *Basics of Hebrew Discourse: A Guide to Working with Hebrew Prose and Poetry* truly pay the dividends that they claim. The text's primary users will likely be biblical studies students.

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Rodney A. Whitacre. *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021. Pp. 508. ISBN 978-0-8028-7927-1. $67.95 (CDN) $49.99 (USD) hardcover.

Amidst the many New Testament Greek Grammars currently available, Rodney A. Whitacre's *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* uniquely and concisely combines the fundamentals of Koine Greek alongside key intermediate material. Whitacre desires not only to prepare students for exegesis, but to enable them to read the Scriptures, delighting in the beauty of the text (x). His own joy in reading the (Greek) New Testament comes across clearly (and is contagious!).

Before offering a critique of the volume, it is prudent to offer a brief overview of the text. *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* is five chapters in total length with eight additional appendices (more on these later). The first two chapters provide an overview of Ancient Greek (ch. 1: Introduction to Greek Writing, Pronunciation, and Punctuation; ch. 2: Basic Features of Ancient Greek). These are

followed by two chapters focusing on morphology, aptly named "Morphology of Nominal Forms" and "Morphology of Verbal Forms" respectively. The fifth chapter (which is longer than the first four combined), "Greek Syntax" deals extensively with syntax, providing examples from the New Testament (hereafter NT) to clearly illustrate each point.

The eight appendices concisely deal with much information of interest and include: (1) rules for accenting, (2) words distinguished by their accents and breathing marks, (3) common suffixes, (4) paradigms for reference, (5) summary of selected syntax topics, (6) simple overview of English grammar essentials, (7) suggestions for approaching a sentence in Greek, and (8) principal parts of common Greek verbs. These appendices showcase one of Whitacre's strengths, clearly communicating the essential information while presenting it pragmatically. I found the appendix dealing with rules for accenting to be a particularly helpful summary and something I will point students to in the future.

In terms of pedagogical sensitivity and typography, the material Whitacre covers is both comprehensive and accessible. Headings and subheadings clearly indicate transitions and bold type is used to highlight definitions and key words. The format of the volume, including many lists and charts, lends itself to much white space which, combined with well-chosen fonts, make its pages both attractive and user-friendly.

Whitacre writes as an experienced teacher, anticipating the questions of the student and specifically offering direction as to priorities in memorization; for example, commenting on stems ending in a vowel, labial, velar, or a dental, he states, "If you have a general understanding of these changes, you will probably be able to recognize the forms while reading without learning these changes in detail" (109).

This volume functions as an excellent reference grammar and by including an Index of Subjects, an Index of Scripture, and an Index of Greek Words, one can quickly and easily find pertinent information. The Glossary of Grammatical Terms provides concise definitions to the grammatical terminology employed throughout the volume. The footnotes not only engage with and direct the reader to numerous other resources, but they also make clear Whitacre's position in the field, specifically noting areas of agreement and of departure. For example, Whitacre states, "Aspect does not signal time. The main morphological signal of past time is the augment on the indicative of secondary tense-forms—the imperfect, aorist, and pluperfect" (228–29) adding in the footnote,

> The temporal reference of the augment is a point of dispute. The view that verb forms do not signal temporal reference is especially associated with Stanley Porter; see *Verbal Aspect*, 76–83; or, more briefly

> and accessibly, Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament* …. For the view taken here, which is the most common view, see Fresch, "Typology, Polysemy, and Prototypes" in *Revisited*, 379–415; and AGG §193a.

These comments are of great benefit to the reader and quickly situate Whitacre relative to recent developments in the field, while simultaneously providing clear direction to related works and different perspectives.

Whitacre engages with current scholarship throughout, but this is particularly evident in his discussions of verbs. His comments on voice as a spectrum (following Rutger Allan) are insightful. He states,

> to understand the various uses of the middle it is helpful to think of a spectrum representing the ways a subject is related to the action of the verb. On the one end of the spectrum the subject is purely the agent of the action, while at the other end the subject is not an agent at all, but purely acted upon by someone or something else, referred to as the patient …. Other forms of voice then represent views both of the subject and of the verb in relation to transitivity that differ from those of the prototypical form (237).

In addition to the agent-patient spectrum, Whitacre highlights nine other types of subject-affectedness in the middle, which ably served to stretch my own thinking regarding this ongoing discussion. Interestingly, Whitacre holds that "the passive in Greek is not a separate voice, but one of the uses of the middle (§2.6)" (241). As a result, Whitacre regards the verbs employing θη/η as second middle/passives rather than exclusively passives, which does help make sense of how they function in the NT.

Whitacre emphasizes that the decision to use one tense-form rather than another may reflect an idiom — it is chosen because that is simply how something is said (232). Whitacre is himself cautious and careful not to overstate the impact of any particular grammatical element while clearly articulating what the text is communicating. Paying attention to what is present can be challenging enough, paying attention to what is absent requires another level of familiarity with the text and this is also something Whitacre models well.

One minor shortcoming is the absence of a discussion of the function of adverbs in chapter 5 (Greek Syntax). Another critique is that though Whitacre capably deals with participles, identifying their uses and possible nuances (with an extremely helpful section on determining the nuance of a circumstantial participle), I did not find his discussion as helpful exegetically as Mathewson and

Emig's, specifically regarding how a participle functions relative to the main verb.[1]

It is of interest to note that Whitacre works from Funk's definition of the genitive: "*genitive is the limiting* [or] *specifying case* and is used to circumscribe the meaning of noun/substantive, adjectives, adverbs, and less often verbs."[2] Whitacre discusses twenty-four ways the genitive functions (pp. 201–10). Whitacre concisely and effectively communicates the varied uses of the genitive along with clear examples without introducing needless categories.[3]

Throughout the volume, Whitacre often includes the ideal examples from the NT. For example, regarding distinguishing the second aorist subjunctive (which always uses a circumflex) from the second aorist second middle/passive (144), Whitacre uses an example from Luke 12:5 where the subjunctive of φοβέω (be afraid) is immediately followed by the imperative of φοβέω, distinguished only by their accents. Whitacre's examples are taken from throughout the New Testament (with numerous examples from every book other than 2 John!).

This volume serves as an excellent resource for the second-year Greek student or for the teacher who is looking for a textbook to use alongside an inductive book study. There are no student exercises or aids for reading specific NT passages included in this volume as it is intended to be used as one part of an inductive study; Whitacre has plans to publish *Learning Koine Greek Passage by Passage,* referencing pertinent sections of this work to help the student understand what they encounter in the NT (ix). *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* would also be highly recommended to anyone who has studied Greek in the past and wants to pick it up again or continue to develop the ability to read and interpret the Greek New Testament. Its primary users will most likely be second year/advanced language students of the Greek NT in Bible College, Christian University College, and Theological Seminaries alongside, one hopes, the industrious pastor and conscientious believer.

Overall, I especially appreciated Whitacre's attention to detail, his clear, concise communication, the care he took to find the ideal examples to illustrate each point, and the richness of the material in his footnotes. Whitacre has done a great service to both the student and the professor with his meticulous research, interacting with recent developments in the field. The inclusion of the fundamentals of

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1 See David L. Mathewson and Elodie Ballantine Emig, *Intermediate Greek Grammar* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 210–15.

2 Robert W. A. Funk, *A Beginning-Intermediate Grammar of Hellenistic Greek*, 3d ed. (Salem, OR: Polebridge, 2013), §0888.

3 By comparison, Wallace (Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996)) has 33 categories for the genitive and Köstenberger/Merkle/Plummer (Andreas J. Köstenberger, Benjamin L. Merkle, and Robert L. Plummer, *Going Deeper with New Testament Greek* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2020)) have 16 categories for the genitive.

NT Greek alongside more advanced material makes this volume one I will continue to return to and highly recommend.

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Kwok Pui-Lan. *Postcolonial Politics and Theology: Unraveling Empire for a Global World.* Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2021. Pp. xii + 261. ISBN 978-0-6642-6749-0. $30.00 (USD) paper.

The vast majority of Christian theology throughout the last two-thousand years has been dominated by white cis-hetero men. Most of Christianity as it exists institutionally today is also the result of colonialism—whether the forceful spread of Catholicism against Islam from the Crusades to the missions of Jesuits on the American west coast, or to Dutch Reformed colonies in South Africa, Indonesia, Brazil, and Sri Lanka, or to the vast expanse of British imperialism in the 1800s which involved nearly the whole planet. Whatever "gospel" this was, it certainly didn't spread primarily by witness or persuasion.

Postcolonial theologies remain young, but Kwok Pui-Lan is an exceptional theologian and Christian activist who has spent an entire career undoing the damage of Christian colonialism. Her Asian, feminist, and liberationist perspectives—combined with experiences from Hong Kong to her career as a professor at leading world universities—offers unique insight, correctives, and contributions in a world that is now thoroughly globalized. *Postcolonial Politics and Theology* is a curated and revised collection of articles from her massive trove of scholarly publications. Her contention is straightforward:

> Eurocentric political theology, based largely on the experiences of liberal democracy, cannot address the kinds of issues arising in the postcolonial world…. Asia, with more than half of the world's population, is multicultural, multilingual, multi-racial, and multireligious. In the past several decades, the religious landscape in the U.S. has become increasingly more diverse and pluralistic as well. Political theology in both the Asia Pacific and U.S. context cannot privilege Christianity and must adopt a comparative approach and include discussion of religious plurality and diversity (2).

Contemporary theology simply cannot be coherent without engaging in postcolonial discourse precisely because it is the "default" way of theologizing. "The theological enterprise has been laden with imperial assumptions and motives ever since Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire" (11), she writes. "As globalization has built on the colonial legacy and enables rapid movements of

capital, labor, and resources, the former binary conceptualizations of the world, such as colonizer/colonized, First World/Third World, and 'the West and the rest' are no longer adequate to describe the new global relations."

What then, does a postcolonial theology—an intentionally *constructive* theology, look like?

> … it must be embodied in new religious and social practices in our heterogenous and richly textured social worlds, in which the local intersects with the global. These practices are counter-hegemonic, creative, and subversive, poised to produce new forms of beings and institutions in our church, community, and society…This book argues that postcolonial theology functions as a training of the imagination and an attempt to construct a religious worldview that promotes justice, radical plurality, democratic practices, and planetary solidary (15).

This is a tall order—a kind of "adapt or die" approach similar to other constructive theologians like Sallie McFague and Gordon Kaufman.[1] ("New religious and social practices" is enough to disturb the majority of church deacon/elder boards!) But readers familiar with the movements of our contemporary world will find this necessary direction difficult to deny.

The book contains eleven articles (chapters) in three sections: (1) Contesting Empire; (2) Political Theologies from Asia Pacific; (3) Practices. The book moves logically from principles to practices. The first section examines the basic ideas of postcolonial theology, the relationship of religion to empire, the relationship of race and sexuality to colonialism, and the American Empire and Christianity. The second section looks specifically at the theological developments of the Asian Pacific, including articles on perspectives, transnationalism and feminism (and labor), and the Hong Kong protests and civil disobedience. The final section addresses pedagogy of postcolonial theology, preaching, interreligious solidarity, and "Christian Mission and Planetary Politics" (ch 11).

Postcolonial Politics and Theology will be immediately challenging to readers who come from a conservative, western, colonial perspective of theology—where God is conceived as the divine monarch who dispenses timeless abstract truth to a special people (usually white men with theology degrees in the priesthood or pastoral office), and the gospel is conceived primarily as escape from otherworldly hell (as opposed to the earthly hell of colonialism, slavery—or today's fascist regimes and global warming). Pui-Lan is absolutely insistent that we must

1 Sallie McFague, *Models of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1987); *idem., A New Theology of Climate* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008); Gordon Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

evolve in our understanding of Christian mission as the circumstances of our world change:

> The disruption and breaking down of planetary cycles, global warming rising sea levels, and the loss of biodiversity demonstrate that we cannot continue to appeal to human rights, property rights, and social justice in the usual sense, without considering the environment. Eco-justice demands that we include the natural environment in our ethical and moral reflections of justice and consider the inherent value of other living things, whenever human actions impact them…. Earth care and planetary habitability must be an integral part of God's mission in the twenty-first century (195).

She also debunks "myths against peace-building," which include the myth of a "clash of civilizations," which has fueled needless war and violence (170), the myth that "equates secularism as progress and regards religion as irrational, absolutist, divisive, and incompatible with modernity" (170-71), and Islamophobia (171). We must reconceive the habitual tendency of Christians to think of themselves as the only ones with something good to share. As she puts it in one of the most memorable quotes of the book:

> A postcolonial approach emphasizes that the aim of interreligious dialogue and engagement is to build relations and avoid drawing a hard and fast line between "us" and "them," or "between "Christians" and "non-Christians." The issue at hand is not whether people profess belief in God or not: the question is what kind of ultimate reality and what kind of power people affirm. Those who affirm power as a top-down process and those who see God or ultimate reality upholding that power are closer to each other, regardless of whether they are Christian or not, than those who affirm alternative forms of power (181).

Furthermore, the concept of "religion" itself must be reconceived (see p. 172).

Even for readers who are aware of these contexts, it will still be challenging to recognize just how important and influential Asian theologies have been in the world over the past several centuries—but especially in the last century. I learned much about Christian history, activism and struggle in Korea, China, Hong Kong, and elsewhere that jarred my typical framework of a "Christian West."

Pui-Lan's writing is clear, well-read, and always relevant to what's happening in the world. It is clear in every page that she loves God and our world, cares for those inside and outside the Christian church, and takes seriously the responsibility of those who construct new discourses, images, and models for human

religious imagination. Radically progressive and academically engaged, *Postcolonial Theology and Politics* is essential for all those engaged in the work of Christian theology and ministry.

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Ashley E. Lyon. *Reassessing Selah*. Athens, GA: College & Clayton, 2021. Pp. xiii + 357. ISBN: 978-1-7341-9156-1. $36.42 (CDN) $29.99 (USD) paper.

Selah, an obscure term in the Hebrew Psalter and Habakkuk, has been "the puzzle of ordinary readers and the despair of scholars."[1] Numerous 19th century scholars have devoted countless hours and many pages in an attempt to clarify this much-disputed word. Veteran commentator, John Goldingay, once quipped (jesting?): "It may be a liturgical or musical direction ('raise the voice'?), but we do not know . . . David Alan Hubbard advocated . . . it was what David said when he broke a string, which is the most illuminating theory because there is no logic about when you break a string, and there is no logic about the occurrence of *sela*" (Goldingay, *Psalms: Volume 1: Psalms 1–41*, 599). Mid-20th century archeological finds, however, reveal certain clues and some stimulating new insights about *Selah*'s use during the Second Temple period.

Ashley E. Lyon, Professor of Hebrew for the Israel Institute of Biblical Studies, Professor of Hebrew Bible for the Israel Bible Center, and author of *Reassessing Selah*, states it is her prayer that through this volume "you'll consider *Selah* in a different light; stripping away all preconceived notions and reading the term in its literary context" (xiii).

Lyon succeeds! *Reassessing Selah* has twelve chapters of different lengths. Chapter one (introduction) offers a select history of research and explicates some of Lyon's methodology (more on this later). Chapter two explores the backgrounds necessary for understanding *selah* in each of the sources that are used in the book. The next four chapters cover the Hebrew Psalter. To be clear, chapter three analyzes Book I (Pss 3, 4, 7, 9, 20, 21, 24, 32, 39), chapter four Book II (Pss 44, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 52, 54, 55, 57, 59, 60, 61, 62, 66, 67, 68), and chapter five Book III (Pss 75, 76, 77, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 87, 88, 89). Chapter six engages Books IV and IV (Pss 140, 143) along with concluding remarks about the Masoretic Text (MT) of the Psalter. Chapter seven explores the role of *selah* in Habakkuk (MT). Chapter eight focuses on διάψαλμα ("apart from psalm") and Pss 2, 33, 49, 79, and 93 in the Old Greek/Septuagint (LXX) version of the Psalter. Chapter

1 Ashley E. Lyon, "What Does '*Selah*' Mean?" Blog. June 2, 2021. https://weekly.israelbiblecenter.com/what-does-selah-mean/

nine engages the Dead Sea Scrolls (both biblical and non-biblical). Chapter ten deals with Pseudepigrapha, i.e., The Psalms of Solomon and The Prayer of Habakkuk (Odes). Chapter eleven goes through several medieval finds, such as Aramaic incantation bowls, the Temple Mount inscription, the inscription at Ein-Gedi, the *Hammath Gader* synagogue, Ein Nashot, the *Gerasa* synagogue, the synagogue of *Horvat 'Ammudim*, and the *Kfar Alma* synagogue. Chapter twelve (conclusion) offers final thoughts concerning the thematic interpretation of *selah* and its place in the Psalter. The book rounds off with a fairly extensive 29-page bibliography, two appendices, '*Selah* Occurrences,' 'Dead Sea Scrolls,' and a thorough subject index. Regrettably, there are no other indices (author, ancient sources/Scripture index, Hebrew words, etc.).

Methodologically, texts are evaluated through the lens of compositional and delimitation criticism. Delimitation criticism seeks out "ancient unit delimiters" such as *paragraphos* (a horizontal line between verses) and *petuḥot* and *setumot* (major and minor section divisions) by means of *vacats* (empty spaces) within ancient manuscripts (see pp. 17 and 233). Lyon contends: "spacing in manuscripts will be of primary focus in this work along with other textual indicators such as stichographic arrangement of the psalms containing *Selah*" (17). Lyon also states:

> Material philology will also be used as a means to look at the relationships in light of the previous texts and manuscripts surveyed . . . The goal of material philology is to look at the relationships between the text and such features as form, layout, para-textual markers, and surrounding context–the ultimate goal to be anchored in the reality of the subject matter, not reliant on historical background. Using ancient delimiters set out in the text, one can combine the lexical and thematic links found through compositional criticism and its compliments to determine a stronger intentionality throughout the biblical psalter. This is one way I will demonstrate *Selah*'s use throughout the MT psalter (18).

There is much to commend in this fairly lengthy yet not unwieldy volume. To begin, Lyon's work is comprehensive with respect to its scope. No other treatment of *selah* provides as much detail in one place. To this end, Lyon will become *the* standard academic reference work on the subject for years to come. Specifically, because so many of the scholars who wrote on the topic of *selah* published their work(s) before the discoveries in the Judean desert, i.e., the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS), Lyon's book stands out from its contemporaries in its ability to analyse more precisely how "*Selah* was being used during the time of the Scrolls' composition" (213).

Thesis-wise, Lyon argues: "*Selah* is more than pause in the text" (213). *Selah*

serves as a rich "transition marker for changes in speaker, changes in topic, or changes in theme" (213). To bolster this assertion, Lyon points to how the scribe who penned QḤevXIIgr did not use διάψαλμα to replace *Selah* but "simply transliterated the term as σελε. This is important because either the scribe did not know what *Selah* meant, or he knew what *Selah* meant and chose to keep the Hebrew term by transliterating it into Greek. Whatever his knowledge, the term was preserved differently here than in any other Greek manuscript" (239–40). Alongside this, "11Q11 employed *Selah* verbally in a communal setting. This spoken word goes against the notion of *Selah* being a silent remark or liturgical direction" but rather "a spoken sentiment of faith" (252; cf. 290). In addition, with respect to 11Q13, one can see how the author "indirectly employed a biblical passage [Ps 82:2], which includes *Selah* as part of the biblical MT Psalter. Thus, since one must ascertain the literary context carefully, and it is clear that the text was read eschatologically, *Selah* . . . fits an eschatological/prophetic/future-oriented context as the author of the *pesher* used its biblical MT citation" (252).

Lastly, concerning the study of Aramaic bowl spells and inscriptions, while it is true that each of the inscriptions and incantations are different, Lyon (rightly) maintains:

> They all reveal the multi-faceted nature of *Selah*. Familiar themes . . . blessings, judgment, and salvation . . . are formed in their own contexts, in their own time. Each context contains an element of future oriented hope that benefits the person who either constructed a synagogue or ancient mosaic floor, or for those who desired protection from demons and evil spirits. Familiar placement at the end of sentiments also mirrors *Selah*'s use in the MT, LXX, and DSS as theme and structure intertwine. And, as incantations were written and then performed aloud over the families to invoke protection, we again find *Selah* in its oral element as it correlates once again with familiar themes found in the MT. Thus, through its diversity in use, we are able to see a progression in the use of the term that reveals its tradition history in the context of not only liturgy, but in spiritual protection association with divine blessing through the ages (277–78).

Despite its strengths, however, *Reassessing Selah* is not above reproach. For example, while Lyon is to be commended in her impressive engagement with primary sources and other works (the ample usage of non-English secondary works is especially notable) the conspicuous absence of some 'standard' commentators and other contemporary scholars is somewhat odd.

For instance, Lyon does not cite the fine excursus "Selah" by Peter C. Craigie in *Psalms 1–50* (Word, 1983) nor the new excursus "Selah" (see pp. 410–11) by

Marvin E. Tate in the commentary's second edition (Thomas Nelson, 2004). Pointedly, Tate engages with Klaus Seybold's impressive work in this second excursus, another scholar whom Lyon fails to note. It is also strange how Richard D. Patterson's article "The Psalm of Habakkuk" is referenced by Lyon (188) yet his extensively researched Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary (Moody, 1993) is not. Likewise, though Lyon does list some of deClaisse-Walford and Rolf A. Jacobson's works (see pp. 306 and 313) their combined contribution to *Psalms* (Eerdmans, 2014) is not in her bibliography. In addition, given Lyon's emphasis on strophic structure, should not Samuel Terrien's *Psalms* (Eerdmans, 2003) have been cited? Readers will likely spot other omissions.[2]

Lastly, some book references (see, for instance, p. 314) do not cite the most up-to-date editions. In a related way, since lexicography plays a key role in a work such as this, I was fairly surprised I could not find any reference to Muraoka's *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint* (Peeters, 2009) in Lyon's definitions of certain key terms (see pp. 35 and 205). It should also be known that readers should look elsewhere for exemplar lexical, text-critical, and grammatical aids to assist them in their translation work of the Psalms. Also, as noted above, given Lyon's emphasis on stichographic arrangement, some readers may be disappointed how Lyon fails to break the lines down into semantic phrases (both in Hebrew and English) so as to help assist the reader in strophic understanding. Lastly, while the author's translations of each psalm is more than adequate one may quibble that Lyon consistently uses the term 'Lord' in place of the traditional LORD for the *tetragrammaton* (or, even better, the more personal, covenantal name Yahweh). On an editorial level, having complete bibliographical details and references in the footnotes alongside a separate, full bibliography seems unnecessarily redundant. Typographical errata (minor) also appear in some places of the volume (see, for example, pp. 303, 309, 322).

These infelicities aside, Lyon's contribution to the academy through *Reassessing Selah* helps to elevate the position of the Hebrew Psalter beyond 'mere' music. As Lyon states: "the value of interacting on a literary level with this term [*Selah*] can address past and present questions with solid evidence from the texts that we now know contain it. As more discoveries are made, other uses of *Selah* are brought to light. This inter-textual study will, hopefully, provide a new perspective for modern readers of this all-too-important book" (17). Its users will most likely be invested laypeople, certain Christian educators and leaders, Bible

2 Some other (older) scholars whom Lyon also fails to note in her bibliography include R. Gyllenberg, "Die Bedeutung des Wortes Selah" *ZAW* LVIII (1940–41), 153–56, and Z. Malachi, "Zur Erklärung des Wortes 'Selah' in der Bible," *Bet Miqra'* XI (1965–66), 104–10.

College/Christian University College and seminary students, and, quite possibly, studious pastors, preachers, and ministers of God's Word. *Sui generis*!

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Mark D. Janzen, ed. *Five Views on the Exodus: Historicity, Chronology, and Theological Implications.* Counterpoints: Bible and Theology. Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2021. 304 pp. ISBN 978-0-3101-0874-0. $30.69 (CDN) $24.99 (USD) paper.

Despite almost a century and a half of archaeological work in Egypt and the Middle East, one of the most highly debated issues within biblical history continues to be the Exodus event. The seeming lack of evidence directly tied to Israel's sojourn in Egypt and the account of the Exodus has led to innumerable attempts to reconcile the biblical narrative and the archaeological record. *Five Views on the Exodus: Historicity, Chronology, and Theological Implications*, edited by Mark D. Janzen, brings together five scholars with different approaches to this issue: Scott Stripling lays out the case for a 15th century BC Exodus (commonly called the Early Date), James K. Hoffmeier and Peter Feinman each give distinct interpretations of why a 13th century BC date should be preferred (the Late Date), Gary A. Rendsburg dates the Exodus to the 12th century BC, and, finally, Ronald Hendel treats the Exodus as (mere) cultural memory.

Each of the contributors are given one chapter to lay out their view of the Exodus, after which each other author is given the opportunity to respond. Every chapter concludes with a rejoinder by the original contributor. As general editor, Janzen also provides an introduction and conclusion to the book. Unlike some other Counterpoints books, there are no 'pastoral reflections' or the like.

Five Views on the Exodus is consistent in its layout (for instance, each scholar is allotted the same number of pages) but also in the ability of each presenter to fully interact with the thoughts, comments, and perspectives of their peers. Interestingly, the five views seem to have been intentionally presented in the "most conservative" to "most liberal" order. One wonders, however, how the authors themselves might have felt about such an arrangement!

Stripling's chapter, "The Fifteenth-Century (Early-Date) Exodus View," heavily emphasizes a so-called 'literal' reading of 1 Kings 6:1. Stripling claims that the relative chronology of the Bible indicates a specific date for the Exodus (1446 BC) that can be connected with other events in world history (29–30). Stripling's strongest evidence for the 'Early Date' comes from his discussion of various sites mentioned in the biblical account of the Israelite conquest of Canaan (Hazor, Jericho, etc.), the Amarna Letters, and especially in his explanation of Tell ed-Daba

as the location of Israel's sojourn and departure. Egyptologists have discovered evidence of a distinctly Asiatic/Semitic city at the site of Tell ed-Daba (ancient Avaris/biblical Rameses) which was inhabited from circa 1900 BC until approximately 1440 BC, when it was abandoned during the reign of Amenhotep II. The last century of its habitation included the construction of a palatial Egyptian royal quarter; a fact easily correlated to the enslavement of the local population for state-sponsored construction projects.

Stripling's greatest weakness is that some of his evidence is not widely accepted by other archaeologists. His attempts to use, for example, the Berlin Pedestal, the structure/altar on Mt. Ebal, and Douglas Petrovich's recent theory that proto-Sinaitic inscriptions are early Hebrew (mentioning individual Israelites) tend to fall on deaf ears (see pp. 35–40, 46–48). While other contributors condemn Stripling for taking biblical numbers too literally, particularly Rendsburg (see pp. 67, 123), one must also ask if such a critique is justified. How else might one record an actual passage of 480 years if (as certain authors more than intimate) biblical numbers can only be (by and large) either 'symbolic' or 'exaggerated' (198–200)?

Hoffmeier's essential premise in his chapter, "The Thirteenth-Century (Late-Date) Exodus View," is that "real events stand behind the sojourn and exodus traditions" (82) and that the Bible should be treated as any other ancient source (85). Hoffmeier uses five types of evidence to support his conclusion that the Late Bronze Age Egyptian context of the Exodus account is secure: (1) Semitic-speaking people lived there, (2) foreigners were enslaved, (3) the Hebrew account in the Torah preserves many Egyptian words, (4) geographical details are impressively accurate, and (5) the toponyms recorded reflect the correct time period (86–103). Since Hoffmeier also acknowledges the appearance of the name Israel on the Merenptah Stela (which is dated to c. 1208 BC) and that Israel was already in Canaan previous to that, this date becomes his *terminus ante quem* for the Exodus/Conquest (105). Hoffmeier speaks with great expertise on these topics and establishes his belief that the Exodus happened between 1270 and 1240 BC.

The problem for Hoffmeier is that while he shows strong evidence that the Exodus truly happened, three of the contributors (Stripling, Feinman, and Rendsburg) all noticed that he does not actually establish 'when' it happened very well. To put the matter differently, Hoffmeier leans heavily on the occurrence of the city named Rameses in the Bible (Exod 12:37). That is, he places the story of the Exodus after the reconstruction of the city of Avaris into the 19th dynasty delta capital called Pi-Ramesses (98). Stripling sees this as an intentional anachronism, thereby removing the problem (112). Hendel feels that because he believes the biblical text was only written 500 years or more later, the name was only a memory of a great Egyptian city and bears no significance to an actual event (127).

One surprising thing is that Hoffmeier does not try to link the destructions of Canaanite sites during the Late Bronze Age to a 13th century Israelite conquest, as many other scholars (such as Albright, Bright, Ben-Tor, etc.) have done.

The third chapter, by Feinman, is titled, "The Thirteenth-Century Hyksos/Levite-Led Exodus View." While both this chapter and the previous one actually deal with the same time period, Feinman's approach is completely different than Hoffmeier's. Specifically, Feinman focuses on the relationship between politics and literature and sees evidence of the Exodus not so much from the Bible itself but as an event that can be reconstructed from Egyptian history. In particular, Feinman uses three texts from the 13th century BC: (1) the Story of Seqenenre and Apophis, (2) Leiden Hymn 30, and (3) the 400-Year Stela (148-160). In his reconstruction, Asiatics in Egypt defied Rameses II and chose to leave Egypt for Canaan (135). Feinman claims (136–46) that among those Asiatics were an elite class called Hyksos (even though that name had long disappeared from the historical record) and soldiers from a division of Rameses' army (whom the author rashly identifies as the eventual Levites).

Feinman places great stress on the Story of Seqenenre and Apophis, a tale which purportedly occurred in the 16th century BC, but only survives in an incomplete 13th century BC copy. To be clear, he believes that it was created in the time of Merenptah (late 13th century BC) as a commentary of his father Rameses II's military failures. Feinman states, "he was declaring that his father Ramesses II had been a humiliated, defeated failure in a Hyksos confrontation led by Apophis" (155). Due to the incomplete nature of the text, however, any reconstruction of the events behind the story (much less the purpose of the story) is essentially pure speculation (something that was also recognized by each respondent).

Rendsburg's chapter, "The Twelfth-Century Exodus View," returns to an 'evidential' approach. Rendsburg uses three lines of evidence to argue that the Exodus happened during the reign of Rameses III (1187–1156 BC): (1) the plethora of new Israelite houses and villages being built in the highlands of Canaan during the Early Iron Age I (1200–1100 BC), (2) the arrival of the 'Sea Peoples' and subsequent end of Egypt's power in the region, and (3) the length of biblical genealogies such as that of King David (186, 195-197, 205-206; Ruth 4:18-22; 1 Chr 2:5-15).

One major obstacle facing Rendsburg, however, is that virtually all archaeologists recognize that Merenptah's stela mentions a people named Israel being defeated in Canaan. As mentioned above, this monument dates to approximately 1208 BC. As such, Israel plainly could not 'emerge' in Canaan if it was already there—a dire problem for Rendsburg. Given such, according to Rendsburg, either the reference to Israel relates to Merenptah's mastery over the Israelite slaves still

in Egypt, or it could reference Israelite tribes in Canaan that were never part of the Exodus (192–93). This assertion, however, by and large, actually destroys his own thesis that Israel was not yet in the land. Indeed, since the mention of a people group named Israel is included in an account which emphasizes geographical place names in Canaan, this theory (to put it mildly) strains credibility.

Finally, Hendel presents his thoughts within "The Exodus as Cultural Memory View." Regrettably, one of the consequences of a multiple-view book such as *Five Views on the Exodus* is that by this time the last author has already had the opportunity to respond to four other contributors, so much of their own position has already been revealed. In summary, Hendel does not see the need to seek 'real events' behind the Exodus story; it was the effect that the story has had on later generations that gives it value. As Hendel states, "This means that (the Exodus) is not plain history, nor is it pure fiction. It is a mixture of reminiscences of historical events and circumstances, traditional motifs, and narrative imagination. It recalls and revises the past, forgetting some aspects while foregrounding others, with the aim to make the past usable in the present, to anchor ancient Israel's identity and ideals" (252). As a result of this overly skeptical approach to the text and because of his own biases, Hendel condemns the traditional evangelical doctrine of inerrancy for not allowing scholars to have the freedom to ask certain questions (238). Hendel even accuses some evangelical scholars of hypocrisy (238–42).

Unfortunately, the debate degenerates at this stage of the book as mudslinging and emotional outbursts begin to overtake well-presented arguments. Janzen himself acknowledges this struggle within the book's conclusion but can only point out the common disagreements the contributors had on evidential issues, not the foundational differences of their viewpoints (283). One wishes that the editor had taken a more firm stance on the matter and required increased tolerance, humility, and patience between each of the various 'combatants' prior to the publication's final release.

The real issue behind the variety and diversity of opinion, though, is not, in itself, the evidence that the contributors present; it is (rather) the presuppositions and biases that each author carries into the debate. Their wide-ranging views on biblical authority, the perspicuity of Scripture, what distinguishes 'fact' from 'fiction,' and a host of other issues are what actually underlie their reconstructions of the past (including in some cases, I would say, an obvious post-modernistic skepticism towards the grand narrative of the Bible). In this way, it may be said that the true evidence, whether archaeological, biblical, or otherwise, is secondary to the main argument: do biblical stories relate to real events transpiring within space and time (historical referentiality)? Said otherwise, most of the evidence (and non-evidence!) mentioned above can (in many ways) be interpreted however one wants to interpret it; it is completely dependent on a person's preunderstanding, theological

bias/constraints, and presuppositions. Even something as widely agreed upon as the Merenptah Stela can (somewhat shockingly, perhaps) be dismissed as evidence if it does not fit one's paradigm. At its heart, this reflects a worldview issue.

Stripling stands alone in this volume as one who interprets the archaeological evidence in light of an authoritative reading of the biblical account. He places far more value on the biblical text itself to describe the Exodus event than the individual items of evidence that he uses. His reconstruction of the Exodus event therefore reflects his belief that the story happened as described in the Bible. That said, Stripling is also very honest about this bias and how this conviction impacts his understanding of the Exodus event (see pg. 52). Unsurprisingly, this approach puts him at odds with many of the other scholars who do not share that viewpoint but are themselves unwilling to admit their bias to others as explicitly as Stripling. Why is it that if one makes clear their conservative convictions from the outset that they are somehow labeled as 'biased,' but if one holds to a so-called 'liberal' position but does not make that explicit, it is often considered 'good scholarship?'

What I mean by this is that while Hoffmeier, Rendsburg, Feinman, and Hendel each do use the Bible as a source for their theories they seem to allow 'scholarship' (not Scripture) a much greater voice—and 'scholarship' will always provide a vast range of opinions to choose from. Hoffmeier (the closest to Stripling) and Rendsburg are very adamant about the accuracy of some biblical data yet are willing to devalue other information when it does not seem to conform to their theory. Rendsburg, for instance, spends almost ten pages (200–09) discussing chronological and genealogical data from the Bible that points to the time between the Exodus and King David as being much shorter than the 480 years of 1 Kings 6:1. As a result, he must dismiss information that contradicts his view (205, 207–08). That is to say, it seems far too convenient for Rendsburg to throw out the numbers and lists that he disagrees with rather than be held accountable to Scripture as the authoritative voice by which to measure things. While some might see this as 'good scholarship,' it comes across as arbitrary and careless. In a similar manner, while one recognizes both the rhetorical and literary intent of Scripture, it is quite difficult to understand how Feinman's and Hendel's positions would uphold the authority of the Bible.

As a whole, *Five Views on the Exodus* is a well-organized book, but it does have flaws and inconsistencies. Although it includes a few charts and illustrations, this is by no means consistent among the authors. In particular, Hoffmeier's chapter would greatly benefit by having a detailed map of the eastern Egyptian Delta (94–102). Even for someone familiar with the region, more clarity could be achieved if one could directly follow his arguments visually. Also, one critical error escaped the eye of the editor. On page 130, Hoffmeier says, "Pi-Ramesses

did not exist during Israel's monarchy, but twelve miles north stood its replacement, *Avaris*" (emphasis added). The city being referred to here in the context of the passage is Tanis, not Avaris. Unfortunately, this mistake confuses an important point that Hoffmeier is trying to make.

To conclude, *Five Views on the Exodus: Historicity, Chronology, and Theological Implications* does an excellent job of delineating the challenges and benefits of holding to each of the various positions of the Exodus. That being said, the breakdown of civility that occurs within the final few chapters is off-putting and runs the risk of alienating the audience. Alongside this, while the uninitiated reader may look at this book as an opportunity to formulate their own opinion on the subject (and will therefore have to decide which of the five scholars they trust to handle the weight of evidence) it is unlikely that an informed reader will actually be swayed by any argument that stands in competition to their own view of Scripture. Such is the world of cognitive bias. This book's most likely audience is Bible college and Christian university/seminary students, along with other Christian leaders and certain invested laypeople. Definitely recommended, as long as one approaches the book with a healthy dose of discernment!

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Pete Myers and Jonathan G. Kline, eds. *A Hebrew Reader for the Psalms: 40 Beloved Texts*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Academic, 2021. Pp. xxiv + 230. ISBN 978-1-6830-7272-0. $53.49 (CDN) $35.99 (USD) hardcover.

The biblical Psalms are some of the world's most familiar and most beloved poems ever written. Regrettably, however, many students of the Hebrew language barely read them in the original.

To begin, one almost always starts one's study of the language with (narrative) prose texts. In addition, precious few people manage to gain sufficient competency in the fundamentals of the Hebrew language (grammar, syntax, morphology, phonology, vocabulary, etc.) to effectively tackle Hebrew poetry. Beyond sound, rhythm, textual uncertainties/alternative text-critical possibilities, unfamiliar idioms, and semantics (the psalms contain a fair number of rare words or words that in context appear to have rare meanings that have largely eluded translators and scholars throughout the millennia), the Hebrew psalms are also challenging since they contain "a surfeit of morphologically difficult forms and rare variations. These forms include many verb and non-verbs that, with the addition of pronominal suffixes, do not closely resemble their lexical forms" (xx–xxi). In brief, "the Hebrew psalms present us with many challenges, a situation that can be frustrating since — perhaps more than any other part of the Bible — we long

to experience in a profound and immediate way the literary beauty and spiritual power of these texts in their original forms (xvii). Enter *A Hebrew Reader for the Psalms: 40 Beloved Texts* compiled and edited by Pete Myers and Jonathan G. Kline.

A Hebrew Reader for the Psalms constitutes "a carefully curated collection of forty psalms from the Hebrew Bible" (xix). Myers and Kline state:

> Our purpose in creating the book has been to remove as many impediments as possible that might stand between you and an intimate experience with the Hebrew text of these psalms. Our goal is to guide you through each of the various kinds of linguistic and literary challenges . . . listed above so that — whether you have studied Hebrew for a year or have a PhD in biblical studies — you will be able to access the riches of these texts and read them with enjoyment and confidence for years to come" (xix).

Aside from the preface, a guide to the Hebrew numerals which appear in the book (more on this later), and two appendices (A Description of the Main Features of *A Hebrew Reader to the Psalms* and The System of Masoretic Accents/Cantillation), Myers' and Kline's volume is comprised of seven main sections: (I) Hymnic/Faith Psalms (Pss 100, 67, 146, 23, 62, 95, 91), (II) Lament/Supplication Psalms: Part One (Pss 43, 27, 14, 56, 41, 22), (III) Liturgy Psalms: Part One (Pss 24, 15, 46, 48, 132), (IV) Lament/Supplication Psalms: Part Two (Pss 32, 51, 88, 90, 69), (V) Liturgy Psalms: Part Two (Pss 93, 98, 2, 110), (VI) Wisdom/Torah Psalms (Pss 1, 19, 82, 112, 127, 36), (VII) Thanksgiving Psalms (Pss 138, 118, 124, 107, 8, 103, 135). Myers and Kline admit, however, quoting Robert Alter, that "genre in Psalms is very often not a locked frame but a point of departure for poetic innovation" (see p. xix).

The authors are to be commended on their inclusion of such a broad swath of literary texts that, arguably, represent some of the most important psalms from the perspective of biblical history, theology, and exegesis. Quite strangely, though, while one of the many notable things about the Psalms is the frequency of citations to the crossing of the Reed Sea (*Yam Suph*) when Israel came out of Egypt (Exod 14), there are, unfortunately, few, if any, references to this event in Myers' and Kline's selection (Cf. Pss 66, 74, 77, 78, 106, 114, and 136). While this seems to be unintentional, it is unfortunate that this momentous occasion is overlooked in this book.[1]

The authors maintain the texts themselves are intentionally presented "roughly in order of what we have judged easiest to hardest" with respect to their length

1 Cf. M. Ferris "The Red Sea Crossing in the Psalms: Returning to Redemption." Blog. August 8, 2019.http://gentlemantheologian.com/2019/08/08/red-sea-crossing-psalms-returning-redemption/

(shortest to longest), vocabulary, morphology, and syntax (xx). The actual presentation of each psalm comprises four major elements: (1) The Hebrew text (consonants, vowels, and accents), (2) the verse numbers, (3) an apparatus that faces the psalm text and provides glosses and lexical forms, and, lastly, (4) another apparatus which follows the psalm and provides text-critical data and morphological analysis (see pp. xx–xxi alongside 191–208). It is of interest to note (see p. 205) that roughly 60% of the words found in the Psalms in this book (on average three out of every five words) are analyzed in the morphology section of the apparatus — a commendable accomplishment!

Myers and Kline note that for each psalm:

> The apparatus of glosses and lexical forms can serve as a hand-curated 'vocabulary guide' to the psalm (allowing you to study the left-hand side of the page before reading the psalm) or as a vocabulary refresher (which you can review after reading through the psalm once or twice), not simply as a reference guide to be consulted during your reading of the Hebrew text (203).

The Hebrew text for most of the psalms presented in this book represents "a fresh transcription of these poems as they are attested in the Aleppo Code ("A"), which many consider to be the finest exemplar of the Tiberian Masoretic tradition" (191). Psalms 15–24 are missing from "A." As such, the four psalms in *Hebrew Reader for the Psalms* which fall in this range (Pss 19, 22, 23, and 24) were taken from photographs of the Leningrad Codex "L" with exhaustive cross referencing between them and the Westminster Leningrad Codex (WLC) electronic text (see pp. 191–92). One notes Myers and Kline have "listed all differences between A and L, and between WLC and L, in the apparatus" and that "differences in the use of *rāfē* are . . . noted occasionally [only] where such variation may have particular significance" (192).

Since "A" and "L" differ in terms of Hebrew pointing, Myers and Kline include clear guidance with respect to these matters, much of which will, most likely, be new to almost all readers, especially matters concerning *rāfē* (see pp. 192–96). As something of an aside, one would be hard pressed to find a guide to the 'System of Masoretic Accents/Cantillation' (see appendix two, pp. 209–30) that is as pedagogically informative, concise, and accurate as that found within *A Hebrew Reader for the Psalms*. It alone (truly) is worth the price of the book.

The decision to use "A" itself over "L" is of immense help for many readers since "A" contains more pronunciation helps than "L." Two examples will suffice: (1) concerning the *shewa*, while the pointing of "L" requires a reliance on one's memory of morphology the pointing of "A" always reminds one that the *shewa* is vocal, (2) the pointer of "A" used *dāgēš* slightly more than the pointer of

"L" thus helping the reader with pronunciation and pausing at times (see, for example, Ps 98:7).

Concerning numbering, Myers and Kline identify each psalm in terms of its position in the Psalter by both an Arabic numeral and a Hebrew numeral. Likewise, every verse in every psalm is marked with both an Arabic numeral and a Hebrew numeral (English on the left-hand side of the page, Hebrew on the right). The author's state:

> We have used both Arabic and Hebrew numerals for two reasons. First, this is meant to encourage you to become familiar with the system of Hebrew numerals. Aside from the intrinsic worth of learning this native method of enumeration, knowing these numbers is helpful if you wish to use most Israeli editions of the Bible, to consult or read publications written in Modern Hebrew, or to understand certain text-critical notes written by the Masoretes themselves (e.g., some of the marginal notes in BHS). Second, as is well known, in many psalms the English and Hebrew verse numbers do not correspond exactly. This is typically because a superscription . . . is not counted as a verse in English Bibles, whereas in the Hebrew texts superscriptions are included in the system of verse numbering (196).

Matters concerning the unique division of the text into lines, clauses, and phrases according to the Masoretic cantillation marks may be summarized as follows:

> The way we have formatted the text means that, as a general rule, there is only one clause on each line. Within a given line, the presence of 'large spaces' and medium-sized' spaces between words allows to easily see how — from the perspective of the ancient Jewish singing tradition — the line breaks down into semantic phrases. Paragraph breaks are based on our subjective judgment and are meant to aid your reading and understanding (199).

Myers and Kline helpfully include both "the *lexical forms* of Hebrew words (to help you see how a word's contextual form differs from its lexical form and to aid your use of a dictionary)" and also "*contextual glosses* (to help you understand how a word is being used in context" (200 — italics original). The authors ably distinguish between each of the different Hebrew stems with respect to their sense and meaning (Qal, Niphal, Piel, Hiphil, Hophal, etc.) In this way, their analysis is free from many of the all-too-common exegetical and "word-study" fallacies (such as the 'root fallacy' or 'basic meaning fallacy,' for instance) which often plague language studies.

Most uniquely (but also most welcome!), in each of their glosses, Myers and

Kline have sometimes used "an uncommon English word to reflect the rarity of a Hebrew word" (xv). In addition to this, given the oft "ambiguous or polyvalent" nature of a given Hebrew word, the authors have also (quite judiciously) provided a choice of two or even three glosses at times (201). Furthermore, since even "competent readers of Biblical Hebrew can be stymied by commonly occurring words when they appear in poetry," Myers and Kline have also chosen to gloss many words that occur commonly in the Hebrew Bible (202). That being said, the authors "endeavored to limit the glosses for each line of Hebrew to one line whenever possible. For this reason ... occasionally a word that we gloss in one place is not glossed in another" (202).

To critique, I found the authors' choice of lexicons to be somewhat odd in light of the embarrassment of riches now available. To be clear, Myers and Kline maintain that while they occasionally made use of HALOT and BDB the primary lexicons they consulted (see p. 199, cf. 201) were Holladay's *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Eerdmans, 1971) and Clines's *The Concise Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (Sheffield, 2009). Alongside this, while Myers and Kline are to be commended in their fine bibliographical selection of 'helpful commentaries' and recommended texts concerning biblical Hebrew poetry and the Psalms in general (see pp. xviii and 202), the conspicuous absence of many notable evangelical authors who have written similar (superior?) works on one and the same subjects is odd; one will search in vain for Hassell C. Bullock, David Firth and Philip S. Johnston, Mark D. Futato, Derek Kidner, John Goldingay, Tremper Longan III, James L. Mays, Allen P. Ross, Leland Ryken, Willem A. VanGemeren, Bruce K. Waltke, Gerald H. Wilson, and others. Lastly, though the authors (see pg. xv) rightly contend the meaning of *selah* is disputed, citing the excursus by Peter C. Craigie in *Psalms 1–50* (Word, 1983), they fail to note the new excursus "Selah" (see pp. 410–11) by Marvin E. Tate in the book's second edition (Thomas Nelson, 2004). One also notes how Ashely E. Lyon's stimulating new volume, *Reassessing Selah* (College & Clayton, 2021) has opened up many new horizons for scholars.

These quibbles aside, there is much to commend in this slim (highly) attractive volume. The book itself is beautifully formatted, printed, and bound. This was intentional. Ornate and intricate designs neatly divide the text and draw the eye. The unique size and shape of the book is pleasing to hold and lays flat well. The opaqueness of the pages prevents most bleed through and the inclusion of two 'ribbon markers' is a nice touch. The type-face for the Hebrew font is superb and the effective use of white space, special shading, bold face type, and the like make for easy tracking at a glance. To quote the endorsement by Gary A. Rendsburg, Pete Myers' and Jonathan G. Kline's "self-stated objective 'is to make the poetry of the Psalter accessible to as wide a range of readers as possible'—a goal which

they attain in the most effective manner. The beginning student will make major strides in reading ancient Hebrew poetry, while the advanced student will discover nuggets on every page. The user-friendly presentation only enhances the most pleasurable learning experience."

I heartily concur with Rendsburg's assessment of *A Hebrew Reader for the Psalms: 40 Beloved Texts*. It is a welcome addition to the ever-growing Hendrickson library of primary source materials. Its users will most likely be invested laypeople, Christian educators and leaders, Bible College/Christian university and seminary students, and, one hopes, studious pastors, preachers, and ministers of God's Word. Highly recommended.

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Christopher A. Beetham, ed. *The Concise New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2021. Pp. cxiv + 1086. ISBN 978-0-3105-9847-3. $79.99 (USD) hardback.

At its core, effective biblical interpretation hinges on effective exegesis. Relatedly, effective exegesis turns on an effective analysis of words as they appear in their respective contexts (clauses/phrases, sentences, and discourse units). *The Concise New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis* (formally abbreviated *CNIDNTTE* but hereafter *CNID* edited by Christopher A. Beetham, is a significant resource for those looking for a quick-reference guide to aid in exegesis and interpretation (back cover). To be clear, *CNID* is an abridgment of the acclaimed five volume *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis* 2nd ed. (Zondervan, 2014, hereafter *NID*), edited by Moisés Silva.[1]

Beetham states, "The goal of this present volume is to make the riches of *NID* accessible to a wider audience. The current volume retains approximately 55 to 60% of *NID*. It differs only in the size of the articles—all the articles and features of *NID* have otherwise been fully retained" (vii). The key question is what has been cut to condense the material from five (!) volumes to one not oversized book? Beetham makes clear (vii): (1) except for noting the most relevant material

1 One notes, of course, that *NIDNTTE* was actually a thorough revision of the *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (*NIDNTT*), edited by Colin Brown, which was originally published in three volumes by Zondervan in 1975–78 (a reissue in 1986 included a fourth volume consisting of indexes and errata). Lastly, *NIDNTT* was, itself, a translation, revision and expansion of *Theologisches Begriffslexikon zum Neuen Testament* ("Theological Concept Lexicon to the New Testament," 2nd ed., 2 vols. [1970–71; rev. ed. in one vol., 2010]). As something of an aside, the *NIDNTT*, much like the *NIDNTTE* has now, also received its own superb, one-volume edition, namely the *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology: Abridged Edition* (formerly titled the *NIV Theological Dictionary of New Testament Words*), abbreviated as *NIDNTTA*, which was edited by the late Verlyn D. Verbrugge (Zondervan, 2000).

from other standard lexical reference works, such as *TDNT*, *EDNT*, *TDNT/TDOT*, and *NIDOTTE*, for example, the bibliographies have all been deleted, (2) besides a substantial trimming of the Greco-Roman sections, most etymological discussions have also largely been removed, (3) discussions of rabbinic Judaism, which, despite having their origin(s) in earlier times, were all written after the New Testament (NT) period, have generally been cut, (4) extended discussions of scholarly interpretations for so-called difficult and/or significant passages have typically been excised, (5) since NT apocryphal and gnostic literature, as well as the writings of the church fathers, date later than the NT documents (much like the bulk of rabbinic Judaism noted above) they are of much less value in determining the meaning of a word in the first-century context than, say, the writings of Philo and Josephus—for this reason, they have mostly all been deleted, (6) discussions concerning putative sources (e.g., JEDP), authorship, and the authenticity/inauthenticity of a specific logion or pericope have, by and large, been entirely eliminated except when deemed to be necessary by the editor for the argument, similarly, text-critical discissions have only been retained when it was thought to be absolutely necessary in order to substantiate a significant exegetical/theological point, lastly, (7) while *NID* often (and liberally) provided the biblical reading (NIV 2011) for the convenience of its users, these have all been deleted for economy of space. One notes, though, that the Scripture references themselves have (wisely) been retained so inclined readers are able to look them up. Indisputably, Beetham is to be commended for his judicious editorial decisions in these regards.

Another boon is the inclusion of Moisés Silva's full introduction to the *NID*, which includes a fine exposé of theological lexicography with ample references to his esteemed *Biblical Words and Their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics*, rev. ed. (Zondervan, 1994). Aside from two exhaustive lists (Greek Words/Concepts) there is also a very thorough Scripture index which is of inestimable value for the serious student. The decision, however, to retain a 'Strong to Goodrick-Kohlenberger Number Conversion Chart' seems odd.[2]

Typographically, CNID is very readable and user-friendly. The two-column-per-page format with ample headings/subheadings throughout makes for easy argument tracking. In addition, ample margins, effective use of white space, (mostly) pointed Hebrew, special shading at times (concept lists), and superb handling of bold face type thoroughly enhance its usability.

One notes, of course, that this volume is not exhaustive. Specifically, *CNID* provides nearly 800 articles covering over 3000 of the approximately 5400

2 Despite not a few notable lexical works being 'keyed' to Strongs, how many users will actually benefit from its inclusion? For a fairly extensive list of resources coded to Strong's number system (which include BDB, *TLOT*, and *TWOT* for the Old Testament alongside *TDNT*, *TLNT*, and Thayer's Greek English lexicon, for the NT), see below: http://www.bibletexts.com/strongs.htm

different words that occur in the Greek New Testament (viii). While one may quibble at what, precisely, constitutes an exegetically and/or theologically significant word, given that this work was never designed to supplant and/or replace any of the standard Greek lexicons, like BDAG or Louw and Nida, for instance, one would be hard-pressed to fault the editor for the exclusion of any specific word(s).

In much the same way, while Louw and Nida's concept list(s) may vary somewhat from *CNID*, the differences between the two are rather negligible in terms of the actual method, practice, and execution of discerning the semantic range, field, or domain of a word. The unique layout of *CNID* is also of great benefit in avoiding a so-called "atomistic approach" to language wherein one discusses "an individual Greek word in isolation from semantically associated terms and therefore ignoring important passages that are relevant for the theological topic under purview but . . . do not happen to include the word chosen for study" (xii). Alongside this, the presentation of *CNID* also helps the less astute user evade many of the egregious and highly irksome trappings which (regrettably) plague far-too-many original language studies. These include, for example, the basic meaning fallacy, illegitimate totality transfer, and such.[3]

While space forbids any sort of analysis of the articles contained within this work, suffice it to say that treasures and tidbits abound within a linguistically informed structure. Beyond question, whatever issues one may have with *CNID* are unlikely to arise due to quality.

If only the unabridged volumes of *NID* by Silva had contained some introductory articles, much like its counterpart, i.e., the *NIDOTTE*. We have needed an update to Gaebelein's *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Volume 1–Introductory Articles* (Zondervan, 1979) for so long.[4]

Though some may quibble, the decision to not include any indices for the Greek and/or Hebrew/Aramaic words is understandable given economics. It may also be argued that the thoroughness of the Scripture index and the superb arrangement of *CNID*, in general, may have made such an index redundant anyway. Perhaps the biggest challenge facing this work, however, is one that most users of *NID* have already faced; namely, proper citation format and source material traceability. To be clear, unlike almost every other so-called 'theological dictionary,' no article/entry closes with the name of a specific author. This makes accurate

3 For more details on these matters, one should primarily consult Benjamin J. Baxter, *"In the Original Text It Says": Word-Study Fallacies and How to Avoid* Them (Energion, 2012) alongside D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*. 2nd ed. (Baker, 1996). For more details on the interplay of James Barr and some of these things, see, above all, Douglas J. Moo, *We Still Don't Get It: Evangelicals and Bible Translation Fifty Years after James Bar*r (Zondervan, 2014) and Stanley E. Porter ed., *James Barr Assessed: Evaluating His Legacy over the Last Sixty Years* (Brill, 2021).

4 Interestingly, the introductory articles to the *NIDOTTE* were of such value for exegetes they were made available separately. See Willem A. VanGemeren's *A Guide to Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Zondervan, 1997).

documentation extremely difficult if one seeks to align (see p. vii) with the *SBL Handbook of Style* 2nd ed. (SBL, 2014). While a clear answer to these things is not simple, compounding this problem is the question of origins. As noted above, *CNID* is based off of Silva's 5-volume set. What's more, the original articles from Colin Brown's work, which, by and large, remain the essential source of both *CNID*/*NID*, are themselves indebted to a team of over 70 German academic and pastors under the editorship of Lothar Coenen and others (xi).

Pointedly, despite Silva's exceptional editorial prowess (who is equal to such a task?) he fails to explicate the precise nature of the not insignificant changes implemented. Silva contends:

> The original German work and the first English edition were produced during a period when the figure of Rudolf Bultmann loomed large over NT scholarship. Thus the contributors interacted extensively with him, as well as with other prominent writers of the mid-twentieth century. Some of these discussions are less relevant today and have therefore been shorted or even omitted in the present edition[*NID*], but it seemed wise to maintain a measure of continuity with the original *NIDNTT* [*NID*] by retaining material that still contributes to our understanding of Greek usage and NT concepts. On a selective basis, these discussions have received brief updating. (Although the revising editor assumes responsibility for the final form of this edition, readers should not infer that the views expressed throughout the work necessarily reflects his own opinions). The revision has involved not only numerous omissions, additions . . . and alterations of various sorts, but also extensive rewriting — so much so that it seemed inappropriate to retain the names of the original authors after each article (xi).

These things aside, Beetham's abridgment should be considered a marked success. This does not mean, however, that one should abandon either the *NIDNT* or *NIDNTTA*. They both retain much that is of great value for serious study. The same (of course) can be said of Silva's *NID*. Even so, Christopher A. Beetham's *The Concise New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis* (*CNID*) deserves a prominent place on the shelf for all budget conscious individuals. Its primary users will most likely (one hopes) include the studious pastor, invested laypeople, certain Christian educators, and a variety of researchers including Bible college, Christian university, and seminary students. Highly recommended.

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Chloe T. Sun. *Conspicuous in His Absence: Studies in the Song of Songs and Esther.* Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021. Pp. x + 326. ISBN 978-0-8308-5488-2. $45.99 (CDN) $34.00 (USD) paper.

How can God be omnipresent (Ps 139:7) yet absent (Ps 22:1)? Why does the Bible include Song of Songs and Esther, in which God's absence, at least by name, is palpable? What does God's absence teach about him? Chloe T. Sun, the author of *Conspicuous in His Absence*, argues:

> God's presence and absence are not mutually exclusive. The way in which God works in the Writings and Megilloth differs from that in the Torah and the Prophets. Since Song of Songs and Esther are rooted in creation theology, where divine presence is not overt but covert, these two books complement and supplement what the rest of the biblical canon lacks. Consequently, they offer insight into the larger question of the nature of God and how believers should respond in times of his absence (11).

Sun presents a thorough, scholarly study of divine absence in both the Song of Songs and Esther while fulfilling her promise to provide a practical theology. Prior to offering a full critique of the volume, an overview of the book is in order.

Aside from the introduction/conclusion and three thorough indices (subject, author, Scripture, etc.) Sun's work is comprised of six, roughly equal-sized chapters. The first two chapters discuss theology, while the latter four apply and reflect on aspects of "the theology of absence … and how it contributes to a fuller picture of God" (86).

Sun posits that teaching about God's absence is (relatively speaking) acutely lacking as compared to his presence. In her introduction, she cuts to the heart with a common human experience, feeling forsaken. She asserts, "God is there but he refuses to act. . . . When suffering abounds, questions of divine absence arise" (1). To answer this problem, Sun uses Theological Interpretation as her methodology (3).

In chapter one, "Theology: Divine Presence and Absence," Sun analyzes the three positions regarding God's presence and absence: (1) diachronic "from divine presence to divine absence" (17), dialectic "divine presence in absence and absence in presence" (26), and canonical (39). Sun argues that when considering theology and our present sufferings, "the absence of God in these two biblical books is a theological necessity" (14).

In the second chapter, "Absence: Wisdom and Countertexts," Sun clarifies that absence is not nonexistence, but "[r]ather, absence refers to an aspect of God that escapes human comprehension" (50). She opines these biblical books are

countertexts which "complement and supplement what is lacking . . in regard to the transcendent and mysterious nature of God" (77).

Chapter three, "Time: Song and Narrative," delineates how Esther and Song of Songs "contributes to the understanding of the theology of absence" (87). Key here is Sun's delineation between the dimension of human existence and God's regarding the felt absence of God from the human perspective (123). In "Temple: Garden and Palace," chapter four, Sun discusses the suggestion of God's presence by way of two temple images. These are the reminiscence of the Garden of Eden in Song of Songs and in the palace in Esther (138–40).

Chapter five, "Feast: Passover and Purim," discusses the significance of these biblical feasts with respect to divine absence in a markedly post-exilic context. Lastly, "Canon: Resonances and Dissonances," traces the distinct echoes, that is, the "motifs of both books [which] resonate with other biblical texts" (228) and their counterechoes. In other words, Esther and Song of Songs "challenge, critique, and evaluate the normative motifs manifested in the rest of the canon" (228). To be clear, Sun posits the echoes confirm the canonicity of these books but "the counterechoes provide an alternative voice, creating a disharmonic symphony" (287).

Incontrovertibly, Sun demonstrates keen scholarship by interacting with the *crème de la crème* of contemporary resources (providing equal treatment of both Song of Songs and Esther) and superb engagement with the Hebrew text (not transliterated) as needed. Typographically speaking, there is a beautiful use of white space with clear headings throughout. The pictures at the beginning of each chapter are also a nice touch! One should also note Sun's effective use of illustrations, summations, and applications. Her conclusion, for example, is an excellent demonstration of the application of theology to reality. Along with a list of several tragedies and hardships, Sun explains:

> The realization and the acknowledgment of divine absence in human history … and in the lived experience of human beings … helps believers align Scripture with reality. Therefore, divine absence is a theological necessity. The experience of the absence of God creates doubt and despair, but it also elicits faith and prayer (293).

Sun's argument that these books function as countertexts in Israel's salvation history alongside the development of a more robust, practical theology of divine absence, highlighting that human suffering and forsakenness demand complements and supplements to divine presence theology, is a true gift to scholarship and this work will surely become the new standard on the subject.

To critique, while Sun does dive into the Jewish figural interpretations of the Song of Songs in the Rabbah and Targums (187–210), she does not offer more

than a passing reference to the church's allegorical interpretations. This oversight is regrettable. Also unfortunate is the fact that Sun discusses the connections between the Passover and the Lord's Supper within chapter six (210–12). While one cannot, of course, include every topic, it is unclear why the discussions on God's presence in the Christian figural readings are nearly absent. She does admit that a Christian figural reading is dismissed "due to its incongruence with historical-critical methods" (184), but are Christian ones less valuable than the Jewish ones? Is it wise scholarship to dismiss "the dominant mode of interpretation since the Song's inclusion into the canon" (184)? What is missed from these interpretations regarding a theology of God's absence?

These infelicities aside, Chloe T. Sun's *Conspicuous in His Absence: Studies in the Song of Songs and Esther* remains an excellent resource that ought to be of top consideration for all those seeking the reason and significance of the absence of God's name in Esther and the Song of Songs. Sun effectively meets her goal of answering this question as well as providing practical answers to what we should think and do when God is absent (6, cf. 290–95). Its primary users are likely theology students in Bible colleges, seminaries, and Christian university programs alongside, one hopes, the studious pastor and invested layperson. Highly recommended!

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Christopher A. Rollston, ed. *Enemies and Friends of the State: Ancient Prophecy in Context.* University Park: Eisenbrauns, 2018. Pp. 613. ISBN 978-1-5750-6764-3. $99.95 (USD) hardcover.

The relationship of preachers to the political authorities has always been a complicated one. But it has also been an *old one,* as the thematic volume *Enemies and Friends of the State* demonstrates. As early as 1,000 BCE, God's prophetic voice can be found making friends and making enemies with the state.

The first chapter of the book is an enlightening discussion about the meaning of "the state" and the history of perception regarding political authority and bringing to bear this sociological and historical discussion on ancient prophecy. The second chapter is equally brilliant and enlightening, "The Politics of Voice," which offers various models, including one that illustrates the distance of prophetic voice from centers of power:

1. Prophet Voice: speaking with moral courage (this is at the center and addresses competing worldviews head-on)
2. Proximal Power: Courage as Standpoint (the second circle around Prophetic Voice)

3. Intermediate Power: Courage as Strategic Interaction
4. Peripheral Power: Courage as Co-cultural Resistance (most distant circle)

Miriam Perkins (the author) then goes on to look at how Isaiah 7 is an example of proximal power (congruence), Amos 7 of intermediate power (assertive opposition), and Jeremiah 28 of peripheral power (aggressive resistance). Combined with interpretive questions about the nature of prophetic communication, her model is markedly sophisticated. She concludes that

> Naming the complexities of speaking truthfully, persuasively, and passionately against more dominant worldviews and in the presence of more powerful individuals exemplifies the prophetic voice many of us need to become people of good will in the contemporary world. The voices of moral courage in Isa 7, Amos 7, and Jer 28 are therefore an important legacy both for communities that honor these texts and those beyond who struggle to give voice to moral conviction from places of social marginality. (55)

The next chapter looks at whether prophecy existed in ancient Egypt (Thomas Schneider concludes that it cannot be ruled out), and the following is a survey on the role of prophets in the Ancient Near East in general, which is "deeply involved in the establishment and maintenance of just kingship by the 'correct' king, with the promise of a good outcome if this just kingship is established and maintained correctly" (107). The next chapter, "Prophecy in Transjordan" focuses on the multi-attested and multi-faced figure of Balaam in and outside the Bible. Balaam was an "international 'seer of the gods,' privy to the higher, international level of the pantheon headed by El. As a spokesman for the whole 'the gods,' who oversee the larger cosmic framework within which kings receive their power to rule their own realms, Balaam stands as a potential friend of the state but, for the same reason, as a latent threat" (198). Two chapters then cover prophecy in Deuteronomistic history, followed by a chapter on Huldah and then prophecy by the Chronicler. The next section looks at prophets and prophetic books "of the First Temple and Exilic Periods" (311), concluding with an eight-chapter section on the second-temple period.

Enemies and Friends of the State is a superb work of biblical studies. It is a well-rounded, scholarly, and yet readable compilation of everything relevant to ancient prophecy and the various bureaucratic, political, and theological roles that it played. The authors are all top of their fields—and I particularly enjoyed the chapters not only by those I had already been familiar with (John Collins on

Daniel, Richard Horsley on Jesus as revolutionary prophet and covenant-renewer, William Schneidewind on early monarchy), but by others as well.

For example, Jennifer Knust poses an interesting question about the book of Revelation: if the book is so anti-state, how can it be so easily used as an inspiration "for those who seek to advance what might be considered a statist agenda" (546)—like in dispensational Zionism and the whole *Left Behind* enterprise? Her sense is that:

> …any attempt to turn Revelation's all-seeing eye of God against current states and contemporary enemies fails to deal adequately both with the book's ambiguous legacy and John's own rhetorical strategies. To invoke John's divine sovereign in order to overturn an objectionable human one repeats the terms of Revelation's arguments, but without calling John's "necro-politics" into question. When John envisions a divinely sanctioned and ruled state apparatus ("New Jerusalem") as the answer to the state he derides, his fantasized state retains the privileges of citizenship for his sovereign's son, this man's allies, and all the obedient members of his heavenly community. Rhetorically, John's persistent defense of the sovereignty of his God—God's armies will ultimately triumph, the citizens of God's city will one day receive all the rewards due to them, and God's law rules supreme—pursues a story that repeats familiar terms of sovereign power and reinstitutes relations of domination. Thus, John's theory of sovereignty actually mirrors that of his archenemy, Rome: he too invests his sovereign with the absolute power to kill or let live, his citizens with the privileges due exclusively to them, and God's laws with the status of absolute truth. Perhaps John's double message—adversarial toward one imagined state but ready to demand absolute loyalty to another—can help explain why Revelation's authority has been so effective at serving the needs of both biblical scholars with liberationist sympathies and the inventors of *Left Behind's* Tribulation Force. (560)

In other words, the author of the Apocalypse took a risk—similar to how the earliest Christians took a risk appropriating political, emperor titles like "Lord" and "Savior" to Jesus—in appropriating the empire's statism to God's kingdom. (Indeed, the "Kingdom of God" is itself a political metaphor.) While I stumbled on this realization a few years ago reading Matthew Bates' *Salvation by Allegiance*

Alone,[1] it struck me as all the more profound to find this argument being made with regard to Revelation. Why? Because this disjunction was partly the source for the great contradiction, or at least tension, in Christology and the church's work: gentle Jesus, friend of sinners, suffering servant (inspiring Christians to care for the poor, love enemies, live radically, and endure suffering) vs. the Return of the King in Revelation, riding on a war horse slaughtering beasts (inspiring the church to engage in Crusades and religious wars). As I learned in a similar book (*Israel and Empire,* also reviewed in this volume), colonized peoples sometimes unfortunately "imitate" the colonizer and empire. That seems to be happening here in Revelation, as happens elsewhere.

Enemies and Friends of the State is the best collection of essays on the subject I'm aware of and provides penetrating analysis regarding these political and social dimensions to the world of the Hebrew Bible and the Israelites.

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Adam J. Howell, Benjamin L. Merkle, and Robert L. Plummer. *Hebrew for Life: Strategies for Learning, Retaining, and Reviving Biblical Hebrew.* Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020. Pp. xiv + 224. ISBN 978-1-5409-6146-4. $22.99 (USD) paper.

The immense pleasure and tangible benefits (both temporal and eternal) of gaining rock-solid proficiency in Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic (the original languages of the Bible) should not be underestimated. Veritably, "true theology and precise exegesis are … systematically dependent on one another" (7). Even so, many individuals find it an arduous task to maintain the necessary discipline(s) to cultivate such skill(s). Enter *Hebrew for Life: Strategies for Learning, Retaining, and Reviving Biblical Hebrew* by Adam J. Howell, Benjamin L. Merkle, and Robert L. Plummer. To be clear, *Hebrew for Life* addresses conclusively the most important questions that most people have about learning biblical Hebrew and provides important resources, methodical approaches, and concrete study habits so as to enable students of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament (hereafter HB/OT) to be "faithful stewards of the unique privilege of reading the Hebrew text" (back cover).

1 Jamin Andreas Hübner, review of Matthew Bates, *Salvation By Allegiance Alone* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016) for *The Canadian American Theological Review* 6:1 (2017):121–27, at 122: "A more significant concern is overstress on the allegiance concept in soteriology, at least to the point of hegemonic reductionism. It is important that Jesus Christ is not only King, but the Prince of Peace, the Lamb of God, the true Vine, the Light of the World, Temple, and so forth. Kingship was stressed in the NT because of the contemporary context of the Roman emperor and Jewish Messiah (a perfect backdrop, by the way, to show Jesus's divinity). This should not overpower Christ as the *logos* or other, non-Jewish and non-nationalist titles, images, and metaphors. The Western world in particular needs this diversity of images, as it continues to recover from oppressive regimes and tyrants, colonialism, racism, sexism, charismatic cult leaders, etc."

Prior to offering a full-scale review, though, it is prudent to offer a synopsis of the volume as a whole. Aside from a brief foreword (written by Miles V. Van Pelt), *Hebrew for Life* is comprised of nine chapters of roughly the same length (NB: the following chapter summaries are derived from pp. x and xi). Chapter One, "The Goal of the Harvest," shows why knowing Hebrew matters in the life and ministry of all Christian leaders in the Church; Chapter Two, "Weighed in the Balances and Found Wanting," helps to ground the student in the proper study habits in order to start learning Hebrew on a firm fitting; Chapter Three, "Review the Fundamentals Often," stresses the value and importance of reviewing vocabulary and paradigms and offers different strategies as to how to most effectively build vocabulary and retain memory paradigms; Chapter Four, "Develop a Next-Level Memory," emphasizes the need to use as many senses as possible to learn Hebrew, including reading, writing, listening to, and singing/chanting Hebrew, not to mention using mnemonics as well as visual aids and the like; Chapter Five, "Strategically Leverage Your Breaks," provides specific texts that people can read over an extended time (such as spring, summer, or winter vacations), along with specific exercises that one may work through in order to maintain their proficiency in Hebrew; Chapter Six, "Read, Read, Read," highlights the value (and necessity) of reading Hebrew daily; Chapter Seven, "The Wisdom of Resources," provides an overview of various tools/aids that are available to assist one's use of the Hebrew language as well as specific strategies as to how best to utilize and leverage them; Chapter Eight, "Hebrew's Close Cousin–Aramaic," offers practical advice on learning biblical Aramaic; Chapter Nine, "Getting Back in Shape," provides practical ways to re-enter the "arena of Hebrew if it has been neglected for some time" (xi).

Aside from the "chapter reflections," i.e., five well-crafted, open-ended questions that are meant to facilitate further engagement with the specific content of each particular chapter, there are also nine brief "devotional reflections" from a wide variety of authors including Tom Blanchard, William Fullilove, Peter Gentry, Steven Hallam, Dominick Hernández, Adam J. Howell, William R. (Rusty) Osborne, and William Ross. These reflections vary quite widely in length from (roughly) two pages to upwards of four and almost even five (!) pages in total page length. Despite this unevenness, the material itself is often quite thought-provoking and even if one does not readily agree with some of the specific writer's assertions or conclusions, they remain 'on-target' with the primary overarching hope that "these brief meditations whet your appetite for a devotional life spent in the Hebrew text" (xi). Perhaps the most stimulating message (written by William Ross) involves 'Reading the Septuagint alongside the Hebrew Bible'– a practice that ought to continue to be heartily recommended for any serious student of the HB/OT.

Various motivational quotes and the like are generously provided in special, gray shaded boxes that are usually found alongside the edges and outer margins of the text. Not a few testimonials also appear which often run a full-page in length or more. These 'asides' are all quite well-written, poignant, and helpful. Three indices (name, scripture, and subject) round out the volume. Regrettably, there is no bibliography.

To critique, I have very few quibbles with this volume. The book itself is quite visually appealing with ample charts, diagrams, and the like. Specially illustrated graphics are also used as a 'type' for how one might perhaps better facilitate vocabulary acquisition. These unique and memorable examples are a special treat! Other 'bonuses' include numerous high-quality reproductions of different resources, such as certain 'Hebrew Reader' editions, interlinears, and even various 'handbooks.' The personal examples and anecdotes that are used throughout the volume are both relatable and inspiring. Though the astute reader will likely find numerous 'favorite' volumes that were 'conspicuously absent' from this work (my own list included Milton Eng and Lee M. Fields's *Devotions on the Hebrew Bible: 54 Reflections to Inspire and Instruct* - Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), as a whole, the sensitivity and astuteness of the 'recommended reading' lists of *Hebrew for Life* are all quite in-depth and commendable.

As something of an aside, one might wish that a more concerted focus was devoted in this volume towards preaching and teaching using biblical Hebrew. That being said, however, since not a few works do make this their primary emphasis, it is possible that Howell, Merkle, and Plummer believe it to be redundant to duplicate such resources.

There remains, though, one primary criticism that must be raised against this otherwise superb volume. While the words lamentable and inexcusable may seem harsh, it remains reasonable to argue that any text that explicitly states (via the title itself) that its overarching goal is to facilitate one's acquisition in the Hebrew language *for life*, the lack of thorough engagement with the discipline of textual criticism is not insignificant. Though it might be tempting for the fledging student or harried pastor to ignore complex matters such as the transmission/copying process of the Scriptures or the procedures for evaluating different textual readings, learning this material effectively will better equip and prepare the exegete to understand God's Word more circumspectly. Inconvertibly, anyone truly emphasizing learning Hebrew *for life* would concur with this assessment.

To conclude, *Hebrew for Life: Strategies for Learning, Retaining, and Reviving Biblical Hebrew* is an excellent text that will undoubtedly aid students in what Howell, Merkle, and Plummer consider to be "the ultimate goal of . . . Hebrew study: *to know and love the Triune God and to love people who are made in his image*" (xi, italics original). Its primary users will likely be any serious Hebrew

student alongside, one hopes, the studious pastor and the invested lay-person. Highly recommended!

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Horatio Clare. *Heavy Light: A Journey Through Madness*. London, U.K.: Chatto & Windus, 2021. Pp. xii + 336. ISBN 978-1-7847-4352-9. $38.24 (CDN) hardcover.

While autobiographical discussions of mental breakdown (and tentative steps toward recovery) abound, there are few penned by someone with Horatio Clare's facility with the English language; and fewer still, thanks to his past employment with BBC, his current literary reputation and public visibility, by someone with access to the intricacies of Britain's health-care plan (National Health Services) and its labyrinthine subtleties of psychiatric assessment, intervention, and follow-up.

Following two earlier crises while on writing assignments, Clare had been diagnosed as cyclothymic; i.e., subject to mood swings that are more exaggerated than normal yet not so extreme as to merit a diagnosis of bi-polar mood disorder wherein the sufferer oscillates between psychotic mania and immobilizing depression. Subsequently, however, his increasing use of cannabis as a stimulant and alcohol as a tranquillizer found his mood swings expanding. During a ski-holiday in the Italian alps he moved into full-blown mania with its classic symptoms (e.g., irresponsible use of money and hypersexuality/promiscuity), together with raging paranoia (other hotel-guests belonged to military intelligence units of European nations) and obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Soon Clare was apprehended by the police. Following interviews by a social worker and a psychotherapist he was moved along to a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist's assessment rendered him 'involuntarily committed' for up to 28 days. He took the prescribed medicine, quetiapine (trade name: Seroquel), commonly used in cases of bipolar disorder, major depression, and schizophrenia. In 19 days, however, he was discharged, with an anti-psychotic drug in hand, even as he refused mood-stabilizing medication. The presupposition of the treatment he received during his institutionalization was that his mental illness was rooted in the brain's chemical imbalance, which imbalance, of course, the drugs were meant to redress. In only a few days, however, he gave up the anti-psychotic medication on account of its side-effects: confusion, numbness, and nausea. Thereafter his recovery proceeded without significant setback.

Part II (almost one-half) of the book moves from a personal delineation of the author's illness to an arm's-length discussion of medical assumptions concerning

the nature of mental illness (here he is at pains to expose and contradict the neurochemical model), followed by an exploration of the thicket-like services, offices, and personnel who deliver government services to the mentally ill. Relentlessly he documents the lack of scientific evidence for the 'chemical imbalance' thesis; and no less relentlessly he exposes the pharmaceutical companies' commitment to this thesis for the sake of Big Pharmas' profit maximization.

At no point, however, does he deny the ever-increasing emotional distress of our era: in 2018, 7.3 million Britons (out of a population of 66.65 million) were taking antidepressants—twice as many as ten years ago. In 1987 1.1 million Americans received disability payments for mental health reasons; by 2021, 5 million did. Neither does he ignore the rising tide of distress among children and adolescents, particularly with respect to anxiety, depression, self-harming, eating disorders, and assorted addictions. Astutely he points out what too many people overlook: the relation between social class and mental illness, wherein the more affluent are afforded privileges, access, and considerations the socially semi-submerged never see. Not least, Clare readily acknowledges the cruciality of early childhood experience: inadequate provision for children subjected to overwhelming stress, emotional deprivation, exposure to marital conflict amounting to warfare—these are factors precipitating mental illness in adults whose present circumstances occasion the crystallization of stresses long suppressed but now virulent.

Clare does not attempt to deny that psychotropic medication 'works' in the sense that it reduces symptoms (even as he repeats tirelessly that no one knows how it 'works'). At the same time, considering the deleterious side-effects of too many drugs, he is undeterrable in his agenda of deprescribing. Why, for instance, should bipolar patients be prescribed lithium when short-term relief is followed by longer-term worsening of prospects for recovery?

Then what does Clare propose as an alternative? Here his anti-chemical agenda (both with respect to diagnosis and treatment) comes to the fore. Instead, he underlines the effectiveness of the sufferer's insight gained through the psychotherapist and social worker, together with "social prescribing": "exercise, hobbies…therapies involving art, literature, writing, music and creativity" (225). While he avoids the more strident pronouncements of the anti-psychiatry movement (whose major spokespersons were psychiatrists R. D. Laing and Thomas Szasz in Britain and USA respectively), the second half of his book advances a 'softer' but unmistakeable opposition.

Many readers will dismiss him as naïve. After all, haven't we all seen psychiatric sufferers whose agony was lessened through drugs? Still, the questions he raises remain.

No less frontal is his challenge to the church. While the book is written from a

consistently secular standpoint ("I was seeking to understand what we know about the causes and treatments of mental disorder… for a third way between pills and praying" (303)), the book everywhere invites theological comment. For instance, when Clare speaks of the erosion of selfhood, biblically informed people will immediately ask, 'What is human selfhood? What is its origin? How is it maintained? How does the community of faith uphold human selfhood in a society that is fast succumbing to social scientific, Marxist, even empiricist perspectives that erode what Scripture attests concerning the indefeasibly human: we are made in the image of God, are addressed by God-in-person, are appointed to render ourselves neighbour, and are possessed of an agency unparalleled in the animal world?'

While Clare rightly deplores the depersonalization rampant in understaffed clinics and hospitals, and perceptively recognizes a major healing factor to be not the medical expertise of nurse or social worker but rather the humanity of these people, he proffers no explicit understanding of the human. Again, it must be noted, the community of faith could not be accorded a greater invitation to address the matter and, no less importantly, exemplify what the gospel alone gives and enjoins. While he was briefly institutionalized yet profoundly percipient Clare wrote, "In here, you cling so hard to hope that you create it" (148). The Christian can only rejoin, 'Hope is a future certainty grounded in a present reality. The present reality is the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the Kingdom he brings with him; the future certainty is that *shalom* in which suffering and sin are remedied in an eschatological appointment that renders us whole as creatures (no longer disfigured by pain) and holy as humans (no longer self-contradicted by sin).' Plaintively he speaks of healing from derangement as "a process of discovering a lost story" (178). Immediately the spiritually alert want to announce (and embody) the truth that everyone's story is taken up into a bigger story, our Lord's story, a story that honours ours yet transfigures it so as to defuse the threat derangement otherwise poses to our identity and integration and serenity.

Since the mental health crisis is not abating (in the last 30 years teenage suicide has increased threefold), and in view of the ministry to the mentally ill that Christian pastors and counsellors invariably exercise, Clare's book should be probed by all who aspire to be witnesses to that Kingdom which cannot be shaken (Hebrews 12:28).

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Leo G. Perdue and Warren Carter. *Israel and Empire: A Postcolonial History of Israel and Early Judaism.* Edited by Coleman Baker. New York: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2015. Pp. x + 328. ISBN 978-0-5672-4328-7. $42.95 (USD) paper.

Post-colonialism and de-colonialism is quite popular in academia today. And it's no surprise why: much or most of the world we now live in is the result of colonizing empires. But the same was true for those in the ancient world—especially the people of Israel. Indeed, perhaps no collection of writings would benefit more from a post-colonial reading than the Bible. The Bible is, after all, a story about Israel and the Judeans, spanning over a thousand years, who have lived under Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and Roman rule. And it is under such colonization that virtually all of the Bible was written.

But what exactly makes up a post-colonial reading? That's the subject of the introduction in *Israel and Empire*. The authors assemble various dimensions of a post-colonial reading stemming from various influential figures, such as nationalism and social power (Michael Mann), the discourse of power (Michel Foucault), and discourse of resistance (James Scott). The second chapter goes into more detail, focusing on post-colonial literary criticism, the "subaltern and economic exploitation," "racism in the ideology and practice of imperialism," "Orientalism: Subverting of Western Stereotypes of the East," "the location of culture," hybridity, mimicry,[1] various approaches to historiography, the imperial metanarrative, colonial resistance, and the "diaspora." "An important goal of the postcolonial," the authors underscore, "is to be a 'vernacular cosmopolitan' who is able to translate cultures and reinterpret traditions in ways that subvert the empire" (19). The "goal of the postcolonial is not simply to accomplish the return of the land and self-rule to the colonized; it seeks to replace the colonized mind with a new understanding of the world and to value its own traditions and cultures …. Opposing the powerful colonial world is difficult but necessary to create a new reality devoid of imperial oppression and racial and cultural stereotypes of the Other" (14).

This orientation is used as the lens for five major chapters that lucidly write the history of Israel under various colonial/empire rule: (a) The Assyrian Empire, the Conquest of Israel, and the Colonization of Judah; (b) Judah under the Neo-Babylonian Empire; (c) The Persian Empire and the Colony of Judah; (d) Judea/Israel under the Greek Empires; (e) Judea/Israel under the Roman Empire.

1 "…mimicry is not simply servile imitation of the empire's culture and customs, but rather an exaggerated imitation of their language, manners, and ideas. Indeed the colonials wear the clothes, use the language, and perform the courtesies of their masters, but in ways that ultimately taunt their masters" (18).

Despite its targeted analysis, the book's balanced treatment, readability, and lack of presuming previous historical knowledge makes *Israel and Empire* a remarkable fit for a fine textbook on Israel's history in general. Readers become not only keenly aware of how much the political and economic situation determines the framework for all of biblical study but are encouraged to become next-level interpreters of the text in a way that effectively connects literature, theology, and history together.[2] Indeed, despite the specialized language of post-colonial discourse, readers can appreciate the genuine applicability and meaningfulness of contemporary hermeneutics.

The authors are also skilled and competent to address the various facets and theory issues surrounding this entire enterprise. For example, they write:

> Since postcolonialism embraces postmodernism's primary argument that there is no single meaning or reality or objective free interpretation, but rather there are multitudes of meanings or realities, usually based on the self-interests of texts and interpreters, interpretation becomes the function and outlook of a particular perspective, something that is both historically and culturally located and yet in constant flux. This does not mean that interpretation or reality is solipsistic, thus denying the concrete existence of data (temporal, physical, active, and spatial), but rather that meaning is construed in large measure by the imagination of the historiographers or other types of interpreters working within their own social locations and out of their own ideological framework. (29)

This becomes important given the big question: can the subaltern speak?

> Spivak … is skeptical that scholars can rediscover the voices that imperialism has silenced, since they are lost forever to human memory. Even if imagined by writers in the past or present, these voices are only the fictional expression of an individual writer. What this means for historiography is the fact that biblical texts, which speak of even the heroes of Israel, are produced by human imagination. The biblical voices of the marginalized are fictional and written by intellectuals who rarely can capture the thoughts, values, and views of the

2 On the latter (history), the authors write: "Historiography involves three major concerns. The first is to discover the material and cultural data of past civilizations and to reconstruct the human thought and behavior that produced them in particular times and places. The second is to examine the ways that the various pasts of these civilizations have been reconstructed and interpreted by later historians from antiquity to the present. And the third is the informed attempt of the modern historian to interpret the peoples and events of civilizations in order to comprehend their past experiences and preeminent understandings and events by using current theories that shape the histories of the contemporary period" (26).

> marginalized. This does not mean she denies history can be written, but it does imply that much in the biblical recreation of human beings in the past is historically irretrievable. Without subaltern discourse, which is rare in Israelite and Judean texts, great care has to be taken by historians who are attempting to reconstruct their lives, ideas, and beliefs. (21)

The book unfortunately does not go further down this important rabbit trail, asking how (for example) the fact that much or most of the OT (especially historical writings) come from the hand of scribes in the 500s BCE under exile, who have perhaps an intentionally subversive goal while handling authentic oral and written traditions that, in some ways, are now irretrievable except through their eyes and literary goals. That the OT was written by not just the privileged (i.e., scribal class) but by the marginalized (exiles Israelites) would seem to be a significant dimension in this discussion.

In any case, one finds plenty of immediate attention given towards subversive literary analysis. For example, we read on the chapter on Assyria and section on Hosea, "It was especially the prophets of YHWH during this period that made use of their hidden discourse that sought to subvert the Assyrian metanarrative and its ideology of hegemony. This discourse, which was grounded in Israel's and Judah's own traditions and drew on the past conventions of salvation, burned within their memories" (49). The authors' analysis also continually compares the "hidden transcript" from the "public transcript," as well as how the economic situation came to frame imperialism and its resistance by Israel, its prophets, and biblical authors.

To stay within its basic goals, the last section on the Roman empire does not look at Christian resistance to the empire as much as the various events, drama, propaganda (another important topic that is continually revisited), surrounding Jewish resistance and the writings of Josephus. For that reason, readers will have to look to McKnight and Modica's *Jesus Is Lord, Caesar Is Not: Evaluating Empire in New Testament Studies* and Herzog's *Jesus, Justice, and the Reign of God* to fill-in the Christian and New Testament era on this subject (though, it should be said, "empire criticism" is not as full and complex as post-colonial analysis).[3] The section "Decolonizing the Mind" was particularly interesting, as it looks at the noncanonical writings of the Second-Temple period as a source of considerable Judean/Jewish resistance to the empire and its agendas.

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3 The book also complements Christopher A. Rollston, ed., *Enemies and Friends of the State: Ancient Prophecy in Context* (University Park: Eisenbrauns, 2018), also reviewed in this volume. I read both side-by-side in a couple months; *Israel and Empire* is more readable and less technical and focuses less on the prophets. Both, however, highlight the inescapable economic and political dimensions of the role of prophets and Hebrew literature in general.

I thoroughly enjoyed reading *Israel and Empire* and consider it a first recommendation for a solid and readable history of Israel, from Abraham to Caesar. It is also another firm reminder about how political and economic the biblical world—and Christian identity—really is.

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