

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?

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.

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/>.