

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

Brittany Kim

Northeastern Seminary at Roberts Wesleyan University

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, **אָמַאָס** 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 (**מָאָס**) the claim (**מִשְׁפֵּט**) of [his] male servant (**עֶבֶד**) or female servant when they contended (**רִיב**) with" him.⁸ Similarly, Job is described in the book as God's "servant" (8–42:7; 2:3; 1:8; **עֶבֶד**), who has "contended" (**רִיב**) with God (9:3; 40:2; see also 33:13) and "prepared [a] claim" (**מִשְׁפֵּט**) 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 (**מִשְׁפֵּט**)? 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 **נִחַמְתִּי**, 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" (**קָרָא**) and "answer" (**עָנָה**) 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* **יָדַע**] 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.

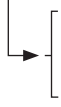

20 See Middleton, *Abraham’s Silence*, 218.

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” (יָחַז) 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 (יָשָׁח) 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 [מלאך] of God/YHWH call[ing] [קרא] from heaven [22:11 ;21:17] "מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם"; 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.