

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,

2 Brittany Kim, "Lengthen Your Tent-Cords": *The Metaphorical World of Israel's Household in the Book of Isaiah*, Siphut 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 *hesed* 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 *šāhaq*, the verbal root of Isaac’s name, *Yiśhāq*. So when the text says that “Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, *māṣaḥēq*,” 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), *yāhidākā* (your only one), and *Yiśhāq* (Isaac), each prefaced with the direct object marker *’et*. But sandwiched between the second and third direct objects is the relative clause *’āsher-’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-’āhūbkā*. God could have said, “Take your son, your only one, *’et-’āhūbkā* (your beloved/ the one you love), Isaac.”

Instead, we have a syntactic shift with *’āsher-’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.

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 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 *śedeqâ 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 **H**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 she¹⁵) 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://richardmiddleton.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)