

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

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Abstract

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

9 Pirkei d' R. Eliezer 31.

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

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