

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

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### Abstract

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

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

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

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

2 Middleton, *Abraham's Silence*, 189.

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

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

### Reading Between the Lines

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

*Why didn’t Abraham argue with God?* In Childs’s exposition of this passage for *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, he says remarkably little about Abraham’s lack of protest, simply stating that “no motivation is given.”<sup>6</sup>

John Walton avers that Abraham did not argue because child sacrifice was familiar to him.<sup>7</sup> Von Rad concludes the opposite, saying, “For Abraham, God’s

3 Edward W. Klink III and Darian R. Lockett, *Understanding Biblical Theology: A Comparison of Theory and Practice* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012).

4 Middleton, *Abraham’s Silence*, 181.

5 Middleton, *Abraham’s Silence*, 166.

6 Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 327.

7 John H. Walton, *Genesis*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2001), 510.

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

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

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

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

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

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

8 Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, rev. ed., OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), 239.

9 R. R. Reno, *Genesis*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2010), 198.

10 Reno, *Genesis*, 205.

11 Middleton, *Abraham’s Silence*, 137.

12 Middleton, *Abraham’s Silence*, 134.

13 von Rad, *Genesis*, 239.

14 von Rad, *Genesis*, 240.

15 von Rad, *Genesis*, 240.

16 von Rad, *Genesis*, 241.

17 Middleton, *Abraham’s Silence*, 172.

18 Middleton, *Abraham’s Silence*, 174–75.

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

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

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

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

### Reading in Canonical Context

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

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

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

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

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

suggests that the statement “YHWH sees” in verse 14 points back to verse 8 and forward to future theophanies in order to “guarantee . . . God’s continual presence among his people.”<sup>21</sup>

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

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

## Whose Canon?

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

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

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

22 “Two Takes on the Test at Mount Sinai — Feat. Carmen lmes,” *BibleProject* podcast, May 23, 2022. <https://podcasts.google.com/feed/aHR0cHM6Ly9mZWVkcY5zaW1wbGVjYXN0LmNvbS8zTlZtVVdaTw/episode/ZWY0MjY2YzMtNTkxZC00MjRjLTgxOTU0OGQ2NDI3NTRINTFk?sa=X&ved=0CAUQkfYCaChKEwjQmdPBu9b7AhUAAAAAHQAAAAAQOw>

23 “Did God Try to Kill Moses? – Exodus Q+R,” *BibleProject* podcast, June 22, 2022. <https://podcasts.google.com/feed/aHR0cHM6Ly9mZWVkcY5zaW1wbGVjYXN0LmNvbS8zTlZtVVdaTw/episode/ZjNjZjY0MmMtNjI4YS00ZDI5LThtNDQtZjk5ODZjOTU4ZjAw?sa=X&ved=0CAUQkfYCaChKEwjQmdPBu9b7AhUAAAAAHQAAAAAQOw>

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

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

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

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

## Remaining Open

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

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

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

25 Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, Interpretation (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 186.

26 Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 187.

27 Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 192–93.

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

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

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