

Response to J. Richard 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 on November 21, 2022.

Abraham's Silence is nothing if not ambitious. With remarkable boldness, Richard Middleton seeks to overturn conventional interpretations of two of the most foundational—and to most readers, two of the most disturbing—texts in the biblical canon. Is the lesson of the book of Job, as many have thought, that the religious ideal is to bear one's sufferings submissively? On the contrary. As Middleton sees them, God's speeches from the whirlwind are a "positive affirmation" of Job's protest; interpretations that suggest otherwise, no matter how widespread and deeply rooted in tradition, represent "a fundamental misreading" of the book (p. 7).¹ Is the Aqedah a story of Abraham's spiritual heroism, valorizing his willingness to do whatever God asks of him? Hardly. Abraham, Middleton says, should have remonstrated with God; the fact that he did not do so means that he "did not pass the test" that God had placed before him (p. 223). Turning traditional readings on their head, Middleton insists that Job's protest of his suffering was good and praiseworthy, and that Abraham's *lack* of protest in the face of God's command that he sacrifice his son was problematic at best, and a miserable failure at worst.

Crucially, Middleton wants to read *with* the grain of the text rather than against it. Speaking of the Aqedah, Middleton tells us that what he will offer is not midrash but something closer to peshat. In presenting "a nuanced literary or rhetorical reading of textual details" (p. 165), he is engaged, he writes, not in "ideological

¹ References to *Abraham's Silence* will be given in parentheses within the text of this article.

criticism” but in “exegesis” of the text of Genesis 22 (p. 191). In other words, as Middleton sees it, the critique of Abraham that he offers is intrinsic to the text, not imposed upon it from the outside. Unbeknownst to them, readers who are troubled by Abraham’s response to God’s command are in fact echoing a perspective held by the author of the text itself.

Abraham’s Silence is vintage Middleton. As he has so often in earlier works, Middleton brings together meticulous attention to textual detail, sophisticated philosophical and theological sensibilities, and profound moral and religious passion. I should perhaps lay my proverbial cards on the table: I read *Abraham’s Silence* wanting to be convinced. Far better, from my perspective, to be horrified *with* the text rather than horrified *at* it. But for all the power of Middleton’s truly important book, I am unfortunately not (yet?) persuaded by his interpretation of the Aqedah.

I obviously cannot hope to do justice to the full range of arguments and interpretations Middleton presents in the short time that I have. So instead let me offer just a few examples of where, despite being tempted, I cannot quite follow Middleton.

In Gen 22:2 God commands Abraham to take “your son, your only one, whom you love—Isaac.” Focusing on the last of the three descriptions of Isaac, Middleton notes that “this reference to Abraham’s love for Isaac is not actually stated as a fact by the narrator . . . but occurs as what is effectively a parenthetical description of Isaac in God’s instructions to Abraham” and then leaps—without sufficient warrant, it seems to me—to the conclusion that “We could take the phrase ‘whom you love’ to have the rhetorical force of ‘You love him, don’t you?’” (pp. 172–73). Since Abraham’s love for Isaac is in question, God’s terrifying command gives him a chance “to prove his love” for his younger son (p. 195). If he argues—prays, laments—it will become clear that he does in fact love his youngest son; if he silently obeys, though, we will know that he does not. It is surely significant, Middleton avers, that after Abraham binds him upon the altar, Isaac is described as “your son, your only one” (Gen 22:12, 16). “Given that Abraham has just attempted to sacrifice Isaac,” Middleton writes, “it makes sense that this God-fearing obedience would not qualify as love for him. And so that phrase [“whom you love”] is omitted” (p. 196).

Middleton offers some intriguing arguments for why we might doubt Abraham’s love for Isaac (pp. 194–96), but let us stay with his interpretation of 22:2. “Your son” is a simple, factual description of Isaac; “your only one”² is a description of Isaac that makes sense, albeit painful sense, given that Ishmael has just

2 Some, like the NJPS, take *yehidka* to mean “your favored one.” Middleton rejects this (p. 171, n15).

been sent away.³ 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.” The phrase should therefore be taken as a straightforward report (from the mouth of God, no less): Abraham loves his son Isaac.

As it unfolds, the story itself evokes the love and intimacy shared by father and son. Consider the dialogue between Abraham and Isaac in 22:7–8. As Jonathan Grossman observes, Abraham addresses Isaac with an “endearing” “my son” each time he speaks. Note also that the first half of verse 7, “Isaac said to Abraham his father and he said: ‘My father!’ And he said, ‘Here I am, my son,’” adds no new content or substance to the story; its “sole purpose,” as Grossman writes, is “the emphasis on the father-son relationship.” And, of course, Abraham responds to his son as he had responded to God, with the word *hinneni*, “here I am.” Much of the power of the story lies precisely here: “Abraham is not a cold-hearted father who is indifferent to the fate of his son.” On the contrary, Abraham has two loves, two commitments, that have now been placed in impossible, unbearable tension and conflict.⁴ To take that away—to imagine that Abraham does not really love his son—is, I think, to miss something utterly essential to the story as it is told.

Middleton wants us to notice what he refers to as “rhetorical signals that complicate a simple reading of the Aqedah” (p. 167), but the question, I think, is what kind of complication some of these signals point to. Picking up on an interpretation put forward by Jonathan Jacobs,⁵ Middleton wonders why Abraham stops to cut wood before leaving on the three-day journey (Gen 22:3); presumably, father and son could have collected wood along the way, or even at the site of the sacrifice. Perhaps, Middleton suggests, cutting the wood is a “delaying tactic” on Abraham’s part. Middleton further observes, again following Jacobs, that the sequence of actions Abraham undertakes is strange. Instead of cutting the wood and then saddling the donkey, Abraham saddles the donkey first. Given that donkeys are impatient animals, this is anomalous behavior. “Perhaps,” Middleton writes, “Abraham is under such stress and emotional turmoil that he is not thinking clearly; but then [he adds,] who would be, in such a situation?” (p. 175).

Abraham’s behavior *is* unusual. But in my estimation the actions that Abraham undertakes do not bolster Middleton’s argument; they do nothing to suggest that

3 Another possible interpretation is that Isaac is “that special son in whom all his God-promised hopes for the future are centered.” Robert Davidson, *Genesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1979), 96. See also, e.g., James McKeown, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 118.

4 Jonathan Grossman, *Abram to Abraham: A Literary Analysis of the Abraham Narrative*, An Outline of Old Testament Dialogue 11 (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2016), 474–75.

5 Jonathan Jacobs, “Willing Obedience with Doubts: Abraham at the Binding of Isaac,” *Vetus Testamentum* 60 (2010), 546–59.

God wants Abraham to resist God's command, or to argue and intercede on behalf of Isaac. Instead, I think, the text wants to gesture at Abraham's profound "apprehensiveness"⁶ in the face of God's terrifying command. He is not a robot but a father who loves his son, and he likely finds the divine command unfathomable. But he nevertheless sets out to fulfill God's word. And disturbing as this may be, from the text's own perspective that is a sign of his greatness rather than his failure. Strikingly, Jacobs looks at the same evidence and arrives at a radically different—and I think more convincing—conclusion than Middleton. "Abraham is presented," he writes, "as a great figure who chooses to fulfill God's word even where this entails waging a difficult inner battle."⁷ Middleton is right to draw our attention to the ways the textual signals he focuses on "suggest tension, stress, and perhaps internal confusion on Abraham's part" (p. 181). But I remain skeptical that the point of these signals is to question "the validity of Abraham's response to God" (p. 182). More likely, I think, these signals are meant to evoke Abraham's humanity—even and especially in the impossible situation in which he finds himself.

At the end of the day, I find it hard to get around the fact that the two angelic speeches in Genesis 22 praise Abraham and bless him. "Now I know," the angel first declares, "that you are a God-fearer, since you have not withheld your son, your only one, from me" (Gen 22:12). One of Middleton's strategies for deflecting—or perhaps better, softening—this divine praise of Abraham is to note "the prominent thematic statement that the fear of YHWH is the *beginning* of wisdom or knowledge rather than its culmination" and to wonder whether this "suggest[s]" that in order to achieve mature wisdom, both Abraham and Job needed to move from their initial, somewhat immature fear of God to a position where godly fear is not antithetical to, but undergirds, vigorous interaction with the divine covenant partner" (pp. 185–86). Despite Middleton's intentions, this feels homiletical to me. (When I was a young rabbi I once asked in a sermon whether Abraham is described as a God-fearer rather than a God-lover because a God-lover would have refused God's command. Although I was convinced at the time that this might be a plausible peshat interpretation of the text, it now seems obviously homiletical to me.) I should emphasize that I do not mean "homiletical" in a pejorative sense. Quite the contrary: homilies are a significant part of how Jews and Christians alike make meaning in interacting with the biblical text. But

6 Jacobs, "Willing Obedience," 559.

7 Jacobs, "Willing Obedience," 559. Jacobs writes: "Abraham is presented as a complex, human figure who is torn between his personal and family needs and the desire to fulfill God's command. His decision to fulfill God's word although it conflicts so painfully with his own needs, illuminates the patriarch of the Israelite nation not as someone who fulfilled God's command in a mechanical fashion, devoid of thought or independent will, but rather as a great figure who chooses to fulfill God's word even where this entails waging a difficult inner battle."

homiletics is explicitly *not* what Middleton intends to be doing here. I do not see anything in what has frequently been called the “motto” of the book of Proverbs to suggest that the fear of God it describes is something that must eventually be surpassed or outgrown. On the contrary, as Bruce Waltke writes in explaining Proverbs 1:7, “The temporally first step in this case is not on a horizontal axis that can be left behind but on a vertical axis on which all else rests.”⁸

The second angelic speech blesses Abraham:

By myself I have sworn, declares YHWH: Because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only one, I will certainly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your offspring like the stars of the heavens and like the sand that is on the seashore, and your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies. And by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves, because you have listened to my voice” (Gen 22:16–18).

Commenting on God’s oath (*bi nishbati*, “by myself I have sworn”), Middleton suggests that “YHWH needs to uphold the promises *by his own oath* precisely because they *cannot* be sustained by Abraham’s less than fully faithful response, evident in the Aqedah. The oath, in other words, is not a sign of approval of Abraham’s actions, but is meant to compensate for the deficiency of his actions” (p. 217). This is extremely provocative, but unless we can find other hints of disapproval in God’s words, it also seems like a stretch to me. More plausible, it seems to me, is the interpretation offered by Rabbi David Kimhi (Radak, 1160–235), who comments that God’s self-reference means to say that God’s promise will be as enduring as God’s very self. John Goldingay suggests two additional possibilities. First, Goldingay writes: “Human beings swear by someone or something other than themselves, which acts as a guarantor of their oath, asking God, in particular, to note the oath and to act against them in case of default. YHWH is saying, ‘It is as if I will punish myself if I fail to do as I say.’” Second, Goldingay suggests, quoting Martin Luther, that God is in effect declaring: “If I do not keep My promises, I shall no longer be who I am.” All of this points in the direction of a kind of assurance or guarantee on God’s part: These promises will indeed be fulfilled. As Goldingay notes, the additional phrase “declares YHWH” (*ne’um YHWH*) so familiar from the prophets, is a way of saying “This really is YHWH speaking and therefore it really is going to happen.”⁹ Whichever of these three possibilities we choose, to me at least they all seem more likely to be the peshat than Middleton’s suggestion.

Middleton places great emphasis on the fact that at the end of the story, Isaac

8 Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs 1–15* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 181.

9 John Goldingay, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2020), 357.

seems to go missing: “So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beersheba; and Abraham lived at Beersheba” (Gen 22:19). Although Jon Levenson warns that “too much should not be made of the omission of Isaac,”¹⁰ I am inclined to agree with Middleton that Isaac’s absence is at the very least suggestive. As Abraham and Isaac head toward the land of Moriah, the text repeatedly tells us that “the two of them went together” (Gen 22:6, 8). Verse 19 employs the same phrase, “went together” (*vayelkhu yahdav*), but this time to refer to Abraham and his servants; there is no mention of Isaac. As Middleton notes, “Abraham went, together with others, but . . . no longer with his son” (p. 182).

The separation between father and son is amplified by what transpires later. When Abraham’s servant brings Rebekah to Isaac, we learn that the latter was living in Beer-lahai roi (Gen 24:62)—but Abraham, as we have seen, was living in Beersheba (Gen 22:19). Although Levenson again warns us not to make too much of the fact that in the wake of the Aqedah Abraham and Isaac never speak again—after all, they never speak before the Aqedah either¹¹—their geographical separation is perhaps suggestive of alienation or existential disconnection between them.

Abraham’s separation from Isaac is seemingly accompanied by another one, from Sarah. As Middleton notes, the next time we hear about Sarah after the Aqedah is when she dies, and we are told that Abraham travels to Hebron to mourn for her (23:2). But recall again that Abraham has been living in Beersheba. “It does not seem,” Middleton writes, “that [Abraham and Sarah] have been living together, at least if we attend to the geographical references in Genesis.” Middleton wonders: “Did Abraham’s attempt to sacrifice Isaac result also in Sarah’s alienation?” What we do know with some certainty, Middleton suggests, is that “we clearly have a broken family” living apart from one another (p. 208).

I agree with all this, and also share Middleton’s impression that Isaac’s diminished stature in comparison with his father Abraham and his son Jacob may stem from the trauma of the Aqedah (pp. 211–12). And yet I am still not sure that this means that, from the text’s perspective, Abraham failed the test of the Aqedah. Perhaps we can say that Genesis 22 was a tragedy (and, as Middleton is right to note again and again, not only for Abraham), but I remain skeptical that from Genesis’s perspective this means that it was a failure.

It is striking, I think, that Middleton effectively aims to “solve” the problem of the Aqedah. God’s command is distressing, but God intended all along for

10 Jon D. Levenson, “Genesis,” in Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 47.

11 Jon D. Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton, 2012), 85–86.

Abraham to refuse it. Abraham's response is perplexing, but the narrator finds it just as perplexing as we do. For all of Middleton's misgivings about theodicy, *Abraham's Silence* offers a theodicy of sorts: if we understand God, and God's motivations, correctly, we'll see that we've been interpreting God wrong all along.¹² God would never do what so many faithful believers have been distressed to think that God did.

As I have stated, I wish I could go along with Middleton. But moved as I am by his project and by many of his interpretations, I am not sold on his reading. This leaves me more or less where I started: disturbed, unsettled, even horrified by the text and by God's command. And so, like countless faithful readers before me, I plan to go on wrestling.

12 I am grateful to Gerry Janzen for our discussion of this point.