

A Masculinity Studies Perspective on *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.

Abraham's Silence not only provides an insightful perspective on the nature of silence, lament, and dialogue throughout the Bible, but it is also clearly written in an engaging personal style that does not water down the academic depth. While there are many productive angles to explore with this fascinating study, I want to put some of the themes related to appropriate speech and discernment in conversation with a discussion of Abraham's masculinity, which I have explored in a couple of prior papers.

Masculinity is a complex concept comprising several culturally contextual characteristics. I have found that a cluster of four characteristics can provide a reasonably well-balanced analysis of masculinity in many of the Hebrew Bible texts, especially those in Genesis. These characteristics include potency, protection, honor, and persuasiveness.¹ In this response I will focus on the aspect of persuasiveness and some of the ways it interweaves with protection and honor. Persuasiveness is the ability of a man to draw others to his cause, based not only on words but on the characteristics of honor, which include hospitality, honesty, integrity, and agency, as well as demonstrated wisdom. While there is often a tension in the texts between the values of masculinity in the culture at large and

1 See Susan E. Haddox, "Favoured Sons and Subordinate Masculinities," in Ovidiu Creangă, ed., *Men and Masculinities in the Hebrew Bible and Beyond*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2010), 2–19.

the imperative in the biblical texts for the people to submit to God, Middleton's explication of vigorous prayer and dialogue provides a way to mediate these tensions and define an appropriate masculine position with respect to God.

One of the significant contributions of Middleton's work is the idea that both Job and Abraham, or "Jobraham," explore the issue of appropriate speech. In a general sense, appropriate speech demonstrates components of wisdom and honor. A person must discern the nature of the relationship, the status of the parties involved in dialogue, the context of the situation, and the required response. In the case of speech with God, the issues of status and relationship are ratcheted up a notch. Middleton traces some interpretive traditions that hold that the only appropriate speech to God is passive acceptance. Yet he asserts that the Bible models several kinds of speech before God that are appropriate, with some reflecting a more robust relationship with God and a clearer discernment of God's character and identity.

Middleton argues that a major purpose of the book of Job is to explore the appropriateness of different types of speech. I might quibble with his dismissal of the idea that Job's purpose is to address theodicy. After all, addressing theodicy does not require solving the problem, which I agree it does not do. Nevertheless, he makes a persuasive case that the issue of speech is a central theme. Within Job, Middleton identifies the following as types of appropriate speech: blessing God, lamenting about God, and lamenting to God, the latter of which is the most appropriate in the circumstances. Inappropriate speech includes that of the friends who defend God at the expense of the victim and cursing God, as suggested by Job's wife.

Although it is only two verses, the exchange between Job and his wife is revealing. The wife says, "Are you still maintaining your integrity? Curse God and die," following the usual assumption that the literal wording "bless God" is a euphemism. While some scholars have considered the implications of understanding her words as literal, perhaps expressing comfort to Job and wishing his suffering to end, based on Job's response, most assume the euphemism.² Middleton agrees, noting that Job identifies the wife's suggestion as that of a *nebaloth* or fool, the opposite of appropriate speech. I am also interested in her use of the word "integrity," which reflects on his sense of honor. This word is only used once outside of Job in the biblical texts, in Proverbs, referring to the qualities of the upright. Job uses it a few times to refer to his innocence in the face of unjust suffering. God uses it in Job 2:3 when telling ha-Satan that Job has persisted in his integrity despite God having been incited to destroy him for no reason. Innocence and integrity appear to be components of honor and honesty and thus of

2 For a positive reading of the wife, see C.L. Seow, "Job's Wife," in Linda Day and Carolyn Pressler, eds., *Engaging the Bible in a Gendered World* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 141–50.

masculinity. Job lost masculine status by not being able to protect his children, his wealth, or his body, but he does have his integrity. His rejection of his wife's advice thus acts a defense of his threatened masculinity through avoiding inappropriate speech, which neither curses God nor condemns himself.

Although he does not follow his wife's advice and curse God directly, her words seem to prompt him to explore the limits of appropriate speech. When he next opens his mouth, he curses the day of his birth and wishes he were dead. Her words perhaps stir him into lament, moving from a silent to a vocal defense of his integrity. His friends do not think that his words are appropriate speech and chastise him. They instead encourage repentance—pro forma repentance if necessary, since they argue that next to God no humans are innocent. Job again insists on his integrity and his right to speak before God, even though he does not think God will show up to be held to account. But God does show up.

Middleton offers a refreshing and insightful interpretation of God's speeches. While there has been considerable debate about the nature of Job's responses to God's speeches, God's speeches themselves have generally been understood according to the "bullying Job" model, or at least to be emphasizing God's power. Even though God's praise of Job's speech in the epilogue indicates to me that God approves of his standing up for his innocence in the face of his friends, I have had difficulty reconciling that praise with the divine speeches, other than saying they redirect Job to other questions and concerns than himself. I find compelling Middleton's suggestion that the first speech provides a corrective to Job's desire to uncreate the world, as well as showing God's care but not micromanagement of creation. Still, all the second person questions give the speech a harsh tone. It is perhaps not surprising that Job backs down, even if it is into silence rather than recanting. Middleton interprets the second speech as inviting Job back into dialogue, encouraging him to be like Leviathan and Behemoth with their unrestrained mouths. In this way God marks off an appropriate masculinity for Job. He explicitly tells Job to gird his loins like a man—here the word is *geber* or mighty man or warrior. He is to speak up and declare to God. He is to be masculine but not dominant; lower than God but not debased by God. Vigorous speech is lauded. In the end the other elements of Job's masculinity are restored—honor, progeny, provision for and protection of others, including his friends.

Middleton then compares Job's speech with that of Abraham, who is found to be lacking. Likewise, I have noted in previous studies that Abraham's masculinity is conflicted.³ At the beginning of his story, he shows strong masculine characteristics in all of the elements except for producing progeny. As he gains offspring, he gives up other aspects of masculinity. One of these aspects is a loss of

3 Susan E. Haddox, "The Desolation of Abraham: Go from Your Kindred," in *Conversations with the Biblical World* 40 (2020) 1–19.

persuasiveness. In Middleton's analysis, Abraham's various speaking encounters with God are an exercise in discerning God's character. In Gen 15 Abram confronts God with his lack of offspring and God promises him progeny that will number as the stars. Middleton notes that God responds honestly and openly to Abram's questions and doubts. When God speaks again to Abraham in Gen 17, promising offspring through Sarah, God responds to his request for Ishmael to find favor in his sight. Although Ishmael is not the primary heir, God promises a good future for him as well. Such receptiveness should encourage Abraham's speech. In Gen 18 Abraham speaks little in the scene with God and the two angels, but God responds to Sarah's protest, not letting her feign silence—her laughter is acknowledged, if questioned, and her perspective sought, if not offered.

Finally at the end of the chapter, Abraham has his most extensive dialogue with God. Abraham significantly avoids voicing the request that most directly concerns him. In arguing for the possible innocents in Sodom, Abraham never mentions his desire to protect his nephew Lot. He bargains God down from saving Sodom for the sake of fifty righteous people to ten. As Middleton observes, Abraham is not actually bargaining with God, because God never makes a counter-offer. Instead, God just agrees to whatever number Abraham names, just as he had agreed to Abraham's previous requests. With no resistance to him, Middleton raises the question of why Abraham stopped at ten. He proposes that God wanted him to ask for more, to recognize the mercy in God's character.

Abraham is persuasive here but stops short of what he could have done. He has often acted as a protector of Lot in the past, but here gives up that role, instead keeping his request on a more general ethical level, not mentioning Lot's name. Yet God responds to the unasked request and saves Lot anyway. It is not clear that Abraham knows this, however, because he arises early in the morning and sees only the smoking plain. It seems a tragic case of miscommunication. Middleton notes that Abraham did not seem to discern God's character sufficiently from the episode, but it is also true that though God saved Lot because he remembered Abraham, he forgot to tell Abraham about it.

The next time Abraham talks to God in Gen 21 after Sarah orders him to send Ishmael away, he is upset, but again he does not make a direct request. The text merely says he was distressed on account of Ishmael. God supports Sarah's position, but comforts Abraham and reaffirms the promise of a future for Ishmael. Abraham then casts out Hagar and Ishmael, providing his son with minimal provisions, leaving his life at risk. Finally in Gen 22, Abraham hardly speaks at all. He only answers "Here I am" to God's call to him at the beginning, when God tells him to sacrifice Isaac. He does not protest vigorously, as he had for Sodom, though not directly for Lot, nor express distress, as he had for Ishmael, though again stopping short of asking for him to be saved, but instead just silently goes

about obeying God. Middleton points out the repetition of the introduction of divine speech, “then God said,” and proposes this as a pause expecting a response from Abraham that was not there. Abraham’s persuasiveness decreases with each encounter with God because he does not employ it. As he speaks less, he protects his family less, giving up his masculine responsibilities. God is left to save Lot, to rescue Ishmael in the wilderness, and finally to stop Abraham from killing Isaac.

Middleton argues that because Abraham did not correctly discern God’s character in his previous interactions, especially the destruction of Sodom in Gen 18-19, he 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. Middleton notes that obedience is not a bad thing—God acknowledges that Abraham fears God and is willing to give God everything—but it is not the full relationship that God most wanted. God wanted a dialogue partner, a man who stands up for the well-being of the innocent and the cause of justice. (As the mini-dialogue with Sarah suggests, God also wants such woman partners.) God invites Abraham into a faithful masculinity, not competing with God or dominating others, but full of wisdom and discernment, a benefactor of others, speaking persuasively with people and with God. Abraham did not quite pass the test, but God continued to extend mercy, multiplying his offspring to keep trying in the future. Israel, after all, means wrestling with God. *Abraham’s Silence* embodies its central theme of vigorous speech, bringing a fresh perspective to the Akedah, Job, and lament. I have enjoyed the opportunity to engage in dialogue with it.