

Between Two Truths: Lament, Trust, and Wrestling with an Inscrutable God

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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.

Richard Middleton states his purpose at the beginning of his book: "ultimately to help people of faith recover the value of lament prayer as a way to process our pain (and the pain of the world) with the God of heaven and earth—for the healing both of ourselves and our world" (p. 9). I am wholeheartedly in favor of this purpose and have tried in my own small way to contribute to it. I confess that I have never considered the Akedah in light of that purpose—nor have I ever read the Akedah in light of Job—and I am profoundly grateful to Middleton for prompting me to do both.

He has helped me to see many things that I never noticed before, in his close and careful reading. For example, I noticed for the first time that Abraham rises early in the morning three times in Genesis. The first time, in Gen 19:27, Abraham goes early in the morning to the place where he had stood before the Lord and tried to persuade God to spare the city of Sodom. What he sees is the smoke of the city's destruction. I wondered what to make of this detail: is Abraham to learn that God's justice cannot ultimately be thwarted? Does he believe that his petitions to spare the city have failed? Or is he meant to see that he should have been more insistent and asked God to spare the city even if it contained only one righteous man?

The second instance is Gen 21:14, when Abraham rises early in the morning to send Hagar and Ishmael out into the wilderness with only bread and a skin of

water—a text in which he is implicated in the near-death of one of his sons, and an angel intervenes to save that son—two details that echo forward into the Akedah. And the third occurrence is Gen 22:3, when Abraham rises early in the morning to take his other son (provocatively called “his only son”) to be sacrificed.

It is a small thread that binds all three stories together, but in a way that is evocative rather than obvious. I have been milling it over ever since Middleton drew my attention to it, and I am still not sure what to make of it. This indeterminacy appears to be a common feature of the Genesis narratives, including the Akedah.

In the footnote at the end of his exegesis of the Akedah, Middleton says that he does not intend his reading to be “a simple replacement for a traditional pious interpretation” but instead “a viable alternative reading.” This text, he writes, “is to some degree open-ended, capable of moving in different directions” (p. 225 n. 89).

I completely agree with this, and it is Middleton who convinced me of this in relation to this particular text. At the same time, I do not think Middleton would be unhappy to set aside the traditional interpretation altogether. Calling tradition a “straitjacket” is one clue to this; despite his caveats that he did not mean this to sound like an insult, I think it ultimately undercuts the thoughtfulness of the argument that he is making.

I would like to wrestle a little more with the value of the traditional reading alongside Middleton’s evocative suggestions about an alternative—indeed, to lean even more into the ambiguity of this text, with a bit of help from Erich Auerbach, whom Middleton cites (p. 166). Here are Auerbach’s comments at greater length:

In the story of Isaac, it is not only God’s intervention at the beginning and the end, but even the factual and psychological elements which come between, that are mysterious, merely touched upon, fraught with background; and therefore they require subtle investigation and interpretation, they demand them. Since so much in the story is dark and incomplete, and since the reader knows that God is a hidden God, his effort to interpret it constantly finds something new to feed upon.¹

I wonder whether this “dark and incomplete” story asks us to stand in the tension between two truths in Scripture: the good of trust in an often hidden God, and the good of vigorous lament (I am borrowing the language of “between two truths” from one of my mentors, Klyne Snodgrass). Middleton has done all of us a great

1 Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (50th Anniversary Edition; trans. Willard R. Trask; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 15.

service by highlighting the second truth, which I take to be an indispensable part of a life of faith.

But is not the first also an integral part of faith? For example, although Middleton tends to position the “anti-protest” tradition as external to Scripture (p. 147–49), this tradition has its seeds in biblical texts. Middleton draws on the work of Dov Weiss when he writes that the “anti-protest tradition seems to have been generated by learned pagan and gnostic critiques of the God of the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible in the first centuries of the Common Era” (p. 148). This is certainly true of the rabbinic literature and the early Christian literature discussed by Weiss.

At the same time, other scholars like Richard Bautch, Rodney Werline, and William Morrow have noted that the seeds of the anti-protest tradition arose long before the first century CE and are present in Scripture in the form of the penitential laments. Not all these scholars agree on exactly when the shift in lament began to happen, but they often point to a similar set of texts that display a shift in lament away from protest and toward penitence (e.g., 2 Chr 30:10–30; Ezra 9:6–15; Neh 9:6–37; Isa 63:7–64:11; Dan 4; Dan 9:18–19; 1 Macc 6; 2 Macc 9). Samuel Balentine also suggests that we can see evidence of this turn toward penitential lament in Elihu’s speech in the book of Job.²

In this respect, as in so many others, biblical texts do not speak with only one voice. Lament is deeply interwoven into Scripture, into both Old and New Testaments (I wrote a book insisting on this point in relation to the New Testament³). And there are other texts that commend a deep trust in the inscrutable purposes of God, and an obedience that leaps into the dark on the basis of that trust—that goes forth to a land yet unknown (Gen 12:1; 22:2).

As Middleton writes, “Scripture affirms in multiple ways that the God of Abraham positively desires vigorous dialogue partners” (p. 63). And, Scripture also affirms the importance of exclusive loyalty and obedience to God, of loving God with our whole heart and strength, of following God even when the way is unclear or difficult.

Middleton admits to being “a bit suspicious of any religious commitment that is ‘absolute and uncompromising’” (p. 196 n.10). I’m a Gospels scholar, so this made me think of Jesus’s absolute and uncompromising statements about

2 Samuel E. Balentine, *Job* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2006), 554. See also Balentine, “I Was Ready to Be Sought Out By Those Who Did Not Ask,” pages 1–20 in *Seeking the Favor of God* (ed. Mark J. Boda, Daniel K. Falk, and Rodney A. Werline; Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006); Richard J. Bautch, *Developments in Genre between Post-Exilic Penitential Prayers and the Psalms of Communal Lament* (Academia Biblica, 7; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003); William S. Morrow, *Protest Against God* (Hebrew Bible Monographs, 4; Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007); Rodney Werline, *Penitential Prayer in Second Temple Judaism* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998).

3 Rebekah Eklund, *Jesus Wept: The Significance of Jesus’ Laments in the New Testament* (Library of New Testament Studies; London: T&T Clark, 2015).

discipleship in the Gospels: Take up your cross and follow me. Deny yourself. Lose your life for my sake (Matt 16:24–26; Mark 8:34–37; Luke 9:23–24; John 12:25). “If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26; see also Matt 10:37–38). You cannot go home first to say goodbye to your family or bury your father or get married. Just drop everything and follow.

To be sure, Middleton’s book is about Abraham, not the Gospels, but in my view profoundly uncompromising commitment is part of the witness of Scripture, and it is even part of the story of Abraham. When God calls Abram, he calls him to go to a place “that I will show you” (Gen 12:2), a command that is repeated when God instructs Abraham to take Isaac and offer him as a burnt offering in “a place I will show you” (Gen 22:2). In both cases, Abraham must leave home and set out on the path before he knows exactly where he is going.⁴

Might not the Akedah stand at the uneasy or tense relationship between those two truths: it is good for Abraham to obey and trust God, and it is also good for Abraham to engage in an active, mutual relationship with this God. Lament itself, of course, stands at the intersection of these two truths, since lament is typically grounded in a trust that God is a God who hears, even if that trust is faint or fading or wounded.

Jesus prays, “Take this cup from me,” and also “But not my will but yours” (Luke 22:42). Jesus prays, “My God, why have you forsaken me” (Matt 27:46), and also “Into your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46). The God of Scripture who invites vigorous debate is also a holy God, a wholly other God, a zealous God. If Abraham’s debate with God over Sodom represents the first truth, perhaps the Akedah points toward the second. Dov Weiss argues that the “early rabbinic voices of opposition to confronting God stand in stark contrast to the Hebrew Bible and Second Temple literature, where theological protest is not foreclosed as a legitimate response to suffering or unethical divine behavior”; but even Weiss takes the Akedah as an instance of “radical submission to the divine will.”⁵

I have not yet said anything about Job, which is obviously a centerpiece of this marvelous book. I am largely in agreement with Middleton’s understanding of

4 Jon Levenson, with whom Middleton deeply engages in his book, notes the parallels between Gen 12:2 and Gen 22:2—the command to “go forth”; and the “step effect” of the terms “from your native land, from your kinsmen, and from your father’s house” in chapter 12 and “your son, your favored one, the one whom you love” in chapter 22. In both cases, “Abraham begins his trek without knowing where it is to end.” Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 128.

5 Dov Weiss, “The Sin of Protesting God in Rabbinic and Patristic Literature,” *AJS Review* 39:2 (November 2015): 371.

Job, and I found it wonderfully generative to think of these two stories in relation to one another.

Both Job and Abraham, of course, are tested. The narrator of Job explains why Job is being tested: to see if he will still love God after all of God's blessings are removed from him. But the narrator in Genesis does not give an explanation. It is unclear in Genesis *why* God feels compelled to test Abraham. It seems that Abraham is being asked to sacrifice Isaac *for no reason*, at least not for any reason provided in the text. This parallels the equally meaningless or inexplicable suffering of Job, who is afflicted "for no reason" (*hinnām*) in Job 2:3.⁶ Perhaps it is because of Gen 21:12: God tells Abraham that it is through Isaac, not Ishmael, that Abraham's offspring "will be reckoned."

This is a slender clue, but it is the clue noticed by the book of Hebrews when Hebrews narrates Abraham's test (Heb 11:18). Will Abraham still trust God to fulfill the covenant even if the son through whom Abraham's offspring will be reckoned is no more? In other words, like Job, will Abraham still love or trust or fear God if God takes away the blessing of Abraham's son?

Middleton rejects this as a possibility, and at one point suggests that God could *not* continue the covenant if Isaac dies: "Simply put, if Abraham had not desisted from the sacrifice when the angel called from heaven, there would be no offspring by which the nations could bless themselves" (p. 218). This made me wonder if God's purpose is really defeated so easily. Can a human thwart God's plan?⁷ Surely if Abraham has learned anything about this God at this point, it is that God can bring forth life in the most unexpected of ways, including from a womb long past child-bearing age.

God, remarkably, learns something from Abraham's decision not to spare his son: "Now I know that you fear God" (Gen 22:12). Middleton compares this to a professor saying "Now I know that you are a C student" (p. 197), but "fearing God" is not a C, is it? It is a good, even if it is not the only good.

There is one other aspect of the tradition regarding Isaac that I think is worth considering, and it is the Jewish and Christian impulse to connect Isaac to martyrdom. Middleton makes a tentative connection between a positive reading of the Akedah, child abuse, and martyrdom (p. 142–44). I do not want to minimize the terror of families choosing to kill one another or to offer themselves up for martyrdom. At the same time, if one had a choice to be violently killed along with their children by a Crusader, or to recite the Shema and then to die under one's

6 Balentine writes, "The report that God has set about to destroy Job for no reason, like a nefarious sinner who ambushes the innocent [Prov 1:10–12], is in my judgment perhaps the single most disturbing admission in the Old Testament, if not in all scripture" (Balentine, *Job*, 60).

7 Elsewhere, Middleton writes, "Indeed, it is not too much to say that if Moses had not interceded for Israel, there would no longer have been an Israel" (p. 53). Could not God have found another prophet to intercede, or pursued him until he does (as God does with Jonah)?

own agency, I can see how that latter choice reorients what kind of a death one has chosen to die—not a meaningless, violent death but as a faithful witness, an offering to God. I can see the power and the defiance in choosing to take agency away from one’s killers and reframe the meaning of one’s death. Therefore, I hesitate both to equate the traditional reading of the Akedah with child abuse, or to undermine the positive function and value of martyrdom accounts.

The Christian tradition, of course, found in Isaac’s story elements of Christ’s story—the only son, the beloved son, sacrificed by a father. To be sure, the analogy is imperfect—Christ is willing, whereas Isaac does not seem to know what is happening to him, at least not in the biblical narrative. And while Isaac’s death is averted—in fact, Isaac’s death does not seem to be at all the goal of the Akedah—Christ plays the role of both Isaac and the ram caught in the thicket. Perhaps as a New Testament scholar, I read Isaac’s story too much through the lens of Hebrews 11, which emphasizes Abraham’s daring faith—but it is also part of the tradition I would not want to set aside too quickly.⁸

At one point, Middleton invokes William Brown’s delightful phrase “reading with wonder” (p. 165). In the circuitous way my mind works, this brought me back to Job, who after his encounter with God declares that he has spoken “things too wonderful for me that I did not know” (Job 42:3). This phrase, “too wonderful for me,” occurs only one other time in Scripture, in Psalm 131: “I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me” (Ps 131:1). This psalm has always been a great comfort to me—that after a long day or night of wrestling with God in the whirlwind, I can simply rest with God, the way that a child rests with her mother (Ps 131:2).

I do not know why God might have approved of Abraham’s willingness (if indeed God does) when it flies so profoundly in the face of our own moral judgments. I do not always understand the zeal of God or the hidden God as much as I understand the God who hears laments and laments along with God’s people.

When I was writing a book on the Beatitudes, people often asked me what I thought the Beatitudes meant. I usually said they mean many things, which satisfied exactly nobody. But the more I studied them, the more I wondered if one of the main functions of the Beatitudes is to make us wonder about them—to move us to talk to one another about them and what they mean and how we might live them out in our own lives.⁹

I like to think that I have Origen on my side in this respect. Origen proposed that God deliberately spoke some of the truths of Scripture in enigmas and parables and problems.¹⁰ As Stephen and Martin Westerholm explain, for Origen “the

8 Although I take Middleton’s point that Jephthah is also in Hebrews 11 (p. 214 n. 59)!

9 Rebekah Eklund, *The Beatitudes through the Ages* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021), 287–90.

10 Origen, *Cels.* 3.45; see also *Hom. Num.* 27.1.7.

presence of mysteries in the divine text is hardly accidental: . . . the struggle to understand them is one of the divinely appointed means for bringing believers to maturity.”¹¹

Carol Newsom points out that even Job does not tell us substantively what he learned from his encounter with God. She says, “The author doesn’t want Job to do our work for us. . . . This is a story which doesn’t want to spell it all out for us.”¹² Job never says another word in the epilogue—and neither does Abraham immediately after the Akedah. As Newsom writes, “[Job] says he has understood something transformative in the divine speeches, yet he refuses to play the role of hermeneut for the audience, for he never makes clear exactly what he has understood. Consequently, we bystanders begin to argue among ourselves.”¹³

My fellow panelists and I were given the opportunity to be such bystanders, arguing among ourselves about Job and Abraham and suffering, and I am grateful to Richard Middleton for prompting this wondering, wonder-full, and important argument.

11 Stephen Westerholm and Martin Westerholm, *Reading Sacred Scripture: Voices from the History of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 79.

12 Carol Newsom, interview on The Two Testaments podcast, March 16, 2022.

13 Carol A. Newsom, *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2003), 235. Likewise, Balentine writes of Job: “When it comes to suffering ‘for no reason’ [Job 2:3], this book seems intent on reminding us that questions about the world, human existence, and God necessarily remain open ended. To settle for anything less is to deny the pain that punctuates every faith assertion with a question mark” (Balentine, *Job*, 33).