

Lament, Job, and the Aqedah: A Critical Response to 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 a virtual meeting of the Eastern Great Lakes Biblical Society, March 17, 2022.

J. Richard Middleton wrote *Abraham's Silence* "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" (p. 9).¹ Middleton's book and the biblical traditions he points to teach us lessons fit for times past and present, that it is good and right to lament and protest "genuine evil" before God. If for this reason alone, I hope and trust that *Abraham's Silence* will be widely read and appreciated by "people of faith" and others.

It would not be difficult for me to continue in a mode of gratitude and praise, especially since I've written in agreement on several passages and positions Middleton takes up in the book. However, it would be unworthy of the author and his work and unbecoming of the review genre for me to do so. Thus, so as to advance the conversation and sharpen our understanding of the important topics raised *Abraham's Silence*, I would like to devote the remainder of the review to make three points thematized around the motif of praise.

In Praise of Lament *In Se*

The first point is a critique of the drift toward narrativization of lament that I see in the book. I agree with the book's claim that engaging in lament can have salutary

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

effects. For example, I agree that lament can begin to reawaken and deepen one's own faith (p. 4), that lament can lead "to a fresh discernment of the character of God" (pp. 237–38), and that lament "can be the beginning of a journey of ethical transformation" that steers us clear of both the Scylla of ethical paralysis and despair and the Charybdis of anger and violence (p. 239). To boot, the psalmic lament, which Middleton characterizes as "half of a thanksgiving genre" (p. 28), and the entire Psalter, which moves from the predominance of lament in the beginning to praise at the end, provide small and large-scale biblical models in which lament moves toward praise. That is, there are sound exegetical, psychological, and theological reasons to agree with Middleton's narrativization of lament as "the hinge—even the fulcrum—between bondage and deliverance" (36, cf. 39) and between suffering and healing.

However, I would be remiss not to lodge my protest that this is not always the case, that lament does not necessarily move us toward redemption—not in the Bible, not in the lived realities of Jews and Christians, nor in lived experience generally. There is a need to safeguard lament not only as a mode of expression but as a mode of being, not only as a bridge from despair to hope but also a place, perhaps even a sacred space, in itself.

Shelley Rambo, in meditating on a sermon by Hans Urs von Balthasar, argues for the recovery of the theological profundity of Holy Saturday in which "death is final" and when death "is not experienced as some segue into life or as a temporary pause in a master plan."² With Rambo, I believe that there is a need to resist the temptation to narrativize the experience of evil (and so also its expression) within a comedic structure of fall, despair, and recovery and to acknowledge that "the powerful reality of death as human beings experience it . . . [may be] a closing with no hope of reopening . . . a total end."³

Balthasar and Rambo operate within a Christian framework in which Holy Saturday exists between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Thus, they cannot altogether avoid the drift toward narrativization. In *Abraham's Silence*, Middleton too identifies multiple biblical stories with a U-shaped plot of fall and redemption, in which he locates and thus narrativizes lament (pp. 36–39). However, the narrativization of laments as "the hinge—even the fulcrum—between bondage and deliverance" structurally parallels explanations of evil as the necessary step before the coming of a greater good. Middleton argues against the greater good explanation of evil (pp. 20–26). The narrativization of lament within a comedic structure of fall and recovery warrants a similar critique.

2 Shelley Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 73.

3 Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 73.

Does God Praise Job?

I would like to begin the discussion of Job by noting that I have written in agreement with key positions that Middleton defends in his book. I agree that God showing up to address Job confers honor on Job (p. 128) but add that God showing up and not condemning Job is tantamount to God declaring Job righteous, just as Job has claimed he is.⁴ I also agree that, in the first divine speech, “God is correcting Job’s theology, his assumptions about . . . the world . . . and the nature of God’s relationship to that world” (p. 118) and that, in the second speech, God is affirming that Job is “more powerful than he thinks” in saying that God made Behemoth “as I made you[, O Job]” (Job 40:15) (p. 112).⁵ Finally, I also agree that God’s characterization of what Job said to his friends as “what is right [בְּכִנּוּיָה]” is an important interpretive datum (Job 42:8).⁶ That is, I agree with Middleton that God thinks highly of Job, and so also of humanity, and lets that be known. That said, I find Middleton’s central argument that God praises Job in the divine speeches and seeks to make of Job “a worthy conversation partner” unconvincing.

In the chapter entitled “Does God Come to Bury Job or to Praise Him?” Middleton argues that “God . . . has unintentionally overpowered Job” into silence with the first speech and that, in the second, God seeks to encourage Job to speak up because what God desires is a “worthy dialogue partner” (pp. 120–21).

Now, if one thinks that the first divine speech is overwhelming and browbeats Job into terrified silence (as Middleton and others argue), I find it difficult to see how the second is any less so. Yes, God expresses divine delight concerning the mythic creatures, Behemoth and Leviathan, and almost under his breathe likens Job to them. But the overall rhetorical force, it seems to me, is meant to humble (though not necessarily to humiliate) Job. The point of the speech is that Job lacks the sufficient power to subdue the mythic creatures. The only one who can is God, who nevertheless chooses not to.

Furthermore, even if one were to agree that God means to encourage Job to speak up and engage in more honest talk in the second divine speech, Job’s second response to God can hardly be characterized as the speech of a “worthy dialogue partner” to God, especially in comparison to the bold daring of Job’s dialogue with his friends. If God meant for his second speech to encourage and embolden Job, we must conclude that God fails. For Job does not revel in his newly revealed likeness to Behemoth but rather gives expressions to the limits of his wisdom: “I

4 Paul K.-K. Cho, “Job the Penitent: Whether and Why Job Repents (Job 42:6),” in *Landscapes of Korean/Korean-American Biblical Interpretation*, International Voices in Biblical Studies 10, ed. by John Ahn (Atlanta: SBL, 2019), 145–74.

5 Paul K.-K. Cho, “‘I Have Become a Brother of Jackals’: Evolutionary Psychology and Suicide in the Book of Job,” *Biblical Interpretation* 27 (2019) 208–34.

6 Cho, “Job the Penitent.”

have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know” (Job 42:3). Instead of entering into dialogue with God, Job bows out by repenting of what he has said about “dust and ashes,” that is, about humanity (Job 42:6; cf. Gen. 18:27).

In conclusion, I agree that God does not come to bury Job. But neither does God come to praise Job, at least not in the divine speeches out of whirlwind. Rather, God comes to lead Job toward a more correct apprehension of God, creation, and Job’s relationship to both. And correct understanding for Job is two sided. On the one hand, God reveals to Job the divine delight in all creation, including Job. God lets it be known that creation is more beautiful and more full of life than Job can imagine after his traumatic experiences. On the other hand, God teaches Job that humanity is not the center of the world and that Job is not the pinnacle of creation. That is, God rebukes Job for his hubristic estimation of himself and firmly, but also lovingly, leads Job toward repentance.⁷

This critique modifies but does not argue against Middleton’s main point that “the book of Job . . . models an alternative to silent obedience in the face of terrible circumstances” (p. 189). God calls “right” all of Job’s laments, complaints, protests, and calls for explanation and justice—but God also calls Job to account for his hubris.

Does God Not Praise Abraham?

My final point is hermeneutical and concerns the book’s highest and also most controversial achievement. Middleton argues that the God, the angels, and the narrator of Genesis 22 disapprove of Abraham’s unquestioning and silent obedience of God’s command to sacrifice his son, his only son, Isaac, whom he loves and attempts to do so while staying “close to the text itself,” that is, by offering not a midrash but a peshat (p. 165). And one of the pleasures of reading *Abraham’s Silence* are the many learned, creative, and often insightful interpretations of the finer details of the Aqedah and the surrounding narratives.

Now, at the same time Middleton pursues a close reading of the text, he also takes advantage of what Erich Auerbach memorably called the fraught background of Genesis 22 (p. 166). That is, while attentive to the givens of the text, Middleton also reconstructs out of the silences of the text interpretive bricks that inevitably build toward his conclusion that Abraham fails the test because he does not protest God’s “command [to sacrifice Isaac] and intercede for his son’s life” (p. 206). (The thesis that Abraham fails the test requires the reinterpretation of the test, not as a test of Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac, but of Abraham’s ability to discern the character of God as precisely a God who would not require

7 Cho, “Job the Penitent.”

such a sacrifice [pp. 204–206].) And the reason that I cannot agree with Middleton that Abraham fails the text in Genesis 22 is that, contrary to Middleton’s rhetorical promises, the reading of the biblical text that Middleton provides is more a midrash than a peshat.

Erich Auerbach draws our attention to the fraught background of Genesis to argue that the unexpressed background gives the biblical narrative a palpable unity and its characters an admirable depth superior to those of Homeric epics.⁸ That is to say, the unexpressed, submerged background, for Auerbach, belonged to Abraham and his time in an intimate and organic manner—so that the foregrounded text and the fraught background together present to the reader a unified reality.⁹ The world the biblical text expresses and equally what it leaves unexpressed make up an indivisible whole. The hermeneutic implied by Auerbach’s assessment of the representation of reality in biblical narratives is not one that is hostile to interpretive play but also one that demands that we take seriously the unity of the text and its world and their essential belonging to each other.

Unfortunately, what often happens when we confront the unexpressed and often mysterious depth of biblical literature, contrary to what Auerbach gestures toward, is that we empty the fraught background, then stuff it with images and meaning taken from our more familiar world. This imposition of the reader and his world on the text effectively severs the text from its own background and transplants it in alien soil. And the result of such imposition and transposition is the transformation of the alienation of the text from itself, for, as hermeneuts have taught us, context matters in the interpretation of texts.

Middleton set out to offer “an intrinsic reading” of the Aqedah with reference to the charge by scholars like Jon D. Levenson and Walter Moberly to avoid readings that “tend to be arbitrary and . . . based on modern assumptions or predilections of the interpreter, which are simply juxtaposed with the ancient text” (pp. 8, 191). However, against his own stated commitment to a peshat reading of Genesis 22, what Middleton ultimately offers is a midrash. It is a creative and daring midrash that builds on neglected aspects of the rich history of interpretation. Nevertheless, Middleton’s interpretation is more a reading of the issues and concerns of the contemporary world into the unexpressed background of the Aqedah than a wrestling with the received text and its fraught and difficult background.

In conclusion, I want to thank Middleton once again for gifting communities of learning and of faith a provocative reading of important biblical texts and for reminding us once again of the vital importance of being earnest, especially when it comes to expressions of grief and sorrow that accompany human existence.

8 Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 12.

9 Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 15.