

## Alternatives to *Abraham's Silence*: Protest or Lament?

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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.

I want to express my delight in reading Richard Middleton's book. It felt like a very *Jewish* book, in wrestling with faith in God on the question of trial, lauding the power of lament and Job's protests, and expressing outrage at Abraham's silence. There is a passion behind his interpretation, a sincere moral investment in how we read, that I rarely see in scholarship and I deeply appreciate. At a slant, the book addresses the age-old question of theodicy—"how to justify of the ways of God to man"—or, in Harold Kushner's famous formulation: how should we respond "when bad things happen to good people."<sup>1</sup>

Middleton, however, does not answer it directly. The focus is not on the theology, the nature of God *per se*. Rather, the author centers his argument on the nature of the *relationship* between God and his lauded servants—Moses, Job, Abraham, and the author(s) of Psalms. They all serve as models for a human response to suffering. Their speech (and silence) are subject to an ethical litmus test: Do they address unjust suffering by calling upon God to demonstrate the divine way of doing what is "right and just [*tzedaqah u'mishpat*]" (Gen 18:19; cf. v. 25)? The question is not: "how could God *try* Job" with such undeserved suffering? Or "how could God demand that Abraham sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac?" but whether the *human* responses were appropriate. In Middleton's thesis, Job is a hero because he railed against God and Abraham failed the test because

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1 Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Schocken Books, 1981).

he remained silent. In the end, Middleton offers a homiletical answer that any preacher or Rabbi would embrace. God does not want silent submission or acquiescence to suffering, but rather, beckons “holy *hutzpah*,” righteous outrage and the call for divine compassion.

Middleton holds up lament as the appropriate response to unjust suffering. My problem is that the *post facto* response to suffering through lament (as in Psalm 88, or Psalm 39, or Job’s cursing the day of his birth in Job 3) is quite different from the genre of “prayers of intercession” (as in Moses’ response to the sin of the Golden Calf, Exod 32–34; or Abraham pleading for Sodom and Gomorrah in Gen 18). Middleton seems to conflate the two as effective forms of protest. Intercession, *at the outset*, is meant to turn aside God’s harsh judgment, move the divine from the prosecutor’s seat to the defense, from *midat ha-din* (attribute of justice) to *midat ha-rahămim* (attribute of mercy). Lament, on the other hand, is a response in the wake of suffering, when God has already, so to speak, swept away the innocent with the guilty.

Middleton’s selection of lament from the Book of Psalms in his first chapter, “Voices from the Ragged Edge” is telling. He analyzes Psalm 39, in depth, alongside lines from Psalm 22: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me [*Eli, Eli, lamah ‘azavtani*]?!?”—quoted by Jesus on the cross, Matt 27:46 and Mark 15:34—yet excludes Jeremiah’s laments and the Book of Lamentations (Eicha) altogether. Where the laments in the Book of Psalms are resolved with words of solace, God never directly answers Job’s lament, such as his cursing the day he was born (ch. 3), or Jeremiah’s lament (as in 11:18–20, 21–23; 12:1–6; 15:10–21), at least not with any reassurance. Is lament, as a genre, really a form protest? When the consequences are enslavement, plague, violent death, or exile, can you really read Lamentations, for example, as a call for justice? Drawing from the shift in C.S. Lewis’ work (*The Problem of Pain*, written in 1940, to *A Grief Observed*, in 1961), and Eli Weisel’s memoir, *Night* (originally published in French 1958), Middleton beautifully demonstrates how lament, as a genre, continues to speak through modern voices. But does sincere lament *really* lead to “genuine thanksgiving for the grace of God...”—as those in Psalms do (p. 39)?<sup>2</sup> Certainly, this follows scholarly understanding of lament as a genre (Baumgartner 1987), and perhaps, more broadly, a Christian understanding of suffering. In Middleton’s words, through lament we come to realize that “it matters to God. Indeed, it matters so much that [Jesus] bore it in his own body on the tree” (p. 39). Would Jeremiah or Job agree?

His study of prophetic intercession in ch. 2 resonated more clearly for me as a response to suffering. The purpose of the protest is to *prevent* any further or undue

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

suffering, rather than address the problem of suffering *per se* (attributed to an omnipotent, benevolent God who allows the innocent to suffer). Moses, in pleading for God to forgive the people after the Sin of the Golden Calf (Exod 32–34), plays the role of “The king’s loyal opposition” (George Coats’s term). This same paradigm for prophetic intercession is explored by Yochanan Muffs, in his foundational essay: “Who Will Stand in the Breach?”<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, Middleton excludes Abraham’s plea for Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18:17–32), as a cogent example of holy *hutzpah* or prophetic intercession, because Abraham *does not go far enough*; he stops at ten when God might have spared the city for even one righteous person. And the patriarch does not plead directly for Lot and his family. Yet, it seems to me, the whole point of that “last divine soliloquy” (Gen 18:17–19), was to set Abraham up for the supposed bargaining, and demonstrate *why* God chose Abraham: to “teach his children and household after him, the way of the LORD, by doing righteousness and justice [*tzedaqah u’mishpat*]” (v. 19). (Why stop at ten? As Middleton points out, God was like a bad used car salesman who would have *given* the car away). Essentially, Abraham argues for a universal principle of justice, “not to destroy the righteous with the wicked” (as Abraham echoes in vv. 23 and 25). In this message, through Abraham, all the families of the earth will be blessed (12:3 and 22:18). To make the claim for Lot and his family obviates the very notion of a universal moral basis for justice. In Middleton’s reading, “Abraham has *not* quite learned what God wanted to teach him—even though Lot and his family have been saved...” (p. 204). His reading is consistent with depicting Abraham’s misconception of God as demanding loyalty at the expense of his intimate relationships—with the first *Lekh lekha* from his father’s house (12:1), to pawning his wife off as his sister (chs. 12:10–20 and 20:1–18), to his severance from Lot (ch. 13), Hagar and Ishmael (ch. 21), and finally from his own son (ch. 22). Yet God *does* make these demands of the patriarch, indirectly or directly—and sometimes Abraham objects (as in the case of Ishmael’s displacement or banishment, Gen 17:18, 21:11).

Now how do we reconcile Abraham’s claim that God uphold “righteousness and justice [*tzedaqah u’mishpat*]” (18:19, 25) with the Aqedah? Middleton’s reading of Genesis 18 as a “failed teaching moment” dovetails with his understanding of Abraham’s response to God’s command in the Aqedah. The close reading of both rabbinic texts (ch. 6) and the biblical text (ch. 7) was really stupendous in breadth. He confronts the challenge of Jon D. Levenson and Walter

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3 See Yochanan Muffs, “Who Will Stand in the Breach?”, in *Love and Joy: Law, Language, and Religion in Ancient Israel* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America; Distributed by Harvard University Press 1992), 9–48.

Moberly to take the plain meaning (*peshat*) of the text seriously.<sup>4</sup> If we see Abraham as having “failed the test,” how do we understand the two statements by the Angel of YHWH, seemingly in praise of Abraham for his willingness to sacrifice his son (v. 12; vv. 16–18)? Middleton compares the demand of *ha-elohim* (generic term for deity): “to take your son, your only son *whom you love*, Isaac” (22:1) to the Angel of YHWH’s statement: “Now I know that you are God-fearing [*yar ‘ei Elohim*] since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me” (v. 12, cf. v. 16). Though Isaac is spared, Abraham has sacrificed the love of his son. And, he never returns to Sarah; in midrashic tradition the matriarch dies of news of the Aqedah. The second speech (vv. 16–18), then, is a way of “righting” the patriarch’s failure. On oath God swears, “*By myself* I have sworn,” to renew the covenant “and *by your offspring*” (not by Abraham) “will all the nations of the world be blessed” (v. 18). In Middleton’s audacious reading, “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” (p. 217).

By remaining silent, Abraham has bequeathed to his son only the “fear/awe” of God (called “Isaac’s fear [*paḥad Yitzḥak*]” by Jacob in Gen 31:42, 53). Subsequent generations in Genesis devolve into broken relationships and dysfunctional families. In the words of Haim Guri: “Isaac’s heirs, are born ‘with a knife in their hearts [*ma ‘akhelet be-libam*]’” (quoted in Middleton, p. 211).

By contrast, Job represents the right response to unjust suffering. Judy Klitsner, as well as André Neher and the aggadic tradition (b. Baba Bathra 15b–16a; Gen. Rab. 57:4), read the trial of Job as a “subversive sequel” to the Aqedah. Where Abraham’s relationship with God ends in silence, Job takes up the response to God’s trial with voluble protest and lament. Middleton traces many of the intertextual clues between Genesis and the Book of Job—both are deemed “God-fearing [*yar ‘ei ‘elohim*]” (Gen 22:12; Job 1:1, 8; 2:3), both refer to their mortal status as “dust and ash” (Gen 18:27; Job 30:18, 42:6), the resonances with the names *Uz* (Gen 22:21; Job 1:1) and *Buz* (Gen 22:21; Job 32:2), and the motif of intercession for others, as well as the exorbitant cost of their respective trials.

The midrashic reading is based on the sequel to the Aqedah—“after these things [*‘aharei ha-devarim ha-‘eleh*]...”—which introduces the genealogy of Nahor (Abraham’s brother) and the birth announcement of Rebekah, destined to become Isaac’s wife (Gen 20:20–23). According to Genesis Rabbah, an exegetical midrash (5<sup>th</sup> c. CE, Palestine), the auspicious words “after these things/words [*devarim*]” hint to qualms [*hirhurim*] on Abraham’s part (Gen. Rab. 57:4). The

4 Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995) and Walter L. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith: A Study of Abraham and Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

patriarch, anxious that all might have been lost had Isaac been slaughtered on the altar, is reassured with the declaration of Rebekah's birth. The lineage comes as a guarantee of continuity. In a second (anonymous) opinion in the midrash, the list of Nahor's descendants assures Abraham that he would not be tried again, for God had found his successor in Job:

Another Interpretation: Abraham was afraid of further afflictions [*nitya'reh min ha-yissurin*]. The Holy One, blessed be He, said: You need no longer fear since the one to receive them [i.e. the afflictions] has already been born, "Uz [*utz*] the firstborn, Buz his brother..." (Gen 22:21). When did Job (live)? Resh Lakish in the name of bar Kapparah said: in the time of Abraham, as it says "Uz [*utz*], the first-born" (Gen 22:21), and it is written: "There was once a man in the land of Uz [*utz*] whose name was Job" (Job 1:1).<sup>5</sup>

Not only, as Resh Lakish argues, does Job live during the lifetime of Abraham, but he takes up where the patriarch left off as the recipient of God's trials and afflictions [*yissurin*].

The modern French philosopher, André Neher, poetically elaborates upon this midrash:

It was after these words that Abraham locked himself in vertical silence and God accompanied him within that silence. It was after these words that Abraham . . . chose and obtained silence in order to devote himself to works. And if he obtained it, it was because God had just discovered Abraham's successor, it was because at the very moment when Abraham had chosen works, a man was born to whom God was to transfer all the trials of the combat, "it was after these Words [*devarim*]," it was after this tempest in the mind that Abraham was told: "Milcah also has borne children, to your brother Nahor: Uz the firstborn . . ." (Gen 22:20–21). Now Uz was Job (Bereishit Rab- bah 57:3), as it is written, "There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job . . ." (Job 1:1)<sup>6</sup>

Neher suggests that the silence between God and Abraham originates with the patriarch. He closes the apertures—turning away from prophecy and God's mission in order to commit himself to "works," which is to say "good deeds."

5 Genesis Rabbah 57:4 (ed. Theodor-Albeck [Berlin, 1912–31, reprint. Jerusalem: Wahrman Books, 1965]), 614–615, author's translation. See the parallels in Midrash Tanḥuma Yelammedenu *Shelach* 42:14, 27, Numbers Rabbah 17:2, and b. Baba Bathra 15a.

6 André Neher, *The Exile of the Word: from the Silence of the Bible to the Silence of Auschwitz* (in French: *L'Exile de la Parole*, 1970), trans. David Maisel (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1981), 191.

Abraham simply gets on with life—finding a burial spot for Sarah (ch. 23), marrying off his son, Isaac (ch. 24), and occupying himself with his own re-marriage (25:1–4). Silence (and perhaps relief) now reign. Job then takes up the gauntlet. Yet Job’s response to the trial is *not* silence. He does not acquiesce meekly in the disputations, which form the core of the book (chs. 3–37), despite the pious assertions of the folktale frame (1:21–22 and 2:10), and the Christian tradition on “the patient Job” (James 5:11). Instead, as Judy Klitsner points out, when “Job’s life is unjustly shattered, the hero rejects all attempts to accept God’s actions as justified and instead demands answers from God with ever-increasing audacity.”<sup>7</sup>

Middleton reads the folktale frame in the Book of Job (chs. 1–2 and 42) in harmony with the disputations (ch. 3–37) and God’s revelation in the Whirlwind (chs. 39–41). Despite the unreasonable or arbitrary nature of his suffering, Job remains, throughout the trial, a “man of integrity, upright, God fearing, who shuns evil” (1:1; 2:3), and does not “curse” God (almost). As I have come to read the book,<sup>8</sup> Job’s speeches present a poignant critique of retributive justice in contrast to the friends. I don’t think Middleton’s argument fundamentally disagrees; but he adds nuance in his discussion of “appropriate” and “inappropriate” speech. In chapter 3, he identifies seven types of response to suffering: 1) blessing God (as Job does in 1:21);<sup>9</sup> 2) cursing God (as the Adversary supposed he would do, and his wife urges him to do); 3) passive acceptance of suffering; 4) nonverbal mourning, followed by silence; 5) protest/complaint about suffering; 6) defending God and explaining suffering (as represented by the friends); 7) and direct protest/complaint to God. Middleton praises this seventh type of response as the most appropriate speech, in line with the genre of lament psalms (p. 89).

In the end, Job is vindicated; God comes to praise rather than bully him. Middleton presents an innovative reading of Job’s first and second responses, in addressing the question, why were there two distinct speeches in the Revelation in the Whirlwind? He reads Job’s first response as a failure, where Job proclaims his insignificance in the face of God as Creator; and admits to not understanding the divine way, retreating into “abased silence” (40:3–5). On the other hand, the second response, “the supposed confession,” in response to the display of God’s power in Leviathan and Behemoth, is laudable (42:2–6). Middleton offers this

7 Judy Klitsner, *Subversive Sequels in the Bible* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2009) xxiixiii. See also Rachel Adelman, “Abraham and Job: Variations of ‘Yes’ to Silence,” in *Search for Meaning*, eds. David Birnbaum and Martin S. Cohen (New York: New Paradigm Matrix Publishing, 2018), 127–52.

8 See Moshe Greenberg, “Job,” *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, eds. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 285–305.

9 Here, on the word *tiflah*—“In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrongdoing [*tiflah*, לא נתן תפלה לאלהים]” (Job 1:22 NRSV; alt. “reproach” NJPS), or “speak irreverently of God” (Clines), Middleton radically rereads *tiflah* as related to the root *p.l.l.*, “to pray or appeal”, and faults Job for *not* responding to God in prayer or supplication (Middleton, 79).

translation: “therefore I retract and am comforted about dust and ashes [*‘al ken ‘em ‘as ve-nihamti ‘al ‘afar va-‘efer*]” (p. 123). Contrast this to Greenstein’s translation, “that is why I am *fed up*; I take pity on dust and ashes.” In Greenstein’s reading, God has bullied Job into submission.<sup>10</sup> The phrase “dust and ash” alludes to the mortal state, a phrase invoked only by Job (30:19, 42:6), and Abraham (18:27), expressing both humility and audacity in the face of God’s omnipotence. In the end, Job is vindicated but God’s justice remains questionable. In contrast to the claims of the friends, who in one way or another imply that Job must have sinned, that God ultimately rewards the good and punishes the guilty, Job knows himself to be a man of integrity. And God affirms this. Addressing Eliphaz (as representative of all three), God upbraids the friends: “My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right [*nekhonah*], as my servant Job has” (42:7).

Ultimately, Middleton criticizes Abraham’s silence and sides with Job as the voice of complaint and protest directly addressed to God. The lament, while perhaps not effective in averting the wrath of God (as prophetic intercession does), advocates ultimately for a moral universe. I end with a quote from Middleton: “One of the lasting impacts of lament is an ethical sensibility. Not only can the practice of lament strengthen our sense of self (Brueggemann’s point), it may open us up to empathy for others in their suffering” (p. 238). This, indeed, is the way one might teach and demonstrate the divine way of doing what is “right and just [*tzedakah u’ mishpat*]” (Gen 18:19).

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10 Edward L. Greenstein, *Job: A New Translation* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2019), 185.