Revisiting the Sacrifice of Isaac

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J. Richard Middleton. *Abraham's Silence: The Binding of Isaac, The Suffering of Job, and How to Talk Back to God.* Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021. 272pp, $26.99.

Did Abraham pass the test in Genesis 22? And does it matter for how we think and talk about God?

Not exactly and *emphatically yes* answers J. Richard Middleton, who is out to show that the *Aqedah*—the binding of Isaac in Genesis 22—does not, in fact, represent the highwater mark of Abraham's faithful obedience to Yahweh, but instead demonstrates a tragic declension in the patriarch's understanding of Yahweh at the end of his life that has lasting consequences not only for his family but for generations of the faithful to come.

This matters, for Middleton because while "it is common in popular Christian thinking to view Abraham's silent obedience to God's will as an example for the faithful to follow…the valorization of Abraham's response to God in Genesis 22 can paralyze people in the face of

evident evil…The result is often a stance of passivity in the face of suffering, whether our own or that of others" (p. 5).

Such passivity, Middleton strenuously argues, is antithetical to a genuinely biblical faith. And this indeed is the strength of his approach. While critical readings of the *Aqedah* are nothing new, what sets *Abraham's Silence* apart is Middleton's determination to argue his case on the basis of a close reading of the biblical text—both the Abraham narratives as well as the wider witness of the Old Testament, through which it becomes clear that what Yahweh seeks, what Yahweh has *always* sought, is not a passive humanity, quiescent in the face of an immutable divine will; rather, he seeks vigorous, active, and vocal covenant counterparts, strong enough in their faith in his character and promises to hold him to his word, willing even to challenge him when the moment calls for it.

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The argument begins with a close look at what Middleton calls "models of vigorous prayer" in the canon, beginning with the psalms of lament and protest. These psalms, for Middleton, serve as vehicles to help us tell the truth about the presence of pervasive evil in our world, rescuing us from the "paralysis and misdirected anger" that comes about when "our own pain…has [not] been adequately processed" (p. 18).

Abrasive and jarring as they may be, these psalms serve an important function: "[C]ontrary to appearances," Middleton writes, the "honest voicing of pain to God is not blasphemous, but is a holy redemptive act. Prayers of lament are radical acts of faith and hope because they *refuse*, even in the midst of suffering, to give up on God" (p. 35). The supplicant, pleading with God for help—even, at times, *accusing God* of giving up on them—is not running from God but acting on the basis of covenant faith. The protest, far from harming the relationship, keeps it alive, and vital, not simply because through it the supplicant still clings to God, refusing to let God go, but because "[c]entral to the story as it is told in the Bible is the Israelites' primal scream of pain to God" through which God *acts*—of which the paradigmatic case is the exodus. Liberating life is released into the death of Egyptian servitude because the Israelites lifted up their voices in vigorous complaint to God. And God acted.

And Moses himself, who led the people into freedom, also serves as a model of vigorous prayer—and a critical one for Middleton's argument about the *Aqedah*, for Moses' supplication is not for himself, but for others. He's a model, in other words, not of lament but of *intercession*, as the golden calf incident at Sinai demonstrates. When Israel, like Isaac, stood on the brink of annihilation—"Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them" (Ex. 32:10)—Moses stood up to God, reminding him of his promises, imploring him to relent. Far from taking offense as Moses, Yahweh acquiesces, without comment. "It is as if," says Middleton, "this is what God wanted all along" (p. 47)—a

point very much worth noting, for if we (rightly) believe that God reveals himself through Scripture, then it is not just the "God-character" who reveals God in any given narrative, but rather *everything that happens reveals God* (more on this later). And so God reveals himself not just in what Yahweh says to Moses *but in what Moses says to Yahweh and in how Yahweh responds*—demonstrable by the fresh revelation of the divine Name in Exodus 34:6-7a, which builds upon and expands Yahweh's revelation of himself in Exodus 20:5b-6, but with an important change: *forgiveness* is introduced, showing something that was not clearly known before, namely, that "consequences [for sin] no longer cancel the covenant…it is now an unconditional covenant" (p. 51). And it was Moses' urgent intercession—willing to risk his own life and standing with God on Israel's behalf ("But now, please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written!" – Ex 32:32) that brought this all about.

Let the reader understand.

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But what of Job? Surely the book that bears his name is an important counter-witness to the Mosaic model, a testimony to the need for human beings to clasp their hands over their mouths in the face of the inscrutable divine will? Says Job to the Almighty in the midst of the Lord's thunderous rejoinders to his complaints: "I am unworthy—how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth. I spoke once, but I have no answer—twice, but I will say no more" (Job 40:4-50). And when the divine speech is concluded: "My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes" (42:5-6).

Or so the standard take on Job goes. But Middleton wants us to take a closer look, contending that the book of Job is not finally a tale demonstrating the *silencing* of the righteous sufferer but rather the *vindication* of their cries. Noting God's *approval* of Job's speech in 42:7-8 ("you have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has") Middleton writes that "Job's outrageous curse on the day of his birth, followed by his abrasive discourses with his friends and seemingly impious and insistent demand that God answer him" is indeed "faithful speech" and that "God answers Job from the whirlwind not to bury him but to praise him" (106-107).

This he gathers not least from the comparison the Lord makes between Job and the beasts, Behemoth and Leviathan, who are—on a close reading of the text, and contrary to how they were and are usually regarded—precisely *not* "presented as intrinsically aggressive or violent" (p. 110). All to the contrary, the text of Job positions the primeval beasts as God's creations, which he is able to subdue but doesn't, because they are *not* in conflict with him. Indeed, there is some indication that he—as their Creator—is *proud* of them (Job 41:12), as he is of all that he has created, *including* (and here is the critical point), Job:

Through a complex web of associations, Job's fearless and courageous strength, by which he stood up to the verbal and emotional assaults of his friends, is evoked in the description of Behemoth and Leviathan. Like them, Job has been impervious to the assaults of his adversaries, and this is a good thing. The core comparison is found in the description of the powerful mouth of each beast…The implication is that Job, in standing up to his friends, is more powerful than he thinks (p. 112).

God has not come, according to Middleton, to further humiliate Job by silencing him but rather to validate his vigorous protest, dignifying it by expanding Job's understanding of God's ways. The challenging questions put forth to Job by the Lord Middleton takes to be *invitations* for Job to rise up into his royal status as an image-bearer (cf. Genesis 1 and Psalm 8), summoned to ongoing dialogue with the Lord and made a sharer in his thoughts and ways—which the Lord demonstrates by giving Job a guided tour of the created order, expanding his frame of reference thereby.

And when God's first speech to Job reduces Job to silence (40:3-5), Middleton regards this as *contrary* to God's declared intention. God had *specifically* called Job to speak, answering Job's earlier pleas that he would be given an audience with the Almighty. Job wanted to speak. And God *wanted* him to speak. And when the first speech "unintentionally overpowered Job" (p. 120), the Lord continued because he "was not satisfied with Job's abased silence. God desired a worthy dialogue partner" (p. 121)—and he gets one, too: "The second speech has the intended effect. Job girds up his loins and rises to the challenge" (p. 121). And thus—and only thus—is Job commended by the Lord.

All of which sets the stage for the *Aqedah*.

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Middleton knows he's entering contested territory here, with the weight of the tradition—Jewish and Christian–siding in favor of the patriarch's actions in Genesis 22. That weight notwithstanding, Middleton thinks that even before a close reading of the text of Genesis 22 begins, there are good reasons for launching the interpretive venture with a critical eye—namely, that (1) we know that God does not and has never approved of child sacrifice (Jer. 19:5, et. al.), (2) the intercession of Moses and the prophets and the long tradition of lament in the Psalms and Job teaches us that God permits and even *welcomes* human protest in situations of injustice (and, as we saw with Moses, such protest often proves revelatory), and (3) Abraham himself has a track record of doing exactly that with God—challenging the Divine Judge and pleading for mercy over the fate of Sodom: "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" (Genesis 18:25).

Indeed, it is this very track record of Abraham's that leads Middleton to think that more is going on with the *Aqedah* than meets the eye. When a flagrant breach of justice is about to fall upon Isaac, the beloved child of the promise, whereas we might have expected Abraham

to plead once again, “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?”, instead we have a startling, even alarming silence. For Middleton, alarm is *precisely* what the narrator intends, scattering hints and clues throughout the dark tale to signal to us that “things are not as they should be…that all is not right with Abraham—or with Isaac, for that matter” (p. 165). To that end, a handful of observations are worth noting here.

In the first place, Middleton notes that Genesis 22:1 is the *first time* in the Abraham narratives that God is depicted as speaking to Abraham *not* by the covenant name ‘Yahweh’ but by the generic ‘ha-elohim’. “The attentive reader will note this deviation from the pattern,” he writes, and “while we don’t know for certain what the purpose of this deviation is, the effect is striking—and, I might add, ominous” (p. 169), for it leads us to wonder if the driving question of the narrative is whether we are dealing with the generic ‘gods’ of the nations (ha-elohim, who regularly demanded child sacrifice) or with the covenant God of Israel (Yahweh). The reader is on alert.

Further, Middleton contends that the narrator has carefully crafted his story to signal to us the complicated interior state of Abraham as he approaches the dread deed, arising early (perhaps to avoid Sarah, who is conspicuously absent from the narrative), saddling the donkey by himself (rather than having his servants do it), unnecessarily cutting wood for the sacrifice (when Mount Moriah surely had wood enough for fire)—and all of this carried out in a strange sequence, as under normal circumstances the donkey would have been saddled *last*. Abraham is in torment.

We also sense trouble in the interplay between Abraham and Isaac, the father exerting complete power over his trusting and helpless son (perhaps an indication of the way Abraham is feeling about God—overpowered and helpless). And if Abraham *did* believe—as he told Isaac—that God would provide a lamb for the burnt offering, Middleton asks, why is it that when he finally *does* arrive on the top of Moriah, we not only have no indication that Abraham bothered to look for one, but even more, the (surely) noisy ram caught in the thicket didn’t garner the patriarch’s notice until the angel from heaven (twice!) thundered from the heavens, staying his hand and directing his attention to the Lord’s gracious provision (pp. 219-221).

Middleton’s case that Abraham’s actions throughout Genesis 22 are not optimal or exemplary is made all the more convincing when we consider the impact that the *Aqedah* has on the covenant family. Sarah (as we have noted), who is nowhere to be found when the story begins, does not reappear in the narratives until her death (Gen. 23:2). And when Abraham finally does come down from the mountain at the end of Genesis 22, not only does he *not rejoin Sarah*, but *heads to Beersheba, where also Hagar lives* (Middleton wonders if Abraham has earlier left Sarah for Hagar). More still, Ishmael (Abraham’s *actual* firstborn, whom we know Abraham loved dearly) is living in Paran, while Isaac (so it seems) has been left behind on the mountain, as the text notes that Abraham returned *with his servants* to

Beersheba (22:19)—no mention made of the nearly-immolated Isaac, who sinks into shadows as the patriarchal narratives progress. Abraham never blesses Isaac (a glaring omission), and the text of Genesis allots but a fraction of the space to Isaac as it grants Abraham and his grandson Jacob, who, as Middleton notes, when called upon by Laban to name the God he serves, calls him "the God of Abraham and *the Fear of Isaac*" (Gen 31:12). What Jacob learned about God from Isaac, Middleton thinks, is what Isaac learned as a boy about God from Abraham on Mount Moriah when he came within an inch of his life—that God is simply "the Fear" (p. 213). Can we blame him?

The Abraham story, for Middleton, ends not with triumph but with tragedy:

These are not matters that are often discussed by interpreters of Genesis 22. But they are important for a nuanced reading of the text. Abraham's family is in tatters, to say the least; and by the end of the Moriah episode the dysfunctional family members are all scattered. But is this what God wants? Is this what faithfulness to God leads to? (p. 209)

Yes—the blessing of Yahweh on the family of Abraham is reaffirmed. But as Middleton wrestles with the angel's words to Abraham (22:12, 15-18), he concludes that Abraham is not being *commended*, but that instead Yahweh is *conceding* to Abraham's failure—a failure, that is, to grasp Yahweh's gracious character and therefore to make vigorous, vocal protest (like Job) as a full-bodied covenant partner in earnest intercession for someone he loves (like Moses). He writes:

It is my claim that Abraham could have chosen the more excellent way of protest (concerning God's command) and intercession (for his son). This would have had the salutary result of Abraham exhibiting (and growing in) his discernment of God's merciful character, and it would have demonstrated (and perhaps deepened) his love for his only remaining son. (p. 225)

Or so we may conjecture. As it is, as ever, we are left with this text as it stands, pondering its dark riddles.

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As I wrestled with Middleton's approach to the *Aqedah*, I found myself thinking about what we mean when we talk about Holy Scripture as the place where God reveals himself to us. John Webster's words rang in my ears:

Holy Scripture and its interpretation are elements in the domain of the Word of God. That domain is constituted by the communicative presence of the risen and ascended Son of God who governs all things…the divine Word commissions and sanctifies these texts to become fitting vehicles of his self-proclamation. (Webster: The Domain of the Word, pp. 3, 8)

If that is so, then several corollaries follow:

First, it reminds us to read across the canon in discerning the face of God. In the case of the *Aqedah* (as Middleton aptly points out) a truly canonical reading will listen to the command of ha-elohim with an ear out not only for Yahweh's gracious welcome of vigorous protest but also for his unequivocal denunciations regarding child sacrifice (Lev. 18:21; Dt. 12:31, 18:10; Jer. 19:5) as expressions of his immutable moral will. Surely no reading of the *Aqedah*–wherever it lands–can be considered valid that does pass through the fire of that canonical scrutiny.

Second, and relatedly, it reminds us that it is not solely the "God" characters in any given story who reveal God; rather, *it is the story, taken as a whole, which reveals God*. And so when Moses protests to God over the looming destruction of Israel and God relents, we should not see a wobbly deity capitulating before a (rather imperious) human subject, *but rather we should see the heart of God unfolded to us in the entirety of the tale—that our God does not will our destruction but our salvation*.

Both of these points, taken together, may shed some helpful light on a potential concern with regard to Middleton's thesis–namely, does it suggest a kind of *carte blanche* for (modern, enlightened) human beings to object to God's will whenever they see fit? The answer must surely be no. Rather, it is because of who God has revealed himself to be (and *how* God has revealed himself to be) that humans can raise their voice in lament and protest and vigorous intercession. Moses, the Psalmists, and Job, lift up their complaints to the God who sees and hears precisely *because they know something of God that God was and is pleased to reveal.*

And so can we.