



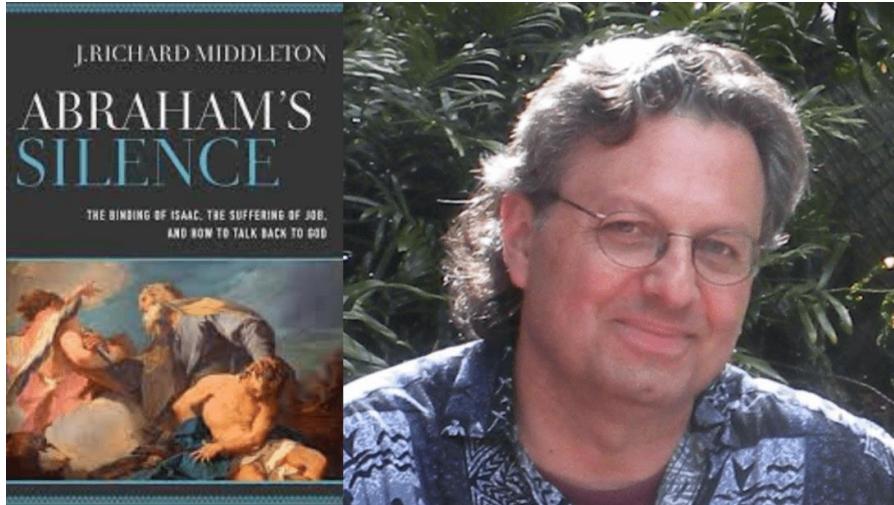
BIBLE | REVIEWS

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ABRAHAM'S SILENCE REVISITED

Review of '*Abraham's Silence: The Binding of Isaac, the Suffering of Job, and How to Talk Back to God*' by J. Richard Middleton.



The voice of God comes to you. Deep in your soul you know that this really is God. You are not given to the religious enthusiasm of "hearing God" speak to you in audible ways, nor do you suffer psychosis. Nonetheless, you have no doubt that this is God's voice. But the voice says something that is horrifically absurd. "Take your child, your only child, the child you love, and sacrifice them. Kill them as an offering to me."

What do you do? What do you say? If it wasn't for the fact that you know that I am alluding to the story of Genesis 22, in which Abraham hears the voice of God giving him precisely these instructions regarding his son-of-promise, Isaac, would you silently obey this voice? Or would you wonder about whether maybe you are having a psychotic episode? Can you imagine following through on such a demand without question?

The traditional interpretation of this biblical story has honoured Abraham's response as exemplary obedience. Even so, the binding of Isaac has put both Jewish and Christian readers in a bind for millennia. While the idols of racism, colonialism, economic growth (and more) have demonstrated an insatiable appetite for child sacrifice, Jews and Christians have insisted that such sacrifice is abhorrent to God. Except, it would seem, when it comes to Abraham. If Abraham was prepared to argue with God, for the salvation of Sodom (Gen. 18:22-33), then why was he totally silent when it came to the life of his son, Isaac?

A DIFFERENT TEST

Enter J. Richard Middleton's new book, *Abraham's Silence: The Binding of Isaac, the Suffering of Job, and How to Talk Back to God*. Middleton's deeply honest and biblically profound exploration of this story results in a daring conclusion.

Middleton argues that Abraham's test in Genesis 22 was not about whether Abraham would demonstrate blind obedience to an uncompromising god who demands child sacrifice. Rather, this was a test as to whether he really loved his son, Isaac, and whether he would truly discern the nature of the God who had initiated covenant with him. And here is where Middleton's interpretation is breath-taking. In his silence, Abraham fails the test. He should have argued with God. He should have pled for the life of his son. Perhaps he should have refused.

I know. This is crazy. We have all been taught to view Abraham's response as one of outstanding obedience, even if we have to swallow our discomfort with it all and suspend our most basic ethical (and biblical) principles. And yet, throughout history, and maybe in our own Bible reading and path of discipleship, there has been something that just doesn't seem right about a God calling for child sacrifice and a father silently acquiescing. Even if the story shows that God never intended for Isaac to be actually sacrificed, there is still something wrong about this story, something unbecoming of God in such a cruel test.

IN PRAISE OF JOB

Middleton situates his discussion of Abraham within the larger biblical story. Arguing with God is, of course, not only found elsewhere in the Abraham story; Middleton also points out that such vigorous argument and intercession is a crucial feature of the lament tradition in Scripture.

And who can forget Moses arguing with God on Mt. Sinai after the golden calf incident? We read that God "repents" or changes his mind in the face of Moses' arguments. Moses does not remain silent before divine judgement. Abraham doesn't say a word.

Perhaps most unexpected is Middleton's explanation of Job's argument with God. This nuanced and compelling reading had me on the edge of my seat. We know that Job's detractors were wrong in telling Job to be silent and accept his suffering as legitimate judgement from God. But what is God up to in the two speeches from the whirlwind (Job 38-39; 40-41)? Is he taking Job down a notch, challenging Job's arrogance in speaking so forcefully to God? In the end, does Job learn that he should have kept silent or at least been less obstinate in his complaint to God? Not according to Middleton. Rather, God corrects both Job's and his detractors' strict act-consequence cosmology, with its micro-managing god. Instead, God outlines a creational wisdom in which a deeply engaged God both delights in the uncontrollable freedom of creation and invites the human creature into vigorous covenantal dialogue. As Middleton puts it, God comes to praise Job, not to bury him. Job is faithful in his complaint and has discerned God well in raising his voice against unjust suffering.

If the scriptures call us to vigorous lament, if Moses was faithful in arguing with God so that Israel might be saved, and if Job has been faithful in questioning God about unjust suffering, where does that leave Abraham? Can we unbind the binding of Isaac from the straight jacket of the traditional interpretation? Middleton thinks so. Through careful and close reading Middleton detects clues within the story itself that suggest something is wrong here. Abraham does not love Isaac enough to stand in the breach (as Moses did) to save his life. And Abraham's silence speaks volumes about what kind of God he thinks has called him. This is a pagan deity, not the covenantal God of justice and love. Abraham has failed the test. He has not demonstrated love for Isaac. And he has not discerned the true character of his God.

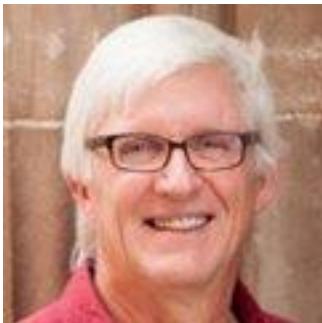
HOPE FOR BROKEN FAMILIES

On this reading, the Abraham story does not offer us an archetypal hero, or a mythical figure of purity and holiness, but a flawed, broken, duplicitous father of a shattered and deeply dysfunctional family. Which raises this question: If the Abraham of the dominant tradition, the Abraham who is silent, the Abraham of uncompromising obedience, can no longer be a companion for people of faith, then how does the Abraham we meet in Middleton's book accompany us?

I think that Middleton's answer is pastorally profound. Abraham's silence is not a model for us to follow, but a call to discern better than Abraham. This story invites us more

deeply into a dynamic covenantal relationship of vigorous and sometimes harsh and difficult dialogue. In the face of Abraham's silence we must speak. In the face of sacrificing our children before any viciously uncompromising gods (let the reader understand), we must not only protest, but stand in the breach to protect them.

But there is more good news to be found in this reading of the Abraham story. In the face of the betrayal, brokenness, harm, trauma and deceit in so many of our own family stories, and of our own faith traditions and institutions, we can dare to trust that this covenant God can bring blessing out of a cursed past, can bring forth healing out of deep brokenness, and will accompany us on the other side of generational traumas. By releasing us from the straight jacket of an exemplary Abraham prepared to sacrifice his son, Middleton invites us into a dynamic relationship with a God who can work through our own imperfections to somehow, like Abraham, bring blessing to the world.



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Brian Walsh is a retired campus pastor and the founder of the Wine Before Breakfast community in Toronto. His most recent book, with Sylvia Keesmaat, is *Romans Disarmed: Resisting Empire, Demanding Justice* (Brazos).

<https://www.christiancourier.ca/abrahams-silence-revisited/>