NEPHY STYLE

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Few passages of Scripture are as well-known, if not infamous, as Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son Isaac in Genesis 22. In his most recent book *Abraham's Silence*, Richard Middleton suggests that the iconic story has been woefully misunderstood. Spurred on by his own experience of loss and lament, Middleton offers and intertextual account of Genesis 22, reading the Abraham narrative along with the book of Job and, to a lesser extent, other passages of Scripture that can be categorized as "lament."

Abraham's Silence

Abraham's Silence is organized into three parts. Part one (ch. 1-2) considers the place of lament and complaint in the prayer life of a believer (17-63). Part two (ch. 3-4) examines the book of Job with special attention given to a) how various characters respond to suffering and b) God's response to Job at the book's conclusion (67-128). Part three (ch. 5-7) turns to Genesis 22 and asks, in light of parts one and two, whether Abraham's response to God's command was ideal (131-225).

Part One

Chapter one discusses the place of lament in the Scriptures. Not only is lament present, but Middleton makes the case that lament is a normative form of prayer in Scripture, thus giving us a paradigm for our own expressions of complaint. Of lament psalms he says,

> Lament psalms, which make up over one-third of the Psalms (compared to hymns of praise, which compose less than a quarter), are honest, abrasive prayers, which squarely face up to the dark side of human experience; and so they can provide us guidance (a "protocol") for how to "host" and process disorientation."

Middleton concludes the chapter with a series of case studies where people cry out in lament. He says, "When we have the audacity to lay our pain at God's feet, to summon the Most High into our suffering, something remarkable happens. God comes" (36). These case studies include the Israelites in Exodus (36), Jesus (37), and Creation itself (37).

Chapter two considers the role of the prophet as an intercessor for God's people. In it, Middleton makes the case that the kind of servant he wants is one who will pray bold prayers with discernment for God's fundamental character.

Special attention is given to Moses who, on multiple accounts, is informed by God that he will destroy the children of Israel. This is followed up by Moses' passionate appeal that God would be

merciful to his people and spare them which, of course, he does. However, in telling Moses his plans "God seems to have intentionally left him a space for intervening" (46). In other words, it is as though God is inviting Moses to speak up, boldly challenge God, and intercede for the Israelites.

Part Two

Chapter three begins to survey the book of Job and focuses on the various verbal responses a person could potentially give in response to suffering. The Accuser is convinced that should Job's health, wealth, and family be taken away, Job will use his speech to curse God rather than bless. Middleton writes,

> At the beginning of Job, the emphasis on appropriate speech is limited to blessing and cursing – two opposite extremes. But there is a whole lot more speaking going on between the prologue and the epilogue, in the poetic section of the book, which does not clearly fit this simple binary. One way to understand the book of Job, therefore, is as a wisdom treatise that raises the question of what constitutes true fear of God – specifically, what sort of speech vis-a-vis God (either to or about God) exhibits such fear" (77).

Middleton observes seven different speech options expressed by characters throughout the book: blessing God (Job at the outset; 79-80), cursing God (Job's wife; 80), passive acceptance of suffering (Job after his second round of suffering; 80-81), nonverbal mourning followed by silence (Job's friends; 81), protest/complaint about suffering (Job in his speeches; 81-85), defending God and explaining suffering (Job's friends in their speeches; 85-88), and Direct protest/complaint to God (Job in his speeches; 88-90). These seven options are given but, prior to God's speeches, it is unclear which of these seven speech options is considered "wise."

God's speeches to Job are the subject of chapter four. He opens with the question: "Is protest to God (or about God) concerning one's circumstances viewed in the book of Job as a form of speech that manifests wisdom?" (99). Traditionally, God's speeches have been understood as a form of rebuke, putting Job in his place (to put it bluntly) or informing him that he just doesn't understand the complexities of the universe (to put it mildly). Middleton spends some time giving the case for this traditional reading (102-105).

However, he notes that at the end God explicitly approves of Job's speech in contrast to the speech of Job's friends (42:7-8b; 106)! So how, then, should God's speeches be understood if he in fact approves of Job's complaint? Middleton first discusses God's second speech before considering his first. In the second speech, God describes two great beasts: the Behemoth and the Leviathan. Middleton argues that Job is being compared to these two beasts in the speech. He says,

> 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" (112).

Later he says,

> If God positively values Leviathan's power over the proud, then perhaps we need to reevaluate God's challenge to Job to look at the proud and abase them (40:10-13). Perhaps this is meant not as a put down of Job but as a challenge that Job might actually rise to" (115).

In summary,

> The book of Job thus suggests that between the extremes of blessing God explicitly (which is, of course, appropriate speech and which Job does at the outset) and cursing God (which

is clearly folly, and which Job therefore avoids), there is the viable option of honest, forthright challenge to God in prayer, which God (as Creator) both wants and expects of those made in the divine image – and this is right speech too" (128).

Part Three

Chapter five first surveys the work of Levenson and Moberly, two modern scholars who hold to a traditional understanding of Genesis 22, that is, a positive reading of Abraham's response (134-144). After noting that this traditional reading was also prevalent in the premodern scholarship, he takes note of premodern interpreters who show unease with a positive reading of the passage (144-163). Commenting on premodern critical readings Middleton says, "the very need to propose such readings is testimony to the sages' implicit discomfort with the Aqedah [the binging]" (163).

Chapter six is made up of two parts. First, Middleton notes certain textual features that should indicate to the careful reader that something is not right. These include Abraham's methodical activity (173), the strange order of Abraham's activity (175), and the strange disappearance of Issac at the end of the narrative (182). Second, Middleton argues through thematic and intertextual links that the author of Job intended his story to be a commentary on Genesis 22 (183-190)

It is in chapter seven that Middleton gives his exegesis of Genesis 22. Through a careful reading of the Abraham story at large, and chapter 22 in particular, he argues that God was a) testing Abraham to see whether or not he could discern God's foundational character and b) seeking to probe the depths of Abraham's love for his son Isaac. Middleton concludes that Abraham gave a less than ideal response since he failed to discern the depths of God's mercy by interceding for his son.

Pros

Middleton does a fantastic job both bringing a larger biblical theology to bear on Genesis 22 and offering a careful, close reading of the text. He is very careful to base his interpretation on a high view of Scripture while simultaneously not being afraid to question the majority interpretation (and it helps that he showed centuries-old, premodern interpreters who also deviate from the traditional reading). Also, he pointed out certain textual features in the Abraham story that are as plain as day, and yet, somehow, I never gave much notice to them (the fruit of chapter seven). I'm thankful for such a corrective because it is an invitation to go back and re-read the Abraham story in light of these once overlooked elements.

Additionally, I appreciate Middleton's pastoral concern woven through the course of his book. It is obvious that he is a scholar with a heart for the people of God. As such, this book has relevance not only for the studious Bible student but for the pastor engaged in the complexities and messiness of church ministry.

Cons

Middleton's exegesis of Genesis 22 relies on a couple of subtle rhetorical elements that can not be proven decisively. Specifically, how the identification of Isaac as the son "whom you love" functions in the text as well as the function of the angel's speech at the end. Because of this, his exegesis moved more by the biblical theology he constructs over the course of the book than the text of Genesis 22 itself. For one with a high view of Scripture and its unity, this may not be a problem. However, this may be a stumbling block for those not already taken by Middleton's argument thus far. Perhaps this is why he saves his exegesis of Genesis 22 for the last chapter.

https://nephystyle.wordpress.com/2021/11/18/review-abrahams-silence-the-binding-of-isaac-the-suffering-of-job-and-how-to-talk-back-to-god-by-richard-middleton/

About

Hello there! My name is David Lyle Taylor I am a lover of all things Biblical Theology. I hold MAs in Old and New Testament from Talbot School of Theology in La Mirada CA. My areas of interest are in the Torah, literary approaches to Hebrew narrative – particularly narrative analogy – canonical crtiticism, and the New Testament's use of Old Testament.

I am a part-time youth leader at Image Church in Ladera Ranch, CA, and an adjunct instructor at Calvary Chapel Bible College in Murietta, CA. I love morning coffee, knitting, hiking, scented candles, ramen, Parks & Rec/The Office, Settlers of Catan, all things Bible Project, The Lord of the Rings, and the sound of the stillness of the morning.