greatly help. The book should become a welcome resource to any OT class that deals with critical issues in the OT.

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Abraham's Silence: The Binding of Isaac, the Suffering of Job, and How to Talk Back to God. By J. Richard Middleton. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021. xvi+256 pp., $26.99, paperback.

J. Richard Middleton is Professor of Biblical Worldview and Exegesis at Northeastern Seminary in Rochester, NY. He begins by stating the problem this book sets out to answer: "For many years, I have been troubled by Abraham's silent obedience in Genesis 22. If, I reasoned, I ever heard a voice telling me to sacrifice my son, I would *not* instantly comply, certainly not without some resistance and questioning. So I have found Abraham's response to God troubling" (p. 1). Among the reasons one might question Abraham's response, Middleton observes, is "the prominence of prayers of lament or complaint in the book of Psalms" (p. 2), as well as other biblical examples of people of faith challenging God. He explains that this book's goal "is ultimately 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—for the healing both of ourselves and of the world" (p. 9).

The book is divided into three parts. In the first, "Models of Vigorous Prayer in the Bible," Middleton wrestles with the problem of evil and the response of the lament tradition. From the prayers of lament, Middleton argues that we learn to "...take our anger, our doubt, and all the dismay and terror of life, and we can put it at the feet of the Most High. We can bring our pain to the throne of God and say, 'You're supposed to be faithful, but I don't see it. You're supposed to be good, but I don't experience it'" (p. 35). Such prayer "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" (Ibid.). This is the way Jesus prayed in the garden, Middleton observes.

Part 2, "Making Sense of the Book of Job," looks at the conversations in the book of Job. This is "a righteous man, who suffers extreme tragedy (the loss of his wealth and children, followed by terrible sickness); yet his friends accuse him of having sinned in some way to deserve his tragic fate" (p. 68). Middleton concludes, "Job's complaints to God about his suffering clearly link the book to the honesty of the lament psalms, thus making Job a prime example of vigorous prayer in the Bible. Job's prayers, however, are more abrasive than most laments in the Psalter" (Ibid.). When Job declares his repentance (Job 42:6), Middleton argues, he "is retracting his inappropriate, passive response to

God after the first speech, when he refused to answer (40:3–5)" (p. 124). In short, "it is clear that Job's response to God at the end of the second speech involves a retraction of his earlier abased silence (along with his lawsuit against YHWH) because he has come to understand that God values this human dialogue partner, especially for his honest, abrasive, unsubdued speech. And Job is appropriately consoled or comforted over this" (p. 128).

Finally, in Part 3, "Unbinding the Aqedah from the Straitjacket of Tradition," Middleton evaluates the story in Genesis 22. This story is widely interpreted as presenting Abraham as a model of faithfulness, willing to sacrifice that which is most precious to him because God told him to do so. Middleton argues that the God who condemns human sacrifice could hardly intend that Abraham kill his son (e.g., Lev 18:21; Deut 12:31; 18:10). Second, there are numerous biblical examples of people of faith questioning God, such as Abraham in Genesis 18, "the lament prayers in the Psalter, the intercession of Moses after the golden calf episode, the prophetic tradition of intercession on behalf of Israel, and the vocal complaints of Job" (p. 132). After an extensive exegetical discussion of the narrative in Genesis 22 and an admittedly limited evaluation of the history of interpretation of the text, Middleton then asks if Abraham passed the test. The two angel speeches (Gen 22:12, 15–18) "are usually taken as validating Abraham's response to God, implying that he passed the test with flying colors" (p. 192). Middleton proposes an alternative interpretation of those speeches. The test, he argues, is not whether Abraham is willing to sacrifice his son; rather, it is a test of Abraham's knowledge of God, a knowledge he is to pass down to his descendants (Gen 18:19): "How will Abraham be able to distinguish this God he is coming to know from the gods of the nations?" (p. 204). Or, to say it another way, "Is the God of Abraham simply one of the pagan deities of Mesopotamia or Canaan who requires child sacrifice as a symbol of allegiance? Or is he different, a God of mercy and love for his children, who was even willing to forego judgment on Sodom for the sake of the righteous?" (p. 205). After walking through the story and engaging a series of challenges to his view, Middleton concludes, "I am inclined to think that Abraham did not pass the test in Genesis 22. His silent obedience indicated that he did not discern God's merciful character (until the angel called off the sacrifice); and he did not show love for his son by interceding on his behalf" (p. 223). He explains, "I am not denigrating Abraham for being a monstrous child abuser or God for being an arbitrary and unethical deity in giving Abraham this test; nor am I claiming that the Aqedah tends to justify child abuse either today or in earlier times....Neither am I intending to disparage the long history of interpretation that exalts Abraham for his response in the Aqedah" (Ibid.). Instead, he writes,

> The question must be asked whether the tradition of prior interpretations of the Aqedah (each dependent on their particular historical context and the assumptions and interests of the interpreters) should act as a straitjacket, preventing new and fresh readings of the text. I believe they should not. Hence I have attempted to 'unbind' the Aqedah from the limitations of traditional readings. (p. 224)

Middleton concludes the book:

> This is why Abraham's silence is so tragic. The Aqedah testifies to the patriarch's missed opportunity for lament. In lieu of Abraham's lament, this book represents my own lament on Abraham's behalf, my grappling with God about Abraham's resounding silence....Yet despite Abraham's failure to lament, God was gracious and kept faith with Abraham, continuing to work through this fractured family—ultimately to bring redemption to the world. (p. 240)

This is, after all, the good news; the God of Abraham will do what he promised, bless all peoples through Abraham (Gen 12:3).

God did not want Abraham to sacrifice his son. This is clear since God stopped Abraham before he committed the horrific deed. Middleton's reading of this text encourages his readers to ask whether Abraham should have known that. The angelic speeches seem to honor Abraham's fear of God, and that is not insignificant, but perhaps, as Middleton puts it, "Abraham could have chosen the more excellent way of protest (concerning God's command) and intercession (for his son)" (p. 224). According to Hebrews 11:17–19, Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son because he believed in a God who would resurrect the dead. For that, Abraham should be honored. However, acknowledging Abraham's faith in the resurrection need not be pitted against Abraham's failure to understand the character of the God he was coming to know.

Some readers will find this book challenging since Middleton does present an alternative view to what has become almost a consensus interpretation. It is worth reading carefully, even skeptically. The book is based on extensive research, rooted in a high view of Scripture and skillful exegesis, and written in a clear and accessible style. The interpretation Middleton presents deserves evaluation and consideration. Anyone who wants to understand this important story and its role in the history of interpretation should read this book.

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