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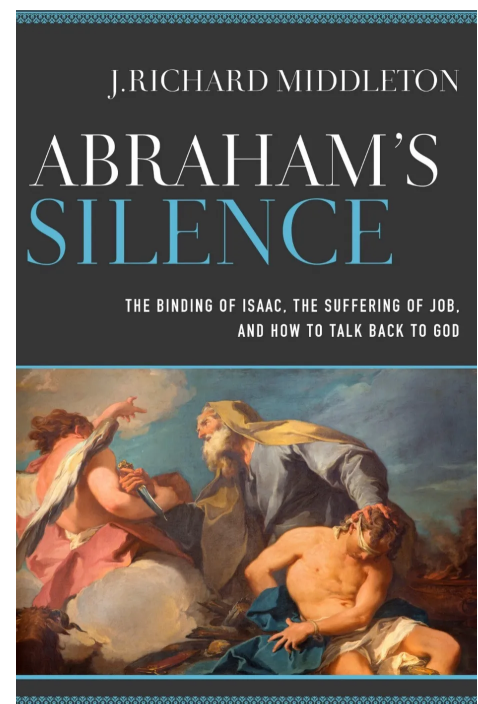
A Time to Keep Silence or a Time to Speak?

 April 29, 2022

Review by Travis J. Bott

In Genesis 22, God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son, and the patriarch obeys in silence. But God stays Abraham's hand at the last moment, sparing the life of Isaac. The Akedah, or Binding of Isaac, is a foundational story of biblical faith. Over millennia, Jewish and Christian interpreters have lauded Abraham's silent obedience as a supreme act of faithfulness and a model to follow.

But what if Abraham was wrong to remain silent? What if, instead, he should have protested God's command, lamenting his suffering and interceding for the life of his son? And, as a result, what if most biblical interpreters have been wrong about Abraham's



The Binding of Isaac, the
Suffering of Job, and How to
Talk Back to God

By J. Richard Middleton

silence? These are the bold questions that J. Richard Middleton asks in his provocative book *Abraham's Silence*.

Middleton admits that if God asked him to sacrifice his son, he would talk back. At the same time, however, he is aware of the temptation to judge Scripture by a modern standard that stands outside its normative frame. So, as a Christian, he wants his impulses to be deeply rooted in canonical context and biblical exegesis.

Middleton finds alternatives to Abraham's silence in the lament psalms (ch. 1), prophetic intercession (ch. 2), and Job's challenge to God's justice (chs. 3, 4). These voices within Scripture offer what he calls "the path of vigorous prayer." Questioning God does not have to be a sign of unbelief; on the contrary, it can be a profound act of faith in the face of great suffering. Middleton has walked this challenging path with God, and he now advocates a "gritty spirituality of lament."

Middleton's pastoral care for his readers is praiseworthy, but his rereading of Genesis 22 is problematic. He "unbinds the Akedah from the straitjacket of tradition" (ch. 5) by exploiting subtle "rhetorical signals" within the text (ch. 6) and concludes that Abraham fails God's test by refusing passionate dialogue (ch. 7).

Of course, traditional interpretations can go astray. But when the mainstream of the tradition praises Abraham's silence, it should act as a guide for Christian readers. In this case, the affirmative history of interpretation begins within the biblical canon. At the end of the story, the author quotes Abraham (vv. 8, 14): "It is said *to this day*, 'On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided'" (v. 14). In other words, Abraham's trust in God's provision was cited approvingly in the author's latter day.

Further, 2 Chronicles 3:1 identifies this mountain as the site of the temple in Jerusalem. Thus, Abraham's act of offering was understood as the foundation of

all orthodox sacrifice in Israel. Finally, New Testament authors also use Genesis 22 as an example of Abraham's faithfulness (e.g., Heb. 11:17-19; James 2:21-23), but Middleton must downplay these texts to argue for his novel reading.

Ecclesiastes says there is "a time to keep silence, and a time to speak" (3:7). The question is, What time is it in Genesis 22? In Genesis 18, when God reveals his plan to destroy Sodom, Abraham vigorously speaks up, interceding on behalf of the righteous: "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" (v. 25). But in Genesis 22, when God's command is clear, he presents himself as a humble servant — "Here I am" (vv. 1, 11) — and obeys in trusting silence.

Abraham understood that different situations call for different verbal responses to God, and the same is true for us today. In my judgment, Middleton is wrong about Abraham's silent journey to Moriah, but he is right about our need, at times, to walk the path of vigorous prayer.

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