Book reviews

Trusting complaint

J. Richard Middleton, *Abraham's Silence: The Binding of Isaac, the Suffering of Job, and How to Talk Back to God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021). Paperback, pp. xv + 256, ISBN 978–0–8010–9801–7, RRP $US26.99.

J. Richard Middleton is Professor of Biblical Worldview and Exegesis at Northeastern Seminary in Rochester, New York, and the author of two widely acclaimed books, *The Liberating Image* (Brazos Press, 2005) and *A New Heaven and a New Earth* (Baker Academic, 2014). This most recent book is likely to enhance Middleton's reputation as a careful biblical exegete, responsible scriptural interpreter, and honest theological thinker. Deeply grounded in meticulous scholarship, *Abraham's Silence* also arises from the depths of the author's own experience of the silence of God, as he explains in his introduction.

Ordinarily a reviewer's threefold task is to provide readers with a good sense of the contents of a book, to identify reasons why (or why not) any particular book deserves the attention of readers, and to offer a critical assessment of a book's strengths and weaknesses. In the case of this book, however, that is not such a straightforward task, not only because no less a scholar than Walter Brueggemann has declared that "this [book by Middleton] is interpretation at its most daring and at its best" but also because I have some history with this book, at least for a short time during its gestation. For the first half of October 2016, the author was my neighbour at St Mark's in Canberra, during which time I witnessed him present a seminar paper that was subsequently published as the lead article in *St Mark's Review* (No. 239, March 2017), which in turn served as the basis for chapter 4 in this book. At a personal level, moreover, that fortnight lives on in my memory as a time of candid and enriching conversation with Middleton, during which we discovered that our scholarly interests and interpretive concerns overlapped. Ever since I learned of this book project, I have been looking forward to its publication. The book does not disappoint. Indeed, if anything, the final scope of *Abraham's Silence* took me by surprise. I already knew that by means of a fresh reading of the book of Job this book would interrogate Abraham's mute compliance when commanded to sacrifice his son, Isaac. In this respect, the book offers profound food for thought. But *Abraham's Silence* is also a much larger project than an inner-biblical dialogue between traditions associated with Abraham and Job. Integral to Middleton's project is the value

of lament psalms for honest engagement with the God of Israel, as well as the significance of speaking back to God in the prophetic tradition stretching back to the figure of Moses. Thus, Middleton ranges across the Tanakh, constructing something along the lines of a biblical theology of complaint or, perhaps better, the biblical basis for a gritty theology of prayer.

The book proceeds in three movements: part 1 explores the existential significance of the biblical tradition of lament, especially in the lament psalms, and the prophetic tradition of intercession—interfering with God's plans to punish Israel; part 2 homes in on Job; and in part 3 Middleton trespasses onto the troubling terrain associated with the Aqedah.

Part 1, entitled "Models of Vigorous Prayer in the Bible," comprises two chapters, the first of which documents the experiential honesty of the Psalms. Focusing on Psalms 30 and 39, the first a thanksgiving psalm and the second a psalm of lament, Middleton provides a helpful analysis of their similarities and differences. From this discussion, one learns much about the Hebrew psalter as whole, but Middleton's purpose is to document the power of honest speech in the Psalms, especially in psalms of lament, which he dubs "supplication with an edge" (p. 35). For Middleton, "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). As such, moreover, the biblical psalms of lament model a mode of processing pain and suffering, both individual and corporate. One might add that they also facilitate the articulation of traumatic experiences when people are incapable of expressing their pain to God.

In his second chapter, Middleton turns from psalms of lament to a detailed discussion of the story of Moses interceding with God for the people of Israel after their idolatry while Moses communed with God on Mount Sinai. This attentive reading of Exodus 32–34 illumes at various levels, not only shedding light on dialogic details of Moses' intercession with God on behalf of God's people but also making the exegetical case that God's change of mind in response to Moses' intercession is an expression of God's steadfast character. "This is a God of overflowing love, who desires, and actively invites, vigorous, honest prayer on the part of the human covenant partner" (p. 52). Middleton also shows how the memory of Moses' intercessory audacity echoes down through the Bible, especially in the prophetic tradition but also in later midrashic and rabbinic traditions. Equally interesting is Middleton's brief reflection on Elijah as a prophetic figure who fails to follow in Moses' intercessory footsteps. Looking both backward and forward, chapter 2 ends with these words: "Whether it is lament psalms, prophetic intercession, or Job's passionate protests about his suffering,

Scripture affirms in multiple ways that the God of Abraham positively desires vigorous dialogue partners" (p. 63).

As with part 1 of this book, part 2 also comprises two chapters, albeit focused on the book of Job. Chapter 3 is Middleton's reading guide for making sense of the book. Along with an overview of Job, focusing on the poetic human speeches, Middleton encourages readers to see the book as something of a thought experiment in Israelite wisdom, focusing on this perplex: confronted with overwhelming suffering, how should a wise or righteous person respond, especially with respect to God? In his own words, "One way to understand the book of Job . . . is as a wisdom treatise that raises the question of what constitutes true fear of God—specifically, what sort of speech vis-à-vis God (either to or about God) exhibits such fear" (p. 77). Middleton proceeds to show that once the question of appropriate speech in relation to innocent suffering is identified as the focal theme of Job, the book's literary arrangement and movement are more discernible and meaningful. By surveying the progression of the various human speeches, including Job's, Middleton identifies seven different responses to the experience of suffering, two of which are protest against God and complaint to God.

Middleton's decisive fourth chapter concentrates on God's response to Job from the whirlwind—in two speeches. Although these speeches are often read as divine responses that effectively put Job in his place, Middleton carefully and creatively constructs a different interpretation in which God both affirms Job as an active (rather than passive and submissive) conversation partner and approves of his honest complaint. "Although it goes against the grain of much traditional Joban scholarship," Middleton muses, "I am impelled to explore the wild possibility that God's speeches might cohere with the explicit approval Job receives in the epilogue to the book" (pp. 106–107). This exploration is conducted by focusing on God's second speech from the whirlwind (Job 40–41), as well as by addressing the question of the reason for a second speech. Although Middleton makes no claim to resolve definitively the meaning of the book of Job, this is a rich and nuanced discussion, with profound insights into the depths of divine delight in the created order and also with significant implications for theological anthropology. Chapter 4 is the central chapter of this book, not only numerically but also functionally because it serves as a thematic fulcrum for considering Abraham's silence in Genesis 22.

In his final three chapters, Middleton turns his attention to Genesis 22, in which Abraham silently acquiesces to God's command to sacrifice his son, Isaac. In Jewish tradition, this story is known as the Aqedah or Binding of Isaac. Middleton's subtitle for part 3 of his book, "Unbinding the Aqedah from the Straitjacket of Tradition," signals his concern to "wrestle a blessing" from a

challenging biblical text and its longstanding history of reception in Jewish and Christian tradition. He opens chapter 5 by articulating three considerations on the basis of which he recoils from merely accepting Abraham's response—or lack thereof—when instructed by God to sacrifice his son: the first is his own understanding of God, though more might have been said about the bases for his view of God (perhaps something along the lines of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience?); the second is biblical precedent for voicing protest to God, as explored in the first two parts of his book; and the third is Abraham's earlier challenging of God's punitive plans in Genesis 18.

Despite these considerations, Middleton first confronts the warnings of two contemporary scholars, Jon Levenson (Jewish) and Walter Moberly (Christian), against presenting negatively critical interpretations of the Aqedah, especially this story's depictions of God and Abraham. Levenson considers that the story of the binding of Isaac reflects a period in Israelite religion when ritual sacrifice of the firstborn was customary, although the end of the story might also reflect a subsequent stage when the life of a firstborn could be spared by substitution. Moreover, both Levenson and Moberly's interpretive engagements with the Aqedah discern continuing relevance in Abraham's attitude of devotion and dedication to God. In Middleton's view, "The attempt by Moberly and Levenson to deflect such criticisms [of God and/or Abraham in Genesis 22] seems to assume that there are only two possible stances toward the Aqedah—either one accepts some version of the traditional interpretation that Abraham is praiseworthy for his obedience or one rejects the authority of the biblical text by standing outside the text and the biblical tradition" (p. 141). By contrast, Middleton's own interpretive engagement with Genesis 22 composes a form of intrabiblical critique—pushing back from a vantage point represented within and informed by the biblical tradition itself. Indeed, he points to a minority pre-modern tradition that problematizes meek acceptance of the Aqedah. "Yet even in the tradition that legitimates protest," according to Middleton, "we do not find any significant questioning of either God's command to Abraham or of Abraham's response to God in Genesis 22" (p. 150). Nevertheless, engaging the rich Jewish tradition of midrash, he suggests that many midrashim on the Aqedah may be understood as interpretive efforts to grapple with two basic questions: "Why would God ask this terrible thing of his faithful servant? and Why didn't Abraham protest or intercede for his son?" (p. 152).

Chapters 6 and 7 present Middleton's own interpretive wrestling with the text of Genesis 22, a close and careful reading attentive to rhetorical subtleties and narrative dynamics but also informed by intertextual resonances with the book of Job. In the first part of chapter 6, the author initially provides his own

fairly literal translation of Genesis 22:1–19, after which he lingers over rhetorical signals easily bypassed on a hasty or superficial reading of this text. Although one might quibble over occasional interpretive judgments—Middleton's view on donkeys, for example, doesn't match my own experience with them—most readers will almost certainly find themselves alerted to dimensions of the story of the binding of Isaac hitherto unnoticed. Patient, attentive exegesis of biblical texts is invariably rewarding—and is certainly so in this case.

After carefully considering "a range of rhetorical signals left by the narrator that complicate a simple reading of the Aqedah" (p. 167), Middleton devotes the second part of chapter 6 to thematic and intertextual connections between Abraham and Job. Having learned the value of reading biblical texts in counterpoint, so to speak, I consider this chapter to be especially eye-opening. In Middleton's words, "It is fascinating that the book of Job contains numerous thematic and intertextual links with the Aqedah and the wider Abraham story, which suggest that the author of Job was gesturing toward the Abraham story, inviting a comparison (and especially a contrast) between the two patriarchs—one gentile, the other the father of the Jewish nation" (p. 183). For the author, the book of Job composes an "implicit critique" (p. 189) of Abraham's silence when confronted with the divine command to sacrifice his son. More than this, however, time spent with both the book of Job and the Aqedah within the larger framework of the story of Abraham as a whole gradually led Middleton to countenance the possibility that the Aqedah itself might also affirm the value and validity of contesting the command of God. The result of that dawning realization is recorded in chapter 7, entitled "Did Abraham Pass the Test?"

Although the Aqedah is often read as a test of Abraham's loyalty and obedience to God, Middleton's contextual exegetical engagement with Genesis 22 leads him to envisage Abraham's test in different terms. Rather than testing Abraham's obedience, God's command to sacrifice Isaac may be read as a probing test of Abraham's insight into the character of God, especially God's mercy and compassion. Middleton supports this alternative interpretation of the Aqedah by examining several important features of Abraham's story as a whole, including narrative indications of Abraham's greater attachment to Ishmael than to Isaac, signals of Abraham's developing relationship with God, the crucial story in Genesis 18 of Abraham's intercession on behalf of Sodom, and what may be inferred about the impact upon Isaac (and through Isaac, Jacob!) of the experience of being bound for sacrifice by his father. This is bounteous exegetical and interpretive fare, and Middleton refuses to shy away from textual details that initially seem problematic to his thesis, as articulated in these words: "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).

Middleton concludes his book by focusing on what he describes as "the gritty spirituality of lament" (p. 227). Here he reflects on reasons for the resurgence of interest in lament and identifies several of his own grounds for affirming the value of lament. For Middleton, lament is psychologically and morally important, and his reflections in these respects are noteworthy. In line with the central thrust of his book, however, perhaps the central significance of lament is theological: "The sine qua non [essential condition] of lament is thus a discernment of the character of God as one who desires and welcomes honesty, even abrasive and audacious honesty" (p. 237).

Abraham's Silence is a book to read, to ponder, and to return to, carefully attending to the wide range of biblical texts discussed. Middleton characterizes this book as his own lament in Abraham's stead, "my grappling with God about Abraham's resounding silence" (p. 240). Perhaps readers will at times see things differently from Middleton himself, but it is difficult to imagine anyone reading this book attentively and coming away without their biblical knowledge deepened, their interpretive horizons stretched, and their theological understanding enhanced.

David Neville
St Mark's, Canberra