

God’s Loyal Opposition: Psalmic and Prophetic Protest as a Paradigm for Faithfulness in the Hebrew Bible¹

J. Richard Middleton
Northeastern Seminary at Roberts Wesleyan College

Abstract

In contrast to the posture of unquestioning submission to God that informs spirituality in many faith traditions, the Hebrew Bible assumes a stance of vigorous protest towards God as normative. This essay investigates the theology underlying the stance of the petitioner in lament/complaint prayers in the Psalter and the prophetic model of intercession on behalf of the people (with Moses as prime exemplar). In light of the background of expostulation with the divine as a mode of faithfulness, the essay briefly addresses the anomalous case of Abraham’s silence in the Aqedah and the possibility that the book of Job might constitute an inner-biblical response, signaled by the use of the term “God-fearer” to characterize both Abraham and Job, and by the phrase “dust and ashes” found on the lips of both (and nowhere else in the Bible).

Personal experience is often generative of hermeneutical questions. In my case, a time of darkness regarding my vocation, and even my purpose, combined with doubt about God’s goodness, led to the discovery of the psalms of lament in the Bible.

The Significance of Lament Prayer in the Bible

These psalms, comprising perhaps as much as one-third of the Psalter (on some counts), are the dominant form of prayer in the book of Psalms, indeed, the dom-

1 Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies, Calgary, AB, May 2016, and in the Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures program unit of the Society of Biblical Literature, San Antonio, TX, November 2016.

inant genre of psalm.² It was the darkest of such psalms, the eighty-eighth, which precipitated a re-awakening of faith.

Psalm 88 as a Door to Hope

Most individual laments (which are more common in the Psalter than communal laments) are composed of sub-genres such as *complaint* (an honest description of what has gone wrong), *confession of trust* (an affirmation of the prior goodness of God), *petition* (the psalmist's request, even demand, that God intervene), and *vow of praise* (a commitment to respond appropriately after the intervention). However, Ps 88 is one of a few that omits the vow of praise. Since the psalm contains no explicit expectation of God's intervention, this would seem to be a prayer devoid of hope.³ Yet that appearance would be deceptive.

Although Ps 88 is dominated by complaint, with no articulated expectation of God's intervention, and only one slender confession of trust near the start (where the psalmist names YHWH "God of my salvation"; Ps 88:2 [Eng. 1]), I found this psalm generative of hope.⁴

First, the psalm's articulation of darkness was appropriate to express the depths of my own experience. Anything more explicitly hopeful might have seemed Pollyannaish. And having prayed Ps 88 (and meditated upon its words), I found my own faith beginning to be reawakened. Indeed, it began to undergo a process of deepening.

This reawakening and deepening is certainly related to the sense of being part of a community, stretching back in time, of others who had analogous experiences to my own. Psalm 88 proved I wasn't alone.

Beyond joining the community of lament, hope was generated by the very presence (indeed, dominance) of this form of address to God in the prayer book of Israel and the Church. Given the status of this text as Scripture among believers, lament prayer could be taken as a normative model or paradigm that was serviceable in approaching God. This psalm (and the presence of other laments in the Psalter) gave me permission to articulate pain and need to God, to question God's goodness, and even to accuse God of complicity in my disorientation.

2 See Appendix B: "Index of Psalms According to Type" (219–24), in Bernhard W. Anderson, with Stephen Bishop, *Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak to Us Today*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 2000 [1983]).

3 For an in-depth study of Ps 88, see Anthony R. Pyles, "Drowning in the Depths of Darkness: A Consideration of Psalm 88 with a New Translation," *Canadian Theological Review* 1/2 (2012): 13–28.

4 Unless otherwise noted, quotations from the Bible will be from the NRSV (one departure from such translations is that the tetragrammaton will be rendered as YHWH). All italics in biblical quotations are my own emphases.

The Divine-Human Relationship Assumed in Lament Prayer

The presence and number of laments in the Psalter suggests that, in the consciousness of ancient Israel, God desires such prayer. Thus, beyond the sense of joining in an ancient community of lament, and beyond the modeling of such prayer in the canonical text, part of the empowerment of lament prayer may come from the divine-human relationship that it assumes.

As feminist theologian Cynthia Rigby proposes, in her essay on Ps 22, it may be the experience of having been heard by a *Thou* who is the transcendent Creator of the universe that emboldens the one praying. Rigby describes women in refugee camps in Latin America who pour their hearts out to God in classic lament prayer (combining complaint, trust, and petition). She notes that after prayer these very women are energized by hope and proceed to organize sanitation, childcare, and medical treatment for others in the refugee camp. That the Lord of the universe would host (even welcome) prayers that express pain and need, is what ultimately generates hope, and, with it, energy for creative living in the human community.⁵

The Honesty of Lament Prayer

Lament prayer, whether in the Psalter or elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, thus contains an implicit theological claim, namely, that God desires and welcomes honesty in the divine-human relationship. This honesty is evident in two parallel dual-pronged prayers of Jeremiah and Habakkuk.

Thus Jeremiah first affirms what is supposed to be true of God: “You will be in the right, YHWH, / when I lay charges against you.” Then he supplements this affirmation with a complaint: “but let me put my case to you. / Why does the way of the guilty prosper? / Why do all who are treacherous thrive?” (Jer 12:1). Similarly, Habakkuk first confesses to God: “Your eyes are too pure to behold evil, / and you cannot look on wrongdoing” But then he boldly goes on to ask: “why do you look on the treacherous, / and are silent when the wicked swallow those more righteous than they?” (Hab 1:13). Both these prophets first acknowledge what is believed to be true of the God of Israel (equivalent to the confession of trust in the lament psalms); they then follow this up with a complaint, in the form of questions (which is also typical of lament psalms).

But as Ps 22 indicates, it is possible to begin immediately with complaint: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Likewise, Jeremiah’s prayer in 20:7–18 opens with the accusation: “YHWH, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; / you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed.” And Ps 88 exhibits an un-

5 Cynthia L. Rigby, “Someone to Blame, Someone to Trust: Divine Power and the Self-Recovery of the Oppressed,” in *Power, Powerlessness and the Divine: New Inquiries in Bible and Theology*, ed. Cynthia L. Rigby (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 79–102.

relenting focus on complaint, implicating God personally in the suffering: “You have put me in the depths of the Pit, / in the regions dark and deep” (Ps 88:7 [Eng. 6]). “I suffer your terrors; I am desperate. / Your wrath has swept over me; / your dread assaults destroy me” (Ps 88:16b–17 [Eng. 15b–16]).

It is certainly not theologically correct to accuse God of evil. The question is, however, what to do with such thoughts in the case of one committed to YHWH. Thus the author of Psalm 39 begins by recounting his initial reticence, even refusal, to pray; and then goes on to explain the reason: “I was silent; I would not open my mouth, / for it is you who have done it” (Ps 39:10; [Eng. 9]; NRSV adapted). And such speech seemed improper. Yet in his newfound boldness, he petitions God: “Remove your stroke from me; / I am worn down by the blows of your hand” (Ps 39:11; [Eng. 10]). And the psalm ends with the audacious request: “Turn your gaze away from me, that I may smile again” (Ps 39:14; [Eng. 13]).

The Expectation of God’s Action in Lament Prayer

Not all lament prayers are as abrasive as Pss 88 and 39. Yet all laments call on God to intervene in some way. Granted, petition or supplication is mentioned in only one verse of Ps 88 (verse 3 [Eng. 2]). And neither Ps 88 nor Ps 39 contains a concluding vow of praise. Yet both psalms contain the implicit hope of God acting in accordance with the deepest needs of the psalmist.⁶ The very point of voicing the complaint is to have God change the situation, to receive succor (in some form). In speech act theory, lament might be called an illocutionary speech act (which highlights the *intentions* of the speaker often beyond what is explicitly stated) with perlocutionary effects (which focuses on the *effect* of the speech on another party).⁷

The watchword of lament prayer is thus well articulated in the words of Joel 2:32. “Everyone who calls on the name of YHWH shall be saved.” That these words are quoted by Peter on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2:21, and by Paul in Rom 10:13, suggests that lament, in the form of supplication, also finds a home in the New Testament.⁸

6 Psalm 39 contains at least seven explicit petitions, in the form of imperatives to God: Deliver me from my transgressions (v. 9); do not make me the scorn of the fool (v. 9); remove your stroke from me (v. 11); hear my prayer (v. 13); give ear to my cry (v. 13); do not hold your peace at my tears (v. 13); turn your gaze away from me (v. 14). Verse numbering is from the Hebrew.

7 Although some have tried to restrict the application of speech act theory to oral discourse (claiming that it is inapplicable to written texts), there has been a significant movement against this restriction. Steven T. Mann not only argues for the application of speech act theory to written biblical materials, but shows the usefulness of such analysis in *Run David Run: An Investigation of the Theological Speech Acts of David’s Departure and Return (2 Samuel 14–20)*, Siphut 10 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013). See ch. 3 for his explicit argument, which includes interaction with the previous discussion, including other biblical scholars who have fruitfully applied speech act theory to biblical texts.

8 Patrick D. Miller, *They Cried Unto the Lord: The Form and Theology of Biblical Prayer* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1994) shows that lament continues into the New Testament, esp. in ch. 3: “‘They Cried to You’: Prayers for Help.” Although the focus of that chapter is the Old

Jesus's Teaching on Prayer

This is nowhere more evident than in the Lord's prayer, taught by Jesus as a model for his disciples (Matt 6:9–13; Luke 11:2–4). This prayer is constituted purely by supplication or petition from start to finish (this excludes the doxology added in later manuscripts to Matt 6:13 and used in the church's liturgy). Although the opening petitions are explicitly God-oriented (“may your name be sanctified,” “may your kingdom come,” “may your will be done on earth as in heaven”), such petitions are not purely disinterested, since the granting of them will positively affect the supplicant, who is associated with God's name and lives on earth.⁹ And the prayer continues with requests for daily bread, forgiveness, preservation from testing, and deliverance from evil—all of which affirm the legitimacy of articulating human needs to God.

This focus on petition is congruent with two parables about prayer ascribed to Jesus, both of which fit the pattern of biblical laments.

In the parable of the importunate widow (Luke 18:1–8), prayer is compared to a widow who badgers a judge who has refused to give her justice (presumably because she is a relatively powerless person, without much status or influence). Her boldness and persistence in bringing her case to the judge until he enacts the justice due her is analogous, says Jesus, to the steadfastness (and I would add, audaciousness) required in asking God to meet our needs.

In the parable of the friend at midnight (Luke 11:5–8), prayer is compared to knocking on the door of a neighbor's house late into the night in order to ask for food to feed a visitor. The persistence required to get the neighbor to come to the door at that hour is analogous, says Jesus, to the steadfastness (and also the audaciousness) required in intercessory prayer.¹⁰

Both of these parables about prayer combine complaint with petition or supplication—the articulation of need with a request for help. The combination of humility and boldness required for such prayer is fundamentally an expression of trust in God (and leads to further trust, when practiced regularly).

Jesus himself embodies the lament tradition on the cross (Matt 27:46), when he prays Ps 22 from the depths of his suffering (“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”). But his lament prayer began earlier, in Gethsemane before his arrest. That Jesus can both honestly express his desire not to die (“Father, . . . re-

Testament, Miller cites dimensions of lament in the New Testament. He continues the discussion in ch. 10: “‘Teach Us to Pray’: The Further Witness of the New Testament.”

9 The translations of the petitions in Matt 6:9–10 are my own. Thanks to Rev. David Biberstein for his profound teaching on the Lord's Prayer when he was my pastor during my undergraduate theological studies in Jamaica.

10 This parable follows immediately on the Lukan version of the Lord's Prayer and is itself followed by the exhortation to ask, seek, and knock, with the assurance that God wants to give his children good gifts (Luke 11:9–13 par. Matt 7:7–11).

move this cup from me”), yet still affirm submission to God’s purposes (“not my will but yours be done”) suggests the requisite combination of boldness and trust characteristic of lament (Luke 22:42).¹¹

Lament Prayer is Grounded in Trust in God

Whether or not such prayers (in the Psalter or elsewhere) explicitly include a confession of trust, it is clear they *depend implicitly* on such trust. The child of an abusive parent, cowering in the corner of a room, would not typically protest that parent’s behavior or ask the parent to act differently. It takes a high degree of trust for a child honestly to voice criticism of a parent—whether that criticism is voiced in anger or only tremulously. The *sine qua non* of lament is thus a discernment of the character of God as one who desires and welcomes honesty, even abrasive and audacious honesty. This discernment may *motivate* one to pray with boldness. Or this discernment may *result* from the experience of such prayer (as was true in my case).¹²

In contrast to the posture of unquestioning submission to God that informs spirituality in many faith traditions (including the Christian tradition in which I was raised), the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament (and even the New Testament) assumes a stance of honesty toward God in prayer as normative; and such honesty often borders on vigorous protest. The God of the Bible desires a dialogue partner with *chutzpah*.¹³

Lament and Healthy Ego Development

It is all too common in many churches that I have had experience of for believers to have absorbed the view that they must accept all calamities as the will of God and many think that they must suffer in silence or even affirm God’s role in the calamities. But this stance of absolute submission to the divine will can be problematic.

The value of lament, with its boldness (and even resistance) toward God, not

11 For an in-depth exploration of lament in the New Testament, see Rebekah Ann Eklund, *Jesus Wept: The Significance of Jesus’ Laments in the New Testament*, Library of New Testament Studies 515 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015).

12 Beyond my discovery of lament prayer in a time of personal darkness, years later I twice participated in a week of communal academic study shaped by Christian liturgy where a lament psalm was integrated into both morning and evening prayers. The *effect* of this regular hearing of words addressing God with the psalmist’s troubles was to generate a deep sense of gratitude for God’s attentiveness and mercy. My thanks to the Colossian Forum for these liturgical experiences in summer 2013 and 2014, which kicked off a multidisciplinary project published as *Evolution and the Fall*, ed. William T. Cavanaugh and James K. A. Smith (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017).

13 Belden C. Lane explores a Christian appreciation of the Jewish tradition of boldness in prayer in “*Hutzpa K’lapei Shamaya: A Christian Response to the Jewish Tradition of Arguing with God*,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 23 (1986): 567–86. Lane speaks of “an audacious faith, almost bordering on insolence” that is “especially prevalent in the rarefied air above Mt. Sinai” (567). The next section of this essay will address Mt. Sinai and the figure of Moses, who best exemplifies the attitude of “boldness towards heaven” (the *Hutzpa K’lapei Shamaya* of Lane’s title).

as an alternative to submission, but in addition to submission, is illustrated by the account of personality development known as Object-Relations Theory, propounded by D. W. Winnicott and others. This theory suggests that the healthy ego-development of a child occurs when that child is first bonded in physical intimacy with its mother, which is the prime example of submission or surrender to a genuine Other outside of the self—hence the name Object-Relations Theory. Without this bonding, a child never learns to trust; and trust is essential both to healthy relationships in general and to the religious life in particular.

But Winnicott suggests that along with surrender, healthy ego-development also needs the experience of the child's *initiative* vis-à-vis the mother, to which the mother is responsive. She uses the metaphor of the child's experience of "omnipotence," which may be an overstatement, but it gets the point across. "A true self," Winnicott notes, "begins to have life through the strength given to the infant's weak ego by the mother's implementation of the infant's omnipotent expressions."¹⁴ If the mother always initiates, and the child is simply compliant, it does not develop a strong ego, but rather a "false self," which then exposes the child later in life to the manipulations of others, including ideologies and fundamentalisms.

To apply this to the life of faith, let me cite Walter Brueggemann's words: "Where there is lament, the believer is able to take initiative with God and so develop over against God the ego-strength that is necessary for responsible faith. But where the capacity to initiate lament is absent, one is left only with praise and doxology. God then is omnipotent, always to be praised. The believer is nothing."¹⁵ He goes on to note that: "The absence of lament makes a religion of coercive obedience the only possibility."¹⁶

This model of vigorous human agency vis-à-vis God, as a dialectic of resistance and submission, is well illustrated by Jesus as he contemplates his own death, and pleads, "Father, . . . remove this cup from me" (resistance), yet affirms "not my will but yours be done" (submission).

Prophetic Intercession in the Old Testament

God's desire for a vigorous dialogue partner is evident, beyond the lament psalms, in prophetic prayers of intercession, pre-eminently in the case of Moses (regarded as the paradigmatic prophet). Intercession is related to lament as *one particular form* of such prayer, one that is characterized by supplication or petition *on behalf of another*.

14 D. W. Winnicott, *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development* (Madison, WI: International Universities Press, 1965), 145.

15 Walter Brueggemann, "The Costly Loss of Lament," in *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, ed. Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 103.

16 Brueggemann, "The Costly Loss of Lament," 104.

Moses's Intercession at Horeb

The paradigmatic episode of Moses's intercession is his prayer at Horeb on behalf of the people in the aftermath of the golden calf in Exod 32–34.¹⁷

Particularly important for our purposes is that it is *God* who initiates the move toward intercession. God signals to Moses that he is angry with the people for their idolatry, which constitutes a breach of the covenant (the second commandment had prohibited constructing and worshipping an image, even of YHWH, which seems to have been the function of the calf). However, God is not yet angry enough to destroy them. So he (somewhat ironically) tells Moses to leave him alone so that his anger may grow sufficiently for that purpose (Exod 32:9), which gives Moses the dialogical space to intercede for the people.

In a series of intercessions,¹⁸ Moses persuades God not to destroy the people (Exod 32:11–13), with the result that God changes his mind (or “repents”) of the evil he had planned (32:14). Moses then persuades God to forgive (or bear with) their sin (32:31–32) so that the covenant relationship can be maintained, and he convinces God to accompany them on the wilderness journey instead of simply sending an angel (33:12–17; 34:8–9), which is portrayed as a distancing tactic due to God's anger, since this anger might break out if the divine presence were too near (33:2–3).

Finally, Moses asks to see God's glory (33:18).¹⁹ And God accedes to Moses's request, telling him that all God's *goodness* (which seems to be a variant of *glory*) will pass before him, with the caveat that he cannot see this manifestation full on (God's “face”). So God will place Moses in a cleft of the rock face of the mountain and cover him so he sees God's “back” (33:19–23).

What is revealed about the meaning of the divine name YHWH in Exod 34:6–7, when God “passed before” Moses, is God's abundance of love (*hesed*) and compassion (*reḥem*), including the desire to forgive all categories of sin (while still bringing judgment for such sin). This summary of the divine character turns out to be the ground and basis for God inviting Moses's intercession in the first place.

17 For classic studies of this key text, see R. W. L. Moberly, *At the Mountain of God: Story and Theology in Exodus 32–34*, JSOTSup 22 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1983); and Michael Widmer, *Moses, God, and the Dynamics of Intercessory Prayer: A Study of Exodus 32–34 and Numbers 13–14*, FAT 2 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004). Interestingly, while the first volume (above) was Moberly's doctoral thesis, the second was Widmer's, doctoral thesis, written under the supervision of Moberly. Widmer has also addressed Exod 32–34 in his more recent *Standing in the Breach: An Old Testament Theology and Spirituality of Intercessory Prayer*, Siphut 13 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015), ch. 3.

18 There are four, possibly five different intercessory prayers in Exod 32–34, depending how they are counted; multiple sources have evidently been used in this composite account.

19 I won't get into the debates about whether (and in what way) *kābôd* refers to God's “body.” For that discussion, see Benjamin D. Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); and Mark S. Smith, “The Three Bodies of God in the Hebrew Bible,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 134/3 (2015): 471–88.

Yet, while such intercession is made possible by God's gracious character, we should not downplay Moses's role, which is highlighted in Ps 106:23. "Therefore he [YHWH] said he would destroy them— / had not Moses, his chosen one, / stood in the breach before him, / to turn away his wrath from destroying them" (Ps 106:23).

Later, in Num 14, Moses will appeal to precisely what he learned about God from this disclosure at Horeb, when he cites God's mercy and forgiveness in his prayer for the people after they refuse to enter the land at Kadesh-Barnea (Num 14:13–19). And just as at Horeb, God again forgives their sin (14:20).²⁰ And there are other narrative accounts of Moses's continuing role of successful intercessor before YHWH on behalf of Israel during the wilderness journey.

As Rabbi Johanan is reported to have said (in *Bereshit Rosh HaShanah* 17b) about the revelation of God's character in Exod 34:

Were it not written in the text, it would be impossible for us to say such a thing; this verse teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, drew his robe round Him like the reader of a congregation and showed Moses the order of prayer. He said to him: Whenever Israel sins, let them carry out this service before Me, and I will forgive them.²¹

The Prophetic Tradition of Intercession after Moses

Not only did Moses learn this lesson, but intercession becomes part of the prophetic tradition, as various prophets stand in the breach between God and the people, bringing a divine word of challenge and repentance to the people *while defending them before God in prayer*, trying to avert judgment for as long as possible. As Mark Boda puts it with reference to Hosea: "the prophet functions mediatorially, challenging both covenant partners, whether Yahweh (9:14) or the people (14:3b–4 [Eng. 2b–3])."²² And in association with prayers embedded in the first chapter

20 Psalm 51 also appeals (indirectly) to the paradigmatic example of God's forgiveness in Exod 32–34. For analysis of specific language from Exod 34:6–7 that the psalm uses, see J. Richard Middleton, "A Psalm against David? A Canonical Reading of Psalm 51 as a Critique of David's Inadequate Repentance in 2 Samuel 12," chap. 2 in *Explorations in Interdisciplinary Reading: Theological, Exegetical, and Reception-Historical Perspectives*, ed. by Robbie F. Castleman, Darian R. Lockett, and Stephen O. Presley (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2017), 26–45.

21 *The Babylonian Talmud: Seder Mo'ed*, ed. and trans. Isidore Epstein (London: Soncino, 1938), 4:68. This midrash is based on (among other things) the statement in the text that God "passed before" Moses (in later Rabbinic tradition a person leading prayers was said to "pass before" the leader's stand).

22 Mark J. Boda, "A Deafening Call to Silence: The Rhetorical 'End' of Human Address to the Deity in the Book of the Twelve," chap. 9 in *The New Form Criticism and the Book of the Twelve*, ed. Mark J. Boda, Michael H. Floyd, and Colin M. Toffelmire, ANEM 10 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2015), 187 (entire article 183–204). This was Boda's 2014 presidential address to the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies.

of Joel, Boda explains the sort of divine-human relationship that is assumed: “For the readers of this prophetic book these words [referring to Joel 1:15a, 19–20; 2:17] are reminders that the deity is open to hearing the verbal response of the community.”²³

Indeed, Jeremiah is so persistent in pleading for the very people that he has been challenging with the prophetic word, that God has finally to tell him *not* to intercede any more (Jer 7:16; 11:14; 14:11; cf. 15:1), since the people are too far-gone and judgment has become inevitable (in the form of the approaching Babylonian armies). Intercession is so crucial to the prophetic vocation that Ezek 13:5 lists *lack* of intercession as part of the accusation against false prophets (Ezek 13:1-16), while in Ezek 22:30, YHWH laments: “I sought for anyone among them who would repair the wall and stand in the breach before me on behalf of the land, so that I would not destroy it; but I found no one.”

This prophetic role, traceable back to Moses, is described by George Coats in a famous 1977 essay as “The King’s Loyal Opposition.”²⁴ A similar phrase shows up in Woody Allen’s movie *Stardust Memories* (1980), where Allen’s character quips: “To you, I’m an atheist. To God, I’m the loyal opposition.”²⁵ The case of Moses and the prophets, combined with the lament psalms, shows that such opposition is not automatically a form of atheism, but may well be a mode of faithfulness to the God of Israel.²⁶

Elijah as Anti-Moses

In the light of the tradition of prophetic prayer, Elijah’s refusal to intercede for the people after the Mt. Carmel episode stands out in high relief.

Having defeated the prophets of Baal in the famous contest (1 Kgs 18:20–40),

23 Boda, “A Deafening Call to Silence,” 191. Without claiming that all Old Testament prophets engaged in intercession, Boda’s nuanced literary reading of the Book of the Twelve, in tandem with Michael Widmer’s previously cited *Standing in the Breach*, shows that intercession was indeed a significant part of prophetic activity in the Bible. For an alternative position, see Samuel E. Ballentine, “The Prophet as Intercessor: A Reassessment,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 103/2 (1984): 161–73.

24 George W. Coats, “The King’s Loyal Opposition: Obedience and Authority in Exodus 32–34,” in *Canon and Authority: Essays in Old Testament Religion and Theology*, ed. Burke O. Long and George W. Coats (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 91–107.

25 These words are spoken by Woody Allen’s character (Sandy Bates) in Allen’s autobiographical movie, *Stardust Memories* (1980).

26 The sort of vigorous prayer exemplified in psalmic lament and prophetic intercession is grounded in nothing less than the character and promises of God. Thus Coats highlights that in the case of Moses’s plea for YHWH not to destroy the people in Exodus 32, “the intercession intends to persuade God to pursue the initial aim, to act in consistency with his own promise” (Coats, “The King’s Loyal Opposition,” 98). Similarly, Samuel E. Ballentine speaks of lament as “Holding to God against God”; Ballentine, *Prayer in the Hebrew Bible: The Drama of Divine-Human Dialogue*, OBT (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), 146. And Claus Westermann describes Job’s lament as follows: “He clings to God against God”; Westermann, “The Role of Lament in the Theology of the Old Testament,” *Interpretation* 27/1 (1974): 32 (entire article 20–38).

Elijah then flees for his life before a threat from Jezebel (1 Kgs 19:1–3). When he arrives in the wilderness near Beersheba he prays that he might die (19:4). Sustained by an angel with food for the journey to Horeb, he arrives forty days later and spends the night in a cave (19:5–9a). To be in a cave at Horeb already begins to have resonances of Exod 34.²⁷

Twice God asks him: “What are doing you *here*, Elijah?” (1 Kgs 19:9b and 13b). That is, why are you at Horeb? And twice Elijah gives the same reply. “I have been very zealous for YHWH, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. *I alone am left*, and they are seeking my life, to take it away” (1 Kgs 19:10 and 14).

Moses, by associating himself with the people, despite their idolatry, refused to allow God to destroy Israel and begin again with him (Exod 32:10–14, 31–32; Num 14:12–20).²⁸ Elijah, however, *disassociates* himself from the people (“I alone am left”), thus opening the way for their destruction. Indeed, Elijah’s myopic vision has to be corrected by God, who explains that there are *seven thousand* who have not bowed the knee to Baal (1 Kgs 19:18) and who will therefore be spared destruction—but not because of Elijah’s intercession, which is simply absent.²⁹

But there is another, equally significant contrast between Moses and Elijah in the two episodes at Horeb. Right after Elijah’s first response of “I alone am left” (19:10), God tells him to “come out” of the cave “and stand on the mountain before YHWH” because God is about to “pass by” (19:11), a clear allusion to God causing his goodness to “pass by” in Exod 33:19.

I won’t get into the issue of how to translate *qôl dēmāmā daqqā* (whether “a still small voice” [KJV], “a soft murmuring sound” [NJPS], “a gentle whisper” [NIV]), or “a sound of sheer silence” [NRSV]). The point is that God was present in a mode different from the theophany at Sinai that Moses witnessed (that one had been accompanied by fire, earthquake, and storm).

But beyond the difference in the manifestation of God’s presence, we find contrasting attitudes of Moses and Elijah to the event. In the first case *Moses* is the one who asked God to show him his glory, and God placed him in a cleft of the rock. But not only does *God* initiate the manifestation of his presence to Elijah, God tells him to come *out* from the cave. And when Elijah hears the *qôl dēmāmā daqqā*, which signified YHWH presence, he did come out, at least to the *entrance* of the cave, but “he wrapped his face in his mantle” (1 Kgs 19:13), in essence averting his eyes.

Could Elijah’s lack of intercession for the people be related to his inability to

27 We are not told why he is going to Horeb, or whether it was by his decision or at God’s instruction.

28 In Exod 33:16 Moses twice uses the phrase “I and your people,” to make it clear he stands with the people.

29 YHWH does not bother to correct Elijah that it was Jezebel, and not the Israelites, who had thrown down his altars.

face God? Moses, after all, was one to whom God spoke “face to face,” as one speaks to a friend (Exod 33:11).³⁰ Elijah, it turns out, lacked the requisite boldness to stand up either to Jezebel or to YHWH. Thus he is decommissioned from being a prophet, and told to appoint a successor, the only prophet ever given such instructions.³¹

The requisite boldness in approaching God is addressed in a ninth-century Rabbinic midrash that recounts the Queen of Sheba testing Solomon for his wisdom. In one of the tests she devises, “Solomon must distinguish between Israelites and non-Israelites in a homogeneous-looking group. To do so, he rolls back the curtains of the Holy of Holies to reveal before their eyes the ark of God. The non-Israelites prostrate themselves face-down entirely, but the Israelites bow at the waist *so they can crane their necks and see*.”³²

Based on this midrash, Moses is the true Israelite, while Elijah’s reticence may be thought of as falling short of the Israelite ideal.

Abraham in Genesis 18 and 22

In contrast to Elijah’s reticence we have the example of Abraham’s bold intercession with YHWH in Gen 18, where he pleads on behalf of the inhabitants of Sodom, motivated (implicitly) by the fact that Abraham’s nephew Lot is living there.³³ This episode of intercession prompts YHWH to tell Abimelech two chapters later that Abraham “is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you shall live” (Gen 20:7).³⁴

Abraham’s prophet-like intercession on behalf of Lot/Sodom is the longest episode of his verbal interaction with God recorded in Genesis (18:16–33), and the subsequent rescue of Lot from Sodom (Gen 19) is one of the longest narratives in the Abraham story.³⁵ The significance of this extraordinary episode corres-

30 And according to Num 12:8, God and Moses speak “mouth to mouth” (my translation).

31 On Elijah’s failure at Horeb in the context of the prophet’s dual loyalty (to God and the people), see Reuven Kimelman, “Prophecy as Arguing with God and the Ideal of Justice,” *Interpretation* 68 (2014): 17–27 (esp. 25–26). For a consideration of the larger context of the proper attitude of anyone who would enter the divine presence and “see God” (namely, proper boldness combined with genuine humility), see Simeon Chavel, “The Face of God and the Etiquette of Eye-Contact: Visitation, Pilgrimage, and Prophetic Vision in Ancient Israelite and Early Jewish Imagination,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 19 (2012): 1–55 (p. 38 on Elijah).

32 Chavel, “The Face of God and the Etiquette of Eye-Contact,” 52 (emphasis added). This episode is found in *Midrash Mishle*. See Burton L. Visotzky, *The Midrash on Proverbs: Translated from the Hebrew, with an Introduction and Annotations*, YJS 27 (New York; London: Yale University Press, 1992), 19.

33 The issue in the case of Abraham is the boldness required to address (and even challenge) God, not simply to “see” God or stand in the divine presence (God often appears in ordinary human form in the Genesis stories).

34 Interestingly, Abimelech uses language similar to Abraham’s when he asks: “Lord, will you destroy an innocent [*sadiq*] people?” (Gen 20:4). Abraham had asked: “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous [*sadiq*] with the wicked?” (Gen 18:23).

35 Only the story of the finding of a wife for Isaac is longer (Gen 24).

ponds in an important way to the story of Moses's intercession after the idolatry of the golden calf.

A Teaching Moment for Abraham

When God tells Moses to leave him alone so that he may become angry enough to destroy the people, this serves to create space for Moses to intercede on their behalf; and the story ends with Moses learning about YHWH's mercy. This learning opportunity in Exod 32 is prefigured in Gen 18, where three "men" visit Abraham's camp and predict that Sarah will have a son. Two of the "men" (angels, it turns out) depart for Sodom, while the third, which turns out to be YHWH himself, remains, for he has something he wants to tell Abraham.

God muses to himself: "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?" (Gen 18:17)—that is, concerning the cry of Sodom that has come to him. And God decides to inform Abraham of this cry in order that "he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of YHWH by doing righteousness and justice" (Gen 18:18–19).

When God tells Abraham that he is going down to see if the cry he has heard from Sodom demands judgment (if not, I will know; Gen 18:20–21), Abraham over-interprets this to mean that God has already decided to destroy the city (where Lot is living).³⁶ No doubt this is partly due to the reputation of Sodom (already alluded to in Gen 13:10; and 14:21–24); but it is also likely due to Abraham's assumptions about the character of God, and what constitutes God's righteousness and justice.

But note, this is precisely what God wants to teach Abraham by revealing his intentions about Sodom. So if Abraham is to be equipped to instruct his children and his household in "the way of YHWH" so they will do "righteousness and justice," this means that Abraham must first *himself* be instructed in God's righteous ways. As with Moses at Horeb, the opportunity for intercession is a teaching moment for Abraham.³⁷

What Is Revealed by God's Responses to Abraham?

Abraham does, indeed, intercede on Sodom's behalf, upbraiding God for unjustly planning to destroy the righteous or innocent with the wicked; he challenges God

36 For a lucid analysis of Abraham's misread of the situation, see Nathan MacDonald, "Listening to Abraham—Listening to Yhwh: Divine Justice and Mercy in Genesis 18:16–33," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 66 (2004): 25–43.

37 The "way of YHWH" that God wants Abraham to learn, so that he may teach his children and household, could be read in light of Exod 32:8, where YHWH tells Moses that in constructing the calf the people "have turned aside from *the way* which I commanded them" (referring to the moral path they should have taken); it could also be read in light of Moses's request to God in Exod 33:13 to "show me *your ways*" (which, in context, are ways of mercy).

despite being, as he puts it, merely “dust and ashes” (Gen 18:27). In a series of requests, that God save the city, initially for the sake of fifty righteous, which he eventually ratchets down to ten (as his last offer), Abraham tests the extent of God’s mercy; and God accedes to each request (Gen 18:23–33).

As Jer 5:1 suggests, God would forestall destruction of the city for just *one* righteous person. That Abraham stops at ten, however, suggests that he hasn’t fully plumbed the depths of divine mercy.³⁸ Nevertheless, God rescues Lot and his family (Gen 19:12–23), even though Abraham hadn’t thought to ask for that outright.

Abraham’s Strange Silence in Genesis 22

Given the pervasive understanding of vigorous prayer in the Hebrew Scriptures as normative for God’s dialogue partners—which grounds the boldness of the psalmists in their laments and the intercessory prayers of the prophets—it is striking to encounter Abraham’s lack of protest when God asks him to sacrifice his son in the famous story of the Aqedah (Gen 22:1–19).³⁹ Against the background of lament and intercession (which I have termed “God’s Loyal Opposition”), Abraham’s silence stands out as anomalous. This raises the obvious hermeneutical question (obvious given this background): Why doesn’t Abraham lament over—or intercede for—his son Isaac, in the wake of God’s instruction to sacrifice him in Gen 22:2? *There*, in the Aqedah, is a “deafening silence,” if there ever was one.⁴⁰

Whereas Elijah in 1 Kgs 19 is differentiated from Moses, Abraham in Gen 22 stands in contrast not only with Moses but also with his own prior intercession on behalf of Sodom in Gen 18. Abraham’s silent and unquestioning attempt to sacrifice his own son, broken only by the single word *Hinnēnnī* (“Here I am”) addressed to God (once before the command in Gen 12:1, once after the command is rescinded in 22:11), seems to be validated by the angel’s announcement on behalf of YHWH: “now I know that you are a God-fearer” (Gen 22:12).⁴¹

From Abraham to Job

This (seeming) approval of Abraham’s attempt to sacrifice his son stands in stark contrast to Job, who is certainly not silent vis-à-vis God, but who vocally protests his suffering.⁴² That the term “God-fearer” is applied to both Abraham and Job

38 Contra the speculations of commentators in the literature about why he couldn’t go lower than ten.

39 Sometimes called the (near) sacrifice of Isaac in the Christian tradition, this story is known in the Jewish tradition as the *Aqedat Yitzak* (the Binding of Isaac) or simply as the *Aqedah* (the Binding), from the verb *’āqad* in Gen 22:9.

40 Playing with the title of Boda’s article, “A Deafening Call to Silence.”

41 My translation.

42 Abraham could also be contrasted with the midwives in Exod 1:17, who “feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they *let the boys live*.” The irony in juxtaposing these two texts is that God in Genesis 22 seems to be parallel to Pharaoh—which is jarring. If God

(Gen 22:12; Job 1:1, 8; 2:3) suggests a possible intertextual connection between them.⁴³ Beyond that, the significance of the phrase “dust and ashes,” which occurs in the Bible *only* on the lips of Abraham and Job (Gen 18:27; Job 30:19; 42:6), calls for analysis of the relationship between Abraham’s silence and Job’s protest—and this does not even touch on the other intertextual connections between Abraham and Job that could be explored.⁴⁴

These intertextual connections have led me to wonder, for some time now, whether the book of Job could be thought of as a commentary on Abraham, intentionally juxtaposing Abraham’s ominous silence in Gen 22 with Job’s vigorous speech toward God, which receives divine approval at the end of the book (Job 42:7–8).⁴⁵ Having previously tried out, in various scholarly settings, my own interpretations of the meaning of the Aqedah⁴⁶ and of God’s response to Job,⁴⁷ this present paper lays a foundation for a new project comparing Job with the Aqedah in the light of the biblical background of vigorous expostulation with God.⁴⁸

Given the biblical background of the sort of vigorous prayer that God desires (exemplified especially by Moses), perhaps we could end with a hypothetical (but heuristic) question: Suppose *Moses* had received the command to sacrifice his son? I wonder what *his* response might have been?

is acting (or seems to be acting) like Pharaoh, then the one praying can be thought of as “God’s loyal opposition.” But Abraham does not protest.

- 43 The term “God-fearer” (*yĕrē’ ’ēlohīm*) is less common in the Hebrew Bible than the general idea of fearing God, though even that idea would constitute a significant intertextual link between Abraham and Job. Besides its usage in connection with Abraham and Job, the specific phrase *yĕrē’ ’ēlohīm* (with *yr’* pointed as an adjective) is found only in Eccl 7:18. The term “YHWH-fearer” is likewise rare, occurring in only five places (Ps 25:12; 128:1, 4; Prov 14:2; Isa 50:10).
- 44 For further intertextual connections, see Middleton, “Does God Come to Bury Job or to Praise Him? The Significance of YHWH’s Second Speech from the Whirlwind,” *St. Mark’s Review* no. 239 (March 2017): 1-27. Also Judy Klitsner, *Subversive Sequels in the Bible: How Biblical Stories Mine and Undermine Each Other* (New Milford, CT, London, and Jerusalem: Koren Publishers; Maggid Books, 2001), xvii–xxxiii.
- 45 That Job might be a commentary on the Aqedah has been suggested by Klitsner in *Subversive Sequels in the Bible* and also in her later (2016) online article, “The Book of Job and its Paradoxical Relationship with the *Akedah*” (<http://thetorah.com/the-book-of-job-and-its-paradoxical-relationship-with-the-akedah/>). My own approach to the relationship between Job’s lament and Abraham’s silence is quite different from Klitsner’s, judging by her (admittedly brief) comments.
- 46 To be published as “Unbinding the Aqedah from the Straightjacket of Tradition: An Inner-Biblical Interpretation of Abraham’s Test in Genesis 22,” in *Lament Rekindled*, ed. Matthew Anstey, Jeanette Matthews, and Peter Lockwood. First presented (under the title “How Abraham Lost His Son”) as the Zenas Gerig Memorial Lecture at Jamaica Theological Seminary, Kingston, Jamaica, September 2012.
- 47 “Does God Come to Bury Job or to Praise Him?” (*St. Mark’s Review*, 2017) was first presented at the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, MB, May 2004; then as the Peter C. Craigie Memorial Lecture, sponsored by the Division of Humanities at the University of Calgary, November 2005.
- 48 Under contract with Baker Academic, with the title: *The Silence of Abraham, The Passion of Job: Explorations in the Theology of Lament*.