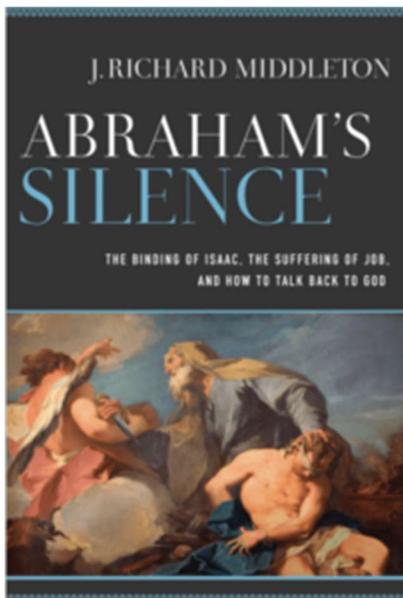


Brian Borger's *Hearts and Minds* review of Abraham's Silence



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Abraham's Silence: The Binding of Isaac, the Suffering of Job, and How to Talk Back to God J. Richard Middleton (Baker Academic) \$26.99 OUR SALE PRICE = \$21.59

If we give out an award this year for Best Biblical Studies book focusing on the Old Testament, this will win that award hands down. Richard is truly one of our favorite Biblical scholars, and I would say anyone who deeply loves the Word of God should just read anything Richard writes. It's that good, that informed, that important. It shakes you up. Thanks be to God.

You may know that he co-wrote (with Brian Walsh) two of most important books in my life, *The Transforming Vision* and *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be* (that I still recommend, regularly, and lament that not enough people buy them these days.) He has a chapter in our oft-

recommended *The Advent of Justice* devotional. He also has the distinction of writing the two best books (in my opinion, anyway) in two categories: the very best book on what it means to be made in the image of God (*The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1*) and the very best serious book on eschatology, *A New Heavens and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology*. In both cases, he brings fresh, important insight that is at once deeply faithful and ancient, and yet fresh and utterly contemporary. Those books are worth their weight in gold, packed full of scholarly insight and practical wisdom. For those who work through them, they could be life-changing.

And now, here is this, a stunning study of Genesis 22, a passage that simply has never sat well with me. God is God and we are not, and God can do what God wants. But God has gone out of His way to show us, in Scripture and in the person and teaching of Jesus, what God is like. And the God of the Bible simply doesn't ask us to kill our children. God does not. Jesus proves it, and to think that God asks Abraham to do this as some kind of test has always been something I've been skeptical of. There just has to be another explanation, another interpretation. The standard evangelical sermons, the critical liberal scholarly studies, even their gut-wrenching Kierkegaardian approach leaves me ill-at ease. Into this mess of inadequate interpretations Richard Middleton says what few have said. God expected Abraham to say no.

Holy smokes, could this be the answer? Well — hold on a minute, because one cannot dismiss centuries of nearly uniform consensus of interpretation without good, good reason and without some deeply Biblical reasons. This is going to take some doing, and Richard gives us 250 pages in three major parts. Some is fairly academic, but he livens everything up with lines from movies like *The Princess Bride*, pop music, and the like.

As the subtitle explains, to get at this daring interpretation, we have to first set aside any qualms about “talking back to God.” In Scripture this is called lament, and in *Abraham's Silence* Middleton adds very good Biblical teaching and explanation to the growing body of literature (scholarly articles in his footnotes and popular books, right here on the shelf at Hearts & Minds) saying that lament is a central part of the Biblical witness and a vital part of our own faith formation and a habit of Christian discipleship. (There is nearer the end of the book an amazing chapter called “The Gritty Spirituality of Lament.”) We must sing those Psalms in the Bible, we must cry out, we must protest. The God of the Bible not only can take it, but seems to expect it. God does not want our passive acceptance of suffering and injustice. There are deep reasons for this, and Middleton helps us get at it a bit. We need, as he notes, to understand “the suffering of Job.”

So, after great chapters offering models of Biblical prayer that include “voices from the ragged edge” and invites us to sometimes boldly stand as “God's loyal opposition” Professor Middleton moves to help us make sense of the equally troubling book of Job. (You know, the one where God plays a deadly, cruel game with the Satan by killing Job's loved ones.) Richard's chapter “The Question of Appropriate Speech” is worth the price of the book. Using the line from Brutus, he asks “Does God Come to Praise Job or Bury Him?” Whoah!

And so, from the question of lament thru the study of Job, we get to this question of “talking back to God.” I hope you get the gist. These serious parts of the book are evocative and generative and transformational, in and of themselves. But you also get to see where this is going

— Abraham’s *silence* is the problem in this Genesis text, called by older Jews the Aqedah. With help from Jewish friends and centuries of Jewish interpretation (which he seems to know well) Middleton asks how to “unbind the Aqedah” from tradition. (Clever use of words, there, eh, unbinding the text.) I can’t over-simplify this careful, even dense, study, and it is a joy and blessing to follow his argument, but it starts with this question of whether or not we have misread and misapplied the story of the binding of Isaac and explains that “God desires more than silent obedience in difficult times.”

I am not alone in insisting that this is a magisterial, extraordinary and daring volume.

This is interpretation at its most daring and at its best. Middleton sees the urgency of speaking up to God, a ‘speaking up’ in which God delights (see Job 42:7)! Middleton’s conclusion matters among us now in a time of authoritarian silencing all around us. — Walter Brueggemann, Columbia Theological Seminary, emeritus

This book is an extraordinary commentary on the meaning of the Aqedah (Genesis 22). I consider this to be a masterpiece of once-in-a-generation quality. *Abraham’s Silence* respectfully reverses millennia of traditions (Jewish and Christian) that praise Abraham’s unquestioning obedience to the instruction to sacrifice Isaac while taking them seriously and honoring them. As a Jew, I deeply appreciate the theological humility with which the whole book is written. The result is a fair-minded, 360-degree scan of all the available wisdom on a theological conundrum that has baffled the wise for centuries. This book deserves to reach the widest possible audience of Bible readers. — Rabbi Irving (Yitz) Greenberg, President, J. J. Greenberg Institute for the Advancement of Jewish Life, Hadar Institute

In this groundbreaking work, Middleton dares to question Abraham’s unquestioning obedience in Genesis 22. His approach is robustly biblical-theological, but his outside-the-box thinking offers an intriguing new solution to two interpretive puzzles: the binding of Isaac and the testing of Job. The pastoral implications of this book make it a must-read for pastors and biblical scholars alike. — Carmen Joy Imes, Biola University

I have been learning from Middleton for over twenty-five years. From him I learned that, in the Bible itself, God invites our questions and doubts. He showed me—through the Psalms and Job—that lament is faithful. This marvelous book exhibits the singular combination that is Richard Middleton: a deep and broad attunement to the Scriptures and a keen philosophical sensibility, both wed to a profoundly pastoral concern. A gift for both church and academy. — James K. A. Smith, Calvin University

Here is an interview with Richard about the book from a special *Publisher’s Weekly* article released for the AAR-SBL academic meetings this past week. At Richard’s blog he notes one typo — the journalist who interviewed him said he’s been pondering this for six years. It should read thirty-six years!

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