

Gritty Spirituality

Biblical scholar J. Richard Middleton demonstrates how to “talk back to God”

BY HOLLY LEBOWITZ ROSSI

Jews, Christians, and other readers of the Bible are likely familiar with Genesis 22—the story known as the “Binding of Isaac.” It recounts how the patriarch Abraham is told to take his son Isaac to a mountaintop as a burnt offering to God. Without argument, Abraham brings Isaac to the appointed place, ties him up, places him on an altar, and is about to offer him as a sacrifice, when an angel stays his hand.

“It’s a troubling story that God would ask someone to kill their son,” says J. Richard Middleton, professor of biblical worldview and exegesis at Northeastern Seminary, an ecumenical Christian school in Rochester, N.Y. “The traditional interpretation is that it proves Abraham’s commitment to God above his commitment to his son, his progeny, and the descendants God has promised Abraham.”

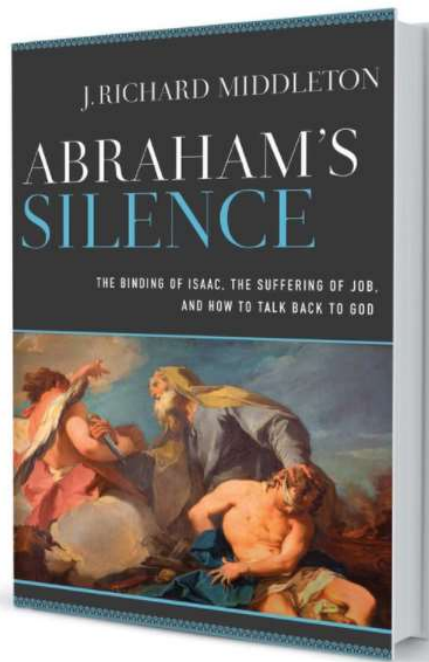
In his new book, *Abraham’s Silence: The Binding of Isaac, the Suffering of Job, and How to Talk Back to God* (Baker Academic, Nov.), Middleton disputes the traditional view of Abraham and his wordless obedience to God’s seemingly incomprehensible, intolerable command. Instead, Middleton explores the idea that God’s test was actually of a different sort.

“I think Abraham is actually being tested to see: does he understand that God is willing to hear his protest,” Middleton posits. Supporting this interpretation, he draws on what he calls “vigorous prayer,” in which humans plead, rage, or protest to God over their fates in the Bible.

Among the texts Middleton revisits are the Book of Job, which famously explores themes of



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human suffering; the Psalms of Lament such as Psalm 130, which reads, “Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord; Lord, hear my voice”; as well as Jesus’s plaintive cry from the cross: “My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?”

Middleton’s study was not entirely academic. Six years ago, he experienced a crisis of faith, which, he says, “brought me to a sense of despair that there was no hope for anything, including my own life.” He soon realized that he had gone from an active, meaningful faith life drawn from his Protestant and Jewish ancestry to someone who had stopped praying altogether. When Middleton encountered the “vigorous prayer” traditions, his inner life was reanimated through “the gritty spirituality of lament,” he says. “I started praying these prayers, and it reawakened my faith.”

Middleton’s research and textual interpretation grew out of that personal experience, and he hopes *Abraham’s Silence* offers readers the opportunity to examine their own spirituality and learn about the history and traditions around the texts he analyzes in the book. “There’s a pastoral element to the book, though I’m not a pastor,” he says.

Having confronted dark times, Middleton hopes readers will be encouraged to inhabit their own struggles as part of their spiritual lives—free of conflict caused by some idea of obedience to God. Rather than simply falling into a pit of despair, he wants readers to grapple with God over the problems of their lives, and from there, find hope for the future.

Jim Kinney, executive v-p of academic publishing at Baker, recognized the personal passion as well as the academic rigor Middleton brought to *Abraham’s Silence*, and he calls the book “a gift to the academy and to the church.” He adds, “It’s addressing issues that are always pertinent—how are humans to respond to a God we don’t understand, especially when things seem to be going horribly wrong.”

Noting the relevance of *Abraham’s Silence* amid “the chaos and pain that many have experienced since early 2020,” Kinney says the book introduces “an honest, yet trustful spirituality” that can empower readers and inspire hope. “It’s the kind of work a publisher delights in giving the broadest exposure possible.” ■

Holly Lebowitz Rossi is a freelance writer in Arlington, Mass.