

What Abraham *Might* Have Said: The Aqedah in an Alternative Timeline

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An excerpt from J. Richard Middleton, “Interpreting Job, Lament, and the Aqedah: A Response to My Respondents,” *Canadian-American Theological Review* 11, nos. 1&2 (2022): 81–83 (entire article 65–83).

The article was written in response to essays originally presented at two panel discussions at the Society of Biblical Literature in 2022, interacting with Middleton, *Abraham’s Silence: The Binding of Isaac, the Suffering of Job, and How to Talk Back to God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021). The essays are also published in the same issue of the *Canadian-American Theological Review*.

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After these things, God tested Abraham. He said, “Abraham.”

His faithful servant answered, “Here I am.”

“Take your son,” said the Lord, “your only one—whom you love—Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him up as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I will show you.”

And Abraham was dumbfounded.

Was this *God* speaking? The God he had come to know?

Abraham knew there were many gods, as many as the peoples of all the lands he had traveled through—from Ur in Mesopotamia to Haran in Aram to the towns and cities of Canaan. And many of them required child sacrifice as a sign of devotion.

But could his God be asking this too? He thought he had been coming to know the character of the one called El Shaddai—that this One was different from the gods of the nations.

Could God really mean for him to kill his own son? Why? What would it prove? How could this be God’s will?

Abraham was shell shocked—and silent for a time.

But then he plucked up his courage and with the *chutzpah* that would come to be recognized as emblematic of the later people descended from him, Abraham spoke up. At first his voice was quavering.

Ah, Lord God, he said. Are you really asking me to kill this young, innocent lad?

Do you really want me to live with the everlasting memory of his blood on my hands? Do you want to subject me to a lifetime of nightmares and flashbacks of me taking a knife to his young neck? Do you really want to do this to me?

Have mercy, Lord.

I know that I have not been close to this boy, not nearly as close as to my firstborn, Ishmael. That boy I loved, and you forced me to send him away.

Now you want me to kill the only son I have left.

Isaac was always Sarah's favorite. Do you know what this will do to her? She will die too—if not physically, then she will die inside.

She and I already have problems between us, because of Hagar and Ishmael. I know it was her idea; but it backfired. Sarah is already distant from me. Do you want to drive us further apart?

But if you don't have pity on me or my wife, Lord, have pity on the boy! He has done nothing to deserve this. Why should his life be cut short just to show my dedication to you?

Do you want his last memory to be of me, his father, tying him down like a sheep for slaughter and then taking a butcher knife to his neck? You can't want that, Lord!

Are you angry with me? Why does your wrath burn hot against me, the one you brought out of Ur of the Chaldees and out of Haran, to this land? (Exodus 32:11)¹ What have I done to so offend you, Master of the Universe?

Plus, you made a promise to me and to Sarah, that through this boy our descendants would become a great nation. What will become of your promise then?

No—I am going to hold you to your word, Lord. I have told many of the peoples of this land, whom I have met, of what you pledged to do through the line of Isaac.

But if they hear of this, that you have commanded his death—for whatever reason—do you know how that will look? It will reflect badly on you.

¹ Biblical references in parentheses note where the language I have used for Abraham's prayer draws on similar formulations, usually from Moses's intercession with God to forgive Israel after the sin of the Golden Calf or from Abraham's intercession with God to save Sodom and Gomorrah.

The Philistines and the Egyptians (whose kings I deceived that Sarah was my sister) will hear of it and they will think that it was with evil intent that you gave me this boy—only to kill him on the mountains and to consume him from the face of the earth. (Exodus 32:12a)

And then Abraham was silent, wondering if he had overstepped his bounds.

He remembered that when he had pled for Sodom, he modulated his boldness, admitting that he was just dust and ashes. (Genesis 18:27) And he twice asked God not to be angry with him for interceding for that evil people. (Genesis 18:30, 32a)

His boldness came from his concern for Lot and his family, living in Sodom. What would become of them if God destroyed that evil city?

He had asked God to save the city if there could be found fifty innocent people there. God agreed. So he asked for forty-five, then forty; then thirty, then twenty. (Genesis 18:24–31) But he stopped at ten. (Genesis 18:32) He didn't have the courage to ask God to save the city for less than that.

But Lot and his family were eight at the most. At the time he didn't think he could push God quite that far. It seemed like asking for too much.

But now, what did he have to lose?

So Abraham dug deep and found his courage and his voice again. He cried out:

I know I am far from innocent. Lord, take me instead of my son. But, whatever you do, do not kill this innocent boy.

Will you really sweep away the innocent with the wicked? (Genesis 18:23)

Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the innocent with the wicked, so that the innocent fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just? (Genesis 18:25)

No Lord. I plead with you: change your mind. Turn from your fierce wrath and do not bring this evil upon your chosen one! (Exodus 32:12b)

And the Lord changed his mind about the evil he was about to bring on Isaac. (Exodus 32:14)

And God spoke from heaven, saying:

Well done, good and faithful servant. (Matthew 25:23)

You have understood that I am, indeed, a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, showing love to thousands. (Exodus 34:6-7a)

Indeed, I desire mercy and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings. (Hosea 6:6; Matthew 9:13)

But what good would it do to just *tell* you that? What would those mere words mean to you?

But by your bold intercession for your son you have attained true knowledge of the God you serve.

Indeed, you dared to call on me to be faithful to my promise. That demonstrated your trust in me. And trust is better than blind submission.

So, yes, Abraham, I have granted your request. Isaac is redeemed by your prayer.

Go in peace and enjoy life with your wife, Sarah, and your son, whom you are beginning to love.

And then God departed from his servant Abraham.

It wasn't clear before Abraham's intercession that he had much love for Isaac.

But now, having stood up for him, defending him against God's seeming desire to slay him, a few sparks of love began to flow between father and son.

And Abraham began to nurture that love and fan the sparks into a fire—with the hope that his family might be healed.

And Abraham's taught his children and his household the way of the Lord. (Genesis 18:19) His descendants were known from then on for their surpassing mercy and generosity to all the families of the earth. Indeed, they were a blessing to all nations. (Genesis 12:3)