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Echoing this theme, Mara Van der Lugt's *Dark Matters* has defended philosophical pessimism as a virtue that helps us overcome our self-defensive desire to avert our eyes from the grim realities around us and encourages us to attend to the fragility of our lives and do the hard work required to sustain hope. Pessimists, thus understood, are not resigned to evil, but resist it, via an unflinching honesty about the brokenness of creation that helps us seek the good less foolishly.

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# 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), pp. xv + 256. $26.99

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J. Richard Middleton's tome is a response to his puzzlement at Abraham's silent response to God asking him to sacrifice his son. So he decided 'to "unbind" the Aqedah from the limitations of traditional readings' (p. 224). With a careful approach to the text of Genesis 22, supported by a reading of the book of Job in a bracing exercise of intertextuality, he argues that both texts, one negatively, the other positively, demonstrate God's approbation of protest and his appreciation of 'a dialogue partner with *chutzpah*' (p. 234).

The book has three parts: part 1 deals with lament psalms and with Moses' challenges of God at Sinai and at Kadesh-Barnea; part 2 considers the book of Job; and part 3 addresses the Aqedah.

With respect to the laments in scripture, Middleton is right: 'These abrasive prayers [Psalms 22, 39, 88] all complain about suffering as intolerable and implore God for deliverance. … I think we can learn from the honesty of the psalmists' (pp. 34–5). Yes, candid appeals to God are not to be deprecated. But that is not the same as saying protests are always recommended, as Middleton posits: God 'positively desires vigorous dialogue partners' (p. 63). After all, the respective situations of the lament psalms, the Moses stories and the Job accounts are quite different from that in which Abraham found himself. His case alone dealt with an explicit command from deity; the other protagonists merely found themselves in calamitous circumstances, *sans* divine diktat. Abraham's choices would not be Job's (to bless or curse God); his was, 'Obey or don't obey God!'

A tour of the Book of Job makes up part 2. The author supposes that God's approval (in 42:7–8) of Job's speech considers not only the latter's final response in 42:1–6, but his utterances throughout the book: 'Could it be that God answers Job from the whirlwind not to bury him but to praise him?' (pp. 106–7). I'm not so sure about the praiseworthiness of all of Job's responses. In fact, Middleton acknowledges that God was 'correcting Job's theology' in the first divine speech (p. 118). Not everything uttered by the sufferer was necessarily being esteemed: 'Job had impugned God's administration

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of the cosmos' (p. 118). So, if Job was wrong in his vocal rebuttals of God's governance of world and life, could we not conceive that Abraham got it right, and was therefore silent, as Job finally becomes?

The last part of the book focuses on the Aqedah: Middleton doubts that God 'values blind, unquestioning compliance. So if I heard a voice … claiming to come from God, telling me to sacrifice my son, I would not automatically comply' (p. 132). But was Abraham's response a 'blind, unquestioning compliance' undertaken 'automatically'? Should Abraham have been unsure about the source of that voice, as Middleton implies? The voice in this test was remarkably similar to the voice Abraham had heard in Genesis 12:1–7, the first time God spoke to the patriarch. Both speeches contained the same command, found nowhere else in the Bible (*lek-lka*, 'Go forth yourself'; Gen 12:1; 22:2). Each repeats its respective prescription in a threefold fashion (to forsake country/relatives/father's house; to surrender son/the only one/the one he loved); and both stressed a journey, an altar and promised blessings. All that to say, this was a familiar voice Abraham was hearing in Genesis 22 (not to mention the numerous times he had heard God speak between those two encounters). How else could he respond to the command but in silent obedience, as he had done in the first instance (*wayyelek,* 'and he went', is employed of his obedience to both decrees; cf. Gen 12:4; 22:3)?

According to Middleton, 'the first clue that something unusual is going on in Genesis 22' is that it is *haelohim* and not 'Yahweh' who speaks to the patriarch. 'Every *other* time God speaks to Abraham in Genesis, the *narrator* uses the covenant name YHWH to introduce God's speech' (pp. 168–9). That is inaccurate: 17:3, 9, 15, 19 and 21:12 have the narrator introducing God's speech with *elohim.* Indeed, God refers to himself that way in 17:7, 8. Indeed, the use of both designations in 21:1–3 suggests their interchangeability. But Middleton suggests that the employment of *elohim* in 22:1–10, and the subsequent switch to 'Yahweh' in 22:11–19 'is a signal to the reader that the instruction to sacrifice Abraham's son could not be something that the deity known as YHWH really wants (or expects) Abraham to do' (p. 170). But even the 'angel of Yahweh' who speaks in Yahweh's name employs *elohim* in 22:12 to refer to God! Middleton also takes issue with Abraham's use of the plural verb in association with *elohim* in 20:13, and suggests that 'Abraham is unclear about whether the [*elohim*] he serves is one God or many' (p. 205). However, even in the Aqedah, we have the patriarch declaring, 'God [*elohim*] will provide [singular]' (22:8; cf. 15:2, 3). Abraham seems to have been quite clear about the identity of this deity.

Middleton does not see the logic of the Aqedah – 'why this test is needed at all' (p. 194). But a contextual reading of Genesis 12–21 makes the necessity for the test quite clear. Abraham's walk with God thus far was hardly exemplary. In Genesis 12, God commanded the patriarch to leave his relatives and father's house, but he takes his nephew, Lot, along, perhaps thinking of Lot as his likely heir. In Egypt to escape a famine, Abraham passes off his wife Sarah as his sister (12:9–14). Later, the still childless Abraham names Eliezer, his steward, as his heir, an attempt that God immediately nixes (15:2–4). The patriarch then resorts to a compromise by seeking produce an heir through the maternal agency of the slave Hagar—another fiasco (16:2–6). In short, Abraham is seen rather clumsily stumbling along in his faith in God's word regarding his heir. And so in Genesis 22, Abraham is tested—a necessary test.

In Genesis 22 Abraham appears to have learnt his lesson in fearing God, as the angel acknowledged (22:12). What had changed the patriarch's attitude was the crucial event of Genesis 21: the birth of the promised seed, Isaac. There, God's faithfulness in this matter is established unequivocally, three times in two verses: 'Yahweh took note of

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Sarah *as He had said*'; 'Yahweh did for Sarah *as He had promised*'; 'Sarah conceived and bore a son … at the appointed time *of which God had spoken to him*' (21:1–2). God, ever faithful, had done as he had said/promised/spoken – Abraham could surely trust him! And, in Genesis 22, trust him, he does. The Aqedah thus defines the meaning of fearing God: obedience and trust that holds back nothing from God!

'I continue to wonder', muses Middleton: 'Suppose Abraham had not been silent. Suppose he had been so sure of the mercy of God that he could wrestle with God, arguing back, challenging God – interceding for his son' (p. 240). But Abraham *was* sure of the mercy of God – that was exactly why he was silent, confident that God *was* going to do something about Isaac post-sacrifice (as Gen 22:5 suggests; cf. Heb 11:19). Middleton concludes: 'The Hebrew Bible/Old Testament (and even the New Testament) assumes a stance of honesty toward God in prayer as normative' (p. 227). I, however, do not think that a monolithic pattern of response to God is what scripture endorses. God also welcomes silent obedience to his commands and rewards the faith implicit in these responses (22:16–18) – not a blind faith, but one based on who God is and how he has revealed himself. 'Abraham's silence' was praiseworthy.

Despite my reservations about Middleton's premises and thesis, I found *Abraham's Silence* to be quite a provocative read, spurring thought – so much so that I plan to include this work as required reading in my graduate seminar on hermeneutics. It is that good!

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## Stephen Morgan, *John Henry Newman and the Development of Doctrine: Encountering Change, Looking for Continuity*

### (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 2022), pp. xvi + 315. $75.00

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In the final chapter, Morgan proposes Newman's *Essay on Development* as a cogent account of doctrinal development. To more fully appreciate this account in the *Essay*, Morgan traces in the first three chapters the development of Newman's thought on the subject, organising each chapter around a different 'hypothesis' Newman proposed. Following Newman's own development of thought closely, Morgan argues, is not only of interest to scholars within Newman studies circles, but also to those seeking a way forward amid various issues raised in twenty-first-century Catholic theology. To illustrate these issues, Morgan focuses in the introduction and conclusion on the debates surrounding *Amoris laetitia* and the death penalty under Pope Francis' pontificate. Morgan argues that a clearer articulation of what it means to embrace the living authority of the church – which Newman came to identify with the Catholic Church – can help one avoid the ultramontanism found on both sides of the liberal–conservative divide within the contemporary Catholic Church.

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