

Abraham's Faith in Kierkegaard's Conception: An Analysis of the "Fear and Trembling" Book

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| Mihai Handaric |

"Aurel Vlaicu" University of
Arad

ABSTRACT

The author of the article "Abraham's faith in Kierkegaard's conception: an analysis of the books 'Fear and Trembling,'" analyzes the theme of faith from the perspective of the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. The philosopher was impressed by the adventure of the faith of Abraham who was challenged to sacrifice his son at the command of Yahweh (Gen. 22). The paper tries to find the explanations of philosophy, with reference to the acceptance of the divine challenge, by Abraham, who seems inhuman and irrational. We will analyze the expression used by Kierkegaard, who calls Abraham the "Knight of the Faith," in what sense, paradoxically, by faith did Abraham win Isaac? What is the significance of the knight of resignation, with reference to the one who refuses the act of faith, and wants to keep the temporality. We will see that from his point of view, the believer cannot accept advice, he will travel alone on this path. The logic of faith, the silence and the fear of faith are analyzed. The relationship between ethics and faith is also discussed. We will discuss the ethics that Kierkegaard refers to, as a set of moral rules shared by a human community - the moral consensus shared by a majority, which seems to be at odds with biblical faith. It also assesses the benefits of faith, in contrast to living by sight, and why Abraham became a guiding star.

KEYWORDS

Faith; Abraham; Kierkegaard; Fear and Trembling; Knight of faith

INTRODUCTION

Abraham's attitude toward Yahweh, as presented in Genesis 22, was a subject of deep reflection for the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. His obsession materialized in the writing of the volume entitled *Fear and Trembling*,¹ translated into Romanian, as in many other languages. Kierkegaard himself foresaw the importance of the book when he made the statement, "Once I am dead, *Fear and Trembling*" alone will be enough to immortalize my name. It will be read and translated into foreign languages. People will shudder at the terrible pathos which the book contains.² The author was impressed by the adventure of faith manifested by Abraham when he was challenged to sacrifice his beloved son, which was

¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Frică și Cutremurare*, trad. Dragoș Popescu, Oradea: Antaios, 2001. It is a volume containing two books, written by Kierkegaard și Hegel, two great thinkers of 19th century. Søren Kierkegaard *Frică și cutremurare* și G.W. Hegel, *Spiritul iudaismului*, trad. Dragoș Popescu, București: Editura „Antaios”, 2001. Kierkegaard speaks about Hegel's philosophy, interacting with him, and criticizing him.

² See the chapter written by Edward Money, „Understanding Abraham: Caring, Faith, and Absurd,” from the book edited by Robert L. Perkins, *Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling: Critical Appraisals*, Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2009, p. 100. Money says that this is perhaps the best known of Kierkegaard's books.

common in those days.³ The philosopher thinks of Abraham's gesture from several perspectives. How was it possible for him to accept the divine challenge after having managed to have this child with great difficulty. What would be the reason for accepting this inhuman challenge to take the knife to stab Isaac?

There are explanations for Abraham's attitude in the sacred text, beyond the original account in Genesis 22. The same book tells us in chapter 15: 6 that Abraham received favor before Yahweh because he believed the promise that his seed would be like the sand of the sea. , despite the fact that at that time he had no son, and Sarah's first son, he received after 25 years. "And Abraham believed the LORD, and the LORD reckoned it to him for righteousness." The author of the letter to the Hebrews also talks about this event, informing us that Abraham was motivated by his faith in Yahweh. "By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he offered his only begotten son. For he thought that God could raise him from the dead: and that he was risen from the dead "(11:17-19). The Bible verses add a motivation that accompanied Abraham, namely, the belief that God can raise Isaac from the dead.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Abraham - Knight of the faith

The author calls Abraham the "Knight of the Faith," a position superior to the great heroes admired by the world, who share the disposition to give up what they have, but differ from Abraham in their expectations. Biblical faith differs from the bravery of tragic heroes because it is accompanied by the unpredictable.

The tragic hero is contrasted with the knight of faith by the way he relates to the general the general ethics accepted by the community. To this end, she refers to the scene of the sacrifice of Iphigenia by her father, King Agamemnon.⁴ "The tragic hero brings the whole story to an end. Ifigenia bows to the decision made by her father, she herself gives up infinitely. And then they find each other in agreement. She can understand Agamemnon, being his approach expressed in general."⁵ Then he explains in what sense the speech of the hero Agamemnon is generally expressed. It is the foreseeable expectation regarding the outcome of the storm triggered by the wrath of Zeus, and prophesied by the prophet.⁶ The hero had to go all the way. "If Agamemnon had not sacrificed Iphigenia, considering that Zeus would change his mind, the king would no longer be a hero, and 'the words of the prophet are a fairy tale for ships and the whole story a vaudeville."⁷ Another example of a hero who must be distinguished from the Knight of Faith is Socrates a tragic intellectual hero. He had to speak to appear. "As a tragic intellectual hero, he is required, at this last moment, to show enough spiritual strength to achieve. ... If Socrates were speechless at the moment of death, the effect of his lives would be weakened, arousing suspicion, that the elasticity of irony in him would not be a force of nature but a game whose mobility, at the decisive moment , should change to an inverse extent, which preserves its pathos."⁸

³ See "Abraham's Curse. Child Sacrifice in the Legacies of the West" in Jacob Neusner, *Review of Rabbinic Judaism*, Brill, 2008, from https://brill.com/view/journals/rj/11/2/article-p346_11.xml, accessed, 07.07.2021.

⁴ Euripides, *Iphigenia At Aulis*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2004.

⁵ Kierkegaard, *Frică și Cutremurare*, p. 109.

⁶ About the difference between heroes of Ancient Greece and the biblical personages see Erich Auerbach, Edward Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, Princeton University Press, 2003.

⁷, p. 110.

⁸ Kierkegaard, *Frică și Cutremurare*, p. 111.

Comparing the hero with the knight of faith, Kierkegaard says that the hero seeks to gain eternity by giving up everything on earth, while the knight of faith is everything for now and here. Paradoxically, Abraham by his faith won over Isaac, whom he was asked to sacrifice. "It is a purely human courage to give up all temporality (for the resigned, disgusted by it) to gain eternity ... but it is a paradoxical and humble courage to get on time in the meantime, and this courage is of faith. By faith Abraham did not give up Isaac, but by faith Abraham won Isaac."⁹

The philosopher makes another comparison between Abraham - a knight of the faith and the man who is not willing to risk by faith. The latter is called the Knight of Resignation.¹⁰ The two knights are compared with reference to their perspective on the future. He who goes on, "The Knight of faith is that lucky man who rules finitude while the Knight of resignation is a stranger and a lost one."¹¹ By faith man rules temporality. Faith is that attitude which rises above temporality. It is a paradoxical statement, but true that through faith the knight of faith fully enjoys temporality, while the knight resigns, who refuses the act of faith, precisely because he wants to keep temporality, in the end or loses and becomes disoriented.

The Characteristics of Faith

From Kierkegaard's point of view, all people have a responsibility to act on the basis of faith. Faith is passion. People will act correctly motivated by passion. "Faith is a miracle, and therefore there is no man who is excluded from it; for what all men once had is passion; and faith is a passion."¹¹

He observes that Abraham used faith as a guide in life. He was deeply impressed with Abraham, precisely because of his unusual (seemingly insane) way of acting according to his faith. He decided to orient himself in life based on his faith in Yahweh. Referring to the paradox of faith as a means of guidance in life, compared to reason as a guide, Kierkegaard observes that faith is: "a monstrous paradox ... faith begins where all thought gives up."¹²

Another characteristic of Abraham's faith, noticed by the philosopher, is its consistency. Abraham's faith was unmistakable. "Abraham believed and did not doubt; he believed the absurd."¹³ The consistency of faith in spite of obstacles made him succeed.

Kierkegaard also observes that a man who decides to orient himself in life on the basis of faith cannot accept counsel.¹⁴ "He who embarks on the path of faith cannot be counseled by anyone." A knight of faith will travel alone on this path. Spectators, who sit on the sidelines and comment or condemn, are considered inferior, due to worthless ideals. For this reason, people who do not taste the value of faith will not overcome this limitation, even if they decide to unite to fight for it. More mediocre will not compensate for the value that God claims. He gives an illustration in this regard: "He imagines the rags that by associating in pairs of rags they can do what is great. But this is utterly and utterly impossible; in the world of the spirit no charlatan will be tolerated ... the Knight of the Faith ... in the solitude of the

⁹ Kierkegaard, *Frică și Cutremurare*, p. 53-54.

¹⁰ For a deeper discussion about the two knights, see Edward F. Mooney, *Knights of Faith and Resignation: Reading Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991.

¹¹, p. 70

¹², p. 58

¹³ Kierkegaard, *Frică și Cutremurare*, p. 31.

¹⁴ See the article written by Laura Nelson, „Kierkegaard and the Silence of Faith,” 2020, from <https://nelson10051954.medium.com/kierkegaard-and-the-silence-of-faith-62ce2a7ffb8>, accessed 07.07.2021.

universe he was not accompanied by a human voice, but only traveled alone, with his awful responsibility.”¹⁵

What the philosopher wants to say is that human society tries to compensate for the lack of commitment of faith, trying to find as an alternative to the act of faith, the consensus of several people who have gone bankrupt. The pressure of the crowd is an attempt to reassure the conscience, which will eventually fail.

The Logic of Faith

From his point of view, faith must be thought of as a duty. Kierkegaard says that this duty relates to God. The faith that motivates action is the responsibility towards the Divinity. The real duty is to conform man to divine expectations. "Duty becomes duty by relating to God."¹⁶

The definition of faith has a contradictory dimension, when Kierkegaard states that "By faith Abraham won Isaac." He tries to discover the logic of this faith, which sees beyond the limits of time and space. The inadequacy of relying on the temporality of life does not have the resources to succeed. "Temporality, finitude is the one around which everything revolves. I can, by my own strength, resign myself to everything and then find peace and tranquility in pain ... by my own power I cannot acquire the smallest thing that belongs to finitude; because ... I have already used all my strength to resign myself,"¹⁷ in the face of losses.

The ordinary man is stuck at the limit of reason which creates the tension between the expectation of faith and its absurdity. That is why few can cross this limit of human reason. "By faith ... you must receive by virtue of the absurd ... this movement cannot be made (to believe). As soon as I want to start something like this, everything revolves around me and I slip back into the pain of resignation."¹⁸ Failure to pursue this type of faith leads to resignation, to blockage. The character who experiences this frustration is called by the philosopher "Knight of resignation." **Silence and fear of faith.**

Continuing the comparison between the authentic believer and the non-authentic believer, the philosopher says that a difference between them has to do with reporting to the opinion of others. On the one hand, the true believer is willing to face loneliness in exchange for fulfilling his duty. In contrast to the true believer, "the inauthentic knight betrays himself by this inclination to make disciples."

Kierkegaard observes that acting by faith does not mean the absence of fear. Even the title of the book shows that *fear and trembling*¹⁹ are feelings that a believer experiences. Speaking of Abraham's silence on the path of faith, Kierkegaard also highlights the fear that accompanied him.

"Abraham is silent - but he cannot speak, in this lies urgency and anguish. Namely in the fact that if I, when I speak, cannot make myself understood, even if I spoke day and night, without interruption, I would not speak. This is the case of Abraham"²⁰. Justification of his gesture was superfluous in the case of Abraham. That's why he came to the conclusion that he must be silent.

¹⁵ Kierkegaard, *Frică și Cutremurare*, p. 81.

¹⁶ Kierkegaard, *Frică și Cutremurare*, p. 71.

¹⁷, p. 54.

¹⁸ Kierkegaard, *Frică și Cutremurare*, p. 54..

¹⁹ The title of the book, published in 1843, id Danish, was: *Frygt af Boeven*, which is translated by: .."Frica si tremur." The author called himself by the pseudonym: Johannes de Silentio, See also Soren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard: Fear and Trembling*, Stephen Evans and Sylva Wals, eds., Cambridge University Press, 2006

²⁰, Kierkegaard, *Frică și Cutremurare*, p. 108.

The author tries to explain why communication does not solve the believer's dilemma. He observes that “the purpose of language is to transfer me in general. Abraham can now say - how beautiful a language can express - how much he loves Isaac. But this is what we would find in his heart, for deeper we find out there that he will sacrifice him, because this is a test. The latter fact cannot be understood by anyone. And so the first can only be misunderstood.”

Continuing the comparison between the knight of faith and the hero, Kierkegaard observed that “the tragic hero does not know the terrible responsibility of loneliness ... Abraham cannot speak. Because he can't say anything that explains everything ... as if it were a test.”²¹. For this reason he understands that he must be silent. This is the fate of the true believer.

Under the immense pressure of debt, the believer seeks peace, which comes to Abraham's situation through two actions full of emotion. “Abraham makes two emotional movements ... he gives up Isaac ... but at the same time he makes the emotional movement of faith. And in it is his comfort. So he says, this will not happen, or, if it does, then the Lord, by virtue of the absurd, will give me back a new Isaac²². Giving up Isaac will help him move forward, and faith gives him hope that he will get his son back.

The Relationship between Ethics and Faith

When referring to ethics, the philosopher refers to that set of moral rules that a human community shares, and which differs from the ethics promoted by the Bible.²³. Speaking of the relationship between community ethics - the moral consensus shared by it and the biblical faith, Kierkegaard says that “An ethic that ignores sin is a completely useless science ... Philosophy teaches us that the direct should be suppressed. That is very true; but it is not true that sin is simply the direct, just as faith is simply the direct.²⁴ The direct would refer to a reality that evades any kind of mediation, which affects the Hegelian dialectic of to causality.

Emanuel Copilaş explains the terms used in the quotation above by Kierkegaard, alluding to Hegel's dialectical philosophy. Kierkegaard believes that if the immediate were identified with faith or sin, then they should not be suppressed, as Hegel argues.²⁵. Because from Kierkegaard's point of view, faith is that intimacy experienced by the sinner who unreservedly abandons himself to the unknown, and who evades any kind of mediation.

The Hegelian direct is nothing more than a windmill, because it did not exist and never will exist. If there is something direct, however, that something is beyond the phenomenological plethora. It is about faith, which does not depend on a prior set of relationships that produce it and ensure its continuity and development, as Hegel suggests; faith is precisely the pure interiority, the intimacy of the anxious sinner who decides to abandon himself without a remnant to the unknown. Or, such a gesture evades any type of mediation, assuming a radicalism that short-circuits any dialectical continuity existing in the external reality.”²⁶

²¹, p. 108-9.

²² Kierkegaard, *Frica si Cutremurare*, p, 108-9

²³About a discussion on the moral, from Kierkegaard, Kant și Hegel's perspectives, see Robert Stern, *Understanding Moral Obligation: Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard*, Cambridge University Press, 2011.

²⁴ Kierkegaard, *Frica si Cutremurare*, p. 96.

²⁵ Sylvia Walsh, *Living Christianly: Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Christian Existence*, The Pennsylvania University Press, 2005, p. 26-30.

²⁶ See Emanuel Copilaş, „Istoria păcatului și păcatul istoriei. Hegel și Kierkegaard despre implicațiile teologice ale filosofiei istoriei,” published in www.academia.edu, accesat 30.06.2021. There are mentioned: Søren Kierkegaard, *Vinovat? Nevinovat?*, transl., Alexandra Jensen and Elena Dan, Editura Mașina de scris,

Abraham's attitude has value in the spirit realm. His gesture elevates him above a hero like Socrates, whom we especially appreciate because of his verticality in confronting the conformist and relativistic sophists. Socrates' model can be imagined by the common ethics of human society, while Abraham's gesture of faith does not. "Abraham ... as the Father of the Faith, has an absolute significance for the spirit ... If there were no replica of Socrates, then I could think of him and imagine one. If I weren't able, then he would be a poet. But Abraham is intangible to any poet."²⁷

In extreme situations, faith no longer respects the general rules of ethical behavior of the human community. Like any true believer, "Abraham could not be understood by anyone.... But he who loves God needs neither tears nor admiration, forgetting his suffering in love."²⁸ What can exist in a man is faith. And faith is learned again by each generation. "No generation has started here from another point like the previous one, every generation starts from here, the next generation does not go further than before ... the task is always suitable for a human life ... Faith is the highest passion from a man."²⁹ And in conclusion, Kierkegaard's exhortation to faith is, "We must go on, we must go on." This drive to move forward is old in this world.³⁰

The Advantages of Faith

Kierkegaard wonders whether Abraham's gesture could be taken as an example to believers.³¹ The question arose as to whether one should be willing to give up all the values he has today in order to conform to divine claims without having a guarantee that the gesture of his faith is worth making.³² Kierkegaard speaks of the advantage of living by faith in contrast to living by sight, stating that "he who has always sought the best will be old, deceived by life..., but he who has believed, is rewarded with eternal youth."³³ The knight of resignation will find at the end of his life that he was wrong, paradoxically, precisely because he sought to take full advantage of life.

Kierkegaard observes that despite the apparent total renunciation, the believer wins everything. "By faith I do not give up anything, but on the contrary I gain everything by faith."³⁴ Abraham's paradox is that by giving up what he loved, he gains everything, not something more than he had before.

Kierkegaard believes that Abraham gained his privileged position because of his unique faith that motivated him to take action. He says that "Abraham was greater than all, great by that power whose strength is weakness, great by that wisdom whose secret is madness, great by that hope (faith) whose form is folly, great by that love which it is self-hatred."³⁵

București, 2000, pp. 107-108 and Søren Kierkegaard, *Conceptul de anxietate*, trans., Adrian Arsinevici, Editura Amarcord, Timișoara, 1998, p. 70.

²⁷ Kierkegaard, *Frică și Cutremurare*, p. 111-2.

²⁸ Kierkegaard, *Frică și Cutremurare*, p. 113

²⁹ Kierkegaard, *Frică și Cutremurare*, p. 116. See also Merold Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2014, p. 102-122..

³⁰ Kierkegaard, *Frică și Cutremurare*, p. 117.

³¹ Sylvia Walsh, *Living Christianly: Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Christian Existence*, The Pennsylvania University Press, 2005, p. 31-32.

³² Merold Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2014, p. 15-25, 254-277

³³ Kierkegaard, *Frică și Cutremurare*, p. 30. Vezi Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, *Stages on the way of life, Kierkegaard*, Edited and Translated with Introduction and Notes by Princeton University Press Princeton, New Jersey, 1988.

³⁴ Kierkegaard, *Frică și Cutremurare*, p. 53. Ross M. Bagne, *Søren Kierkegaard: Knight of Infinite Resignation*, Book Surge Publishing, 2009, p. 22-24.

³⁵ Kierkegaard, *Frică și Cutremurare*, p. 28.

Abraham's faith resolves, on a higher plane, the contrasts of the type: strength-weakness, wisdom-madness, love-hate. Through faith, Abraham became a role model for mankind. "It is one thing to be admired and another to be a guiding star."³⁶

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Analyzing Abraham's faith from the perspective of the book "Fear and Trembling," written by Søren Kierkegaard, I understood that the Danish philosopher was impressed by the adventure of Abraham's faith who was challenged to sacrifice his son at God's command (Gen. 22). We sought to understand the philosopher's explanations, referring to Abraham's response to the divine challenge, which seems inhuman and irrational.

Kierkegaard calls Abraham the "Knight of the Faith," placing him in a position superior to the great heroes of the world. Paradoxically, by faith Abraham defeated Isaac, whom he was willing to sacrifice. The character who refuses to act on the basis of faith is called: "Knight of resignation." In contrast to the Knight of Faith, who fully enjoys temporality, the so-called Knight of resignation, although he wants to keep temporality, loses what he values.

Faith is called, by the philosopher, passion. And people will act correctly when they are motivated by passion. Kierkegaard argues that the believer cannot accept advice. He will have to travel alone on this road. On the other hand, people who do not like the value of faith will not overcome this limitation, even if they decide to unite more to support their point of view. The Danish philosopher observes that the pressure of the crowd is an attempt to reassure the conscience, which will ultimately fail.

In this paper the logic of faith was presented. I understood that the failure to follow this type of faith leads to resignation, to blockage. The silence and fear of the faith were also highlighted. Kierkegaard observed that acting by faith involves experiencing fear, as the title of the book reflects: "Fear and Trembling." I noticed that justifying Abraham's gesture was superfluous. That's why he understood that he had to be silent.

The relationship between ethics and faith is also discussed. When it comes to ethics, the philosopher has in mind that set of moral rules that a human community shares. That moral consensus, shared by the community, sometimes contradicts the biblical faith. Abraham was able to overcome the pressure of the community to act by faith.

Among the advantages of faith, evaluated by contrast with living by sight, the knight of resignation will find at the end of life that he was wrong. And the result is paradoxical to the expectations of one who refuses faith. He will lose precisely because he sought to take full advantage of his existence in temporality, without taking the risk. Through his gesture Abraham rises above the heroes of the world. Kierkegaard's conclusion is that Abraham thus became a guiding star for mankind.

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