

## The story of absolute duty to God in the Bible

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(This was written for an Existentialist Philosophy course at Purdue University in 2018. It applies concepts from Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* to other passages in the Bible).

In the book of Isaiah, we see a vivid account of the prophet Isaiah's truly terrifying encounter with God (Isaiah 6, *English Standard Version Bible*). Without a doubt, Isaiah was stuck with fear and trembling at this encounter. Søren Kierkegaard, or at least Johannes de Silentio, did not shy away from Biblical stories that struck fear and trembling into his own life, particularly in *Fear and Trembling* (1985).<sup>1</sup> Kierkegaard presents Abraham as a Knight of Faith. That is, his existence was in the absurd—namely that his ethical obligation both to Isaac and to the future nation of Israel were both against him in his act of willingly sacrificing Isaac. Any *reasonable* or *ethical* analysis of Abraham's life would show him in the wrong—as Kierkegaard (1985) would say, “Abraham would be done for.” Even as he points out this absurdity, almost always overlooked by most readers of the story, he brings the problem of absolute duty to God to the modern day by citing a terrifying passage of Jesus' in Luke, “If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.” This deviation from the story of Abraham directs the reader's experience from a third person look at Abraham to an introspection of his own duty to God. If Kierkegaard is on to something, it would seem reasonable to ask whether this absolute duty to God is a consistent pattern in the Bible; whether those who pleased God were those who moved through life in absolute duty to God and those who displeased God were those who did not.

The story in Isaiah chapter six perhaps presents the foundation for why it might be *reasonable* from the first person, to surrender oneself in absolute duty to God and do what seems absurd to any onlooker. Surely after such an intense experience of the majesty of God, the cares of the world, even any possible universal ethics, lose immense weight. From the outside,

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<sup>1</sup> See (Hong et al., 2000) for a useful index of Kierkegaard's texts—including all references to the Bible. I found it at Purdue Libraries, but ended up sticking with my own choices for passages to look at.

someone would surely still deem Isaiah to be insane as he babbled on to Israel about the coming judgement of God. But, perhaps it wasn't absurd from Isaiah's internal experience (Isaiah 6).

One interesting story is found at the beginning of 1 Samuel. Eli was a Levitical priest at the time the prophet Samuel was born. Samuel's mother, Hannah, longed for a son but was barren (an interesting parallel to Abraham and Sarah). She prayed to and promised God that if he would grant her a son, she would dedicate him to full-time service to God. She then had a son, namely Samuel. She then gave Samuel to Eli so that Samuel could learn to serve God. In the meantime, Eli's sons were blaspheming God. Because the Levitical priests were a tribe set apart for service to God and, consequently, were priests full time, they were allowed to take a small portion of the offerings for their own meals. However, Eli's sons abused this system by taking the best, fattest meat from the offerings, thus profaning the sacrifices which were to atone for the sins of Israel. Eli rebuked his sons for doing this but took no further action to stop them. A while later, Samuel was called by God, and Eli was aware of it. Eli demanded that Samuel tell him what God told him in the call, and Samuel gave in after Eli threatened him (1 Samuel 1-3). Eli revealed God's charge,

...I am about to punish [Eli's] house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. Therefore, I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be atoned for by sacrifice or offering forever (1 Samuel 3:13-14).

Such a charge strikes many readers as quite harsh, yet Eli's response suggests a much different attitude, "It is the LORD. Let him do what seems good to him" (1 Samuel 3:18). Did Eli take a leap of faith into the absurd when he accepts this charge, and did he fail to make such a movement when he failed to restrain his sons? Let us consider the role of Eli's sons. They were

Levitical priests. As such, they were responsible to the people of Israel to mediate between God and man. As Kierkegaard (1985) says, “The ethical as such is the universal, and as the universal it applies to everyone, which can be put from another point of view by saying that it applies at every moment.” Clearly, Eli’s sons, to be ethical, must perform their priestly duties without blasphemy. Furthermore, there is no teleological suspension of the ethical for the sons—they, in absolute duty to God, must perform the sacrifice without stealing meat. Thus, Eli’s sons are done for. For Eli, the ethical considerations are less clear. Eli has an ethical responsibility to look after the well-being of his sons, as did Abraham with Isaac. However, Eli, as a priest himself, also had an ethical responsibility to the people of Israel to honor their sacrifices. Let’s consider what God might have expected of Eli. God says of him, “...he did not restrain [his sons]” (1 Samuel 3:13). However, Eli did rebuke his sons. He did take action, but he did not hate his sons. As Proverbs says, “the LORD reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights” (Proverbs 3:12). Thus, for Eli to rebuke his sons was to love them. To love them is not to hate them in absolute duty to God (in this particular case, his redemptive sacrifices). This, it seems, is the point of contention. Here, Eli had the chance to be a Knight of Faith by restraining his sons in duty to God, but he did not. Even more so, he had the chance to also be a Tragic Hero by restraining his sons for the sake of the people of Israel, but he did not.

As another example, the story of Rahab takes place in Joshua. When Moses died after forty years in the wilderness, God placed Joshua in command of Israel. Rahab was a prostitute in Jericho. Joshua sent two spies into Jericho to spy on it, but leaders in the city heard about it and sent a search party after them. The spies took refuge in Rahab’s house and she struck a deal with them. If she will hide them, then they will save her from the destruction of Jericho. Now Rahab had heard of the works of God on behalf of Israel—the parting of the Red Sea and the

destruction of kings—and she was afraid (Joshua 2). However, before this, Israel had been wandering in the wilderness for forty years in punishment for rebelling against God and refusing to enter the promised land when the original twelve spies were sent in by Moses (Numbers 14). Thus, it would be reasonable for Rahab to think that if she turned the spies into the search party, she would be praised as a hero and the Israelites would shy away once again from invading. Rahab, however, looked at the nation of Israel and chose to be a hero for them instead. Rahab could have turned in the spies. This would have been understood—it wouldn't be a paradox. In fact, it probably would have been ethical, as we often view duty to one's own people as transcending duty to another people. But, what she actually did was become a hero for the Israelites. We might argue, as a prostitute, she was marginalized or even rejected by Jericho, thus making them not her nation or city. Her ethical duty is convoluted. But, the goal of this essay is to examine those who did, or did not, enter the absurd. For Rahab, it was neither absurd to turn in the spies, nor absurd to hide them. Both were reasonable courses of action. So, rather than considering the *reasonableness* of her action, let's look at her own reason. "I know that the LORD has given you the land..." (Joshua 2:9). Compare this to Abraham, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burn offering, my son" (Genesis 22:8). Each character gives us the tiniest glimpse into their mind, revealing that they believed God would do something. What makes Abraham so difficult is that, even with this glimpse into his belief, it *remains absurd*. As Kierkegaard (1985) says, "I can understand a tragic hero, but not Abraham, even though in a certain lunatic sense I admire him more than all others." After a glimpse into Rahab's belief, we no longer find her absurd. She heard what God had been doing, knew he would destroy Jericho, and wanted to protect herself. Thus, Rahab is not absurd, but she becomes a hero all the same.

After a glimpse into Abraham's belief, however, we still find him absurd. It is absurd for him to think he can kill his son and keep his son.

Agamemnon, as discussed by Kierkegaard (1985), was a Tragic Hero—sacrificing his daughter to save the nation of Israel. He had absolute duty to God, but he was understandable as a Tragic Hero. Eli was, in a way, a failed Knight of Faith. He had the chance to step into the absurd by taking drastic action against his sons. He chose not to. This was understandable, but he did not act in absolute duty to God. Rahab also acted in absolute duty to God, but she was understandable in that duty. She was not a Tragic Hero as she only gave up her position in a city where she was marginalized as a prostitute, nor was she a Knight of Faith as she did nothing absurd. Abraham had absolute duty to God, but in an absurd sense—preparing to kill his own son and consequently the future nation of Israel. In these characters, we find a great deal of variety. Abraham, Rahab, and Agamemnon were all successful in their actions in duty to God while Eli was not. Thus, the criteria we see throughout the Bible is that those who believed God in some internalized way, demonstrated by acting in absolute duty to God, are those who please God. As Hebrews says, “Without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him” (Hebrews 11:6). This is an internalized description. Seeking God is something done by individuals. Rahab sought God by believing that he would destroy Jericho, Eli did not seek God by believing in the necessity of the sacrifices and allowed his sons to continue blaspheming. Abraham, sought God by believing that he would somehow sacrifice Isaac and still keep him. What is really remarkable though, is not how they sought God, but why the actions Abraham and Eli moved to take were absurd while Rahab's action was quite understandable. Perhaps, in one's duty to God, some individuals must move to take absurd action. Meanwhile, other individuals need not take absurd action. Indeed,

the Knight of Faith remains incommunicable. What is true for one Knight of Faith may not be true for another. To conclude with the words of Kierkegaard (1985) on this particularity,

It is possible on the basis of the paradox to construct certain criteria which even someone not in it can understand. The true knight of faith is always absolute isolation, the false knight is sectarian...As for the knight of faith, he is assigned to himself alone, he has the pain of being unable to make himself intelligible to others but feels no vain desire to show others the way.

### **Works Cited**

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