

Faith Beyond Reason: Søren Kierkegaard's Interpretation of the Biblical Patriarch Abraham

HAROON BASHIR, School of Languages, Cultures and Societies, University of Leeds
ll10mhb@leeds.ac.uk

The story of the binding of Isaac, also known as the *Aqedah*, exists as one of the most well-known and discussed parables from the Hebrew Bible.¹ It has had, and continues to have, great significance for all three Abrahamic faiths. One of the most famous expositions of the tale from within the Christian tradition belongs to a Danish philosopher-theologian Søren Kierkegaard. In 1847, he published the book *Fear and Trembling* in which he explored the biblical tale of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac on Mount Moriah in little more than 100 pages. It should be noted that references to Abraham are scattered throughout Kierkegaard's works, however the text of *Fear and Trembling* constitutes his most focused exposition of Abraham and the *Aqedah* narrative. This paper seeks to analyse Kierkegaard's interpretation of the biblical patriarch Abraham. It will include an assessment of Kierkegaard's understanding of faith, ethics and individuality that characterise his reading of Abraham within *Fear and Trembling*. This paper will also examine Kierkegaard's influences, the intellectual environment in which he was writing, and the ideas he was attempting to challenge with his interpretation of the biblical patriarch.

Upon first approaching the text of *Fear and Trembling*, the reader may notice that it has two authors: The first is Søren Kierkegaard; however, the title page credits a second name, Johannes De Silentio. Kierkegaard often published his works under pseudonyms. Whether or not these pseudonymous characters fully represent Kierkegaard's views is a highly contested issue within Kierkegaardian studies; nevertheless, we respect Kierkegaard's wishes to distance himself from the text. As Kierkegaard chose to express *Fear and Trembling* through the voice of Johannes De Silentio, within this paper the author shall be referred to as Kierkegaard, while the narrator of the text as Silentio. Kierkegaard frames the style of the text in a fashion that expects familiarity with the eighteen verse Genesis episode. Abraham is commanded by God to offer his son Isaac in sacrifice. However, Isaac is replaced by a ram at the last moment, once Abraham has proved he is willing to complete the task that has been requested of him. The text discusses the narrative with an audience who recognise the story. For Kierkegaard, this is a problem; readers are far too comfortable with a story that he believes, when properly understood, should cause horror and 'make a person sleepless'.²

There are a number of different characteristics of Abraham that Kierkegaard seeks to emphasise through his interpretation; one of the most evident is the fact that Abraham did not simply accept God's

¹ The story of the *Aqedah* is found in Genesis 22.

² Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, ed. and trans. by Edna H. Hong and Howard V. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 30.

command but was deeply troubled at the thought of sacrificing his son. Silentio claims ‘only the one who was in anxiety finds rest’.³ Silentio states this in the context of explaining his dissatisfaction with the intellectual climate in which he is situated, in which ‘everything can be had at such a bargain price’⁴ and ‘everyone is unwilling to stop with faith’⁵ as though faith is an easily obtained commodity that holds little worth. To reach faith, one must struggle. Abraham is considered the father of faith not because he simply completed the task God requested from him, but because of the anxiety and pain it caused him. Kierkegaard’s Abraham accentuates the necessity for a spiritual struggle in order to attain ‘true faith’. Kierkegaard appears despondent at how indifferent readers have become to the narrative. Silentio states, ‘there were countless generations who knew the story of Abraham by heart, word for word, but how many did it render sleepless?’⁶ He references a preacher emptily praising Abraham as the father of faith and a true believer who sacrificed what was most dear to him due to his conviction. However, Silentio contends, if a man approached the same preacher and claimed he had been ordered by God to partake in the same actions, he would subsequently be accused of madness for wanting to murder his own son.⁷

These concerns voiced through Silentio appear to correspond with Kierkegaard’s anxieties regarding the complacency of Christians in Denmark in the 19th Century.⁸ On this level, Kierkegaard’s interpretation of Abraham has been described by Lippit as ‘theological shock treatment’⁹, in which Kierkegaard uses the story of Abraham to cajole a complacent Christian nation into addressing Abraham’s passion for faith. Kierkegaard’s Abraham attempts to provoke his contemporaries to reflect on the nature of faith, and on the arduous task of becoming a true believer. Akin to many of his Danish and German contemporaries, Kierkegaard was raised in a household in which a Lutheran form of Christianity was practiced.¹⁰ Lutherans traditionally emphasised that faith was more of an inward, personal relationship to God, rather than a faith that was linked to external observances. However, by the 19th Century, Lutheranism had itself become the established Church of Denmark, and this no doubt caused huge discomfort for Kierkegaard. In the Kierkegaard’s view, partaking in institutionalised religious rituals did not make one a true believer, nor did being born into a Christian nation. Silentio states that ‘it was different in those ancient days. Faith was then a task for a whole lifetime, because it was assumed that proficiency in believing is not acquired in days or weeks’.¹¹

Kierkegaard’s Abraham works as a reminder that faith is not something easily obtained, but something that requires struggle and suffering. For Kierkegaard, Abraham is the epitome of suffering, a character that properly portrays what it means to have faith in the midst of anguish. Abraham does not lament God’s decision, nor does he claim any injustice has taken place; rather, he shows the ‘humble

3 Ibid., p. 27.

4 Ibid., p. 5.

5 Ibid., p. 7.

6 Ibid., p. 28.

7 Ibid., p. 29.

8 John Lippit, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to: Kierkegaard and Fear and Trembling* (London: Routledge, 2003) p. 140.

9 Ibid.

10 Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino, ‘Introduction’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. by Alastair Hannay and Gordon D Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp.1-14 (p. 3).

11 Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 7.

courage' of faith.¹² Furthermore, Kierkegaard's Abraham is characterised by the fact that he cannot be considered a rational actor, his actions cannot be understood. Silentio claims that a character who sacrifices someone they love to achieve a higher purpose, such as Agamemnon, Jephtha or Brutus can be considered tragic heroes. For example, when Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia to secure victory in the Trojan War, his actions remain within the ethical, they can be understood and have a purpose. Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, according to Silentio, has no purpose and therefore his act cannot be deemed ethical. He states,

Abraham is at no time a tragic hero, but it something entirely different, either a murderer or a man of faith. Abraham does not have the middle term that saves the tragic hero. This is why I can understand the tragic hero, but cannot understand Abraham, even though in a certain demented sense, I admire him more than all the others.¹³

Abraham did not sacrifice Isaac to achieve a noble end; moreover, the sacrifice did not have a purpose except that God commanded it. Kierkegaard attempts to prove two things with this claim; firstly, he emphasises the importance of an individual relationship with God that can transcend all other relationships, duties and bonds. Secondly, he argues that in order to save Abraham's virtue, within the story there must be 'a teleological suspension of the ethical'.¹⁴ That is, an acceptance that the ethical can be relegated and a realm can supersede it: the realm of faith. With this claim, Kierkegaard and Silentio leave readers with a terrifying decision; either faith can transform the killing of a child into a holy act, or the biblical patriarch should be considered a murderer.

Primarily, the ideas challenged by Kierkegaard's Abraham are those of Kantian ethics and Hegelian philosophy more generally.¹⁵ It appears that Kierkegaard was familiar with both thinkers from time spent at the University of Copenhagen studying with Danish Hegelians such as Hans Martensen, Johan Heiberg and Rasmus Nielsen.¹⁶ Within Kantian ethics, the religious must be confined to the parameters of the rational which ultimately dictate the ethical. Religious belief and practise are to be accepted so long as they exist within the parameters of reason. Both Kant and Hegel contend that true religious faith consists 'in fulfilling, to the best of one's ability, the ethical requirement of good life conduct'.¹⁷ Particularly within Hegelian thought, the emphasis between the ethical and duty to the collective is stressed. However, for Kierkegaard, faith cannot be limited to the ethical sphere or by the collective group. A believer's relationship to God cannot be limited to the postulating and limited rational capacities of human beings. Silentio's references to those 'who are unwilling to stop with faith'

12 Ibid., p. 73.

13 Ibid., p. 57.

14 Ibid., p. 66.

15 Lippit, pp. 142-46.

16 Clare Carlisle, *Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling: A Reader's Guide* (London: Continuum, 2010), p. 29.

17 Ibid., p. 17.

appears to refer specifically to the Hegelian notion that faith was a relatively elementary stage of intellectual development that Hegelian philosophy could surpass.¹⁸

The differences in approaches between the thinkers are emphasised more readily when assessing their interpretations of the *Aqedab* narrative. When Kant discusses Abraham, he argues that it could never be known for certain whether the command has been ordered by God, and therefore Abraham could never be justified in transgressing moral reason and sacrificing Isaac. In his *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, he states,

After all, the revelation has reached the inquisitor only through men and has been interpreted by men, and even if it did appear to have come from God himself, like the command delivered to Abraham to slaughter his own son like a sheep, it is at least possible that in this instance a mistake has prevailed.¹⁹

For Kant, God would not order the unethical and Abraham should have considered that the source of the command was not divine. As expected, within Kant's framework, the religious cannot contradict the confines of the rational. Therefore, Kant's interpretation of Abraham seeks to bring the narrative in line with his ethical framework, and this renders his conception of Abraham as blameworthy for attempting to partake in the morally reprehensible. Hegel's interpretation of Abraham differs from Kant's reading; Hegel attempts to use Abraham to establish the supremacy of Christianity over Judaism. Hegel's Abraham is the 'true progenitor' of the Jews; he constitutes the Jewish 'unity and soul' and 'regulates the entire fate of his posterity'.²⁰ For Hegel's Abraham, the ultimate test of faith was his willingness to submit to the divine command to sacrifice his own son, a point that Kierkegaard would agree with. However, unlike Kierkegaard, Hegel interprets Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac as representative of the 'negative moment of alienation'²¹ found in Judaism. This act does not represent true faith; moreover, it more readily represents the spirit of Mosaic Law which finds things of this world without worth and demands 'a consciousness of one's annihilation, or deeds in which man expresses his nullity, his passivity.'²²

For Kierkegaard, Abraham represents the radical individuality through which all other relations are forsaken to attain true self-hood and faith. Whereas for Hegel, Abraham symbolises the collective spirit found within Judaism, acts such as Abraham's embody the fact that everything in this world must be sacrificed in order to attain the afterlife. Alienation from the world is ultimately reconciled through the appearance of Christian love, which Hegel regards as the completed manifestation of faith. It should be noted that Hegel's interpretation of Abraham should not be read in isolation of his general

18 Lippit, p. 140.

19 Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. by Theodore Green and Hoyt Hudson, 2nd edn (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), p. 175.

20 Georg. W. F. Hegel, *Early Theological Writings*, trans. by T. M. Knox and Richard Kroner (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), p. 182.

21 Mark C. Taylor, 'Journey to Moriah: Hegel vs. Kierkegaard', *The Harvard Theological Review*, 70 (1977), 305-326 (p. 311).

22 Hegel, *Early Theological Writings*, p. 207.

philosophical method of dialectics in which Christianity is the pinnacle of human progression. As Taylor notes,

Hegel's analysis of Abraham cannot be understood apart from the dialectical progression of the essay as a whole. Hegel insists that Abraham's faith and the Jewish people are moments in the unfolding of human spirit that prepare the more complete form of selfhood revealed in Christianity.²³

Hegel's denigration of the 'Jewish Abraham' appeared to have currency within Kierkegaard's environment, as did Hegelian thought in general. Indeed, it appears that anti-Jewish sentiment was flourishing during this period and the story of Abraham and Isaac was interpreted in manners to further project anti-Semitic stereotypes. Dalrymple argues,

Pseudo-scholarly works claimed that cannibalism and blood-drinking had been passed down from Abraham to modern Jews. Interpreting Abraham as egoistic, murderous and bloodthirsty permitted the denigration of Judaism and thus the curtailment of Jewish freedoms and powers...²⁴

The fact that Kierkegaard's Abraham is not portrayed as particularly Jewish or Christian is noteworthy considering the environment in which Kierkegaard wrote. There are references to Abraham as the 'second father of the race'²⁵ which allude to his Jewish progeny, but importantly, these references to his Jewish lineage are not construed in a negative sense. Moreover, Kierkegaard draws parallels between Abraham's suffering and the suffering of Jesus Christ,²⁶ in an attempt perhaps to bridge the gap between Abraham and Christianity. Kierkegaard's interpretation of Abraham does not attempt to establish Christianity as superior to Judaism such as in the work of Hegel. In fact, as stated earlier, many read Kierkegaard's Abraham as a direct critique of the Christianity practiced in his time. Green claims that Kierkegaard's Abraham, although nuanced, ultimately purports a normative view of Christian faith. However, ostensibly, Kierkegaard's Abraham does not overtly promote Christianity in lieu of other traditions.²⁷ Green posits a convincing argument regarding the underlying message of *Fear and Trembling* constituting an appraisal of a Pauline-Lutheran understanding of faith and redemption, in which the story represents the human capacity to sin, and yet continually be forgiven due to God's grace. However, as Green himself notes, this does not necessarily represent the reception of Kierkegaard's Abraham and how he has been understood traditionally.

In fact, it may be due to the ostensible lack of Christian supremacy of *Fear and Trembling* that has caused Kierkegaard's Abraham to impact other religious traditions. This should not be misunderstood as

23 Taylor, 'Journey to Moriah: Hegel vs. Kierkegaard', pp. 305-326 (p. 312).

24 Timothy Dalrymple, 'Abraham: Framing Fear and Trembling', in *Kierkegaard and the Bible: The Old Testament*, ed. by Lee C. Barrett and Jon Stewart (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 43-88 (p. 62).

25 Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 23.

26 Ibid., p. 66.

27 Ronald M. Green, 'Enough is Enough! Fear and Trembling is Not about Ethics', *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, 21 (1993), 191-209.

to say that Kierkegaard's Abraham is any more palatable to Judaism or Islam than he is to Christianity. Moreover, within the classical Jewish tradition the *Aqedah* was read not as a suspension of the ethical, but 'as a moment of supreme moral responsibility for both God and man'.²⁸ Rather, it is to argue that Kierkegaard's Abraham has in some cases caused scholars from other traditions to rethink their respective relationships with the narrative of the *Aqedah*.

For example, Kierkegaard's interpretation of Abraham appears to share some resemblances with those found within Hassidic Judaism. This can be seen through the works of Rabbi Abraham Kook also known as 'Rav Kook' who was the Chief Rabbi in Palestine in 1921.²⁹ It is not clear that Rav Kook himself was part of a Hassidic group, but it does appear that he was heavily influenced by Hassidic thought more generally. Though the interpretations of Abraham are not identical, Gellman claims 'there are affinities between Kierkegaard and Rav Kook in their respective treatment of the story of the binding of Isaac'.³⁰ This is highlighted through the focus on the passion of Abraham's faith, the spiritual struggle the patriarch faced highlighted by both thinkers, and the analysis of the attainment of true selfhood characterised by Abraham's sacrifice found within their respective works. Kook's Abraham, much like Kierkegaard's Abraham struggles with the decision to sacrifice Isaac. In comparison to more traditional conceptions of the *Aqedah* within Judaism, such as that of Rabbi Maimonides, Kierkegaard's influence becomes slightly clearer. Maimonides interprets the *Aqedah* as a story that proves prophetic revelation is infallible and that God's prophets are absolutely certain of the source of revelation. For Maimonides, had there been any ambiguity regarding the source of the divine command to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham would not have completed the task. Maimonides writes, '[Abraham's] soul would not have consented to perform an act of so great an importance if there had been a doubt about it'.³¹ Therefore, Kierkegaard's Abraham has clearly had resonance within strands of Jewish thought as well as within the Christian tradition.

Having cited the influence of Kantian thought and Hegelianism and Kierkegaard's refutation of the concepts through his interpretation of Abraham, the other major trend that have impacted Kierkegaard was the rise of the historical-critical method. According to Grant and Tracy, the historical-critical approach was quickly becoming regarded as 'the only legitimate method to approach scripture'³² in the academies of Europe during the 19th century. Kierkegaard was familiar with Strauss' famous work *Life of Jesus* in which the Abraham story receives explicit criticism; Abraham is reprimanded for his willingness to sacrifice Isaac, and source criticism compares concepts of child sacrifice within ancient traditions to the *Aqedah*.³³ The context in which Kierkegaard wrote clarifies the purpose of his interpretation more sharply. For Kierkegaard, the story of the *Aqedah* was not a puzzle needing to be pieced together by the source-critical method, nor was it representative of inhumane child-sacrifice rituals

28 Ronald M. Green, 'Abraham, Isaac and the Jewish Tradition: An Ethical Reappraisal', *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, 10 (1982), 1-21 (p. 1).

29 Jerome I. Gellman, *The Fear, The Trembling and The Fire: Kierkegaard and the Hasidic Masters on the Binding of Isaac* (London: University Press of America, 1994), p. 99.

30 Ibid., p. 100.

31 Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. by Shlomo Pines (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1963) pp. 501-02.

32 Robert Grant and David Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible* (London: SCM Press, 1985), p. 110.

33 Dalrymple, 'Abraham: Framing Fear and Trembling', pp. 43-88 (p. 61).

from a bygone era. It was not to be apologetically explained away in a bid to make Abraham's sacrifice compatible with a rational framework and it certainly was not to be used to emphasise the alienation within Judaism and the supremacy of Christianity. For Kierkegaard, and for Silentio, Abraham is the father of faith for all.

However, due to Kierkegaard's interpretation of Abraham placing religion and faith above the realm of ethics, his reading of the narrative has been heavily criticised, with some commentators identifying his reading as particularly violent. The main contention cited claims that, as a consequence of Kierkegaard's reading, religion and faith enter a mystified realm that cannot be understood and through this conception of faith and religion ceases to abide by the ethical. As a result, religion justifies the unethical and repugnant simply through the means of faith. For example, the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas argues,

Kierkegaardian violence begins when existence, having moved beyond the aesthetic stage, is forced to abandon the ethical stage in order to embark on the religious stage, the domain of belief. But belief no longer sought external justification... That is the origin of the relegation of the ethical phenomena to secondary status and the contempt for the ethical foundation of being which has led, through Nietzsche, to the amorality of recent philosophies.³⁴

Levinas proposes an alternative reading of Abraham that does not relegate the ethical below the religious sphere. He contends that the most important point in the story comes to pass when Abraham is told not to sacrifice Isaac by God on Mount Moriah. This second voice represents the call to return to the ethical sphere and for Levinas, the second voice properly represents the spirit of the narrative.³⁵

As well as the criticisms of projecting an unethical Abraham, another commonly cited critique surrounds the origin of the voice commanding Abraham, which Kierkegaard does not probe. This accusation charges Kierkegaard with taking for granted that the voice commanding Abraham originated from God. This argument attempts to safeguard God from ordering his Prophet to partake in the unethical, and contends that the voice may have indeed originated from the devil. Abraham's mistake in this case was accepting that God would order his servant to partake in the morally unacceptable. As stated earlier, this mode of interpretation was employed by Kant, but it has also been directly used to critique Kierkegaard's Abraham in the work of Martin Buber.³⁶ However, the criticisms put forth by both Buber and Levinas presuppose that the purpose of Kierkegaard's interpretation is to valorise Abraham for his willingness to kill Isaac. They do not consider that Kierkegaard simply seeks to clarify the consequences of referring to Abraham as exemplary and commendable. Indeed, Kierkegaard's Abraham does not serve to delineate what the correct understanding of the ethical should be; rather, he attempts to demonstrate the incoherence of particular philosophical conceptions of the ethical.

³⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, 'Existence and Ethics', in *Kierkegaard: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Jonathon Rée and Jane Chamberlain (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 26-38 (p. 31).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

³⁶ Martin Buber, 'On the Suspension of the Ethical', in *Eclipse of God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1952), pp. 113-120.

Along similar lines to Kant and Buber, the attempt to interpret the story of Abraham through a rational framework by questioning the origin of the voice is not limited to the Christian tradition. Within the Islamic tradition, a prominent rationalist thinker named Ghulam Parwez similarly critiqued interpretations of the *Aqedah* narrative by claiming the voice commanding Abraham had not been from God, but indeed from the devil.³⁷ God had intervened, according to Parwez, to stop the sacrifice and Abraham's mistake was to accept that God would order the unethical. Whether Parwez had been directly influenced by the writings of Kant or Buber is not clear, however, the fact that his critique of the story replicates those from a differing tradition raises pertinent questions regarding interpretations, traditions and hermeneutical approaches.

A traditional approach, famously articulated in the work of Jon Levenson, contends that there are three Abrahams; the Jewish Avram, the Christian Abraham and the Muslim Ibrahim.³⁸ Levenson provides ample material to prove that there are clear differences between conceptualisations of the prophet within the three traditions, and ultimately argues that the term 'Abrahamic religions' is unsuitable due to the differing conceptions of the patriarch. However, readings such as Kierkegaard's are traditionally ambiguous in this regard, as they refuse to fit precisely into a specific tradition and have clearly influenced other traditions, as shown earlier with Rav Kook. Kook's Abraham has far more in common with Kierkegaard's interpretation than it does with Maimonides reading, though Maimonides and Kook share the same faith tradition. Furthermore, Parwez's Abraham would feel far more comfortable with Kant's and Buber's Abraham than he would within mainstream Muslim readings of the Ibrahim narrative. This is not to argue that bodies of literature that can be described as distinctly Christian, Jewish or Islamic do not exist, however, it is the acknowledgement that there also exist moments of inter-sectionality within interpretive discourse that transcend the frameworks of demarcated traditions. Rather than simply accepting Levenson's model of three different Abraham's belonging to three different traditions, it may be appropriate to take into consideration the various hermeneutical trends and approaches that influence various interpretations. This would not only account more accurately for the interpretative differences that are found within traditions, but also account for the similarities in interpretive practises across traditions.³⁹

Focusing on hermeneutical methods would also begin to explain the plethora of difference within the interpretation of the *Aqedah* narrative. From Maimonides, to Kook, to Hegel, to Kierkegaard; to more contemporary interpretations from the likes of Derrida⁴⁰ or feminist readings such as that provided by Exum,⁴¹ the meaning of the *Aqedah* has been transmuted and altered based on the differing

37 Ghulam A. Parwez, *Exposition of the Holy Quran*, trans. by Habib-ur-Rehman Khan (Lahore: Tolu-e-Islam, 2010), p. 740.

38 Jon Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012). Especially Chapter 6: 'One Abraham or Three' pp. 173-214.

39 For examples of such dialogue, see the project set up by the Faculty of Divinity from the University of Cambridge in which Christians, Muslims and Jews meet and interpret sacred scriptures together, see: <http://www.scripturalreasoning.org>

40 For an in-depth analysis of Derrida's interpretation of the *Aqedah*, see: John D. Caputo, 'Instants, Secrets, and Singularities: Dealing Death in Kierkegaard and Derrida', in *Kierkegaard in Post/Modernity* ed. by Martin J. Matustik and Merold Westphal (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 216-238.

41 J. Cheryl Exum, "'Mother in Israel': A Familiar Figure Reconsidered", in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. by Letty M. Russell (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), pp. 73-85.

interpretive practices, traditions and schools that interpreters have been affiliated with. By focusing on the hermeneutical tendencies of specific groups helps to account for why a single text has had any number of differing interpretations, and it may also suggest why specific interpretations have been deemed valid or incorrect within a certain contingency. Stanley Fish elucidates this point as he argues that the criteria that validate specific interpretations of text are constantly changing, and the rules governing how text should be read are not universal.⁴² Indeed, the canons of acceptability are constantly altering regarding what might be considered a correct reading of a text. Kierkegaard's Abraham constitutes a vibrant illustration of Fish's argument in this regard. An interpretation that in his own time was 'consigned to oblivion' and was dismissed by a public that 'hoped never to hear his name again'⁴³ has resurfaced as one of the most widely accepted, popular and influential readings of the narrative that exists in the contemporary world.

Within the twentieth century, the themes and ideas developed by Kierkegaard's interpretation of Abraham influenced many thinkers. Philosophical heavyweights such as Camus, Sartre, Badiou, Heidegger and Derrida all incorporate themes and arguments from *Fear and Trembling*.⁴⁴ Additionally, 20th century theologians such as Paul Tillich and Rudolph Bultmann have also been influenced by Kierkegaard's work on Abraham.⁴⁵ The appreciation of Kierkegaard's reading of Abraham developed long after Kierkegaard's death and evidences the point regarding the changing notions of correctness within interpretive theory. Kierkegaard's Abraham reminds us that 'no reading, however outlandish it might appear, is inherently an impossible one.'⁴⁶ Though Kierkegaard's Abraham was initially rejected by his own community, the rules of interpretation shifted which allowed the popularity of Kierkegaard's Abraham to grow exponentially. Indeed, the fact that readings which once seemed ridiculous can become venerated demonstrates that canons of acceptability constantly change, and Kierkegaard's Abraham serves as a rich example of such.

To conclude, when Kierkegaard first wrote *Fear and Trembling*, he predicted,

Once I am dead, *Fear and Trembling* will be enough for an imperishable name as an author. Then it will be read, translated into foreign languages as well. The reader will almost shrink from the frightful pathos in the book.⁴⁷

Kierkegaard's prophecy proved correct; his reading of Abraham exists as one of the most established interpretations of the narrative and has been translated into numerous languages across the world. It has

42 Stanley Fish, 'What Makes an Interpretation Acceptable?', in *Is there a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (London: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 338-355.

43 Roger Poole, 'The Unknown Kierkegaard: Twentieth-Century Receptions', in *Cambridge Companion*, ed. by Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino, pp. 48-75 (p. 49).

44 Carlisle, p. 174.

45 Ibid.

46 Fish, p. 347.

47 Lippit, p. 1.

influenced and challenged philosophers and theologians, believers and non-believers alike, with many attempting to claim the legacy of the renowned Danish thinker for their own.

Kierkegaard's interpretation of Abraham responded to different intellectual currents that were emerging in Denmark during the 19th Century. The rise of rationalism and the historical-critical approach to the biblical text certainly informed Kierkegaard's work, but also more directly the philosophies of Kant and Hegel hugely influenced Kierkegaard in so far as his Abraham served as a direct critique to Kantian ethics and Hegel's philosophical method. Kierkegaard's depiction of Abraham was not negative as many other interpretations were; he was not portrayed as an alienated Jew, nor was he a remnant of a mythical narrative that represents ancient practices of child sacrifice. Kierkegaard's Abraham was, and is, the father of faith. He represents the trial and tribulations that faith demands, the fear and anxiety that one must experience to reach bliss, and ultimately, for Kierkegaard, Abraham is the constant reminder of the sacrifice that faith entails.

Kierkegaard's Abraham also works as a reminder that classifications and taxonomies are not absolute and timeless, and ideas and interpretations that may be a given in a specific period, may not remain so. Kierkegaard's Abraham has found much acclaim in the postmodern intellectual environment due to his prophetic foresight that claimed objectivity and rationality would not lead to universal truth. In sum, Kierkegaard's Abraham, much like Kierkegaard, stresses the importance of standing out from the crowd and having the *humble courage* to be an individual.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Buber, Martin, 'On the Suspension of the Ethical', in *Eclipse of God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1952), pp. 113-120.
- Cambridge Inter-faith Program: Faculty of Divinity, *Scriptural Reasoning: Reflecting Together on Sacred Texts* <<http://www.scripturalreasoning.org>> [Accessed 5 April 2016].
- Caputo, John D., 'Instants, Secrets, and Singularities: Dealing Death in Kierkegaard and Derrida', in *Kierkegaard in Post/Modernity*, ed. by Martin J. Matustik and Merold Westphal (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 216-238.
- Carlisle, Clare, *Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling: A Readers Guide* (London: Continuum, 2010).
- Dalrymple, Timothy, 'Abraham: Framing Fear and Trembling' in *Kierkegaard and the Bible: the Old Testament*, ed. by Lee Barrett and Jon Stewart (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 43-89.
- Exum, J. Cheryl, "'Mother in Israel": A Familiar Figure Reconsidered', in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. by Letty M. Russell (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), pp. 73-85.
- Fish, Stanley, 'What Makes an Interpretation Acceptable?', in *Is there a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (London: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 338-355.
- Grant, Robert M., and David Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible* (London: SCM Press, 1984).
- Green, Ronald M., 'Abraham, Isaac and the Jewish Tradition: An Ethical Reappraisal', *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, 10 (1982), 1-21.
- Green, Ronald M., "'Enough is Enough!" Fear and Trembling is Not about Ethics', *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, 21 (1993), 191-209.
- Gellman, Jerome I., *The Fear, The Trembling and The Fire: Kierkegaard and the Hasidic Masters on the Binding of Isaac* (London: University Press of America, 1994).
- Hannay, Alastair and Gordon D. Marino, 'Introduction', in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. by Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 1-14.
- Hegel, Georg. W. F., *Early Theological Writings*, trans. by T. M. Knox and Richard Kroner (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975).
- Kant, Immanuel, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. by Theodore Green and Hoyt Hudson, 2nd edn (New York: Harper & Row, 1960).
- Kierkegaard, Søren, *Fear and Trembling/ Repetition*, ed. and trans. by Edna H. Hong and Howard V. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).
- Levenson, Jon, *Inheriting Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012).
- Levinas, Emmanuel, 'Existence and Ethics', in *Kierkegaard: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Jonathon Rée and Jane Chamberlain (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp.26-38
- Lippit, John, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to: Kierkegaard and Fear and Trembling* (London: Routledge, 2003)
- Maimonides, Moses, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. by Shlomo Pines (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1963)
- Parwez, Ghulam A., *Exposition of the Holy Quran*, trans. by Habib-ur-Rehman Khan (Lahore: Tolu-e-Islam, 2010)
- Poole, Roger, 'The Unknown Kierkegaard: Twentieth-Century Receptions', in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. by Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp.48-75
- Taylor, Mark C., 'Journey to Moriah: Hegel vs. Kierkegaard', *The Harvard Theological Review*, 70 (1977), 305-326