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That Solitary Individual - The Biblical Joshua as Kierkegaard's 'Knight of Faith' and Nietzsche's 'Man of Power'

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By the 19th century, European philosophical thought was experiencing the residual effects of the Enlightenment. Ideas such as the social contract, power of the people, and the ubiquity of universal morality had permeated European society. In response to this ‘rise of the masses,’ early existentialists like Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard and outspoken atheist Friedrich Nietzsche ridiculed the loss of personal identity and called upon others to transcend the masses to live as an individual. While Kierkegaard and Nietzsche represent opposing ends of the religious spectrum, their models of individuality have commonalities. In his theological treatise *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard analyzes the character of Abraham to derive an archetype for the ‘knight of faith,’ a supreme individual who stands alone before God; similarly, in *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche finds the cure for European ‘sickness’ in the ‘man of power,’ an individual characterized by strength and vitality. The Biblical character of Joshua fills both roles, demonstrating the importance of individuality in faith and the immense power of the man who draws his strength from God.

For Kierkegaard, the knight of faith’s character exhibited most clearly in Abraham exists in a series of paradoxes. This man has gone through the difficult process of surpassing the universal to become the ultimate individual in which “he resigned everything infinitely, and then took everything back on the strength of the absurd” (Kierkegaard 70). Through this transition, the knight of faith can exist in the ordinary world while simultaneously understanding the realm of infinity. Kierkegaard describes the knight’s experience, highlighting its paradoxical nature: “he drains in infinite resignation the deep sorrow of existence, he knows the bliss of infinity, he has felt the pain of renouncing everything, whatever is most precious in the world, and yet to him finitude tastes just as good as to one who has never known anything higher” (70). For Kierkegaard, the ideal man understands his place within the universal but is able to sacrifice that to move to the higher realm of faith. The realm of faith is characterized by the knight’s solitude and separation from mankind. This individuality is so intensely personal that the knight of faith cannot be properly understood by other men (“he who walks the narrow path of faith, no one can advise, no one can understand”(95)). Finally, the knight of faith must place himself in relation to God so that “the individual relates himself absolutely, as the single individual, to the absolute” (98), trusting the power of God to surpass rationality so that the knight does everything “on the strength of the absurd” (69). In simplest terms, the knight of faith is the solitary individual who stands alone before the master of the universe, with a profound recognition of who he is in relation to the absolute transcendence of God.

An analysis of the character of Joshua shows that he fills Kierkegaard’s archetype of the knight of faith. As the leader of the tribes of Israel, Joshua represents the mouthpiece of God to his people. The Book of Joshua recounts

numerous instances of Joshua speaking alone with the Lord and returning to Israel with a set of commands or directions; as the knight of faith, he continually interprets between the universal and the particular existing simultaneously in both realms. His ability to interpret God's revelations to Israel is understandable only if Joshua lives in close proximity to God existing in continual relationship with him. This is reflected in Joshua's speech to the Israelites in Joshua 24, in which he encourages them to choose to serve God while recognizing their journeys will take their own form. He states, "as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD" (Joshua 24:15),¹ leaving the decision of who to follow open for the rest of Israel. Through this declaration, Joshua embraces the individuality of true faith and "relates himself absolutely, as the single individual, to the absolute" (98).

Also inherent in Joshua's story is his continual reliance on the 'strength of the absurd.' Much like Abraham, Kierkegaard's poster-child for the knight of faith, Joshua follows seemingly nonsensical commands, fully relying on his faith in God to guide his actions. While this theme runs throughout the book of Joshua, it is most evident in Joshua's actions when conquering the city of Jericho. When the Israelites besiege Jericho, known throughout the land for its impenetrable walls, God gives them explicit instructions on capturing the city. God tells Joshua, "march around the city once with all the armed men. Do this for six days. Have seven priests carry trumpets of rams' horns in front of the ark. On the seventh day, march around the city seven times, with the priests blowing the trumpets. When you hear them sound a long blast on the trumpets, have all the people give a loud shout; then the wall of the city will collapse" (Joshua 6:3-5). The absurdity of God's command here is clear: there is nothing rational to suggest that marching around a city will make its walls fall. In addition, this tactic is dangerous because it exposes the men, including unarmed priests, to an unprotected attack from the city walls. By following God's command, Joshua is actively jeopardizing the lives of both his men and the religious leaders of Israel. Nevertheless, even though God's command goes directly against reasonable military strategy, Joshua relies on faith and does exactly what God instructs. Kierkegaard's analysis of faith is especially beneficial when imagining the confusion of other Israelite leaders as Joshua relayed this command. He writes, "faith is this paradox, the single individual is quite unable to make himself intelligible to anyone" (Kierkegaard 99). In this rejection of human reason and embrace of divine authority, Joshua embodies another vital characteristic of the knight of faith, "not the least thing does he do except on the strength of the absurd" (69). Joshua embraces the absurd to draw in power through faith.

Another indispensable characteristic of Kierkegaard's knight of faith is his ability to suspend the ethical to follow a higher command. This "teleological

¹ All biblical citations are taken from the New International Version (NIV) translation of the bible.

suspension of the ethical” (99) allows the knight to supersede universal morality to obey God by doing something that is not readily justifiable through universal ethical standards. For Kierkegaard, this is realized in Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac. Even though murder, especially the murder of a child, is ethically irredeemable, Abraham’s willingness to kill Isaac represents his pursuit of a higher calling. Joshua faces a similar challenge when commanded to destroy the Canaanites. Before the Israelites conquer the promised land, they are instructed to annihilate those living there: “when the LORD your God has handed them over to you, and you have defeated them, then you must destroy them totally. Make no treaty with them and show them no mercy” (Deuteronomy 7:2). In Hebrew, this is understood as a command to *herem*: to give over to destruction; and as the military leader of Israel, it is Joshua’s responsibility to ensure that *herem* is carried out. The suspension of the ethical is clear here: *herem* is little short of genocide and completely opposed to all standards of morality.² Nevertheless, Joshua obeys God’s command; the battle of Jericho contains a specific reference to this in which the Israelites “devoted the city to the LORD and destroyed with the sword every living thing in it - men and women, young and old” (Joshua 6:21). Joshua fulfills his duty even as he rejects the ethical, “for duty is precisely the expression of God’s will” (Kierkegaard 88); and in doing so, he transcends ordinary faith to experience God’s “supreme passion, the sacred, pure, and humble expression of the divine madness which the pagans admired” (56).

On the other end of the spectrum, Nietzsche asserts that the man of power should have nothing to do with faith in God. Concerned with the ‘sick weakness’ of modern Europe, Nietzsche’s ideal man arises as a figure characterized by power and vitality. Like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche’s man of power is fiercely individual; he refuses to be defined by society and will not conform to societal moral standards. Nietzsche determined that because of Christian patterns of inducing guilt in the individual, man had come to fear himself, and “together with the fear of man we have also lost our love of him, our reverence for him, our hopes for him, even the will to him” (Nietzsche 44). Nietzsche was disgusted by what he saw as man’s unjustified hatred of himself. In opposition to the self-loathing masses which Nietzsche believed permeated European culture, he espoused that the ideal man “feels himself elevated above the surfeit of ill-constituted, sickly, weary and exhausted people of which Europe is beginning to

² It should be noted that many contemporary Christians struggle to reconcile this command with their understanding of a loving God. Many biblical scholars have sought to explain the reasoning behind this passage. Some interpretations call into question whether God commanded the people’s physical destruction or a metaphorical destruction of their values and religious systems. But for purposes of this essay, the scripture is interpreted literally, and Joshua’s actions support this understanding.

stink today” (Nietzsche 43). According to Nietzsche, the elevated man is “the sovereign individual, like only to himself, liberated again from morality of custom” (59) and “characterized by a proud consciousness [...] of his own power and freedom” (59). Instead of rejecting humanity, this man revels in his humanness, embracing this identity instead of fleeing from it. Above all else, this man is powerful and loves life; he is a “spirit strengthened by war and victory, for whom conquest, adventure, danger, and even pain have become needs” (96).

Joshua also fills Nietzsche’s prescription of the man of power, suggesting that the pursuit of God may not lead to the weak sickness to which Nietzsche confines it. The book of Joshua opens with God’s selection of Joshua as the leader of Israel and his command to Joshua to “be strong and very courageous” (Joshua 1:6). This command becomes the theme verse for the book of Joshua and the most concise definition of his character. The parallels are evident: both Joshua and the man of power are defined by their strength and courage as individuals. Central to the Book of Joshua is the conquest theme represented by Israel’s efforts to conquer Canaan. Joshua, the leader of the Israelites, spearheads this campaign. Here, he can be likened to “the splendid blond beast prowling about avidly in search of spoil and victory” (Nietzsche 41). Throughout the entire book, Joshua represents the immense power of God revealed in a man. He is remarkably similar to Nietzsche’s predicted savior of humanity, a “man of great love and contempt, the creative spirit, whose compelling strength will not let him rest in any aloofness” (96).

However, Joshua does not fulfill all of Nietzsche’s prerequisites. Most importantly, Joshua does not draw his strength from being human. While he by no means falls in line with men who lead Nietzsche to declare, “We cheerfully vivisection our souls: what is the ‘salvation’ of the soul to us today?” (Nietzsche 113), Joshua’s strength comes from his deep faith in God rather than belief in the transcendence of mankind. And yet, Joshua can accurately be said to possess “a sensation of mankind come to completion” (Nietzsche 59), but it is a completion that came through relationship with God rather than mankind completing itself. The character of Joshua challenges Nietzsche’s archetype of the man of power as completely independent of any higher being. Joshua is a man of strength and glory, victorious in all he does, with a prolific love of existence, and still, it would be hard to find a man who had more faith in God than Joshua. The pursuit of God can lead to the birth of a man of power blessed by God, endowed with victory. Nietzsche’s definition of God as “the immeasurability of punishment and guilt” (Nietzsche 92) falls short of explaining this ability to transcend the mundane through relation to God.

Joshua’s most notable action enhances both Kierkegaard’s and Nietzsche’s understandings of the individual. In Joshua 10, while pursuing enemies on the battlefield, Joshua makes a direct demand of God, commanding “sun, stand still

over Gibeon, and you, moon, over the valley of Aijalon.’ So the sun stood still, and the moon stopped.” (Joshua 10:13). After this event, the Bible recognizes that “there has never been a day like it before or since, where the LORD listened to a human being” (Joshua 10:14). There is no more profound recognition of individual faith than for Joshua to make a demand of the Lord. Kierkegaard would marvel at this immense expression of faith as Joshua stands alone before God with the humility to demand his favor and blessing. And for Nietzsche, there can be no greater revelation of human power than for a man to literally stop the earth’s motion. Joshua’s actions are only understandable through a combination of the knight of faith and the man of power, where he stands, the supreme individual, in absolute relation to God, with the inestimable strength, glory, and victory that comes from abandoning himself to faith.

Works Cited

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