

The Nature of Faith

John Brown

Shawn Kain
9/14/10

"And God tempted Abraham and said unto him, Take Isaac, thine only son, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah, and offer him there for a burnt offering upon the mountain which I will show thee."

It was early in the morning, Abraham arose betimes, he had the asses saddled, left his tent, and Isaac with him, but Sarah looked out of the window after them until they had passed down the valley and she could see them no more. They rode in silence for three days. On the morning of the fourth day Abraham said never a word, but he lifted up his eyes and saw Mount Moriah afar off. He left the young men behind and went on alone with Isaac beside him up to the mountain. But Abraham said to himself, "I will not conceal from Isaac whither this course leads him." He stood still, he laid his hand upon the head of Isaac in benediction, and Isaac bowed to receive the blessing. And Abraham's face was fatherliness, his look was mild, his speech encouraging. But Isaac was unable to understand him, his soul could not be exalted; he embraced Abraham's knees, he fell at his feet imploringly, he begged for his young life, for the fair hope of his future, he called to mind the joy in Abraham's house, he called to mind the sorrow and loneliness. Then Abraham lifted up the boy, he walked with him by his side, and his talk was full of comfort and exhortation. But Isaac could not understand him. He climbed Mount Moriah, but Isaac understood him not. Then for an instant he turned away from him, and when Isaac again saw Abraham's face it was changed, his glance was wild, his form was horror. He seized Isaac by the throat, threw him to the ground, and said, "Stupid boy, dost thou then suppose that I am thy father? I am an idolater. Dost thou suppose that this is God's bidding? No, it is my desire." Then Isaac trembled and cried out in his terror, "O God in heaven, have compassion upon me. God of Abraham, have compassion upon me. If I have no father upon earth, be Thou my father!" But Abraham in a low voice said to himself, "O Lord in heaven, I thank Thee. After all it is better for him to believe that I am a monster, rather than that he should lose faith in Thee."¹

"Thus and in many like ways that man of whom we are speaking [Isaac] thought concerning this event. Every time he returned home after wandering to Mount Moriah, he sank down with weariness, he folded his hands and said, "No one is so great as Abraham! Who is capable of understanding him?"²

Who is capable of understanding him? On the surface, the story of biblical Abraham and Isaac evoke thoughts of condemnation and confusion. What could

¹ Keirkegaard, Soren. Fear and Trembling. Radford, Va: Wilder Publications., 2008 (p.9)

² Keirkegaard, Soren. Fear and Trembling. Radford, Va: Wilder Publications., 2008 (p.11)

the moral of such a story be; and what kind of people would live by such convictions? At first, it is almost dismissed as superstition from the archaic times of the West. However, these feelings change when we encounter a historical character like John Brown. His actions force us to reconsider such biblical tales. Fable and legend play an active role in shaping our society and the more objective study of history helps us to understand our past, and both subjects are relatively easy to comprehend; but what about faith? How can we understand the role that faith has played on the people of our past without a thorough understanding of faith itself? I don't believe we can. John Brown was a deeply religious man that believed in an active omnipotent Lord; a God that he had direct communication with and a God that viewed his life as a trial that would come to an ultimate judgment. Without an appreciation for the nature of faith, John Brown's actions, like the biblical Abraham's actions, become preposterous and wrong. However, with an appreciation of faith John Brown's actions may be judged as right. In any case, his relationship with the Lord can never be truly understood; such is the nature of faith and such is the nature of John Brown.

The day of his dying, December 2nd, dawned glorious ; twenty-four hours before he had kissed his wife good-bye, and on this morning he visited his doomed companions—Shields Green and Copeland first; then the wavering Cook and Coppoc and the unmovable Stevens. At last he turned toward the place of his hanging. Since early morning three thousand soldiers had been marching and countermarching around the scaffold, which had been erected a half mile from Charlestown, encircling it for fifteen miles; a hush sat on the hearts of men. John Brown rode out into the morning. "This is a beautiful land," he said. It was beautiful. Wide, glistening, rolling fields flickered in the sunlight. Beyond, the Shenandoah went rolling northward, and still afar rose the mighty masses of the Blue Ridge, where Nat Turner had fought and died, where Gabriel had looked for refuge and where John Brown had builded his awful dream. Some say

he kissed a Negro child as he passed, but Andrew Hunter vehemently denies it. "No Negro could get access to him," he says, and he is probably right; and yet all about him as he hung there knelt the funeral guard he prayed for when he said: 'My love to all who love their neighbors. I have asked to be spared from having any weak or hypocritical prayers made over me when I am publicly murdered, and that my only religious attendants be poor little dirty, ragged, bareheaded, and barefooted slave boys and girls, led by some gray-headed slave mother. Farewell! Farewell!'³

John Brown was a man of principle and faith. His principles were clear and easily understood: "my love to all who love their neighbors," he despised slavery. His faith, however, was a mystery. Did he believe that the raid on Harper's Ferry could have had a successful outcome after the terrible conclusions drawn by Frederick Douglass in the weeks prior to the event... that against incredible odds and without the help of Douglass he and his men would be protected by the Lord? Or was he truly content to sacrifice himself and his sons simply to make a statement against slavery? Or was he putting on a façade for posterity and fame? Faith is a paradox that cannot be understood rationally. Soren Kierkegaard, a philosopher and contemporary of John Brown, who's supposed "only wish" was to be present at the time when Abraham experienced his "shudder of thought"⁴, wrote about faith:

"Isaac he must love with all his soul; when God requires Isaac he must love him if possible even more dearly, and only on this condition can he sacrifice him; for in fact it is this love for Isaac which, by its paradoxical opposition to his love for God, makes his act a sacrifice. But the distress and dread in this paradox is that, humanly speaking, he is entirely unable to make himself intelligible. Only at the moment when his act is in absolute contradiction to his feelings is his act a sacrifice, but the reality of

³ Du Bois, W.E.B. John Brown. New York: Random House Publishing, Inc., 2001 (p.218)

⁴ Kierkegaard, Soren. Fear and Trembling. Radford, Va: Wilder Publications., 2008 (p.8)

his acts is the factor by which he belongs to the universal, and in that aspect he is and remains a murderer.”⁵

W.E.B. Du Bois, the first black man to receive a Ph.D. from Harvard, wrote a biography of John Brown approximately 50 years after the raid on Harper’s Ferry. He “remembered the years during which he wrote *John Brown* as a period of deep personal transformation.”⁶ In the biography he wrote about the nature of faith, in regards to John Brown’s actions, and our ability to understand it, as *The Riddle of the Sphinx*:

“THE deed was done. The next day the world knew and the world sat in puzzled amazement. It was ever so and ever will be. When a prophet like John Brown appears, how must we of the world receive him? Must we follow out the drear, dread logic of surrounding facts, as did the South, even if they crucify a clean and pure soul, simply because consistent allegiance to our cherished, chosen ideal demands it? If we do, the shame will brand our latest history. Shall we hesitate and waver before his clear white logic, now helping, now fearing to help, now believing, now doubting? Yes, this we must do so long as the doubt and hesitation are genuine; but we must not lie. If we are human, we must thus hesitate until we know the right. How shall we know it? That is the Riddle of the Sphinx. We are but darkened groping souls, that know not light often because of its very blinding radiance. Only in time is truth revealed.”⁷

Russell Banks, a present-day American author, recently wrote the book *Cloudsplitter*. Although the book is based on the historical events and the character of John Brown, Banks admits that the book is not historically accurate. *Cloudsplitter* is a story narrated from the perspective of Owen Brown (again about 50 years after the events took place), a son that was witness to his father’s incredible deeds and subject to his Old Testament prophet like qualities. Throughout the story John Brown is compared to Abraham and Owen is likened

⁵ Keirkegaard, Soren. *Fear and Trembling*. Radford, Va: Wilder Publications., 2008 (p.53)

⁶ Du Bois, W.E.B. *John Brown*. New York: Random House Publishing, Inc., 2001 (p.xi)

⁷ Du Bois, W.E.B. *John Brown*. New York: Random House Publishing, Inc., 2001 (p.200)

to Isaac. Russell Banks stated in an interview that he wrote the book in order to, and for us to understand the human soul: “The portrait is of a moralist of biblical proportions who dedicates himself to the eradication of slavery and turns to killing as if it were an act of God.”⁸ Banks presented his interpretation of Brown and Abraham, Owen and Isaac and the nature of faith in the following manner:

“Father [John Brown] was to be our Abraham; we were to be his little Isaacs. We were supposed to know ahead of time, however, the happy outcome of the story- we were supposed to know that it was a story, not about us and our willingness to lie on a rock on Mount Moriah and be sacrificed under his knife, but about our father and his willingness to obey his terrible God. That was the difference between us and our father. We had him for a father, and he had someone else. His father, like ours, had taught his son John to be independent of all men, but Grandfather had included himself, the teacher, amongst them. He, too, like Father, had told the story of Abraham and Isaac to his eldest son, but he had told it in such a way that it was not about the nature of obedience or sacrifice; it was about the nature of God. Grandfather Brown was a gentle, rational man whose greatest difficulty was in accommodating his character to a cruel and inexplicable universe, and unlike his son, he was not bound by a lifelong struggle to overcome his own willfulness and vanity. It’s their own secret struggles that shape the stories people tell their children. And had I been blessed with a son of my own I would have told yet a third way. The central figure in it would have been neither Abraham nor God. It would have been Isaac, and the questions my story asked and answered would have been Isaac’s alone.

I would have told my son that Isaac’s father, Abraham, rose up early in the morning and led Isaac up into the mountains of Moriah, claiming that he had been directed to do this by God, in order there to make a sacrifice unto him. And Isaac believed his father, for he loved him and had never known him to lie. And when they reached the mountaintop and Isaac’s father had claved the wood for the burnt offering and Isaac saw no lamb there, the boy spoke unto Abraham, his father, saying, ‘Behold the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?’ And his father said unto Isaac, ‘God will provide a lamb.’ But when Isaac saw his father come forward with a rope and a knife in his hands to bind and slay him upon the altar they had built together, he understood that he himself was to be the lamb. He was afraid and asked himself, did he love his father so greatly that he could not flee from Moriah back to Canaan, where lay his

⁸ Gussow, Mel. John Brown Lives Anew As a Writer’s Inspiration. The New York Times: published April 27, 1998

aged mother, Sara, or that he could not follow his father's bondswoman Hagar and her son, Ishmael, who was his brother, into the wilderness of Beersheba? He said to his father, 'I heard not this command from God. It comes to me only from thee, and thou art not the Lord, nor canst thou speak for Him. For thou hast taught me that, and I have believed it, and therefore now I must flee thee from this place, or else abandon all that thou hast taught me.' Whereupon his father fell down upon the ground and said that an angel of the Lord was calling to him out of heaven, saying, 'Abraham, Abraham, lay not thine hand upon the lad, for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing that thou hast not withheld thy son from me.' And Isaac showed his father where behind him a ram had been caught in a thicket by his horns, and Abraham went and took the ram and offered him up for a burnt offering in the stead of Isaac, and father and son prayed together, giving thanks unto the Lord, and descended together from the mountain feeling wise and greatly blessed by the Lord. That is the story I would tell."⁹

I submit that most stories could be read and history studied without such demands on the reader. To contemplate the actions of John Brown and to contemplate the actions of Abraham is to contemplate the nature of faith, not only of the world, but within oneself. Serious readers and thinkers will be transformed after such an experience. Incredibly, John Brown himself wrote in his last letter to his family about the nature of faith and his coming sacrifice:

'Be determined to know by experience, as soon as may be, whether Bible instruction is of divine origin or not. Be sure to owe no man anything, but to love one another... to abhor, with underlying hatred also, the sum of all villainies, slavery'. And finally he rejoiced: 'Men cannot imprison, or chain, or hang the soul. I go joyfully in behalf of millions that 'have no rights' that this great and glorious, this Christian republic is 'bound to respect.' Strange change in morals, political as well as Christian, since 1776."¹⁰

Was John Brown insane?; for if he was, his actions could not be understood. However, what if he was sane? Could his actions have been justified?

⁹ Banks, Russell. Cloudsplitter. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, Inc., 1998 (p.495)

¹⁰ Du Bois, W.E.B. John Brown. New York: Random House Publishing, Inc., 2001 (p.224)

According to Keirkegaard, like Abraham, John Brown's actions could not be ethically justified. But, according to Kierkegaard, faith is not bound by ethics, so could his actions have been religiously justified? Kierkegaard suggests that they could have been:

"It is now my intention to draw out from the story of Abraham the dialectical consequences inherent in it, expressing them in the form of problemata, in order to see what a tremendous paradox faith is, a paradox which is capable of transforming a murder into a holy act well pleasing to God, a paradox which gives Isaac back to Abraham, which no thought can master, because faith begins precisely where thinking leaves off."¹¹

"How then did Abraham exist? He believed. This is the paradox which keeps him upon the sheer edge and which he cannot make clear to any other man, for the paradox is that he as the individual puts himself in an absolute relation to the absolute. Is he justified in doing this? His justification is once more the paradox; for if he is justified, it is not by virtue of anything universal, but by virtue of being the particular individual."¹²

"The ethical expression for what Abraham did is, that he would murder Isaac; the religious express is that he would sacrifice Isaac; but precisely in this contradiction consists the dread which can well make a man sleepless."¹³

John Brown believed that he was sane¹⁴. When asked by the 'inquisitive Southern aristocrats' after he was captured at Harper's Ferry if he thought he was 'an instrument in the hands of Providence?' He simply stated: "I do."¹⁵ Was he right? I believe that the answer depends on the person who is asking the question and his or her own reckoning of faith. In the words of Kierkegaard:

"As for Abraham there was no one who could understand him. And yet think what he attained! He remained true to his love. But he who loves

¹¹ Keirkegaard, Soren. *Fear and Trembling*. Radford, Va: Wilder Publications., 2008 (p.38)

¹² Keirkegaard, Soren. *Fear and Trembling*. Radford, Va: Wilder Publications., 2008 (p.45)

¹³ Keirkegaard, Soren. *Fear and Trembling*. Radford, Va: Wilder Publications., 2008 (p.21)

¹⁴ Du Bois, W.E.B. *John Brown*. New York: Random House Publishing, Inc., 2001 (p.215)

¹⁵ Du Bois, W.E.B. *John Brown*. New York: Random House Publishing, Inc., 2001 (p.208)

God has no need of tears, no need of admiration, in his love he forgets his suffering, yea, so completely has he forgotten it that afterwards there would not even be the least inkling of his pain if God Himself did not recall it, for God sees in secret and knows the distress and counts the tears and forgets nothing.

So either there is a paradox, that the individual stands in an absolute relation to the absolute / or Abraham is lost.”¹⁶

¹⁶ Keirkegaard, Soren. Fear and Trembling. Radford, Va: Wilder Publications., 2008 (p.88)

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(Originally written in 1843)