SOME NOTES ABOUT THE BIBLICAL INFLUENCE ON KIERKEGAARD'S THEORY OF STAGES

Igor Tavilla[*]

University of Parma, Dipartimento A.L.E.F., Via M. D'Azeglio 85, Parma, Italy

Abstract

In this essay I will offer a detailed investigation of the importance that the Bible had on Søren Kierkegaard's theory of stages. I will begin with focusing on the fundamental role that the Augustinian-Pauline vocabulary have had in Kierkegaard's choice of the term 'stage'. Then, I will explain that the phrase 'stages on life's way' itself can be regarded as a derivation of the wisdom books. Subsequently I will outline the way in which the biblical typology influenced Kierkegaard conception of the three basic stages, respectively presented as 'first immediacy' (aesthetic), 'infinite requirement' (ethical) and 'fulfilment' (religious). In the end I will argue that the Kierkegaard's notion of the leap has a biblical base and that understanding the biblical connection will enhance the grasp of the transition from one stage to the other in terms of an ontological passage from not-being to being (creation/Adam), from being to not being (annihilating power of the law/Moses), and from not being to being anew (new creation/Christ).

Keywords: stages, life, way, typology, leap

1. Introduction

One of the most controversial points about the theory of stages is the definition itself of what exactly Kierkegaard means with the term 'stage' [1]. ("The Danish noun *Stadium* or *Stadie* derives from the Greek word στάδιον, which refers to an ancient Greek racetrack that covered a distance of 600 Greek feet. A stage thus has come to mean the covering of his length of track one time. In Danish, it means a part of a larger course of development. It is often used in the sense of a surpassed or already completed stage." [1]) In his monograph on Kierkegaard, Harald Høffding (1843-1931) posed the following objection: "It is an inappropriate term which Kierkegaard uses when he calls that which he describes *Stadier*. Since by a stage we mean a step in a development; but about Kierkegaardian Stages we do not get to know whence they come, and basically (because 'the leap' is not an answer), neither where they go." [2]

So, the term 'stage' would seem to suggest more than Kierkegaard wants to admit. In fact Kierkegaardian stages appear closed and impermeable to each other, by reason of the fact that the transition between them does not take place

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[*]E-mail: igortavi@libero.it

in a gradual manner, but through an abrupt, unpredictable leap. To speak of 'stages' would require, instead, an evolution, and this could happen, as Høffding saw clearly, only if the different forms of existence have no fixed and unchangeable characteristics so to allow a gradual transformation of the one into the other [2, p. 90-91].

Yet this objection only makes sense if we assume that the progression through the stages has to be, as in the Hegelian philosophy, the result of quantitative changes ruled by the dialectic of mediation. But there is reason to believe that the terminological question raised by Høffding can be resolved by examining the biblical sources that inspired Kierkegaard's conception of stages.

2. Stages in the Augustinian-Pauline salvation theology

Evidence of the biblical influence on Kierkegaardian vocabulary can be found in a journal entry dated 14 January 1837. There Kierkegaard compares Augustine and Pelagius. Referring to the Augustinian conception of Christianity, Kierkegaard uses the term 'stage' in the plural form. This quotation is one of the first occurrences of the word 'stage' in the Kierkegaardian *corpus*: "There is a fundamental opposition: Augustine and Pelagius. The former wants to crush everything in order then to regenerate it; the latter appeals to man as he is. Thus regarding Christianity, the former system acquires three stages [*Stadier*]: Creation – The Fall and, as a consequence, death and powerlessness [*Døds- og Afmagts-tilstand*] – and a new Creation, so that man is placed in the position [*Standpunct*] of being able to choose, and afterward – if he chooses – Christianity." [S. Kierkegaard, Pap. I A 95]

During the winter semester 1833-1834 and the summer semester 1834 Kierkegaard attended to Henrik Nicolai Clausen's lectures on Dogmatics, and as a result of it he was well informed about the Augustinian doctrine of the sin and restoration. In the notes from 1839-1841, we can also see that, for Kierkegaard, Augustine's point of view is rooted in the fifth chapter of the *Epistle to Romans* [S. Kierkegaard, Pap. II C 35; 3; 4]. In that text, Paul describes the itinerary of salvation in the following terms: "but death reigned from Adam until Moses, even upon those who had not sinned in the likeness of Adam's transgression, who is [the] figure of him to come" (Romans 5.14). (This pericope recurs often in Kierkegaard's Journals and lies at the background of *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844).)

In his interpretation of salvation history Augustine spoke alternatively about three divisions of time or three stages. In the *Second exposition on Psalm 29*, Augustine explained why Christ had been in the grave for three days before rising again: "one day is [the time] before the law, the second, under the law, and the third under grace" [5]. In the *Third exposition on Psalm 103*, he mentioned the three years-old animals that Abraham offered to God (Genesis 15.9): "Then it is said that these animals were three years old, because the revelation of grace took place in old age. The first age was the one that preceded the Law; the second began when the Law was given; the third is the current one,

which lasts since the kingdom of heaven has been preached." [5, vol. 6, p. 462] In *De Doctrina Christiana* we find: "three divisions of time, before the law, under the law and under the grace" [5, vol. 8, p. 39], while in *De Trinitate*: "we compute one portion of time before the law; a second, under the law; a third, under grace" [5, vol. 11, p. 78]. In the *Sermo* 72: "The first time was before the Law; the second under the Law; the third is now, which is the time of grace" [5, vol. 7, p. 405]. In the *Sermo* 110, about the Gospel of Matthew (Mathew 21.18-22): "The fig-tree is the human race. And the three years are the three times; one before the Law, the second under the Law, the third under grace." [5, vol. 7, p. 559]

It deserves to be noticed that there is a numerical correspondence between Kierkegaardian basic stages and those that Augustine and Paul preached about. "There are three existence-sphere: the esthetic, the ethical, the religious" states Frater Taciturnus [6]. And in the *Unscientific Postscript* (1846) Johannes Climacus claims: "There are three stages, an aesthetic, an ethical, a religious" [7]; then he reiterates: "There are three existence-spheres: the esthetic, ethical, religious" [7, p. 501]. But what is most interesting for our purpose is that while the Latin 'tempus' suggests the idea of becoming, 'gradus' means step, stage or degree. It is very likely that these references inspired Kierkegaard's conception of a progressive and ascendant movement taking place throughout holy history and involving every human being's personal existence, so that it develops through different stages. In a note from his diary, dated 6th January 1939, Kierkegaard emphasizes: "The life of every individual also has its Genesis, and then its *Exodus* (its exit into the world), its Leviticus, when the mind turns toward heaven, his Numbers, when one begins to count the years, its Deuteronomy" [S. Kierkegaard, Pap. II A 321].

Moreover, also the title of his pseudonymous work of 1845, *Stages on Life's Way*, provides evidence of the biblical influence on Kierkegaard's vocabulary. The phrase 'life's way' [*Livets Vej*], which recurs several times in Nicolai Balle's [8] and in Thomas Kingo's [9, 10] Hymnsbooks, can be regarded as a derivation of the biblical wisdom books. "Thou wilt make known to me the path of life" says the Psalmist (Psalm 16.11). In the book of Proverbs, the sacred author warns against the charm of the foreign woman who does not walk in "the path of life" (Proverbs 5.6); on the contrary, "reproofs of instruction are the way of life" (Proverbs 6.23); "keeping instruction is the path to life" (Proverbs 10.17), "the path of life is upwards for the wise" (Proverbs 15.24), "the fear of Jehovah [tendeth] to life" (Proverbs 19.23). In the New Testament the 'way of life' consists essentially in the *sequela Christi*. So it is written: "narrow the gate and straitened the way that leads to life" (Mathew 7.14). In the *Acts*, the King David's prayer sounds: "Thou hast made known to me [the] paths of life" (Acts 2.28). Then, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is called "the way of salvation" (Acts 16.17), or simply "the way of the Lord" (Acts 18.25), "the way of God" (Acts 18.26), "this way" (Acts 22.4), or "the way" (Acts 24.14).

Finally the consonance between the Kierkegaardian stages and the biblical scheme emerges even more clearly in the following words: "The esthetic sphere is the sphere of immediacy, the ethical the sphere of requirement (and this requirement is so infinite that the individual always goes bankrupt), the religious the sphere of fulfillment [*Opfyldelse*]" [6]. As Kierkegaard writes in *Works of Love* (1847), "the concept of the Law is to be inexhaustible, limitless [*uendelig*], endless in its provisions; every provision beget of itself an even more precise provision, and in turn a still more precise provision by reference and in relation to the new provision, and so on infinitely" [11, 12]. Then the images of the bankrupt and the insolvent debtor are part of the *repertoire* that the Danish philosopher often uses to illustrate the dialectic between law and grace [S. Kierkegaard, Pap. XI^2 A 286; Pap. XI^2 A 367], while the term *Opfyldelse* refers to the accomplishment of the Old Testament prophecies and the fulfillment of the law [S. Kierkegaard, Pap. II A 473; Pap. X^3 A 615; Pap. X^3 A 712; Pap. X^4 A 366].

3. The aesthetic stage as 'first immediacy'

According to Johannes Climacus, pleasure (*Nydelse*) and perdition (*Fortabelse*) are the existential features of the aesthetic stage [7, p. 420]. Both of these determinations can be brought back to the biblical conception of the sin (Luke 8.14, Philippians 3.19, Romans 11.25). Nevertheless, they do not exhaust the definition of the aesthetic formulated by Kierkegaard's pseudonyms.

In the *Stages on life's way* Frater Taciturnus states that "the esthetic sphere is the sphere of immediacy" [6], while in *Enten-Eller* (1843) Assessor Wilhelm identifies the aesthetic with 'the first'. On a closer inspection, 'the first', which the pseudonyms speak about, implies a prophetic conception of the time. "The first – says the Assessor – contains the promise of the future" [13] and "what is heralded in the first is something other than the first itself" [20, p. 40]. The figurative relation between the Old and the New Testament lies at the roots of Kierkegaard's conception of 'the first'. 'The first' is a type, a foreshadowing of what will be realized in the future. The picture used by Wilhelm to illustrate his speech confirms that the Bible is inherent to the matter. "There is an engraving that portrays Cain murdering Abel. In the background, one sees Adam and Eve" and the caption reads: "prima cædes, primi parentes, primus luctus [the first killing the first parents, the first sorrow]" [13, p. 40].

Equally significant is the reference to the Epistle to the Hebrews in which a typological relation develops between the 'first alliance' and the 'new alliance', between 'the first tabernacle' and Jesus Christ, the "high priest of the good things to come" (Hebrews 9.11). So the Assessor can affirm that in the Epistle to the Hebrew: "the first acquired its whole profound meaning" [13, p. 41].

4. The ethical stage as 'infinite requirement'

In the second part of *Enten-Eller* Assessor Wilhelm proposes to identify the ethical stage with the Jewish people, chosen as the depository of the Mosaic law. "The ethical is the abstract and as such is without the means for accomplishing the least thing [...] in its perfect abstraction [...] it is always interdictiory. Thus the ethical takes the form of the law." [13, p. 255] The impotence of the ethical corresponds to the impotence of the law, which "has perfected nothing" (Hebrews 7.19), since it has only "a shadow of the coming good things, not the image itself of the things" (Hebrews 10.1). While Assessor Wilhelm outlines in what the moral requirement consists, he evokes a biblical image which is a metaphor to describe the ethical. The ethical is like a shadow which slips continuously out of the hands of those who seek to grasp it [13, p. 255]. Then, the ethical appears only as a transitional stage "and therefore its highest expression is repentance as a negative action" which has "an infinite annihilating power" [6, p. 476-477]. Moreover, "What is said of the law is also true of ethics: it is a disciplinarian that demands, and by its demands only judges but does not bring forth life" [14]. The correspondence between the ethical and the Mosaic law could not have been expressed more clearly.

5. The religious stage as 'fulfillment'

Frater Taciturnus and Johannes Climacus define respectively the religious as a new immediacy and the faith as the immediate [6, p. 6, 162; 7, p. 291]. To understand better the meaning of these expressions we must investigate what exactly the 'new' stands for. In order to do that, it is worthwhile referring to the concept of repetition (*Gjentagelse*), since the dialectic of repetition is the dialectic of the new itself. Constantin Constantius wrote: "the dialectic of repetition is easy, for that which has repeated has been, otherwise it could not be repeated – but the very fact that this has been makes the repetition into something new" [15]. As in the Bible – where the alliance through Christ says 'new' compared to the former one which was founded on the law – also here the 'new' is regarded as the antitype of a prophetic foreshadowing which reaches its fulfillment by the repetition.

Furthermore, to allude to the new immediacy pseudonyms speak of 'rebirth'. In *Philosophical Fragments* (1844) Climacus develops this theme in a very exemplary way. The disciple – the pseudonym states – is literally renewed by Truth. "He becomes a different person, not in the jesting sense – as if he became someone else of a same quality as before – but he becomes a person of a different quality or, as we also call it, a *new* person." [16] He becomes "the new man" (Ephesians 4.24) and he is part of "the new creation" (Mathew 19.28), the "new heavens" (Isaiah 65.17, 66.22), "the new Jerusalem" (Revelation 21.2). This typological relation between the old man and the new man was effectively stressed by the German Lutheran theologian Johan Arndt (1555-1621), whose

devotional book *Vier Bücher vom wahren Christenthum* was probably Quidam's "second book of guidance" [6, p. 230] after the Bible [17].

Coming to the conclusions of his *Epistle to the reader*, Frater Taciturnus identifies the religious stage with a new immediacy. The pseudonym wonders how this is possible and what the second immediacy differs from the first one [6, p. 484]. Alongside these considerations, Frater Taciturnus discusses the religious problem of the remission of sins, which provides the interpretative key to figure out the biblical sense that is implicit in the expression 'second immediacy'. The remission of sins is, in fact, a new creation in Christ. As "the first man, Adam" (1 Corinthians 15.46) opposes to "the second man" (1 Corinthians 15.47), "the second Adam" or "the last Adam" (1 Corinthians 15.45), the "figure of him to come" (Romans 5.14), the first immediacy, the aesthetic, is figuratively opposed by Kierkegaard to the new one, the religious.

6. The leap and the biblical dialectic of stages

In order to make understandable the progression through stages, Kierkegaard introduces the category of the leap (*Springet*), which means that each stage is not the result of the development of a previous stage. Each stage comes into being from not-being, not referring to anything except to itself. This peculiar way of coming into being presents an ontological fracture which Kierkegaard can only seek to represent it through the image of the chasmic abyss (*svælgende Dyb*) [7, p. 409, 423]. But this description can scarcely be regarded as an exhaustive explanation, because the leap takes place between one stage and the other and for this reason can not be observed. "[Kierkegaard] explains that the leap takes place between two moments, between two states, one of which is the last state in the world of possibilities, the other the first state in the world of reality. It would seem to follow from this that the leap itself can not be observed." [18]

In *Philosophical Fragments* Johannes Climacus has described the redemption as a transition from not-being – in which sin consists – to being, namely to being a 'new man' in Christ. The disciple, argues Climacus, "was in untruth and now along with the condition receives the truth, a change takes place in him like the change from 'not to be' to 'to be'. But this transition from 'not to be' to 'to be' is indeed the transition of birth." [16, p. 19] On a closer inspection, this ontological fracture regards all the stages, starting from the aesthetic. The aesthetic is presented in fact as the stage of immediacy, before which there is nothing. Here the leap from not-being to being occurs for the first time. Høffding ascribes the fact that we cannot know whence the aesthetic comes to Kierkegaard's incoherence [2, p. 89], but assuming that the aesthetic corresponds to 'the first' in the biblical sense, its arising from nothing does not imply any contradiction. On the contrary, it is a consistent consequence with the biblical story of the creation *ex nihilo*, as we can see from a journal entry dated 19th March 1837, in which Kierkegaard draws a parallel between the first creation and the second creation in Christ: "The first creation produces the immed.

consciousness (that's the impression, but just like the wind, one knows neither whence it comes nor whither it blows); beyond this we cannnot go. Xnity is the second creation. (that's why Xt is born of a pure virgin, which is again a creation out of nothing, therefore the spirit of God cast its shadow over the Vrg. Mary, just as previously it brooded over the waters)." [S. Kierkegaard, Pap. II A 31; 19]

Also passing from the aesthetic stage to the ethical requires a leap from being to not-being. Already in his dissertation *On the concept of Irony* Kierkegaard writes: "the skepticism of the law had to pave the way, by its negativity had to consume and cauterize, so to speak, the natural man so that grace would not be taken in vain" [20]. Frater Taciturnus precises that repentance is the ultimate expression of the ethical stage and repentance is a negative action with an infinite annihilating power [6, 21].

Finally, the religious stage appears as the eschatological new creation, which brings the "heavenly man" (Revelation 21.5, 2 Corinthians 5.17) out of not-being, while the leap can be regarded as an index of transcendence, as a sign of God's intervention in human history. In fact, to Kierkegaard's mind, existence does not have an immanent and self-referential evolution, but it develops constantly 'before God', according to a biblical scheme [22]. In this perspective the 'stages on the life's way' come to identify the 'order of grace' consisting of a sequence of steps arranged by God for the redemption of mankind [23].

7. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to investigate the influence of the Bible on Kierkegaard's theory of stages. First, I tried to explain that the genesis of the term 'stage' can be brought back to the Augustinian-Pauline vocabulary. Second, I stressed that 'life's way' is originally a biblical phrase coming from the wisdom book. Then I took in consideration the three basic stages (aesthetic, ethical and religious) – as they have been mainly defined by pseudonyms (as 'first immediacy', 'infinite requirement', and 'fulfilment') – and I tried to argue that the first creation (Adam), the law (Moses) and the new creation (Christ) can be considered as the biblical archetypes of them, while the leap marks the ontological transition from not-being to being (aesthetic), from being to not-being (ethical) and from not-being to being anew (religious).

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