

Each true word is a testament

Prophecy is history /2 – The small and harsh last wishes of a great king confirm that no one is like God

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«David was an excellent man equipped with every virtue that a king should possess. He was prudent, tender, kind with those in need, fair and humane. And he never fell or erred, except with Uriah's wife»

Giuseppe Flavio, *Antichità Giudaiche (Judaic Antiquity): 390-39*

We come straight into the heart of the story of Solomon, and continue with the intrigues and

skulduggery which, in hindsight, reveal other essential messages of biblical humanism to us.

The great biblical stories continue to speak to us because, despite being much greater and more beautiful than we are, they resemble us. It is while being in exile that human communities are given the opportunity to write some of their most beautiful stories. The great suffering during those years, the «beautiful but lost» land, the humiliations, the forced labour, the great prayers of the psalms sung along the rivers of Babylon, created a new and incredibly profound *pietas* in the people, which ended up becoming a new outlook on humanity as a whole. It is while being stranded in the desert that you learn to really value water; it is while coming in contact with the limits of men and wounded and humiliated women that you learn the infinite value of being human. Our suffering and that of others transforms ethics into mercy, the only thing that enables praising the wounds of man because it recognises a blessing in them. You would need an entire lifetime, if even that is enough, to learn how to recognise and meet God in the sins of the world.

When we last saw Adonijah, King David's eldest son, heir and pretender to the throne, he was at a sacred banquet with the leaders of his "party" rivals to that of Solomon, King David's other son.

The sacred meal was a well-known concept among all religions and ancient cults. In many civilisations, food was the first sacrifice offered to the divinities. And when the killing of animals was offered to the gods, that food was also often consumed together, becoming a sacrifice of communion for the members of the community. Dead animals, hence blood and violence that become the place and language for the dialogue between man and the gods and among men themselves. Food was in fact a fundamental resource of life and its very image, something more and different than just mere nutrition; hence it had to be excluded from the laws of individual strengths and skills and shared in common – everyone had to feed within the clan, the tribe and the family, the weak as well and above all: this is the first evolutionary norm protecting society from extinction. It is, therefore, no surprise that murders and other crimes in the Bible take place during sacred meals, because the very act of sacrifice inherently carried a dimension of violence

and death within it (albeit, paradoxically, also connected to life). The same way, it doesn't surprise us that meetings among politicians and businessmen today take place around a meal, when sharing food helps to create and boost relationships, which then in their turn then contribute to grease the mechanisms and dynamics of decision making; nor that many conflicts and separations start at the table or with prepared and refused meals, and that wounded and dying relationships can be reborn through a shared meal, where we rise once again as companions – *cum panis*.

Old David no longer found any excitement despite Abishag, his new incredibly beautiful concubine. Another woman, his wife Bathsheba, arrives to his bedside. The prophet Nathan, however, had visited her before, to tell her about the banquet-sacrifice offered by Adonijah, interpreted by the prophet as an attempt to proclaim himself as the new king: «Then Nathan asked Bathsheba, Solomon's mother, "Have you not heard that Adonijah, the son of Haggith, has become king, and our lord David knows nothing about it? Now then, let me advise you (...) go in to King David and say to him, "My lord the king, did you not swear to me your servant: "Surely Solomon your son shall be king after me, and he will sit on my throne"? Why then has Adonijah become king?»(1 Book of Kings 1, 11-14).

We first met Nathan in the second book of Samuel, after the crime committed by David against Uriah the Hittite, to take away Bathsheba from him. In one of the most emotionally charged and tremendous episodes in the Bible, the prophet then accused David while telling him the parable of the lamb, and subsequently made the King recognise his own sin («Then David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord»: 2 Samuel 12,13). Now Nathan seems a very different person. In the fratricide struggle for succession, he is clearly on Solomon's side, and begins to scheme. Trusting the King's precarious health condition, he probably invents the story of David swearing to Bathsheba («your son shall be king after me »), of which there is no trace in the book of Samuel. He behaves, hence, as a prophet of the court, a Richelieu, a polished plotter of court intrigues. And yet the previous story had revealed his nature as a non-false prophet. Even a real prophet can perform morally dubious and ambiguous acts. The Bible tells us that the prophets can be fragile people and even sinners, as well. It is not their weaknesses or their sins that tell us that they are false prophets. Prophecy is not a moral quality in people. There have been, and there still are, cases of false prophets who are morally irreproachable, false not because they lie or act in bad faith but because they speak in the name of a voice that, objectively, *does not exist*; the same way that there have been and there still are, in the Bible and in real life, true prophets who have committed crimes and sins, while being, however, inhabited by a voice that is true and real and which they have referred to their people with honesty. It would be far too easy if the moral conduct of a person was all that was needed to reveal the truth of their calling – the calling and the holiness of a person are two different things, even if, the two often interact (but not always and not in the same way in everyone). This distinction is the main reason why communities are almost never able to recognise real prophets and for better or for worse confuse them with false ones.

Bathsheba listens to Nathan's advice and goes to her husband David to tell him the story of Adonijah. While the two of them are speaking, Nathan arrives (as promised) and reinforces and confirms Bathsheba's version of things. And once more, David continues to listen, believe and obey a woman: «Then King David said, "Call in Bathsheba! (...) I will surely carry out this very day what I swore to you by the Lord, the God of Israel: Solomon your son shall be king after me, and he will sit on my throne in my place."» (1 Book of Kings 1, 28-30). Maybe, Nathan knew what Bathsheba was to David, this breathtakingly beautiful woman who had enchanted him and turned his life upside down. And as a cunning strategist, he turns to the most powerful weapon available to manipulate David. Many years had passed since David first saw her from his terrace. She had aged, but certain charms, like the different light found in her eyes, never grow old. Some beauties, at least one, are not erased by time, their magic lasts a whole lifetime. If this wasn't the case, we would not be able to recognise in our latest hello the gaze from our first encounter.

David orders Nathan and Zadoc the priest to anoint Solomon king (1 Book of Kings 1, 34-35). Nathan's scheming has proven successful. In this decisive episode in the history of Israel we once again find another narrative that is a constant in biblical stories. In many instances of decisive choices, divine will does not follow the rules of the Law, the first shall be the last, and

the last become the first. This reversal of the natural-divine order of things, almost always, happens when a prophet and/or a woman interferes. Prophecy is a principle that unhinges and tears down the laws of the established order and disrupts the natural course of the community. If it wasn't for the prophets (and some women) the mighty and powerful would never be deposed from their thrones, the last would always remain the last, life would never surprise us and everything would be tremendously boring and foregone, the humble would never be exalted, nobody poor would ever hear him or herself be called "blessed".

Once Solomon has been consecrated, David dies leaving his will after him: «I am about to go the way of all the earth. So be strong, act like a man, and observe what the Lord your God requires: Walk in obedience to him, and keep his decrees and commands, his laws and regulations, as written in the Law of Moses» (1 Kings 2, 2-4). And hence David pronounces his last words. The composer and singer of psalms, the poet and the man in love with God, reaches the end of his life while giving instructions for settling still ongoing scores with some people, who those of you who have read the books of Samuel know very well: «Now you yourself know what Joab son of Zeruiah did to me (...). Deal with him according to your wisdom, but do not let his grey head go down to the grave in peace. But show kindness to the sons of Barzillai of Gilead (...). And remember, you have with you Shimei son of Gera, the Benjamite from Bahurim, who called down bitter curses on me (...). Bring his grey head down to the grave in blood » (1 Kings 2, 5-9). Could we have expected anything different or better from the Bible's much-loved David's will. Other patriarchs die leaving us with the heritage of words that are often much more divine and humane. David, however, remains shrouded in moral ambiguity till the end. This is yet another, efficient, kind of language in which the Bible tells us: *no one is like God*. And this is why no man, not even the greatest ones, should become idols. The Bible's fight against idolatry also takes form in presenting us with non-idealised ethical frescoes of its greatest men and women – making them better people in the process: curing them of their moral plagues while displaying them to us.

Finally, the words regarding Shimei, the Benjamite from Saul's defeated party, are striking. Years later, on the verge of death, David continues to feel the weight of those curses and words hurled at him. In biblical humanism words are a very serious matter. The word creates, fertilizes and rises again. The words of Yahweh and – in a different way but really – ours as well. The Lord's blessing and that of a friend are the greatest gift that we can receive, when that kind word reaches us, loves us, changes us, it becomes the wind-*ruah* that resuscitates the dried structures of our heart. Words are not *vanitas* – breath and smoke – because they affect our bodies and souls; *for they are flesh*. But the Bible is much too true to not take the responsibility of the cost of this upon itself as well: if good words bless us and make us feel better, then bad ones curse and hurt us. They remain living things, acting like moral bacteria in our hearts. Shimei had spoken terrible words against David. They were still there, by his bedside, whispering their last syllables. They still hurt him maybe because they were true («you David deserve the war waged upon you by your son Absalom, for you have fought your "father" Saul as well»). Only words that are true, but spoken without love, are capable of cursing us. True words must be handled with infinite care. They are a *testament*, because they hold the power of life and death.