
FAITH THAT MAY “CONVERT” GOD

THE PROPHET’S JOB ALSO INCLUDES THE “SECOND PRAYER”

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“Evil gossip kills three: the one who says it, the one who listens, and the subject of the gossip; but it does more harm to the one who listens to it than the one who says it.”

Moses Maimonides, *Norms of Moral Life*
(rough translation)

Religions and faiths are also places for the satisfaction of human needs,

because no religion has neglected the material and corporeal dimension of life. Fish, bread, manna, quails, water, focaccia, crushed grapes: the Bible could also be read as a story of food, conviviality, or *goods*. The promised land is a land flowing with milk and honey. But also because of their concrete and whole dimension, faiths have an intrinsic tendency to shrink and be reduced to a *market* where every good on demand meets its offer paying the price, thus becoming idolatries or magic. Authentic prayer can only live and grow in an *encounter of gratuitousness*. Providence cannot be bought; it comes as a surplus above our small contractual register. The biblical God is the God of the Covenant, where the actual good offered is a kind of proximity, a presence. Just like in communities which satisfy essential needs (emotional security, warmth and also concrete and economic needs) if everyone knows how to draw on an interiority that’s deeper than needs, where the most intimate and beautiful part of the communities is generated. The prophets are jealous custodians of this greater beauty that is able to live with a need that nourishes the *dream* and the *need* for God.

In a mystical vision Ezekiel is transported to the temple of Jerusalem: “He put out the form of a hand and took me by a lock of my head, and the Spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven and brought me in visions of God to Jerusalem, to the entrance of the gateway of the inner court..., where was the seat of the image of jealousy” (Ezekiel 8:3). The Bible knows these visions, and we, too, as we have tasted them, and sometimes have had some mouthfuls even - like when, in exile, on certain bright nights we go back to the house we left behind, and we see our parents, brothers and sisters, her; or when we wake up from different dreams and feel that what we saw was not all just a breeze and *vanitas*. Ezekiel’s visions are something still different, but if they were too different from our little “visions” they would not be human, and we would have to place the prophets among the cherubs, depriving ourselves of their friendship and fraternity. We can understand the experiences of the prophets, even the most extraordinary ones, because even though they are different, in the end they remain people like us.

Ezekiel's first vision is a female deity, perhaps the goddess of fertility, Asherah, a Canaanite deity who also evoked a strong fascination from Israel for centuries. We find the female divinity in many ancient cults, because there has always been a strong need to recognize a supernatural nature at the source of life, fertility and motherhood. Perhaps (as some engravings from excavations at Horvat Teiman, East of Sinai also seem to suggest), in some periods Asherah was venerated in Israel as the "wife of YHWH". Nothing could be more natural than to imagine their God as a married man, and thus feel him closer to the ordinary life of all. The affirmation of faith in YHWH, the different and unique God, was a slow process which had its beginnings in natural and polytheistic cults. Israel also demanded gods and goddesses of fertility (the golden calf) and motherhood for itself. In times of crisis, furthermore, the temptation to venerate gods like those of other peoples became particularly strong, and therefore the reaction of the prophets grew stronger. During the Babylonian occupation, the fascination with religious syncretism was especially powerful, because military defeat was read as religious defeat; and the prophecy had to fight hard so that YHWH, who had become a defeated God, would not be replaced by the victorious gods, who, among other things, were much more understandable to the people. This battle typical of prophets is impressive and moving: while feeling the presence of God alive in nature have prevented them from being identified with the earth and flesh. They were the ones to guard that transcendence that one day allowed us to decipher the absolute novelty of the mystery of Bethlehem - the incarnation of the Word of God, which could not be told by the worshippers of the gods of nature, as they are too similar to our flesh to be able to generate a different flesh-word and save us.

The vision of the temple continues. The spirit takes Ezekiel to another room where seventy elders are worshipping Egyptian gods, saying: 'The Lord does not see us, the Lord has forsaken the land' (8:12). Then he sees the women crying for the god "Tammuz", a Babylonian deity of the cycle of the seasons, who was mourned in summer when he "died" and celebrated in spring when he "rose again". He was a much loved and popular divinity who had been introduced into the temple of Jerusalem with the Babylonian occupation. Eventually he reaches the most intimate and sacred part of the temple, and here he sees twenty men gathered by a cult to the Sun god, the powerful Babylonian god. The celebrants look to the east, where that god rose, and so they turn their backs on the Ark of YHWH - a gesture of the body that in itself says the betrayal of the Covenant, to which they now only associate some bad smells (8:17).

At this point the image of religious corruption is complete. Ezekiel then sees the arrival of seven gigantic executioner warriors. Standing at their centre, one of them has the clothes (white linen) and the tools of a writer (inkstand and ink), which recalls the figure of Nebo, the scribe of the Babylonian pantheon. Before the divine wrath is unleashed, the scribe places the *tau* sign on the forehead of some who will be spared from the massacre. They are the ones "who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed" (9:3). Those who suffer from the infidelity of others are saved. It is the sign of Cain, the sign of the exterminating angel placed on the houses of the Jews in Egypt on the night of the great Passover. When the crisis and corruption become generalized and radical, when the people are entirely spoiled, there are still some who can at least suffer and cry in their impotence, and are saved by their tears. No crisis can prevent us from crying and suffering, and if we still have real tears to cry for the infidelity of our people, we

are already saving ourselves. In a state of abandonment we can still scream, and that cry can draw in a resurrection. Crying for injustice is the extreme resource that can earn us the sign of the *tau* in the night, which in ancient Hebrew had the form of a decussate cross, with the arms placed diagonally, like the cross of St. Andrew.

Ezekiel witnesses the massacre by the executioner warriors in his vision, sees the "glory" of YHWH abandon the temple (10:18), and then he cries with his face to the ground: "Ah, Lord God! Will you destroy all the remnant of Israel...?" (9:8) The prophet who had believed in the theology of the faithful remnant now fears that this great hope of the remnant is also dying out. It is the great test of the prophet who stands in the middle between heaven and earth, understands God's reasons but desperately seeks salvation for people. God's response gives no hope: "Then he said to me, »The guilt of the house of Israel and Judah is exceedingly great. The land is full of blood, and the city full of injustice... (...) As for me, my eye will not spare, nor will I have pity«" (9:9-10). But despite this absolute verdict, Ezekiel, the prophet of the exile continues to ask, hoping against all hope and he requests the remnant to be saved. In fact, perhaps in a later vision, Ezekiel finds himself in the temple of Jerusalem again, during a meeting of the "princes of the people". In this vision he receives the order to prophesy, and while men listen to his words, a member of the council (Pelatiah) falls to the ground dead. This death rekindles Ezekiel's intercession-prayer: "Then I fell down on my face and cried out with a loud voice and said, »Ah, Lord God! Will you make a full end of the remnant of Israel?«" (11:13) At the second request YHWH changes his answer: "Therefore say, »Thus says the Lord God: I will gather you from the peoples and assemble you out of the countries where you have been scattered«" (11:17).

This, too, is part of the job of the prophet: to repeat to God the same question when the first answer had not saved anyone. He is the man of the second prayer, because certain forms of wickedness are too great to be lifted up by a single imploring. If a living fragment of that saved rest has reached to Nazareth and then to us, we owe it to the many prophets who knew how to pray a second time, to those who repeated impossible prayers and "converted" their God. The Bible is full of these "second glances", salvations arriving after words that the prophets should not have said but they did, for us. We were saved in radical crises and in total destruction, because someone - a father, a friend, a wife - knew how to repeat a prayer for a second time, and their faith generated a change of perspective on us. We didn't know about it all, maybe we were sleeping or crying out from pain, but it was that second prayer that tore us from death.

The Bible did not want any deities to mediate between YHWH and the people, because its God wanted women and men, the prophets, to intercede for us. Here, too, lies the great humanism of the Bible. And when Christians placed a woman and a mother in their temples, they chose a human being, the mother of the man-Verb "born of woman". No "mother goddess" could have given more spiritual dignity to man and woman. The Bible continues to lift us up by drawing us near to the earth. We would like to fly in search of the company of angels, and we lose the gaze of men and women. But the prophets continue to repeat their prayers, "falling down on their face" to the ground, in the most spiritual place given to us under the sun.