

## The name that must be learned

Prophecy is history / 6 - The Bible tells us and tells us again that the one true God is the God of all. And so is Christ.

By Luigino Bruni



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*«Job would not accept to passively sacrifice his own son, because he would no longer mistake devoutness with surrendering to orders and laws.»*

**Ernst Bloch**, *Atheism in Christianity*

**Solomon finishes the construction of his temple, and immediately tells us that the abode of God is not in the temple. It is this religious chastity that makes faith different from idolatry.**

The temptation of all those who set out to build a temple is the desire to capture God in the dwelling they have built. Because the risk of every theory and practice of the sacred is the transformation of the divine into a consumer item. The Bible reminds us that the presence of God in temples and on earth is an *absent presence*, within which we may practise the humble exercise of faith. The biblical sacred is a partial sacred, the temple is an imperfect religious place. This necessary "religious chastity", which always leaves us needy and desirous of the "not-as-yet God" while experiencing a certain true and imperfect presence, has been jealously guarded and cultivated by the Bible; and once upon a time allowed the Jews to continue their experience in faith even with the destroyed temple. The poverty of having to dwell in a temple that was much less luminous than those of other people, lay the seed to the wealth of a religion which was freed from a sacred place and therefore also still possible to practice in exile. Only idols are small enough to be contained by their sanctuaries. The biblical God is the Most High because He is infinitely higher than any temple roof we could ever build.

The dedication of the temple takes place during a large assembly of all of Israel. The liturgy begins with the transportation of the Ark of the Covenant from the tent where David had placed it to the temple: «King Solomon and the entire assembly of Israel that had gathered about him were before the ark, sacrificing so many sheep and cattle that they could not be recorded or counted» (1 Kings 8,5). The Ark of the Covenant (which, as the text recalls, contained "only" the tables of the Law of Moses) is a sacrament of the nomadic time of the exodus and of the Sinai, it is the link between past, present and future. Another golden thread that unites the new temple with the ancient history of Israel is the presence of the *cloud*: «When the priests withdrew from the Holy Place, the cloud filled the temple of the Lord. And the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled his temple» (1 Kings 8,10-11). The cloud, in fact, had already filled the "conference tent" when Moses had completed its construction: «Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the

tabernacle»; even «Moses could not enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle» (Exodus 40,34-35).

The temple begins its public life under the sign of a radical ambivalence. It is the new conference tent, the new home of the Ark and of the tables of the Law, the house that holds the roots and the Covenant. At the same time, the dark cloud signals that the temple hosts a *presence* that, although true, is less true than the *absence* of God, who is lord of the temple because he is not obliged to dwell there. The cloud is a symbol of the presence of the "glory of YHWH" and of the darkness of our ability to see and understand it. And so Solomon, in what is perhaps the most beautiful verse and the real profound meaning of this whole great chapter, can (and must) exclaim: «But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!» (1 Kings 8,27). And so Solomon, on the very day of the dedication of the temple, his religious and political masterpiece, repeatedly says again and again that the true "abode" of God is *not* his wonderful temple. It is this capacity for continuous self-subversion that makes the Bible a truly living work and capable of always surprising us.

Another narrative-theological strategy to express the absence-presence of God is the distinction between YHWH and his *name*. A name in the Bible says many things, and all of which are important (the Bible is also a story of given and changed names, spoken and unspoken). YHWH, the name that God reveals to Moses on the Sinai, is a *revelation* because it reveals and immediately veils again (re-veiling). It is a name / non-name ("I am who I am"), which does not allow itself to be manipulated or pronounced except in the temple on special occasions. The name therefore performs the same function as the cloud: it reveals and unveils, it speaks and is silent, it illuminates and darkens. Every time a Jew entered the temple he had to relive something of Moses' encounter with the bush: a dialogue with someone who burns without being consumed, who speaks without being there: «May your eyes be open toward this temple night and day, this place of which you said, "My Name shall be there!"» (1 Kings 8,29). The *name* of God dwells in the temple to remind us that the *God of that name* is not there, because if he were he would not be God. And if the temple does not contain God, but only his name, it is possible to pray and meet YHWH everywhere.

Biblical faith has done everything to safeguard the co-essentiality of the presence and absence of God. All idolatrous deviations that have been known throughout its long history have been the result of the exit of the cloud from the temple and of the illusion that YHWH's name was YHWH himself. When the cloud of mystery clears and disappears we can finally see the gods in a clear light merely *because they have become idols*. The price of seeing without the cloud is being able to see something different - which we like very much, but which is not God. As long as we manage to remain destitute before a cloud that envelops the mystery and a name that reveals and unveils, we can remain retain some hope that a living presence could exist beyond that cloud and name; instead, when we no longer accept this religious poverty, and try to drive away the cloud in order to see better, wishing to see God face to face, there in that space, when pronouncing God's name we think we know him perfectly, ends biblical faith and idolatry begins.

Faith lives in the space that is created between our sincere subjective experience of God and the reality of God in itself: when this space is reduced faith is reduced as well; when it is nullified, it is the faith that is nullified. The pronunciation of God's name saves us as long as we keep alive the notion that between that name and God there is a cloud of mystery that does not reduce faith but makes it very human and true. The only experience of God that we can have under the sun of this earth is within a dense cloud, and the name to which God responds is a non-name that can call him and wake him as long as we know that we are calling him by a name that is imperfect and impartial and *therefore* true. And then, if as the Apocalypse says, «They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads» (Revelation 22,4), then the name of God will be revealed to us by another looking at us - and we will reveal it to them.

Within this horizon of light and shadow, of proximity and distance, we can enter the great prayer of Solomon in his temple. It is a solemn prayer, it embraces the whole history of salvation reaching all the way from Egypt to the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem and exile, and perhaps beyond. It is an individual and collective song; it is thanksgiving, memory and supplication, with some authentic pearls embedded. Its centre is still the experience of exile: «and if they have a change of heart in the land where they are held captive, and repent and plead with you in the land of their captors and say, "We have sinned, we have done wrong, we have acted wickedly"; and if they turn back to you with all their heart and soul in the land of their enemies who took them captive... then from heaven, your dwelling place, hear their prayer and their plea, and uphold their cause» (1 Kings 8,47-49).

This prayer said by Solomon is wonderful and written by scribes deported to Babylon who were learning an essential lesson: one can be saved while in exile by "returning to oneself" and "returning to you [God]". These are the *first two movements* during exile, which are much more radical and decisive than the more common "returning home". Because without the «I will set out and go back to my father» (Luke 15,18), no return is a return of salvation - in the Bible and in life it is not enough to go home to end an exile, as Third Isaiah also told us.

The experience of exile also inspires Solomon's other splendid prayer for the *stranger* or *foreigner*: «As for the foreigner who does not belong to your people Israel but has come... to pray toward this temple, then hear from heaven, your dwelling place. Do whatever the foreigner asks of you» (1 Kings 8,41-43). If the abode of God is "heaven" (constant refrain) then every man under the sun can pray to him, because this God is no longer imprisoned by national borders and his kingdom is the whole earth. It is these passages, inspired by a universalistic and inclusive religiosity, written by a people who were rebuilding their mortally wounded national identity around their different God, which in turn make the Bible something different from just a book that narrates the historical and theological events of a single people. These phrases, these prayers, could and should *not have existed* in these historical books; and instead there they are, like "flowers of evil" generated along the rivers of Babylon. Only a people that had come to know the humiliation of feeling like foreigners in a great empire by great gods, could understand that if there is a true God and if the earth is not only populated by idols, then this God must be able to listen to the prayer of every person; because if my God does not listen to a foreigner or a stranger then he does not have ears capable of listening to me either, because then he is simply a banal idol who knows only how to act within the realms of his feigned sacred enclosure. The biblical faith of the exiles understood that their God was different because he was becoming the God of all.

Biblical humanism and Christianity have repeatedly told us and reiterated that if there is a true God, then he must be the God of all. We already knew it, but really learned it during all the wars, deportations, prison camps, through the "enemy" soldiers hidden inside our homes, when we knew how to read, in the midst of all the pain, the "name of God" on the forehead of those who knocked on our door, of those who came to our borders and to our ports. Our grandparents and our parents learned it, and on this lesson of flesh and blood they built and rebuilt Europe. We have forgotten it. But perhaps in the long exile of humanity that we currently find ourselves in we can re-learn that Name again.