

## To learn to rise again

### Prophecy is history /1 – Do not be afraid of life or of the carnal words of the flesh to narrate man and God

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«An ancient sage and master of the Mishnah, Ben Bag Bag, once said: « Look at it which way you will, it is all in the Torah [Law]». It can all be found in the Torah, but you must turn it over and turn it over again: God has spoken, but it is up to man to add the comments»

**Paolo Benedetti**, Introduction to Judaism (Introduzione al giudaismo) **De**

**This is where we begin our commentary on the Books of Kings, coming straight into the ambivalence, ambiguity and skulduggery of David and Solomon, telling us that salvation does not need purity and innocence to operate and induce us to start over again.**

After his people built and worshipped the golden calf on the slopes of mount Horeb, Moses entered a deep crisis. In the context of that great failure he felt the need to reinforce his own faith, and asked his God-Yahweh: «Now show me your glory» (Exodus 33,18). Every once in a while after rebellions, betrayals and unfaithfulness, our own and of others, a strong urge and Moses' same request is reborn in us as well. We feel a strong need to see the "glory" of the very first day again, to enable us to continue believing and living. And sometimes, our prayers are heard. Reading the Bible is a real and wonderful way of reliving the "glory" during and after any collective or individual crisis, when the memory of the "glory" witnessed in the past isn't enough anymore. And that invincible and enormous request: *show me your glory*, suddenly sprouts from within and surprises us. This too is the Bible: a theophany that is there for us each day, merely waiting for us to call for it.

The beginning of the "Books of Kings" also includes the ending of King David's life, which began in the Book of Samuel. And so the spectacle of deceit, cheating, murder, fratricide and violence continued, and with it the radical propensity of the ancient Jew to not be afraid of the ambivalence in his own history or in the history of men; an ambivalence and an ambiguity that also characterizes sacred history, which in essence is the narration of God's action intertwined with the history of men and therefore also with their sins.

The Books of Kings were written, or at least finished, during the first years of the Babylonian exile, hence after the epochal tragedy of 587 B.C. – the conquest of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar and the destruction of the Temple of Yahweh. Their intended audience were therefore the exiles in Babylon, but also the survivors who were still left in Jerusalem and a

significant community that had emigrated to Egypt. People of very different life conditions, but all struck and afflicted by a few new, great and urgent questions of the people of Israel at the time (and our time): does it still make sense to continue believing in a God-Yahweh who has been defeated? Can a defeated God still be a real God? Were the Covenant and the promise merely an illusion and a hoax? Do we, as a people, still have a universal mission to carry out or has our time already passed? With what religion and through which worship now that the temple of Solomon has been destroyed? What if the only true gods are the simpler ones worshipped by other people? What do the stories of the patriarchs, of Moses, of the Sinai, of the parting sea, still have to tell us? Are they only memories of the past or a deposit for the future?

The story of the Books of Kings attempts to answer these questions (as well as others). They are therefore books of narrative and historical theology, in which prophecy is given great importance – in fact, these books include a great number of chapters dedicated to two prophets who are absolutely fundamental to the whole Bible: Elijah and Elisha. They are history and prophetic theology, they are history and prophecy, because in the Bible *history is prophecy*. Human history is where God communicates his message through the words and gestures of the prophets. If you wish to know God, learn how to read human history: this is, possibly, the first and main message of the Bible, also serving as a map and dictionary to finding our way in this difficult reading – each endeavour to study the biblical texts is also and above all a hermeneutics exercise in contemporary history. What did the destroyed, fatally wounded Jewish people, who was experiencing hunger and forced labour, while afflicted by religious and political conflict, do in order to find a meaning in the past and imagine a future that was possible and hence still connected to a non-vain past? It started writing a story. In the midst of the profoundest of collective depressions, that different group of people began to narrate its past in order to resurrect the present. And this is a splendid message for us the heirs of those ancient biblical writers, living in similar times today. When we wish and need to start over again after a difficult trial, but feel wounded, dispirited, a small, frightened and lost herd, we can always try to get up again by telling a story. In our bewilderment and collective depression, we can stop crying and try to rise again drawing on our last remaining resources: our narrative resources, our heritage and gift. We can trace a golden thread and embroider patterns of light in the dark. And then, as in the Japanese technique of *Kintsugi*, we can use the gold found in that thread to mend the various bit and pieces in the broken vase, where the scars become the most beautiful and noble part of the new creation. We cannot understand the Bible, or many stories of various communities, without taking the retelling of the part as a re-creation of the future seriously.

With this outlook which is also a prayer we begin our reading: «When King David was very old, he could not keep warm even when they put covers over him. So his attendants said to him, “Let us look for a young virgin to serve the king and take care of him. She can lie beside him so that our lord the king may keep warm.” Then they searched throughout Israel for a beautiful young woman and found Abishag, a Shunammite, and brought her to the king. The woman was very beautiful» (1 Kings 1,1-4).

At the beginning of the Books of the Kings we find David, old, enticed and unable to "warm up". A king's sexual vigour was a very important element in the ancient world. An impotent king was seen as a sign and message of the impotence of his kingdom. Reigniting that faded virility was thus a political matter, not a medical one. And introducing a new, young, "extraordinarily" beautiful woman into the harem of the court, seemed like an ideal solution to the government officials – that however did not work: the king did not have any relation with the beautiful Abishag: «She took care of the king and waited on him, but the king had no sexual relations with her» (1 Kings 1, 4). The female component, which has for better or for worse been a constant in his life, makes a reappearance with David – it was in fact for the beauty of a woman, Bathsheba, that David committed his greatest sin; but perhaps no man in the Bible knew how to understand, talk and listen to women like David could.

A first reading of this well-known episode leads us to empathize with this old king who at the end of his life tries to respond to death with a last call to life. *Eros versus thanatos*. And, perhaps, through David, this most-beloved character in the Bible, we can also attempt to look at the many men (and some women) who in the fall of their lives search for younger companions in the belief that it will keep death, inexorably advancing on the horizon, at bay – and maybe, thanks to the affection for David, without condemning them and, if we succeed, concede a ray of human *pietas* to them (the Bible is also a bank in which to ask for an interest-free loan of good words regarding human weakness).

But while looking at David, we cannot not look at Abishag as well. A girl, a woman, a fragile person used in the politics of court (a common thing in various cultures and ages). Every once in a while we will continue reading the stories in the Bible while placing ourselves next to the victims and often of the women. The episode with the cold David looks different, if we look at it in a different light with the eyes of that girl, perhaps very young, torn from her family and brought to court to act as a bed warmer for the king. Let's try to stay for a while right next to her, and through her next to so many girls who continue to "warm" the rich and powerful through no choice of their own, brought in those beds because of their own poverty and the power of others. And then, if we succeed and are not hindered by all the pain, we continue reading the rest of the story: «Now Adonijah, whose mother was Haggith, put himself forward and said, "I will be king." (...) He was also very handsome and was born next after Absalom. Adonijah conferred with Joab son of Zeruiah and with Abiathar the priest, and they gave him their support. But Zadok the priest, Benaiahson of Jehoiada, Nathan the prophet, Shimei and Rei and David's special guard did not join Adonijah» (1 Kings 1,5-10).

Adonia is one of David's surviving sons, elder brother of Solomon. Like his brother Absalom, killed during the civil war against David, he was tall and handsome, and advanced a birth right and was therefore a candidate to become a successor to his father on the throne. Then we find key figures whom we already met in the Book of Samuel, especially Joab, the bloodthirsty general of David, and Shimei, the one who had cursed David while fleeing Jerusalem in the civil war with his son Absalom. And, in the opposite party, the prophet Nathan, who plays his part as court prophet, also ambivalent, like the world of power in which he lives - we will in fact see that it is not enough to be a true non-false prophet to avoid becoming an ambiguous and biased prophet. More examples of common meals that, instead of being moments of conviviality, fraternity and communion, are corrupted into becoming places of conflict, homicides and fratricides, which will also involve David and Solomon. Perhaps to let us know that if David and Solomon, despite their many sins and trickery, were chosen by God, spoke with him, had his wisdom and his blessing, then we too can hope to speak with the angels, and be blessed by God and his wisdom in the very midst of all the ambivalence of our human condition. The Bible continues to love us in this way, with these messages of extraordinary carnal and spiritual hope, divine and human, holy and sinful. Like David, like Solomon. Like us.

We will not be able to penetrate the great beauty and wisdom of the Books of Kings if we are afraid of the sins of men and women, if we read them searching for words that are pure because they have been purified of human waste. The Books of Kings (and the whole Bible, Old and the New testament) are open only to those who are not scandalized by humanity as a whole, or by their own and that of others, because it is from within the abyss of curses that they will lead us to the peaks of their true blessings. There are too many words of life and wisdom that do not truly reach us because, frightened by their apparent shell of pain and sin, we end up blocking them and do not let them penetrate our flesh to cure and redeem it. We will however try to allow ourselves to be touched by the carnal words of these books, with courage and without fearing their humanity. And then we can really hope for and expect anything.