

## The wrong way of listening to the heart

Prophecy is history / 8 - The corruption of scholars is different, as great as the good that is being destroyed

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*«In the life of any emperor, there is a moment, following the pride for the boundless breadth of the territories we have conquered, the melancholy and relief of knowing that soon we will give up knowing them and understanding them; it's a sense of emptiness that takes over us one evening with the smell of elephants after the rain and sandal ash cooling down in the braziers;... it is the desperate moment in which we discover that this empire that first seemed to be the sum of all wonders to us, is really a debacle without a real*

*ending or form, and that its corruption is too gangrenous for our scepter to be able to provide any shelter.»*

**Italo Calvino**, *The invisible cities*, Introduction

**The story of Solomon's decline contains one of the most precious anthropological teachings in the Bible, and continues to inspire us in its drama: our most beautiful talent can be transformed into the cause of our ruin.**

The corruption of the righteous is different from that of the wicked. There is the corruption of those who, for many reasons (and not all of them guilty) have always lived surrounded by evil. He grew up with a heart cultivated by bad thoughts and actions that overwhelmed the good and true feelings that dwell in all human hearts. These people are rare, but they have always existed and still exist. Their corruption is very dangerous, and produces a lot of evil and pain. But there is also the corruption of the just, even of the wise, which tends to be as great and serious as the justice and wisdom that preceded them. The Bible also tells us about this second type of corruption. The story of Salomon's moral decline is among the most famous ones. In the story, this comes right after the description of Solomon's greatest success, but reading the text and the whole Bible carefully, we realize that the moral corruption of the wisest king had already begun with the growth of his political success and his

riches: «The weight of the gold that Solomon received yearly was 666 talents, not including the revenues from merchants and traders... The king had a fleet of trading ships at sea along with the ships of Hiram... King Solomon was greater in riches and wisdom than all the other kings of the earth» (1 Kings 10,14-23). Once again, the text here is all about wealth and wisdom, as if they were two sides of the same coin, as if the welfare (*shalom*) of Solomon was the effect of his wisdom. In fact, there is an essence in the Bible that interprets riches as a blessing from God, hence creating a close correlation between economic-political success and justice (see the book of Job). But in the same Bible, prophetic tradition and a theological school of thought, which was also present in the school of scribes that wrote much of the Books of Kings during the Babylonian exile, see the accumulation of wealth and the growth of political power in a much more problematic way.

If we read between the lines in the narration of the magnificence and greatness of Solomon a strong contrast immediately appears between the description of that kingdom and what the Law of Moses recommended to the kings of Israel in the *Deuteronomy*: «The king must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold» (Dt 17,17).

The scribes who recounted the riches of Solomon were the same ones who were writing the book of Deuteronomy which, drawing on the Mosaic law, the highest authority, criticized those same riches. They knew the texts of Isaiah (chapter 23) and of Ezekiel (chapters 26-27) who had condemned the great businesses of Tyre (of which Hiram was king), a commercial city that became rich and powerful thanks to its commercial exchanges and financial activity. We must not forget that these biblical texts were written in Babylon, which also was a commercial and financial superpower, with large companies and banks. Those prophets and those scribes saw the results from the many riches directly with their own eyes: usury, debts, and people enslaved due to insolvency. It is not by chance that it was precisely during the exile that the Jewish people began to elaborate that unique piece of legislation on the prohibition of lending at interest and on the *Sabbath* as a utopia of a time freed from the law of wealth and power. The prohibition regarding interest and the *Sabbath* was born during the exile as a way of saying no to an economy that kills and excludes and yes to an economy of life and communion. Hence, the prophets and a school of scribes learned the *vanitas* of riches and their ability to mislead and corrupt *everyone* in Babylon. Even those who, like Solomon, had received the riches of God as a reward for asking only for wisdom (chapter 3). And so while those scribes describe Solomon's disproportionate wealth, they also show us the invisible termites that are already corroding the foundations of that kingdom and the very same temple that that great wealth had built.

Therefore, we must not let ourselves be distracted or confused by a superficial or too modern a reading of what we read at the beginning of chapter 11 regarding the reasons for the decline of Solomon: «King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh's daughter: Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites... Solomon held fast to them in love. He had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray» (1 Kings 11,1-3). That huge number of women had arrived in the harem and in Solomon's court following political alliances, which were essential in the cultures of those days to create solid and lasting empires - until recently, women were also the first instruments used in politics: and it is always advisable to dwell on these details in the text, in order not to miss even a drop of that pain, and allow our attention to be called upon by it. When they arrived in Solomon's court, those women brought their culture and therefore their religion as well. It was part of the political alliances with their fathers and relatives to allow the women (at least the ones belonging to the most powerful families) to be able to continue the cults and worship of their homeland in Jerusalem. Hence, the multiplication of altars in ode to foreign gods and goddesses, among these Astarte, the most important goddess of the Phoenician pantheon, and Moloch, god of the Ammonites, to whom perhaps even children were sacrificed.

We do not know if Solomon really was a "*philogynaios*" (in the Greek version of the Bible), that is, a womanizer or a "lover of women" in the sense in which his father was (think of the effect that Bathsheba bathing had on David), and if lust was one of the reasons for his decline. What is interesting to the authors of this narrative is the *religious* dimension of that decline, and therefore in the biblical world something much more serious than mere lust and political alliances.

It is not a coincidence, in fact, that the text here repeats a keyword in the history and mission of Solomon twice: the heart (*leb*). At the beginning of his reign, in that wonderful vocational dream, the young Solomon had only asked YHWH for "a heart that knows how to listen", the most beautiful request that a sovereign ever addressed to a God. That listening heart had made him wise, known everywhere for his wisdom, and therefore also rich and powerful. But it was that same heart, the center of his vocation, the very precious talent he had received from life and from God, which little by little had changed slowly becoming sick and corrupt.

Here we have a great message from biblical anthropology. When a covenant that was the center of our vocation is shattered due to a political alliance or the allure of a beautiful woman, we find ourselves on the plane of consequences and *effects* not *causes*. The concrete act of betrayal with which a marriage pact is broken is the effect of something that already began in the heart a while ago, when in order to grow in wealth and / or in power, we began to build other altars inside our soul and allow other gods to enter the intimacy of an exclusive alliance. If I had not already brought an altar into the house, I would not have had a place to consume my betrayal.

But there is more, what corrupts us as adults and in old age is often the same great gift we received as young people. The great moral and spiritual illnesses are always *auto-immune* diseases. The viruses and bacteria that come from outside and touch the soul bring suffering, trials and difficulties, which hurt and cause damage, but are not able to transform a heart of flesh into a heart of stone. They act on the surface, but do not enter the marrow. The alchemies of the heart are produced not by what "enters" man, but by what was already there and which, day after day, has undergone a slow transformation and then a perversion. It is our most beautiful talent that becomes the first agent of our corruption. It is our greatest blessing that also becomes our curse. The same thing that happens with neuroses, when what is ill is not the shadow, but the light that, once ill, turns dark and darkens us leading into a dense night, as dark and dense as the light before it was bright.

With spiritual vocation, for example, it is precisely that special heart that as a young person was able to welcome into its infinitely small space a presence of infinite greatness, that spiritual excellence that managed to understand that ineffable subtle voice of silence, that one day - day after day and almost never without having decided it intentionally - uses that same capacity for infinity and that spiritual excellence to begin to listen to other voices and other silences, to build other altars perhaps in order to love and respect new relationships encountered along the way.

The great heresies and schisms in communities come from people with great vocations; the greatest negators of God are those who knew him and saw him closely, because only those who feel great love can really hate. The traitor does not come from outside, he is one of the twelve, and we do not know if Judas was one of the most brilliant and gifted of the group (perhaps he was: if only because he was the treasurer).

YHWH had spoken to Solomon "twice" (1 Kings 11.9), but even this extraordinary act was not enough to stop treason. It was not enough, also because Solomon did not notice the exact moment when his corruption began, nor when he exceeded the critical threshold and the corruption process became irreversible. This is often the way these things happen. The real drama of any authentic vocation that breaks down is the inability to recognize the moment in which the degeneration of the heart is triggered. Perhaps, if instead of seven hundred wives Solomon had had only one true one, she would have been able to see that invisible beginning in the eyes or the soul of the king, and perhaps she would have been able to save him.

Not even we can recognize the dawn of decline, we often confuse it with midday. The voice had spoken to us twice, maybe ten times or a hundred and we really believed it. But, one day, something happened, and the heart started to listen to the wrong people and things, without really wanting it or knowing it. Maybe things could only end this way. What if God really is greater than our heart?