

## The value and price of gratuity

The exile and the promise/25 – Resisting the temptation of the (ideological) normalisation of prophesy

by Luigino Bruni



published in the Avvenire  
28/04/19

Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said:  
«In the old days of the Temple, if a man sacrificed a burnt offering he was credited with the value of a burnt offering; if he offered an oblation, he was credited with offering an oblation. But Scripture credits all those who are humble in spirit, with the value of all possible sacrifices»

### Babylonian Talmud

*The description of the temple by Ezekiel gives us an excellent opportunity to*

***identify some of the most distinctive traits of the view held by the prophets regarding religion and the world, one that clearly differs from that of clergymen. Especially in terms of matters regarding gratuitousness and sacrifices***

The religion of the prophets differs from that of clergymen. In the Bible, both are on the side of the same people, part of the same covenant, they worship the same God, recite the same prayers and read the same sacred books... But their perspective, the form and the ways of the faith of the prophets is not that of the clergymen. The prophets proclaim, recall and cry that justice and the salvation of the people do not depend on the acquisition of *merits* through acts or sacrifices, but that we *begin* by being saved and *then* become pious, religious and maybe good and saintly. The prophets aim to empty the temples to enable themselves and us to see the real presence of the glory of Yahweh, because they know that there is little room in a temple full of sacred objects and religious artefacts for the glory of God. Law and spirit, merit and grace, James and Paul, identity and inclusion, purity and hybridization. The dynamic between prophetic and clerical, a constant in biblical and civilian life, cannot be interpreted lightly.

Above all, it doesn't just concern religion: prophecies are a universal common good, and the tendency to clericalize is not exclusive to the Church, but an anthropological constant in power management. There is plenty of atheist clericalization going on in politics and economy, we are all somewhat prophets in our youth and tend to clericalize as we grow old (in the sense that we are about to see). There also ministers who are much more prophetic than lay people (Ezekiel was also a minister).

Many communities are born prophetic and then end up becoming clerical with the passing of time, converging exclusively within and around the temple. This happens when the importance given to the altar within the church makes us forget the importance of the crosses standing outside, for only the cry of the crucified can tear the separating veils in all the temples of the earth; when the merits of "Sabbath for the sake of Sabbath" (which also holds an existential value) makes us forget the other (equally essential) kind of merit of "Sabbath for the sake of man"; or when the virtue of prudence takes the place of the imprudence of the Beatitudes, order prevails over the disorder of real life, the reasons behind liturgy overshadow those of the poor, the hours and schedule of service and prayer become more important than the non-schedule of

the friend who knocks on our door when he can and wishes to. The Bible often tells us, the prophet is a sentinel. He is also a sentry posted on the threshold of the temple, placed there to remind us that if the true presence of God can be found within those walls it is only because there is an even truer presence to be found on the outside, and that the day we start believing that we can *only* or *predominantly* find Him in the temple, is the day we will only find a mere mundane idol when we enter, even if we continue calling Him Jesus or Yahweh. The prophet desecrates that which is sacred and sanctifies that which is profane, because he knows that “the Spirit of God fills the earth” and hence there is no place so profane that it cannot be touched by that breeze. And he sees this, senses it, and sings it to us.

Ezekiel’s chapters dedicated to the new temple provide us with an excellent exercise to learn how to recognize the typical signs of the religion of the prophets. Ezekiel has no wish to discipline the cult of the second temple that will one day be rebuilt in Jerusalem; he is not interested in the legislation of the temple, the discipline regarding the many forms of sacrifice, the clothing, the rules regarding matrimony or the norms regarding the purity of clergymen. His is a *resurrected temple*, mystical, the image of a new “celestial” Jerusalem: «Son of man, this is the place of my throne and the place for the soles of my feet. This is where I will live among the Israelites forever. The people of Israel will never again defile my holy name--neither they nor their kings--by their prostitution» (Ezekiel 43,7). Ezekiel sees and describes the temple with great attention to detail, but does not dwell on details regarding the interior furnishings, the work of the artisans or their artefacts, elements which instead are very important and accurately described in the descriptions of the Temple of Salomon and even earlier in those of the Arc of the Covenant . His vision of the temple is theological, it does not regard ethics, it is *eschaton*, and it does not regard history. It is a message regarding God and man, not religion or cult.

But then why are these chapters filled with religious laws and norms? When a school of scribes after the exile, amended and developed Ezekiel’s original manuscript, that prophetic vision was transformed in a sort of *Magna Carta* for the reconstitution of the cult of the new temple of Jerusalem. The original theophany became a highly authoritative legitimisation of the new religious norms: and hence *prophecy became religion*. The great name of Ezekiel, prophet and minister, offered a noble tradition on which to found the reform of religious and clerical practice. And so these chapters became a collection of norms for the reform of the ordinary and extraordinary running of the temple: «the Lord said unto me: "Son of man, mark well, and behold with thine eyes, and hear with thine ears all that I say unto thee concerning all the ordinances of the house of the Lord, and all the laws thereof"» (Ez 44,5). In the meantime, the people had returned from exile, and, despite the fact that Ezekiel had prophesized many years before that the end of exile would mark the end of unfaithfulness and idolatry, the sins and treason had started again and were in no way inferior to those of the past. Hence, Ezekiel’s successors and (maybe) disciples felt the need to amend the original prophecies, in order to transform them into norms that could be useful in managing the religion of a people that had gone back to being corrupt once again.

Let us look closer at two examples. Like the other great prophets, Ezekiel had written wonderful verses on universalism and the inclusion of foreigners. The second Isaiah, for example, a contemporary of Ezekiel and like him also an exiled prophet, had had the courage, while violating the Law of Moses, to write these splendid verses: «For thus said the Lord unto the eunuchs... unto them will I give in mine house and within my walls a place and a name better than of sons and of daughters. The sons of the stranger... I will make them joyful in my house of prayer» (Isaiah 56,4-7). When editing the end of the book of Ezekiel, these post-exile ministers, instead felt the “disciplinary” and institutional need to add words which were very distant from the spirit of the prophet Ezekiel: «Thus says the Lord God: “No foreigner, uncircumcised in heart or uncircumcised in flesh, shall enter My sanctuary, including any foreigner who is among the children of Israel» (Ez 44,9). The second group’s institutional prudence prevailed over the first one’s prophetic imprudence. The pragmatic needs concerning the temple lead the successors

of Ezekiel's teachings to rectify some of the fundamentals of his prophecy, and their (legitimate) "pastoral" doubts ended up creating, maybe in good faith, an ideological exegesis of the prophet.

We are dealing with a clear case of the *normalisation process* of a prophecy by its successors which, by the way, is often also found in the dynamics of the relationship between the charismatic founders of communities and the second and third generations who succeed them. A prophet-founder, who through his calling brings spiritual and/or social novelty, and who through his life and words innovates and changes the ruling religious and civilian thinking. In the generation that follows, organisational and pastoral needs (the running of the "temple", that is the coming and going and the actual organization) provoke a progressive downsizing of the actual novelties of his charisma and the resulting reabsorption of these novelties into the mainstream. This is how prophecies exhaust or reduce their thrust for change, and what remains is usually a spiritual and ethical legacy devoid of its power for social and spiritual transformation (unless reformers with the calling to revive the prophet's charisma appear: this, in fact, was in part possible in the Bible because for centuries new prophets arrived and continued the prophecies of those who had preceded them).

The second example, which can be seen as the implementation of the reabsorption process of the original prophecy, is the subject of *sacrifices*, which took up considerable space in the edited and modified chapters: «And thou shalt give to the priests the Levites that be of the seed of Zadok, which approach unto me, to minister unto me, said the Lord God, a young bullock for a sin offering... Seven days shalt thou prepare every day a goat for a sin offering: they shall also prepare a young bullock, and a ram out of the flock, without blemish...» (Ez 43,19-26). In those days, ministers weren't able to not defend the offering of sacrifices, because their mission and role was entirely dependent upon them. Thanks to these sacrifices they lived and they lived well: «The best of all the firstfruits and of all your special gifts will belong to the priests» (Ez 44,30). The prophets, however, are not particularly fond of the custom of offering sacrifices. They know that they are part of the tradition of their people, that they are present in the Law of Moses which is also their law. But first and foremost and from a more radical point of view, the prophets know that these do not constitute the right language in which to communicate with God, because the sacrifices offered to Yahweh are very similar, too similar, to the sacrifices offered to the idols. The religion of sacrifices was the religion which the Jews encountered when arriving in Canaan, the religion practiced by the neighbouring people, which influenced them greatly. Which influenced everyone – everyone *except the prophets*. Because due to their personal calling they continued to speak of a different God, different also due to the fact that he did not use the language of sacrifices. Men like the habit of offering sacrifices because they think that it is a way to influence and maybe control God. The prophets - however - tell us that this is faulty thinking.

That's why the prophets were and are the foremost critics of the *industry of the temple*, which before and after Jesus of Nazareth, contributed to killing the prophets in their role as proclaimers of an "oikonomy of grace" and of a freely bestowed mercy which radically upsets their "economy of salvation" based on the offering of sacrifices and their required price. The temple sacrifices are only valuable if they have a price; the mercy heralded by the prophets however, *is of value precisely because it does not have a price*, the prophets cancel the value of the price tags on the religious goods of sacrifice. The prophets liberate the doves of the temple altars. Enabling them to fly away, transforming them into icons of the liberated and free Spirit.