

## Let us reopen the door to heaven

### The exile and the promise/ 17 - The angel's name is not "economy", but the right way does go through here

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«Business is a great source of war. It is jealous, and jealousy provides men with weapons. The wars of the Carthaginians, of the Romans, of the Venetians, of the Genoese, of the Pisans, of the Portuguese, of the Dutch, of the French, and of the English all testify to this. If two nations trade together for mutual needs, it is these needs that oppose war, not the spirit of trade itself»

**Antonio Genovesi**, *Commentary on The Spirit of the Laws of Montesquieu*, 1769

There is no single ethical assessment regarding the economy

in the Bible. In the various biblical books we find different and in some cases opposed ideas and judgments on the nature of goods, wealth and business. Because, simply put, wealth is deeply ambivalent. Thus we encounter passages where having many goods is a blessing and a sign of having been elected, and shortly after others where the search for profits and wealth is pure *vanitas*. We read of the poor considered cursed, and of the poor who are called blessed. Up to the terrible words said to the angel of the city of Laodicea in the book of Revelation: «You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked» (Revelation 3,17). This sentence contains the key to understanding many prophetic and evangelical criticisms of wealth: 'I do not need a thing'. The great deception, the tremendous illusion of wealth lies in its seductive offer of self-sufficiency, of independence, in the illusion that through it we will no longer need anyone, and therefore, in the end, not even God. It (almost) promises us the same land promised by God to Abraham, which, not surprisingly, is defined on the basis of *goods* or assets: 'milk and honey'.

Prophets often use the economic sphere and its language to compose their poems. Also because, being the experts in humanity that they are, they know that few things (if any) have a greater ability to immediately enter the daily and decisive reality in the life of both people and communities than economics. Since childhood we know and recognize coins, we understand their value and use. Our grandparents perfectly understood the language and value of wealth, goods and money, they knew how to 'count' even without knowing math. And even today, if we want to say and write words capable of entering into daily life and perhaps changing it a little as well, we must also learn to talk about things such as work, goods, value, wealth, poverty. If we don't, our words risk flying too high to meet the eyes of regular men and women, our images remain too aerial to intercept Adam, the earthling. We can make many lofty speeches, use a series of perfect words in our daily dialogues with the people we love, but when we return to our parents' house, the simple language of a repaired shelf, the silent word of a screwdriver that fixes a chair, of a pruned and watered plant is infinitely stronger and more real. The beautiful secularism of life.

Set in the heart of the oracles about the cities (Chapters 25-32), we also encounter Ezekiel's songs dedicated to the Phoenician city of Tiro, which contain a magnificent anthropological, theological and sapiential reflection on the economy and wealth: «In the eleventh month of the twelfth year, on the first

day of the month, the word of the Lord came to me: "Son of man, because Tyre has said of Jerusalem, 'Aha! The gate to the nations is broken, and its doors have swung open to me; now that she lies in ruins I will prosper... They will plunder your wealth and loot your merchandise'"» (Ezekiel 26,1-2,12). Tyre's guilt and condemnation have to do with its wealth and extraordinary businesses, known all over the world at the time. Tyre probably was a city similar to New York, Singapore or London today, known above all as a major hub of international trade and affairs, the protagonist of the proto-globalization that was the Mediterranean economy. Ezekiel proves to be an authentic master when he describes the admirable intertwining of exchanges and flows, with great competence and effectiveness (the vastness of Ezekiel's culture does not cease to impress me): «Tarshish did business with you... Greece, Tubal and Meshek did business with you; they traded human beings and articles of bronze for your wares. Men of Beth Togarmah exchanged chariot horses, cavalry horses and mules for your merchandise... Arabia and all the princes of Kedar were your customers; they did business with you in lambs, rams and goats. The merchants of Sheba and Raamah traded with you; for your merchandise they exchanged the finest of all kinds of spices and precious stones, and gold. Harran, Kanneh and Eden and merchants of Sheba... so you became prosperous, filled with heavy cargo as you sail the sea» (Ezekiel 27,12-25). Tyre dominated trade from the Iberian Peninsula (Tarshish) to Greece (Javan), from Asia Minor (Togarmah) to the Arabian Peninsula (Sheba). An authentic mercantile, economic and financial superpower, ruler of sea and land.

Resorting to the beautiful metaphor of the ship, Ezekiel thus describes the sad fate of a civilization founded on the religion of wealth: «Your oarsmen take you out to the high seas. But the east wind will break you to pieces far out at sea. Your wealth, merchandise and wares... will sink into the heart of the sea... Who was ever silenced like Tyre, surrounded by the sea?» (Ezekiel 27,26-32). The ancient and eternal thesis on the ephemeral nature of wealth, very common in the sapiential literature of ancient civilizations, returns. Placing one's trust of salvation in gold and silver and in their fake omnipotence is simply foolishness, because the happiness of wealth also is radically vulnerable and unstable. A storm triggered by a bad wind is enough for the promises of happiness from goods to end up destroyed at the bottom of the sea, and us along with them. The accumulation of wealth protects against small daily misfortunes, but makes us dramatically exposed to *greater tragedies*. Like the inhabitants of the Lotofagi Island (lotus eaters) in the *Odyssey*, wealth makes us live in a constant present, making us forget the thousand realities of life that wealth cannot cure and does not satisfy, and so when those realities arrive they invariably find us most unprepared and fragile. There is no promise of happiness more false than that of wealth, which, however, still remains the sea in which we most like to shipwreck. With a difference compared to past civilizations: they deceived themselves knowing full what they were doing, while we simply deceive ourselves, because we've lost the ethical concepts and categories to understand the fraud.

In Ezekiel, however, we also find the deep biblical root of the economic sin of Tyre: «In the pride of your heart you say, "I am a god; I sit on the throne of a god in the heart of the seas." But you are a mere mortal and not a god, though you think you are as wise as a god» (Ezekiel 28,2). This is the *idolatrous nature* of wealth, the folly of saying to yourself: 'my heart and wisdom is like that of God', the will to violate the name of the angel (Michael: *who is like God?*).

Not having a language more powerful than that of economy to fully express the Covenant and its promises, the Bible inevitably had to attribute a special ethical and spiritual status to wealth, which contributed greatly to confuse the ideas of Western man. Hence the paradox that has accompanied us for three thousand years, nestled deep in the heart of the Bible - a humanism that on the one hand criticizes wealth because it presents itself to men as the alternative to God, and on the other hand uses the words and symbols of wealth to describe the blessing and promise of God.

Ezekiel, however, also tells us something else that is extremely important in these chapters. His song goes further, and gives us a meditation on businesses and the economy of extraordinary innovation and depth, among the most daring in the entire Bible: «You were the seal of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone adorned you» (Ezekiel 28,12-13). In this oracle to the Prince of Tyre, Ezekiel offers us an admirable version of the myth of Eden, of Adam and of his fall, different from that which we find in the first chapters of Genesis (testifying that in those centuries the narratives on the *beginning* were plural in nature). This Adam, in the beginning, was a model of perfection and conduct, «till wickedness was found in you. Through your widespread trade you were filled with violence, and you sinned. So I drove you in disgrace from the

mount of God... By your many sins and dishonest trade you have desecrated your sanctuaries» (Ezekiel 28,15-18).

Here the sin and the consequent expulsion of Adam from Eden ('the mount of God') was the consequence of *economic sin*. A shocking and very interesting thesis. Economy raised to theology. Not disobedience, not having eaten the fruit of the forbidden tree, not having listened to the snake's logos. No, none of this: to Ezekiel, man was expelled from heaven for *a wrongful relationship with commerce and the economy*, it was the wrongful trade that 'profaned the sanctuaries'. A statement that makes you quiver.

Let us leave the garden of delights, at sunset Adam interrupts the dialogue with Elohim and breaks the good dialogue that he has with the woman, with others and with creation, whenever he makes a mistake in his relationship with money and wealth. Looking at the first men from the observation point of his exile in Babylon, another great economic and financial superpower, Ezekiel saw with extreme clarity that sin was not so much born from the seduction of the snake but from that of money, that Cain killed his brother not due to envy of his status but out of economic envy, that disobedience to God did not consist in eating the fruit of the forbidden tree but in the insatiability of avarice. Ezekiel did not then find a language more powerful than that of economics to describe man's refusal of the project of harmony and love thought for him by YHWH. Making a mistake in our relationship with the economy then means making a mistake in the relationship with ourselves, with others, with creation, with God. Hence, its enormous dignity, its enormous value also from a theological point of view, and our infinite responsibility in matters involving making economic choices.

We were thrown out of Eden, we lost paradise, we didn't take care of the earth, we didn't keep our relationships, we killed our brothers. We know this, we see it. But here, Ezekiel also sends us another message in backlight: every time we set our economic life according to justice and communion we are returning to the gardens of Eden, we are still 'full of wisdom' and 'perfect in beauty', walking and talking with the angels at sunset. Maybe we don't know this, we never noticed, they never told us; but the right way of the economy is the door to heaven.