

The song of the risen bones

The exile and the promise/22 - Words for this time and age of destroyed temples and disappeared promised lands

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«How can someone be born when they are old?» Nicodemus asked. «Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!»»

Gospel of John, Chapter 3

Prophets are experts and teachers of the spirit. They recognize it when it blows in the wind on earth, whether it blows outside or inside of them. Among the many types of wind, they know how to intercept it as a different kind of breeze. They have a vital need to respond to their calling. Without the spirit, the prophets would not be able to understand the words

they hear and then refer to us. It is the exegete of the words that they receive. They wait for it, they pray to it, they implore it and they know how to stay silent when, despite receiving the words, they do not receive the spirit. In the Bible, the spirit is closely intertwined with the word. Both give life, both create, transform, fertilize, bathe, generate and regenerate. Elohim, Word, Ruah; Father, Logos, Pneuma. The unity and multiplicity of the biblical God were already present in the Bible and in the historical experience of that faith. The prophets are, furthermore, essential to be able to discern spirits, to distinguish the wind of vanity, *havel*, from the breeze of the spirit, *ruah*. The Bible knows them well, and the prophets know and recognize them both very well too.

Even Qohelet's *havel* - *havel havalim*: vanity of vanities - is breath, is wind; it is the type of wind that we know as well, the kind that reveals the inconsistency of things, the ephemeral aspect of life, which reminds us that everything passes, and passes quickly. *Havel* is also the name of the brother killed by Cain, and the name of the idols (in the Book of Jeremiah), of that which is empty, void, nothing. The *havel*-wind resembles the *ruah*-wind, sometimes they are even on friendly terms. Because without the breath of the spirit, we would not be able to recognize the dimension of *vanitas*, though present in the very heart of things, we would just be deceived by wealth and goods, trapped forever in self-consolation and illusions. Because the *ruah*-spirit gives us that typical intelligence that knows how to see that which is ephemeral and, beyond it, how to celebrate life, which in order to be understood and truly lived, first needs to be grasped in all its fragile and fleeting dimension. However, if once you have experienced the vanity of everything (an essential stage of existence), you do not also discover that other breeze of the spirit, if *ruah* does not take the place of *havel*, only the nothingness of pessimism and depression will remain in adult life. There are lives that do not come to full bloom because they never reach the *havel*/vanity phase, and remain trapped inside illusions, including religious ones; and there are others that regress because once touched by the wind of *havel* they find themselves unable to fly with the new breeze of *ruah*. The prophets know by vocation how to tell us that "ruah will beat havel", that the life-giving and renewing breath is in fact more powerful and truer than the nihilistic one. Here, we have another reason to why prophets are needed.

Ezekiel is the prophet of the *ruah*-spirit, in part because he also came to know the *havel*-spirit well. The word *ruah* is mentioned in his book more than in any other text in the Old Testament. The heart can only change in spirit. Elohim's breath gave life to the first man, and a mysterious spiritual breath

continues to generate and regenerate life in the universe. And so, after having announced the miracle of the new heart made of flesh, Ezekiel shocks us with one of the most original and wonderful scenes in the whole Bible: «The hand of the Lord was on me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones... and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. He asked me, "Son of man, can these bones live?"» (Ezekiel 37,1-3). We find ourselves inside another one of Ezekiel's visions. In a valley in Babylon, perhaps the same one where the young Ezekiel had been transported in a vision when his calling began (Ezekiel 3,22) - it is not uncommon for the tremendous callings in the adult life of a prophet to occur in the same enchanted places as their very first one. Ezekiel now sees the great valley all covered with bones, withered, dry, old, devoid of any flesh or nerves. God says to him: «Prophecy to these bones and say to them, "Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life"» (Ezekiel 37,4-6). A scene of infinite narrative and lyrical power. Ezekiel executes the command, and prophesies: «As I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them» (Ezekiel 37,7-8).

Only he who witnessed the scene and had an active part in it could write about it and describe it to us like this. The Bible is not a work of fiction. And if we want to avoid turning it into a film, we have to believe in the words of Ezekiel; to believe that he "saw" those bones and then "heard" a noise – the biblical prophets are like trusted beggars who hardly ever receive anything from us readers, who instead continue to deride and mock them together with their contemporaries. We need stand next to him and see those bones move and regroup, hear their creaking; to then, at the same time as he does, realize that *the essential spirit is missing*: «Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, son of man, and say to it, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live". So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet - a vast army» (Ezekiel 37,9-10).

The spirit is the great protagonist of this vision. Ancient man was able to see more things than we do. Alongside the wind that was blowing, he could also feel a different kind of breeze that made things alive. And he recognized it, and celebrated it. The Bible is also a vast and far-reaching pedagogy teaching us that the spirit of life is not only the spirit of the mountains and the forests, but that another name of the true and invisible God is found in its essence, *true because it is spirit*. And to assert the *spiritual* nature of God, the Bible engaged in a radical fight against idols that, while presenting themselves as the source of the divine breath on earth, took away the breath of man, who can only breathe in an infinite wind. It was this absolute custody of the mystery of the spirit that one day enabled Christians to be able to call him God.

These bones coming back to life are the Pentecost of the Old Testament. A frightened church that died on Golgotha coming back to life and collectively rising; a people destroyed and humiliated who still had hope in a new ancient promise. An epiphany of the spirit, alive and giver of life, in both.

The transformation of those bones into living humans takes place in two stages. First, the bones become skeletons on which flesh and tendons are recreated and recomposed. This first miracle, however, will only create corpses, if the spirit does not come as well.

This work of Ezekiel's in two acts contains a precious message for the communities that are spiritually dead and hope for a new life.

Jerusalem had been destroyed. The people exiled and discouraged: «Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel». Faith faltered, hope was dying out. The people kept repeating in tears: «Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off» (Ezekiel 37,11). Within this immense tragedy, Ezekiel suggests a grammar for us, to enable us to rise again after a great crisis. And in this time and age of destroyed temples and disappeared promised lands, we need to learn how to listen to him.

Whenever a charismatic community realizes that its "bones have dried up", that hope "is gone", and that it has been "cut off", there is still a possibility of being born again *if a prophet manages to prophesy and invoke the spirit*. There is, however, a pre-condition: the community in question must intone its funeral song, it must realize that its bones have withered - many dead communities are unable to rise

again because they continue to operate under the false belief that they are still alive. We cannot exclude that the vision was a response to the prayer of lament of the exiled people. Acknowledging and observing mourning is the first necessary prayer for resurrection.

Then, we need a prophet, who survived the persecutions, and who has not been expelled or turned into a false prophet (in good or bad faith). Not all withered-bone communities have prophets; all too often, they end up dying during the destruction of their cities and temples. However, when at least one is saved - the prophetic "critical mass" is equal to 1 - the first part of his prophesying consists in reassembling the skeleton, and then reviving the flesh and tendons surrounding it. After dying and realizing that they have in fact really expired – whether for lack of vocation, or because they aged within liturgies and forms that eventually became older than them, or due to serious scandals, schisms, due to not being able to write a new charismatic narrative after the death of their founder, which is always a mystical death of the community itself, or due to having spent all their residual energy pursuing the wrong battles... – these communities start over again. New people arrive, economic resources, projects, structures, new spurs of energy, activities and work all come back again. The scattered bones recompose and create a proper skeleton with flesh and nerves forming around it. The community takes shape and gradually begins to resemble the one that became extinct.

Nevertheless, Ezekiel tells us that, however necessary, this phase *is not sufficient* to really enable the community to come back to life again. The spirit is missing. The people are there, but the *vocation* is missing; there are stories but not *charismatic stories*; there are words but not the *verb* that binds them; there are works but the vital *breath* is missing; there are plans but the big dreams are missing; there are prayers but they cannot speak. The resurrection of Christ was not merely the reanimation of a corpse. And if the resurrection of Lazarus is not interpreted as a sign and announcement of the different resurrection of Christ, it is nothing more than the exhumation of the body of a man who had the sad fate of dying twice. The rebirth of a community cannot happen (or if it did, it would only be like that of Lazarus) if the skeleton and the external signs of life are the only things that are restored. A true prophet, returning to the valley of that first calling now turned into a valley of bones, needs to be able to invoke the spirit while it, softly, arrives. We call some of these vocations or callings *reforms*.

Ezekiel tells us that these resurrections are possible. That cemeteries can turn into gardens of Eden. That we can go to sleep as old people and wake up as children again.