

Despite everything, life

The exile and the promise/23 - The real (and biblical) alternative source of energy: keeping warm with burnt down weapons

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«Here is what is difficult in this era: ideals, dreams and good expectations barely have time to be born before they are already being beaten down and completely devastated by the cruellest of realities. It is very strange that I have not abandoned all my dreams yet because they all seem absurd and impossible. Instead, despite everything, I hold them tight, because I still believe in the intimate goodness of man»

Anna Frank, *Diary*, July 1944

The others that attract and frighten us are a constant that marks all human civilizations since their inception. A radical and tenacious ambivalence, an expression of that "sociable unsociability" which according to Kant characterizes all human beings. Others fascinate us because they are different and bearers of an unknown world, but this very same diversity and lack of knowledge easily generates fear and distrust as well. There are plenty of moments in human history where it has won, completely overpowering the charm and beauty of encountering that which is different. The others have often been loved and fought against, but the fights have decisively been more frequent and longer than the loves. All great religious traditions can also be interpreted as ethical and social systems to manage this fundamental anthropological ambivalence. In the Bible as well, the others are both the enemy to protect yourself from as well as the strangers that the Torah commands us to welcome as sacred guests. In some biblical passages these foreign people are bearers of a blessing, in others they are the image of enemy gods and idols, who come to destroy the chosen people and their true God. The first two brothers, one mild and the other fratricidal, also contribute to display the two sides of biblical and western humanism. Christianity then added, "no one touches Abel" to the moral code based on "no one touches Cain". *The sign of Cain*, the merchant and the citizen, contributed to limiting the violence applied as mimetic revenge, and the *sign of Abel*, the good shepherd and the vulnerable man, helped to establish the ethics of meekness and love-agape as the foundation of a different civilization - which we still await and we never tire of waiting and wishing for. In spite of everything.

Taking place over the course two long chapters, the myth of Gog and Magog in the Book of Ezekiel is one of the instances in which the others, who come from afar, become an icon of absolute evil: «The word of the Lord came to me: "Son of man, set your face against Gog, of the land of Magog, the chief prince of Meshek and Tubal; prophesy against him and say... I am against you, Gog, chief prince of Meshek and Tubal. I will turn you around, put hooks in your jaws and bring you out with your whole army - your horses, your horsemen fully armed, and a great horde with large and small shields, all of them brandishing their swords... the many nations with you» (Ezekiel 38,1-6). Once he returned after his long exile, Gog receives the order from YHWH to destroy Israel: «Therefore, son of man, prophesy and say to Gog: 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: In that day, when my people Israel are living in safety, will you not take notice of it? You will come from your place in the far north, you and many nations with you, all of them riding on horses, a great horde, a mighty army. You will advance against my people Israel like a cloud that covers the land» (Ezekiel 38,14-15). However, eventually Gog is

defeated: «Then I will strike your bow from your left hand and make your arrows drop from your right hand. On the mountains of Israel you will fall, you and all your troops and the nations with you. I will give you as food to all kinds of carrion birds and to the wild animals. You will fall in the open field» (Ezekiel 39,3-5).

Who were Gog and Magog? Gog, king of the land of Magog, appears in the book of Ezekiel with roots originating in very ancient Middle Eastern traditions, so remote as to make it impossible to identify the character or the locations in question. Over the centuries, commentators and scholars have indulged in proposing different possible historical and geographic hypotheses (an allegory of the Babylonians, Gyges king of Lydia, etc.). A decisive moment in the events of the myth of Gog/Magog, is the quote in the Book of Revelation, which brings up these mysterious chapters in the Book of Ezekiel, changing their meaning and context, placing them in an eschatological and gloomy environment that inspired a lot of literature and plenty of legends during the Middle Ages: «When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth - Gog and Magog - and to gather them for battle. In number they are like the sand on the seashore» (Book of Revelation 20,7-8).

The Jewish historian Giuseppe Flavio talks about it in his "Jewish Antiquities" (end of the 1st century AD), contributing decisively in the creation of the legend of Alexander the Great, who was said to have confined Gog and Magog behind a wall which he built in the Caucasian region. An ideal-physical barrier, marking the insurmountable borders of western civilization, because beyond them there were only the satanic people of evil. We find this same legend later in the Koran: «Until, when he reached a pass between two mountains, he found beside them a people who could hardly understand his speech. They said, "O Dhul-Qarnayn, indeed Gog and Magog are great corrupters in the land. So may we assign for you an expenditure that you might make between us and them a barrier?" He said, "That in which my Lord has established me is better than what you offer, but assist me with strength; I will make between you and them a dam» (Surah XVIII: 93-95).

In the first millennium of the Christian era, Augustine, Isidore of Seville, Ambrosius, Jerome, and then the Pseudo-Methodius and the Tiburtine Sibyl, helped create the myth of Gog and Magog as an image of great military and religious threat. It has been applied to many foreign people, including the Jews, and in the recent war in Iraq, when Gog and Magog were once again summoned by Bush and Chirac in that "holy war" against evil. The regions of Gog and Magog are also mentioned in Marco Polo's "The Million" (The Travels of Marco Polo, 73), while many maps and globes called some remote lands in Asia (next to Babylon, near the Caspian Sea, or in the region of the Tartars or Turks), Gog and Magog.

The myth of Gog and Magog is one of the most relevant cases of the creation of imaginary people that have produced very concrete political, religious and cultural consequences. Throughout the Middle Ages, every time a people came down from the North or East and appeared in Christian Europe (Goths, Huns, and then Arabs, Turks ...) it was interpreted as a fulfilment of the words of Ezekiel and the Book of Revelation on unleashing Gog and Magog and their evil empire. The legend of Gog and Magog is therefore an important step in the ideological construction of the concept of the "great enemy", which marked and continues to mark and influence Western culture to a considerable extent. Although the Bible and the Gospels have given us innumerable words of peace and fraternity, Western man has been decisively better at identifying the dark and threatening passages of the sacred texts and therein finding a justification for continuing to "practice the art of war". No peaceful and bright page in the Bible has come close to reaching the dark power of Gog-Magog or the Antichrist.

However, even in the midst of the darkness of the oracles about Gog and Magog, Ezekiel manages to find and offer us different words full of benevolence: «Then those who live in the towns of Israel will go out and use the weapons for fuel and burn them up - the small and large shields, the bows and arrows, the war clubs and spears. For seven years they will use them for fuel. They will not need to gather wood from the fields or cut it from the forests, because they will use the weapons for fuel» (Ezekiel 39,9-10). *Because they will use the weapons for fuel*: the true alternative energy that the world has never wanted to invent, despite the deep moral vein running through it that has always longed for it. If we transformed the companies that produce weapons into companies that warm us up without "cutting wood from the forests" today, if we oriented the technological energies invested in the art of war in the numerous forms of art of peace, we could keep warm and live well for "seventy times seven" years. But we do not; instead, we continue to see Gog and Magog in those who come from afar, to see monsters in the faces of the men and women who come to visit us, to write maps and globes marked with new names for Gog and Magog ("economic migrants", "clandestine", "illegal immigrants"...). And

we continue to build walls to prevent these imaginary monsters from disturbing the peace within our forts.

Prophecy, however, cannot leave the last word to absolute evil. It knows about it, talks about it, telling us to be aware of its presence in the world; ending its oracles with words full of messianic hope: «When I have brought them back from the nations and have gathered them from the countries of their enemies, I will be proved holy through them in the sight of many nations... for though I sent them into exile among the nations, I will gather them to their own land, not leaving any behind. I will no longer hide my face from them, for I will pour out my Spirit on the people of Israel» (Ezekiel 39,27-29).

Europe has imagined and made up many non-existent Gog and Magog; but on a few rare occasions Gog and Magog have really arrived. They destroyed, burned, hung children, they were very dark clouds covering the sky. We screamed, and we all died. But then, we were able to rise again, all together. Europe today is the result of these tremendous deaths and amazing resurrections. Its history has engraved one of the greatest truths of biblical and western humanism: good runs deeper than evil. Evil may win sometimes, but it cannot always win. Cain killed and continues to kill Abel, but he did not kill or manages to kill Adam, who remains that "very beautiful and very good" thing, the epilogue of creation.

In the book of Genesis (10,2) Magog is the son of Japheth, and therefore grandson of Noah, the righteous one, the builder of the Ark of salvation. No evil can turn into good, no weapon can turn into fuel, no civilian death can turn into resurrection, if we confine evil behind the "wall of Alexander". Evil does not come from afar, from the east, from the north, from the sea: evil is simply our nephew, our son. It lives among us. Cain is Adam's son too. In the Bible, the greatest evil is present within a much wider horizon of good. Its *first initial root* is not rotten; it is a good, healthy root. This is the immense gift that the Bible has been giving us for three millennia: to believe in life. In spite of everything.