

The hand that lowers the bridge

The soul and the harp / 2 - Myths know the limits, and this terrible time becomes their legacy

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"There is something great about living in hope, but at the same time there is also something deeply unreal about it. The specific value of the individual, which can hence never be fully realized, decreases, because incompleteness marks his or actions".

Gershom Scholem *The messianic idea in Judaism*

Psalm 2 takes us into the great biblical theme of waiting for the Messiah, and therefore into the importance of hope in times of crisis and meekness to be able to cross it with strength.

«Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain?» Psalm 2 opens with this question. A tremendous question that prophets and scholars have been repeating for millennia: why, despite the vocation for peace and well-being inscribed in the heart of every person and community, does man continue to practice the art of war, to sow and cultivate discord and enmity? A civilization will stay alive until it tires of repeating this question.

The psalm transports us into an environment of rebellion, of people conspiring against a king – «Let us break their chains and throw off their shackles» (Psalm 2,2). This king is no ordinary ruler: «And the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed» (Psalm 2,2). The protagonist of the psalm is the *Messiah*, the anointed of YHWH, mystery and yearning of the whole Bible. The psalm says that peoples conspire «in vain», and that «The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them» (Psalm 2,4) and at their conspiracies.

Most probably, Psalm 2 was written after the Exile, when the monarchy in Israel was long gone and the people had experienced destruction, defeat and deportation. They had felt on their own skin the tremendous force of the plots of power and conquest of the peoples, and there they came to understand that the truth of their God did not coincide with the victory over the enemies. Exile in fact marked the great moment in time during which the Jews learned that a defeated God could still remain a true God.

Why then that «in vain»? Despite the experience of defeat and violence that prevails over peace, the Bible here and elsewhere announces the advent of a Messiah, and therefore of a new time that will finally be different, just and good. The more reality moves away from the messianic time, the more it needs to be announced. Believing and affirming a truth when history and the present say something else: this is the true role of great spirituality, it is always present, embodied, and speaks of our lives especially in times when all the evidence says the opposite. The greatest dreams are made while in exile.

The waiting for the Messiah is a profound aspect of the soul of the entire Bible. We find it in the prophets, in the historical books, and now in the psalms. A concrete form that assumes hope within

itself. This expectation kept the future alive, safeguarding it as judgment on the present and as a possibility of liberation.

If the messianic dimension of history is lost, individual and social life shortens its horizon, inexorably focusing and crushing down on the present, extinguishing all joy and darkening all freedom. We hence fill ourselves with smaller expectations because we have eliminated the greater one. Capitalism moved to enclose the Messiah in commodities (as Marx had seen and understood), and thus cancel him. Biblical messianism is the jubilee year of history, that different time that becomes a moral criterion for judging the practices of all other times. Thus will the Messiah remain until he comes. He is the ruler of the not-yet, his time is the ideal that measures real time, an ideal that is a prophecy of history. There is a profound relationship between prophecy and messianism: both find themselves both within and outside of history, real and ideal, already and not yet. When this vital and paradoxical tension is lost, messianism often ends up being identified with this or that political leader and true prophecy is turned into mere court prophecy - this also comes into play in the critical attitude regarding monarchy, which can be found in many instances in the historical books of the Bible.

In the words of Jacob Taubes, biblical messianism reminds us that «the drawbridge is on the opposite riverbank and it is from that riverbank that they must inform us that we are free». It therefore tells us that if self-liberation is indeed one of the fundamental aspects of freedom, another important side to it is liberation at the hands of someone who lowers that drawbridge for us. Over the centuries, the Bible has preserved and safeguarded this aspect of freedom as liberation, writing it down as its first commandment, and thus protecting us from the frequent self-deception of imagining freedom without perceiving a need for a voice other than our own to call upon us and save us. This is one of the fundamental aspects to what we call *salvation*. Thanks to this tenacious waiting for the Messiah, the future did not become «a homogeneous and empty period of time in the Bible: because every second was the door through which the Messiah could enter» (Walter Benjamin).

A frequent and serious mistake by Christians is hence to think that the waiting for the Messiah ended with the coming of Christ, forgetting that he must come and return every day. The liturgy is the great place where what has been, encounters what is and what will be: each Easter Saturday, we pray that the tomb will once again be empty and the resurrection will happen *today*. In the Bible, remembering is a verb in the future tense. Verse 7 of Psalm 2 is both very well known and powerful: «I will proclaim the Lord's decree: He said to me, "You are my son; today I have become your father"». A splendid phrase, very much loved in the New Testament and in Christianity as well, where the concept of the "Son of God" has become a theological pillar. In this psalm (and elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible) we discover, among other things that calling God 'Father' and perceiving the human condition as sonship or progeny is not an invention of Christianity but in fact a biblical inheritance.

It is that word *today* however that really conquers us - «Today I have become your father». Here we have not only, perhaps, an ancient trace of a song composed for the consecration of a new king in Israel; in that "today" we can also read something different and far beyond. The paradigm of every spiritual vocation, a sonship that manifests itself for the first time today and is repeated in all of todays, for the rest of eternity, because a vocation is only alive in the present, and it is in this continuous present that we encounter eternity.

Every human paternity and human motherhood is hence a procreation in the present. It is repeating throughout your life: «Today I have become your father/mother» - «But now that you are dead, mother, I know all the times that you have begotten me. In silence, not seen by anyone» (David Maria Turolto). Each generation is re-generation, and what is alive and does not regenerate, decays. Fatherhood-motherhood tells us, symbolically (and therefore really), that we are alive and capable of generating because *today* we too were regenerated. The day everyone stops generating we will start dying. To the Bible, the principle, the origin of this ever-present generation-regeneration is God, who then becomes the guarantor of that mutual generation that marks the rhythm of life. Until the end, on the last day, when we will be surprised to see the drawbridge go down and we will cross unscathed, far above the crocodiles.

After hearing the promise of the son-Messiah, we are immediately plunged into another wide and deep landscape: «Ask me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession» (Psalm 2,8). That «ask me» recalls the invitation made by God to Solomon in the *today* of his calling: «Ask for whatever you want me to give you » (1 Book of Kings 3,4). Solomon asked for the

most beautiful thing possible («A discerning heart» 1 Book of Kings 3,9). We do not know what the king of the ancient psalm asked; however, we know the promise contained therein, which since becoming a psalm is now a universal promise: the people and the earth are also our inheritance and our possession. They are the legacy and possession of those who pray and chant the psalms, who today, while chanting them, rediscover themselves to be the heirs of all people and owners of the whole earth. In biblical humanism, however, the whole earth belongs only to YHWH, and men are only the users and administrators (treasurers). Therefore, any property is actually secondary and every possession imperfect. The promise is true because it is imperfect, or because true completeness lies in its incompleteness.

Every child is an heir, and hence the children of God are all heirs of the heavens and all the earth. We sensed it, and felt like heirs. We forgot however about the incompleteness, we became masters of the earth, profaned it, becoming mercenaries, many times over.

Within that same tradition and promise, one day Jesus of Nazareth told us something else, new and important, about this special inheritance: «Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth». Gentleness or meekness is also about recognizing the incompleteness and the provisional nature of our existence and our possessions. The meek inhabit the world without becoming predators, own without concupiscence, and use any goods parsimoniously. The meek are the guardians of the earth and of their brothers and sisters. They are the anti-Cain. Only a mild kind of custody can truly administer the inheritance of the earth and ensure that our children will be heirs of a non-squandered heritage.

Gentleness is a manual virtue, of the hands – *meek (mansueto)*, that is, "accustomed to the hand", docile to the touch of the shepherd, as the lamb is. Our generation has not applied a gentle or meek care. Today, however, we suddenly found ourselves in a flood of gentleness, in an ocean of meekness. This tremendous time is becoming the time of myths. That of those who know how to stay at home, of those who know how to stay, docile, under the touch of the hands of doctors and nurses. We are seeing many hands lowering bridges on opposite banks that previously seemed unattainable. «Therefore, you kings, be wise; be warned, you rulers of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear and celebrate his rule with trembling» (Psalm 2,10-11). The last words of the psalm present us with a new blessing for this time: «Blessed are all who take refuge in him».