

The other name of faith

The soul and the harp/ 9 - When the Son of Man returns it is in human relationships that he will see if "God is present"

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"In this Spirit, which is the love between the Father and the Son, between the Son and us, between us and us, between those who have a soul, in this Spirit which is our love, it is in this Spirit that all our salvation lies: thrown into his fire, our human salvation becomes our madness. Oh may it be so, oh may it be so".

Giuseppe de Luca, The intelligence and salvation of the soul

The question of God's existence is also present in the Bible. Psalm 14 helps us understand that devoted atheism is a disease and that to

stop seeking God signifies the loss of man.

«The fool says in his heart, "There is no God." They are corrupt, their deeds are vile; there is no one who does good. The LORD looks down from heaven on all mankind to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God» (Psalm 14,1-2). An original way to begin for a unique psalm in the psalter. A special start because the stakes are special. In fact, it is the only time in the Bible that we find *There is no God* written. Even the ancient religious world knew about the doubt that the gods were merely an invention of man. The biblical man is closer to us than we think and write. The question about the existence of God is also found among the legitimate questions in the Bible.

Psalm 14 was most likely written during the Babylonian exile. The Babylonians were not atheists. They left us with collections of beautiful prayers and they had their gods in high regard honouring them with spectacular processions, temples and statues. Hence, the Babylonians did not explicitly say "There is no God ", let alone the Jews. Was the psalmist thus making an accusation of false religion? Was it criticism levelled against idolatry? No. The sort of denial of God of which this psalm speaks is not an idolatrous one. What kind does it refer to then?

It is revealed to us by two different elements: a linguistic one and a theological one. The Hebrew word that Psalm 14 uses to express "There is no God" is Elohim, which in the Bible is the generic name of divinity (the gods). If the psalmist wanted to criticize idolatry, the cult of "false and lying" gods, the name of God used would have been YHWH, the proper name of the biblical God. Also, because YHWH is the name that is most used in the psalter and almost exclusively in the first book (Psalms 1-41) for God. Using Elohim here then means wanting to give that denial – There is no God - a value that goes beyond idolatrous criticism. Something universal and tremendously important is hidden for every religion (and for every atheism in that "There is no Elohim". What "*atheism*" does this psalm speak of?

We find out by taking a closer look at the second element: «All have turned away, all have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one. Do all these evildoers know nothing? They devour my people as though eating bread... You evildoers frustrate the plans of the poor» (Psalm 14,3-4,6). Here we find the prophetic thesis that the denial of God is revealed in the denial of man, especially the poor. "There is no God " should therefore not be read as an atheist affirmation of the kind we have

come to know in modern times in Europe, but as a consequence of a central idea in the Bible: *God exists if man exists* - man is the other name of biblical faith. It is the "devouring my people as though eating bread" that speaks of this type of atheism. It is not just a philosophical or intellectual affair, it is so much more.

Most likely, the social life of the Babylonians had a great effect on the deported Jews. Those banks that lent interest and generated rows of slave debtors, the corruption of power in that great empire, greatly impressed the Jews and their prophets. Ezekiel, a prophet in exile, even went so far as to formulate a version of Adam's sin in Eden as an economic sin: «By your many sins and dishonest trade you have desecrated your sanctuaries» (Ezekiel 28,18). However, the practical atheism inscribed in socio-economic practices was something even more generally present than what was practiced in Babylon. It can already be found in the writings of Isaiah, long before exile: «Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me... Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow» (Isaiah 1,13-17). Isaiah accused his fellow citizens not the Babylonians; he stigmatized assiduous temple goers and practitioners who offered sacrifices while trampling on both law and justice.

The psalmist hence sees the absence of God in the absence of man. These are the passages from which one understands that biblical theology is immediate humanism: the biblical God honours himself by honouring men, women, the poor. The anthropology of Genesis returns once again: we are also the image of God because when someone - an empire or a culture - no longer sees man, it no longer sees God, even when it continues to pray and praise him in temples. He is already an atheist, although he does not know it yet. There are many ways to say "There is no Elohim", "Elohim is nothing" (in Ceronetti's translation). But what is most dear to the Bible is clear: "man is nothing", "the poor man is nothing". And that the meaning here really is nothing, is confirmed by the only language that really matters: that of behaviour and action. The world has always been populated with religious men who honour God and dishonour men, who value the gods and despise their fellow men. It is not enough to be religious to not be an atheist. And if the psalmist chose Elohim and not YHWH to tell us about this typical atheism, it was also to tell us that this disease of *devout atheism* crosses into all religions, including biblical ones. Men say "There is no God" with their way of treating each other and treating the poor. The Bible is not a treatise on ethics, but it is clear from the ethics of men whether the people have faith or not.

The psalm calls those who say "There is no God" foolish, "darkened" and "stupid". *What* exactly is the foolishness of this atheism? First of all, it is a collective atheism, a disease that has infected an entire people: «*There is no one who does good, not even one*». This foolishness, which leads to denying God, is therefore not a matter of a single intellectual or sceptical philosopher; the atheism denounced by the psalmist is a popular kind of atheism: where *not even one true believer* remains. We are in a situation similar to that of Sodom and Gomorrah, in Jerusalem, where Jeremiah did not find even one single just person (Jeremiah 5,1). The worst of the world observed by Satan in recognition that he found at least one righteous man (Job, chapter 1), a world more corrupt than the one before the flood, where at least there was one righteous man left, Noah.

The radical nature of the Bible is so beautiful - everyone, not even one. All are fools. We all are when corruption lurks and spreads within institutions, communities, movements, businesses and churches. We precipitate in "a mutual spoiling". The (rare) Hebrew verb used here, *'alàh*, speaks of and expresses mutual contagion, mutual contamination. Although many are asymptomatic, the corruption reaches everyone. To get out of these situations it would take a Noah, a Jeremiah, an Abraham, Mary. Alas, they are not always any to be found. Almost never. Because in order not to be foolish that «not even one» should rise to denounce injustice, resist in his denunciation, endure persecution, and if he does not get any results, resign, lay off, quit and dissociate. These actions, however, tend to be very costly and are therefore rare on earth. Even in these dynamic of "spoiling each other" we are all children of Adam, we are sympathetic to corruption, and even when the symptoms are not evident we are at least complicit and therefore foolish.

The word which the psalm uses to say "fool" is *nabal*. Nabal was the name of Abigail's husband. In the episode of the first Book of Samuel, Nabal did not understand how he should behave with David. He did not respond to his gifts with other gifts, he did not "recognize" David. He would have started a war if Abigail had not intervened, Abigail who instead did everything her husband had not done: she was

grateful, she recognized David, filled him with gifts, she was generous, and she was able to honour her guest: «Please pay no attention, my lord, to that wicked man Nabal. He is just like his name -his name means Fool, and folly goes with him» (1 Samuel 25,25). Abigail rebuilt the relationship that had been broken by her husband, and with her gifts, she obtained the forgiveness of David, who in that caring relationship recognized the presence of God: «Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel, who has sent you today to meet me» (1 Samuel 25,32). Abigail was the anti-Nabal, by saying "There is a God", "God exists" she was really saying "Man exists", turning war into peace. There is no better way to say God, to say Elohim - women are well aware of this, women know better.

The Psalm defines the "wise" (*maskil*) who was not found by God on earth as one who "seeks God". The opposite of the fool is therefore a seeker of God. The first seeker we find in the psalm however is God-Elohim himself, who looks out from his balcony in the heavens searching for at least one righteous man. God searches to find *someone* who in turn *is looking for him*. Faith is a meeting of searches, a reciprocity of desires, which becomes a ternary relationship: God looks for a man who is capable of looking for him by looking for him in man - «... and the second commandment is similar to the first». However, there may be yet another meaning to this Psalm 14: if a wise man is he who seeks God, then the fool is he who says "There is no God" because he simply *does not seek him*: what if foolish atheism was simply the atheism of those who stopped looking?

One day, another crazy man «was looking for God». He did not find him and thus announced to everyone that he was dead. Perhaps because he had looked for him in the «market», where «many of those who did not believe in God were found» (F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*). The world in which we find the God that we were looking for dead is preferable to that corrupt world where nobody can say "God exists". And if they said it, they would be saying something even more false than "There is no God", said by the foolish in that same situation. There is a less foolish atheism than a faith proclaimed in the midst of general injustice. If the God we sought for is dead, we can always hope and pray that he will rise again.

When the «The Son of Man returns» he will not go to the temples or churches to see if «there is still faith on earth» (Luke 12,7-8). He will look at our social relationships: he will look at how we will love each other, he will look at our banks, our tax evasion, our hospitals, the salaries of the workers and those of the managers. And if there is still faith, he will find it only within the justice and truth of our relationships; if it still exists, he will be able to recognize it by how we respond to the hopes of those who are miserable.