

The tremendous beauty of a pact

The Exile and the Promise/10 - We freely expose ourselves, becoming vulnerable, for the freedom of others

By Luigino Bruni



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«If woman had not separated from man she would not have died with him. Their separation marked the beginning of death. This is why Christ came, to remedy the separation that was from the beginning and to unite them both again, man and woman...»

The Gospel of Philip, 78-79

Human love is complex. In the most important and evolved relationships, love is in essence unconditional, that is, it has the capacity to love even

without expecting anything in return. An essential ability to overcome crises, to resist famines of reciprocity, to start again after a great betrayal. However, this ability coexists with the equally radical need for mutuality and communion, to be loved while one loves or after having been loved. Because the most important kinds of love take place within a pact, that is a collective commitment and its related mortgage. "Love thy neighbor" flourishes in "love each other", where the commandment to the "I" and the "you" aligns with the same command to the you and us. And even when love matures and reaches the paradisiacal notes of *agape*, it never ceases to be eros and *philia* (friendship) as well, because, until the end, each remains destitute of the other as eros and as free as *philia* (*agape* can only really raise "organs" already moved by all human love). It is in this dynamic of freedom and bond where the most sublime and terrible human experiences meet. We freely entrust part of our liberty to pacts, and once it has been donated, we lose part of our private property. We freely chose to expose ourselves for the freedom of the other person, to become vulnerable to their changes of heart, to tie our life to a rope of which we control only one end and not even the more robust one. The Bible, in some of its most precious pages, took the words of the greatest and most committed human love and gave them to God so that it could tell us about His love: *ahavah*, *hesed*, *dodim* and, finally, *agape*. Because in spousal love the first and greatest gift is the reciprocity and exchange of beautiful words.

In the beginning (in Genesis) the Bible resorted to commercial and political contracts to retell the Covenant. Then, the prophets realized deep in their soul that that first language was much too poor to accurately describe it and they began making use of the image of marriage instead. But in order to add truth to this metaphor the prophets had to extend the analogy to its extreme, using its tragic words to touch upon the experience of betrayal and the broken pact. And so the extreme harshness of the words about the betrayal of the pact that the prophets left us also tells us the extreme truth of our own pacts and promises, true in their most beautiful words precisely *because* they are true even in their desperate words.

Thanks to the prophets, we then came to understand that the love between YHWH and us is indeed entirely free but not detached, it is *unconditional* in its choice but *conditioned* by our responses and betrayals, it is both utterly free and jealous. When the Bible speaks of the

covenant it tells us that God is affected by our loyalty and betrayal, because He chose to put himself in a position where he could be betrayed - the possibility of betraying God has widened the sphere of human freedom, and *hence* it has also extended our level of responsibility. This is the paradox of betrayal: the true value of every fidelity depends on the possibility of being able to be unfaithful, because no one would feel loved by someone to whom they denied the freedom to betray them. And so we have the ability to make God rejoice, ("rejoice in the heavens ...") because we also have the *possibility to make him suffer*.

Ezekiel is, among these extreme and reckless prophets, the one who used unpublished and arduous linguistic references more than anybody else: «This is what the Sovereign Lord says to Jerusalem: "Your ancestry and birth were in the land of the Canaanites; your father was an Amorite and your mother a Hittite. On the day you were born your cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water to make you clean ... You were thrown out into the open field ... You grew and developed and entered puberty. Your breasts had formed and your hair had grown, yet you were stark naked. Later I passed by, and when I looked at you and saw that you were old enough for love, I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your naked body. I gave you my solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Sovereign Lord, and you became mine"» Ezekiel 16: 3-8).

Jerusalem, with its pagan and humble origins, is "seen" by YHWH, saved, chosen and made His bride ("I made an alliance with you"). But after the phase of the first love, after having transformed her from an abandoned woman to a princess, («You became very beautiful and rose to be a queen» Ezekiel 16,13), the bride began to ruin herself, to prostitute herself with foreign men (the Egyptian, the Assyrian, the Chaldean), offering herself to anyone who passed by her bed in the crossroad (Ezekiel 16,20-32). And as if that weren't enough, that bride had also upset the very nature of prostitution: «All prostitutes receive gifts, but you give gifts to all your lovers, bribing them to come to you from everywhere for your illicit favours» (Ezekiel 16,33). Jerusalem had no economic or social reason to prostitute itself (it was true then and remains true today, that many people who end up on the streets are really victims who neither chose nor wished for that life). Hers was therefore an intentional choice, dictated only by vice and the pursuit of pleasure, and *hence* guilty.

Ezekiel (and before him Hosea and Jeremiah as well) was transformed by YHWH into a message in the flesh. However, unlike Hosea, Ezekiel does not tell an autobiographical story. He did not marry an unfaithful woman; he speaks of his wife as "the light of my eyes". But, as he utters those words of condemnation for his prostituted people, he feels the same pain he would feel if his wife really had betrayed him. This is how we can explain, or at least guess at, the lexical harshness of Ezekiel's words (which, in the original language, not yet edited by translation, borders on a really vulgar sexual language). This is Ezekiel's personality and nature, of course, but it is above all the song of pain sung by a true bridegroom who has shamelessly been betrayed. The Bible is long, at times immense, even and perhaps above all because of its ability to make us meet and make the acquaintance of real, whole men and women, so whole that they even manage to enable us to touch the hem of God's mantle, and feel it becoming aware of our touch. Underneath this integral humanity - which will later also become that of John the Baptist, of Paul, of Jesus – we encounter only various religious ideologies and idols, which do not touch us because they are mere smoke and *vanitas*.

But there is more. Perhaps YHWH whispered these words to him while he was walking in the streets of Babylon populated by prostitutes. When seeing their business, those words made him feel actual pain as a member and pastor of that people prostituting itself to idols (no true prophet loses solidarity with the people he must admonish and condemn, and therefore while condemning them he's also condemning himself). That oracle of YHWH, however, also made him feel God's pain for the people who had betrayed him. This is the fate of honest prophets. They live more lives and live and suffer more pains: their personal ones, those of their people, and those of God. If the voice of God that speaks to the prophets is true, then the God's pain must be true as well, and on earth, we can get to know it through the suffering of his prophets, who teach us the joys and sorrows of men together with the joys and sorrows of God. When Ezekiel was walking through Babylon, he *truly saw* Jerusalem in those prostitutes, the city of David and the holy city with the holy temple. In the wrong gestures of those women, he saw the

same perverse gestures of his people. He does not imagine them, he sees them, and the strength of his cry and his vocabulary comes from these "visions". This way of viewing things is the fundamental sense of the prophets. They see different things, hear different things, and only then utter and say different words.

Ezekiel had begun his metaphorical tale on the betrayal of Israel in Chapter XV, where he used the image of the vineyard, another very common biblical and prophetic metaphor for representing Israel. He told us of a cultivated and well taken cared for vineyard that at a certain point became ruined, eventually becoming useless: «Son of man, how is the wood of a vine different from that of a branch from any of the trees in the forest? Is wood ever taken from it to make anything useful?

it is thrown on the fire as fuel and the fire burns both ends and chars the middle» (Ezekiel 15,2-4). A degenerative process that then continues and is exalted in the following chapters.

A narrative and theological central aspect in these stories regarding the depravity of Jerusalem is hence the complex and risky relationship between *choice* and *merit*. The wood of the vine does not have particular merits in itself; it is no better than the oak or the beech, whether the purpose is to make tools or to use it as firewood. It is the care of the winemaker, which makes it a queen among the plants of the fields. When one obtains good wine, it is not thanks to the merits of the vine, but a gift, gratuitousness, grace, *charis*, *agape*. However, when the vine and the bridesmaid begin to consider their choice a matter of merit instead of a gift, the germ of perversion takes hold and begins to crawl in and grow. In the *vine* and in *life*. The Bible and the prophets tell us, with all the strength they are capable of (and it is truly remarkable), that choice, being chosen among many, is a gift - *ahavah*: *agape*.

It is the merits that we see in things that determine and generate the choices regarding many human issues, but these are not necessarily the actually decisive elements. We did not deserve to be born into a family that welcomed us, loved us, respected us, made us study and supported us, and we did not deserve to be born in a country at war and without freedom. We did not deserve to experience those few decisive encounters on which our human and professional profile depends, we did not deserve to be "seen" and called by name. It is this radical gratuitousness of life that the Bible and the prophets have always defended and continue to defend to the end. So that we may feel more loved than we deserve and demerit.