

The Biblical Prophets - Human Dignity Defenders

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Abstract

The theme we offer for debate as part of the works of the symposium today is a topic, but at the same time difficult. Its present interest is given both by each person's and each human community's profound aspiration for a meaning of their passing through the world, and by the vocation of the Biblical text to reveal such a meaning. However, the difficulty of the theme is more related to the historical and cultural distance that separates modern mentality from that of the Biblical authors and from the way they used to define man and his vocation in the world.

As the time allocated to a symposium presentation is limited, we will try to overcome the difficulty of the theme by resorting not to the historical-critical method of interpretation, but to our own availability to let ourselves be captured and interpreted by these texts and their authors. Obviously, this availability means not only an intellectual exercise, but also a deep emphatic capacity, that is a translation into the spiritual and existential context where the prophets fulfilled their vocation. In order to facilitate such a frame of mind, we suggest considering the following aspects of the theme:

- I. Who are the Biblical prophets?
- II. How do the prophets defend human dignity?
- III. The prophets' voice: a critical instance for the modern consciousness.

1. Who are the Biblical prophets?

In the books of the Old/First Testament (the wording belongs to Origen) there are several phrases to define the prophets' personality. Three of them seem significant to us, so we mention them here: prophets are God's men (Deuteronomy 33, 1), they are God's servants (Joshua 1, 1-2) and, finally they are God's Word bearers and messengers (*dabar*). The true prophets assume this vocation with humbleness and responsibility. Jeremiah writes, "The word of the Lord came to me, saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations" ' (Jeremiah, 1: 4-5). This text is very suggestive. For the prophet, God' Word (*dabar* in Hebrew, *Logos* in Greek) is the One who knows him, sanctifies him, and appoints him as a prophet not only for a community or for a people, but for all the peoples. In other words, though he lives in a limited historical and cultural context, the prophet has the consciousness of a universal vocation. If we used the language of an inclusive language, we could say that the prophet is the part that bears the whole. In a manner similar to a drop of dew that mirrors the sky, the prophet's soul mirrors the entire human beauty and dignity.

The first prophet mentioned in the Holy Bible is Abraham (Genesis 20, 7). His call is paradigmatic and coincides with the first forming of the Hebrew ethnic nucleus. The exegetes consider that the moment of Abraham's call represents a crucial moment in ancient history, as it produced a radical mutation in man's self-consciousness and in the way he would perceive time and his historical becoming. On the way of inspired faith, Abraham becomes God's word bearer and the father of a community that God promises His blessing to. Abraham and the people that will be born out of him will no longer look nostalgically towards the past, towards a time of 'eternal return', but prophetically and eschatologically towards a Promised Land and towards a messianic future. The difficult experiences of history, as well as the experience of human suffering, will be interpreted from the same messianic perspective by all the prophets, but especially by Moses, the Law, the receiver of the Torah on Mount Sinai. The time when the Torah was released was, according to a great Hebrew

theologian, Alexander Şafran, a time of Ghelui Şefina, that is a moment of the manifestation of God's presence. Within the horizon of this conquering presence, Moses sketched out the most human code of the ancient world that will uniquely structure Israel's religious consciousness and will offer the prophets the paradigm of a formal justice as the basis for their defending human dignity. We consider it necessary to briefly present this paradigm that can be enunciated as follows: **man is God's icon or image on earth.**

This is the fundamental paradigm that human dignity relies on and it represents the nucleus of the anthropology presented in the Genesis, the first Torah book. Genesis does not mention precisely what this 'God's image encoded in man' represents exactly, but suggests a way of interpreting this concept starting from the statement: 'So God created man in his own image (*Adam* in Hebrew, *Anthropos* in Greek), in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.' (*iş ŧi iŧa*). The word 'Adam' is a symbolic name that defines the universal human nature that has the personal alterity of masculine and feminine as a concrete hypostasis. This is why, the word 'Adam' is difficult to translate into other languages. It however suggests that there is an ontological unity of the entire humanity, yet this unity is not uniformity. It does not exclude the persons' creative plurality just as the persons' creative plurality must not destroy their ontological unity. From this perspective, each human person is unique, i.e. they cannot be transformed into a mere statistic element which can be eliminated, manipulated or marginalized. In other words, each person is an icon able to bear God's glory in history and this confers them an eternal dignity and value before God and other persons.

The symbolic language of Torah underlines the fact that man can only know and preserve his dignity by means of his free, conscious and responsible relation with God and, in God, with the entire creation. Abandoning the communion with God is synonymous with the loss of dignity and implies man's entering a horizon of slavery, existential exile and, finally, of death. Genesis mentions the fact that man freely broke the communion with God and when the latter searched the former

'in the cool of the day' (Genesis 3, 9), man 'hid'. This means that the beginning of the perversion of human dignity lies in the perverting of his moral responsibility to God. Man 'hides' and once he is discovered, he does not acknowledge his guilt, but provides justifications, accusing God and his fellow humans: 'The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat' (Genesis 3, 12). We here notice that man in a state of sin does no longer feel God and his fellow human as friends, but as strangers that threaten his self-centered individuality through their simple presence. Losing his own dignity through sin, man no longer acknowledges the dignity of others. Thus this leads to a crisis in human existence with manifold historical manifestations:

- the spiritual crisis (the perversion of the relationship with God);
- the moral crisis (the mistake of good for evil);
- the social crisis (Cain kills Abel);
- the ecological crisis (the Earth is doomed);
- the economic crisis (the Earth does no longer bear fruit for a selfish and self-centered being).

In this situation, humanity may find itself in misery. However, God interferes again and promises man a way to restore his lost dignity: 'And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.' (Genesis 3, 15). Most scholars interpreted this text from a Messianic perspective of man's restoration to his original dignity. The same perspective can also be found in the prophetic books.

2. How do the prophets defend human dignity?

On analyzing the period of the prophets, the same paradigm present in Genesis can be discovered in their works, now extended to the entire community of Israel. The community itself is considered by the prophets as a unified whole, having a distinct vocation and personality in the middle of the other peoples. According to the prophets, the community of Israel is the 'priest' of humanity called to impart to the world the experience of his relation with God. It is obvious that the priests acknowledge both the dignity of each Israeli person in part and defend the dignity of the community

as a whole because God has made an oath with the entire community, not only with a single person. Even the promise made to Abraham had community significance as it engaged Abraham's followers. This profound relationship between person and community is possible since, according to the prophets' vision, community cannot be mistaken for a formless mass or the sum of its components. Just like the person, community is a part that bears the whole in it; it is a '*qahal*' (*ecclesia* in Greek) that raises its voice (*qol*) to praise God. Similar to the person, the community is not spared the temptation of a triumphalist, autonomous and self-sufficient conscience in its relationship with God: 'Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth: for the LORD hath spoken, I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me [...]. Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider.' (Isaiah 1 2, 3). This self-sufficient conscience is summoned by the prophets to 'conversion' (*teshuba*) to prepare, in their historical present, the Messianic future of Restoration and reconciliation with God. The conversion of conscience or, in the language of the prophets, the conversion of the heart is necessary to transcend any formalism in religious life and to respect each person's dignity, especially that of the marginalized ones: the foreigner, the widow and the orphan. The conversion of conscience is a demand which can be found in all prophets but especially in Jeremiah and Ezekiel. The stress on this demand as an absolutely necessary condition for the preservation and affirmation of human dignity, at first in their own person allows for the prophets' attitude not to be mistaken for a social or religious activism; it is only a non aggressive attitude that shows that Biblical prophets were not only 'convinced' by the importance of their message, but also impregnated with God's 'presence'. There is a difference in quality between 'being convinced by' and 'being impregnated with' a spiritual reality. Being impregnated with God's presence means accepting one's vocation as a praise to God, by praising and defending human dignity. It is obvious that the defense of human dignity may harm those that do not respect it, therefore the prophets' voice does harm, but this wound also heals and delivers. In other words, the Biblical prophets

are a disturbing presence which raises side effects in any person or community that asserts itself haughtily, despising or offending the dignity of other persons or human communities. Therefore, we could say that in history Biblical prophets represent the model of a critical conscience which ensures the defending of human dignity before God.

4. The Voice of Prophets – A Critical Instance for Modern Conscience

Taking into account that even today freedom and human dignity is questioned, as individuals and entire communities are sometimes simply items considered from a statistical point of view, or instruments to be manipulated, the voice of biblical prophets could become a critical instance and the conscience of prophets would be able to establish itself as our better conscience, or perhaps remorse, when we allow the human dignity conferred by God himself, to be perverted in our being or in the being of others. In order to argue that the voice of Biblical prophets is needed today as a critical instance, we will give some examples, starting from a German theologian's reflection suggestively titled: **Paternity of God in an emancipated world.**

Prophets have emphasized the paternity of God in order to establish brotherhood among humans. Modern mentality denied this paternity, often establishing a tyrannical and restrictive ideological paternalism instead. For instance, Marxist ideology on which the totalitarian and atheist communism were founded has centered on the total emancipation of the human being. Starting from this idea, communist dictatorships have replaced the fraternal unity in God with a more abstract fraternity of many 'brothers' and 'comrades', sons of the single party. The phrase uttered by Stalin has remained famous for posterity: *'The state is a family and I am your father.'* In other words, communist ideology has usurped God's paternity and replaced it with the paternity, or better, with the paranoiac paternalism of the political leader. Now it can be noticed quite clearly that in the modern era, the struggle for emancipation was won, but it was not necessarily followed by the plenary affirmation of human dignity. Discrediting God's paternity and moral values often ends in

unconditional obedience to other 'pseudo-parents': gurus, leaders of sects or representatives of ideologies that are questionable in terms of respect for human dignity. This fact is underlined with competence by the theologian mentioned above, who in an international conference said: 'The self-aware and self-centered generation of the past few years, which used to oppose any specific engagement, or every political and social decision, was replaced by the generation that sacrifices with joy its own judgment to identify with a powerful chief. Youth today is therefore tired of freedom. It wants a strong chief, an object to which it may devote itself, opportunities to sacrifice itself. It does not take into account that many of these causes will lead to a catastrophe.'

We should point out that these words were uttered by the German author before World War II. After the experience of war, after all that happened in the dictatorships that followed, it is natural to ask ourselves whether that 'Israel Sema' uttered by the Biblical prophets could become the existential paradigm of all the spiritual guides, who fight for freedom and dignity bestowed on every person and on the human community.

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