

The wisdom of the cocoon

The soul and the harp /14 - Knowing how to "curl up" in God as his children, understanding what true blessing is

By Luigino Bruni



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"Every word is a spoken word. Originally a book is only at its service, at the service of the word turned into sound, being sung, being pronounced."

Franz Rosenzweig, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*

Psalm 37 makes it clear to us that wisdom is the learning of the human perspective from which to look at justice and injustice, in order to learn true meekness.

«Do not fret because of those who are evil or be envious of those who do wrong... do not fret when people succeed in their ways, when they

carry out their wicked schemes» (Psalm 37,1-7). We find ourselves within a tempting scenario. That of the righteous, poor because of their sense of justice surrounded by the wicked who instead continue obtaining success and wealth. A classic theme of wisdom in biblical literature, that is at the very centre of the Bible, of history, of life. These are the questions of Job, of Qoheleth, the questions of the poor and the victims, these are our questions. It has always been very difficult, sometimes much too difficult, to persevere in a life that we think is right when our troubles increase and the prosperity of those who we believe to be unjust grows. Sometimes we are in the wrong and believe ourselves to be more righteous than we really are. Other times, however, we are not actually wrong, it is simply a case of life "making a mistake"; and so we begin to think that God is the one being wrong and making a mistake.

The author of the psalm is aware of this typical temptation crisis of the righteous. He starts from it, does not discard it, takes it seriously and, like any good companion, he uses the clay available to him to create a new Adam. Right away, he gives the righteous a very important command: *stay innocent*. Being poor is not enough to be righteous, it requires innocence as well, because saving our innocence within our misfortune is the gift that we will bring as our gift to the angel of death. Biblical innocence is not about the absence of sin - or no one would be truly innocent. Instead, it is something different and much more important. It is about remaining attached through our life to that faith-rope to which we bound ourselves in our youth. Not giving up on it through all the steering and sliding, having preferred this humble rope to the chairlifts that promised far easier, faster and more spectacular climbs. Innocence is the faithful embrace between our hand and the rope.

«Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret - it leads only to evil» (Psalm 37,8). Disdain, which is generally a good and important ethical resource because it helps to activate processes of change, can also trigger degenerative circuits, when anger and indignation generate worry and the self-injurious passions of envy and revenge, or when they bring the worst idea of all to our heart: "I've always been wrong, it wasn't worth being right". It is difficult not to fall into these traps (each temptation is a trap) because we are, more or less consciously, all faithful to some economic-retributive cult or other; devotees of a religion founded on the dogma that the blessing of God manifests itself in wealth and success, and that his curse therefore takes the form of poverty and failure. In part, because the Bible

itself (and not only the Bible) contains verses and books where this idea is present and active - see Abraham or Job's prologue.

Before entering into the heart of his discourse, the author of the psalm invites us to make a movement, a gesture of the body. He invites everyone, but especially the poor who find themselves in the midst of that typical and great temptation, and in particular the poor who might no longer find themselves in poverty if they imitated the dishonest: but who do not go through with it, because they would rather fail while being righteous than win and be impious.

He makes us enter a *place*. He asks us to "curl up in God": « Commit your way to the Lord, trust also in Him and He shall bring it to pass» (Psalm 37,5). The Hebrew verb *galàl*, as Guido Ceronetti reminds us, refers to winding, spooling; it recalls the cocoon of a silkworm, "a cloud of cotton candy around a stick", the image of a foetus curled up in the womb. The psalmist advises us to curl up in the bosom of God, and to read and interpret life from there. It is the only good position to do so.

Psalm 37 is not a prayer. Its author does not turn to God but to man. By immediately advising us to curl up in God's womb, he reveals a fundamental aspect of wisdom tradition to us. A wise man is not a prophet who speaks to men in the name of God ("so says the Lord"); he is not a priest, a custodian of the Law, minister of the temple and all that is sacred. A wise person does not obtain his authority from private words addressed to him directly by God or from the Law-Torah. Instead, the source of authority of his words is life itself, history, human experience – «I have been young, and now am old» (Psalm 37,25) – that the wise man explores and penetrates to discover truths that take on great value in the eyes of the Bible, so much so that some of the wisdom books are among its most beloved ones. Herein lies the splendid biblical secularism. Wisdom is not prophecy, it is not prayer, it is not even theology: it is the *human perspective* to understand all the "Law and the prophets", in order to be able to really start praying, distinguishing the true prophets from the false ones. Wisdom is the creature that places itself in the right place, discovering it as the "seat of wisdom" and naming it its *fiat*.

Therefore, after placing us in the silk of that cocoon, the author of the psalm begins his discourse on wisdom. And he does so while levelling fierce criticism against remuneration centred religion and the theology of prosperity, that is, the idea of a God who uses the language of wealth and success to speak to us about our justice or iniquity and that of others. The psalm shows us powerful, successful and wealthy people, who have all their possessions *because* they are wicked: «The wicked draw the sword and bend the bow to bring down the poor and needy, to slay those whose ways are upright» (Psalm 37,14). This psalm contains a predatory vision of wealth and power. Not all wealth comes from abuse, we know it and the Bible knows it; but we both also know, the Bible even more so, that a lot of wealth comes from some form of abuse - even if many injustices today are masked by laws legitimately issued by parliaments, (the necessary principle of legality has never been sufficient for any justice). The mere fact that *some* wealth is certainly the fruit of impiety is sufficient to stop us from being able to read our and others' wealth as a blessing from God and poverty as his curse: «Better the little that the righteous have than the wealth of many wicked» (Psalm 37,16). From inside the cocoon we are able to see this clearly.

The discourse on loans and gifts is of great beauty and important - it is always moving to find the economy present within biblical prayer: it should not be there, and yet there it is: «The wicked borrow and do not repay, but the righteous give generously» (Psalm 37,21). Wickedness and justice are debased in financial language. Unlike many biblical passages that insist on the prohibition of lending (at interest), here we find condemnation coming from the other side of the contract. Those who ask for a loan are condemned, not those who grant it. In order to remind us that there is not only the impiety of granting loans at usurious rates, there is also that of those who take loans with no intention of ever repaying them. Because while poor insolvents end up becoming slaves to their creditors, the rich always had and still have a thousand ways to get out of an insolvency, and often even make it an opportunity to make a profit.

The righteous, on the other hand, are those who use their goods and property generously, transforming them into *gifts*. Hence, does this mean that the only good and right kind of wealth is that which is shared and given? The most subversive thesis, however, is obtained by putting together verse 21 with verse 26, which while speaking of the righteous add: «They are always generous and lend freely; their children will be a blessing». *Lending*: can lending be a righteous activity, an expression of compassion equated to a gift? Yes: we are righteous when we share our wealth through gifts and when we share it by lending our property and goods to others. Hence, those who, in principle, see philanthropy and

finance, gifts and contracts as polar opposites are wrong. There are righteous loans that release and offer more than gifts, and there are gifts that end up being more poisonous than any contract ever could be. This was as true back then as it is today, when a financial system that enables the poor to live, coexists with one that instead proceeds to devour them.

One last tile is still missing in the mosaic, the central and brightest piece: «The meek [the *nwym*] will inherit the land» (Psalm 37,11). The earth as an inheritance. Superb. That ancient sage does not promise success to the righteous. It promises much more: the righteous who save their innocence will inherit the earth. The whole Bible is essentially the guardian of this promise; it is the *shomer* (sentinel) of this word, which is the foundation of the calling of Abraham, the Covenant with YHWH, the great liberation and the exodus, the cave in Bethlehem. A promise that was not fulfilled with the arrival in Canaan, because if the Promised Land had become our property and possession, the land would have remained but the promise would have disappeared. Hence, the promise of the inheritance of the earth - which is mentioned no less than five times in the Psalm - is the promise of having a *future*. It is not a reward for here and now; this different promise does not belong to the "already is or was", and even if we get to taste a few bites, these are only a deposit of the "yet-to-be", which is the place of the unfulfilled fulfilment of the promise. The righteous who do not yield to the council of the wicked «There is surely a future hope for you» (Proverbs 23,18). The promise of a future is not a guarantee of success or wealth, but of the gaze of someone who, like Moses' sister-child, will accompany us while our basket runs along the great river, because «The blameless spend their days under the Lord's care, and their inheritance will endure forever» (Psalm 37,18). Therefore, the righteous are those who keep the promise of a land, which they know they will never possess; they are sentinels of the *utopia*, who experience every land as if it were just provisional and live life like a pilgrimage.

Psalm 37 was behind the third beatitude, behind all the beatitudes: *blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth* (Matthew 5,5). Therefore, this psalm is also an explanation of what biblical and Christian meekness truly is. The meek are the just and righteous in this psalm. They are those men and women who do not follow the way of the wicked; they do not envy them, and remain firmly tied to their rope during their climb of life, only to realize, in the end, that they never left that cocoon protected by all that good and merciful lining during their journey. The earth is the inheritance of the meek, because only the meek are able to keep the promise of a land without also possessing it. We can still have a land and a future if we learn to apply this justice and this meekness, if we learn how to inhabit this planet without feeling like its masters and therefore its predators. The future will either be meek or it will not be at all: «A future awaits those who seek peace» (Psalm 37, 37).