

Like sparrows and swallows

The soul and the harp/18 - The space of the prophet is profane and goes from the valley of tears to the threshold of the temple

By Luigino Bruni



Published in the [Avvenire](#) 26/07/2020

"The dryness that springs up, the wall that breaks so that God appears without appearing is the wonderful lesson of Psalm 84".

Guido Ceronetti, The book of psalms (Il libro dei salmi).

A great religious innovation of the Bible, as psalm 84 reminds us, was to learn that God is not tied to his temple or sacred places.

Homo viator. For tens of millennia *Homo sapiens* was a nomad and a traveler. We followed the rhythm of the seasons and the blooms, we chased the tracks of the deer and the bison, we returned thirsty to the oasis

and the source, experts of transhumance. We did it to survive, we ran to escape death. Then, at a certain point, in that territory furrowed and marked only by the natural hours of life, we began to discover different spaces, to recognize special places; and we started to mark rocks, to erect stems, to build altars. The sacred was born. Along those ancient tracks, we thus began to stop, not only, to gather, hunt, repair, and drink; we began to stop in other places too because we were attracted by a spiritual presence that manifested itself and changed the landscape. Space became *quality*. From that moment, it was no longer enough to just eat, repair, drink and reproduce. It was no longer enough for us to walk along the deer trail. We wanted to know the *mystery* of the deer and its paths, find out where those we loved ended up after death, to know who moved the sun and the other stars. We started asking new questions about things, and so we began to see the gods. The world changed forever, filled with silent words, with new languages, with symbols. We spoke basic languages among us, and they were enough to coordinate the hunting and raising our children. However, we also learned new languages in order to speak with nature, with demons and angels – but we forgot many, if not almost all of them, while turning inter-human language increasingly powerful, because those other languages could only live on the weakness of our language.

Millennia have passed since then, and we have changed a lot, but we never stopped walking. For wars, for trade, but we continued to walk, to go and see God in his place too. When we reached the threshold of the temple, we entered another time, our dead felt alive, we felt we like family members of the saints, and we were given eagle wings to fly crazy flights until we could touch paradise. That threshold was the door to heaven; just touching it meant conquering death: if only for a few hours, but still truly conquering it. We forgot the pain of living, we forgot to be poor, and in that moment, our hearts felt the thrill of being at the same altitude as the angels. Together with new fears, we learned new kinds of gratitude. The experience of the sacred was the experience of the sublime, therefore transitory, punctual, embodied in space and time, it only happened there, and therefore soon ended. And it was wonderful, sometimes scary, always tremendous. It was wonderful because it was exceptional and extraordinary. So exceptional and extraordinary that people and entire communities often ended up shipwrecked and drowned in this sea.

This is why there was no journey more beloved than the pilgrimage; we liked the elegant and imagined houses of the lords, but above all, we liked the house of God: «How lovely is your dwelling place, Lord Almighty! My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God» (Psalm 84, 1-2). *How lovely, how I love, what a delight* your home is: different words to express the beautiful Hebrew word that we also find in the name of David, in the love song of Isaiah (5,1), in the Canticle, in the wedding psalms (45). There is no other word in the Bible that is more intense in order to speak of the love of desire, the movement of the heart - Psalm 84 is the song of someone in love.

However, once he arrived near the temple in Jerusalem, the psalmist first of all gives us a detail in particular: «Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may have her young - a place near your altar» (Psalm 84,3). This is one of the most delicate and surprising things of beauty in the Bible. A man who calls his God "Jehovah Sabaoth", that is, God of armies and hordes, who then arrives at the temple and shows us a sparrow and a swallow. The infinitely great retracting to make room for the infinitely small, the immense abode of God who curls up inside a sparrow's nest. The Almighty who curls up to enter the space of a manger. The first beatitude or bliss of this psalm is for the little bird: «Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you» (Psalm 84,4). Almost as if to confuse the praises sung by the priests of the temple with the chirping of the sparrow and the warbling of the swallow. Both permanent inhabitants of the most beautiful place in the world, ever present singers of his glory, both praised and somewhat envied by the pilgrim temporarily inhabiting that same eternal realm. But a second bliss is the true heart of the Psalm: «Blessed are those whose strength is in you, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage!» (Psalm 84,5). The pilgrim's bliss immediately becomes the bliss of the path: «As they pass through the Valley of Baka, they make it a place of springs; the autumn rains also cover it with pools. They go from strength to strength» (Psalm 84,6-7). The pilgrim is the one who transforms the valley of tears into a spring, it is his movement that makes the arid land flourish, and it is his foot that fertilizes the desert. A splendid reciprocity between *Adam-adamah* (man-earth). The custody of Eden continues: we are the custodians of the earth making it flourish with our industrious hands, and we are its custodians leaving our imprints on it while we as nomads trample, moving towards the house of God. These roads are wounds of the earth through which rays of eternity every now and then peak out. They are not yet a temple, but its desire already makes them a temple. Walking is nourishment for the road ("they go from strength to strength").

These two verses are full of symbols and linguistic ambivalences, some of which we cannot quite grasp now. The Quran (Sura III, Al-Imran: 96) sees the second name of Mekka in the Bakka valley, and Islamic tradition places the desperate pilgrimage of Hagar (Genesis, 21) and the well (of Zamzam) from which, through the intervention of the angel, Hagar drew water to save his son Ishmael, in that desert. Hagar's tears were the first "blessed rain" on that arid valley; she was the first "traveler in this arid soil" (Leopardi). This deep connection between Psalm 84 and Hagar, Sarah's slave, to whom the first angel of the Bible appeared, is very beautiful. She, the image of a poor pilgrim, and the other a wandering Aramaean, to tell us that at the end of the pilgrimage, the God who appears to a slave and a discarded child in order to save them, is one and the same.

The journey ends, reaching Jerusalem: «Till each appears before God in Zion» (Psalm 84,7). What did the pilgrim see in the temple? What can you see of an invisible God without images? What theophany could be found in an empty temple, closely guarded in its emptiness? Biblical theology has grown and become a universal common good thanks to its ability to inhabit the paradox of an invisible God who did manifest himself, but whose real glory truly lived in an empty temple because it had been completely emptied of every idol. In an ancient Middle-Eastern world populated by an infinity of gods and idols, each with its own very visible face and its own shrines full of shimmering statues, the Bible managed to show its many faithful a God without the need to really see or touch him. A different kind of *place*, the temple, was enough for him to show the invisible-reality to those who reached his threshold. Being in an empty space generated the first theological innovation of antiquity: not being able to see and touch a God whom you believed and knew to be true, produced an idea of God no longer imprisoned within the language of our senses. What did those pilgrims see then? We do not know anymore, but they certainly did not see statues or paintings: they saw the one they believed through faith. Perhaps faith arises when we, as pilgrims on the threshold of an empty temple, repeat: "I believe in you", and without hearing it we sense a true voice replying: "I am".

«Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked» (Psalm 84,10). *In your courts, to be the doorkeeper*: the believing pilgrim is the inhabitant of the courtyard, the companion of the sparrow and the swallow, he is the inhabitant of the threshold, a liminal woman or man, who knows how to stand on the threshold of an empty yet inhabited dwelling. That threshold, savored one in a thousand days, is the best place under the sun. Because it is the post of the "keepers of the temple", that of the sentry. The threshold is also a place of *prophecy*, of those who walk, arrive and do not enter, because in order to guard an empty space they also protect it from their own presence. The space of the prophet is not the sacred one inside the temple, but the profane one that goes from the valley of tears to the threshold and then back from the threshold to the valley of tears, made fertile precisely through that walking and that custody.

On another day, those pilgrims of the absolute experienced the most tremendous and dramatic of experiences. That temple, that one true home of the one true God, was desecrated and destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar. Psalm 84 and the other psalms of the temple continued to be sung by the exiled people. Here we find ourselves in front of a second religious innovation, perhaps the greatest of them all: we can meet God even without a temple, even without any sacred places. YHWH became a pilgrim, just like us. Therefore, the cancellation of the sacred space, already concentrated in Israel to that one temple, enabled those tormented people to free themselves from the need for a sacred place in order to meet God, to understand that if there is a true God, he does not live anywhere because he lives everywhere: «I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple» (Revelation 21,22).

Journeys of pilgrimages are still undertaken and must continue to be undertaken, because when we stop wandering in search of God we begin to walk only looking for idols in their threshold less atria. That God who awaits us at the end of the journey is already walking in our midst (Matthew 18,20), without a nest to rest in. And once you reach his threshold, do not ask "where is God?", but "where are we"? If all the temples disappeared one day, if the whole world became a large empty temple (or is it already?), two or more pilgrims would be able to repeat the same wonderful experience of Psalm 84, they would be able to intone his song, on his very own threshold.