

EZEKIEL, THE DUMB PROPHET

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Abstract: Prophet Ezekiel is ordained, from the very beginning of his mission, to remain mute; nevertheless, he has to transmit the words God trusted him in order to bring people on the correct path of living their lives. The possible lack of coherence of this text might be emended either by interpreting the significance of muteness or by a different translation.

Key words: Ezekiel, Septuagint, prophet, muteness, translation.

The historical setting of the *Septuagint* book known as *Ezekiel* is utterly ominous: the descendants of Israel had to face the maximum crisis of their history and seemed that little hope was allowed. The Northern Kingdom had already been conquered and did not survive; the Judah's Kingdom appeared to be in a similar position and faith was continuously diminished. The prophets that transmitted the words of God to the exiled were actually the persons who rescued the people, transforming the remnants into a kernel, offering a clear-cut future to those in despair, lost, ready to forget who they were and to embrace foreign gods.

The prophetic mission of Ezekiel is thorny, not only as confronting a rebel and ungrateful crowd, unwilling to obey the divine rules: soon after he is ordered to transmit the divine words, he becomes a human with no voice, unable to speak (3.25–26). The contradictory demands and acts are recurrent in Ezekiel's prophetic work, beginning with his immediate reaction at the overwhelming vision of the tetramorph (the four living creatures that had, all four, the face of a man and the face of a lion and the face of an ox and also the face of an eagle, *vide* 1.10; the creatures of this vision were connected, since St Jerome, with the representations of the four Evangelists: Matthew as the winged man, Mark as a lion, Luke as an ox, John as an eagle; *vide* also the four beasts from The Book of Revelation 4.7: one like a lion, one like a calf, one with a face as a man, one like a flying eagle). Terrified by the powerful apparition, Ezekiel fell on his face, in deep humility. Fallen as he is, he hears a divine voice ordering him to stand; on his feet, he is instructed to depart and to start his predictions in front of the people. He is ordered to move to open space and to stay in the house, to remain motionless and to act. The major incongruence appears in 3.22–27: the prophet is both instructed to be mute and motionless.

The Greek term *kophos* is generally translated here as “mute”, but its meaning allows also the “deaf” interpretation. The command is decidedly surprising, mostly in this moment of initiating his prophetic mission, of transmitting the words of God to

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the people. He regains his ability to speak solely in 33.21 *sq.*, but the incongruence of his prophetic muteness is enormous. Several interpretations were offered, but none of them is perfectly plausible: from 4th to 33rd chapter, Ezekiel might be selectively speechless, as he is not urging to repentance, but is predicting the ultimate end; or he might be unilaterally mute, speaking to people in the name of God, but not speaking to God in the name of the people, renouncing thus the reconciliation; or he might be no longer a prophet verbalizing publicly, but addressing only the people who entered his house. The desperate solution of this incongruence belongs to the textual criticism: a deficient text transmission would have been responsible for the present status of the pericope.

The first part of the pericope (22–23) highlights Ezekiel’s weakness, as a humble human facing the glory of God, as a man overwhelmed by the divine power. “Son of man” is the emblematic phrase for Ezekiel, along the entire book, being attested here no less than 94 times (which is an intense presence, in a text of 48 chapters). The humbleness of his human condition is perfectly illustrated by this expression. He seems unable to act independently from the divine energy that put him in motion, he is unable to interact with the other human beings that are simple obstacles for his mission, stubborn creatures that do not understand God’s plan and never obey. The prophet suffers a triple physical limitation: isolated in his house, is tied with ropes by humans and has his tongue tied by God. The divine *pneuma* (that the prophet sensed and almost saw on the Chobar shore) puts Ezekiel totally in the power of God, so that he is silent when God is silent and speaks to the people when God speaks to him, perfectly illustrating the phrase: “he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets” (Luke 1.70).

The muteness of Ezekiel is haloed by the divine gesture of handing over an inscribed scroll, meant to become the inner source of prophecy. The episode is comparable with the Book of Jeremiah 1.9, where God’s hand touches the lips of Jeremiah; similarly, investing Moses with sacred power (Book of Exodus 4.12) is expressed by “opening his mouth”, as a symbol of verbalising the divine message, but it has not a corresponding material act. The particular trait of touching Isaiah’s lips with an ember taken from hearth (6.6 *sq.*) is an element that appears naturally in narrating a prophet’s investiture; transferring the word of God over Isaiah throughout the touch of his lips is equivalent with getting him ready to receive the divine message. In The Book of Ezekiel, the investiture is signified by the memorable image already mentioned, accomplished in two steps: he is handed over a scroll (Gr. *kephalis bibliou*, 2.9) inscribed with the divine message, concentrated in three components: lamentation and mourning and woe (Gr. *threnos kai melos kai ouai*, 2.10); he is then asked (3.1 *sq.*) to eat the scroll. Besides the bizarre fact, the episode includes some remarkable details: the term designating the scroll is Gr. *kephalis* (diminutive for *kephale*, “head”) is identically attested in 2Ezra 6.2; the peculiarity of this evidence is that the papyrus scroll is written on both sides, a fact rarely showed by documents, including the archaeological testimonies, mostly due to the fragile nature of this material – that hardly admits the verso script – and to the reading

habits, that implied successive rolling and unrolling, damaging the exterior side of the scroll.

Ezekiel's prophetic mission is symbolically accomplished by swallowing the inscribed scroll. This command results in transforming the scroll into an inner (and essential) part of Ezekiel himself, who is, along the whole book, the human verbalisation of the divine word.

Gregory the Great interprets the episode in the Homilies on Ezekiel (1.9), highlighting the tension between word and silence: not obeying the command to speak, Ezekiel would have irritated God with his silence (*de suo silentio exasperasset*), just as the evil people irritate God with their evil words. Ezekiel, alongside the good humans, is not allowed to keep silence over the divine words (*reticent bona*). The scroll he received, in Gregory's interpretation, is the Holy Scripture itself – rolled up (*liber autem inuolutus est*), as a closed text, not available to common minds (*ut non facile sensu omnium penetretur*), but easily accessible for the chosen one, for the prophet. The outside text is part of the human history, but the hidden text is a promise for heavenly existence. The lament (*threnos*), the mourning (*melos*) and the woe (*ouai*) are part of the human history, where coexist the penitence and the joy, just as coexist evil and just people.

The scroll swallowed by Ezekiel is sweet like honey (the words of God have the taste of honey, *vide* The Book of Psalms 118.103): the Greek term attested here is *glykazon*, a *hapax legomenon* in *Septuagint*. Besides the definite gustatory characteristic, honey is in perfect chromatic harmony with some other memorable episodes of this book. The vision Ezekiel had on the shore of the river Chobar is dominated by *electrum* (Gr. *elektron*), an ambiguous term in Greek (and simply borrowed by Latin language): it designates both amber and an alloy of gold and silver (*vide* Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis historia*, 33.81). The *Septuagint Lexicon* of Lust prefers the later meaning for the Book of Ezekiel (the term is attested in only three verses: 1.4, 1.27, 8.2). The Hebrew corresponding word, *ḥašmal*, is equally ambiguous; the Acadian analogous term, *elmešu*, is only used to describe a radiating manifestation of God, and consequently the precise meaning can not be determined.

The patristic commentaries unequivocally prefer the meaning “alloy of gold and silver”. Gregory the Great (1.2.14) clearly interprets the phrase *species electri* as *Christus Iesus Mediator Dei et hominum*, the mediator between God and humans. The dual nature of *electrum* is a symbol for the dual nature of Christ, whose divine essence is blurred in human appearance, just as the gold glowing is mitigated in silver form.

Regardless the denotation of *electrum*, amber or alloy of gold and silver, its colour is yellowish. The chromatic coherence of the Book of Ezekiel points to a godly significance of yellow, both the colour of gold and honey. The honey taste of the scroll Ezekiel swallowed is the counterpart of the muteness status of the prophet. The divine word that became inner part of the prophet can not be simply spoken – it is transmitted beyond human words, leaving Ezekiel wordless but utterly eloquent.

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