Prophetic voice and spirituality.
Luis N. Rivera Pagán

"What use are our thoughts, the hand, the pen and the paper if with them we do not defend those who disappear, the oppressed, those who fight, the tortured?"

Elena Poniatowska, *The Indomitable*[1]

The Bible: provocative literature

The reading of Sacred Scripture is not simple, nor easy. Its attentive and careful study tends to be provocative and disturbing. Too often, it shatters our comfortable attitudes, inclinations, and perspectives. In the words of Amos Elon, one of my favorite Israeli writers: "The Bible... unlike the books of other ancient people, was... the writing of an insignificant and remote people - and not the literature of their rulers, but of their critics. The Jerusalem prophets refused to accept the world as it was. They invented the literature of political dissent and, with it, the writing of hope.”[2] Let us mention in passing some of the particular characteristics of those sacred scriptures, the Hebrew Bible and the Greek New Testament, so disturbing.

First, let us point out its perennial translatability,[3] key feature for its inexhaustible cultural reincarnation, thanks to the absence of an exalted language as sacred. The Gospels, lest we forget, are translations to Koine Greek. It is absolutely impossible for us to have direct access to the original words of Jesus and his apostles. This initially unfortunate limitation actually allows us something very valuable: to avoid the subtle temptation of idolatry of the sacred letter, the cradle of so many rigid fundamentalisms. The incarnation of the divine Word, exposed in the prologue of the Gospel of John (John 1:14) and defended in the Second Epistle of John (II John, 7), is the theoretical and doctrinal foundation of perennial translatability from the Bible. [4] And it is the guarantee of the theological and religious dignity of every language and every culture.
Second, unlike many ancient sacred texts, the Hebrew Bible is not a hymn of exaltation or glorification of the ruling powers. It rather comes from the anguish of defeat, of the cruelties that are propitiated by the violence of war or the sufferings of oppression. Its matrix of origin is captivity and exile. It is the testimony of a devastated and displaced people. The question "why has God abandoned us?" is the great theological and political dilemma of the Old Testament. Hebrew scriptures were written from the perspective of captivity and dispossession.[5]. They summon memories and lament; also promise and hope.[6]

The New Testament also stems from tragic catastrophes: the crucifixion of Jesus, the devastation of Jerusalem by the Roman imperial army, and the persecution and dispersal of the still small group of followers of the Nazarene. Jesus' heartbreaking cry on the cross: “My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me?”, dramatically summarizes the bitter cry of pain that, from slavery in Egypt to those persecuted in the New Testament Apocalypse, expresses the hardships of men and women martyred by those who believe they are the owners and masters of history. From the tragedies of the people of God and from their yearnings for redemption our sacred writings arise, the literary matrix that forges our identity and our hopes.

This means, therefore, that the key issue of the human redemption is seen in the Bible always from the perspective of serfdom (in Egypt), captivity (Babylon) or forced dispersion (throughout the Roman Empire). The hope of emancipation comes from the experience of human history as a tragedy. The desire for redemption is, therefore, a key perspective that cannot be waived when reading and interpreting the scriptures. [7]. As the Mexican theologian José Porfirio Miranda wrote several decades ago, “there is hardly a single biblical passage that describes Yahweh… and refrains from mentioning the poor and oppressed for whose liberation Yahweh makes war on the oppressive and unjust.”[8]
A key question

A key question that was hotly debated in original Christianity was this: Should the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, be preserved as canonical scripture? The final response, supported by most Christian communities, was affirmative and for various reasons.

In the first instance, to preserve the unity of the God of Israel and the Father of Jesus Christ and avoid fragmentation of divinity. That was the conviction vigorously defended by Irenaeus of Lyon, to the contest against Gnostics and Marcionites at the end of the second century, in his extensive and intensive work apologetics Adversus haereses. [9]

Corollary of this answer affirmed the intrinsic value of creation, of the body, of matter, of nature, against the Gnostic and Neoplatonic tendency to spiritualize redemption. The Christian vocation should not be conceived as a dissolution of the materiality of life. [10] We are beings of body and blood, not only of spirit and soul.

The centrality of history was also highlighted as the setting for encounters and disagreements between God and humanity. It is in history, with its many fortunes and sorrows, that the human being cultivates nature, forges its cultures and designs its religiosities.[11] That is why it has been asserted that the idea of a universal history is the original creature of Christianity, the fruit of the rich theological creativity that occurs from Irenaeus to Augustine. [12] The Christian faith is inseparable from the ontological primacy of history as an inescapable human destiny. [13]

However, from the beginning of Christianity, the following risks of canonical preservation of the Old Testament were recognized:

- The possible return of legalistic and self-righteous mentality that gives hegemony, in thought and life, to the Law on solidarity, justice and compassion, therefore breaking the Pauline contrast between grace and law, and even generating atrocious practices such as the sentence of
heretics and sorceresses, the stoning of non-virgin or adulterous wives and the execution of homosexuals. [14] It is the seductive and perennial temptation of the idolatry of the sacred word.

- The possible reconstitution of a rigid and intolerant theocracy, which is inevitably patriarchal and misogynistic, by an alleged generic male correspondence between God, the monarch and the paterfamilias. [fifteen]

- The temptation of the mentality of "holy and exclusive people" with the alleged right to clean the land of the infidels and impure. [16] An example of this is shown in the epilogues of the books of Nehemiah and Ezra, culminating in an act of immense cruelty: the expulsion of foreign women for being considered potential sources of spiritual and cultural contamination. [17] In Phyllis Trible's timely phrase, they are genuine "horror texts." [18]

- The Hebrew Bible with its notions of "chosen people" and "promised land" has been used, by Israeli Zionists, Jews and Christians, as a sacred resource of last resort to justify the displacement, dispossession and plunder of the Palestinian people, who are unjustly forced to redress the grievances of centuries-old Western anti-Semitism. [19]

**The prophetic voice**

In this balance of risks and gains, the prophetic scriptural tradition is decisive for the design of a genuine theological reflection. Let's briefly look at some of the key features and nuances of the biblical prophetic voice.

34:1-10). [20] Even with respect to Sodom the prophet Ezekiel condemns sin in a different way we are used to hear: "Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy" (Ezekiel 16:49). The prophetic voice repudiates and transgresses all structures of oppressive domination, especially that which tries to legitimize itself arguing national or religious ideologies.

2. The solidarity with the destitute, homeless, oppressed and vulnerable emerges as a hermeneutical and epistemological central criterion in the reiterated prophetic judgment of the established powers. ¿Who are the underdogs? In that broad category, those members of the community who need collective protection to subsist with freedom and social dignity are repeatedly mentioned: the poor, the orphans, the widows and the outsiders. Psalm 72, possibly an expressive crowning hymn of the dominant ideology of the Davidic dynasty, shapes the monarchy, sheltered from the prophetic voice, as a guardian of solidarity with the needy and oppressed.

3. Highlighted is the memory of the exodus as emancipatory paradigmatic event and a source of the standards of social justice (Deut. 5:15; 15:15; 24:18, 22; Micah 6:4). The exodus defines God as deliverer and Israel as the people who must faithfully preserve the memory of their redemption. Therefore, there should be no oppression whatsoever in the people God has rescued from slavery. That is the goal of the annual Passover celebration (Deut. 26:1-11), as a liturgical ceremony commemorating the liberation of the Hebrew slaves from Egyptian oppression. [21] It is not only a matter of recalling the founding and fundamental event of the exodus, but above all, remembering the touchstone of a society where equity, justice and solidarity prevail. Liberating spirituality and justice go hand in hand in the biblical scriptures.
4. The anti-imperial tone assumed by the prophetic voice in these sacred texts arises from a people whose history always runs in the shadow and on the margins of various imperial powers that continually subjugate it. Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Macedonia, Rome constitute the horizon of imperial dominance that tears the collective life of the Biblical communities, but that, paradoxically, also configures the source of their cravings and demands for liberation.

5. One of the main features of the prophetic voice is the criticism of the two possible religious evasions of ethical responsibility: the pharisaic of the idolatry of the sacred letter and the priestly of the liturgical norms. A perpetual tension is maintained throughout the Bible between canonical text, temple/worship, and word/prophecy. Solidarity with the helpless and excluded is the trait that predominates and articulates the memory and hopes of the people of God.

6. There is, in the prophetic voice, an unbreakable intimate link between the search and preservation of justice and the eschatological vision of peace (Micah 2:1-5; 3:1-4; 4:1-4 and Isaiah 1:10-23; 2:2-4; 10:1-2; 58:6-7; 61:1; 65:17-25). Careful and critical reading of the Hebrew Bible continually evokes the prophetic imagination of an unprecedented world, hidden behind the veils of injustice: a world where social righteousness and respect for the full humanity of all sons and daughters of God achieve historical primacy. A world not yet realized, but certainly longed for, in which the peoples can build their houses and inhabit them in peace, sow their wheat and eat their bread serenely, plant their vineyards and enjoy the wine that the Nazarene Jesus enjoyed so much.

7. The life of Jesus, as well illustrated by the beginning of his ministry (Lk. 4:16-19) and some of his disturbing parables, such as that of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:25-37) and the judgment of the nations, (Mt. 25:31-46), cannot be properly understood if it distances from the prophetic tradition. It was Walter Brueggemann, who in his classic text on the "prophetic
imagination”, insists on the need to study the Jesus of the Gospels as the culmination of the double prophetic tradition, of radical criticism of the established powers and provocation of unusual hope.[26] And it has been Jon Sobrino who has extracted from this vision the key principle of a hermeneutic from the perspective of the victims.[27] In Jesus, it is about the full unity between the prophetic voice and the solidarity spirituality.

The permanence of the prophetic voice, which is eliminated when it is understood exclusively as Christological prediction, in the too popular typological scheme of “promise-fulfillment”, is an inescapable challenge. Preserving the Old Testament, in our canon, implies preserving the prophetic vocation of the people of God. Its silencing or marginalization serves only those who seek to perpetuate their privileges of ownership and control. What we must emphasize is the conjunction, in the sacred Hebrew/Christian scriptures, between the prophetic voice and the solidarity spirituality.

Let us never forget the words of the exiled José Martí, poet and prophet, who say thus:

“They are, as always, the humble, the barefoot, the homeless, the fishermen, those who stand together against iniquity shoulder to shoulder, and fly away, with their lit silver wings, the Gospel! The truth is better revealed to the poor and to those who suffer!”[28]


