# The Muteness of a Prophet

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*Der Prophet Ezechiel bekommt sein himmlisches Gebot in Umständen, die nicht nur erschreckend, sondern auch verwirrend sind. Von der Vision des Tetramorphs erschüttert, hört er widersprüchliche Befehle, die wir im Rahmen seiner prophetischen Aufgabe nur schwer verstehen können. Nedergeworfen auf seinem Gesicht, wird er streng gemahnt, aufzustehen, kaum ist er aufgestanden, wird es ihm befohlen, sich auf dem Weg zu machen, um vor dem Volk zu prophezeien; es wird von ihm verlangt, in die Ebene hinauszugehen und doch im Haus zu bleiben, unbeweglich zu sein und doch zu handeln. Der Bibelvers 3.26 erfasst eine Situation, die Ezechiels himmlischem Auftrag zu widersprechen scheint: er wird verstummt – diese Lage wird nur im letzten Drittel des Buches in 33.21. ff. aufgehoben. Der Text der Septuaginta verwendet in 3.26 das Wort kophós, dessen Bedeutungen die Stummheit des Propheten nuancieren können.*

*Schlüsselwörter: Septuaginta*, *Ezekiel*, *Investiture*, *Prophet*, *Stummheit.*

The etymology of word "prophet" (Greek *prophétes*) is undoubtedly connected to the verbal radical *phemí*, "to declare, to say". The common interpretation, based on the historical usage, predominantly biblical, is "person speaking on God's behalf, interpreting the divine will for the human beings". Gregory the Great, the author of the most extended patristic commentary on the book of Ezekiel, opens the series of the homilies devoted to this prophet with a preamble (1.1.1) offering a personal interpretation of the terms *prophetia, prophetes*: among the three distinctive segments of a prophesy (past, present and future), two of them do not strictly correspond to the genuine meaning, as – in Gregory the Great's approach of etymological evaluation – a prophesy is the verbalised proclamation of something that is to happen in the future (*prophetia dicta sit quod futura praedicat*). Accordingly, whenever regarding something belonging to the past or present, prophesy do not fully covers its own term, being actually the evocation of a completed act or the hint for a simultaneous event. The comprehensive significance of the term "prophesy" is consequently engorged, namely it embraces the exposure of something hidden for the mortal eyes and the human capability of understanding (1.1.25: *quia prodit occulta*); nevertheless, prophesy regarding present time, might imply a fact that is not deliberately concealed, but is simply secluded.

For the specific case of Ezekiel, the etymology needs some further nuances, as the verbalised expression of tha divine message is hardly certain. The entire



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prophetic mission of Ezekiel is marked by contradictory orders: his response offers a probable (though hardly intelligible) inner coherence, whose visible materialization is a series of mysterious acts. He only has one moment of hesitation, rendered into a quasi refuse to a divine command (4.12-15); horrified of baking the barley cakes in man's dung, he says "Not so, Lord God of Israel: surely my soul has not been defiled with uncleanness" and God allows him: "Behold, I have given thee dung of oxen instead of man's dung, and thou shalt prepare thy loaves upon it".

The string of acts endowed with prophetic significance is opened by Ezekiel's physical response to the overwhelming experience of encountering the Tetramorph – the terrifying vision of divine glory, embodied in one unique creature with four visages, with wings and intricate wheels, that moved forward and in all the other directions in the same time. Struck by fear and astonishment, he fell facedown and his gesture generates both his prophetic mission and an avalanche of presumably discordant instructions: lying prostrated, he is ordered to hold firm on his feet; standing, he is ordered to proceed; he has to close himself in the house and to go outside, in the field – seemingly in the same time; he has to remain immobile and, simultaneously, to accomplish precise acts; most of all, he is ordered to be mute and to preach in the name of God.

The pericope 3.22-27 is hardly intelligible in human (rational) perspective. The Greek term attested by Septuagint is *kophós*, whose meaning extends from "deaf" to "deaf-mute", and simply "mute": the Ezekiel occurrences are currently interpreted in the latter sense. Subsequently there appears a tension between v. 24-26, where the muteness is imposed to the prophet (and, nevertheless, the motionless), and v. 27, where he is ordered to accomplish the divine mission, to prophesise, *id est* to verbalise for humans the divine message. Seeming to be affected, from the first moment of his prophetic investment, by aphasia and catatonia, Ezekiel regains his speaking ability, as promised, in v. 33.21 sq. The two moments are logically acceptable if the enouncement in v. 3.26 ("I will bind thy tongue, and thou shalt be dumb") is accomplished only previous to 33.22 ("the hand of Lord […] opened my mouth […] and my mouth was open, it was no longer kept closed"), though there are no textual arguments to consider it. Otherwise it is hardly admissible that all along the chapters 4 to 33 Ezekiel is a prophet that cannot open his mouth, a silent prophet, totally mute. The development is consistent with the contrast between the acts he ordered to accomplish and 3.25, announcing him the immobility ("bonds are prepared for thee, and they shall bind thee with them").

Numerous elucidations have been proposed to meet this incongruity, plausible both as clarifying nuances and approximations. The muteness of the prophet might be not complete: his silence covers only the non-prophecy, meaning that the human Ezekiel is dumb, though the prophet Ezekiel is eloquent; or, in a different perspective of the relative muteness, he no longer speaks in public, remaining a voice inside his own dwelling, where people came to listen to him. His muteness might be selective: he no longer acts as a prophet urging people to repent, but is



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prophesying the end of sinful humans. His muteness might be one-sided: he gives people the word of God, but is no longer speaking to God in the name of his people, abandoning a potential reconciliation. Finally, the editorial approach transfers the incongruity to the continuous alteration of manuscripts during the text transmission (the alleged muteness might be a simple error of a copyist).

The specific premises of Ezekiel's endowment with the capability of transmitting the divine will to the people display some similarities with other biblical pericopes. He being handed the word of God in form of a written scroll that is to be swallowed ought to be compared, for the most part, with Jer. 1.9., where the hand of God touches the lips of Jeremiah. On the other side, Moses being invested by the words "I will be in your mouth" (Exodus 4.12) does not include a visible gesture, remaining within the boundaries of verbalising the divine message. The peculiar trait of Isaiah (6.6 sq.) growing to be a prophet is probably closer: his lips are being touched by a seraphim, "having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar"; transferring the word of God to Isaiah is preceded by a fire cleansing of his lips (on the contrary, *vide* 3 Kings 22.22: "I will go out and be a lying spirit in the mouths of all his prophets")

In the book of Ezekiel, the messenger's assignment to transmit the divine words to people around him is implied by a memorable image, accomplished in two tempos: he is being handed a scroll (2.9, Greek *kefalís biblíou*) inscribed with the divine message, expressed in three components – "lamentation and mourning and woe" (2.10, *thrénos kaí mélos kaí ouaí*); he is subsequently asked to swallow the scroll. Beyond the oddity of the scene, the episode includes some actual details that are striking. The term *kefalís* (a diminutive of *kefalé*) is attested with the same meaning in 2Ezdra 6.2 (despite the usual sense, *vide* Exodus 26.24,32,37 e.a., as "edge", "capital or plynth of a pillar"). The text written on both sides of the scroll – a papyrus scroll, probably – is uncommon in the documents offered by archaeology, due both to the fragile nature of the material (*vide* Pliny, *Naturalis historia*, 13.68-89) and the reading habits, implying successive revolving and rolling, with destructive effects on the outer side.

Ezekiel's mission is symbolically depicted by swallowing the scroll inscribed with the divine message. Strictly formal, the episode parallels the story of the Golem, as it is present in the Jewish folklore: like Adam, golems are created from mud – a golem could be animated and gain ability to speak when inserted a piece of paper in his mouth. The command to swallow the scroll equals assimilating it, receiving it as a constituent that defines Ezekiel for the duration of his mission (and/or the rest of his life). The episode of swallowing the words of God is to be found also in Jeremiah 15.16: just like Ezekiel, the prophet discovers the sweet taste of the divine words.

Gregory the Great reads the pericope as a tension between word and silence: if Ezekiel had not obeyed the request to intermediate the divine word, he would have irritate God with his silence (*de suo silentio exasperasset*), because, just as the villains annoy God speaking or doing evil, the good ones sometimes exasperate



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him being silent when they are supposed to speak (*quia reticent bona*). The scroll Ezekiel receives from the hand of God is the Scripture itself: it is rolled up (*liber autem inuolutus est*), meaning it contains the enclosed text of the holy scripts, that common knowledge can hardly comprehend (*ut non facile sensu omnium penetretur*), but evolves under his eyes, for the reason that the obscure texts become clear and comprehensible for the preachers. The scroll written on both sides suggests, in the interpretation of Gregory the Great, an allegorical content doubled by the human history. The text hidden on the inner side brought the promises of the concealed future, while the text on the outer side of the scroll was the visible world that became steady established throughout precepts. The inner part was a promise regarding the heavenly life, while the outer one was teaching about the mortal goods.

The text written there was a chant of joy or a chant of sorrow. Bible habitually places the chant in the frame of joy: when God took his people over the Red See, Moses and the sons of Israel rejoiced and sang for the glory of God (Exodus 15.1); after defeating his enemies, David sang for God (2Kings 22.1). Gregory the Great understands *carmen* (Greek *mélos*) here in its positive meaning: *quia igitur pene semper in bono carmen ponere Scriptura sacra consueuit, ita a nobis etiam in hoc loco debet intellegi*. The lamentation (*lamentationes*), chant (*carmen*) şi woe (*uae*) are part of the scroll received by the prophet: lamentations and repentance for the sins people committed, chant for the joys that are to come for the good ones, woe for convicting the villains.

The word of God coming to Ezekiel is an emblematical image of this prophetic book. In its written form, might be found in several other pericopes of this book, such as the "sign" (Greek *semeíon*, 9.4) the divine messenger is to place on the foreheads of some men; this sign seems to be the Hebrew taw, the final letter of the alphabet, that used to have, in Ezekiel's times, more or less the shape of X.

The words of God are just as honey, *vide* Psalms 118.103: honey is mostly defined by its gustatory trait, as this text explicitly states: "full of sweetness". The Greek term (*glukázon*) is a *hapax*, being attested only in the book of Ezekiel, in this unequivocal episode. On the other side, honey seems to offer perfectly harmonized chromatics with some other pericopes of the book. The first of them is immediately preceding the handing over of the scroll: the vision Ezekiel had near the Chobar river is clearly dominated by the *electrum* (Greek *élektron*), a term that has a double meaning both in Greek and Latin (which directly adopted from Greek, with no formal or semantic development), denoting either amber or an alloy of gold and silver (*vide* Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis historia*, 33.81). The Lust lexicon (2003) favours the later sense, here and in the other two pericopes where it is attested (1.27 and 8.2). The Hebrew corresponding term, *ḥašmal*, is not supported by some other occurrences, and the Accadian *elmešu* is also used to describe a bright vision manifestation of God. The patristic readings of the periscope clearly understand here an alloy of gold and silver. In the Homily 1.2 of Gregory the Great (chapter 14), the brilliant vision in the middle of the fire, *species electri*, is *Christus Iesus*



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*Mediator Dei et hominum*, Christ that intercedes with God on behalf of the humans; his human nature merges with his divine nature, the human part emerges to the divine glory, the divine part fades its golden brightness to be contemplated by mortal eyes.

The metallic shine has already been part of the description Ezekiel offered for the four creatures in his vision (1.7): "their legs were straight legs, and the sole of their feet was like the sole of a calf's foot, and they sparkled like burnished bronze". Gregory the Great (1.4.5) interprets the bronze here as referring to the voice of the preacher: the image of the burning bronze (lat. *aspectus aeris candentis*) alludes to the preachers, whose voices and sayings unite sound and fire. The bronze sparks (lat. *scintillae*) are the words, delicate and minute, as the preachers can only put in their words an infinitesimal part of the fire burning in them.

Electrum, bronze, honey: they have in common the gentle brightness that gradually undergoes into words. The divine word, becoming inner part of the prophet, does not need to be spoken: it is spread beyond the human words, allowing Ezekiel to be a prophet eloquent in his muteness.

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