



## **“ARISE AND WALK”**

### **A CONSIDERATION OF THE GRAMMAR OF THE JOURNEY IN DIALOGUE WITH THE BOOK OF DEUTERONOMY**

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#### **INTRODUCTION: THE DYNAMIC OF THE WORD**

We listen to the Word that has called us together. It is a Word we are to listen to “today” but one that comes from far away. Before allowing the Word to speak, let us try to understand the path that has brought it to us. I do not intend to offer you an overview of the formation of the biblical canon and its reception over the centuries. I only want to put into focus with you the dynamic of the journey of the Word attested to in the Scriptures. With an image that here I limit myself to evoke (and that could fruitfully go off in several directions), the dynamic of the Word is comparable to an inheritance, which comes to us suddenly, as an undeserved gift from one who makes a will, entrusted to us in such a way as to be able to take advantage of its richness. Not for nothing has the Christian Bible immediately resorted to the language of Testament, old and new: a way of designating the Word, certainly, in terms of Pact, but underlining its divine initiative, its gratuitous character, together with the responsibility for the good use of what we have received. Exactly like an inheritance, the Word breaks into our lives in terms of free gift (grace) and asks that we take responsibility for it, making choices, and not limiting ourselves to keeping it intact. An inheritance is not a done deal but a task.

The inherited Word is a gift offered to sons and daughters: it opens the future, it makes one grow and become responsible. One who leaves an inheritance tells the heirs: you are precious, just like the inheritance I leave you; you are adults now: administer my treasure. The Apostle Paul reminds us of this in his letter to the Romans (not by chance, in that more mature letter that is considered his spiritual testament): “And if we are children, we are also heirs: heirs of God, heirs of Christ” (Rm. 8:17). Not little daughters, still under parental control and in need of being cared for, but adult and responsible people, called to decide, take risks, and administer with wisdom.

At the foundation of the experience of giving, through a will and receiving an inheritance, more than it being a question of a patrimony, what is at stake is the question of desire: the desire that has moved the action of the one who makes the will and which has materialized into the goods attained and that now falls to the heir to carry forth. As if to say: more than goods, one inherits a desire, a dream that must be assumed, not by parroting what has been done by the one who preceded, but by investing that capital in new projects that will generate a future.

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Knowing how to grasp this “testamentary” dynamic of the Word, safeguarding the meaning of the journey that has led it to us, preserves us from understanding the gathering as just another business appointment – like condominium meetings! – and places us before the serious event of the divine Word, which always breaks into our lives in an unprecedented way, doing “a new thing,” calling us to walk together (con-vocation) the path traced by God, daring to believe that roads “in the desert” can be opened (Is 43,19). And the roads opened by the Word, are not our ways, with the divine imprimatur added to them: they are different, other (Is 55:8-9), they are those that the divine audacity offers us so that we might place our steps in the direction of his Kingdom.

## **THE MOTHER-SCENE: DEUTERONOMY**

Of this unsettling and multi-faceted way of the Word, I will seek to highlight the scene that has inspired the title of your Chapter, “*Arise and set out*” (Dt 10,11) ... *trusting in the Promise*. The entire book of Deuteronomy is presented as a rich reflection on faith on the move. Furthermore, it is a “testamentary” text: these are the last words spoken by Moses.

Israel is approaching the Promised Land. After the long wandering in the desert, finally the people that the Lord rescued from the oppression of Egypt reaches the Jordan: it is enough to cross it in order to reach the goal. The journey has been tiring, it seemed infinite; but now it will end. Does not the meaning of a journey lie entirely in the goal toward which one moves? What is more important than achieving the goal, ensuring the result?

But exactly here, at this most beautiful point, the divine Director stops the scene – very long still image of the land, now so close, in order to then frame the path backwards... The Jewish fugitives, who were already tasting the promised milk and honey (much more palatable than manna!), are instead brought back to the foot of the mountain to listen to the Word a second time (as the title of the book reminds us: *deuter-onomy* = “the second naming”).

Not only was the journey of Israel in the desert non-linear; even the path of the Word proves to be an unprecedented trajectory, not in line with expectations and, above all, not in line with the haste of those who wish to carry out their own projects.

## **RE-WRITING THE WORD**

Let us pause on the scene described in chapter 10. Immediately before this, we are reminded of the unreliable and rebellious character of the people: having just been freed, when Moses was still on the mountain to receive the ten words, there they were betraying God by prostrating themselves before a golden calf. The Pact, not yet established with the Israel’s acceptance, is already broken. The two tablets written by the finger of God are broken (Dt. 9). The end of the covenant? Chapter 10 tells of the “second” Pact and the new stone tablets. The Word must be rewritten: it does not change (v. 4), certainly, but the fact that it is given after the sin of the people, on new tablets, compels the Word to make a move different from the originally intended one, originally intended along the linear path of the order to be carried out.

The Word moves in the midst of being betrayed; it learns to retrace its steps. Even more, from this moment on, it will reveal itself as a Word on a journey, transported in the ark, with ministers – the Levites – in charge of transporting the ark of the Covenant, setting the Word in motion, without any other concern (inheritance!) that is not this.

Word heard in the fire; Word written upon stone; Word transported in the ark. When even the great constitutive words, etched or rather engraved on stone, are shattered, it is necessary to rethink them, to place them back on the journey to find again the fire from which they arose.

Our text, after having told us about the descent of Moses, goes back to recount the act of intercession, which preserves the people from destruction (v. 10). If the Word gives voice to a desire – the desire of God that humanity will live again in the garden designed for them from the foundation of the world – then it is to that desire that we must return, even when the Word itself pronounces judgments of knowledge of final sentence, condemnation without appeal. Moses, the man of the Word, is not worried about saving his skin together with that of his loved ones (9.14): he has all the people at heart and with astute wisdom defends them in the sight of God. If the people have inherited the Word of God, God also has received the people as an inheritance and must take care of them in spite of everything (9:29).

## GRAMMAR OF THE JOURNEY

And at this point we find the verse that inspired the theme of this gathering: «The LORD said to me, “Get up and lead the people on their way, so that they may enter and take possession of the land I swore to their ancestors to give them.”» (v. 11) The journey of Moses has as its only compass this trust in the promise: God has a good land, a luxurious garden in store for humanity; and in order to be able to inhabit this land without turning the garden into a desert, it is necessary to set out to follow the Word.

The anthropological experience is no different: we receive a word that snatches us out of the desert, a word that is entrusted to us by our mother in order to be able to inhabit life as a good land, in order to get out of the aridity of solitude and self-referentiality and to communicate. The good land, more than being an eremitic experience is communitarian life, an exchange of narratives, mutual listening and dialogue. Exile is the solitude of our convictions repeated like a broken record, never confronted with life.

There is a direct relationship between obedience to the Word and inhabiting the land. So much so that when Israel forgets the Word, it will lose the land and will find itself back in exile, this time no longer in Egypt but in Babylon. Moses recalls precisely this in the words of his final testament addressed to Israel.

Ultimately, we can recognize here the mother-scene of the path of the Word. The Bible shows us the discourses that can be made on the basis of this grammar—a plurality of different discourses, marked by the varied historical moments in which they arise, from the many challenges that humanity has to face. There is no single path; but there is one same dynamic, the one illustrated in the scene in which the “arise and set out” resounds, which God addresses to Moses and to his heirs, the daughters and sons who trust in the promise.

Other images of healing and resurrection echo in this invitation (Jn 5: 8). There is the promise of support, in the face of failure and in the loss of direction, on the part of a God who walks with us and who, when our knees bend, more out of discouragement than out of excessive devotion, encourages us to start again.

Today, this invitation is addressed, in a timely manner, to women. In the exodus they are also called to come out of the land of slavery. The epic of liberation concerns not only men, but also women and children. The inheritance of the Word has been left to daughters and sons, heirs of the Kingdom; yet a deafening female silence must be recognized within the Church (and not only). A vocation of missionary women who make communication their “mission” cannot refrain from (re)giving voice to this silence, from assuming the prophetic responsibility to be vigilant, to denounce whenever the Gospel is announced only by one part of humanity. Along with this voice of prophetic denunciation, the missionary presence is called to occupy an educational role in order to support, form, and encourage all those feminine voices so that they can (re)discover that unprecedented aspect of the Word that is released when it is once again placed on the journey through the bodies of women.

It is a risky journey, along roads already beaten down but also unprecedented, in deserted places, where one has to take responsibility for opening new paths. It's a journey without "google maps", or tutorials. The disciples of the Word will have to learn and accept that the path, in the Scriptures, always opens up after the experience of losing trust in the path – *the Lord has taken us to the desert to make us die* – after the experience of wandering for a long time, forty years; after having received the Word a first time and then abandoning it; after having received it a second time.

It is a standing up and walking, which comes after many other attempts at movement. Ultimately, the journey of the Word entrusts to us the wisdom of beginning again, of retracing our steps and starting all over again, that is, from the paradox of the pause that triggers the journey, of the handbrake that sets the car in motion. If the ark is the device that pushes us forward, to settle accounts with history, which urges us to measure ourselves against the signs of the times, to be the Church that goes out, the tablets contained in the ark of the covenant express the movement of return, of stopping to listen, so that it does not happen that our feet walk astray into blind alleys and dead ends.

It is Mary of Nazareth's moving in haste towards the mountain, together with Mary's (Martha's sister) stopping at the feet of the Master. It is to sit down and attentively read the testament that calls us into question, and it is to move so as to put back into play what was inherited.

## THE WORD FOR THIS TIME

What can this dynamism of the Word tell us about our present time? What light does it shine upon the urgencies of our time? What guidelines does it offer to our religious community?

Because we are not academics of the Crusca [*an Italian society for scholars and linguists: the most important research institution on the Italian language, dedicating to maintaining the purity of the Italian language*]: we pay attention to grammar only in order to be able to engage in discourses that promote the good of the city, that free the Churches from the temptation to return to Egypt, that make us understand what it means to renew the pact today.

The Book of Deuteronomy was written in a moment of crisis, when Israel had lost its land and found itself again to be in exile along the rivers of Babylon. It is a story that offers us a retrospective glance, that questions us about the reasons for failure and about the more than concrete threat of loss of the future.

When – as we read in the book of the prophet Jeremiah – the urgency of the moment made visible no other alternative than to form an alliance with the Babylonians or to rebel against this powerful nation by forging an alliance with the Egyptians. The discussion revolved around the best political strategy, on how to save their skin. It is a season of unheard-of prophets, seen as destructive presences, as snakes in the bosom. It is a season of sharp contrasts between opposing supporters. It is a historical moment in which the Temple no longer exists: Ezekiel goes so far as to say that God himself abandons his residence.

When those fixed points, which have been the stable reference for generations and generations, diminish, what can be done? How did Jeremiah and Ezekiel trust in the promise? How did the book of Deuteronomy read the situation of crisis? These authors, whose work has come to us as an inheritance, do not offer cheap solutions. Rather, they urge us to stay in the crisis, to question it, so as to seek to understand how it reached this point. They tell us that there is a time when the tablets of the Word are broken, as if they were struck dumb before the spectacle of idols. And that even in those moments, when the people forget and betray, the prophets cannot forget or betray the people. Their task does not consist in preaching "peace, peace", because it would be curing the plague too lightly (Jer. 6:14). Prophets are asked to listen to the Word and proclaim it, being careful not to confuse it with their personal words.

(This is done) in the awareness of one's own fragility and precariousness, taking into account dying before reaching the Promised Land, but trusting that, if not they, others, the future generations will reach

it. And in certain moments, we are only asked to keep alive the memory of the promise, to believe in the Word and in its power. The Word itself will tell us what to do, how to redesign and reprogram life.

Along the journey of the Word, attested to in the Scriptures, this mother-scene that has taken shape during the time of exile, will be discussed and re-written. Thus, we find Job, who contests the Deuteronomic trust in the relationship between listening to the Word and a blessed life. And Qoheleth who tries to formulate a different wisdom about crisis. And the last Isaiah, reprised by the visionary of the book of Revelation, that sees “new heavens and a new earth”. However, despite the diversity of tones and languages no biblical book ventures to offer an ungrammatical narrative which speaks of trust without dealing with its possible failure and with the historical (and even ecclesial!!) consequences of such a crisis.

To get up again and walk, it is necessary to return to the scene of the crime and at the same time, to the scene of revelation. A path that has the mobility of dance steps (“Turn around, Turn around, Sulammita...” Ct 7:1) that knows how to take on a liturgical movement proper to one who, looking back, is able to recognize that “until now the Lord has sustained us”, together with a clear glance proper to one who removes nothing from the historical scene and takes responsibility for it.

It is a journey that moves, a broad journey, capable of alighting in a penetrating way (not immediately consoling) upon history and upon Sinai. It will be this type of look, favored by God, that puts us back on our feet and suggests the steps to be taken, that makes faith an experience of authentic listening and not a reassuring ideology in a cheap market of presumed grace.

The Word, received as an inheritance, for which we are grateful, entrusts a responsibility to us. It demands of us the seriousness of a prophetic figure, who does not move forward until it has understood the meaning of the crisis in light of the Word. And only after this does it stand up and walk, together with the people whom God has been placed around him.