
A Prophet as a Witness to His Call: A Narrative Key to the Reading of Prophetic Call Narratives

El profeta como testigo de su llamada. Una clave narrativa para la lectura de los relatos de vocación profética

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Abstract: Biblical scholars tend to believe that prophets addressed the issue of their call for apologetic reasons: to justify his authority, a contested prophet mentioned his being called by God to spread God's word. The current form and location of prophetic call narratives within prophetic books is, however, a result of the activity of the prophets' disciples and not the prophets themselves. Hence, three different communicational situations may be distinguished in the prophetic call narratives, whose subjects are in turn the prophet, his disciples and finally the text itself. The chain of testimonies of the original event of the prophecy did not end with the writing down of the narrative but continues to exist due to the existence of new listeners (readers). The prophet's testimony of his call does not have as its aim the defence of the prophet's authority or the legitimization of his word. Sharing his experience of the call, the prophet introduces his listeners to direct contact with God's word to enable them to make a decision whether or not to listen to the word. As a result, the event founding the prophecy is performed and updated in the time and space of the new listeners of the prophetic word.

Keywords: Prophetic Call Narratives, Narrative Analysis, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel.

Resumen: Entre los biblistas se suele mantener que la razón por la cual los profetas hablaron de su vocación era en el fondo apologética: el profeta al sentirse rechazado por los oyentes y para defender su autoridad, se refería al hecho de haber sido enviado por Dios para predicar sus palabras. Sin embargo, la forma y ubicación actual de estas historias en los libros proféticos no proviene del profeta, sino que es el resultado de la actividad de sus discípulos. Por lo tanto, en las historias de la vocación profética, se pueden distinguir tres situaciones de comunicación diferentes en las que los sujetos son sucesivamente el profeta, sus discípulos y, finalmente, el texto mismo. La cadena de testimonios sobre el evento original de la profecía no termina con la narración de este evento, sino que continúa gracias a la historia que todavía tiene nuevos lectores. El propósito del testimonio del profeta sobre su vocación no se limita a defender su autoridad como persona o legitimar su palabra. Al compartir la experiencia de haber sido llamado, el profeta les facilita a sus oyentes el contacto directo con la palabra de Dios para que puedan tomar la decisión de escuchar o no escuchar la palabra. Como resultado, el evento que funda la comunicación profética se está reconstruyendo y actualizando en el tiempo y el espacio de vida de los nuevos oyentes de la palabra profética.

Palabras clave: Relato de vocaciones proféticas, Análisis narrativo, Isaías, Jeremías, Ezequiel.

Biblical scholars tend to believe that prophets addressed the issue of their call for apologetic reasons: to justify his authority, a contested prophet mentioned his being called by God to spread God's word¹. The current form and location of prophetic call narratives within prophetic books is, however, a result of the activity of the prophets' disciples and not the prophets themselves. At the same time, scholars emphasize the schematicity and conventional language of these accounts, as a result of which these narratives are considered a product of later redaction, having little to do with the prophets per se².

These statements stem from a diachronic approach to prophetic call narratives. Another question arises, however, namely if it is possible to hear the voice of the prophet himself when reading the texts today in their final (canonical) form, that is from the synchronic perspective? The prophet's communication does not end with his death. It is extended through the narration that is included in its written form in the prophetic book. In this new communicational context, which posits the act of reading as an act of interpretation³, the apologetic character of the prophetic call narrative seems to give way to its role as a testimony. It is no longer the prophet who is a witness to the call, but the text itself that testifies to this event. Whose testimony is thus contained in

¹ Cfr. HABEL, N. C., «The Form and Significance of the Call Narratives», *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 77 (1965) 317; BALTZER, K., «Considerations Regarding the Office and Calling of the Prophet», *Harvard Theological Review* 61 (1968) 568; LONG, B. O., «Prophetic Call Traditions and Reports of Visions», *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 84 (1972) 500; GÖRG, M., «Der Einwand im prophetischen Berufungsschema», *Trierer Theologische Zeitschrift* 85 (1976) 164; FERRY, J., «Les récits de vocation prophétique», *Estudios Bíblicos* 60 (2002) 211-224; BARBIERO, G., «Tu mi hai sedotto, Signore». *Le confessioni di Geremia alla luce della sua vocazione profetica*, AnBib.Studia 2, Roma: G&BP, 2013, 25-26; HAYES, E. R., «The Role of Visionary Experiences for Establishing Prophetic Authority in Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel: Same, Similar, or Different?», in HAYES, E. R. and TIEMEYER, L.-S. (eds.), «*I Lifted My Eyes and Saw*». *Reading Dream and Vision Reports in the Hebrew Bible*, LHB/OTS 584, London-New York: T&T Clark, 2014, 59-62.

² Cfr. WERLITZ, J., «Amos und sein Biograph. Zur Entstehung und Intention der Prophetenerzählung Am 7,10-17», *Biblische Zeitschrift* 44 (2000) 242-243; SWEENEY, M. A., «Ezekiel's Debate with Isaiah», in LEMAIRE, A. et al. (eds.), *Congress Volume Ljubljana 2007*, VTS 133, Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2010, 559-560; TIEMEYER, L.-S., «Ezekiel: A Compromised Prophet in Reduced Circumstances», in GRABBE, L. L. and NISSINEN M. (eds.), *Constructs of Prophecy in the Former and Latter Prophets and Other Texts*, Society of Biblical Literature. Ancient Near East Monographs 4, Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature Ancient Near East Monographs, 2011, 175-177; HUBMANN, F. D., «Der Bote des heiligen Gottes. Jesaja 6,1-13 im Kontext von Berufung», in *Prophezie an der Grenze. Studien zum Jeremiabuch und zum Corpus Propheticum*, Stuttgarter Biblische Aufsatzbände 57. Altes Testament, Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2013, 138-139.

³ For a more detailed discussion of the hermeneutics of biblical text that takes into consideration an act of reading see: ALONSO SCHÖKEL, L. and BRAVO ARAGÓN, J. M., *Appunti di ermeneutica*, Studi Biblici 24, Bologna: EDB, 1994, 55-56.

the prophetic call narrative? To what extent does the schematicity of these narratives make it possible to determine the content of the prophet's testimony of his call? What is the rhetorical goal of these narratives in the context of the act of reading undertaken by new readers? These questions will mark subsequent stages of my reflection on call narratives.

1. A PROPHETIC CALL NARRATIVE: FROM REVELATION THROUGH TESTIMONY TO WRITTEN WORD

In what way is the truth about the prophetic call communicated to the reader? Who speaks in the prophetic call narratives? The dynamic character and the complexity of the communicational process can be grasped on the basis of Isa 8,11-20, located in the centre of the so-called Book of Immanuel (Isa 7-12)⁴. Prophet Isaiah shares the word he has heard from God: «For this was how Yahweh spoke to me» (8,11). The word constitutes a warning for the people that seek help from Assyria instead of trusting God. The prophet terms the revelation given by God a «testimony» (*ta'ûdāh* in 8,20). Isaiah translates his experience of God's «speaking» into the language of human beings and gives a «testimony» of what he saw and heard, thus making it possible for his listeners to confirm or contest his testimony. Isaiah corroborates the credibility of his testimony by presenting himself as a reliable witness: «Look, I and the children whom Yahweh has given me shall become signs and portents in Israel on behalf of Yahweh Sabaoth who dwells on Mount Zion» (8,18). The prophet's whole life, his present («I») and future («children») constitute for him evidence of the truthfulness of the words he heard from God.

The prophet's testimony is passed to his disciples as they are told to «bind up the testimony (*ta'ûdāh*)» and «seal the instruction (*tôrāh*)» (8,16). The credibility of the prophet's testimony is thus to be verified in the future by his disciples. This verification occurs through writing down the prophet's words, which – bound up and sealed – become an objective confirmation, that is one recognized and corroborated by the disciple's testimony. The disciple confirms that his teacher's conviction of having received the word from Yahweh was true.

⁴ Cfr. BORGONOVO, G., «*Tôrāh*, Testimonianza e Scrittura. Per un'ermeneutica teologica del testo biblico», in AGNIELINI G. et al. (eds.), *La Rivelazione attestata. La Bibbia fra testo e teologia. Raccolta di studi in onore del Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini*, Quodlibet 7, Milano: Glossa, 1998, 285-291.

The disciple's testimony confirms the prophet's credibility. The original event of the word of God in the prophet's life becomes now a subject of the disciple's testimony: having recognized its credibility, the disciple passes it on through the word of his testimony. The credibility of the testimony is guaranteed by the disciple's life. The prophet's testimony would not exist without the testimony of the disciple. It would fall into oblivion just like numerous words of false prophets, or even if it survived in one form or another, it would be a text without any performative power for its listeners (readers) as it would lack historical verification by the disciple.

The testimony to the testimony⁵ has a written form. A prophetic event is thus an attested testimony, which – passed by the prophet onto his disciples as his legacy – was verified by them as credible (for the disciples saw its realization) and was conveyed by them as such in writing. The event of the original prophetic communication is now available via text, which becomes an intermediary between the communication act as experienced by the prophet and the act of speaking (reading) addressed to the prophet's new listeners.

The analysis of the communicational situation in 8,11-20 makes it possible to differentiate three different testimonies (communicational situations) in prophetic call narratives:

- the prophet, who shares his experience of the prophetic call with his listeners;
- the prophet's disciple as the narrator (witness to the first testimony), who communicates it in a narrative form to the recipients of his text;
- the prophet as the implied author, who relates his call to the implied readers.

The proposed division is based on a model of narrative communication in which «a narrative is a linguistic message conveyed by a narrator to an audience (addressee). The sender is the narrator, the message the narration and the addressee is called the narratee»⁶. The most complete scheme includes seven elements: real author → implied author → narrator → narration →

⁵ The moment of «testimony within testimony» is discussed by RICOEUR, P. in «L'hermeneutique du temoignage», *Archivio di Filosofia (La Testimonianza)* 42 (1972) 35-61.

⁶ Cfr. SKA, J. L., «Our Fathers Have Told Us». *Introduction to the Analysis of Hebrew Narratives*, Subsidia Biblica 13, Roma: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1990, 40.

narrate → implied reader → real reader⁷. Despite noticeable differences between these two models, narrative analysis helps clarify the multilayeredness of communication inscribed in the prophetic call narrative.

1.1. *Revelation – the prophet’s testimony*

The event of the prophetic call is available to the reader only through the prophet’s testimony, yet it is not possible to fully determine the content of the prophet’s account. It stems in the first place from the hypothetical character of the results of redaction criticism. It is enough to compare the analyses of various authors to see that the «original» text of the prophetic call narrative may be reconstructed in various ways⁸. Secondly, a text established on the basis of redaction criticism may not necessarily have been authored by the prophet in question, for it is impossible to prove that the prophets wrote the testimonies of their calls in spite of the traces of the prophets’ writing activity. Thirdly, supporters of redaction criticism presuppose a certain model of a prophetic call narrative that needs to have been followed by the prophet⁹. As a re-

⁷ The reader (the real reader) has access to the prophet (the implied author) only via the text (the narration). The prophet (the implied author) is a projection into the narration of the real author (the prophet’s disciples – in this model of communication they include also later redactors of the book). The one that reads the narration is the real reader, who through the act of reading is to become the implied reader and heed the words of the implied author, that is the prophet. For a more detailed differentiation between the real and implied author and the real and implied reader see: SKA, J. L., «*Our Fathers Have Told Us*», 41-43.

⁸ The results of the analysis of the prophetic call narratives with the use of redaction criticism are divergent or even contradictory as a result of employing different criteria of determining which elements of the text come from later redactions. As an example, one may cite the reconstruction of the original text of Jeremiah’s call carried out by Winfreid Thiel and Jacques Vermeylen. For Thiel, the original narration is restricted only to Jer 1,4-8 (with the exception of v. 7bß). According to him, this is the basis to which Deuteronomistic editors added subsequent fragments: vv. 7bß,9-10; vv. 11-15; v. 16; vv. 17-19 (cfr. THIEL, W., *Die deuteronomistische Redaktion von Jeremia 1–25*, WMANT 41, Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1973, 62-79). Vermeylen, by contrast, sees the vision of the doom that is to come from the North, included in the first chapter of the book (vv. 11-14), as the chronologically earliest fragment of the book, dating it to the initial stage of Nebuchadnezzar’s conquests (circa 605 BCE). He situates the narrative of the prophetic call (vv. 4-10) at the end of the redaction process, seeing it as a re-reading of vv. 17-19 that were added earlier and that originally referred to the Jerusalemites and not to Jeremiah (cfr. VERMEYLEN, J., «La rédaction de Jérémie 1,4-19», *ETL* 58 [1982] 252-278).

⁹ In his classical study of the genre of prophetic call narratives Norman C. Habel distinguishes the following components of these narratives: (1) the divine confrontation, (2) the introductory word, (3) the commission, (4) the objection, (5) the reassurance, and (6) the sign («The Form and Significance of the Call Narratives», *ZAW* 77 [1965] 297-323).

sult, all the divergences from the model (repetitions or inconsistencies) are removed as «non-original». Finally, it is debatable that the prophet's testimony of his call is included exclusively within the so-called prophetic call narratives. Amos speaks of his call during a dispute with Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, when the latter attempts to silence him (cfr. Amo 7,14-15)¹⁰. Jeremiah as well refers repeatedly to his call in the texts that have the character of lamentations (cfr. 15,16) or defence during a court case (cfr. 26,12-16).

Despite these reservations, it is possible to determine the context in which a prophet could give a testimony of his prophetic call. In light of all the prophetic call narratives, prophetic activity had its foundation in the commission word that defined the prophet's activity in terms of movement and speech: «for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you» (Jer 1,7). The prophet resorted to the commission word whenever his mission was negated by the listeners. This is illustrated in a most dramatic way by the clash in the Bethel temple between Amos and Priest Amaziah. The latter questions the intentions behind Amos's prophetic activity, to which the prophet responds with a declaration accentuating his having been called by Yahweh: «Yahweh took me from following the flock and Yahweh said to me, "Go, prophesy to my people Israel"» (7,15). More frequently, though, the prophets' activity was questioned by other people who aspired to the same role. Jeremiah's response to Hananiah's challenge questions the latter's status as a prophet: «Yahweh has not sent you» (28,15)¹¹. In a similar way, Ezekiel accuses his adversaries for «saying: Yahweh says this, although Yahweh has not spoken» (22,28)¹². If one were to indicate the motives behind a prophet's resorting to the event of his prophetic call, these would be the challenges to their prophetic authority by listeners who questioned the divine provenance of the prophet's words.

¹⁰ The beginning of Amos's statement in v. 14, in which he uses three nominal sentences to speak of his being a prophet, poses an interpretational difficulty. The fact that it can be rendered in the past tense («I was not a prophet...») or the present tense («I am not a prophet...») does not change the fact that v. 15 refers to the event of the prophetic call. Amos's response may possibly be linking his call with Amaziah's current contestation of his status, to which he reacts by citing his initial objection to God's initiative of call (v. 14), before giving in the following sentence a testimony of what happened during that encounter (cfr. WILLOUGHBY, B. E., «Book of Amos», in FREEDMAN, D. N. [ed.], *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, I, New York: Doubleday, 1992, 204-205).

¹¹ The same argument appears in Jer 14,14; 23,21.32; 27,15; 29,9; Eze 13,6.

¹² Cfr. Jer 23,16.26; Eze 13,2-3.7; Zec 13,4.

1.2. *A disciple's testimony*

The meaning of the term disciple is not constant as disciples were not merely witnesses to the prophet's life and activity. This is corroborated by the Book of Isaiah: the prophecies included in Chapters 40–55 and 56–66 come from the disciples of the historical prophet Isaiah who lived during the period of the Babylonian exile and the return from it (that is, in the 2nd half of the 6th century BCE), even though the prophet himself was active in the 2nd half of the 8th century BCE. The process of the redaction of prophetic books in itself entails the deployment of the word «disciple» with reference to all those who contributed to the final shape of the text. Their roles may vary depending on the assumed model of a prophetic book's redaction. The model of compilation sees the role of the redactor as that of grouping the material left by the prophet into larger units formed as anthologies of oracles similar to one another in terms of form or content¹³. The updating model (*Fortschreibung*) assumes that the prophet's disciples expanded the original oracles left by the prophet¹⁴. Finally, the model of re-reading signals the process of re-interpretation of prophetic oracles undertaken by redactors who updated the prophet's words in new historical circumstances¹⁵.

A special position in this redactional chain is occupied by a disciple as a direct observer of the prophet's activity. In light of Isaiah's admonition to his disciples quoted above: «Bind up the testimony, seal the instruction among my disciples» (Isa 8,16), the disciples' role is to take up the testimony and give it a written form so that the prophet's testimony may be heard in the future.

What are the motives behind a disciple's work? Writing down the account of the prophetic call heard from the prophet, a disciple performs a certain «canonization» of the word: he acknowledges the credibility of the experience and thus recognizes it as God's word. The goal of a disciple's work goes beyond writing a prophetic biography as a chronicle of the events occurring

¹³ Cfr. MARCONCINI, B., «Profeta e parola profetica», in MARCONCINI, B. et al. (eds.), *Profeti e apocalittici*, LOGOS, Corso di Studi Biblici 3, Leumann (Torino): Elle Di Ci, 1995, 40.

¹⁴ The model is also termed *Tradentenprophetie* (cfr. RENDTORFFE, R., *Theologie des Alten Testaments. Ein kanonischer Entwurf. I. Kanonische Grundlegung*, Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1999, 152).

¹⁵ Brevard S. Childs calls this type of redaction «retrospective reading» («Retrospective Reading of the Old Testament Prophets», *ZAW* 108 [1996] 362-377). It was not an achievement of one person but of a whole group behind the Deuteronomistic and Priestly traditions (cfr. CLEMENTS, R. E., «The Chronology of Redaction in Ez 1–24», in *Old Testament Prophecy. From Oracles to Canon*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996, 160-163).

in a prophet's life. A disciple's narration is oriented towards testimony to the testimony left by the prophet of his experience of God's revelation.

A disciple's account is not a mere verbatim repetition of the prophet's narrative. This stems not only from the imperfection of human memory or the psychic, cultural and literary distinctness of the two speaking subjects. The major issue is the fact that God's word of revelation is expressed through human word, which fact necessitates interpretation. The interpretation is attempted by the disciple himself through his account in which he resorts to a few interpretational keys. The first of these is the life of the prophet seen as a whole. Further, the disciple makes use of earlier testimonies of other prophets' calls, referring primarily to their narrative structure. Finally, he situates his narrative in a new context – not that of life (*Sitz im Leben*), but that of literature (*Sitz im Wort*). This decontextualization leads to the positioning of the description of the call at the outset of the prophet's texts, which finally acquire the shape of a book. This way, a disciple strives to authenticate not only the prophet's call but also his word, whose source and authority lie in God himself. The prophetic call narrative thus legitimizes the whole narration mediated by the disciple¹⁶.

1.3. *Writing – a new chain of witnesses*

The writing of the prophetic call narrative leads to the positioning of the original event of revelation in a new time-space. Thanks to the disciple's testimony, the prophet's testimony reaches out through the ages to the present time and space, in which one more communicational act occurs, spawning a new chain of witnesses. A contemporary reader of a prophetic book encounters the prophet as seen by his disciple¹⁷. The image of the prophet present in the prophetic call narrative is, in a way, a projection of the way he is perceived by his disciples (redactors). It does not mean, however, that the figure of the prophet in the book is a creation of literary fiction. A disciple objectivizes the prophet while remaining an interpreter of the prophet's life and word.

¹⁶ Cfr. GOUDERS, K., «Zu einer Theologie der prophetischen Berufung», *Bibel und Leben* 12 (1971) 92-93; LONG, B. O., «Prophetic Authority as Social Reality», in COATS, G. W. and LONG, B. O. (eds.), *Canon and Authority. Essays in Old Testament Religion and Theology*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977, 10-11.

¹⁷ The proposed understanding of the prophet as the implied author is based on SKA, J. L., «*Our Fathers*», 41.

Having made sure of the prophet's credibility, the disciple – as a witness to the prophet's activity – presents his «ideal» image.

The testimony contained in the written text remains mute until it finds a new recipient (reader). During the reading process, the event of the call is ultimately decontextualized, proceeding from the literary context (*Sitz im Wort* understood as a whole prophetic book) to the new *Sitz im Leben*, namely that of the reader. The recipient's dialogue with the text aims not only for interpretation geared towards comprehension and explanation. The real reader has an opportunity to become an ideal reader, who would assume the role inscribed by the narration¹⁸, that is the role of the listener to whom the prophet speaks of his call. In this way, the reader becomes the witness to the prophetic call, which ceases to be a fact from the past but belongs now to the present time. The reader is invited to be a new witness who will verify the credibility of the prophetic word.

2. THE CONTENT OF THE PROPHET'S TESTIMONY OF HIS CALL

What elements constitute the event termed the prophetic call? Form criticism of prophetic call narratives posits the impossibility of determining all the crucial elements forming the prophetic call. One may have an impression that form criticism is more interested in adjusting the narratives to some predetermined structure than in finding the form in the text itself¹⁹. The homogeneity of the literary genre of «prophetic call narrative» does not preclude the pluralism of literary structures, as corroborated by the comparison of prophetic call narratives in Isa 6, Jer 1 and Eze 1,1–3,15. Walther Zimmerli points out that the first of these has a visionary character (the call takes place

¹⁸ Paul Ricouer in many of his texts interprets the process of the reader's transformation that occurs while reading. His theory, together with other scholarly proposals on the communicational element under study here, is discussed by Z. PAWŁOWSKI, *Opowiadanie, Bóg i początek. Teologia narracyjna w Rdz 1–3*, Rozprawy i Studia Biblijne 13, Warszawa: Vocatio, 2003, 214-230.

¹⁹ Even the most conventional narratives of the Book of Jeremiah and the Book of Ezekiel do not subscribe to the model of the prophetic call narrative. In the case of Jeremiah, two call visions (Jer 1,11-16) that bring the revelation of the nature of the prophetic word fall beyond the pattern of the call narrative. As for the Book of Ezekiel, the delimitation of the narrative generates some questions. It is conventionally believed that its end corresponds to the end of the vision of Yahweh's Glory in 3,12-15, yet two subsequent texts also address the issue of Ezekiel's call: 3,16-21 (the call to be a watchman over the house of Israel) and 3,22-27 (the prediction of the prophet's silence); cfr. PIKOR, W., *La comunicazione profetica alla luce di Ez 2–3*, Tesi Gregoriana. Serie Teologia 88, Roma: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 2002, 30-33.

during a vision: Isa 6 – the prototype of such a type of narrative may be found in 1 Kgs 22), the second – an auditory character (the call as a word-event: Jer 1 – the prototype of the narrative in Exo 3), while the third one – that is the one on Ezekiel's call – combines the two forms²⁰. As Walter Vogel notes, the language varies as well depending on the type of the narrative²¹. Court language dominates in the narrative on Isaiah's call, with emphasis placed on the prophet's role as God's advisor, while in the case of Jeremiah's call (and, to some extent, Ezekiel's) diplomatic language is deployed, thanks to which the prophet's freedom and God's trust in him are emphasized. It thus seems appropriate to leave aside the formal reading of prophetic call narratives and to focus on the content of the event the prophet's testimony centres on. The event of the call presupposes communication between two subjects: God and the prophet. It occurs through word and pertains to the word the prophet is to preach. The communicational situation sketched in such a way is indispensable for determining the content of the prophet's testimony²².

2.1. *The prophet as a witness to God's theophany*

Theophany is the first element of the prophetic revelation. Its meaning is not grasped through the understanding of a whole through its parts (that is, through the interpretation of theophany's individual elements contained in its narrative account) but, on the contrary, through the understanding of a part through the whole (individual elements of theophany are interpreted in the context of the whole narrative). This does not translate into resignation from capturing the symbolism of theophany's individual elements. What is at stake is rather an understanding of the dynamics of the whole theophany and thus of its significance for the prophet.

Through theophany God decisively enters the life of the one called. In the call narrative, theophany discloses the tension between God's transcen-

²⁰ Cfr. ZIMMERLI, W., *Ezekiel 1. A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel. Chapters 1–24*, Hermeneia, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979, 97-100.

²¹ Cfr. VOGELS, W., *Le prophète, un homme de Dieu. La vie intérieure des prophètes*, Hier-aujourd'hui 14, Paris: Desclé & Cie, 1973, 15-46. Alongside court and diplomatic language, Vogel identifies military language, which emphasizes the disproportion between God's and prophet's positions (cfr. Hos 1,2-3; Amo 7,15; Jon 1,1-2; 3,2), and the language of wisdom, which refers to the relationship between the master and his disciple (cfr. 1 Sam 3).

²² Cfr. PIKOR, W., «Pytanie o funkcję retoryczną opowiadań o powołaniu prorockim», *Roczniki Teologiczne* 52/1 (2005) 32-36.

dence and immanence. A confrontation with God generates fear in man (Isa 6,5) and makes him aware of his own limitations (Jer 1,6). This finds reflection in Ezekiel's prostration before Yahweh's Glory, not only as a sign of his reverence but even more so as a confirmation of the truth that in God's eyes the prophet is a «son of man»²³ (Eze 1,28–2,1). Through his revelation, God bridges the distance between himself and the prophet as a man, a distance which is insurmountable from human perspective. The acclamation that Isaiah hears in his vision leads from the accentuation of God's holiness to the statement of the fact that his Glory fills the whole earth (6,3), and not only the temple (6,2). God's sanctity manifests itself through the Glory which overcomes any obstacle raised by people²⁴.

This is experienced by Ezekiel, who encounters Yahweh's Glory in the land of exile, treated by the Israelites as unclean (cfr. Eze 4,13). The Jerusalemites perceive the deportees to Babylonia as «keep[ing] away from Yahweh» (Eze 11,15), yet Yahweh's Glory transcends the borders of the Jerusalem temple erected by men. The vision of Yahweh's Glory that Ezekiel sees during his call (Eze 1) is to manifest not only God's transcendence but also his immanence. Ezekiel is to experience this himself: lying prostrate before Yahweh's Glory – that is, acknowledging the distance between himself and God – he is revived («put on his feet») by the spirit («the spirit came to me»), which is a source of the mobility of Yahweh's Glory (cfr. 2,1–2)²⁵.

As evinced by Jeremiah's call, with his theophany, God refutes the stereotypes of both theological and existential nature. God reveals himself to Jeremiah as that who entered his life before his conception and birth (Jer 1,5: «Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you came to birth I consecrated you; I appointed you as prophet to the nations»). God precedes not only the prophet's experience of call but also his existence in the world indebted to his parents. What is more, by consecrating the prophet God incorporates him within the sphere of his sanctity, thereby making him a manifestation of his sanctity in the world²⁶.

²³ The reference to Ezekiel as a «son of man» (*Ben-ʾādām*) recurs 61 times in the Book of Ezekiel (cfr. the analysis of the expression in: PIKOR, W., *La comunicazione profetica alla luce di Ez 2–3*, 62–63).

²⁴ Cfr. BEUKEN, W. A. M., *Jesaja 1–12*, HThKAT, Freiburg–Basel–Wien: Herder, 2003, 171–172.

²⁵ Cfr. PIKOR, W., *The Land of Israel in the Book of Ezekiel*, Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies, 667, New York–London: T&T Clark, 2018, 175–177.

²⁶ Cfr. BARBIERO, G., «*Tu mi hai sedotto, Signore*». *Le confessioni di Geremia alla luce della sua vocazione profetica*, AnaBib.Studia 2, Roma: Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2013, 30.

Describing God's theophany experienced during the moment of call, the prophet aims not only to legitimize his prophetic call. He testifies at the same time to God's involvement in his history as the man called, and this way in the history of those who will read (listen to) his word. Their lives, like the life of the prophet, constitute the time and space of God's presence.

2.2. *The prophet as a witness to the word*

Theophany finds its completion in the gift of the word that God grants the prophet. The word forms the bridge between God and the prophet not only at the moment of the call but, more generally, in the prophet's life as God's herald. The word of the call is introduced with the conventional word-event formula: «The word of Yahweh came to me saying» (cfr. Isa 6,8; Jer 1,4; Eze 2,1). Hence, owing to the fact that it is written down and situated at the outset of the book, the original act of God's communication with the prophet acquires the status of an event that is the *principium* of the prophet's life. As the redactors (disciples) see it, this event – chronologically first in the prophet's life – becomes at the same time the principle of his activity, which is renewed every time the prophet is to preach God's word²⁷. The source of this communication is a «commission» from God (Isa 6,8; Jer 1,6; Eze 2,3.4), accompanied by the command to go and to speak (Isa 6,9; Jer 1,7; Eze 2,4.7; 3,4.10-11).

The call narrative thus manifests the prophet's divine mandate. God not only authorizes the prophet to speak on his behalf but also gives him his word. The content of the prediction in the texts analysed here comes down to one message: «Thus says the Lord Yahweh» (Eze 2,4; 3,11). The messenger formula present in the account of Ezekiel's call reveals the presence of two speakers in the prophetic mission: the one sent speaks the words of the sender. What is heard (read) is the word coming from man, but God's word is incorporated within it. It is not the prophet who creates God's word, but it is God's word that creates the prophet.

The reconstruction of the process of prophetic communication on the basis of the call narrative sheds light on human conditions of the prophecy,

²⁷ Cfr. PIKOR, W., *La comunicazione profetica alla luce di Ez 2–3*, 204–205; CUCCA, M., *Il corpo e la città. Studio del rapporto di significazione paradigmatica tra la vicenda di Geremia e il destino di Gerusalemme*, Studi e Ricerche. Studi Biblici, Assisi: Cittadella Editrice, 2010, 65–66.

the first of them being the prophet's credibility. The prophet has no other arguments to support the word he utters than the reference to God's word founding his prophecy: «Thus says the Lord Yahweh»²⁸. The paradox of the situation stems from the absence of the verbal language that would precede the prophet's words. What prompts the prophet to speak is God's original speech that precedes all human words and constitutes the source of the prophet's word. An astounding proof of the principal role of God's word in the prophetic communication is the judgment on Jeremiah in the wake of his prediction of the destruction of the Jerusalem temple (Jer 26). In his defence, the prophet does not negate what he has said, nor does he explain the sense of his utterance; he merely says: «Yahweh himself sent me to prophesy against this house and this city all the things you have heard» (Jer 26,12). Jeremiah makes a reference to the event that marks the source of his speaking: God who said, who sent, who commanded²⁹. The prophet essentially repeats: «Thus says the Lord Yahweh», evoking his prophetic call³⁰.

Another problem with the interpretation of prophetic communication lies in the huge number of the prophet's (or prophets') words in contrast to one word uttered by God. The prophet mentions being granted the word by God, thereby testifying to the fact that all of his words come from this one word that God directed to him at the moment of his call. This finds its most emphatic illustration in the scene of Ezekiel's eating the scroll (Eze 2,8–3,3). The scroll is covered on both sides with «words of lamentation and mourning and woe» (v. 10). The scroll symbolically contains all Ezekiel's prophesying. Despite the variety of words that the prophet will use to communicate God's word, he will not change it nor add anything to it³¹. The congruence of the prophet's words with God's «one» word is emphasized also in the narrative of Jeremiah's call³². The title of the book that constitutes a narrative introduction to Jeremiah's call accentuates, on the one hand, the fact that the book contains Jeremiah's «words/affairs» (*dāḇārîm*) (1,1), while on the other emphasizing one «word» (*dāḇār*) that Yahweh directed to

²⁸ Cfr. PIKOR, W., *La comunicazione profetica alla luce di Ez 2–3*, 84–86.

²⁹ Cfr. FISCHER, G., *Jeremia 26–52*, HThKAT, Freiburg-Basel-Wien: Herder, 2005, 31.

³⁰ Cfr. BOVATI, P., *Così parla il Signore. Studi sul profetismo biblico*, Collana Biblica, Bologna: Dehoniane, 2008, 81.

³¹ Cfr. the analysis of the description of the scroll that Ezekiel is given to eat in: PIKOR, W., *La comunicazione profetica alla luce di Ez 2–3*, 108–109.

³² Cfr. FISCHER, G., *Jeremia 1–25*, HThKAT, Freiburg-Basel-Wien: Herder, 2005, 128.

Jeremiah at the moment of his call (1,2). This one «word» is transformed into the multitude of «words» that Jeremiah consumes (1,9). The word that creates the prophet constitutes the source and principle of unity of the words that he utters later.

Finally, the difficulty in the reception of the prophetic word stems from the fact that, accepting God's word, the prophet captures it within his own cognitive, cultural and linguistic structures. The interpretation of the prophetic word thus requires reaching its divine essence. God always speaks to the prophet in a given time and place, which generates a two-fold danger in the reading of the word. First, the prophetic word may be interpreted as having merely a local significance. Since the prophet acts within a particular area, one may feel tempted to limit the prophecy to this locus only. As a matter of fact, God's word is universal; it has a symbolic dimension that is revealed in this particular place for the whole world. The second danger jeopardizing a proper understanding of God's word lies in a temptation to treat it as a word from the past, outdated in the temporal context of the new listeners. Albeit rooted in human time, the prophecy guarantees the continuity of history, which determines the present time and defines the identity of the new recipients of the prophet's word. Therefore, it is necessary to go beyond the original communicational context to reach the life-giving essence of the prophet's word that manifests God and is binding for a human being.

2.3. The prophet as a witness to the figure of the prophet

The prophet's call as an experience of God approaching a man and making him a tool of his communication finds its complement in a sign, an integral part of which is the prophet's mouth. The prophet's mission is to speak; hence, the manipulation of his mouth is interpreted as a gesture of prophetic investment. This activity constitutes God's response to the prophet's doubts concerning his personal qualifications.

Isaiah emphasizes the impurity of his lips: «Then I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, Yahweh Sabaoth"» (Isa 6,5). Isaiah utters these words in the temple, which indicates that he does not mean ritual impurity, for, if he were unclean, he would not be able to enter the sanctuary. Rather, the prophet views himself as unworthy of being exposed to God's ho-

liness; thus, he realizes he is not worthy of speaking about God or capable of speaking in a manner that would be commensurate to who God is³³.

Jeremiah, on the other hand, realizes his young age: «Ah, Lord Yahweh! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth» (Jer 1,6). Recognizing himself as a youth, Jeremiah admits to his incompetence; this makes him similar to Salomon, who confessed to God at the beginning of his rule: «I am only a very young man; I do not know how to go out or come in», which words were meant to indicate that he could not rule Israel in a proper, mature way. Apart from this, Jeremiah realizes that his words as those of a young man stand no chance of being heard as normative words and of enjoying authority that would transform an act of listening into an act of compliance³⁴.

Ezekiel, by contrast, does not verbalize his objections, but these are known to God for he sees them in the prospect of the listeners' future resistance to the prophet, a resistance that is expressed through the metaphor of «briers and thorns» and «scorpions» (2,6)³⁵. The prophet needs to realize the danger of being rejected so that later he does not give up on his mission and does not voice complaints.

In light of these reservations voiced by the prophets, God's intervention focuses on their mouths as an organ of speech: Isaiah's lips are purified with a burning coal brought by a seraphim from the temple's altar (6,7), Jeremiah's mouth is touched by God's hand and then filled with God's word (1,9), while Ezekiel is given a scroll to eat (2,8–3,3). As a result, the prophets' mouths are enabled and authorized to speak on behalf of God³⁶.

³³ The statement is interpreted in such a way by: WILDBERGER, H., *Isaiah 1–12*, CC, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991, 268; HURVITZ, V. A., «Isaiah's Impure Lips and Their Purification in Light of Mouth Purification in Akkadian Sources», *HUCA* 60 (1989) 39-89; BLENKINSOPP, J., *Isaiah 1–39. A New Translation with Commentary*, AB 19, New York: Doubleday, 2000, 226; MELLO, A., *Isaia. Introduzione, traduzione e commento*, Nuova Versione della Bibbia dai Tesi Antichi 10, Cinisello Balsamo (Milano): San Paolo, 2012, 80.

³⁴ Cfr. BOVATI, P., «Il corpo vivente. Riflessioni sulla vocazione profetica», *La rivista del clero italiano* 67 (1987) 339-340; JAWORSKI, P., *Tożsamość proroka w świetle Jr 23,9-40. Studium egzegetyczno-teologiczne*, *Studia Biblica Lublinensia* 15, Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 2016, 179.

³⁵ What is metaphorized are the results of the words of the rebellious listeners. Ezekiel's pain will be as acute and long-lasting as pain caused by contact with briars. It will also be unexpected and stinging, just like a scorpion's bite (cfr. PIKOR, W., *La comunicazione profetica alla luce di Ez 2–3*, 91-92).

³⁶ The narrative of Isaiah's call does not mention the word put inside the prophet's mouth; the emphasis is placed on the purification of the prophet's lips. As a result, Isaiah's lips will utter words that correspond to God's sanctity, making the prophet ready to accept God's revelation; cfr. BENZI, G., *La Profesia dell'Emmanuele. I testi di Isaia 6–9 tra attesa e avvento della salvezza*, *Studi Biblici* 68, Bologna: EDB, 2014, 163-165.

The symbolism of these actions does not pertain only to the new quality of the prophet's speech. The mouth is also an organ of eating, which is signalled in Jeremiah's call³⁷ to find its complete development in Ezekiel's call. The vision of the scroll shown to Ezekiel manifests a new status of the prophet, the status which is defined by a double opening of the prophet's mouth³⁸. The first opening signals acceptance of God's word (the verb «to eat» in Eze 2,8; 3,1.2.3), while the second one has as its aim the communication with the house of Israel (the verb «to speak» in Eze 3,1). The verbs in the imperative that encourage Ezekiel to feed on God's word emphasize the precedence of listening to speaking. The prophet is thus called to be the first recipient of God's word, becoming for his listeners a model of listening. Ezekiel's listening is not a one-time event but is to be transformed into the activity of the heart. The words of the scroll that he eats are «sweet as honey» in his mouth (3,3) to then fill his entrails and finally reach his heart. It is in the heart that the word is to be stored, memorized and constantly reflected on. As a result, God's word is not an entity exterior to the prophet but it fuses with him; it is incorporated not only in the prophet's words but also in his body. With all his corporeality, the prophet becomes the word of God.

Summing up this part of my analysis of the prophet's testimony of his call, it needs to be emphasized that the testimony first centres on the truth about God, who becomes involved in the life of a given person to enter the history of Israel through this person, already ordained a prophet. God's activity towards the prophet transcends the framework established by the word of the call. The prophet appears in God's eyes as a son to whom God gives something that is not second-rate, for God gives himself to the prophet. Like a father, God teaches the prophet to speak, manifests himself to him through the word and authorizes him to speak his word. The prophet's response is that of a son, who listens to God and obeys him, becoming in this way a paragon of listening to God's word.

³⁷ If words are put into Jeremiah's mouth, then it would be natural for him to eat them, which is confirmed by Jer 15,16, a text referring to the event of the call. In light of Deut 18,18, one cannot ignore an aspect of the legitimization of the prophet present in God's activity of putting his words into the prophet's mouth.

³⁸ Cfr. PIKOR, W., *La comunicazione profetica alla luce di Ez 2-3*, 111-114.

3. THE AIM OF THE PROPHET'S TESTIMONY OF HIS CALL

The interpretation of the prophetic call narratives that makes use of the apologetic key and is most common in exegesis does not fully capture the theological significance of these texts. They essentially constitute an account of the history of salvation, whose main protagonist is the word of God. God, the prophet and his listeners remain in mutual relations through the word. The word has its source in God, who gives it to the prophet so that he can communicate it to his listeners. From God's perspective, speaking the word constitutes the foundation of the prophetic act, while from the human point of view its basis lies in listening to the word. Giving a testimony of his call, the prophet encourages his listeners to take up a similar testimony. Does he mean merely a written corroboration of his testimony? What is the essence of the testimony that the prophet calls for?

The prophet reveals himself as a listening subject, yet it is only in the case of Isaiah that one can speak of immediate and unquestionable subjection to God's word (cfr. Isa 6,8). In the case of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, listening seems a process that occurs at various levels.

The prophet's listening to God assumes a dialogic structure. It is formally present in the narration itself, which testifies to the prophet's objections and his debate with God (cfr. Isa 6,11; Jer 1,4-8; Eze 2,8). In the prophet himself, the listening process leads to the assimilation of God's word, its internalization and the subjugation of all aspects of his life to the word so that ultimately the prophet can himself become the word of God³⁹. The prophet's body is not only a tool for preaching the word, but it becomes the word of God itself⁴⁰. The body in this context needs to be understood relationally, for God speaks through the prophet's life, his family, wife and children⁴¹.

The dialogic character of the prophetic communication necessitates the prophet's attunement to the real world in and through which God communicates. An example of such a dialogue of God's word with the world can be seen in two visions that constitute an integral part of Jeremiah's call (cfr. Jer 1,11-

³⁹ The aspect of the corporeality of the prophetic word is clearly noticeable in the prophet's sign-acts, in which he makes use of his body (cfr. Isa 20,1-6; Jer 16,1-9; 27,1-3; Eze 4,4-8; 24,15-27). For this reason, Ezekiel's silent body (mouth) can be a carrier of a prophetic message despite the absence of words (cfr. Eze 3,21-27; 24,15-27; 33,21-22).

⁴⁰ Cfr. BOVATI, P., *Così parla il Signore*, 88.

⁴¹ To confirm this, it is enough to mention Hosea and Gomer's conjugal tribulations (Hos 1-3), the names of Isaiah's children (Isa 7,3; 8,1) or the death of Ezekiel's wife (Eze 24,15-27).

16): God's word is not only incorporated into the reality of the material world (almond tree; a seething pot) but it brings a response to the situation of the world (God keeps watch over the realization of his word; God judges Jerusalem)⁴². The prophet is faced with a task of understanding the world of his listeners (it is in fact his own world, too), for only in this way can he introduce his listeners to a dialogue with God's word. Listening to God requires from the prophet a sensitivity to the situation of the addressees of his word.

The prophet's obedience to God's word manifests itself also (if not primarily) as an act of trust in God. Such an aspect of listening is present mostly in God's response to the fear articulated by the prophet. What is the source of this fear? Fear is a reaction of the body that is spawned by an awareness of threat and danger. Objection masks fear and is a form of escape from it. God does not negate the fact that the prophet's fate is to be rejected, persecuted, judged and sentenced to death. To overcome his fear, the prophet has at his disposal only God's word that says to him: «do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you» (cfr. Jer 1,8.17-19; Eze 2,6; 3,8-9). The prophet overcomes his own fear when he listens to God's promise of assistance; God wishes to lead the prophet away from loneliness experienced in the face of trouble and to open him up to embrace hope. The word admonishing him to reject fear becomes a source of trust in God⁴³.

The prophet's listeners adopt an opposite attitude to God's word. Their failure to listen is rendered through a metaphor of handicapped organs of perception, starting with those that are needed for first contact – heavy ears and blind eyes (Isa 6,10) – and ending with the damage of the heart, a central intellectual, volitional and emotional organ in the Bible, which in this case is «fat» (Isa 6,10) and stubborn (Eze 2,4; 3,7)⁴⁴. These images convey the truth of the Israelites' loss of the ability to hear, to understand the word and to make proper decisions. However, this is not a situation that they have no bearing on. God explains to Ezekiel the reasons for the unsuccessfulness of his mission, saying that the «house of Israel will not be willing to listen to you, for they are not willing to listen to me» (3,7). Their refusal to listen manifests their resistance to God's word, which finds its reflection on their faces and foreheads

⁴² Cfr. BARBIERO, G., «Tu mi hai sedotto, Signore», 47-48, 51-52.

⁴³ Cfr. COSTACURTA, B., *La vita minacciata. Il tema della paura nella Bibbia Ebraica*, AnBib 119, 2^a ed., Roma: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1997, 260-261.

⁴⁴ It is in fact a «stony heart» (Eze 11,19; 36,26), close to being seen as dead (cfr. 1 Sam 25,37).

(cfr. Eze 2,4; 3,7). The animosity of «the nation of rebels» (Eze 2,4.5; 3,26.27) assumes a form of aggression towards God's word. They will declare war against the prophet to destroy his body (Jer 1,19) or at least to deprive him of mobility (Eze 3,25)⁴⁵. Deprived of his listeners, the prophet would be neutralized in spite of his ability to speak, and this would translate into the neutralization of God's word⁴⁶.

In this context, a new approach to the effectiveness of the prophetic prediction – and thus to the prophet's testimony of his call – is necessary. The prophet's effectiveness is not measured by the number of those who accept his word and become witnesses to his life. At the moment of his call, the prophet is told by God that his prophesying is to prompt the listeners to make a decision whether or not to listen to God's word. Ezekiel is to preach the word regardless of the reaction of his listeners, as corroborated by the recurrent formula: «whether they hear or refuse to hear» (2,5.7; 3,11). This affirmative formulation is ultimately transformed into an exhortative phrase that terminates the narrative of Ezekiel's prophetic call: «He who will hear, let him hear; and he who will refuse to hear, let him refuse» (3,27). God's word demands that the listeners make a definitive stance towards it, which finds its manifestation in their response to the prophet's words. A similar finality is noticeable in the case of Isaiah's mission (6,9-10). His prophetic activity is not meant to harden the hearts of the people for they are already hardened. Isaiah is to manifest with his words the state that makes it impossible for Israel to convert and to open up to God's healing activity⁴⁷.

Reading today the narrative of the prophet's call that belongs to the past, its reader (the real reader) assumes the role of the prophet's listener (the implied reader). Becoming the implied reader in this case signifies the realization in one's own life of the attitudes present in the world of the narration. The reader is faced with a choice of identifying either with the prophet and his attitude to God's word or with the prophet's listeners and their decision not to

⁴⁵ Binding the prophet with bands foretold in this verse seems to be a metaphor of one more form of aggression evinced by the prophet's listeners that completes an earlier plant-animal imagery in 2,6 (for a discussion of its significance see PIKOR, W., *La comunicazione profetica alla luce di Ez* 2-3, 190-192).

⁴⁶ Cfr. BOVATI, P., *Così parla il Signore*, 97.

⁴⁷ The negative interpretation of the prophet's mission (to harden the hearts of the people) is disproved by other statements of Isaiah, in which the people are presented as a subject capable of entering the path of obedience to God's word (cfr. 1,19-20). The prophet himself believes that Israel is able to convert (cfr. 30,15).

listen. It is only by identifying themselves with the prophet's attitude that the future recipients of his word can experience the power of God's word, which «is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart» (Heb 4,12).

* * *

Three different communicational situations may be distinguished in the prophetic call narratives, whose subjects are in turn the prophet, his disciples and finally the text itself. The chain of testimonies of the original event of the prophecy did not end with the writing down of the narrative but continues to exist due to the existence of new listeners (readers). The prophet's testimony of his call does not have as its aim the defence of the prophet's authority or the legitimization of his word. Sharing his experience of the call, the prophet introduces his listeners to direct contact with God's word to enable them to make a decision whether or not to listen to the word. As a result, the event founding the prophecy is performed and updated in the time and space of the new listeners of the prophetic word.

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