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Bibliologue

An Introduction in Theory and Practise

I. Christian Quests for Understanding and Jewish Tradition

One can perceive a trend at present toward quests (*Suchbewegungen*, "search movements" [Tr.]) for deeper understanding of the nature of access to and interaction with the Bible. These movements can be seen both in homiletics as well as in work on Biblical texts being performed by groups. Amidst the variety of approaches, it is possible to identify tendencies that can be understood within the context of the present societal development: approaches are favoured that are hermeneutically positioned to work with different, even thoroughly contradictory, interpretations, and which to some extent possess "a competence of plurality".

An inherent part of this is a veneration of subjectivity, insofar as the subject is understood as a productive dimension of interpretation. This in turn is not restricted to learned theologians, but is instead more strongly oriented toward participation. All of this should be of little surprise in a societal landscape shaped by pluralisation, individualisation and subjectification. At the same time, and yet not at all contradictory to the aforementioned, one can also make out tendencies toward a search for form and structure, but even more so toward a new estimation of tradition. Where tradition – classically modern – in recent decades had been largely considered something dusty and rear-facing, prescriptive and restrictive, it appears of late that the potential of tradition has been rediscovered again. Just as the "post-modernism" has been accredited with a new turning to tradition, traditions are gaining new value in daily life, and even more strongly in the sphere of religion. Yet the regard for tradition is generally linked with a specific interaction with it, described as "plurality-ready" or "post-traditional".¹ To this extent, biblical texts can also gain a new appreciation and esteem after decades where critical interaction tended to be in the theological foreground.

Interestingly – if only occasionally – these quests are now coming encountering Jewish ways of interacting with biblical texts and Jewish hermeneutics. Unlike in Christianity, where beyond its first centuries (during which four Gospels were set up in coexistence) it was the search for the "right," for the "true" message as distinct from the "false" one that dominated for several centuries, Judaism was always significantly more guided by an awareness that the wealth of the Torah, as the collection of human interpretations and varied exegeses, is inexhaustible. According to the Jewish understanding, exegesis is inherently brought up to date with the current era and situation. The Midrash presumes that each generation will have to interpret the Torah anew, because each generation will pose new questions or have them posed upon themselves by changed societal conditions. Various interpretations are not just tolerable for the text, but in fact serve it. Hence in the Jewish tradition it is said that each of the six hundred thousand people standing at the foot of Mt Sinai when the Torah was received (both in writing and orally) had their own opportunity to understand the Torah and that a different aspect was intended for each person. The Jewish tradition has coined the image of the "white fire" blazing between the letters of the "black fire" and opening pathways into the

¹ Cf. Rudolf Englert, Vom Umgang mit Tradition im Zeichen religiöser Pluralität, in: ZPT 55/2003, 137–150.

black fire of the text: "The Torah that the Holy One, hallowed be His name, gave unto Moses, He gave it unto him as white fire engraved with black fire. It is fire, wrapped in fire, chiselled from fire and given from fire, as it is said: 'from his right hand went a fiery law for them" (Deuteronomy 33.2).²

The Midrashim provide answers to questions posed by the text, but do not answer them in full or claim to provide the single definitive correct answer to the text's questions. This allows different Midrashim and different exegeses to coexist with one another. Their common basis however is a veneration of the biblical text as one to which authority is allocated and potency is entrusted. From them spring a joy in the Torah and a desire for its exegeses.

This behaviour can also be observed in modern forms of the Midrash as it has developed in recent decades, primarily in North America. The "Institute of Contemporary Midrash" brings together many, often quite different, opportunities for continuing on the tradition of the Midrash using artistic means. This is how the inventor (or perhaps better: discoverer) of the Bibliolog, Peter Pitzele, understands the approach. Peter Pitzele is a literary scholar and psychodramatist, yet interestingly not an academically trained theologian. Having grown up a secular Jew, through the development of the Bibliodrama he found his own new approach to the Torah. Bibliolog is – not least through psychodrama – related to what is known in Europe as "Bibliodrama," but the two differ in the methodologies, the role of the director, the orientation, and perhaps most importantly in their handling of the Biblical text in such significant ways that they must be understood as separate approaches.

The fundamental element of the Bibliolog is the differentiation between the letters of the text and its empty spaces. On the one side, the Bibliolog respects the letter of the Biblical text³ Yet it is perpetually astounding how sometimes seemingly tangential or confusing aspects prove to be key to new understanding of the text. Bibliolog sets itself the goal of bringing the white fire to a blaze, so as to achieve a living and personal access to the black fire. The Bibliolog not only accepts that understanding of biblical texts is inherently moulded by the personal, but actually uses it as the source of recognition and personal access to the text. Automatically, without the need for conscious framing and reflection, people fill the biblical roles in ways that correspond to their life experiences and world view.

II. Bibliolog

III. Bibliolog and new homiletic tendencies

1. Bibliolog and reader-response criticism

In its implicit hermeneutic, the Bibliolog is closely related to the theoretical approach of reader-response criticism, which has grown in importance in recent years for homiletics in the German-speaking world. A brief review of reader-response criticism can hence aid with a better understanding of the hermeneutical presumptions and ramifications of the Bibliolog.

² ySheq 6,1.

³ "The words in the Bible are canonized and immutable; the black fire cannot be modified". "But in the spirit of midrash it searches for sub-stories and voices within that existing text; it plays with narrative inconsistencies, unanswered questions, puzzling juxtapositions. It plays with white fire." (Pitzele, *Scripture Windows*, 31)

The reader-reception approach⁴ developed within the framework of literary studies levels its gaze on the happenings between the text and the recipient, and hence on the ongoing process of understanding. Instead of determining the meaning of a text in advance, one that is then communicated to others, the theory holds that the meaning of a text first emerges as part of the response process, that is, through active contribution by the participants, who are responsible for the activity of interpretation. The texts not only foresee the role of the reader – known as the "implicit reader" – they in fact require it to be understood. Hence the role of the reader can be filled culturally and individually in very different ways, depending on the preconceptions that the receiver brings into the process.⁵ This approach strikes upon a problem that in homiletical terms has already been formulated by Ernst Lange, namely that there is no "sermon listener". An understanding of the sermon as "open art" by contrast supposedly "provides the listener him- or herself with the opportunity to bring his or her situation into the happenings of the sermon."⁶ This makes the sermon plurivalent, with no unambiguous message that need only be relayed.

Reader-reception oriented homiletics initially drew upon arguments from communication theory to make clear that this individual reception process of the sermon is unavoidable – as "factual ambiguity". In the practical execution of sermons, this helps explain a phenomenon familiar to most preachers, namely that following the conclusion of services members of the community will offer thanks for some aspect of the sermon that the preacher is not at all certain was referenced at all. This is an expression of the multi-faceted "Auredite" of the sermon.⁷ It is however also suggested that the "factual" be made into a sermon's "tactical ambiguity".⁸ That means that the preacher purposefully stages a sermon's readiness and need for interpretation, indeed buttressing the need for interpretation through the very design of the sermon itself. The sermon should by this theory be so open-ended that the listeners can overlay their personal method of reading (or several variants of the same) onto the sermon.

This is precisely what Bibliolog does. It understands the Biblical texts as plurivalent and through its methodological approach opens them to the various comprehensions of the community members. Unlike the familiar settings for the sermon, the plurality of understanding can also be articulated. The individual "auredites" of a sermon, as they are known in reader-reception terminology, are continued onward by the Bibliolog into a multifaceted "oredicten".⁹ Through its methodology, this make quite apparent to all – even in ambiguous sermons – that mistaking one's personal interpretation for being the only correct one is not possible. Through the articulation of the various 'oredicte', an exchange and the rudiments of communication between the individual and plural approaches also becomes possible. This lends the individuals the chances to discover not only their own approach, but also the variety of others and thereby to expand, even change, their own perception. At the foundation of the Bibliolog, and frequently fascinating in its practice, is the resolution of hierarchies between those who are well versed in the biblical tradition and those who are not. The same is also true for the generations: Every utterance has the same validity and

⁴ Cf. *Wolfgang Iser*, *Der Akt des Lesens. Theorie ästhetischer Wirkung*, München 1976; *Umberto Eco*, *Lector in Fabula. Die Mitarbeit der Interpretation in erzählenden Texten*, München 1990.

⁵ Cf. l.c., 65f.

⁶ *Gerhard Marcel Martin*, *Predigt als 'offenes Kunstwerk'? Zum Dialog zwischen Homiletik und Rezeptionsästhetik*, in: *EvTh* 44/1984, 46–58, 49.

⁷ The term "auredit" was coined in *Wilfried Engemann*, *Semiotische Homiletik. Prämissen – Analysen – Konsequenzen*, Tübingen/Basel 1993, 91, with the sense of "heard by the ears," as opposed to "manu-script" or 'written with the hand'.

⁸ "Investing in an ambiguous sermon ... means taking seriously the recognition that the need and ability to interpret are not flaws in the message, but rather in a semiotic and theological sense the presumptions for their relevance" (l.c., 197).

⁹ Analogous with the "auredit", the "oredict" is 'spoken with the mouth.'

contributes to an ever-richer understanding of the text. At the same time it is implicitly clear that the process of interpretation is not complete with the one Bibliolog, but rather generally cannot be brought to a conclusion at all. It makes reference beyond the group that is present and hence implicitly toward future generations. The Bibliolog is therefore also a bridge between the past, as manifested in the text, the present and the future.

One essential presumption for the possibility of this kind of active reception process are "empty spaces" in the text, pointed out above all by Wolfgang Iser.¹⁰ A text always says something, but never everything. Space is left open between that which is said, allowing the recipients to bear in their own experiences and fill them with elements from their own spheres of living. The empty spaces are the most important "switch-over element between text and reader" and allow for a creative relationship between one's own experiences and the external experiences of the text. It is precisely through this "dialectic of showing and silence"¹¹ that the communicative process between text and reader is put into motion. The empty places in the text are not simply completed with a previously existing filling, but rather they open up manifold possibilities for how they can be filled. "The author of the Biblical text has left room for the potential reader so that she can stage the roles intended for her as her own roles, and hence enter into the production of a new text. In cooperation with its reader, the Bible text begins to have more meaning than its author foresaw."¹²

This approach corresponds with the rabbinical talk of the "black fire" of the letters and the "white fire" of the gaps between the letters. Bibliolog lives from individuals filling in these gaps in the text for themselves and in the process expressing the content that is created. The talk in a Bibliolog is hence not just of the 'new text' of the preacher, but rather the individual comprehension of the "white fire". The subjectivity of the individual is also taken seriously through the methodology: The individual is explicitly asked for his own approaches and can articulate these as part of the happenings.¹³ The encounter with the text is therefore less mediated than in the classical sermon setting. The technique of 'echoing' is used to signalise that each individual subjective utterance is esteemed and valued.

2. The limits of interpretation

With this comes the problem of an arbitrariness of reception, however, a problem that ranges across multiple levels: From a textual theory point of view, completely arbitrary interpretations of the text cannot be justified by the fact that they also include personal intentions and views of what is being said. From a scientific-theoretical standpoint, there is concern about a relapse into naive Bible approaches which ignore the achievements of historical-critical research. Hermeneutically, the texts would lose their character as critical counterparts that open up that which is new. Above all else, however – and this is also

¹⁰ Iser, *Akt des Lesens*, 284ff. Similar argument in *Eco*, *Lektor in Fabula*, 63f.

¹¹ "The thing that is kept silent forms the drive of the constitutional act, yet at the same time this stimulus for productivity is checked by that which is said, which for its part changes once that which it has pointed to is brought to occurrence" (Iser, *Akt des Lesens*, 265f.) The keeping of silence in turn reminds of the quote from Yerushalmi, *Schekalim* 6.1: "The torah that was given to Moses is written in black fire onto white fire, sealed with fire, and cloaked in fire."

¹² Wilfried Engemann, *Der Spielraum der Predigt und der Ernst der Verkündigung*, in: Erich Garhammer/Heinz-Günther Schöttler (Ed.), *Predigt als offenes Kunstwerk. Homiletik und Rezeptionsästhetik*, München 1998, 180–200, 189.

¹³ It is impressive – and sometimes even alarming – how many people find this aspect to be the central experience involved with getting acquainted with bibliological sermons. Heartfelt statements like "I've been attending mass for 50 years, and today was the first time that I was ever asked!" or "I was really allowed to express myself" are common both from dedicated churchgoers and from people who rarely attend services.

requested again and again during the Bibliolog – interpretations of the text shaped by personal history could so dominate the text that its own statements become completely distorted.

Umberto Eco devoted extensive consideration to this question. He referred to the 'limits of interpretation': The texts themselves restrict the arbitrary, indifferent range of interpretations by disciplining their readers.¹⁴ They do this primarily through "textual strategy"¹⁵ which simulates to the readers the possibility of combining the elements of the text and organizing the repertoire of the text, and thereby moulding the processes of understanding.¹⁶

Eco sees the reception of a text as comprising the creation of a circle of comprehension, an interplay between text and reader: The text brings its own intentions with it, although they are not openly visible. The reader must speculate and presume an intention, something which in turn can only be done in the context of her experiences and her preconceptions—namely by filling in the blank spaces. Meaning is constituted through this experimentation. The text however begins working on its recipients at the same time as they for their part are being changed by their interaction with the text.¹⁷ The provisional meaning is then checked against the text, since a partial text interpretation is only tenable if it is confirmed by other textual passages encountered as the reader moves forward – if it is contradicted by other portions of the text, then it must be corrected. The subjective and hence perpetually also arbitrary interpretations are hence disciplined through internal 'text coherence'.¹⁸ Incorrect interpretations that overstep the 'limits of interpretation' can be recognised as such over the course of the reading. In this way the text remains a genuine counterpart and is not carried away by either the *intentio auctoris*, the intended statement of the author, or the *intentio lectoris*, the reader's interpretation. Through the interplay between text and interpreter, it is on the one hand the interpreter who completes the text, insofar as the text only achieves its goal once it has been understood. Although that comprehension can occur in the most varied of ways, the text remains itself during the process and provokes an understanding that is oriented toward itself – with the '*intentio operis*', the intention of the text, taken seriously.

This circle of perception is made very clear through the Bibliolog: For each blank space, the participants experiment with meaning, and this process takes an effect on them as well, evoking new assumptions about meaning, although at the same time these are also methodically delimited through the textual strategy, through the fact that things always lead back to the text.¹⁹ The text as "black fire" remains unchanged in its wording. Beyond these textual theory considerations, the subjective interpretation by the individual is also methodically relativised and corrected. Insofar as various interpretations are made aloud, it becomes clear that the personal one is one of several possible ones, and has its own validity alongside the

¹⁴ Cf. *Umberto Eco*, *Die Grenzen der Interpretation*, München 1995, 39. Similar idea also in *Iser*, *Akt des Lesens*, 63.

¹⁵ Cf. *Iser*, *Akt des Lesens*, 143ff., and *Eco*, *Lektor in Fabula*, 65.

¹⁶ The "idiolect" of the text, that is, the "stubbornness" based on the concrete textual strategy is to some extent the "bulwark" against the "uncontrolled nature of ... the process" (*ibid.*, *Grenzen der Interpretation*, 169).

¹⁷ "The interaction fails when the mutual projections of the partner experience no change and/or when the reader's projections are superimposed onto the text without resistance. Because the lack mobilises projective ideas, the text-reader relationship can also be changed solely through its changes. Hence the text constantly provokes a plethora of images from the reader, through which the reigning asymmetry in the totality of the situation begins to be overridden. The complexity of the text structure impedes the smooth occupancy of this situation through the reader's conceptions. Impeding means that the conceptions must be relinquished. Corrections to mobilised conceptions of this kind that are forced by the text form a referential horizon of the situation. This provides contour, allowing the reader to correct his own projections. Only in this way can he experience something that previously was not in his horizon" (*Iser*, *Akt des Lesens*, 263).

¹⁸ Here Eco is reaching back to Augustin, cf. *Augustinus*, *Aurelius*, *De doctrina Christiana* III, in: CChrSL, XXXII, 1962, 10ff.

¹⁹ If at a particular empty space things are expressed that are contrary to the continuation of the text, then the director uses this productively, such as through a formulation like: "Whatever your initial feelings about this were, now you have decided ... What moved you to this?" The director is – not unlike in the Bibliodrama – a lawyer for the text.

other. An explicit part of the Bibliolog also involves making a critical reference to the interpretation of the last speaker. Experience also shows that – similar to what happens with Bibliodrama – texts develop a strong dynamic of their own that inhibits any subjective assimilation. Bibliologs typically include the naming of important theological insights from exegetic commentaries – albeit connected directly with their meaning for one's own belief and life. The text is fundamentally read and prized as it stands in 'black fire', and the text gets the last word, the one that envelops personal experience once again. At the same time it becomes clear that we never completely grasp and construe the text, but rather that it is always larger than our interpretations.

3. Staging of the Biblical texts

This insight fits with the tendency of contemporary homiletics to grasp the sermon "not as an interpretation of the text ..., but rather as a staging of a text".²⁰ In critiquing North American approaches to preaching, Martin Nicol more than anyone else profiled the model of "preaching as an event": "The sermon does not inform about events of faith, but rather is itself an event in which God through His Word draws humans into his healing reality."²¹

Instead over preaching 'about' a Biblical text, this involves "preaching from within the text", or more simply and concisely, "preaching in the text". Thus a sermon should not talk about consolation, but rather should itself console. The event of the sermon is the ostensible interpretive process, as opposed to the sermon only conveying the result of an already transpired process of interpretation.²²

The Bibliolog, it would seem to me, is related to this approach, insofar as it places the biblical text in the centre and stages its interpretation as a joint interpretation by the congregation. As a rule, a great variety of things happen for the participants during the Bibliolog. This can be taken up again in the follow-up to the Bibliolog as an explicit updating of the text, although this is not obligatory; things can also remain at the level of the individual discoveries of the subjects, what they will take for their lives from the encounter with the text. From a theological standpoint, this can be connected with the conviction that the revelation is never concluded, but rather is a constantly occurring and continuing process. The joint interpretation of the text that occurs here can lend a sense of clarity and gravitas to this permanent process of revelation. In the Jewish tradition there are two corresponding feasts related to the Torah: Shavuot is more strongly concentrated on the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai, while Simchat Torah recalls the existence of the Torah and the responsible interaction with it, including in the ever progressing interpretation.

4. The Role of the "Office"

That the role of the preacher changes with a Bibliolog should be clear at this point. The Bibliolog can be understood as the methodological implementation of the "Priesthood of all Believers". In reform terms, the task of annunciation is delegated to the officer holder out of purely functional concerns. It may potentially also be that this functional determination of the

²⁰ Henning Luther, Predigt als inszenierter Text. Überlegungen zur Kunst der Predigt, in: ThPr 18/1983, 89–100, 97.

²¹ Martin Nicol, Preaching from within. Homiletische Positionen aus Nordamerika, in: PTh 86/1997, 295–309, 300. Cf. also *ibid*, Einander ins Bild setzen. Dramaturgische Homiletik, Göttingen 2005, and Alexander Deeg/ibid, Im Wechselschritt zur Kanzel. Praxisbuch Dramaturgische Homiletik, Göttingen 2005.

²² Cf. Nicol, Preaching from within, 307.

annunciation duty is consistent with today's societal conditions, insofar as the person aids, structures, moderates and provides space for the congregation's interpretation, instead of executing it alone.

At this point, these reflections encounter Jewish traditions and convictions which relate the religious office more strongly to teaching and judgement, and which allow for a more important role for the congregation than long was case in Christianity, at least in a de facto sense.

The Bibliolog points Christianity and the Church toward certain lines of questioning that have always been entrusted to it for reflection, not least its understanding of truth. Above all else in the end it points out to Christianity and the Church its Jewish roots and traditions of a plurality-ready interaction with the Bible which Christianity has repressed over the course of centuries.

Because of all of these factors, the astoundingly rapid approval for the Bibliolog and its dissemination in Christian spheres of the German-speaking world is a joyous event in many regards. The problem has arisen however that the Bibliolog in the Jewish realm is perceived as something Christian, which has made its reception in Jewish communities problematic. Here it would be better if the Christian side would point even more clearly toward its Jewish roots. Should it succeed in helping the Bibliolog establish a stronger foothold in the Jewish sphere, then it could offer a chance to bring Jewish and Christian interpretations into conversation with one another on the methodological basis of the Bibliolog.