

**Bibliolog in times of crisis and on crisis texts**

**Lecture at the 5th. Bibliolog Congress 6.-8.5.2022**

**Topic „your heart shall live for ever... (Psalm 22:26)  
the Bible and the Bibliolog in times of crisis “**

Now that we have dealt first with the phenomenon of “crises“ in general from a psychological perspective and then with crises in the Bible, I now have the wonderful and, I think, also challenging task of considering with you how crises and Bibliolog relate to each other. Can the Bibliolog be helpful in times of personal or even social crises? Many who are familiar with the Bibliolog would probably answer this question intuitively in the affirmative because they have had experiences of people in difficult life situations of various kinds benefiting from participation in a Bibliolog. I would like to pursue such experiences and first consider how it can be explained that the encounter with texts that are quite old can help people in their current crises in the here and now. In a second step, I ask in what way the Bibliolog can be helpful in times of crisis before I conclude by looking at what this means for Bibliolog with “crises texts”.

**1. Why does the Bibliolog help in times of crisis?**

For the first question about explanatory models why the Bibliolog has chances to support, I will start a little more fundamentally with what constitutes the Bibliolog.

One of the fundamental assumptions when we teach and experience Bibliolog is the conviction that the ancient texts of the Bible have something to do with our lives today, even though there is a great historical and cultural gap between their textual world and our own. That and how the biblical texts can be meaningful for our lives over this gap is always fascinating – and obviously, this happens especially often in approaches such as Bibliolog (or also Bibliodrama), which creatively relate the texts and people today. On a theoretical level, this can be interpreted with insights from reception aesthetics. One of the most important theses is that people find meaning in texts when they fill its “blank spaces” with their own experiences.<sup>1</sup> Not only in the Bible, but in texts in general, we bring in ourselves with elements from our own life, says the literary scholar Wolfgang Iser. He calls the gaps– what a text does not say, called “white fire“ in the Bibliolog – the most important “switching element“<sup>2</sup> between a text and those who read it. We relate to the texts in a communicative process by filling their blank spaces ourselves with our respective experiences. Texts and people interpret each other according to this approach: People make sense of a text, and potentially, in the light of the text, understand themselves a little differently than before. As the experiences with which we bring ourselves in texts are different, the aesthetic reception approach also explains why people

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 284ff. and id., Die Appellstruktur der Texte, in: Warning, Rainer (Ed.): Rezeptionsästhetik. Theorie und Praxis, München 1975, 228-252, 236ff. Similar is also Eco, Umberto: Lector in Fabula. Die Mitarbeit der Interpretation in erzählenden Texten, München 1990, 63f.

<sup>2</sup> Iser, Akt des Lesens, 265f..

understand texts so differently. This leads to the ambiguity of biblical texts, which is particularly important to us in the Bibliolog – in this respect, it is also „a meaning“ that opens up to someone in the encounter with the text and not “the meaning” of the text.

In its view on the Bible, however, the Bibliolog goes one step further than reception aesthetics in its view on texts in general. According to Judeo-Christian conviction, the Bible is not a book like any other, but possesses a special quality. There are very different models for describing this quality. However, they all assume that biblical stories deal with existential themes and questions that affect people deeply. In this respect, it is not surprising that the Bible deals so intensively with crises of all kinds, as Katrin Brockmöller has impressively shown us. On the other hand, however, they are convinced that a third factor, in addition to text and people, plays a role in dealing with biblical texts, namely a divine one. This is because the spirit, as we call this divine greatness in the Christian tradition, blows where it wishes, as it is worded in John 3:8. According to Jewish and Christian convictions, God cannot be defined in humanly comprehensible categories, such as the appearance of God in the whisper of a breath of wind (instead of in earthquakes and fire) – as the story in 1 Kings 19:10-12 with Elijah as the protagonist shows.

According to Jewish and Christian beliefs, the participation of God in the encounter between people and biblical texts is not only aimed at understanding the text and certainly not only at a cognitive perception of the meaning of the text. It is always about the human being and about a change for his or her good. Because in the Jewish-Christian tradition, God cannot be thought of in a neutral way, in the sense that he:she created the world once, but then would not be interested in the fate of people afterwards. If we believe that love is a central divine characteristic, then this is always connected with the wish that the beloved beings are well and have a good life – and which is part of the truth – to suffer when that is not the case. In this respect, it is also not surprising that crises in biblical stories are often associated with overcoming them through action, but almost always at least with perspectives of hope, so that “our hearts shall live”, as it was said in the invitation to this congress. So, it is not surprising that the Bibliolog can support people in times of crises. This applies to personal crises, which on the one hand, probably all people know in one way or another and which, on the other hand, are much more severe for some people than for others. It also applies to social crises such as we are experiencing with the pandemic and now with the war in Ukraine – though the two dimensions cannot be separated, since people usually also feel such social crises personally.

## **2. How does the Bibliolog support people in crisis?**

But what does it mean more precisely that the Bibliolog can support people in times of crisis? This seems to me to be possible in different directions, which cannot be sharply separated, but perhaps show tendencies in which sometimes one and sometimes another one is more prominent. In addition, of course, every experience is always individual and usually cannot be precisely assigned to a particular direction – but that is not what it’s all about; it is about understanding a little more precisely how the Bibliolog can help in crises situations. These reflections are based, on the one hand, on practical theological considerations, especially in the field of pastoral care, and on the other hand on my experiences with the Bibliolog. I will add examples, also from the practice of Bibliolog, which I experienced or thought about in courses or in my own Bibliologs.

### **Variant 1: Interpreting the own crises in a larger context**

Pastoral psychology, in particular, has emphasised that it helps people in crises when they can interpret their personal life experiences in a larger context that transcends the here and now. The former pastoral psychologist from Kiel, Joachim Scharfenberg, saw this as an opportunity for biblical texts. They form a narrative space for human experiences (quotation) “in which ambivalences and conflicts can be resolved, expressed and processed in symbols. One’s own experience can then reconsolidate into a story that makes it possible to find meaning.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, when people find their personal crisis story in biblical texts and symbols, it does not remain just an individual fate but appears in a larger context. This does not solve the problem, and the pain does not disappear, but it can relieve and help to interpret oneself and one’s own difficult experiences in a bigger picture without levelling or de-personalising the own situation.

This can prevent the enlargement of the suffering by isolating oneself with one’s own crises as the only person hit by fate, and a feeling of isolation arises because no one can share and understand one’s own experiences. Sometimes the integration in a larger whole may even offer new possibilities of dealing with the crisis as it appears in a different light. “Reframing”, giving a new frame, is what systemic therapy calls it when the problem is re-examined in a different context, and a different way of dealing with it becomes possible through the change of perspective.

Such awareness can theoretically also grow if someone reads the Bible for him- or herself. However, it becomes more likely if one experiences a biblical text in a vivid, and life-relevant way in a Bibliolog. The roles offered are a special invitation to bring myself into a biblical text with my experiences – also with my stressful and strained ones – and to understand myself as part of its narrative context. In this respect, the Bibliolog can integrate a personal crisis into a larger context.

In concrete terms, this could mean, for example: In the second year of pandemic, many people suffered above all from the burdens and restrictions that did not want to end. What wore them down and led many people to depressive moods was the lack of perspective on how the situation could be improved, but above all: how they themselves could improve the situation – which had been different in the first phase of the pandemic, with the impression that the virus could be defeated through consistent compliance with the measures and solidarity (“we stand together”). In such a situation, a Bibliolog on the so-called “desert narratives” could possibly be helpful, in which the people have to stay for a much longer time than expected after their liberation from Egypt and suffer from this situation which seems to last forever. I think, for instance, of the narrative of Manna and Quail (Ex 16), where God says in verse 12: “I have heard the grumbling of my people”, or Ex 17:1-7, where the people blame Moses that they don’t reach the promised land and God then makes water leap out of the rock. Especially when a person from the people is asked in these texts what is particularly stressful in this situation, one’s own experiences can be integrated into the biblical narrative. The fact that these texts not only tell of a crisis but also of help in a crisis should, of course, be part of the Bibliolog.

In personal crises, which are determined by the fact that there is always another blow to come, or also in the current situation where people have the impression that they can no longer get out of crises mode with the sequence of pandemic and war, a Bibliolog on Job could possibly

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<sup>3</sup> Joachim Scharfenberg, *Pastoralpsychologie*, Göttingen<sup>2</sup>1990, 72.

have this effect. However, care should be taken that Job himself is not being questioned when he receives the news that his cattle and donkeys, as well as his sheep and camels have been stolen, and above all that his ten children have died in a desert storm and that he then also falls seriously ill because this bears the risk of leading even deeper into the crises. It makes more sense to ask a maid or one of his friends on the way to Job or when he meets him how she or he is moved in this situation. Own experiences and feelings can then be reflected indirectly, and in this way, their own story can be brought into the story of Job. It is, of course, also important here that the desperate situation does not end there, but that other perspectives are also shown in the Bibliolog – more on that below.

The second variant is related to this but has a different emphasis.

### **Variant 2: Sharing experiences in a protected setting**

Furthermore, it can be helpful in a situation of crises to be able to share one's own feelings and thoughts with other people. There are not always people who can bear this well and deal with it helpfully, and people are not always willing and able to put their thoughts and feelings into words. With its setting, the Bibliolog offers a special kind of protected framework in which people can share some of their painful experiences, well-dosed in different intensity and always at a certain distance.

Because the biblical text in which one moves is taken from a different time and a different context. I am not speaking as myself, but in a role that I have not even chosen – in a community of people who also identify with the same role. Ideally, I experience a secure and competent leader whom I can believe that every statement is okay and even valuable. My words will hopefully be received warmly and appreciatively in the echoing, and there will only be a question in the interviewing when it is appropriate for me. And the whole thing happens based on a tradition that has held and carried people of many generations. These are pretty good conditions for people to open up and also express stressful experiences in the roles. In this respect, it is not surprising that in the Bibliolog, there are every now and then utterances in which people are visibly moved, even to the point of tears. We then suspect that they are filling the biblical role with moving and stressful personal experiences without us necessarily knowing about it. Mostly unconsciously, people then take the opportunity to bring up and share their painful experiences in the group within this supporting framework and with the distance offered by the role. For this, it is probably helpful that they can decide for themselves whether they participate loudly and audibly or silently for themselves and how much they reveal of their biographical experiences if there is an opportunity to do so in a discussion after the Bibliolog, and how much of it remains private. And then, an open offer for talks is very helpful.

Here are two experiences: A few years ago, a person who leads a monthly Bibliolog group, told me that in a Bibliolog on the crossing of the red sea (Ex 15), an elderly lady not only burst into tears but also showed apparent physical symptoms of traumatisation. In the discussion that followed, she told the group that as a child, she had been one of the few survivors of the refugee ship "Gustlow", which was bombed in 1945, and that she had never spoken about it for decades. The leader of the Bibliolog was first unsure whether it was really helpful for her that this traumatic experience unexpectedly came up during a Bibliolog. But she told him some time later how valuable it was for her to address this traumatic experience in a protected setting after many decades.

I myself experienced in a Bibliolog course during a Bibliolog on a healing story of the Greek Bible that one participant in the role of a relative of the sick person was in tears while talking about the fact that there could certainly be no healing here. Still during the Bibliolog, he said that it had just turned out that there would be no real improvement for his disabled daughter, which they had hoped for because of a surgery. When I asked him what he needed now, he said that it felt good to express this pain in this setting and that we should just continue the Bibliolog.

Both experiences were positive for the participants concerned. Nevertheless, such constellations remain fragile and delicate, including possible re-traumatisation so that they should not be provoked – more on this later.

### **Variant 3: Experiencing consolation and hope in crisis**

Since crises are usually associated in the Bible with perspectives of consolation, hope, and often salvation, biblical texts can also provide productive impulses that are beneficial and comforting to people in their personal crises. The unique opportunity of Bibliolog lies in the identification with the biblical figures: In contrast to just talking about help in a crisis or even ways out of a crisis, in a Bibliolog this way can be experienced emotionally. In the field of practical theology, we speak of a “performative character”, which means that a new reality is set through a linguistic action (such as an apology or a blessing). This happens in the biblical role, but the beneficial experience in it can also console or strengthen one for the own personal situation. In this way, the tendency to reject the offered perspectives of hope, which arises from the feeling that they will not come true for oneself anyway, is also reduced because, in the biblical story, the positive impulse for the biblical figure becomes real. The trance allows one’s own reality to fade into the background for the duration of the Bibliolog so that there is a chance to engage with the perspective of hope, at least in the role, and thus to experience at least a little of it for oneself.

A Bibliolog on Elijah at Horeb (1 Kings 19:1-8) is ideal for such an experience.

Elijah is threatened with death by Queen Jezebel after killing several prophets of Baal. Elijah flees. He leaves his servant in the city of Beersheba and walks alone – away from the human settlements.

*(Verses 4-8; English Standard Version): He himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness. He came to a broom bush, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. “I have had enough, LORD”, he said. “Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors. Then he lay down under the bush and fell asleep. All at once an angel touched him and said, “Get up and eat.” He looked around, and there by his head was some bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again. The angel of the LORD came back a second time and touched him and said, “Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you.” So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he travelled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God.*

In this scene, there are different possibilities of roles that can explore the narrative and be helpful for people in crises situation at the same time. When Elijah is asked about his first reaction when he is touched by the Messenger and he hears: “Get up and eat”, unbelieving or defensive reactions are possible (from “leave me alone everyone” to “now, I am hallucinating too”), but these are probably already relativised within this role by other utterances. If Elijah is then asked what it is like for him to eat the toasted bread and drink the water from the jar,

or also what it is like to go back to sleep after this meal, then an inner change is not unlikely. An impulse of hope could be experienced even more clearly with the question: "Elijah, you have regained your strength through the food – how does it feel now to walk the long way to the mountain of God with these new strengths?" A change of perspective into the role of the messenger could also be helpful, for example, with the question: "What goes through your mind and heart when you touch Elijah and say these words to him?"

That it does not make sense to ask why Elijah wishes for death (even in the wording of what makes him wish for death), even though this can certainly be psychologically interesting (especially after he himself has killed), should be even more evident now in the light of people in life crises than otherwise. I think this is a good example that not necessarily the question to which one would actually like to get answers are useful in the Bibliolog – and should be postponed even more when considering pastoral dimensions. A specific group setting with the agreement that it is possible to address deeper personal issues can be an exception.

If the text is about strengthening in a crisis, the stories of the Bible often also tell of overcoming crises through divine intervention – for example, by ending starvation with the giving of the manna and quails in Ex 16 or by the multiplication of loaves and fishes narrated in Mk 6:30-44 and 8:1-10; Mt 15:32-39 as well as Jn 6:1-14.

Here it may be worth asking first for the reaction to the dialogue between Jesus and his disciples. After the disciples in Mk 6 suggest to Jesus to send the people away to get their food, perhaps a young person sitting far in the front hears Jesus say: *"You give them something to eat". And they say to him: „Shall we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give it to them to eat?" But he says to them: How many loaves do you have? Go and see!" And when they found out, they say: "Five and two fishes". And he commanded them all to sit down in groups on the green grass."* And the young person is asked:

"You are the young person, let's call her Rhode. Rhode, what is your first reaction to what you have just heard with your good ears?"

Of course, it is also possible to ask someone of Jesus' surrounding here. After it is said in verse 42: "And they all ate and were satisfied", Rhode or another person could be asked again, e.g., with the question: "What does it feel like now that you have eaten all this food?" This would give a possibility to express doubts about how realistic it is to overcome a crisis, and then it would have been experienced once, as an example, what it is like to feel sated – literally as well as figuratively.

#### **Variant 4: Suggestions and ideas for dealing with crisis**

Apart from emotions such as consolation and hope, a Bibliolog can sometimes also provide concrete ideas on how to deal with one's own crisis differently than before. On the one hand, these can come from the biblical text itself, in which the biblical figures do something different from what one has done so far. However, such impulses can also be gained from statements from participants, which happens in my impression even more often. Of course, this cannot be planned but it can be encouraged by questions that allow a very different way of dealing with a difficult situation (provided, of course, that the biblical text allows such ambiguity and does not tell afterwards how the acting persons really deal with the situation).

I choose Ruth 1 as an example of a text that can stimulate an impulse for a different way of dealing with things. The classic alternatives in relationship or job crises, "leave or stay", become explicit in the confrontation between Orpah and Ruth, not only as two equally

legitimate possibilities but also in two variants in each case. In contrast to classical Christian reception, which has portrayed the “loyalty” of Ruth to her mother-in-law in combination with her departure from her homeland as the better behaviour, the key sentence in Ruth 1:14 says without any judgement (after Naomi has asked both of them clearly not to follow her): “Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.” When both Ruth and Orpah are asked in the Bibliolog about their motives for their decision and / or their feeling about it, it can become clear that a behaviour different to what is usually felt to be right can also be legitimate – especially since there is a sense of departure and loyalty in both variants: Orpah says goodbye to the family and is faithful to her origins, and Ruth leaves her homeland and stays with her mother-in-law. If, finally, Naomi is asked about her thoughts and feeling, in my experience, her view of the daughter-in-law is not clear either: Kind words could be found for Orpah as well as Ruth can be experienced as a burden or at least her presence as ambivalent.

In a completely different way, a Bibliolog on Acts 16, 23-24 could provide inspiration for dealing with crises. The text is about Paul and Silas in Philippi, who get in trouble with the authorities after Paul orders the spirit of divination of a maid to go out because he has annoyed him too much:

*23 And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. 24 Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks. 25 About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. (English Standard Version / ESV)*

Hymns in prison, feet in the stocks... an astonishing way of dealing with a crisis that could possibly be called a “paradoxical intervention”, which can be found in systematic therapy and pastoral care. My recommendation would be not to question Paul or Silas immediately at this point – not only because the hurdle is quite high then, but also because it is very difficult to empathise with the gloomy situation and the surprising way of dealing with it at the same time. Recently, I, therefore, asked a fellow prisoner, whom I called Junia, as my first role:

Junia, for whatever reason you have ended up here in prison and for however long you have been here, you now wake up from your sleep at midnight hearing your two new fellow prisoners singing and praising God in their songs. What does that do to you?

Then the change of perspective followed:

While Junia is still lost in her thoughts, Paul and Silas continue to sing continuously. You are now Silas. Silas, what makes you praise God here in the specially guarded part of the prison, without being able to move your feet?

### **3. What should be considered while dealing with “crises texts“?**

Four variants on how participation in a Bibliolog can help in crises, with examples of how it could work. Is the Bibliolog, therefore, a suitable instrument for dealing with crises, is it recommended for crisis intervention, so to speak? Certainly not, for several reasons.

On the one hand, what always applies in a Bibliolog and is particularly evident in schools and in the context of community pedagogics, also applies to crises: As the one leading the Bibliolog, I set the framework and guide the perception through the selections of scenes, roles and questions, but it is up to the group what will become the focus and in what intensity. Whether awareness of crisis is at the centre of attention or the participants interpret the text in a

completely different way is up to them – as the one leading through a Bibliolog, we respectfully echo whatever they discover in the text and whatever they want to express, without judging (not even as “still a bit shallow” or “they didn’t really dare to approach the topics”). If I have the impression that topics that seem obvious to me in the text do not emerge, this can be a motivation to check where my questions have led the perception – and otherwise to accept that the participants make of it.

Conversely, however, as the one leading through a Bibliolog, I always have to consider which text, with which scenes, roles and questions, it is likely to evoke crises experiences and in what context I can justify and endure this with which probability. The first time the question arises with the choice of the text with the principle “avoid text of error”: Texts that already clearly address traumatic experiences are not a good basis for a Bibliolog. If it is sometimes mentioned in courses that extremely violent texts of the Bible should not be avoided, this is true, but it does not mean that it should be the topic of a Bibliolog. In the case of narratives about sexualised violence, for example, it seems to me that, because of the large number of people who have their own traumatic experiences in this field, it is not responsible to consciously address them in a framework that specifies its content and goal as the engagement with a biblical text. In one of the first online Bibliolog around Eastern 2020, I actually once participated in a Bibliolog on the crucifixion of Jesus and felt very confirmed that this is not an appropriate text for a Bibliolog, even if no experience of crisis became public. The fact that the Bibliolog can be helpful in life crises does not mean that we are blindly confronting participants with their experiences of crisis without an appropriate agreement.

However, there are also texts that are possible for a Bibliolog, but should be treated carefully. With some texts, it is a question of the audience. The story of Moses in the Reed Sea is not a suitable text, especially for young adults, because the experience of losing a child, often before it is born, is just as likely as the worry of losing a child. In other age groups, however, the text is certainly possible if care is taken in the choice of roles.

For the choice of scenes, roles and questions, the caution that applies to every Bibliolog should be intensified even more in the case of a biblical “crisis text”. Which question applies to which perspective? Generally, it should be avoided to question biblical figures who do not survive the further action. I once experienced that a child was asked who was watching Noah build the ark, which had the effect that the identification with the perspective of being saved, which is suggested by the text, barely existed, and the text became a story of destruction. If roles are created in such a way that stressful feelings seem likely, they should be chosen neither as the first nor the last role, and it should only be one. I once experienced a Bibliolog on the healing at the lake Bethesda (John 5), in which we were asked as the sick person first, what it is like to be sick for 38 years and never be the first in the water. Then we were a relative of him. And then we were asked again as the sick person, how he says that no one carries him into the healing water and finally, the stretcher of the sick person became a role that is no longer needed. No one had any healing experiences afterwards.

Of course, not every Bibliolog must end joyfully. Even the biblical stories do not all end well, and many do not end at all, but rather remain open. But there are almost always perspectives of help, of hope, of the prospect of positive change, for the very reason that the texts are about the relationship with a loving God who wants the best for his creation and his people. If we lead the perception of the participants in a Bibliolog to these perspectives without suppressing the suffering in crises, we correspond equally to texts and to the participants in their desire for healing perspectives – what more do we want in a Bibliolog?