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# In the Cobra's back

## Why it would perhaps be better to read the Bible as literature *

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*Reading the Bible as literature*
*breaks down any bridge between text and practice – that is true.*
*It may, however, teach the reader to swim.*

## *1. Why would anybody put a venomous snake on his head? A short excursion into the history of religion*

The cobra is a very dangerous animal. Her poison is lethal. If the cobra bites you, you are doomed to death. Of course, old Egyptians knew that. Still, the Egyptian king[1] is depicted with the uraeus, a cobra in the state of aggression, at his forehead in a vast number of reliefs, statues, and paintings (conf. figure 1 below). Usually, we tend to flee any being which might be dangerous and may even threaten our life, but not so the Egyptian king. Instead of fleeing from the cobra, he's looking to get close to it. He puts the venomous snake on his head. He puts it on his chest and even bears it at the belt of his royal loincloth (view figure 2 below). And the cobra is always depicted in the state of aggression: upright, menacing with flared neck, ready to attack. In many cases, the cobra is not just located at the forehead of the king, but its body covers the whole top of the king's head (conf. figure 2 and 3 below).

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* This article is the extended English version of a previously published German text: Joachim KÜGLER, Im Rücken der Kobra. Warum es vielleicht besser wäre, die Bibel als Literatur zu lesen, in: id./ E. Souga Onomo/ S. Feder (Eds.), Bibel und Praxis. Beiträge des Internationalen Bibel-Symposiums 2009 in Bamberg (bfT 11), Berlin: Lit 2011, pp. 105-132.

1 I avoid labeling the Egyptian king as "pharaoh", as this expression (deriving from Egyptian *pr ʕ*, "great house" = palace) was only used as title of the king in Late Egyptian time.

For most of us, wearing a dangerous snake on our head would be quite an uncomfortable idea, but in the case of the king, there is logic in his close relationship to this dangerous animal.

Of course even the king has to soothe the aggressiveness of the dangerous snake with special songs and incense offerings, but neither the snake's poison nor her fire-emitting eyes can really harm the king.

Modern people would perhaps think that the reason for that lies in the fact that the cobra at the forehead of the king is, of course, not alive but just an artificial piece of art. This explanation would, however, be simply too modern and a sheer anachronism. Of course, pieces of art in modern cultures are mostly understood as mere aesthetic signs. Egyptian icons, images, and even Scripture, however, are much more. They have a kind of sacramental character. Egyptian pieces of art and also Egyptian Scripture are performative signs. They not only show something, but do something. Signs create reality; they are not just depicting it or pointing to it. That's why people in old Egypt would not have made a big difference between a depicted cobra and a living one. Both are dangerous. The uraeus at the forehead or at the chest of the king does not just depic the bodily shape of a dangerously powerful being, but it shapes a body in which the powerful being can inhabit.[2] Therefore an artificial cobra is as dangerous as a natural one. So the reason why the king does not fear the cobra lying on his head cannot be found in the fact that it is only an artificial one. The real reason is that he is on the right side, which means in the cobra's back.The snake is not looking at him, but is facing the same direction as the king. That means that any person who encounters the king get s in front of the dangerous cobra at the same time. Any potential opponent of the king will immediately be intimated. So it is precisely the dangerous quality of the cobra that gives effective protection to the king and adds to his power. When he bears the cobra at his forehead, the king shares the dangerous power of the cobra. He himself also shows "cobraness" and the message is clear: The king is also mighty, powerful and dangerous! One had better not be his enemy! He is as dangerous as a cobra as he has the power to kill like the cobra. From that perspective, the cobra is only dangerous for those who get in front of the king, but for the king himself the cobra is not dangerous but helpful. It increases his power and protects him. In this logic of using

[2] As to the Egyptian understanding of signs see: Jan ASSMANN, Stein und Zeit. Mensch und Gesellschaft im alten Ägypten, München 1991, pp. 88-90: 88.

the cobra as an apotropaic means one even can say: the more dangerous the cobra, the better!

This apotropaic use of the cobra had a religious dimension from the beginning.[3] Due to her dangerous power, the cobra was regarded as a divine being. Because in the understanding of Egyptian culture and religion, power in itself is something divine, it is clear that an animal which is so powerful that it can destroy life must be a divine phenomenon.[4]

Furthermore the apotropaic symbolism surrounding the cobra has been theologically rationalised since oldest time. Already in the Pyramid Texts[5] of the Old Kingdom (ca. 2700-2200 BCE) a kind of uraeus theology the can be found. The snake is interpreted by the royal theology[6] as the eye of the sun god, but it can also be related to several (mostly feminine) deities.[7] The cobra can often be found in combination with a vulture. A very famous example for this combination is the well-known gold mask of Tut-ankh-Amun (conf. figure 3 below). The combination of cobra and vulture refers to the two crown goddesses of Egypt, namely Nekhbet, the crown goddess of Upper Egypt who appears in the shape of a vulture and Uto, the crown goddess of Lower Egypt who appears in cobra shape. The combination of Nekhbet with Uto shows the king as

3 Cf. Manfred LURKER, Lexikon der Götter und Symbole der alten Ägypter. Handbuch der mystischen und magischen Welt Ägyptens, Darmstadt 1987, pp. 218 f.; and also: Karl MARTIN, Art. „Uräus“, in: Lexikon der Ägyptologie VI, col. 864-868.

4 It plays no role at all that the power of the cobra is a destructive one. There is no “ethics” for deities in Egyptian religion. The only important point is their power. A powerful being which is harmful and destructive can be as much divine as a friendly and helpful one.

5 The Pyramid Texts (PT) are a collection of religious texts written on the inner walls of royal pyramids (esp. 5th-6th dynasty). Classical edition: Kurt SETHE, Die altägyptischen Pyramidentexte, 6 vol., Leipzig 1908-1922; reprint: Hildesheim 1969. A small selection in English can be found with Miriam LICHTHEIM, Ancient Egyptian Literature, Vol. I: The Old and Middle Kingdoms, Berkeley 1975, pp. 29-50.

6 The expression “royal theology” does not only mean the conception of the divine role of the king (usually labeled as “royal ideology”). I mean the entire Egyptian theology which originated in the context of the Egyptian kingship and was characterized by an understanding of the royal state as *sacramentum salutis*.

7 Prominent are Hathor, Bastet and Sakhmet, but also minor deities are connected with the Uraeus, e.g. the friendly goddess Renenutet, who protects harvest and guarantees food supply. Cf. Christine BEINLICH-SEEBER, Art. „Renenutet“, in: Lexikon der Ägyptologie V, col. 232-236). Even Amun, the king of the gods, can embody in cobra shape (cf. Mohammed EL-SAGHIR, Das Statuenversteck im Luxortempel, Mainz 1992, pp. 52-54 with fig. 110-113).

incorporation of the two goddesses and as the one who unifies Upper and Lower Egypt through his powerful reign. In this manner, the uraeus is part of a larger performance which shows the king as *nṯr nfr* ("visible[8] God") who has power over life and death.

We can easily imagine that this "God on earth" impressed his subjects a lot. A literary testimony can be found in the Sinuhe novel, one of the classical texts of Egyptian literature: The novel tells the story of Sinuhe, a high-ranking court official who was involved in a failing coup d'état against Amenemhat I and had to flee. He finds a new and successful life abroad, but is later called back to his home country by the new king (Sesostris I).[9] Full of fear, Sinuhe encounters the king at court:

> When it dawned, very early, they came to summon on me. Ten men came and ten men went to usher me into the palace. My forehead touched the ground between the sphinxes, and the royal children stood in the gateway to meet me. The courtiers who usher through the forecourt set me on the way to the audience-hall. I found his majesty on the great throne in a kiosk of gold. **Stretched out on my belly, I did not know myself before him, while this god greeted me pleasantly. I was like a man seized by darkness. My ba** [= kind of soul] **was gone, my limbs trembled; my heart was not in my body, I did not know life from death**.[10]

Even when friendly, the divine king scares his subject to death, but he is soothed by a song of the king's children:

> Your hands upon the radiance, eternal king,
> Jewels of heaven's mistress!
> The Gold gives life to your nostrils,
> The Lady of Stars enfolds you!
> Southcrown fared north, northcrown south,
> Joined, united by your majesty's word.
> **While the Cobra decks your brow,**
> You deliver the poor from harm.

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8 The semantic range of *nfr* is very broad. Basically the word means something that is well defined. By being defined a thing is perfect, good, beautiful, and visible. I prefer the translation "visible" as it refers to the main difference between the king and other deities: He is the visible representative of those other gods who cannot be seen – at least not by ordinary Egyptians – but are present through the king.

9 The origins of this text are dated to the 20th century BCE (12th dynasty), but the novel was copied again and again in the New Kingdom since it had the status of a classical text. Cf. William K. SIMPSON, Art. „Sinuhe", Lexikon der Ägyptologie V, col. 950-955; also Erik HORNUNG (Ed.), Gesänge vom Nil. Dichtung am Hofe der Pharaonen, München 1990, pp. 181-184.

10 Cf. LICHTHEIM, Ancient Egyptian Literature I, p. 231 (**bold** writing and explanation [in brackets] by JK).

Peace to you from Re, Lord of Lands!
Hail to you and the Mistress of All!
Slacken your bow; lay down your arrow,
**Give breath to him who gasps for breath!**
Give us our good gift on this good day,
Grant us the son of northwind, Bowman born in Egypt!
/.../ He left the land in dread of you!
**A face that sees you shall not pale,**
**Eyes that see you shall not fear!**[11]

Of course the cobra is not the only factor that makes the king so impressive, but it is an important part of the royal appearance which is meant to communicate a clear message: there is a fundamental gap between the king and his subjects. The king is the shepherd and his subjects are his flock. The human shepherds, by being human, are different from their flocks that consists of animals; and in the same way, the king, being a divine shepherd, differs from his flock that consists of mere human beings. As a powerful being, the king belongs to the family of the gods and represents the other powerful members of this family on earth.[12] This is the reason why encountering the king is always an intimidating and extremely scary experience; It means encountering the supreme power of the gods: Fascinosum et tremendum!

## 2. *The Christians' magical Uraeus: how the Bible is used as a fetish*

Already a superficial look at how the Bible is used in World Christianity can teach us that the Bible is often used as something like a Christian uraeus. Like the Egyptian cobra the Holy Scripture is a powerful sacred thing. The majority of global Christianity looks upon the Bible as God's revelation.

[11] Cf. LICHTHEIM, Ancient Egyptian Literature I, p. 232 (**bold** writing by JK).

[12] Cf. Joachim KÜGLER, Willenlose Schafe? Zur Ambivalenz des Bildes vom Guten Hirten, in: W. H. Ritter/ J. Kügler (Eds.), Gottesmacht: Religion zwischen Herrschaftsbegründung und Herrschaftskritik (bfT 4), Münster: Lit 2006, pp. 9-34; esp. 11-20.

The Word of God; the Bible is eternal, infallible, and unchangeable and requires unconditional obedience. The sacredness of the Bible, however, does not necessarily lead to people actually reading it.[13]

Sometimes reading the holy text is even the last thing that comes to mind, as its content is not always regarded as the most important aspect when it comes to a sacred text.

This has to do with the fact that a sacred book is looked upon as something that has the power to cause certain effects by itself. Sacred books are something like an embodiment of the divine.

That is why sacred books easily lend themselves to be used as a kind of fetish. This makes the sheer materiality of the book more important than the content of the text of this book. Of course, content and book belong together because if the text of the Bible were not inside the book, the book itself would not be sacred. But on the other hand, it's not necessary to read a sacred book; you can also use it without even opening it. The book is simply a sacred thing with a large magical potential.When the Bible is used as a magic tool, it becomes part of the large and universal tradition of fetish religion.[14] I only want to give some examples on how things work if the Bible is used as fetish.

In Cameroon – as Eric Souga Onomo states – there is a ritual called *faire la Bible* (= "to do the Bible"). This ritual is done in order to get (more or less) supernatural information on important things of daily life. One can use this ritual to learn if your wife is betraying you, or who stole from the common money box, or whose witchcraft is causing your bad luck.[15]

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[13] Cf. Joachim KÜGLER, Der ungelesene Bestseller oder Warum man die Bibel nicht lesen muss, in: id./ W. H. Ritter (Eds.), Auf Leben und Tod oder völlig egal. Kritisches und Nachdenkliches zur Rolle der Bibel (bfT 3), Münster: Lit 2005, pp. 123-136.

[14] Cf. Gerardus van der LEEUW, Phänomenologie der Religion, Tübingen [4]1977, pp. 19-27. I do not share, however, van der Leeuw's differentiation between fetish and amulet, as in my point of view this leads to underestimating the significance of amulets. Cf. Thomas STAUBLI, Amulette ... am roten Faden der Geschichte, in: Welt und Umwelt der Bibel, pp. 2-7; also: Christian HERRMANN/ Thomas STAUBLI (Eds.), 1001 Amulett. Altägyptischer Zauber, monotheistische Talismane, säkulare Magie, Stuttgart: Kath. Bibelwerk 2010.

[15] Cf. Joachim KÜGLER, Hände weg!? Warum man die Bibel nicht lesen sollte ... und warum doch, Würzburg: Echter 2008, p. 38.

Obvious Vengeyi reports[16] that the Bible in Zimbabwe is often seen as a weapon which not only conquers the power of the devil but any problem, be it poverty, disease, HIV/AIDS or others. Any negative power is overwhelmed by the power of God which is inherent in the Bible.

Some believers sleep with the Bible under their head; and in West Africa people also put the Bible into the beds of small children to protect them against the harmful influence of evil spirits. To sleep on or with the Bible is said to attract sweet dreams and to protect against evil or scary ones.

The Bible is also used for exorcisms during which it is laid on the head of the patient. Some exorcists even "go as far as beating the head of the sick with the Bible"[17].

Many Zimbabwean Pentecostals put the Bible into their car to receive an effective protection against accidents. Many believers will never make a trip with their car without having the Bible in it.

Western readers might tend to mock such magical, superstitious conceptions.[18] Before doing so, they should remember that fetish use of the Bible is also common in the European tradition.

Of course, Catholic liturgy always knew that you can do much more with the Bible than just read it. For example, you can decorate it with gold and diamonds, you can carry it around in ceremonial processions, you can offer incense to it, you can kiss it, you can lay it on the head of somebody or kneel down in front of it.[19]

And even beyond liturgy, the Bible is used as a sacred object: if, for example, somebody lays his hand on the Bible to swear on it, it is not important at all whether this person reads or understands the Bible. It is even better not to read it in that context. Imagine what could happen if you opened the Bible and started reading it and came to the Gospel of Matthew where you would be told that swearing should be avoided alto-

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16 Obvious VENGEYI, 'The Bible equals Gona'. An analysis of the Indigenous Pentecostal Churches of Zimbabwe's magical conception of the Bible, in this volume pp. 80-107, here: pp. 103-109; see also: Lovemore TOGARASEI, The Use of the Bible in HIV and AIDS Contexts. Case study of some Pentecostal churches in Botswana, in this volume, pp. 19-37, here: p. 21.

17 VENGEYI, 'The Bible equals Gona', p. 89.

18 Even the word „fetish" (deriving from portuguese feitiço for „witchcraft, sorcery"; cf. LEEUW, Phänomenologie, p. 20), was originally meant to be a pejorative. Like van der Leeuw, I also use it, however, in a neutral phenomenological sense.

19 Cf. KÜGLER, Der ungelesene Bestseller, p. 127.

gether (cf. 5:33-37) – that would be quite awkward in the context of a public swearing ceremony.[20]

Of course, the use of the Bible as a fetish is much more readily found in those denominations that belong to the Protestant family and therefore assign a supreme status to the Bible according to the Lutheran principle of 'Sola Scriptura.' A Catholic bus driver in Ecuador, for example, would certainly not put the Bible into his bus. He would prefer to decorate his windscreen with stickers of powerful Madonnas or the Divino Niño ("Divine Child"). His pentecostal boss – and the combination of social status and denomination is not incidental! – would instead prefer to put the Bible into his car as he, as a born again Christian, of course deeply rejects the veneration of Saints as a pagan act. Both of them, however, protect themselves against the unforeseeable risks of the street jungle with the help of a powerful object. The form of this object is different due to their different denominations, but their purpose is the same and therefore the function of the object they use is also the same.

In either case, one would hope that the confidence in the powerful protection these sacred objects are believed to provide would not rule out careful and responsible driving. But this is precisely what is often is the case, whether the sacred object is the Bible or the Virgin of Quinche. This occurs because the fetish religion is usually not interested in ethics. Fetish religion belongs to the huge realm of votive religion[21], which is usually fully concentrated on securing the welfare of the individual person by means of a powerful blessing.

Somebody who uses the Bible as a protective means for driving his car is not very interested in the ethical dimensions of the Christian message, at least not any more than somebody who offers candles in holy places like Lourdes, Fatima or Guadalupe for the sake of his/her ill grandchild. To avoid any misunderstanding, one has to say that of course somebody who uses fetish religion may also try to lead his/her personal life in accordance with the high standards of Christian ethics. I just want to stress that within the context of fetish religion, ethics are not relevant. Even a pious Mafioso can use amulets of powerful Madonnas. And, to use an extreme case, a professional contract killer, knowing that he is doing a dangerous job, might use the Bible as a protective fetish.

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20 Cf. KÜGLER, Hände weg!?, p. 38.

21 For ancient cultures cf. Walter BURKERT, Antike Mysterien. Funktionen und Gehalt, München $^{3}$1994, p. 19-34.

## 3. "Even the Bible says ..." – How the Bible is used as the ideological Uraeus of Christianity

The magical use of the Bible as a powerful sacred object clearly shows the same structures as the apotropaic use of the cobra (and other items/ images) in Old Egypt. This is what makes it so interesting and attractive for a historical comparative analysis. But the history of religion and theology are not the same and from a theological point of view, the magical use of the Bible is not the most interesting as it is not the most dangerous.

Magic as a simple form of personal religion is usually very closely linked to the individual life of a person; a major potential of violence is only rarely linked to it. As mentioned above, the fetish use of the Bible is usually not normative and in itself ethically neutral.

Much more dangerous is the use of the Bible as uraeus when it is linked to *reading* the Bible and therefore exhibiting "Cobraness" on a *semantic* level. This is the case in a power oriented use of the Bible as canonical text. In Christian communities the Bible is usually both a sacred text as well as a canonical text. This is not the same. While sacredness is linked to magic and cult, canon is linked to corporate identity, delimitation, and organization of power. Canonical texts are primarily powerful instruments of groups and only in second line power tools of individuals. Canonical texts have a specific message which serves to build up collective memory and corporate identity.[22] Canon propagates the norms and formative values of the specific community and in this manner influences the thinking and acting of the individual members of the group. That is how canonical texts create a link between individual identity and collective identity. That means that canonical texts always have a clear ethical dimension, which of course is even more true of the biblical canon which contains large parts of outspokenly normative texts.

The origin of the canon is usually connected to the process of constituting collective identity by delimitation. Once a canon is constituted, it continues to exercise this function of delimitation. In the case of the

[22] On the realation between canon building and corporate identity cf. Aleida ASSMANN/ Jan ASSMANN (Ed.), Kanon und Zensur. Archäologie der literarischen Kommunikation II, München 1987; Jan ASSMANN, Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen, München 1992, pp. 87-129.

biblical canon, it goes first against "the peoples" in order to constitute the identity of "Israel"[23] and later it goes against the "pagans" (lat.: pagani, i.e. those living at the countryside) to constitute the identity of "Christians" (living in the cities). The biblical canon, like any canon, does not stop its delimitative function once the corporate identity is established, but continues to delimitate – now within the group. The canon originates out of semantic polarization, but it does not finish this polarization. On the contrary, the canon fosters continuous polarization. This is highly precarious as there is a rather straight way from delimitation to elimination.

> Denn wir können und müssen eine historische Linie aufzeigen, die von der Scheidung zwischen dem Kanonischen und dem Apokryphen (zunächst nur ein Wertakzent zwischen dem Wesentlichen und dem Unwesentlichen) zur Trennung zwischen Orthodoxie und Häresie, also nicht nur Eigenem und Fremdem, sondern Freund und Feind geführt hat. Mit der Richtschnur des Kanons, nicht mehr nur auf Gegenstände und Sachverhalte, sondern auf Menschen angewandt, hat man immer wieder über Sein und Nichtsein, über Leben und Tod entschieden.[24]

> We can and must point to a historical line which leads from the difference between the canonical and the apocryphal (which in the beginning was only an evaluative accent between the essential and non-essential) to the separation between orthodoxy and heresy, i.e. not only between 'self' and 'other' but between friend and foe. With the canon as guideline-now not only applied to objects and concepts, but applied to human beingstime and again decisions to be or not to be, decisions about life and death were made.[25]

It is of course not simply the canon itself which showed this eliminative, lethal power against non-believers, sinners and heretics. Just as the uraeus needs the king to function as an apotropaic sign, the biblical canon also needs a group of users to show off its separating effect. This group of users was rarely the church as a whole. During a major part of church history the canon was in the hands of certain groups within the church. That seems inevitable because the biblical canon, like any canon, needs interpretation. As the text in itself cannot be changed anymore, a canonical text needs interpretation in order not to lose its relevance for

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[23] Cf. Klaus BIEBERSTEIN, Grenzen definieren. Israels Ringen um Identität, in: J. Kügler (Ed.), Impuls oder Hindernis? Mit dem Alten Testament in multireligiöser Gesellschaft. Beiträge des Internationalen Bibel-Symposions Bayreuth 27.-29. September 2002 (bfT 1), Münster: Lit 2004, pp. 59-72.

[24] ASSMANN, Gedächtnis, p. 125.

[25] English translation by JK.

contemporary life. That's why the biblical canon always required a group of skilled experts which concentrated on the interpretation of the canonical text. With the existence of this group of experts, the canon fosters separation within the community whose identity it is defining. The more the interpretational work of these experts is needed, the more their power grows within the community. The experts for the canonical text have the power of interpretation and are therefore delimitated from those who lack that power.

In church history, the line between the powerful interpreters and powerless recipients is often identical with the line between clergy and lay people. There was also a clear gender bias as the status of clergy was strictly reserved for men only (as is still the case in many churches all over the world – also in Africa). Those who have power decide on the interpretation of the formative texts and by doing so gain more power.[26] The authorized interpreters carry the Bible as a uraeus at their forehead.

Comparing the use of the Bible by its privileged interpreters with the use of the cobra by the Egyptian king implies that the power of the Bible was only used against others and that the users of this power at the same time avoided being confronted with it themselves. This clearly goes against how the clergy wants to see themselves. Christian theologians and church leaders always understand themselves not only as preaching the gospel but also as listening to the biblical message.

I nevertheless think that the comparison with the cobra is quite convincing as it is a fact that despite the humble self-understanding of the clergy, the Bible was almost always read in a way that legitimized the power of the powerful. Those who read it in a way that might have threatened this power were eliminated. And this even seems inevitable. One has to read the Bible in a very specific way if one wants to legitimize anti-judaism, crusades, slavery, the burning of heretics, racism, and the exploitation of the poor. With love towards the enemy (Mat 5:44) and strict non-violence (Mat 5:39), one cannot easily do that.

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[26] Therefore the reading of the Bible (and sometimes even owning one) was strictly forbidden to lay persons during long times of church history. Those who referred to the Bible against the clergy often had to pay with their life, as can be seen in the case of Peter Waldo (ca. 1140 CE – ca. 1218 CE). Cf. Peter SEGL, Auf Leben und Tod! Bibel und Ketzer im Mittelalter, in: J. Kügler/ W. H. Ritter (Eds.), Auf Leben und Tod oder völlig egal. Kritisches und Nachdenkliches zur Rolle der Bibel (bfT 3), Münster: Lit 2005, pp. 25-48, esp. 42-46.

> How wreckless and unscrupulous the Christian experts were in subjugating the biblical texts to their own intentions can easily be seen from what they did for example with Luke 19:27. Ulrich Berner refers to Humbert de Romanis, who was a General of the Dominican order in the 13th century. At the Council of Lyon (1277) he argued against Christian pacifists by pointing out that Jesus himself used violence against his enemies. He quotes: "As for my enemies who did not want me for their king, bring them here and execute them in my presence" (Luke 19:27 NJB), intentionally ignoring that in the text it is not Jesus who speaks these words, but a fictional king within the framework of a parable narrated by Jesus. These 'minor' details had to be left aside in order to win Jesus as the ultimate authority for the use of violence by the church and the Christian state.[27]

Unfortunately, using the Bible as an ideological uraeus is not merely a historical phenomenon. Taking the Bible as an ideological fetish continues to this day. Of course the users of the cobra have changed. Clergy means something different in African Initiated Churches than it meant in catholic medieval church. Also, the use of the biblical text by Christian politicians in public debates is something quite new, a kind of lay-theology which the medieval church didn't know. In postmodern times everyone is his/her own pope and anyone can take over the role of Grand Inquisitor, if she/he wants to.[28] But whoever is wearing the biblical uraeus nowadays, the fundamental apotropaic structure didn't change: take good care that the cobra threatens and frightens only the others and never bites its user. Therefore, the biblical message must be read and interpreted in a highly selective way in order to make sure that in the end the divine word strengthens one's own position and endangers that of the others.

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[27] Cf. Ulrich BERNER, Die Bibel in der mittelalterlichen Diskussion um Ketzer und Muslime, in: J. Kügler/ W. H. Ritter (Eds..), Auf Leben und Tod oder völlig egal. Kritisches und Nachdenkliches zur Rolle der Bibel (bfT 3), Münster: Lit 2005, pp. 11-24, esp. 17 f.

[28] Since the New Kingdom there is a similar phenomenon in Egypt: the cobra could then be used as an apotropaic amulet (cf. figure 4) by non-royal persons also. Cf. Anna STEVENS, Domestic religious practices, UC Los Angeles: UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology 2009, pp. 9.11.17 and 20. [URL: http://escholarship.org/uc/item/7s07628w].

> To give only one example, which is now very well documented[29]: In the Zimbabwean debate on homosexuality one can often find the wording "even the Bible says"[30]. The little word "even" is very important and very meaningful in this context. It indicates that those who say that knew what is right and what is wrong before they were reading the Bible. To find a legitimation for one's own view in the Bible is a second step: Look, even the Bible is against homosexuals! One's own position (views, concepts, attitudes and values) is usually derived from non-biblical sources like family tradition, education, culture, dominant societal mainstream, political correctness, personal preferences or deformations and so on. The Bible only serves for finding a confirmation of one's own view later in the Word of God: "I always hated green tomatoes and look, even the Bible ..."
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> It is hard to escape from this mechanism as long as the Bible is read in a context of power. In times where we are all entitled to use the Bible, this mechanism shapes how all of us read. Christians of any gender, social position and denominational context are doing more or less the same violation to scripture. Gunda shows in a most impressing way that not only the conservative-homomisian party reads the Bible in a highly selective and ideological way, but the gay-rights movement does so as well. The difference is, however, that the gay-friendly interpretation is usually only pro-gay and not anti-heterosexual. That means a gay-friendly reading of the Bible may also be highly ideological but it is self-defensive and not trying to aggressively eliminate other sexual orientations. There simply is no such thing as "heteromisia". [31]

Obviously the context of power by which every normative reading of the biblical canon as a text of power is determined makes it impossible to avoid the cobra structure. Most Christians, and I include myself explicitly, are not really open for conversion as they are already Christians. That is why we tend to avoid any encounter with the Bible that might pose uncomfortable questions to our life. When we read the Bible as Christians, we usually do that in the firm conviction that we and the Bible belong to the same side, i.e. the right one. Remember, the cobra always looks into the same direction as the king. If we were to encounter the Bible as a text that tells us something new and unexpected, than we

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29 Cf. Masiiwa Ragies GUNDA, The Bible and Homosexuality in Zimbabwe. A Socio-historical analysis of the political, cultural and Christian arguments in the homosexual public debate with special reference to the use of the Bible (BiAS 3), Bamberg: UBP 2010.
(http://nbn-resolving.de/urn/resolver.pl?urn:nbn:de:bvb:473-opus-2522).

30 Cf. e.g. GUNDA, Bible and Homosexuality, pp. 472 f., Appendix 26.

31 Cf. GUNDA, Bible and Homosexuality, pp. 154-157; as to the term "homomisia" cf. loc. cit., pp. 64 f.

would have to admit that we, our thinking, and our living are not in full accordance with what the Bible says; we would then also have to admit that perhaps we ourselves belong to the non-believers and sinners. Only religious masochists (or holy people like Francesco of Assisi, Mother Teresa and so on) love to do so. We, as regular people, usually try to avoid that. Why should we seek the danger of learning that we have to change our life completely? That is why we usually admit being criticised by the Bible only in minor things: I should be more polite to my neighbours, I should drink less, I should donate more for the poor, I should pray more intensively and more often, and so on. In fundamental things which are really relevant for our whole existence we don't seek the confrontation, because we know that the biblical cobra is dangerous. If we look at it from the wrong perspective, it might cost us our life; at least the life we are used to. Avoiding that is reasonable, and that is why most of us are using the Bible as a critical norm for others but not for ourselves. The life and behaviour and thinking of others are in contradiction to the Bible and must be given up. Our own practice, our own life, our own thinking, however, need some minor correction and improvement at most.

## *4. Stop fearing the snake: reading the Bible as human literature*

If we try to escape from the framework of power with our reading of the Bible, we have to realise that there is no outside of power. The Apostle Paul already knew that,[32] and we post-modern people know that again, at least since reading Foucault.

> Macht ist für Michel Foucault „keine Substanz" repressiver Natur, die maliziös an verborgenen Schalthebeln des Bösen sitzt, sondern vielmehr ein spezifischer „Typ von Beziehungen zwischen Individuen", dessen Dispositive als ein „produktives Netz" die gesamte Wirklichkeit überziehen. Nach Foucault gibt es kein Außen von Macht, und es kann schon

[32] The Apostle conceives liberation not as annihilation of power per se, but as a change of domination. Christians are free as they have changed from the mortal power of sin to the life giving power of God. Cf. Joachim KÜGLER, Die Würde der Freien. Konzeptionen menschlicher Freiheit bei Paulus und in der Jesustradition, in: R. Bucher/ O. Fuchs/ J. Kügler (Eds.), In Würde leben. Interdisziplinäre Studien zu Ehren von Ernst Ludwig Grasmück (Theologie in Geschichte und Gesellschaft 6), Luzern: Edition Exodus 1998, pp. 35-48: 43-48.

> gar keinen herrschaftslosen Diskurs à la Jürgen Habermas geben – einen solchen machtfreien Raum zu postulieren, ist vielmehr selbst wiederum eine Form diskursiven Widerstands im endlosen „Agonismus" der Mächte und Gewalten: „Politik ist Fortsetzung des Krieges mit anderen Mitteln."[33]

> For M. Foucault power is not a substance of a repressive, malicious nature, but rather a specific type of relationship between individuals. The circumstances of this relationship span reality in the form of a "productive network." According to Foucault, there is no outside of power, and particularly no discourse that is free of power as Jürgen Habermas pledged for. Postulating such a space that is free of power is itself a form of discursive resistance in an endless struggle of powers and forces: Politics is the continuation of war with different means.[34]

If that is true, it does not make sense to even try to escape the influence of power completely. The only thing we can do is to organise a play of checks and balances. In relation to reading the Bible, this would for example mean that we strengthen ourselves, the readers, in a way that allows us to overcome the fear that seduces us to use the power of the Bible against others instead of daring to confront ourselves with it. We need to learn how to avoid the dichotomy of either being the victim of the cobra or being the one who uses it as a power tool to dominate others. We have to learn, so to speak, to look at the cobra from the side.

The first step to learning this approach from the side could for example be to treat the cobra with the attitude we already usually apply to the uraeus of the Egyptian king. None of us would really be frightened if he or she encountered the royal cobra in an Egyptian Museum, an exhibition, or in a photo in a catalogue. We don't get scared, first, because the mythical framework of Egyptian royal theology is no longer the framework of our own life. Therefore we do not fear the Egyptian king and we do not believe that he really is (was) the representative of divine powers. The second reason why we are not frightened is that we have learnt to see this uraeus as a piece of art. We look at it from an aesthetical point of view. We do not conceive this uraeus as a 'sacramental' sign which performs the presence of divine powers, but we conceive it as a merely aesthetic sign, which points to a reality outside itself, but of course does

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[33] Christian BAUER, Macht und Gnade. Versuch einer Klärung der Begriffe angesichts von Ohnmacht und Gnadenlosigkeit heute, in: R. Bucher/ R. Krockauer (Eds.), Macht und Gnade. Untersuchungen zu einem konstitutiven Spannungsfeld der Pastoral (Werkstatt Theologie 4), Münster: Lit 2005, pp. 45-60: 53.

[34] Free English translation by JK.

not perform the presence of this reality. That means that we approach the uraeus with an aesthetically relaxed attitude. We enjoy its beauty; we admire its golden brilliance, the quality of its craft, the elegance of design, we analyse its meaning in the context of old Egyptian royal theology and so on.

I would now like to propose applying this attitude to the Bible as well, not as the only way of reading it, but as a good way of reading it -at least, if we try to avoid the fatal collusion of power and fear which seduces us to use the Bible as ideological uraeus and produce violence, first of the verbal and then of the physical kind. [35]

Reading the Bible with the same attitude we use for literary-fictional texts (like novels or poems) seems very much preferable to me than the normative reception which shows all the negative effects that the victims of church history have experienced in the past and continue to experience in the World Christianity of today.

- First of all, a literary-fictional reading goes very well with individual reading. All those who are able to read today can take the Bible and read its texts without being bound to the public reading of a lector in the assembly of the community. Of course, reading the Bible publicly will most likely always be a part of Christian service, but in former times when the majority of Christians was illiterate, this was the only way getting to know the biblical text. This is no longer the case today.
- Today, individual readings of the Bible is much more important than it was then. Being alone with the Bible, studying the text was a privilege of biblical scholars in former times. Now, this is something everybody capable of reading can do. Nothing stands between text and reader in private reading, especially not a speaker or a lector. What happens is

[35] In the following paragraph I come back to some ideas already uttered some twenty years ago. Cf. Joachim KÜGLER, Der Jünger, den Jesus liebte. Literarische, theologische und historische Untersuchungen zu einer Schlüsselgestalt johanneischer Theologie und Geschichte (SBB 16), Stuttgart: Kath. Bibelwerk 1988, pp. 44-61. – I meanwhile, however, changed my position slightly, as my view of reading the Bible as literature with the time has become even more positive. One of the reasons for this change of view is that I am speaking here about ordinary reading and not about professional scientific biblical studies, which was the topic in my thesis of 1988. – And of course I am not the first to propose reading the Bible as literature. Cf. e.g. Edgar V. MACKNIGHT, The Contours and Methods of Literary Criticism, in: R. A. Spencer (Ed.), Orientation by Disorientation. Studies in Literary Criticism and Biblical Literary Criticism, Pittsburgh: Pickwick 1980, pp. 53-69; R. Alan CULPEPPER, Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel. A Study in Literary Design, Philadelphia: Fortress 1983.

direct and uncontrolled interaction between text and reader.[36] Private readers can do with the text whatever they want (and the text can do with the readers whatever they allow it to do).

It is therefore no coincidence that in the history of reading, the emergence of individual reading and the discovery of the positive value of fiction are so closely linked. In the fourth century BC, Aristotle developed the theory that it is not the task of poets to tell what really happened, but to tell what might have happened. According to his theory, literature is something more philosophical than historiography. Fiction even exceeds history as it reveals universal truth, whilst history sticks to details. [37]

- Another strong point of reading the Bible as literature is that this kind of reading is a "textpetal"[38] one. I would like to introduce this new word to express that literary-fictional reading is not moving away from the text to an extra-textual reality. Just on the contrary, this kind of reading will never be done with the text; will permanently care for it in all its details and read it again and again.

That is a huge advantage in the context of theology and church. Contrary to this type of reading, non-fictional reading is usually "textfugal", meaning it relates the semantics of the text to an extra-textual reality in a quite straightforward fashion and leaves the text behind in order to get to this reality.

> An extreme example for such a textfugal, non-fictional reading is a technical manual: you read it to get information on how to run your PC, for example. Once you have read it and know how to manage your machine, the text is no longer of any interest. Once the transfer of the text's information to the extra-textual reality is complete, you can forget about the text. You can, however, also forget about it if you notice that the manual is providing information for a machine you don't have. If the transfer to extra-textual reality is not possible, you will also forget about the text.

The textfugal structure of reading the Bible like a manual, i.e. with a non-fictional attitude, can lead to severe conflicts, especially when it is not possible (or at least very difficult) for the reader to relate the informa-

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36 Cf. Wolfgang RÖSLER, Die Entdeckung der Fiktionalität in der Antike, Poetica 12 (1980) pp. 283-319.

37 Cf. RÖSLER, Entdeckung der Fiktionalität, p. 309.

38 As it is about the relation to a text and not to any centre, I prefer textpetal/ textfugal to centripetal/ centrifugal, which is used by Stierle to express the difference between fictional and non-fictional reading. (Karlheinz STIERLE, Was heißt Rezeption bei fiktionalen Texten, Poetica 7 (1975), pp. 345-387: 348-377).

tion provided by biblical texts to extra-textual reality. In western culture, this is the case when it comes to the miracle stories which tell of things that are simply not possible according to our post-enlightenment concept of reality. That is why these stories caused historical criticism and all the debate around that since the 18th century. And even ordinary western readers have problems reading these texts as non-fictional as it is so difficult to decipher the narrated events as facts to an extra-textual reality.[39] I can well imagine that many African readers do not have this problem. I am however not sure how long it will be possible to keep African minds free from the influence of western rationalism. Already now, those who are in contact with biblical studies on an academic level will not easily ignore the problem that most of the stories told by the Old Testament as the "history" of Israel are shown to be fiction by modern archaeology.[40] And what about the poor Africans who study theoretical physics and learn that the universe needed a bit more than six days to come to its present state? Will they be able to read mythical texts like the cosmogonies in Gen 1 f. as non-fictional texts? Do they have to dismiss the biblical texts as their information is simply not "true" on the level of scientific facts? Or are they forced to become schizophrenically double minded persons with a biblical and a scientific cosmology in their heads? One mind for the church, one for the office? Perhaps it might be helpful to at least some Africans to read the Bible as literature. They could then ask for the truth of the texts even if some or even many "facts" are wrong and many stories are just that – stories, not history.

- Another point: a textpetal, literary-fictional reading of the Bible never gets done with the text and therefore is very much appropriate for those texts in the Bible which speak in metaphorical terms, like for example

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39 Western biblical fundamentalists usually solve the problem by creating a second, fictional reader in their mind. This reader lives in a "biblical" world where all the narrated miracles really happened. More often than not, the consequence is, however, that this fictional reader has nothing to do with the rest of the readers mind. The rest of the reader is not living in this magical biblical world, but (e.g.) cares very much about her/his economic survival, (s)he is firmly convinced that in the world of radical capitalism there are no such things like miracles or even coincidence and of course (s)he will defend her/his property with a gun and not with a prayer.

40 Cf. e.g. Israel FINKELSTEIN/ Neil A. SILBERMAN, The Bible unearthed. Archaeology's new vision of ancient Israel and the origin of its sacred texts, New York [et al.]: Simon & Schuster, 2002; EIDEM, David and Solomon. In search of the Bible's sacred kings and the roots of the Western tradition, New York [et al.]: Free Press 2006.

the synoptic parables or the Johannine Christology. When the Gospel of John[41] portrays Jesus as the way, truth, life, temple, resurrection, light, bread, shepherd, vine, son, king and so on, these metaphorical expressions can only be understood if one does not read them as facts. Only a literary-fictional, or in this case, poetical approach can derive sense and meaning from this kind of metaphoric language. I think it is no conincidence that in the history of Christian theology, only the expression 'son' played a major role. It did so because it was the only one of these metaphors that could be understood in a non-metaphorical way. That the gospel is not speaking about facts when it calls Jesus a lamb, a door or a vine was clear as no human person can be any of those in the sense of a "fact". But of course a human person can be a son, and so it was easy to ignore the metaphoric character of calling a human person the son of God. Consequently, the whole Christology concentrated on this category of sonship, whilst the other metaphors were left aside. They played absolutely no role in systematic Christology, but were left to spiritual meditation. Reading the fourth gospel as literature and conceiving in this manner the metaphorical character of all its Christological terms[42] would help us get out of the fruitless discussions nowadays which arose throughout church history about secondary questions like for example if Jesus Christ had only one will or two, or – more recently - what kind of chromosomes Jesus had). A poetic way of reading, which is not bound to so-called facts, but concentrates on what this text wants to say with all these metaphorical terms, will understand the message of the fourth gospel's metaphorical Christology much more easily.

- As I tried to show above, a normative approach to the Bible easily falls into the double structure of fear of power and threatening with power. This double structure almost makes it impossible for the ordinary reader to really confront his/her own life with the biblical message. My impression is that fear is the most important reason why we try to avoid direct confrontation. A literary-fictional approach offers the big

[41] When I use this traditional term I do not want to say anything about the real author of the fourth gospel, who according to my opinion was a later Anonymus, neither identical with John, the son of Zebedee, nor with the Beloved Disciple. Cf. Joachim KÜGLER, Das Johannesevangelium, in: M. Ebner/ S. Schreiber (Eds.), Einleitung in das Neue Testament, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 2008, pp. 208-228.

[42] Cf. Ruben ZIMMERMANN, Christologie der Bilder im Johannesevangelium. Die Christopoetik des vierten Evangeliums unter besonderer Berücksichtigung von Joh 10 (WUNT 171), Tübingen 2004, esp. pp. 22-26.

advantage to be perfectly free from fear. If we encounter a literary text, we are interested; we are curious about what it has to say, but we are never frightened. We may perhaps be scared when,we read a novel by Stephen King, for example, but that is only a game we play with the text. Usually, we read literary texts with an attitude that Weinrich once called "Heiterkeit der Kunst" (i.e. serenity of art).[43] This serenity has a lot to do with the fact that reading literature does not necessarily have consequences for our lives. We know that, and that's why we are relaxed and not frightened in any way. Landwehr, another German scholar in literary sciences, stated that the readers' attitude of serenity is closely linked with a mechanism which can be described as building up a "fictional reader". In a certain way, we are not ourselves when we read literature or watch a drama at the theatre or at the cinema. Landwehr uses the example of the famous Austrian play "Publikumsbeschimpfung" (1966) by Peter Handke.[44] People would not go to the theatre to be abused by the persons on stage if they really felt that they were being personally and directly offended. Only masochists would allow themselves to be to be abused like that; ordinary people would not. The audience of Handke's play, however, does not feel offended as they do not relate the "offending of the audience" on the stage to themselves. They relate it to a fictitious audience which is not present.[45] If we were to apply this kind of attitude to reading the Bible, we would experience a tremendous change in our reading.

> To give just one example: We are used to identifying right away with the addressees of Jesus when we read the Sermon on the Mountain in the gospel of Matthew. We are those to whom Jesus speaks. In the context of literary-fictional reading, we would not immediately proceed to that identification. On the contrary, we would apply the distance of serenity of art and read the text as something which Matthew tells about a narrated, i.e. fictional[46] Jesus, who speaks to a narrated audience.

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43 Cf. Harald WEINRICH, Literatur für Leser. Essays und Aufsätze zur Literaturwissenschaft, Stuttgart 1971, pp. 12 ff.

44 Peter Handke (* 1942) is an avant-garde Austrian playwrighter and novelist. His "Publikumsbeschimpfung" was published 1971 in English also: Offending the Audience/Self-accusation, London: Methuen.

45 Cf. Jürgen LANDWEHR, Text und Fiktion, München 1975, pp. 168 f.

46 "Fictional" does of course not mean that Jesus did not exist. I just want to express that in fictional reading we are not communicating with the historical Jesus, but with a person narrated by Matthew, who calls this person Jesus and thus links it to the historical Jesus.

Reading the Bible like that quite certainly has the big advantage that any question of power or abuse of power is excluded. The text is primarily an aesthetic phenomenon which does not have anything to do with me directly or my fellow Christians today. There is no need to fear possible consequences of its message, nor is it possible to use the text as a power tool to discipline others.

But exactly this, at the same time, seems to be the weakest point of the literary-fictional approach. When it comes to the question of how to relate the Bible to practice, this approach seems to know only one answer: there is no relation between biblical literature and practice! I would however try to come up with a kind of defence for the literary-fictional approach by pointing to two aspects that are usually overlooked.

- First of all, we already use this kind of approach in relation to many texts in the Bible. A quite good example for that is the vast number of juridical texts found in the Old Testament. Usually, Christian readers do not relate the rules given in these texts to themselves but to a fictitious audience which no longer exists. Of course it is true that in some African churches people try to obey certain rules of the Old Testament which have always been regarded as no longer valid in traditional Christian denominations. But even those African churches will not care for all Old Testament prescriptions. I have for example never heard of Christians, be it in Africa or elsewhere, who understand the rules given for the ashes of the red cow (Num 19:1-10)[47] as an order given directly to themselves that they would have to comply with. The same is true for many cult rules in the Old Testament. Either they are not read at all by Christian readers or they are read only with the attitude of relaxed distance (in accordance with "Heiterkeit der Kunst"), so that all practical consequences are suspended.
- Furthermore, one has to point out that a literary reading is not a reading without any consequences. As especially Wolfgang Iser stated, reading a text as literature also has its consequences.[48] These consequences cannot be seen in direct orders given by the text. Only fools would read "Open the window and jump!" in a novel and then do so.

[47] Ulrike BECHMANN, Die Asche der roten Kuh (Num 19) oder: die Transformation vom Tod zum Leben, in: A. Wagner (Ed.), Abfallmoderne. Zu den Schmutzrändern der Kultur (grazer edition 4), Wien: Lit 2010, pp. 133-158.

[48] Cf. Wolfgang ISER, The act of reading: a theory of aesthetic response, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1980.

Literature is not a manual for action, not even in those parts that give direct orders or pretend to do so. The consequences of literary-fictional reading would be better understood as special kinds of effects. Iser[49] explains that literary texts are not vessels containing a certain message, but are half-open structures which lead the reader to a certain kind of "making sense." Literary texts don't make sense in themselves; it is the reader who in the act of reading makes sense of the text. At first glance, this theory seems to declare the reader to be a dictator who absolutely dominates the text. This, however, is only true for readers who do not really want to read the text. All those who want to read, want to understand, and want to learn something new, will very sensitively observe the appealing structures[50] of the text which guide the act of reading, i.e. the act of making sense. Through this process of making sense, the attentive reader is very much involved in the world of the text – so much that the reader is transformed by reading. Not only does the reader do something with the text, but the text also does something to its reader. The process of making sense will have its effect on the reader. This effect, however, is something completely different from what happens when we read a normative text and fulfil its orders. The changing effect of literary-fictional reading can hardly be planned. It is individual and open. The text has only as much power as the readers gives to it, and so the text can change its reader only as much as the reader allows himself or herself to be involved in the text's world. Those readers, however, who do so to a greater extent, will not only be involved in a process of making sense. They will, in a second step, also ask what the meaning they have derived from their reading has to do with their lives. By asking this question readers will begin to realize the transformation they were undergoing by reading and will begin to reflect about this. This is – according to Iser – the way from sense ("Sinn") to meaning ("Bedeutung"). As can be seen, reading the Bible as literature must not cut every link between (biblical) text and (political) practice. It is true; literary-fictional reading breaks down all bridges between text and practice, but it may teach the reader to swim or use boats.

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[49] Cf. Jane TOMPKINS, Reader-Response Criticism. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1980.

[50] Cf. Wolfgang ISER, Die Appellstruktur der Texte. Unbestimmtheit als Wirkungsbedingung literarischer Prosa. Konstanz: Univ. 1970.

## 5. Embracing the cobra – Final theological remarks on Revelation, Bible and "Heiterkeit der Kunst"

Should we really dare to read texts like the Sermon on the Mountain, the creation narrative, and the Decalogue in the same way we read George Orwell's "1984," or Hemingway's "The Old Man and the Sea," or Dan Brown's "Da Vinci Code"? Is that allowed for Christians? Many believers would deny this instinctively and would feel that applying the attitude of "serenity of art" to the Bible is equivalent to blasphemy.The tradition of reading the Bible as a manual for daily life, as a normative text, a collection of divine laws and orders, or as a spiritual book for imitating Christ is simply too strong.The normative approach to the Bible will of course be legitimate as long as readers really try to encounter the biblical message, allow themselves to be transformed by this message, and feel motivated to greater and greater love without using the Bible as a power tool against others.

My invitation to read the Bible as literature is really meant as that – an invitation. I don't think that the literary-fictional reading should substitute all other approaches, but I am sure that it might help to fight against the negative consequences which the normative approach to the Bible has had in history and still has until now. However, I don't prefer reading the Bible as literature simply for strategic reasons; it is not just a useful tool in the fight against violence motivated by religion. I appreciate reading the Bible as literature because I think that it is most appropriate to the Christian theology of revelation.

One has to remember that the meaning of the Bible to Christianity is not the same as that of the Quran to Islam. The text of the Bible is not identical with the divine revelation. God does not reveal a text; God reveals himself. God did that in the history of Israel, in Jesus Christ, and does so through his people today. The status of the Bible is that of the supreme testimony to revelation, but not that of revelation itself. That is why it is not heresy to acknowledge the human character of the biblical texts. I know that the Second Vatican Council is not a binding authority for other denominations, but as a Catholic I feel free to recommend its "Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation" (Dei Verbum) as a possible source of theological insight to theologians and believers beyond the denominational borders of the Roman Church. The Constitution e.g. says:

> In Sacred Scripture, therefore, while the truth and holiness of God always remains intact, the marvellous "condescension" of eternal wisdom is clearly shown, "that we may learn the gentle kindness of God, which words cannot express, and how far He has gone in adapting His language with thoughtful concern for our weak human nature." For the words of God, expressed in human language, have been made like human discourse, just as the word of the eternal Father, when He took to Himself the flesh of human weakness, was in every way made like men. (DV 13)[51]

That means that the council sees a structural equivalence between incarnation of the one eternal Word and the divine words becoming human text. Therefore it is neither heresy to call Jesus a human being, as – according to oldest Christian tradition – he is truly human and truly divine the same time, nor can it be a heresy to call the biblical texts truly human texts. And being human texts, they of course can be read as human literature.

This is true even for those texts of the Bible that don't want to be fictional texts. The best examples are perhaps the original letters of St Paul (i.e. Romans, 1 & 2 Cor., Gal., Phil., 1 Thess., Philemon), which were never meant to be literature. They were written by the Apostle as a kind of practical theology clearly related to a quite specific pastoral situation. Therefore they were clearly written as non-fictional texts. But already in earliest time, the Christian church was aware of the fact that these texts were much more than that. That is why one never stopped reading them although the Apostle was already dead and the critical situation which he wanted to manage with his writings had also stopped to exist. On the contrary, as they were continually read, they were copied again and again, andcopies were handed over to Christian communities and the letters of St Paul were collected, forming the core of what we later called the New Testament. This attitude towards the letters of St Paul clearly showed that the Christian communities at the end of the first century A.D. didn't think that these letters were just non-fictional texts meant to solve a specific problem. If the Pauline letters would have been just that, one would have forgotten about them after the problem was solved. Instead they were treated as theological literature, not bound to a specific Pastoral situation, but applicable to problems and questions of Christian life in general. That means that, already at the end of the first century,

[51] Cited from the official english version on www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html.

these letters were read as literature. We can speak of a discreet literary-fictional reading of the Pauline letters. It was discreet because one didn't call them literature or fiction; one simply treated them like that. And there was almost no alternative.

Those who say that they are nowadays reading the Pauline letters as non-fictional texts are deceiving themselves a bit. They are not reading Paul's letters in their entirety but selectively. They concentrate on those texts which can be quite directly applied to their own situation, while other texts are treated as if they did not exist.

For example, one of the main points treated in the letter to the Galatians is the religious status of circumcision. This discussion is nowadays usually read by Christians with the attitude of serenity of art. For female readers, Paul's phallocentric discussion does not apply to their own bodies and for many Christian men, circumcision is not an important topic because it would never occur to them to get circumcised. Other Christian men who are circumcised for cultural or hygienic reasons (as it is the case e.g. in the US and many African countries) read the discussion of Paul but don't feel bothered by it. They can do so because they look upon their own circumcision as something which is religiously irrelevant. So they do not relate Paul's arguments against circumcision to their own circumcision. They do not understand it as denying the salvific effect of Jesus' death. That means that they behave like the audience in the theatre when Handke's Offending the Audience is performed: the audience that is being offended is not "us". In the same way, circumcised readers of today form a fictitious ego when reading Galatians: the circumcision which Paul condemns so heavily is not mine!

The problem is that there is no room for a positive value of fiction in the attitude of reading the Pauline letters as non-fictional text. And therefore those texts that cannot be applied directly to the reader's situation are very much ignored. On the contrary, a literary-fictional reading in the attitude of "serenity of art" could even allow us to read those texts and simply ask what they mean. In a second step, one could ask: What happens to me when I read these texts, what are their effects on me? In the case of the phallocentric discussion in Galatians, a non-normative approach could even give female readers a chance to profit from this discussion. This is also true for the misogynous texts in the Book Ben Sira

(Ecclesiasticus)[52]. If they are not read as a manual on how to despise women, but as poetry on gender roles, then perhaps even feminist readers might not be forced to simply reject these texts. Reading them as poetry on gender conflicts might open a chance to construct a positive meaning of even these highly problematic texts.[53]

The example of Ben Sira shows that a non-normative, literary-fictional reading in the attitude of "serenity of art" does not necessarily have to dismiss the authority of biblical text. The authority of the text, however, is no longer that of a law. It is the authority of a counterpart of the reader, who can transform the reader as much as the reader allows. The encounter of text and reader in this model is an encounter of equal partners. This equality is a problem for theological conceptualizations that regard the Bible as divine and the reader as purely human. Ottmar Fuchs and others, however, have pointed out that this perception of the reader is a denigration of baptism. If baptism is taken seriously, one has to regard the reader as well as the biblical text as being under the influence of the Holy Spirit. That means that an inspired reader encounters an inspired text. This basic equality seems much better expressed in a literary-fictional approach than in other approaches.

As a last argument to theologically legitimise a non-normative reading of the Bible I would like to turn attention to the fact that fictionality seems especially adequate to the biblical concepts of soteriology. Both parts of the Bible, Old and New Testament, favour soteriological concepts that are based on the tension between ALREADY NOW and NOT YET in the majority of their texts. The biblical God is not a thing of this world, but has to do with this world. S/He reveals themself in a human way but transcends all human ideas, gender roles, and expectations at the same time. God is, in the end, pure and absolutely secret, a mysterium stricte dictum. Getting in contact with this mysterium means experiencing something completely new, completely unknown, and perfectly different. As a

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[52] The book is not part of the Hebrew Bible. Being, however, part of the Greek Old Testament (LXX), it was accepted as part of the Christian biblical canon by Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and most Oriental Orthodox churches. Most Protestant denominations label it as "deuterocanonical". Despite this lower status, Ben Sira always had a huge influence on the conception of gender roles in protestant churches also.

[53] This is the way of reading proposed by Ursula RAPP, Weisheitsbeziehung und Geschlechterverhältnis. Untersuchungen zu Texten über Frauen und Ehe im Buch Jesus Sirach, unpublished habilitation thesis, Bamberg University 2010/2011.

consequence of this supreme divine quality, the salvation God grants to his/her people is nothing that can ever fully be realized in the present world, nor is it something that belongs only to the future or only to heaven. It has its proper place in between: between heaven and earth, between now and then. This soteriological IN BETWEEN which the Bible presents seems much better conceived by a literary approach, as the way in which fiction constructs reality is very much similar to this tension between the known reality and the unknown.

As Wolfgang Iser made clear, fictional texts do not depict reality but create reality. In doing so, they, however, have to use elements of the commonly known reality. Even the weirdest fantasy novel has to work with pieces of the old, well-known world. Even things which are perfectly new and never existed before combine fragments of the existing world in themselves. What is new is the combination, not the elements. This can well be exemplified by the unicorn, which combines the well-known body of a horse with the well-known horn of other animals. What is new is the combination of a horn with a horse, as well as that the unicorn has only one horn and not two like other animals, such as cows or rams.

The repertoire from which fiction selects the elements to create a new world contains all kind of things which are part of the extra-textual world: previous texts, social norms, religious traditions, historical concepts, technical achievements- in short the whole socio-cultural context from which the specific text originates.[54] It is, however important to realize that the selected elements are not simply depicted or enacted. They are taken from a specific cultural context and become part of a new game with its own rules. They of course still refer to the context they were taken from, but they are no longer part of this context. In the case of specific normative concepts, the consequence is that they are no longer norms in action, but narrated ideas that were formerly (or: extra-textually) known as norms. They loose their original, normative function and enter into new combinations and achieve new, intra-textual functions. Within the text they are part of a new game, with new rules, new combinations, but of course the reader knows where they come from and what their original normative function and meaning was. So, normative concepts (like all the elements of the text's repertoire) oscillate between old and new. Deriving from an old world, they share in creating a new one. That is why they have a kind of double identity: Any element

[54] Cf. ISER, Akt des Lesens, p. 115.

of the repertoire is neither exclusively identical with its extra-textual origin nor exclusively identical with its new literary use.[55]

Although literature uses elements of the extra-textually known world, its prime interest is not the status quo. The things and ideas we are used to are just a means to construct something new, not yet existing. This new world or new state of mind cannot be expressed directly as the text itself is not part of this new world. Literature cannot depict something absolutely new, but it can try to get close to it by showing the status quo as something relative that can be overcome. By working with elements of the old world and pointing to a new one, literature is suspended between past and future. Its presence is performative; a happening which leads the reader to the insight that the Well-Known is overcome and no longer intended and the New is intended but not yet deciphered.[56]

The basic structure of fiction is the tension between new and old and literature's truth consists in the capacity to talk about something which does not yet exist. Insofar, the truth structure of fiction is highly adequate to biblical soteriology, which is primarily eschatological in the Old and the New Testament. The tension between ALREADY NOW and NOT YET is one of its prime characteristics. God's redeeming self-revelation can only be conceived in the tension between the Old that is already overcome and the New that is not yet achieved. That means there is a theological affinity between the biblical soteriology and the truth structure of fiction. It is definitely no coincidence that Jesus talked about the Kingdom of God – already here and not yet fully realised – in parables, i.e. in a clearly fictional genre.

To sum up, I would like to say that from my theological point of view, there is no reason to condemn a literary-fictional approach to the Bible. It is not only a good alternative to the common use of the Bible as a power tool to threaten others, but it is also highly adequate to the truth structure of soteriology in the Bible and to the role of the Bible in the act of God's self-revelation. As readers who are called to salvation by God, we need not be afraid of the powerful Bible-cobra. We can come closer to it without fear, admire its beauty, listen to its message, feel free to accept it as an authority in which we trust, and we may even be capable of not using it against others.

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55 Cf. ISER, loc. cit., p. 116.

56 Cf. ISER, loc. cit., p. 117.

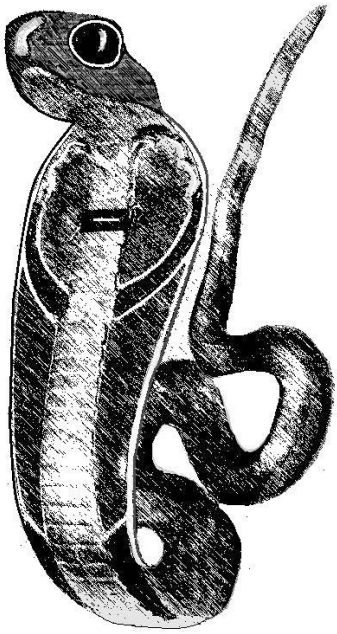
The question at stake here is whether our baptism is just a ticket to church membership or whether it really means something in our relation to God and His Christ. If through faith and baptism we really become Son of God in Jesus Christ (cf. Gal. 3:26-29), then we can say: God empowered us to read the Bible as friends, not as slaves; as inspired readers we can embrace the cobra, and who knows, perhaps it will transform into something as powerful and friendly as the Goddess Renenutet, who was venerated by old Egyptian people as a source of nourishment, fertility and protection (cf. figure 5).

*Then He said to me,*
*"Son of man, eat this scroll I am giving you and fill your stomach with it."*
*So I ate it, and it tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth.*
(Ezekiel 3:3)

# Illustrations

**Figure 1 | Golden Uraeus of King Sesostris II.**

Head snake, Egyptian Museum Cairo (JE 46694), Gold, Lapis lazuli et al.; H. 6,7 cm; Br. 3 cm; Middle Kingdom, 12th dynasty, 19th Century BCE; Reign of Sesostris II. Computer graphics by JK. Cf. Mohamed SALEH, Die Hauptwerke aus dem Ägyptischen Museum Kairo, Mainz 1986, Figure 108.



Originally the uraeus was only fixed to the royal Nemes- head scarf; from the Middle Kingdom (ca. 20th-18th century BCE) on however, it was combined with all kind of crowns. Later, the cobra is even used in the vulture-crown of the royal wife. Cf. the well designed overview given by: Kazimierz MICHALOWSKI et al., Die ägyptische Kunst (Ars Antiqua VI.3), Freiburg: Herder $^{3}$2000, p. 577. A scientific introduction is offered in: Christine STRAUSS, Art. „Kronen", in: Lexikon der Ägyptologie III, col. 811-816.

**Figure 2 | King Thutmosis III. Offering to the Holy Bark of Amen.**
Wall relief in king Hatshepsut's "House-of-million-years" in Deir el Bahari (Middle Colonnade, southern wall), New Kingdom, 18th dynasty, 15th century BCE, reign of Hatshepsut. Computer graphics (reducing details) by JK based on: Edouard NAVILLE, The Temple of Deir el Bahari, Part III, London 1898; tab. LXXXII.[57]


The king is wearing several cobras:

one at the blue Kheperesh-crown (**< 1**),

two on the royal pectoral (**< 2**) where the snakes protect his heart which is placed between them.

Two more cobras can be seen on the pendant of the royal loincloth (**< 3**).

[57] Unfortunately, I provided incorrect information in: J. KÜGLER, Im Rücken der Kobra. Warum es vielleicht besser wäre, die Bibel als Literatur zu lesen, in: J. Kügler/ E. Souga Onomo/ S. Feder (Eds.), Bibel und Praxis. Beiträge des Internationalen Bibel-Symposiums 2009 in Bamberg (bfT 11), Berlin 2011, 105-132: 129. The King depicted is not Thutmosis II. and the plate in Naville's edition on which I based my computer graphics is not LXXII. I take the chance to give the correct information here and to apologise for the errors that have occurred.

**Figure 3 | Golden mask of Tutankhamen (detail)**

Golden mask, Egyptian Museum Cairo (JE 60672), Gold, Lapis lazuli et al.; H. 54 cm; Br. 39,3 cm; New Kingdom, 18th dynasty, 14th century BCE, reign of Tutankhamen. Computer graphics by JK. Cf. Jürgen SETTGAST (Ed.), Tutanchamun. Ausstellungskatalog, Mainz: Zabern 1980, pp. 162 f. with fig. 53.

The combination of vulture and cobra refers to the goddesses Nekhbet and Uto, the personifications of the crowns of Upper and Lower Egypt. The king is thus presented as "Lord of both lands". According to the dual unity of Egypt, Upper and Lower Egypt do not melt but form a duality which has to be reunited by the reign of every Egyptian king. According to the Egyptian conception of state, unity has to be produced and achieved over and over. Unity – as well as other cultural achievements – is not something that is simply given. It has to be achieved.

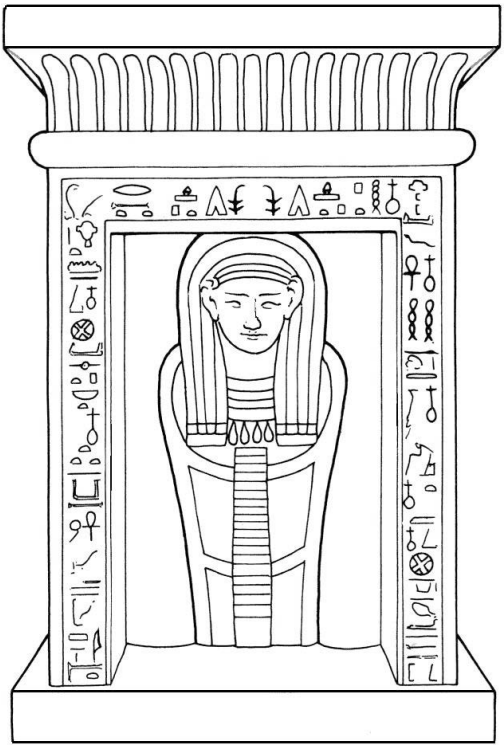
**Figure 4 | Uraeus Amulet**

Uraeus amulet with eyelet, excavation depot Alexandria (SCA 552), Faience; H. 4,2 cm; B. 2,2 cm; T. 1,1 cm; Late Egyptian time. Computer graphics by JK. Cf. Franck GODDIO/ Manfred CLAUSS (Eds.), Ägyptens versunkene Schätze, mit Fotografien von Christoph Gerigk, München u. a. 2006, p. 187 (and p. 443) fig. 376; Note also the very similar pieces SCA 555 (loc. cit., p. 187 and p. 440, fig. 338) and SCA 557 (loc. cit., p. 443, fig. 377).

A broad transfer of royal theology to common people can be noticed in the time of Late Egypt. The royal uraeus is not among the most popular amulet motifs, but it can often be found on scarabs and sealing amulets. Uraeus amulets were found in Egypt, Israel/Palestine, Northern Africa, and Sardinia and at the southern and eastern coasts of Spain. Cf. Christian HERRMANN, Ägyptische Amulette und Amulettmodel, in: Id./ Th. Staubli (Eds.), 1001 Amulett. Altägyptischer Zauber, monotheistische Talismane, säkulare Magie, Stuttgart 2010, pp. 14-160, here: 110-113 (with lots of illustrations!). Herrmann states that the frequency of uraeus amulets in Israel/ Palestine is less than 1 % (loc. cit. p. 110). The comparative number for Isis lactans e.g. is 2,4 % (cf. loc. cit, p. 30), 4,4 % for Sakhmet(cf.. loc. cit., p. 39).

**Figure 5 | Shrine for Renenutet**

Shrine for the goddess Renenutet, New Kingdom, found at Edfu; lost today, but still documented by DESCRIPTION DE L'EGYPTE, publiée par les ordres de Napoléon Bonaparte, Paris 1809-1830 (reprint: Köln: Taschen 1994), p. 516, tab. 47, fig. 8.



Renenutet was venerated as the "Goddess of the Double Granary" and the "Lady of Fertile Fields", who nourishes with good tidings and gives food in abundance. From the New Kingdom on, Renenutet was of great relevance in popular religion. Under her greek Name of (Th)ermuthis she even found her way to Jewish historiography. Flavius Josephus tells about the princess,who saved Moses: Θέρμουθις ἦν θυγάτηρ τοῦ βασιλέως (Ant. 2,224; cf. 2,225.227.228.232.236.243). Later, Christian legends also know about Thermutis. Cf. BEINLICH-SEEBER, Art. „Renenutet", col. 232.