

Uta Pohl-Patalong

Bibliolog

A Creative Access to the Bible



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W. Kohlhammer

Translated from German by Saskia Eisenhardt.

Cover: Marc Chagall: Jakobs Traum, 1931
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© 2015 W. Kohlhammer GmbH, Stuttgart
Production:
W. Kohlhammer GmbH, Stuttgart

Print:
ISBN 978-3-17-026970-5

E-Book-Formats:
pdf: 978-3-17-026971-2
epub: 978-3-17-026972-9
mobi: 978-3-17-026973-6

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Preface by Peter Pitzele

A man of great stature in the contemporary Jewish world, Ismar Schorsch, the Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary of New York, wrote recently that though he was by training a historian, he had come at the ripe age of seventy to appreciate “the importance of the imagination in renewing the Torah.”

Ah, the imagination, that often unwelcome guest at religion’s feast, regarded with misgiving and fear. Where among the symposia, conferences, the ecclesiastical synods, the parish conversations, where, oh where, is the religious imagination to be found? Our ministers, priests, educators, lay leaders are fearful lest imagination track mud into the sanctuary, distract the pious from their prayers, hint at the forbidden, picture the invisible, or disturb tranquility of approved methods with a riot of contrary interpretations. A little imagination, yes. Perhaps. But imagination unbridled? No thank you.

What is this fear of the imagination that seems to be so deeply interfused with religion?

You might say it was there in the beginning, in the Garden of Eden itself, with the serpent inviting Eve to consider the possibility that the tree in the garden is not what it seems. “Who told you the tree would cause you to die?” he asks. Well, she has it on good authority from her husband and he from God. Oh, really? Says the serpent. Perhaps there is another story here. Another story? Could it be? And so he speaks not to reason and not to order, but to desire, to possibility, to the unknown. The serpent stands as imagination’s emblem and to this day religion disputes whether the serpent is the devil in disguise or an instrument of divine love.

I cannot speak with any authority about Christianity, but I know Judaism has its own caution about imagination. We read in Genesis 6:5 that God, fed up with man, destroys the world by flood because God saw that “the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that his imagination (Hebrew yetser) was bent on evil.” Here is man made in God’s image and yet the very faculty of image-making in man is connected with evil. So law, custom, and the literalism come crowding in to repress imagination’s vagrant tendencies.

And our culture has grown up in the shadow of that repression for many thousand years, repressing imagination and her hand-maidens: the body, the feminine, the erotic, the earth’s music, and the fertile, ever evolving diversity of human experience. This repressive tendency has come so far that an elder of the Jewish tribe, Chancellor Schorsch, may write that in his old age that he sees as if with the force of revelation that imagination is necessary for re-

newing Torah. In the human search for meaning, imagination has a key that history, etymology, analysis, theology do not. Imagination is not superior to these approaches, but she informs them and she deserves her own enterprise.

Some of us have known this for a long time. Some of us have been seeking, patiently, respectfully, to find a way to bring imagination to religion's feast. Some of us know what the serpent knows, that there are other stories, other interpretations. We see that religion may either follow the path of exclusiveness – reducing to a single voice the range of meanings a text or tale may have. Or it may be inclusive – expanding the possibilities of meaning ad infinitum. Can the Rabbis be serious when they say that we are to “turn the Torah again and again for everything is in it?” Everything? Even you and me?

So welcome, dear reader, to Bibliolog, which once I called “the psychodrama of the Bible,” and later “Bibliodrama,” and which has been called and will be called many other things. It is a label, the name of the fruit that grows on the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil. You stand in precisely the same place Eve stood and I am the serpent addressing you. What have you been told about the tree? Who told it to you? And is it possible there might be another story? How will you find out?

We always stand at this moment in the myth. We are always Eve – daring, gullible, desiring, fearful, brave, foolish, curious, bored, defiant. Nothing will ever be quite the same after this act. Like her you will learn to see with your own eyes. You will become an authority for your own experience. You will have made a covenant with your imagination and you will find it is a sacred bond.

Foreword: Development, content and usage of this book

Bibliolog is an approach to discovering and interpreting a biblical text that involves a group of people, e.g. a congregation or a school class. Bibliolog was developed approximately 30 years ago by the North American scholar Peter Pitzele. Since the late 1990s it has been established in Germany and later in many other European and some African countries as well. This approach obviously fascinates people throughout different cultures – one could say perhaps that Bibliolog shows how different people can all be fascinated by biblical texts. Bibliolog employs the Jewish tradition of Midrash. By creatively filling the ‘gaps’ of the biblical texts (*white fire*) Bibliolog seeks to get closer to these written texts (*black fire*). Bibliolog can be performed with any group that is dealing with the Bible, whether it is in a service as a “sermon together with the congregation” or at school, or in women’s groups, senior groups, children’s groups or with people who have had little or no contact with the Bible.

This volume introduces the theoretical and practical essentials of Bibliolog, which can be performed in a rather short period of time with a group of any size. The book’s contents correspond to what is taught in basic Bibliolog courses. It often refers to “Scripture Windows”, written by Peter Pitzele.¹ In this book Pitzele introduces his concept of Bibliolog – which, in North America, is known as Bibliodrama – and presents the reader with helpful practical examples. In Europe, however, Pitzele’s approach could not be adopted without some minor changes. In Germany, for example, an approach related to Bibliolog, called Bibliodrama, had already been established. This had to be taken into account while trying to adapt Pitzele’s approach. Pitzele, who profits from his many years of experience, acts on intuition and often merges shorter and longer forms of Bibliolog spontaneously, while in Europe it has proven successful to start with the basic form and work on the more advanced forms later (which will be described in a second volume). This clear structure makes it easier to teach people in different contexts and cultures how to conduct Bibliolog – by now there are several thousand people who have been trained in Bibliolog.

This book may be used as accompanying literature while participating in a basic course for Bibliolog or as a reference later on. And for readers who are

¹ Cf. Pitzele, Peter A. 1998. *Scripture Windows. Toward a Practice of Bibliodrama*, Los Angeles: Alef Design Group.

not yet acquainted with Bibliolog at all, this volume provides them with all the essential information and hence might help them decide whether or not they would like to learn this particular approach. Reading the book, however, can by no means substitute for actually participating in a basic course. Especially people who already have a lot of experience working with the Bible might think that they could learn Bibliolog by simply reading this book. This cannot be recommended because Bibliolog is a very complex approach in which the details play an important role. Experience has shown that the attempt to conduct Bibliolog without having learned it properly is not very successful and might lead to confusion on the part of the participants. At worst people might have negative experiences with Bibliolog or even with biblical texts. Usually, the basics for performing Bibliolog can be learned in a one-week course (which can be divided into two parts). Bibliolog is a very versatile approach and provides a point of access to the Bible in many different environments. Therefore, learning Bibliolog requires relatively little effort, compared to the rich outcomes. Information regarding Bibliolog courses all over the world is available at: www.bibliolog.de or www.bibliolog.net.

At this point, I would like to add a few words regarding myself: I first encountered Bibliolog in 1999 in several workshops by Peter and Susan Pitzele and have been in touch with them ever since. Authorized by both of them, I have been giving seminars on Bibliolog since 2004. Furthermore, I have developed the advanced training concept for Bibliolog, on which this book is based. After all these years I still have a lot of fun performing and teaching Bibliolog. To see people get enthusiastic about Bibliolog and thus find a point of access to the Bible is fascinating and makes me very happy. Meanwhile, approximately 60 other people from different countries have become coaches in Bibliolog as well. In 2006 we founded the International Bibliolog-Network and as its spokesperson I am responsible for the internal and external communication. Together with all the other coaches it is my concern to spread Bibliolog and to give as many people as possible the chance to get to know this access to biblical texts.

In order to show that Bibliolog can be performed in many different fields and in different styles, I have asked several colleagues to present some of their experiences with this approach in the last chapter of the book.

Many people have been involved in the process of writing and publishing this book, either directly or indirectly. First and foremost I would like to thank all participants of my Bibliolog courses. With your curious, constructive and also critical questions and ideas you have contributed not only to the practical implementation of Bibliolog but also to its hermeneutical and theological foundation. My thanks also go to the coaches of Bibliolog with whom I am connected via the International Bibliolog-Network and who have taught

courses on Bibliolog together with me. They have played an important part in further developing Bibliolog in theory and in practice – and they continue to do so. Furthermore I would like to thank all the people who have agreed to share their experiences with Bibliolog in a particular field. I am thankful for Iris Weiss, Jens Uhlendorf and Maria Elisabeth Aigner's valuable advice regarding the German edition. I would also like to thank Saskia Eisenhardt for her translation, which profited both from her language expertise and her experience with Bibliolog. I owe special thanks to Peter and Susan Pitzele – for their wonderful friendship, for their generosity in sharing Bibliolog with all curious and open-minded people as well as for the gift of Bibliolog which they have given to people across the world. It is a great pleasure for me that Peter and Susan can now read this book in their language. Both have been very supportive of this project and Susan even agreed to proof-read the translation. Thank you so much!

May this English edition help more people in different countries to get to know Bibliolog. Hopefully, they will be inspired by this approach and experience that biblical texts are still alive and relevant for their lives.

Kiel, December 2014

Uta Pohl-Patalong

1. Bibliolog – an introduction

1.1 Three examples of Bibliolog – an appetizer

The best way to understand Bibliolog is by experiencing it. Re-narrating a Bibliolog, however, comes closest to actually experiencing it and therefore helps to understand this approach. The roles and questions were taken from my notes. The participants' utterances, however, as well as mine during the echoing and interviewing were taken from memory.² For a better understanding, everything I say in my role as conductor in direct speech is printed in italics.

Bibliolog during Sunday service Matthew 14:28–33

Dear congregation,

Preaching usually means that the preacher studies a biblical text in preparation for the sermon and then communicates the results of this study to the congregation. The members of the congregation listen and reflect upon what is said. I have been invited to deliver a different sermon today: instead of telling you about my take on the text, I would like to take you into the text and discover it from within – in other words, I would like to “preach” together with you. By using an approach called “Bibliolog” we will enter into a dialog with the Bible.

It's pretty simple: I am taking you with me into the world of a biblical text. I am going to read part of the story and then stop. Then I will ask you to identify with a person from the Bible. In this moment every one of you will be this person and I will address you as that person and ask you a question. You are invited to share your answer with the group, even if it is quiet and short. I will be coming to your seat and will repeat your answer in my own words, loudly so that everybody can understand. I might have to check with you at some point. Most importantly, there are no wrong answers: everything that is said is valuable and gives insight into the biblical story. Everyone does not have to share his or her thoughts with the group. To keep them to yourself can also be just as valuable and worthwhile. If, however, nobody chooses to express his or her thoughts it would be like having a meditation – which is

² For these essential techniques please refer to Ch. 2.4., in which the meaning and significance of echoing – beyond making quiet utterances audible – will be explained.

very nice as well but not as lively as a Bibliolog. Therefore, do not hesitate to share your ideas!

The story that we are about to enter can be found in the 14th chapter of Matthew. Jesus and his disciples have been on the road for quite a while. The disciples have made many different experiences since they joined Jesus. They have seen Jesus healing people and exorcising demons; they have listened to him discussing and arguing – and they have done the same in his name (Matt. 10:5–15). Just today the disciples have seen Jesus feeding a great crowd although they had nothing there but five loaves and two fish! Immediately afterwards Jesus orders his disciples to leave and get into the boat and go ahead to the other side. He would meet them there. His disciples do as they were told but soon find themselves in the midst of a storm rocking their boat to and fro. The boat gets battered by the waves, the situation becomes dangerous, – and then they see a figure on the water moving in their direction. They cried out in fear, “It is a ghost!” But then they hear Jesus’ voice saying, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

In this situation one of the disciples, Peter, reacts differently than the others. The Bible says (I open the Bible and read out Matt. 14:28): Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.”

You – all of you – are Peter. Peter, what makes you say these words? What makes you want to leave the boat?

– I don’t care where I go – but I have to get out of this rocking boat full of screaming people.

I just have to leave this small rocking boat and I have to get away from those screaming people around me. I just want to get out, even if that means I have to go onto the water.

– I’ve been with Jesus for quite a while now. I can heal; I can exorcise demons, so it’s time for me to learn something new.

I want to learn more from Jesus and I’m eager to enhance my abilities. Today’s lecture is walking on water.

– This is my chance! If he can do it, maybe I can as well!

Now is my chance to walk on water myself! And if it works, that would be ...

– Amazing! Walking on water – wow, I’ve always wanted to do that!

Being able to walk on water – that must be amazing and a long-cherished dream would come true for me.

– I want to know if that really is Jesus. If it is indeed him then it’ll work.

I want to find out if that person really is Jesus and this is my way to prove it.

Thank you, Peter.

And it says in the Bible (Matt. 14:29): He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus.

You are Andrew, Peter's brother, who, just like his brother, chose to follow Jesus and is sitting in the boat right now. Andrew, you see your brother walking toward Jesus on the water. How do you experience this situation?

– Shoot! He was faster than me ... again.

I am angry and annoyed that he was, again, faster than me.

– I wonder if that's gonna work ...

I am not sure whether this is going to work out or not. Why are you doubtful, Andrew?

– I know my brother and he has a big mouth. He likes to talk big but in the end he never follows through.

He's just not as good as his word. He never finishes what he's started.

– Oh, that is so typical. Always him!

I'm used to my brother acting like this. He's always ...

– He's always the star. He's just got to be the center of attention.

My brother likes to be in the spotlight. What about you, Andrew?

– I don't even have a chance anymore.

Because of my brother I can never be on top. He pushes me into the background.

– But I'm also scared for him. The waves are so high ...

It is very dangerous out on the water and I am afraid that something could happen to him!

This is what happens next (Matt. 14:30–31): But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

You are Jesus. Jesus, how do you say these words to Peter? What are your reasons for saying this?

– Well, I thought he had finally understood what all this is about – but I guess he's not ready yet.

I thought he had made greater progress by now. But he still needs to learn a lot.

– Oh, that's too bad. It looked quite promising at first – but in the end it wasn't enough ... again.

I am disappointed with my disciple. I really thought him capable of doing it – and he didn't make it.

– But at least he tried. He ventured to take the first step.

I appreciate that he had the courage to give it a try.

– It's a pity that he was doubtful in the end. I'd really like to know why so that I can help him next time.

If only I knew the reasons for his doubts. I could help him overcome them. And then ...?

– It would work the next time!
If I helped him he would be able to make it.

We continue to read in the Bible (Matt. 14:32–33): When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

You are Peter once again. Peter, we see your fellow disciples falling down on their knees and saying, “You are the Christ”. Surprisingly, you remain silent at this point. Peter, what do you do, what do you say now? Or what do you think without saying it out loud?

– This whole situation is very embarrassing for me. I wasn’t thinking and then it went all wrong.

I’m not saying anything at all because I feel so embarrassed. I was acting without thinking and hence I failed.

– I am still shocked by what has happened.

I’m still frozen in shock. I need to take a deep breath.

– At least I was daring enough to try, as opposed to the others. It’s easy for them to criticize. They were sitting safely in the boat all along.

I was the only one daring enough to actually do something. The others are only talking big. And for me this is ...?

– I think it’s completely wrong that suddenly I am the one looking small. I mean – I was the only one with the courage to step out of that boat.

I am upset and think it is unfair that my courage, unlike the others’ words, is not appreciated.

– Jesus held out his hand to me and saved me. He was there for me when I really needed him.

What’s really important to me is that Jesus reached out to me when I needed him.

– It’ll work next time.

It wasn’t that bad for a first attempt. It’ll work next time, I’m sure. It’ll work because ...?

– Because now I know that I mustn’t look down at the water. I should only look at Jesus.

Now I know that all I have to do is concentrate on Jesus instead of the dangers of the sea. And then it won’t be a problem.

Thank you, Peter.

This is how our story ends. We do not know how Jesus and his disciples reached the shore or what they thought. We also do not know what this experience has meant for Peter and his relationship to his brother, the other disciples, and Jesus, respectively. But there are other passages in the Bible addressing those issues, telling stories of courage and fear, of faith and doubt