

What is my interest in reading biblical texts? I want to learn about the experiences of people with God. Faith attributes the greatest possible authority to God. But therein also lies the danger of concealing massive selfinterests „in the name of God“. There are texts which explicitly want to justify domination of humans over humans. We have to differentiate. Bert Brecht's poem „Questions of a Reading Worker“ may be helpful here: „Caesar defeated the Gauls. Didn't he have at least one cook with him?“ In the bible cooks do get to speak. This makes the bible very special in the antique literature, that preferred heroes, kings, conquerors as speaking subjects. The **socio-historical interpretation** of the texts has largely been by-passed by theologians who are above all interested in dogmatics. If you try to link economic questions to these contents, a discussion will be refused – often by referring to how particular the social relations were at the time of biblical texts – agrarian and slave-based economic systems of patriarchal character. Now – does this mean, that the biblical references are just fictional, idealising or utopian? Can we neglect the fact that God aligns himself with oppressed and degraded people? But exactly this partisanship of God with those at the bottom should be the basis for our faith: for Judaism it's e.g. the story of Exodus.

The incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth – asserted by the Christians – emphasises the partisanship, the favour of God, his „being among“ in the depths of human existence. A theology which separates this aspect from the sense of God's omnipotence is therefore highly questionable. By the way: Jesus and his followers were living and moving at the line between absolute poverty and relative poverty.

**God's acting in the narration of the exodus** from Egypt the “slaveryworkhouse“ is definitely described as one of liberation and caring. The climax is God's covenant with the people at Sinai, which was sealed with the donation of the Tora – literally directive „instruction“- a body of laws.

This law is based on solidarity and compassion. Christians have chosen the ten commandments as their ethical handout out of the 613 dispositions of the Tora. And they disregarded f.i the prohibition of taking interest bearing loans, which is mentioned three times in the Tora, they disregarded the laws which told the people of Israel to treat strangers as well as their own people. In connection with that, we heard and discussed yesterday afternoon, let me tell you about the fantastic system of rules in the Tora, which hindered the total indebtedness. The reason to get more and more entangled into debts was the same as today: illness, missharvests, naturcatastrophies, misery or even stupidity. You had to borrow money or natural goods to survive the winter. You have to pawn or mortgage your estate, the bible speaks of a loan, given by God to your family as a permanent heritage. In Lev 25 you find the commandments to stop this vicious cercle: the socalled order of Sabbat. 1. the sabbat the seventh day of the week -we know as Sunday, an interruption of dailylife. Time to recreate, time to do things you want to do. 2. Every seventh year – the Sabbatical these people – men and women, who had to sell their capacity for work as slaves had to be set in freedom again, provided with money and other support to start again a life in freedom. This year too was the year, when the land was not cultivated. 3. The seven times seventh year – the socalled Jobelyear or the year of release – brought a

total cut of all debts and restored the original relations of possessing the hereditary estates.

All these Commandments want to facilitate a self determined life and to protect people from the abuse of power. The group which was in greatest danger was seen as the „widows, orphans and strangers“ , whose vulnerability was great, being without the protection of the extended family in a system of injustice, „Vulnerable people“ is the term used for these people by UNICEF today.

**Jesus saw himself as a Rabbi, a torah teacher** and he used the jewish didactics of midrasch – that is telling stories from the daily life of the listeners or fairytales in order to start a discussion about the place of god in these stories and their lives: where can he be found or tell these parables something about lives without him. The NT is written in Koine – a simple form of ancient Greek which has no questionmark. Christians never dared to put a questionmark at the end of a story Jesus told. But why? What, if Jesus himself did that to start a big discussion? And provoked? And smiled?

Since the time of the patristics the parables were interpreted as allegories. If we had time enough I would bring you an amusing example.

In the famous parable of the merciful Samaritan, whose part Jesus overtakes; the hurt man is the sinner, the devil is incorporated in the bandits, oil and vine is the Holy communion, the inn is the church, the keeper is a priest, and the donkey is the sermon.

And in these exegesis God - the Almighty - certainly has to be the king, the vineyard owner, the father and the owner of an estate, the master of slaves or servants. But what if he is not? Jesus advocated horizontal levels of relationships. Remember God's alignment and partisanship. And remember the only single idea of Christianity within the concert of all religions of the world: it's the belief in the incarnation.

**Michaelas story of the biscuits** is told too by Jesus in the parable of the workers in the vineyard.

At that time the majority of the population lived from agricultural work, which was done by peasants and is characterised by reciprocity and subsistence. They produced at least what was needed for day-to-day survival. The only way of obtaining big estates was by expropriating the peasants. The top of society could only achieve this if they disobeyed the Tora, and so it happened that about 2 % of the population at Jesus times controlled 70 % of all wealth. You understand that the social pyramid with the concentration of power and property in the hands of a few and their clientele on top and an everbroadening base of people in absolute poverty at the bottom was the same in biblical times as it is today. For most people work meant paying back debts and working for others. Thus they formed a cheap human mass in a set scene.

The livingconditions of free wage earners – so called day labourers were the hardest. Also women and sometimes even children belonged to this social level. They had hardly any possessions and were ready to agree any wage performed for all kind of physical work. As today, women were those most exposed to existential danger. Besides looking after the household and raising the children, they also worked on small farms and in artisans workshops. If they were not living in a household dominated by a man nothing was left to them than begging or prostitution. In the

sources the prices paid for the services of a prostitute were extremely low: a quarter of a denarius. From this we can conclude that there must have been a great number of them.

The economic doctrines of the ancient world are exclusively addressed to landowners, who very rarely lived on their estates but preferred the more luxurious life in the cities. Varro (16-27 B.C.) recommends the landowner:

„to have their land when situated in bad areas worked by day labourers, because this is more advantageous than to have the work done by slaves.“ He speaks of hard work in the fields such as harvesting fruit, gathering grapes or doing other harvest work. Since hired labourers could only get work on a piece basis – during harvest and for building projects, survival was very precarious. They were supposed to put up with flexibility and mobility which caused the breakup of their social environment – the family and village community – as today.

Cato recommends not to employ a day-labourer longer than one day, because the supposed poor nutritional situation would so weaken him that he could no longer be used efficiently.

The usual payment of one denarius for a day-labourer was sufficient to feed a family of four or five members only with barley bread – that was the cheapest bread.

The hard reality of day labourers' lives is broached in one of Jesus' parables Matthew 20,1-16. Even at the end of the day men are offering their work on the market square hoping to be employed at least for one hour, expecting a handful of grapes. The unusual point in the story is that all workers – the last too – get one denarius, which was paid for a whole day's lasting work. The long-term workers protest against being levelled down in that way (vs 12): „These last have wrought but one hour and thou hast **made them equal unto us**, which have bore the burden and heat of the day.“) . We are used to see God's generosity and benevolence in the owner of the vineyard. But is that reasonable? All workers can feed their family only this evening and only with bread. God's grace is wonderfully described in the story of Ruth, when Boas acts like God: he gives Ruth not only a piece of bread but popcorn (roasted corns), not only some water to drink but cider – Ruth learns by him about the generosity of God's *chesed* – grace. Boas fills her bags with corn at the end of her working day. He protects her from sexual abuse by the knights.

No, this owner of the vineyard sows the seed of discord. Solidarity is broken in this conflict, solidarity which helps to overcome the greatest needs. He sows envy. Let me explain the difference between greed and envy with a joke: Two friends walk along a street, a large, expensive car passes them. One says to the other: „Next year I shall drive the same car.“ In a European country the same situation happens. But one says to the other: „and next year this driver too will walk by feet.“ Do you notice: greed focusses on a thing, on a possession. Envy wants to damage a person – the story of Cain and Abel is a warning.

And here we find Michael's cookies:

In no country of the EU it is law, but everywhere it is **praxis**:

If the lowest wages draw too close to the social benefits the social benefits are reduced instead of increasing the low wages. Benefits have to be lower than wages.

And the worst paid people want to be reckoned to those who take part in the market how so ever. They don't want to accept that their living extremly is exposed to danger. This attitude destroys the possibilities of sharing, help, reciprocity and is isolating. Churches should take advantage of their image of a caring community.

Barbara Rauchwarter: Genug für alle. Biblische Ökonomie, Wieser Verlag  
Klagenfurt 2012