PROTESTANT THEOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY

From "Myth" to "Magic" -
A Comparative Study of Exegesis and Bibliolog
with the text of 2 Kings 4:1–7

A Biblical- and Practical Theological Inquiry

Interdisciplinary Study in the
Departments of Old Testament Studies
and Practical Theology

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Introduction

The method of bibliolog is relatively new, but it possesses a considerable potential that remains largely untapped due to its recent emergence. My decision to explore this topic stems not only from my personal fascination and prior research into the similarly cutting-edge field of bibliotherapy, but also from an understanding that both congregations and the broader church require methods that acknowledge and accommodate the diverse voices present within it. I believe that the approach of bibliolog is exceptionally well-suited to fulfil this need. However, for the church to adopt and effectively implement this method, it is essential to establish a strong theological and theoretic foundation, as I firmly believe that these aspects are closely intertwined, particularly in the context of interpreting the Bible, which functions both as a benchmark for the church and as a critical point of reference for theology. My thesis seeks to demonstrate how this interconnectedness can be effectively observed and cultivated within the framework of bibliolog.

My interest in this interconnectedness comes from the fact that I myself will soon be entering the field of Transylvanian church ministry as a pastor of the Transylvanian Reformed Church. I studied theology at the Protestant Theological Institute of Cluj-Napoca. In my thesis for attaining my bachelor's degree in 2022, my focus was mostly oriented toward the field of Old Testament studies, examining the prophetic portrayal of Moses in his so-called "call narrative" in Ex 2,23–4,17. However, during my master's studies, I was also captivated by the field of practical theology, and so I wrote my master's thesis on bibliotherapy, investigating its application in congregational pastoral care, between 2023–2024. My thesis on bibliotherapy, similarly to this one, was interdisciplinary, confirming my continued interest in both Old Testament atudies and the world of the Scripture in general, and practical theology. In an empirical case study, I compared the exegetical interpretations of Psalm 143 and the meaning which arose during its bibliotherapeutic application. In the autumn of 2023, I was introduced to the method of bibliolog during my studies in Groningen, when together with my peers I participated in my first bibliolog session, entering the world of a New Testament miracle story. The occasion was unlike anything I had experienced before. Its novelty thrilled me, made me think, provoked me, and at the same time fascinated me. One question stayed with me I began searching for an answer by writing this thesis: how is this more than what we are used to?

Thus, my thesis aims to achieve two primary objectives, aligning with the integration of methods from biblical and practical theology in my attempt to address the research question.

From a biblical-theological standpoint, I intend to explore the relationship between various forms of biblical text interpretation and to analyse whether the bibliolog as an approach on interpreting biblical texts can add more to the existing approaches and interpretative horizons. Meanwhile, from a practical theological perspective, my goal is to deepen the understanding of the interaction between readers and biblical texts, particularly within the framework of bibliolog, which is deeply grounded in the hermeneutics of reader-response theory.

The approach of Bibliolog, as defined by the renowned European scholar Uta Pohl-Patalong, is a method of exploring and interpreting a biblical text through group participation, such as with a congregation or a school class.[1] The practice requires careful text selection, which falls under the conductor's responsibilities.[2] The Bibliolog operates within a three-part framework: conductor, text (or plot), and participants. In this setup, the conductor introduces the story through a prologue – initially paraphrasing and providing background details – and then prompts participants to connect with a character by posing questions, guiding the session like a "tour guide."[3] Participants respond to questions in the first person by raising their hands, after which the conductor employs a technique called "echoing", where the responses are rephrased without altering the essence of the participant's answer. During the session, multiple biblical characters may "speak", and the conductor might even question fictional characters or inanimate objects referenced or implied within the text. Although the biblical text forms the foundation of the session, the full story is only revealed at the conclusion of the Bibliolog.

This is only a very brief and very basic summary of what bibliolog looks like to be. However, under this surface, the structure of the bibliolog, something, which I like to call the "magic" of the bibliolog happens. In my thesis, I do not want to add or take to the method itself, but to explore its depths and possibilities, focusing on the source of this "magic" – interpretation of biblical texts. I assume bibliolog holds a key to another dimension of biblical texts which was inaccessible till now. How this key opens a door to new horizons of interpretation is what I aim to find out.

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[1] Pohl-Patalong, *Bibliolog*, A creative Access to the Bible. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 2015. p. 9.

[2] The selection of text follows a rigorous set of guidelines, ensuring that the text addresses human experiences and relationships. Characters should be relatable, enabling participants to identify with them, and the plot must be straightforward and concise. These criteria are elaborated upon by Pohl-Patalong in detail. Pohl-Patalong, *Bibliolog*, 45-51.

[3] Pohl-Patalon, *Bibliolog*, 30.

Methods and Methodology

To see what the additional value of bibliolog is compared to previously used and largely acknowledged methods of interpretation, I aim to answer the following research question:

> What does the method of Bibliolog with the miracle story of 2 Kings 4:1–7, through processes of interpretation and identification of participants, add to different exegetical approaches?

To effectively address my main research question, it is essential to conduct a targeted comparative analysis, focusing on the distinctive interpretative possibilities presented by the text. For these interpretations to be comparable, they must first be clearly defined.

To achieve this, in the first Chapter of my thesis, I will introduce the method by its most important feature, with special attention to its hermeneutical background. In this chapter, I will define what the word "bibliolog" in the main research question stands for. Over the past fifteen years, the Bibliolog has grown increasingly popular in both church settings and group activities beyond the church in Europe. To properly explore this method, I plan to provide a brief overview in the introductory chapter of my thesis. The Bibliolog offers an interactive approach to interpreting and engaging with biblical texts through group discussion, where participants use their imagination and personal insights to "fill in the gaps" within the text.[4] This process allows us to distinguish between these interpretative "gaps" and the written text itself, helping us to better understand the text. However, I believe that the distinctions between the text ("black fire") and the gaps ("white fire") are not clearly defined. To investigate this hypothesis, I will review the most significant material on Bibliolog and provide a brief overview of its hermeneutical foundation, which is based on reader-response theory.

In Chapter 2, I will employ the method of literature review to begin my case study with the text of 2 Kings 4:1–7 and to map out the existing meaning which is achieved through employing exegetical analyses of different kinds. Here, "exegetical approaches" and the miracle story of 2 Kings 4:1–7 are in the focus of our attention. Throughout centuries, interpretation took place, in different forms, through different lenses, and scholarly publications carry the imprints of these. In order to find out how bibliolog relates to other forms of interpretation, we must see what other interpretations existed before the bibliolog for this research took place. For this, I will present some of the earliest patristic interpretations, together with the latest

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[4] Pohl-Patalong, *Bibliolog*, 9.

developments of modern to postmodern interpretations, including historical-critical, narrative-literary, feminist, childist, and intersectional analyses of the text.

Following this, in Chapter 3 I will investigate through an empirical study, how the method of bibliolog gave new meanings to the same narrative. For this, my main method on inquiry will be a thematic analysis of a transcript of a bibliolog with the text of 2 Kgs 4:1–7, facilitated by a trained conductor. The bibliolog took place in Groningen during my studies there, with 14 participants. I had the privilege to be both a participant and a researcher of the bibliolog, therefore my insights will be contextualized.

In Chapter 4, the comparison now can be done based on the findings of Chapter 2 and 3. In this chapter, the focus will fall on the "processes of interpretation and identification", two terms which will be developed in this thesis. For "interpretation", we can see in the first three chapters what hermeneutics, exegesis, and bibliolog can provide in their own right. As for "identification", the theory behind the concept is vast in different scientific fields, such as developmental and social psychology, and media studies, but interestingly, the concept of identification and its detailed discussion is lacking from the literature of bibliolog. I assume, there is more to the notion in the context of bibliolog, standing at the core of the interpretative process of the method. My aim is to reach a deeper understanding of the concept and its role in bibliolog by the end of my thesis.

1. What is Bibliolog?

The pursuit of a lively and meaningful connection between the Bible and modern readers who get further away from the text in a temporal sense has resulted in a constantly growing list of theoretical approaches and practical methods which aim to bridge this ever-growing gap. In this list appeared an entry approximately three decades ago the word "bibliolog", denoting a pragmatic approach with a solid theoretical background. While this approach has received little attention for some time, there has been an increased interest in both the method and its applicability in recent years.

In this chapter, I present this approach in the light of the most substantial literature that has been published in recent years. In this presentation, I will move my focus from the outer forms toward the inside dynamics of bibliolog, first by examining the origins of the method, its relevance to the contemporary religious situation, its methodology and forms, and finally its inherent hermeneutical principles.

1.1. Origins of bibliolog

Considering the novelty of the approach, writing a "history of research" seems odd when the current scholarly work on bibliolog is history in the making. Moreover, since Peter Pitzele, the inventor of the method, is still present in the discussion as a contemporary scholar and expert in bibliolog, it would be more appropriate to use Pitzele's words, and instead of a history of research to speak about the origins of the method, about which Pitzele himself wrote a personal account.[5]

Peter Pitzele received an invitation in the spring of 1984 from Samuel Klagsbrun to conduct a class in his course on leadership at the Jewish Theological Seminary. Combining his literary knowledge and experience as a psychodramatist, Pitzele, as he describes it, in a "shotgun marriage of necessity"[6], delivered a class to students on the life of Moses and his leadership role. In this class, students were required to answer questions posed by Pitzele, stepping into Moses' shoes and responding in the first person. It was within the walls of this seminary that Pitzele claims to have encountered the concept of midrash for the first time.

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[5] Pitzele narrates the origins of the method in his handbook with a personal tone, which I am summarizing in this section. For Pitzele's detailed account, see Peter Pitzele, *Scripture Windows: Towards a Practice of Bibliodrama*, Los Angeles: Torah Aura Productions, 1998, pp. 14–15.
[6] Pitzele, *Scripture Windows*, p. 14.

Following this lecture, Pitzele's direction shifted, and his interest turned towards biblical interpretation brought to the surface through role-playing connected to the midrashic tradition. During further lectures and classes, events held in synagogues and churches, as well as within retreat centers and therapeutic communities, Pitzele demonstrated "this dance between text and drama".[7] Thus, the method known then as bibliodrama was born, coined by Pitzele and developed together with his wife, Susan Pitzele. After its success in New York, this form of bibliodrama spread to Europe, taking root in theological circles in Germany through the scholarly and educational efforts of Uta Pohl-Patalong and others.

In 1998, Pitzele attended the first international bibliodrama conference at the North Elbian Protestant Academy in Bad Segeberg, and to his surprise, he had to acknowledge that there was already a widespread movement in development under the name bibliodrama with similar practices to his own.[8] However, there were significant differences between the practice of European bibliodrama and the bibliodrama practiced by Pitzele, which required both conceptual clarifications and aroused the interest of European scholars in the new method. After the conference, Pohl-Patalong and her colleague Frank Muchlinsky invited Pitzele to present his method to scholars in Germany in a training course of several days, which took place a year later under the title "bibliodrama as Midrash". This is where the above-mentioned terminological clarification took place and Pitzele's approach received the official name of bibliolog.[9] In 2003, another visit to Bad Segeberg followed, which began a line of courses in German on the approach. The growing demand for courses required a more stable format, and so the International Bibliolog-Network was finally founded in 2006. The Network was established together with the Pitzele couple and was accompanied by a well-established training programme that further extended the framework of bibliolog and brought the method beyond the borders of German-speaking Europe.

Pohl-Patalong calls the sequence of events summarised above the "origin myth" of bibliolog.[10] However, if we want to talk about a method in the context of scientific discourse, one needs more than "myth". For this reason, one may call the process of the past decades the "demythologization" of bibliolog. Since the first few bibliologs held by the Pitzele couple, the

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[7] Pitzele, *Scripture Windows*, p. 15.

[8] Uta Pohl-Patalong, the writer of another significant handbook on bibliolog with emphasis on the European development and practice of the approach, recalls her own encounter with the Pitzele couple and the beginning of the practice and training in the field of bibliolog in Europe. For her full account summarized here see: Uta Pohl-Patalong, *Bibliolog: A Creative Access to the Bible,* Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2015, pp. 35–37.

[9] Pohl-Patalong mentions that the new name was invented by Pitzele, who combined the Bibilio- prefix as a reference to the biblical connections of the method and the prefix of the Greek λογος, meaning "word" and indicates the dialogical and interactive character of the approach. Pohl-Patalong, *Bibliolog,* p. 36.

[10] Pohl-Patalong, *Bibliolog*, p. 35.

approach gained a form and content which later was described in written sources and analysed, studied, and practiced according to the outlined rules. Both Pitzele and Pohl-Patalog wrote a handbook on the method. Pitzele published his in 1998, as the first representative work on the approach, and Pohl-Patalong followed in 2009, with a handbook which is somewhat more comprehensive, scholarly in tone, and adapted to the European context, with case studies of the method in practice.[11] In addition to the major manuals, there have been other studies, articles and book chapters on the method, either providing a more general introduction to the method, or dealing with a formal aspect or sub-form of the method.[12] However, although the formal outlines of the method are becoming more concrete, the practice of bibliolog still raises many questions for researchers and practitioners. The discourse on the method is not limited to academic-level publications but is a living discourse among the members of the Bibliolog Network, who are also constantly sharing their experiences and seeking answers to questions about the method on a digital forum and on regular conferences for practitioners.[13]

1.2. Definition and structure of bibliolog

1.2.1. Definitions

After we have seen how the method was developed in its "origin myth", it is time to step out of this "mythical" world and bring the method closer to ourselves by focusing on its specific features: what is bibliolog? Just as the literature is wide and diverse, the definitions are not clear-cut either. Pitzele describes his method with the following words when defining it:

> Now simply described, bibliodrama is a form of role-playing in which the roles played are taken from biblical texts. (...) As I have developed it, then, bibliodrama is a form of interpretive play. To honor it with a venerable Hebrew name, bibliodrama can be called a form of midrash.[14]

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[11] For the full references see: Peter Pitzele. *Scripture Windows: Towards a Practice of Bibliodrama*. Los Angeles: Torah Aura Productions, 1998. and Uta Pohl-Patalong, *Bibliolog. Impulse für Gottesdienst, Gemeinde und Schule. Band 1: Grundformen*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 2009. An English translation of this latter book was published in 2015 at Kohlhammer, as cited above, since I have been using the translated English version of the text for accessibility reasons. Pohl-Patalong's work on the bibliolog is in fact published in the form of a trilogy, the first volume of which contains a general introduction to the method, the second volume presents the various forms of bibliolog (Uta Pohl-Patalong & Maria Elisabeth Aigner, *Bibliolog. Impulse für Gottesdienst, Gemeinde und Schule. Band 2: Aufbauformen*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 2009), and the third deals specifically with the catechetical side of the method (Uta Pohl-Patalong, *Bibliolog: Impulse für Gottesdienst, Gemeinde und Schule. Band 3: Handlungsfeld Religionsunterricht*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 2019).
[12] For an exhaustive list of publications see: https://www.bibliolog.org/was-ist-bibliolog/literaturhinweise/ (last opened: 2024.08.15)
[13] These discussions take place in a forum dedicated to facilitators and trainers of the method, therefore I did not have access to it. For more information on the Bibliolog Network see: https://www.bibliolog.org/
[14] Pitzele, *Scripture Windows*, p. 11.

When defining his own invention, firstly, Pitzele focuses on the outer dynamics of the process of bibliodrama (as he used the term at that time) named "role-playing", and in the gap indicated in the citation he simply enlists the almost endless possibilities of these roles, where the only criteria are the explicit or inferred presence of the character marked by the role in the biblical text or its connection to it in tradition or history.[15] This is how bibliodrama becomes an "interpretive play", as Pitzele names it, moving inward with his definition toward the inner dynamics of interpretation and approximating it to the Midrashic exegesis. Pitzele consciously replaces the capital letter "M" at the beginning of "midrash", and later in the process, he understands midrash as a kind of action that occurs with the text and takes place during bibliodrama, emphasizing the timelessness of midrash: "midrash—now in lower case—may be extended in time to later ages and to our own. From a more liberal perspective, midrash may include extra-literary acts of interpretation such as movement, song, visual art, and drama, which, like their classical forebears, serve to illuminate meaning in the biblical narrative."[16]

The handbook of Pitzele contains several other sentences which define other aspects of bibliodrama (or bibliolog), which comes naturally as the whole book is dedicated to elaborating the approach, but for his subchapter on definitions, he chose to highlight the above-cited aspects of the approach. The same is true for the handbook of Pohl-Patalong, with the exception that she does not dedicate a section in her book to defining the method, but rather chooses to present the method step by step, letting the reader discover what the bibliolog in its core is. The introductory sentence of the book reads:

> "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."[17]

The book starts with this opening sentence, and with this one sentence it expands the series of definitions, specifying that the method is a group practice. The focus is on the people who do the work of discovering and interpreting. This process follows a well-developed structure in which the roles and the plot of the bibliolog are controlled by an external person.[18]

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[15] In the full citation we read: "The roles may be those of characters who appear in the Bible, either explicitly and by name (Adam or Eve), or those whose presence may be inferred from an imaginative reading of the stories (Noah's wife or Abraham's mother). In bibliodrama, the reservoir of available roles or parts may include certain objects or images that can be embodied in voice and action (the serpent in the Garden or the staff of Moses). Places can speak (the Jordan River or Mount Sinai). Or spiritual figures may talk (angels, or God, or the Adversary). Then there is a host of characters from the legendary tradition (Lilith or the five perverted judges of Sodom) who can be brought onto the bibliodramatic stage. Finally, as an extension of the process in a different direction, there are the figures from history who have commented on the Bible (Philo, Augustine, Maimonides) whose presence and perspectives may be imagined and brought alive by an act of role-playing." Pitzele, *Scripture Windows,* p. 11.

[16] Pitzele, *Scripture Windows,* p. 12.

[17] Pohl-Patalong, *Bibliolog*, p. 9.

[18] For the detailed presentation of the structure of bibliolog see subsection 1.2.2. Triadic Structure of Bibliolog.

The rules of the bibliolog are given by this external person (the conductor, or in German literature, "Leitung"), and the bibliolog is defined each time a new group meets the approach in the prologue. How the prologue introduces the method varies, but the content always outlines the same form and elements. To see the most essential elements of a bibliolog is enough to look at one of these prologues. The bibliolog I conducted research on also had its "definition" in the form of the prologue, and in the order of definitions, it is fitting that this example not be omitted from the set of definitions:

> "Thank you for being here and also for this sitting (sc: regrouping in a circle for seating). We could also do it at the couches, but for a real experience, according to the rules, this is better. And since it is for this research, we thought we'd just do it according to the rules. But of course you can also do it in a church, you know, with benches, and you could do it sitting on the ground. But today we do it like this. And as you have not experienced any bibliolog, I will explain it a little bit. And for some maybe 'bibliolog', I don't really find that name so inspiring because it's, you know, what it is, but the idea is that it is actually a dialogue with the Bible text, and I love it because it's not me giving the answers, but you will give answers, you know? So it is really looking for the wisdom in the group and for ideas we have, and to explore the text together. And we are not talking about the text, but we will almost diving into the text. So what we do is that I will have a short introduction into this Old Testament Bible text, and then I will start reading it. And at a certain point, I stop, and then I will invite you to imagine being one character of that story, and you are all the same character. And then I will ask you a question, as the character. So it's a very open question. There is no right or wrong answer. That's very helpful, you know, so it's really that there can be different answers, and there can be even answers that are opposite to each other. And that's fine. They're all welcome, they're all meaningful and enriching. And so if one person says something, another person can say something else. But it's also that you don't have to answer. So you are most welcome to answer and invited to, but if you just don't want to answer, then you can also do this bibliolog in silence. If you want to answer, please do it in the character. So if I would ask you to be Moses, to imagine being Moses that you would answer as if you are Moses, you know that you say, 'I'm Moses, I did this…', and not about Moses, but as Moses. Please also raise your hand so that I can come beside you. And that's where we need the spaces, you know, so that I can stand beside you and I will repeat your answer in my own words again. (…) And then I repeat it, and then someone else is giving an answer. And I will just go on like this. And if I feel there are no more answers, then we go on in the text. So that's in principle all, so that you're all invited to join, but you are also free to just listen to what others say and be enriched by it. So that's the idea."[19]

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[19] The prologue is cited from the transcript of the audio recording made during the bibliolog. For the full transcript see Appendix. As the transcript is a shorter text, and easy to follow due to the bibliolog's structure character I will use the citations without references to this appendix, as this is the only source I have been working with.

"So that's the idea", the conductor concludes her introduction, and in fact the main features of the bibliolog are recalled in her introduction before the bibliolog session. In this and similar definitions, there is no deep theoretical foundation, no detailed research history, but all the necessary information to understand what bibliolog is. Bibliolog can be called "approach", "interpretive play", or "dialogue with the Bible text". But perhaps the most complete definition of bibliolog is that bibliolog is a process. Below, I will outline what this process looks like and what are its most essential constitutive elements.

1.2.2. Triadic Structure of Bibliolog

Although not stated verbatim by the authors, bibliolog assumes a triadic formulation, with the interaction of the elements of the process, namely the triad of the conductor – plot – participants of the bibliolog. As the latter element is an ever-changing and essentially open category element, there is no rule for who can be a *participant*. During bibliolog, participants are not confronted with tasks but with possibilities and interact with the plot through the conductor. Nowhere in the literature are there definitions or guidelines for who the participants can be or how they should behave during a bibliolog. Nevertheless, this is very substantial characteristic of bibliolog, since the bibliolog aims to explore endless possibilities of interpretation for which the text has potential through the lenses of different participants. Talking about a group method, the only thing which can be defined is the ideal number of participants. Pohl-Patalong notes about the participants that ideally a group of at least 8-10 people should be expected, as for a smaller number the bibliolog "is generally slow-moving and can be less productive", but virtually there is no upper limit to the number of participants, so the method can work well with larger congregational communities.[20] Although the participants are the ones who implement the interpretive and discovering process of bibliolog, it is the interaction with the other two elements that makes it possible. This is precisely the reason why the role of the other two elements needs to be clarified, namely the role of the conductor and the plot.

The presence of the *conductor* in the process is what really makes the bibliolog different from other interpretational methods. If the conductor were absent, the relationship between the participants and the Bible text would be no more than a simple reading and understanding of the text. Pitzele uses different concepts when he speaks of the person leading the bibliolog and distinguishes between a "facilitator" and a "director". While a facilitator is still a novice in terms of her or his leadership skills and stays relatively afloat in her or his tasks with the story

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[20] Pohl-Patalong, *Bibliolog,* p. 39.

selection and encouragement for identification in role-playing, a director is a well-trained and experienced leader of the occasion who can exploit the potential of the bibliolog in both theatrical and therapeutic terms.[21] The term "conductor" is used by Pohl-Patalong, as she clarifies that the bibliolog conductor does not have a pronounced role. A conductor is not directive in the interpretation, as a pastor would be on the pulpit preaching about a specific biblical narrative, but is conscious about her or his role, and regarding the content of the bibliolog, the conductor always takes a backseat, trusting the participants that they can interpret the discussed Biblical text from within.[22] However, this does not mean that the conductor's role can be underestimated. Just as in the light of the Lutheran teaching of "priesthood of all believers", where the pastor's role did not become superfluous, Pohl-Patalong notes that the presumption of the participant's ability to interpret the narrative does not mean that they do not need a leader who can lead them through the process of understanding and learning.[23] In this process, the conductor is present long before the participants would be.

The conductor is responsible for the selection of the text and for the election of the roles from within the text, for the presentation of it in a way that emphasizes the most relevant theological aspects of the narrative, in a way that the participants can gain valuable insights from her or his prologue to the text, in which the biblical narrative is not cited but paraphrased in a way that is true to the original content of the biblical text.[24] Closer to the actual bibliolog, the conductor prepares the setting of the bibliolog, organizes the environment, and at the beginning of each session, presents the framework and structure of the bibliolog to the participants and from the very beginning of the bibliolog, the conductor is responsible for making sure that every participant can keep up with the setting.[25] During the bibliolog, the conductor introduces the participants to the setting of the biblical narrative and formulates questions for the participants which invite them to identify and role-play and which require them to answer in first person. The response of the participants is later followed by the "echoing" of the conductor, which paraphrases the participants' responses in a way that it is made audible for the whole group as a significant a valuable insight and helps both in deepening

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[21] Pitzele, *Scripture Windows*, p. 35.
[22] Pohl-Patalong, *Bibliolg,* pp. 28–29.
[23] Pohl-Patalong, *Bibliolog,* p. 29.
[24] Pohl-Patalong summarizes the role of the conductor on a few pages in her introductory chapter, see Pohl-Patalong, *Bibliolog*, pp. 28-30. However, one must note that the role of a conductor is not as simple that its complexity can be summarized in a few sentences. The later chapters of the above-mentioned handbooks deal almost exclusively with the role of the conductor and give an insight into the background of the conduction of bibliolog. In fact, bibliolog training is a conductor training, where those who wish to learn and master all the details of the method. As this thesis is not intended to add to this well-established toolkit or to modify the stable method, I will only summarise the most essential elements of the conductor's tasks.
[25] The introduction quoted above is a good example of this kind of conductor speech.

the experience for the participants, and giving an edge to their answers when expressing oneself meets its linguistic limits.[26] At the end, the conductor is the one, who in the context of an epilogue detaches the participants from the story calling them back to reality and ends the session by reading the story from the Bible, and in some cases participates in the evaluation of the session.

The role of the conductor is essential, and so is the role of the *plot*, where the definition becomes even more complex. If the origins of the bibliolog can be called "mythical", the plot of it can be considered as the "magic" of the bibliolog. In the entanglement of the biblical narrative evoked by the conductor and the responses of the participants to the questions posed to them, meaning arises, when the participants themselves "join the story".[27] The plot of the bibliolog is not solely built from the plot of the biblical narrative and the dynamic between the characters but is based on the interaction of the participants with the narrative and the roles which they can take up during the bibliolog. The plot is what makes bibliolog unique and valuable both for the interpretation of the biblical narrative and for the personal understanding and lives of the participants. But to understand how the plot is developed at this threshold, we must dig deeper and evaluate the underlying hermeneutical principles of the approach.

1.3. Hermeneutics of bibliolog

The role of hermeneutics is crucial when it comes to interpreting any type of text or engaging in activities that involve interaction with a text. In the context of bibliolog, the interaction between participants and a biblical text highlights the significance of biblical hermeneutics in the process.

"Biblical hermeneutics investigates more specifically *how* we read, understand, apply, and respond to biblical texts",[28] as Thiselton states, and therefore if one wants to understand truly how the plot of the Bibliolog unfolds from the encounter between each participant and the biblical narrative, one must evaluate the approach from the perspective of this interaction, which according to the definition is what biblical hermeneutics investigates. In the interconnectedness of the elements of the above-outlined triadic formulation, it becomes inevitable that interpretation takes place. Pitzele's other definition underlines this idea: "Text-centered Bibliodrama is a creative and expressive mode of biblical interpretation".[29] In this

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[26] Pohl-Patalong, *Bibliolog*, pp. 61–62.
[27] Pohl-Patalong, *Bibliolog*, p. 25.
[28] Anthony C. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics, An introduction*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009. e-book edition.
[29] Pitzele, *Scripture Windows,* p. 23.

interpretative process, taking into consideration the hermeneutical turn of the 20th century, both the "responsible interpretation" of the biblical text and the "horizons of understanding that readers or communities of readers bring to the text" become important.[30]

Therefore, when we approach the bibliolog from a hermeneutical point of view, we are looking for an answer to the question "how?" posed by Thiselton. In the introductory chapter of his book, namely, Thiselton looks for a definition of hermeneutics, and in his final statement, he explores the possibilities of answering this "how?" question: "...whereas exegesis and interpretation denote the actual processes of interpreting texts, hermeneutics also includes the second-order discipline of asking critically what exactly we are doing when we read, understand, or apply texts. Hermeneutics explores the conditions and criteria that operate to try to ensure responsible, valid, fruitful, or appropriate interpretation."[31] To answer the "how?" question, we must first answer "what exactly are we doing?", by defining the conditions and criteria of understanding. The aim of this sub-section in presenting the bibliolog is to outline how bibliolog helps the participants in understanding and interpreting biblical texts, and in what way this understanding is different from the above-mentioned process of exegesis and interpretation.

As we have seen before, bibliolog has an established way of looking at what happens during a bibliolog, so the conditions' visible side is laid already. However, if we consider the group setting and the multiple interpretive horizons of engaged participants resulting from it, we can come to the logical conclusion that there are so-called conditions that are not self-evident, and there are criteria that must be considered when dealing with biblical texts. Moreover, the conditions of interpretation are not only given by the conductor's side of the plot (delivering the prologue, posing questions, etc.), but also by the inner claims of the biblical text.

Pohl-Patalong, although using different terminology than Thiselton, speaks of the importance of the "how?" question, and by the very nature of the method, raises questions mainly concerning the legitimate interpretation of the biblical text, stating that "bibliolog inevitably raises these questions[32] because it presupposes a certain understanding of texts and their interpretation and promotes it at the same time".[33] Interpretation is something bibliolog aims for. The approach not only takes into account the fact that the connection between the text

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[30] Thiselton, *Hermeneutics,* e-book edition.
[31] Thiselton, *Hermeneutics*, e-book edition.
[32] In an earlier paragraph, in the introduction to the hermeneutical discourse, she cites the following questions as examples, to which she also refers in her definition: "Under which conditions can we understand and properly interpret them (the texts)? Where does an appropriate and legitimate text interpretation end and where does misinterpretation start?" Pohl-Patalong, *Bibliolog*, p. 87.
[33] Pohl-Patalong, *Bibliolog*, p. 87.

and the participants within bibliolog inevitably entails and anchors an interpretation, but also that this interpretation must be carried out within a set framework and set criteria.[34]

In the following section, I present this hermeneutical framework, which will help us to navigate the theoretical concepts of bibliolog and to understand how we can answer the question "how?" when it comes to the plot of bibliolog.

1.3.1. Bibliolog as midrash - the "white fire" and "black fire" of the text

Pitzele's attempts with the bibliolog initially came from his background as a literary theorist and psychodramatist, without a well-defined hermeneutical foundation behind them, and he instinctively drew on his competences in interpreting the Scripture, harnessing the power of creative-imaginative processes. On the first of these occasions, as the above account testifies, he was confronted with the fact that his efforts were not particularly novel but involved the tools of rabbinic scriptural interpretation - the midrash.

The midrash is one of the most significant of the Jewish interpretative approaches, with the texts belonging to it being rabbinic commentaries that process units of both legal corpora and non-legal texts, generally moving through the Scripture verse by verse and arriving at a novel observation in the conclusion of the commentary on the verse.[35] Midrash derives from the root *d-r-sh*, as a verb meaning "to inquire", "to investigate", "to seek", and in most cases, the purpose of the inquiry is nothing other than finding God's will (see e.g. 1Sam 9:9; 2 Chron 17:4; 22:29; Ps 119:10; Jer 21:2), or investigating earthly matters (e.g. Deut 13:14; Judg 6:29). In later texts, attested by the late Biblical Hebrew, the nominal form (מִדְרָשׁ, see in 2Chron 13:22; 24:27) also appears, with the meaning "story", "book", or as an allusion to the later form of the midrash, as "a commentary".

Due to the different genres of the texts, two types of midrash can be distinguished: the midrash halakah, which relates to the legal texts and arrives at legislative conclusions, and the midrash aggadah, which is a commentary on the non-legal texts in the broadest sense, and which allows freedom for different commentaries in terms of genre and character.[36] Although the term

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[34] In the words of Pohl-Patalong: „Bibliolog is not just a simple method that could be combined with any other theoretical understanding of the biblical text or the role of the conductor and participants. It is an approach with certain requirements and consequences." Pohl-Patalong, *Bibliolog,* p. 87.

[35] For the very concise presentation of midrash I consulted: Paul Mandel, 'Midrash and Aggadah. I. Judaism.'. *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception Online*, edited by Constance M. Furey, Peter Gemeinhardt, Joel Marcus LeMon, Thomas Chr. Römer, Jens Schröter, Barry Dov Walfish and Eric Ziolkowski, Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2021, pp. 1–6.; Craig E. Evans, 'Jewish Exegesis', *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible,* edited by Vanhoozer, Kevin J. Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, 2005, pp. 380–384.

[36] The list provided by Mandel gives an idea of what this variety means: "...midrash is a rabbinic comment of any sort, containing either legal or non-legal content, that is appended to a biblical verse, often presenting a novel conclusion arising from the verse." Mandel, 'Midrash and Aggadah', p. 1.

"aggadic midrash" is still used today in the midrashic scriptures associated with non-legal texts, the later interpretation of "aggadah" has become generally applicable to didactic rabbinic sayings, while "midrash" refers to a closely related explanation of a text, which also follows a set of rules (*middot*).[37]

The classification of these midrashic scripts shows a kind of dichotomy: on the one hand, it is closely related to the text, its closer reading is supported, the grammar and the syntax's significance is very important, and the linguistic usage of the text is definitive regarding the interpretation; on the other hand, midrashic interpretations, especially concerning non-legal texts, may give rise to fanciful, suggestive interpretations, in the background of which the didactic-homiletical aim of the given interpreter becomes more important than the message of the text for its primary addressees. Biblical texts thus offer a solution to the problems of contemporary times through midrashic interpretations, rooted in the hermeneutical principle that a scriptural text has a divinity and ultimate significance, and it can hold many meanings and possibilities for exploring the relevance of scripture (cf. Jer 23:29).[38] The purpose of midrash is best captured in a sentence by Evans when he juxtaposes the Halakah and Aggadah texts, which already hints at how midrash relates to the Bible: "Haggadic midrash was much more imaginative in its attempts to fill in the gaps in Scripture and to explain away apparent discrepancies, difficulties, and unanswered questions."[39]

Pitzele argues that the midrash itself articulates a kind of self-interpretation, according to which the possibility of interpreting texts is somehow located in the gaps between the texts.[40] Interestingly, we read about this in a passage from the halakhic midrash, in the Jerusalem Talmud, in which two terms that Pitzele included as key concepts in his bibliolog's vocabulary, the terms "white fire" and "black fire", appear.[41]

The Talmudic passage discusses the question of the location of the Torah scroll within the Temple sanctuary, in a discussion between Rabbi Talmunah and Rabbi Phineas. While the primary topic of rabbinic discourse revolves around the placement of the physical scroll, Rabbi Simeon ben Laqish's instructive remark is cited as a conclusion, which delves into the essence and definition of the Torah itself: "The Torah which the Holy One, Praise to Him, gave to

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[37] For a more detailed summary of these rules see: Evans, 'Jewish Exegesis', pp. 381–382.

[38] See also Pohl-Patalong, Uta & Deeg Alexander. 'Theologie im »weißen Feuer«. Der Prozess des Theologisierens im Midrasch und im Bibliolog als Herausforderung für gegenwärtiges Theologietreiben'. *Praktische Theologie* 55/1 (2020). pp. 34–41. p. 36.

[39] Evans, "Jewish Exegesis", p. 381.

[40] Both handbooks refer to the following midrashic passage. Pitzele, *Scripture Windows,* pp. 23–24.; cf. Pohl-Patalong, *Bibliolog*, p. 26.

[41] For the full text see: Jerusalem Talmud, Shekalim 6:1:15, (Ed: Heinrich W. Guggenheimer, 1999-2015) https://www.sefaria.org/Jerusalem_Talmud_Shekalim.6.1?lang=bi (last opened: 2024.08.14)

Moses, was white fire engraved in black fire. It was fire mixed with fire; hewn from fire, given from fire: That is what is written: From His right hand, the fiery law to them."[42] The absence of any locational references in the final statement suggests a shift in focus, with an allusion to the history of the Torah's transmission through the cryptic reference to Deuteronomy 33:2. The interpretation of this verse mysteriously differentiates between the Torah's essential "white fire" and the "engraved black fire." The rabbinic explanation sidesteps defining these two elements, instead focusing on their relationship. It states that the Torah is "mixed with fire; hewn from fire, given from fire." What then could the "white fire" and "black fire" signify considering the text? The meaning of the "black fire" (אֵשׁ שְׁחוֹרָה) is relatively clear following the participle verb חָרַת ("to engrave", "to inscribe") associated with it, thus referring to the written Torah scroll. Nevertheless, the concept of "white fire" (לְבָנָה אֵשׁ) also appears in the sequence of thought without a clear definition, necessitating a closer look at the text cited by Rabbi Simeon ben Laqish and considering the unique character of midrashic exegesis.

The midrashic liberty can be discerned in how the rabbinic explanation seemingly isolates a single expression from Deuteronomy 33:2 (אֵשׁ דָּת) to legitimize the Torah's divine authority within the sanctuary through the image of fire. However, in a paradoxical way, even this one verse and term within it can show how wide the variety of interpretations can be. According to Otto, the connection between the "fiery law" (דָּת אֵשׁ) in Deuteronomy 33:2 and the Achaemenid royal ideology suggests a different meaning than the one commonly defined by rabbinic commentaries.[43] While most rabbinic commentaries view fire as a tool of divine punishment, the Achaemenid ideology linked to this phrase suggests a contrary meaning. Within the Achaemenid vocabulary, evidenced by parallel texts, the term ʾeš dāt appears to represent the royal power and the tradition it upholds.[44] Though suggesting a completely different translation for the problematic term of ʾeš dāt,[45] Lewis argues that the term is less contextual but rather conceptual within the OT, as the divine fire of JHWH as a motif is a prominent image used by the authors to depict divine presence.[46] The term (אֵשׁ) appears in all

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[42] Jerusalem Talmud, Shekalim 6:1:15.

[43] Eckart Otto, *Deuteronomium 12–34. Zweiter Teilband: 23,16–34,12* (Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament), Freiburg: Herder 2017. p. 2241.

[44] Otto, *Deuteronomium*, p. 2242. To understand Otto's arguments, it is important to note that he considers the text of Deut 33 to be a late dating and relates it to the royal hymns of the Achaemenid period. See pp. 2238–2243.

[45] Following Steiner, Lewis argues that the text contains an archaic form of the verb *dāʾāt*, which results in the following translation: "from his right hand, fire flew". Lewis in his article argues that this translation would perfectly fit into the concept of divine fire present throughout the OT, but since the Talmudic passage cites the verse with the "fiery law" meaning variant and the rabbinic interpretation adopts the supposedly Iranian/Old Persian loanword, therefore the problem related to the translation is not relevant for our discussion at this point. Theodore J. Lewis, 'Divine Fire in Deuteronomy 33:2', *JBL* 132, no. 2 (2013), pp. 791–803; pp. 794–796.

[46] Lewis, 'Divine Fire', pp. 797–798.

literary strata of the Pentateuch (see. Gen 15:17; Ex 3:1–6; 13:21–22; 14:24; Num 9:15–16; 14:14; Deut 1:33) and in a variety of poetic and narrative text outside of it (1Kgs 18:38; Neh 9:12.19; Ps 78:14; Ps 18:9), where it accompanies the divine theophany as a sign of the divine presence.[47] Although, from the perspective of both the halakhic and aggadic variants of midrash, the general impression is that it approaches the text atomistically, it is hard to deny that these concepts were prevalent in the rabbinic interpretation of the Talmudic passage.[48] When we look only at the aforementioned Talmudic passage, the meaning of "white fire" in the interpretation of Deut 33:2 brings into play the entirety of biblical tradition on a conceptual level and creatively constructs the concept of "white fire", which, according to all indications and considering the entirety of tradition, is an expression of divine presence and authority. In the Talmudic passage, therefore, the "white fire" appears as the authoritative divine presence, which is the source of the "black fire".

The relevance of the above detour can be understood by asking, in relation to the Talmudic "black fire" and "white fire", what relevance was attributed to the terms within the context of the bibliolog. When we begin to talk about the hermeneutical background of the bibliolog, these two concepts, along which the method operates, are inevitable. In what follows, after tracing the midrashic roots, it is necessary to take a closer look at how the existing scholarly work on the approach of bibliolog defines the terms "black fire" and "white fire" of the text and what are the strengths and the limitations of these definitions. When first using the terms, Pitzele writes:

> "The black fire is seen in the form of the printed or handwritten words on the page or scroll; the white fire is found in the spaces between and around the black. The black fire is fixed for all time; the white fire is forever kindled by fresh encounters between changing times and the unchanging words. The black fire establishes the canonized object we can all see before us; the white spaces represent the endless potential for the fresh interpretation of that object. Bibliodrama takes place in the open spaces of the text for which the black fire, the black letters, are the boundaries."[49]

The term "black fire" as defined is broadly consistent with what the rabbinic commentary also presents as an interpretation, since the "written words on a page or scroll", its

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[47] Lewis, 'Divine Fire', pp. 796–798.

[48] Devora Steinmetz argues that the aggadic midrash addresses the biblical tradition in a broad way, incorporating stories, images and concepts that are commonly known and rooted in the tradition. In contrast to the general, atomistically defined midrashic picture, Steinmetz convincingly argues in her case study that the stories view the texts from a broader perspective. For her discourse on the question see: Devora Steinmetz, 'Beyond the Verse: Midrash Aggadah as Interpretation of biblical narrative', *AJS Review* 30, no. 2 (2006, Nov). pp. 325-345.

[49] Pitzele, *Scripture Windows,* pp. 23–24.

"fixed" character, and the reference to it as a "canonized object" within the biblical context clearly refer to the written text of the Bible. In contrast to the rabbinic commentary, however, in the Jewish tradition the range must be extended to include the Nevi'im and Ketuvim in addition to the Torah scrolls, and in the Christian tradition it is essential to include the New Testament texts. However, even if the substance of "black fire" is defined by Pitzele, from his definition it would seem that black fire is nothing more than a set of words lined up on a page, which is indeed a component of the bibliolog, but the bibliolog begins where the creative reading of these words starts.[50] Pitzele does not go deeper here exploring the concepts of "black fire" and "white fire", but being aware of the textual meaning of the words in the Talmudic passage it becomes evident that the terms are used with a slight liberty as inspiring metaphor to describe what the bibliolog's interpretative horizon implies.

Pohl-Patalong and Deeg take one step further in the analysis of the relationship between midrash and bibliolog. They state, that the midrash and the bibliolog are closely comparable, but the differences must also be taken into account: in the midrash, the interaction of the biblical text with other texts is represented, or its interpretation is sought in its details, even broken down to grammatical levels; in the bibliolog, on the other hand, individuals are placed in the situation of the characters and constellations of the biblical story, they experience the situation of the characters in the given circumstances ("situative Auslegungen"), and this is what gives the bibliolog its real richness.[51] On the subject of midrash, the authors also warn against idealisation, as rabbinic interpretation of the scriptures was not open and democratic for all, with no one but educated men having a voice and a say - women, for example, had little access to the interpretation of the scriptures at all.[52] In contrast, bibliolog is an inclusive method, where the group of participants is generally open and every opinion expressed carries equal weight and importance.

In addition to drawing an important line with her co-author between midrash and bibliolog, Pohl-Patalong further nuances Pitzele's definition of the terms, especially with regard to the significance of "black fire". Adopting the expressions with caution, she states that the "black fire" can be problematized, not only because of the question of authority of the biblical texts but also because the text itself carries intentions in the historical-critical context in which

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[50] For his exact phrasing, see: "It is, then, with the ability to read creatively that Bibliodrama begins. It begins in the mind of a reader who discovers what the biblical stories leave out, the gaps and the spaces in the tales, and who imagines ways they might be filled." Pitzele, *Scripture Windows,* p. 26.
[51] Pohl-Patalong & Deeg, 'Theologie im »weißen Feuer«.', p. 40.
[52] Pohl-Patalong & Deeg, 'Theologie im »weißen Feuer«.', p. 36.

it was written.[53] By making a difference between ambiguous and arbitrary interpretations, Pohl-Patalong argues that the latter should be eliminated in bibliolog, as the "black fire" poses limits to interpretation by the internal coherence and textual strategy. During the interpretative processes unfolding throughout a bibliolog, the text must serve as a counterpart for personal interpretations. The biblical text is presented by the conductor, not only verbatim, but sometimes with paraphrasing. Therefore the conductor is responsible not only for reading the narrative as it is on the pages of the Bible (as in Pitzele's "black fire"), but also for including theological and historical-critical findings about the selected narrative.[54] When it comes to the question of the interpretation of texts, Pohl-Patalong also draws attention to the importance of the role of the conductor in the interpretative process, since it is crucial skill for them to know the scriptural texts in depth and to be aware of the hermeneutical basis that is rooted in the fact that the historical-critical analysis of biblical texts points to a much more distant time in which the text was written and that this difference must be taken into account.[55]

But where does the "white fire" start then? Can we enlist historical findings and rephrasing of the text to the "black fire"? Or should we restrain the limits of the written words even more, and question the reliability of translations and textual variants as well? The answer to these questions is to be found in our endeavour to define the answers for the hermeneutical questions of "how?" and "what exactly are we doing?" in bibliolog. As per definition, Pohl-Patalong directs our attention toward the reader-response criticism, as the core of the hermeneutical process in bibliolog.

1.3.2. Reader-response theory in practice

In bibliolog, the text is seen as a "space", an inviting environment for the participants to make their own observations about the text at hand and to engage with the "black fire" in a creative way.[56] However, this world is already given by the text itself, as Pohl-Patalong stresses the importance of the textual factors. How readers interact with this given space, the "white fire" of the text, is what creates bibliolog, which then becomes, with the words of Pohl-Patalong, "reader-response theory in practice".[57]

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[53] Pohl-Patalong devotes an entire section to proving that the text itself carries a kind of intention, and suggestively titles the sub-chapter 'The "black fire" as a limit to interpretation'. Pohl-Patalong, *Bibliolog*, pp. 92–95.

[54] Pohl-Patalong, *Bibliolog*, p. 96.

[55] Pohl-Patalong describes this skill of conductors with the following concept: "hermeneutisches Verständnis auf historisch-kritischer Grundlage als gewachsene Texte einer bestimmten Zeit.". See Pohl-Patalong & Deeg, 'Theologie im »weißen Feuer«.', p. 37.

[56] Pohl-Patalong, *Bibliolog*, p. 89.

[57] Pohl-Patalong, *Bibliolog*, p. 86.

Reader-response theory is rooted in the axiom that the "reader, or community of readers »completes« the meaning of the text."[58] The intentions of the author need completion, as the implied meaning or message of the text is solely a potential until the reader finds its relevance. Therefore, the reader becomes an active participant in the meaning-making process. The hermeneutical movement of the second half of the 20th century emerged as a natural response to the claims of Romanticism that the author was the actual conveyor of meaning, and to the New Criticism in which form became the transmitter of meaning. Among literary theorists, the reader-response theory has not been a unified direction either, but its various forms have been placed at either end of a spectrum depending on the controlling element of the text itself in the models provided.

The bibliolog by the definition of Pohl-Patalong stands on one side of the spectrum in terms of its hermeneutic background, the foundations of which were laid by Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss, in which the reader is justified by the text to "fill in the gaps" and to "complete" its meaning.[59] The text must be "open" for interpretation, as some technical texts leave almost no room for the reader's freedom.[60] As for how "closed" or "open" the meaning of some Biblical passages are, is still a matter to be debated. However, the hermeneutical turn and the rejection of some Christian theological traditions and dogmas regarding the univocal character of the Scripture gave space in the past few centuries to a more polyphonic biblical hermeneutics, in which the diversity of voices can and should be considered with space for interpretation – which bibliolog aims to provide.[61]

Although the textual limits are recognized and emphasized in bibliolog as "limits of interpretation", we must not forget that the reader is in fact at the heart of the interpretative structure of reader-response theory, since it is the reader who, according to Iser, participates in the "concretisation" of the potential of the text.[62] He also states that in reader-response theory the actual focus should be on the "ideal reader" or the "literary" reader, who is willing to step

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[58] For the brief introduction on the history of reader-response theory/criticism my main source was: Thiselton, *Hermeneutics*, e-book edition.

[59] By naming Wolfgang Iser and Umberto Eco as the representatives of the reader-response theory Pohl-Patalong chooses the more moderate side of the reader-response theory, in which the text as a space for interpretation is still significant in the process of interpretation, as it carries an internal coherence which defines the possibilities of interpretation. See for reference Pohl-Patalong, *Bibliolog*, pp. 90, 93–94.

[60] Umberto Eco defines "closed" texts as texts with predetermined meaning by the author, which leave no room for the reader's freedom in interpreting the words – the information is exact in a way that misunderstanding it could lead to extreme conclusions. Thiselton gives the classic example for such texts by mentioning a medical prescription, in the case of which the interpretation is severely restricted, and the intentions of the author should not be distorted. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics,* e-book edition.

[61] Pohl-Patalong, *Bibliolog*, pp. 91–92.

[62] For the wording see: Thiselton, *Hermeneutics,* e-book edition.

into the world of the text and share conventions and assumptions with the author of the text, having an openness toward the actual potential of the written words.[63] Still, the text has a prevalent role. All the same, Pohl-Patalong in her presentation of the hermeneutical background of bibliolog draws primarily on the works of Iser and Eco, who are on one side of the spectrum.

We must critically ask what happens when interpretation slips to the other side of the scale in the process of bibliolog. Stanley Fish, Norman Holland, and David Bleich are those who argue that the reader actually finds in the text what he or she puts into it since the reader's response is not about the meaning, but the response becomes the meaning.[64] The role of the subjective component although less unequivocally, is also acknowledged in bibliolog: "In bibliolog the 'white fire' is the place where the personal life story is included and comes into contact with the text. The 'gaps' between the 'black fire' of the text will be filled from the participants' reservoir of life experiences. The 'white fire' begins to blaze. This however is not the end in itself but helps us understand the 'black fire'".[65] Yet, the final word both in hermeneutical and literal way, according to Pohl-Patalong is attested to the biblical narrative, the "black fire" of the text.

1.3.3. "Hermeneutics of Confidence" – is there a place for suspicion?

Pohl-Patalong refers to the hermeneutics guiding bibliolog as the "Hermeneutics of confidence", which essentially implies that "bibliolog believes, that when people deal with biblical texts, they prove to be meaningful and salvific."[66] The confidence thus lies in the inherent meaning of the text, which aligns nicely with the reader-response theory's so-called moderate application, where the text guides the reader's interpretative possibilities. The term created by Pohl-Patalong is not accidentally used in citation marks, since it is a new way to express how bibliolog assumes that contemporary readers can grasp the meaning of narratives originally written for audiences temporarily and culturally distant from them. The confidence therefore lies in the fact that the words carry the space of interpretation. But what if we approach the question from a seemingly opposing but relevant hermeneutical concept, from the perspective of hermeneutics of suspicion?

The term inspired by the work of Paul Ricoeur denotes a way of interpretation, which with the words of Bryan, states that "words may not always mean, or may not only mean, what

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[63] Thiselton, *Hermeneutics*, e-book edition.
[64] Thiselton, *Hermeneutics,* e-book edition.
[65] Pohl-Patalong, *Bibliolog*, p. 89.
[66] Pohl-Patalong, *Bibliolog*, p. 88.

they appear to mean at first hearing."[67] Bryan presents the hermeneutics of suspicion as "deconstructive", but nonetheless "destructive", stating, "It does not demolish the text, but rather explores what is going on in and around it. When the hermeneutic is complete, the text still stands, and stands more clearly."[68] One can easily draw a parallel at this point with bibliolog, which, although it might be said to hold the text in higher esteem by introducing the concept of "gaps", derives interpretation as the result of the process from the side of the readers, the "black fire" being stable and untouched. Moreover, the questions directed toward the readers can levitate in a "grey field", when the question and prompts of the conductor invite into the narrative characters, who seem to disappear in the background of the narratives but can be revived through an ideological reading of the biblical texts. Nevertheless, although the task of the conductor is to prepare the text and to present its historical background, which inevitably requires the elements of suspicion toward the text in the exegetical process, the finding presented by the conductor cannot be questioned by the participants, but simply reflected upon.[69]

Conclusively, the hermeneutics of confidence and suspicion are not mutually exclusive, yet the latter perspective, in my opinion, is not given enough space in bibliolog. The conductor's questions have a great impact on the process and the way of answering, thus some of the participants' questions about the narrative might not be surfacing during the process. Still, the demanding power of the "black fire" may in some cases also lead to a confrontation with the text. The conductor and the way she or he leads the occasion will greatly influence the occasion, and the questions will determine the kind of responses that can be given - but knowing the full story that is told during the bibliolog may also raise questions in a participant that the conductor may not have anticipated. Nonetheless, during the encounter with the text a revision of the narrative's content in a participant inevitably occurs, which presupposes an unspoken attitude of suspicion that must be reckoned with.

1.3.4. Conclusions

Although the method is based on midrashic concepts, the above discussion shows that bibliolog uses the concepts in a loose way. While in the midrashic reference "black fire" refers exclusively to the written text, in bibliolog the concept is also associated with contextual knowledge about the text. As far as from the above presentation goes, it seems that the "black

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[67] Christopher Bryan, 'The Hermeneutic of Suspicion', in: Christopher Bryan & David Landon, *Listening to the Bible: The Art of Faithful Biblical Interpretation*, New York: Oxford Academic, 2013, pp. 23–29. p. 23.
[68] Bryan, 'The Hermeneutic of Suspicion', p. 25.
[69] Pohl-Patalong, *Bibliolog*, pp. 26–27.

fire" of bibliolog becomes binding. At the same time, while the midrashic commentary suggests in light of Deut 33:2 that the "white fire" is itself the divine authority behind the written word, in bibliolog the term becomes sort of the opposite, meaning the space of discovery and identification for the readers. Whether the divine presence and authority and the interpretation of the readers align at some point, is the mystery of each individual bibliolog session. Interestingly however, the midrashic exegesis along which the bibliolog operates, beyond its apparent interpretive freedom, in all cases essentially speaks to and involves in the interpretation the wider scriptural tradition that is attributable to the rabbinic background, but which cannot be assumed to be in the repository of each bibliolog participant. This is not a limiting factor, in fact it makes the bibliolog significantly more inclusive, but it must also be taken into account that it calls to life the different background of the interpretive community, rather than the more traditional and theologizing community of Beth Midrash.

Similar conclusions can be drawn from the explicitly hermeneutical background. In fact, bibliolog is based on a text-centred hermeneutic. In the more moderate approaches of reader-response theory, the text limits the possibilities of interpretation, even if the interpretation remains the reader's own interpretation. The "hermeneutics of confidence" builds on the assumption that the text conveys a message and a proposition that can be understood and discovered by the reader, but significantly reduces the possibility of suspicion about the text, since the guided questions do not challenge the content of the text, only what the text does not claim. The questions or prompts for identification are not supposed to challenge the content of the text according to bibliolog theory. However, in the hands of a more deconstructively minded conductor, there might emerge some "grey fire", where what we know about the background but is unstated in the text also gets some attention and the participants can react to that equally (e.g. the voices of marginalized groups and characters). Nonetheless, the reader is also present in the process as a participant, and the text itself influences the recipient, beyond the questions posed by the conductor. How, then, is the reader present in the interpretations that arise in the bibliolog? Is there room for the reader's "scepticism" regarding what is stated in the "black fire"? Is there room for contradiction and free response to the text? How does this "grey fire", the "already known" relate to the interpretations which wire in bibliolog? To find the answers, in the following chapter I will provide an overview of the existing meaning achieved through different exegetical analyses, providing examples from commentaries, individual studies and chapters on the interpretation of 2 Kgs 4:1–7

2. Review of Literature on the Existing Interpretations of 2 Kgs 4:1–7

The bibliolog presented in my empirical research was based on the text of 2 Kgs 4:1–7. I had no control over the choice of the text. The invited facilitator picked the narrative and the text was a surprise to me until the moment of the bibliolog. The text was familiar to me, and presumably, most of the participants had already encountered the story. However, to evaluate the new meaning generated by the encounter between the participants and the text from a more scientific point of view, it is necessary to examine how the meaning created during the bibliolog compares to the way it was previously articulated. In this chapter, therefore, I attempt to give an overview of this already existing and mappable meaning, by presenting written interpretations of the text.

To do so, I will give a literature review of exegetical literature on the text. This chapter is divided into two major sections. First, I will present the existing commentary literature. Given the constraints of the thesis, I will, however, limit the wide range of commentary literature to the most significant and representative ones, some examples from the earliest and latest literature. The more general introductions and handbooks will deliberately not go into the depths of the text and will avoid going into detail. However, for the purposes of my survey of the exegetical literature, it is precisely these detailed issues that I wish to highlight in this chapter. In the second major part, I will look at the existing studies that deal specifically with 1 Kgs 4:1–7. For this latter part of this chapter, I will also briefly present the findings of the more recent research on topics which are prevalent in the text but not dealt with in detail in the commentary literature or the text-specific studies.

2.1. Text and translation

As we have seen before, bibliolog treats the biblical text as a "space" open for exploring it, taking the lead in the participants' discovering process, giving them liberty in this process and at the same time limiting the possibilities to what the text implies and gives space to.[70] In order to compare any interpretation with each other, we must have a look at the object of these interpretations, namely the text itself. Below I include in my thesis the Hebrew text of 2 Kgs 4:1–7, and my translation of this text. In the translation, I will not go into detail on textual critical observations, since the most relevant textual variants and their interpretations will be

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[70] Fort the detailed description of how the texts work in bibliolog see Pohl-Patalong, *Bibliolog*, especially pp. 89–95.

discussed by the commentaries presented below. All the same, I make some remarks on why I choose to translate some terms the way I do, which might seem different from the majority of the existing translations.

The Hebrew text of BHS[71]

ᵃוְאִשָּׁה אַחַת מִנְּשֵׁי בְנֵי־הַנְּבִיאִים צָעֲקָה אֶל־אֱלִישָׁע לֵאמֹר עַבְדְּךָ אִישִׁי מֵת וְאַתָּה יָדַעְתָּ כִּי עַבְדְּךָ הָיָה יָרֵא אֶת־יְהוָה וְהַנֹּשֶׁה בָּא לָקַחַת אֶת־שְׁנֵי יְלָדַי לוֹ לַעֲבָדִים: ²וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלֶיהָ אֱלִישָׁע מָה אֶעֱשֶׂה־לָּךְ הַגִּידִי לִי מַה־יֶּשׁ־לָכִי בַּבָּיִת וַתֹּאמֶר אֵין לְשִׁפְחָתְךָ כֹל בַּבַּיִת כִּי אִם־אָסוּךְ שָׁמֶן: ³וַיֹּאמֶר לְכִי שַׁאֲלִי־לָךְ כֵּלִים מִן־הַחוּץ מֵאֵת כָּל־שְׁכֵנָכְי כֵּלִים רֵקִים אַל־תַּמְעִיטִי: ⁴וּבָאת וְסָגַרְתְּ הַדֶּלֶת בַּעֲדֵךְ וּבְעַד־בָּנַיִךְ וְיָצַקְתְּ עַל כָּל־הַכֵּלִים הָאֵלֶּה וְהַמָּלֵא תַּסִּיעִי: ⁵וַתֵּלֶךְ מֵאִתּוֹ וַתִּסְגֹּר הַדֶּלֶת בַּעֲדָהּ וּבְעַד בָּנֶיהָ הֵם מַגִּשִׁים אֵלֶיהָ וְהִיא מִיצָקֶת: ⁶וַיְהִי ǀ כִּמְלֹאת הַכֵּלִים וַתֹּאמֶר אֶל־בְּנָהּ הַגִּישָׁה אֵלַי עוֹד כֶּלִי וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלֶיהָ אֵין עוֹד כֶּלִי וַיַּעֲמֹד הַשָּׁמֶן: ⁷וַתָּבֹא וַתַּגֵּד לְאִישׁ הָאֱלֹהִים וַיֹּאמֶר לְכִי מִכְרִי אֶת־הַשֶּׁמֶן וְשַׁלְּמִי אֶת־נִשְׁיֵכִי וְאַתְּ בָּנַיְכִי תִחְיִי בַּנּוֹתָר: פ

Translation

¹ One woman from the wives of the sons of the prophets cried out to Elisha, saying, "Your servant, my husband died. And you know well that your servant was a fearer of JHVH!ᵃ But the creditor came to take my two sons for himself as slaves." ² Elisha said to her, "What shall I do for you? Tell me, what do you have in your house?" She said, "Your maidservant has nothing in the house except a jarᵝ of oil". ³ He said, "Go, and borrow for yourself vessels from outside, from all of your neighbours; empty vessel, and not just a few. ⁴ Then go inside and shut the door behind yourself and behind your sons, and pour in all of these vessel and set aside the filled ones" ⁵ She went form him and shut the door behind herself and her two sons. They were bringingᵞ (the vessels)ᵟ to her, and she was pouring. ⁶ And when the vessels were full, she said to her sons, "Bring me another vessel", and (they) said to her, "There is no other vessel". Then the oil stopped flowing. ⁷ She came and told the man of God, and he said, "Go, sell the oil and pay your debt! And you with your sons can live from what remains."

ᵃ To put emphasis on the widow's intent with her statement about the faith of her late husband I chose to end this sentence with an exclamation mark, since the אַתָּה pronoun appended to a verb emphasizes the action implied by the verbal form.[72]

ᵝ The word אָסוּךְ is a *hapax legomenon*, linked to the verbal root סוך meaning "pour in anointing, anoint".[73] This could imply that the jar was as small as one containing enough oil for anointing, hence just a small amount.

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[71] Source: *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, Karl Elliger,Wilhelm Rudolph (ed.; 5ᵗʰ edition, ed. by Adrian Schenker.) Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft 1997. https://www.die-bibel.de/en/bible/BHS/2KI.4 (last opened: 2024.08.14)

[72] Richard Whitaker et al. *The Abridged Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew-English Lexicon of the Old Testament: from A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament by Francis Brown, S.R. Driver and Charles Briggs, based on the lexicon of Wilhelm Gesenius* 1906: n. pag. Digital edition.

[73] BDB, digital edition.

γ Both verbs (נגשׁ, "bringing" and יצק, "pouring") in v. 5b are in Hif'il participle form, which suggests the continuous character of the activity, translated here with present continuous forms.

δ The word is omitted from this section of the verse, but the context implies that they were bringing the *vessels* (כְּלִי) to the woman.

2.2. Literature review of commentaries on 2 Kings 4:1–7

Patristic and medieval literature

Charles Kannengiesser in his *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis* published in 2004 notes that 1-2 Samuel and 1-2 Kings were frequently referenced works, but that there are few specific mentions of the texts.[74] According to Kannengiesser, the patristic authors may have been aware of the strong continuities between David, Elijah, Elisha and Jesus, but the individual stories did not receive much attention in the commentary literature or textual literature of the time.[75] Nevertheless, the figure of Elisha as a prophet and miracle worker is discussed briefly in sermons of Ephrem the Syrian and Caesarius of Arles presented below, and also the 7th century work *De mirabilibus sacrae scripturae* mentions Elisha as a miracle-working prophet.[76] In these works, his figure is in the focus of attention, and the miracles were seen as prototypes of Jesus's healings.

Ephrem the Syrian (cc. 306–373) in one of his preserved sermons gives a detailed interpretation of the narrative, showing the peculiarities of the early Christian interpretative tradition.[77] He already names the widow as the wife of Obadiah, the trusted and high-ranking treasurer of Ahab, but one who could not pay back the debts to the taxmen of the king.[78] After his death, the now indebted widow turned to Elisha, the "father of orphans and the defender of widows", as the taxmen of the king "in justice, according to the law of the Hebrews, had moved against his children".[79] After establishing the narrative frame, he also turns to the symbolism of

[74] Charles Kannengiesser, *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis: The Bible in Ancient Christianity* (The Handbook of Ancient Christianity, Vol. 1), Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2004, p. 292.

[75] Kannengiesser, *Patristic Exegesis*, pp. 292–293.

[76] For a brief introduction to the history of interpretations of the character of Elisha in ancient Christianity see: Bernard McGinn, 'Elisha'. in: Constance M. Furey *et. al* (eds), *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception Online*, Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2013.

[77] For the following description of the content of the sermon I made use of the translated version of it, in: Conti, Marco (editor): *1-2 Kings, 1-2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther.* (Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. Old Testament, Vol V., Thomas C. Oden ed). Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2008. pp. 155–157.

[78] Ephrem the Syrian refers to the Targum variant of the text from the Targum Jonathan on II Kings, rooted in the intertextual connections with 1 Kgs 18, and reads: *"And a certain woman, one of the wives of the sons of the prophets, cried out to Elisha, saying: 'Your servant, my husband Obadiah, is dead. And you know that your servant feared the Lord. When Jezebel killed the prophets of the Lord, he hid a hundred men of the Lord's prophets, fifty by fifty men in a cave, and he provided them with food and water. Now the creditor has come to take my two sons to be his slaves.'"* Source: https://www.sefaria.org/Targum_Jonathan_on_II_Kings.4.1?lang=bi (last opened : 2024.08.14)

[79] Conti, *1–2 Kings*, p. 155.

the text, and sees the widow as the church, who in fact "was not abandoned when her husband ascended to heaven, but she filled the hearts of the Gentiles with the oil of the knowledge of salvation which has multiplied", the empty vessels are seen as the saints who are "filled with the fat of the holy ointment and the oil of happiness", and the oil left by the husband is seen as the mercy of Christ shown to the saints.[80]

Caesarius of Arles (cc. 470–542) also comments on the narrative, as one about the "blessed Elijah (who) typified our Lord and Saviour".[81] Preaching on the narrative, Caesarius of Arles uses the allegorical interpretation of the narrative, as he sees the widow as the church indebted by sin, who made herself subject to the devil. With the appearance of the Redeemer, the church was freed from its debt by the oil, understood as the mercy of Christ. The Gentiles are seen as the neighbours, whom mercy can be shown after they made an offer for the church, so by merit, they can get the "chrism and oil of benediction, so that they no longer merit to be empty vessels but full of God as his temples".[82] As long as the widow did not have enough oil to share, she remained indebted, but after pouring out the "oil of charity" she could free herself, and pay of the debt - so can the church and its members do so after practicing benevolence and charity work.[83]

From medieval commentaries on the text worth mentioning the notes in the _Glossa Ordinaria_.[84] As the text of 2 Kgs 4:1–7 was marked as the reading for Tuesday of the Third Week in the Latin Lenten liturgy, the _Glossa_ provides another allegorical interpretation, in which the widow with the two sons are seen as the church of the two people, Jews and Gentiles, and the filling of jars in a miraculous way is how the church fills the mind with divine love from every member of it.

It is interesting to note that in the three early interpretations presented above there are some symbolical links which seem constant and some changes in the symbolism attested to the narrative. In both patristic commentaries, the _widow_ is seen as the church, but while Ephrem the Syrian emphasizes the caregiving and preaching quality of the church through the symbolical act of pouring the oil, Caesarius of Arles grasps the indebted status of the widow linking it to the indebtedness of the church by sin. In this latter interpretation, _Elisha_ is linked to the Redeemer, implicitly Jesus, who lifts the debt of sin, whereas Ephrem the Syrian refers

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[80] Conti, _1–2 Kings_, p. 156.
[81] The texts are published in the same edition cited above, in a verse-by-verse and combined reading of the two sermons. cf. Conti, _1–2 Kings_, pp. 155–157.
[82] Conti, _1–2 Kings_, pp. 156–157.
[83] Conti, _1–2 Kings_, p. 157.
[84] For the translation and interpretation see: McGinn, 'Elisha', pp. 741–742.

to the deceased husband as Christ, the exalted Husband of the church. Other characters get special roles in each interpretation individually, Ephrem the Syrian personifying the *empty vessels* as the saints, Caerasius of Arles seeing the *neighbours* as the gentiles making an offer and by merit receiving the blessing of the oil, and in the interpretation provided in the Glossa Ordinaria the two sons get special roles as representing the church of Jews and Gentiles as equals in receiving the divine love. The most prominent similarity between the interpretations is how the oil is seen as a source of divine goods and blessings, by describing it as "oil of knowledge", "oil of happiness", "mercy of Christ" (Ephrem the Syrian), "oil of charity" (Caesarius of Arles), and as "divine love" (Glossa).

Modern biblical scholarship from the second half of the 20th century

The early allegorical and symbolical interpretations in their peculiar way reflect something from how the identification of narrative characters within the wider tradition can result in new meaning (cf. with the midrashic dialogue with biblical tradition and the identification in bibliolog). However, it is similarly important to look at the results of modern exegetical endeavours of the past decades.

James Alan Montgomery was the first amongst modern commentators to pay attention to the pericope of 2 Kgs 4:1–7 in his representative critical commentary published in 1951 as part of the *International Critical Commentary* series.[85] His explanation of the story, though is merely half-page long, but all the more concise. Montgomery points out the parallel between the text and the story of 1 Kgs 17:8 ff. In the story, the widow is described as the wife of a prophet. Montgomery observes that this is unusual for the prophetic image found in the Scripture since prophets usually lived in well separated ascetic communities. Also in his textual criticism of the first verse, he reflects on the Jewish Obadiah-tradition, which appears as the result of wordplay and an attempt at harmonizing certain textual interpretations. On the question of slavery in the light of biblical law and prophetic texts (see Ex 21:7; Am 2:6; 8:6; Is 50:1), he notes that the practice was permitted by Jewish law until after the captivity (cf. Neh 5). Interestingly, Montgomery already notes that the §117 of the Code of Hammurabi is a parallel to this, limiting the period of slavery to 3 years.[86] As the last of his mainly historical-critical

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[85] James Alan Montgomery, *A critical and exegetical commentary on the Books of Kings* (The International Critical Commentary, ed. Gehman Henry Snyder). Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1951. p. 366.
[86] The law (§117) states: "If an obligation is outstanding against a man and he sells or gives into debt service his wife, his son, or his daughter, they shall perform service in the house of their buyer or of the one who holds them in debt service for three years; their release shall be secured in the fourth year." For the source of translation and the full version of CH see William W. Hallo *et. al* (eds), *The Context of Scripture. Volume 2*. Brill Academic Publishers, 2003, p. 343.

insights, he also points out in his brief analysis that the expression translated as "pot" (אָסוּךְ) is a unique term in the Old Testament and may have referred to a small container for oil, which had a high value in its time and was a great export commodity from Palestine. In the short section of the commentary on the pericope, it can already be seen that the archaeological and historical findings in general shaped the focus of the inquiry on the text.

T. Ray Hobbs, author of the commentary on 2 Kings in the *World Biblical Commentaries* series, Vol 13., published in 1985, approaches the two narratives of the chapter four of the book under the same heading, in a short introduction providing a form-critical and literary analysis of the texts.[87] As a conclusion, he states that the texts should be interpreted as a type of "problem to solution" texts, in which the narrator uniquely combines rhetorical devices and phrases in each story.[88] In an equally short description as the one of Montgomery, Hobbs also starts his analysis by drawing a parallel between the story of 1 Kgs 17:8–16 and the narrative of 2 Kgs 4:1–7, treating the texts as doublettes. In his narrative literary analysis of the text Hobbs points out that the narrative is driven by the continuous dialogue, broken by some action from the part of the widow, but the focus is oriented toward Elisha, as the man of God. Hobbs describes the woman who gets the "direct commands, which she dutifully obeys". Later on Hobbs adds: "Her obedience to the man of God is constant". The factually clear statements of Hobbs makes the perception of the widow as a significant character of the narrative virtually impossible.

Almost at the same time, in 1988 Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor published their commentary on the second book of Kings, as the 11th volume within The Anchor Bible series.[89] As the authors mention in the preface of the commentary, their inquiry is directed by their background as historians of the Ancient Near East.[90] As usual for the series, the commentary for each passage is provided under the Notes heading, with verse-by-verse textually- and historically-critically oriented comments. The narrative approach, which was prevalent in the work of Hobbs disappears in such a commentary, but is interesting to note how the perspective of historians can produce different meanings in the same era of biblical scholarship. The emphasis, besides the textual notes (cf. earlier mentioned Jewish Targumic tradition linking the widow to Obadiah of 1 Kgs 18:3,12 rooted in the interpretation of עֲבָדְךָ; and the hapax of אָסוּךְ) falls on the reconstruction of the historical background of the text. In their comment on v. 1.

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[87] T. Ray. Hobbs, *2 Kings* (Word Biblical Commentary, Vol 13), Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1985. pp. 44–46.
[88] Hobbs, *2 Kings*, pp. 45–46.
[89] Mordechai Cogan & Hayim Tadmor, *II Kings. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (The Anchor Bible, Vol. 11), Doubleday & Company, 1988, pp. 53–60.
[90] Cogan & Tadmor, *II Kings,* p. v.

they see a mirroring of the religious strife in the time of Ahabites, as the term יָרֵא אֶת־יְהוָה serves as a replacement of the Deuteronomic term of "fearing God".[91] Similarly, they analyse the historical background of slavery related to the narrative, but in their analysis, they do not give more information than Montgomery did before in his commentary. Concluding the Notes section, the authors comment on all four narratives of chapter 4.[92] They state that the dating is hard due to a lack of historical references within the narratives, and the general description of poverty and need as the basis of the current economic status of Israel can be linked to multiple time periods. Nevertheless, they recognize that folkloric motifs could connect these stories, as narratives circulated within the circles of the Sons of Prophets. Cogan and Tadmor interpret the narrative as a relic of ancient times, where each line adds to the comprehension of the broader context of the author's writing. By uncovering concealed political and religious allusions within the words of this brief narrative and piecing together the historical backdrop defined by poverty and conflict, they stress the role of the authors of the text in the interpretation process, whose intentions and messages endure across time and space.

After the millennial turn with the rise of awareness in biblical criticism toward a more sensible and inclusive approach to the narratives, the focus in commentary literature has changed. Although feminist criticism or post-colonial exegetical endeavours were not novel by this time, the commentary literature presented above dating from the 1950s till the end of the 1980s shows that not much attention was paid to the character of the widow, as a marginalised female character in the narrative and possibly within her time's historical circumstance, neither to the inherently problematic nature of debt-slavery of children as a phenomenon seemingly "naturally" present in the text. Some commentators, however, made some significant remarks on these aspects of the text after the general change in perspective.

Martin A. Sweeny in his commentary on both books of Kings published in 2007 in *The Old Testament Library* series is one of the authors who balances the historical-critical and narrative analysis regarding the books presented and points out some key features of the texts resulting from the novel approach outlined above.[93] He is also avowedly adopting the perspective of postmodern historiography, looking at these historical books as a coherent narrative, chosen to be told by the author as a contemporary interpretation of some of the events

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[91] Cogan & Tadmor, *II Kings,* p. 56.
[92] Cogan & Tadmor, *II Kings,* pp. 59–60.
[93] Sweeney, Martin A. *I & II Kings: A Commentary* (Old Testament Library). Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013 (paperback edition, original published in 2007).

of his era, selectively, guided mostly by ideological concerns.[94] When he applies this approach to the narrative of 2 Kgs 4:1–7, new meaning arises. To illustrate the different character of his exegetical endeavours, I want to highlight two key ideas from his short presentation on the narrative.

The first one is formulated in his introduction to the wider pericope of 2 Kgs 4:1–37.[95] While other commentators were previously concerned with the similarities between the narratives of 2 Kgs 4:1–7 and 1 Kgs 17:8–16 with their main interest in redaction history, Sweeney pays more attention to the narrative connections between the narrative and the following story of the woman from the city of Shunem. According to Sweeny, the stories in vv. 1–7 and 8–37 are closely related, and this connection is supported not only by the *waw-consecutive* forms, but also by the motivic elements of the stories: in both stories, Elisha is presented as having a connection with women, in both stories the salvation of the women's children is at stake, and in both stories the miracle takes place behind closed doors (see 4:4–5 and 21–33). Elisha's figure becomes articulated here not only by his miracle-working activity but also by his relationship with women, and the motivation of his deeds is not solely to legitimize his agency as a prophet but to help the widow in need. Elisha, as a historical figure can be discerned in his deeds, while his power demonstrations according to Sweeny are a narrative construct on an ideological basis. According to Sweeny, the texts can be fully understood in the context of the polemic with the house of Omri and its cult of Baal, and the figure of Elisha not coincidentally bears the hallmarks of the Canaanite god of fertility (e.g. providing food, vv. 3-4; providing child-bearing, v. 16; healing and restoring life, vv. 34-35).

The second difference which can be observed in his analysis compared to the previous ones is the greater attention he gives to the striking phenomenon of the threat of debt-slavery in the case of the children of the widow. Referencing the biblical passages (see 1 Kgs 14:1–18; Am 7:10–17), he dives deeper into the explorable socio-economic circumstances alluded to in the narrative. While we have biblical passages legitimizing slavery, there is none explaining why the children should be taken as slaves. According to Sweeny, the widow does not appear to be in the creditor's sphere of interest in the light of the story. The reason the wife's children are included as children in the threat of debt-slavery is that they can be put to work more

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[94] In his own words: "No history can realistically be expected to account for all events or facts; it must be selective in choosing what and how to present the past. Any history therefore represents an interpretation of history that is guided by the questions and concerns that motivate the study of history in the first place. The choices made in the presentation of history, the questions and concerns that guide these choices, and the ideological, political, social, and theological perspectives that prompt these questions and concerns constitute the core of historiography." Sweeney, *1&II Kings,* pp. 1–2.

[95] Sweeney, *1&II Kings,* pp. 287–288.

effectively since they will become adults during the upcoming years of slavery.[96] Through his more detailed explanation of the practice in commentary literature, he shows that answering the *why?* question in some previously unquestioned scenarios is crucial. Child slavery became a matter in the research of the Ancient Near Eastern times' socio-economical background, and this approach was represented in the general commentaries as well.[97]

By temporal proximity, an even more recent commentary on 1 Kings 16–2 Kings 16 was published by Steven L. McKenzie in 2018, in the *International Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament* series.[98] In this, the author gives a more detailed narrative-literary exegesis on the story. Specifying the setting of the narrative, he quickly notes that the lack of details is due to the miraculous character of the narrative. Nevertheless, the scene of distress caused by the death of the unnamed widow's husband serves as a starting point for the narrative. In his analysis, McKenzie gives significantly more attention to the character of the widow than any other exegetes before in commentary literature. The cry (צעק) of the widow becomes important since she knows that turning to Elisha equals with turning to the man of God. Her outcry rooted in her faith is underlined by the fact that she is not looking for legal help, but for undefined divine help. McKenzie also sees Elisha as a less powerful figure, mentioning, that in the narrative Elisha, similarly to the widow, is looking for a way to solve the problem at hand, addressing the widow about her resources. In his analysis, he also turns his attention to the secondary characters of the narrative, the neighbours, as the agents of the miracle through their generosity. Another significant statement McKenzie makes is related to the miracle itself: the miracle is not performed by Elisha, he is not even present at the place of the miracle happening, but he serves as the channel for the power of God. However, McKenzie's most significant contribution to the commentary literature should be that he devotes a whole subsection to the character of the widow, with the subtitle "The qualities of the widow". He states, that the widow is just as interesting and admirable figure in the narrative as Elisha himself.[99] Nevertheless, he fines these admirable qualities of the widow in her obedience and honesty ("wie gehorsam und wie integer sie ist"). Whether this obedience is toward God or the man of God is not clear from

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[96] Sweeney, *1&II Kings,* pp. 288–289.

[97] For a discussion of child slavery in antiquity, see the subsection *2.3.2. Slavery and children in the Bible and in 2 Kgs 4:1–7.*

[98] The original work was written in English and published in 2018 by Kohlhammer. However, I was using the German translation of the commentary, translated by Gerlinde Baumann and published in 2021, by the same publishing house. For the full reference, see: Steven L. McKenzie, *1 Könige 16 – II Könige 16* (Internationaler Exegetischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament), Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2021, pp. 320–322.

[99] With his own wording: "Auch der Frau ist für ihre Rolle bei ihrer Rettung Anerkennung zu zollen. Sie ist in der Geschichte eine ebenso interessante und bewundernswerte Figur wie Elischa selbst." McKenzie, *1 Könige 16 – II Könige 16,* p. 321.

the phrasing of McKenzie. Although McKenzie acknowledges the important role of the widow, acknowledging her agency and own contribution to the unfolding of the events does not happen.

That shift occurs in the commentary literature when we look at the feminist interpretations of the narrative. The first and notable female commentator of the narrative was Gina Hens-Piazza, whose work was published in *Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries* series in 2006.[100] In her brief description of the narrative she focuses her attention on the widow, and already problematizes the background of widowhood in patriarchal society as one which puts the widow in a vulnerable position, especially if her children are taken away. Henz-Piazza recognizes the widow's agency in her willingness to turn to Elisha, where she shows how witty she is, when she "marshals evidence that there are good reasons for the prophet to act" and "explicitly provides the incentive that should prompt the prophet to respond whether he plans to or not".[101] The widow also becomes part of the miracle as the acts to solve her own problem and she succeeds in addressing her own situation in the narrative. It is important to mention here that the author later returns to this narrative in a chapter, analysing it through the lenses of subaltern studies, focusing on how the subaltern agents change the storyline of the narrative.[102] Hens-Piazza there details how the power dynamics between the dominant creditor and the subordinate group of the neighbours shapes the outcome of the story. The neighbours, by willing to give become the agents of the miracle.[103]

Song-Mi Suzie Park, another female commentator of the book of 2 Kings givers a more detailed commentary on the narrative. In her work published in 2019 in the *Wisdom Commentary* series, Park reads the story in the context of 2 Kgs 4:1–44, in which she discovers the thematical bonds between the stories, all revolving around "fecundity, reproduction, and life".[104] She mentions that each episode of chapter 4 deals with death in its unique form (economical, social, reproductive starvation, deprivation), and by the power of JHVH as "provider and producer of life" the ending of the stories implies in all cases the "abundant

[100] Gina Hens-Piazza, *1–2 Kings* (Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries), Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006, e-book edition.

[101] Hens-Piazza, *1–2 Kings,* e-book ed.

[102] Gina Hens-Piazza, "Artifacts of Scenery or Agents of Change? -A Subaltern Character in II Kings 4:1-7", in: Keith Bodner & Benjamin Johnson (eds), *Characters and Characterization in the Book of Kings*, London: Bloomsbury, T&T Clark, 2019, pp. 199–213.

[103] Hens-Piazzal, "Artifacts of Scenery or Agents of Change", p. 211. I mention this work here because it was written by the same author who also wrote a commentary on the Book of Kings. I discuss her chapter briefly, because the main focus of it falls on characters who were not involved in the bibliolog as characters participants had to identify with, and these characters were only mentioned in a few responses. Nevertheless, the work is still significant of its kind and therefore deserves mentioning and attention.

[104] Song-Mi Suzie Park, *2 Kings* (Wisdom Commentary, Vol. 12), Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2019.

reproduction of food, people, and health".[105] In her work, not only does she start a dialogue with previous commentators of the narrative through references, but she also formulates the first critique toward previous interpretational endeavours: "The reader cannot help but feel for this poor, hungry woman who, in the largely patriarchal setting, has to care for two children alone. Yet the brevity with which the widow's story is discussed in most modern commentaries speaks to the general disregard of such victims - both inside and outside of the text".[106] Park's lenses in her commentary on the text also show this hint of scepticism, toward the original intents of the story. She argues that the stories in the Elijah-Elisha cycle serve to show "the masculine prowess of JHVH as reflected through his male messengers".[107] Therefore, she also links Elisha's attentiveness and caring response to the widow's cry to the membership of the deceased husband in the prophetic group, an "all-male cohort" indicated on a textual level by the expression בְּנֵי־הַנְּבִיאִים. What the story does, however, is call attention to the female members in relationship to this cohort: in the daily lives of these prophets there were women, an there was a family in which the men could also be "husbands, fathers, uncles, and grandfathers", and a life in which prophecy wasn't just a divine calling but a job which served as a means to support one's family.[108] And in this unique narrative, one member of these families steps forward and lets the readers see the difficulties of this hidden family life, and as Park phrases it very aptly and heavily: "(...) the narrative also forces the reader to reconsider the difficult lives of the women and children who exist in the shadow of these (largely) male prophetic figures."[109]

The main interest of Park's analysis in the commentary on the passage remains on the particular socio-economical vulnerability of these women and children. She also recognizes that the story contains allusions to the religio-political events of the era, but the focus remains on the characters in the background of these events. Dealing with economic insecurity and the task of protecting the ones threatened by it should be the main concern of a monarch, but in the story, the widow approaches Elisha, hence, the monarchy was in such a condition that it failed to meet the needs of these people. In this marginalized position, the widow and her two sons become the victims of collectors, and the threat of slavery becomes a reality.[110] Although recognizing the inherently problematic nature of cases of marginalisation presented in the narrative, Park doesn't see the widow as a character with agency. The only deed she adds to her

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[105] Park, *2 Kings*, p. 39.
[106] Park, *2 Kings*, p. 40.
[107] Park, *2 Kings*, p. 41.
[108] Park, *2 Kings*, p. 41.
[109] Park, *2 Kings*, p. 41.
[110] Park recognizes the importance of the topic but doesn't add new insights to the question, only presents it via the summary of Julie Faith Parker's comprehensive work, which I will present in detail later in this chapter.

credit is her cry for help. In the concluding paragraph of her analysis, she highlights the reproductive and life-giving character of the miracle, but presents it as a miracle that happened though the male prophet of JHVH: "As is evident, the prophet Elisha, like his master (Elijah) before him, is once again connected to the reproductive, regenerative, and procreative powers of the life-affirming God, YHWH."[111] The agency of the widow remains unacknowledged here, but not for long in the academic world.

This final step toward the recognition of the widow's agency in commentary literature was taken by Johanna W. H. van Wijk-Bos, another female scholar and commentator of the books of Kings. Her work is titled *The Land and Its Kings: 1–2 Kings*, published in 2020 as the third volume in the *A People and a Land* series.[112] In her commentary on this specific passage Wijk-Bos questions from the very beginning whether the "certain woman" within the prophetic group should truly be seen only as a wife of a prophet, or perhaps more. Since in the Hebrew language, the same word denotes "wife" and "woman" (אִשָּׁה) and the same word unjustifiably appears in the same verse twice, in the first term it can be understood as the woman being part of the prophetic group. This would not be unparalleled in the Old Testament either (see Ex 15:20; 2 Kgs 22:14; 2 Chr 34:22; Isa 8:3; Neh 6:14). Moreover, Wijk-Bos also suggests that the threat of slavery would economically affect her as well, depriving her of the sustenance the boys can provide for her in the future. The cry of the widow is therefore described by the author as a cry for help of the "woman, widow, mother".[113] In Elisha's first question, the author sees more than a rhetorical question, stating: "Elisha's first intervention constitutes his asking what he can do for her, meaning that he assumes the position of waiting for the woman to tell him a way forward out of her predicament rather than presuming to know what she needs. Then he asks her to consider her resources."[114] Elisha's character in Wijk-Bos's description in her commentary is outlined as a respectful equal to the widow, almost a secondary advisor, who respects the widow's strength and resources and provides guidance toward a self-sufficient outcome from the part of the widow. When the miracle happens, it happens is secret, and this hidden, secretive setting means "behind closed doors, and the life-giving oil flows in the circle of her small family, the place where she experienced her deprivation most sharply".[115] But the miracle, in the interpretation of the author is the result of the actions of the widows, the bringing

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[111] Park, *2 Kings*, 44.
[112] Johanna W. H. Wijk-Bos, *The Land and Its Kings: 1–2 Kings* (A People and a Land, Vol. 3), Eerdmans, 2020. ebook edition.
[113] Wijk-Bos, *1–2 Kings*, e-book edition.
[114] Wijk-Bos, *1–2 Kings*, e-book edition.
[115] Wijk-Bos, *1–2 Kings*, e-book edition.

and pouring, the coming and uttering the word "Bring me", all expressed with active verb forms and all pointing at the active participation of the widow in the course of events. In her closing words of Wijk-Bos we read: "Elisha steps aside, and the woman moves into the center of the action, anticipating her more promising future. In its own way, this account injects into the downward trajectory of the history of the kingdoms a note of confidence that, for Israel also, the universe is not closed, and new possibilities may open up beyond a horizon of loss and despair."[116] The interpretation of the author is an authentic feminist interpretation of the narrative, which now gives full control to the hand of the widow, whose character is depicted as fragile and exposed, but at the same time versatile and resourceful, herself being the channel and the agent of the miracle.

To sum up, the commentary literature on the book of 2 Kings is not exhaustive, but rather diverse. From summaries of half a page to about 3-4 pages, the authors touch briefly on a variety of topics. Regarding the historical background, especially in the case of the first authors and more notably in Park's interesting account, it is stated that religio-political conflicts determine the development of the story and the position of the characters in the story. The extent to which there is a political message behind the events is also a matter of varying judgement. Over time, and following the changes of the 1970s and 1980s, authors have approached the themes of slavery and widowhood with increasing sensitivity and attention, recognising their inherently problematic nature. Wijk-Bos, in her most recently published commentary, brings this freshness at the level of interpretation, as the agency and figure of the widow is given special attention in her work. This shows, that although the vast majority of commentary writers place the figure of Elisha at the centre of interpretation, the perspective is changeable.

2.3. Literature review of individual studies on 2 Kings 4:1–7 and topics present in the narrative

The complexities of a biblical text cannot be fully uncovered by the more general and deliberately shorter analyses presented in the commentary literature. Although we have seen that in the case of 2 Kgs 4:1–7 each commentator provided something unique and novel to the interpretation of the text, these exegetical endeavours, as Park noted correctly, through their brevity limit the depth of each analysis. Fortunately, in the past few decades more attention was given to this specific narrative in individual studies as well. The complexity of the narrative with only a few verses was reflected upon from different angles of interpretation, which I would

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[116] Wijk-Bos, *1–2 Kings*, e-book edition.

like to present below. As the bibliolog touches upon three major themes through the questions addressed by the conductor toward the widow, the child, and the oil, for this review of individual studies I chose to present the works thematically, around these three major topics which the individual studies reflect upon: widowhood in the bible and contextual interpretations, children and slavery, and the miraculous character of the story and the agents of the miracle.

2.3.1. The widows in the Bible and in 2 Kgs 4:1–7

I would like to start the presentation of the existing work on the narrative with the Presidential Address of Gale A. Yee from 2019 for the Society of Biblical Literature meeting in San Diego, delivered as the first Asian American and the first woman of colour elected for president. The title of the publication following the speech is *Thinking Intersectionally: Gender, Race, Class, and the Etceteras of Our Discipline*.[117] Yee used the narrative of 2 Kgs 4:1–7 as a springboard in her study presenting what intersectionality implies. The very motive why I chose this article to present first is because through the lenses of intersectionality, one can truly sense how complex the narrative and the power dynamics beneath the surface are.

Gale A. Yee promotes intersectionality as a desirable form on analysis for biblical exegesis. Intersectionality focuses on the inequality embedded in power relations, and by its application as a hermeneutical prism exegetes can avoid the compartmentalization of gender, race, class, et cetera.[118] When it comes to providing an example of how intersectional approaches on a narrative work in interpreting biblical texts, Yee chooses the story of 2 Kgs 4:1–7 and illustrates the complexity of power relations in the narrative on two level, on the level of *interpersonal* power-relations and on the level of *structural* domains of power. When it comes to interpersonal power-relations, the only source to recreate the situation at hand is through a narrative-literary analysis of the text, with special attention on the characters of the narrative. Yee does something which an expert in bibliolog would probably praise: she reckons with the characters not presented but alluded to in the narrative. She looks at the widow in the wider web of power-relations, reckoning with the structural effects of her relationship with her deceased husband, debtor and debt collector, children, Elisha, the company of prophets, neighbours, and God himself, and emphasizes the fact that in the narrative each character has a specific location within the power-dynamics of the narrative.[119] In her analysis, Yee argues that

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[117] Yee, Gale A. "Thinking Intersectionally: Gender, Race, Class, and the Etceteras of Our Discipline". JBL 139, no. 1 (2020). pp. 7-26.

[118] For a detailed definition and assumptions of intersectionality see Yee, "Thinking Intersectionally", pp. 7–12.

[119] Yee, "Thinking Intersectionally", pp. 17–19.

except the possibility of some neighbours being female,[120] the male characters dominate the narrative in which gender and economic class are strongly related. From the patron-client relationship of Elisha with the group of the sons of the prophets it becomes obvious that Elisha has the highest socioeconomic position of power in the narrative. Although the character of the widow is outlined in this picture as disadvantaged by both gender ad economic status, Yee praises the widow for being able to "negotiate the disruptive events of her husband's death and her children's near confiscation by recognizing her best hope, namely, appealing to her husband s male economic patron."[121] The widow's resourcefulness is seen in how she navigates the depriving and complex structure of power-relations and by her cry makes an appeal to Elisha, and holds him responsible as a patron to his deceased husband. Yee mentions the "rhetorical dexterity" of the widow as her main weapon working toward the positive outcome of the narrative.[122] Nonetheless, there is one more structure, in which the widow of the narrative is just an arbitrary example, but which should not be overlooked: the structural domains of power, which ultimately show a negative and degrading image about the situation of widowed female members of the society.

By structural definition, the main interest is on the location of the widow in the patriarchal society of Israel.[123] When Yee turns to define this position, the narrative interest fades, and a strong emphasis is put on the historical circumstances outlined by multiple historical sources from the preexilic monarchy: the state extracting goods via taxing from villages and agricultural areas to sustain the powerful and rich, and who was not able to pay the taxes became indebted (cf. 2 Kgs 4:1–7); battles with neighbours; unpaid labour on the estates of the state. The questions Yee wants to answer are: "Within the structural domain of male state power, how did the landless אלמנה support herself economically? How could the אלמנה negotiate the power structures that engendered widowhood and her vulnerable status?"[124] This is then followed by a short summary of what has already been said on the matter.

To answer the questions posed by Yee, I would like to give an overview of how the situation of the widows is outlined in the legal and narrative texts of the Bible, based on the most frequently cited works in the wider literature on the topic.[125] It is interesting to note how

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[120] She builds on the assumption that household vessels appear traditionally in the domain of the female. Yee, "Thinking Intersectionally", p. 18.
[121] Yee, "Thinking Intersectionally", pp. 18–19.
[122] Yee, "Thinking Intersectionally", p. 19.
[123] For the structural aspects see Yee, "Thinking Intersectionally", pp. 19–25.
[124] Yee, "Thinking Intersectionally", p. 22.
[125] For the following sections my mains sources were: F. Charles Fensham, "Widow, Orphan, and the Poor in Ancient near Eastern Legal and Wisdom Literature.", *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 21. (1962), pp. 129 –139. Mark Sneed, "Israelite Concern for the Alien, Orphan, and Widow: Altruism or Ideology?", *Zeitschrift für die*

the perspective changes toward a comparative analysis with other Ancient Near Eastern documents and sources to illustrate the situation of the widows in the wider context. As for this thesis, I will primarily present the widow's situation in the biblical context, in the light of biblical legal and narrative texts.

Widows in the Ancient Near East[126]

The word אלמנה ("widow"), as an adjective, appears in Hebrew texts, and within the ancient Semitic language family, words with the same root (*'lmn*, or Hebrew למן) emerge. For example, in Akkadian we have *almattum* (*'almantum*), in Ugaritic *'lmnt* (*'almanatu*), and in Phoenician *'lmt* (*'almant*), where the ending *-(a)t* is attached to the words as a feminine suffix, and the initial *'a* comes from the adjectival *'aqtal* form.[127] According to Hoffner, the word carries entirely negative connotations in Hebrew texts, as the term was used for a *"woman who had no financial support from an adult male member of the family (husband or grown son)"*.[128] This definition may seem strange, especially when reflecting on today's context, where we include those women who lose their husbands during their child's (even adult child's) lifetime in the widow category. Scholars recognized early on that in order to comprehend the meaning of the term, it is essential for us to distance ourselves from our own context and interpret the concept of "widow" based on the social structure revealed by surviving textual evidence from the ANE. So does Sneed (1999), who in his quest to find the voices that speak of the oppressed category in the canonical form compiled by the elite for propaganda purposes, and to decipher whether altruism or ideology underlies such texts, suggests that there may have been an old communitarian ethos, expressed in a triadic formula of the designation of the marginalized groups: widows (אלמנה), orphans (יתום), and strangers (גר).[129] The triadic form is peculiar within the text of the Bible, and generally, it can be considered as unique within the Ancient Near East

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Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft vol. 111, no. 4 (1999), pp. 498-507. Pnina Galpaz-Feller, "The Widow in the Bible and in Ancient Egypt.", *Zeitschrift Für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* vol. 120, no. 2 (2008), pp. 231-254. Annette Schellenberg, "Hilfe für Witwen und Waisen", *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, vol. 124, no. 2 (2012), pp. 180-200.

[126] This section of my thesis does largely correspond to an exam paper I previously submitted to PThU in a course (*The Bible in its Ancient Context 2023-2024*, Block 2, T-V-BAC-2324-2), entitled "The Widow's Plea In 2 Kings 4:1–7. The Voice And Voicelessness Of The Widows In The Light Of Biblical And Ancient Near Eastern Literature." Prior to writing the exam paper, the course lecturers approved the paper to be recognized as work in advance for the Master's Thesises of the course participants. My thesis supervisors also approved the use of the exam paper in the thesis.

[127] Harry Hoffner, "אלמנה", Johannes G. Botterweck *et. al.* (eds), *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament, Vol. I.* Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1974. p. 287.

[128] *TDOT, vol. 1,* p. 289. Cf. also with: Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus: Chapters 20–40.* (Historical Commentary on the Old Testament, Vol 3). Peeters Publishers, 2000, p. 221. Houtman also supports the idea, that the term never appears in a neutral sense, but implies the circumstances of the widows as well.

[129] Sneed, "Altruism or Ideology?", pp. 498–499.

(ANE) as well. In most ANE texts, we encounter dyadic formulations (*widow* and *orphan*), which thus form a typical ANE formula again, consisting of two elements.[130] If we consider the meaning of the term אלמנה within this triadic or dyadic formulation, it becomes clear that widowhood can be interpreted as a natural alienation from the societal structures which sustain the male members of one ethnic group and the lack of this male patron figure detaches the ones dependent on him prior from this sustaining structure.

Beyond a simple definition of the concept and for a more precise outline of the phenomenon, it is important to examine the situation of widows in light of ancient literature as well. In the line-up of ancient norms and values, attention and care for widows and orphans generally held a prominent place. However, in order to gain a fuller picture of how widows lived in biblical times within Israelite society and under what circumstances, it's worthwhile to turn our attention to the legal texts, as it is presumed that at least some of these legal texts were aimed at offering practical solutions to the problems at hand in different periods. Nevertheless, these texts also have their own agenda, which must be kept in mind in their analysis.[131]

It's worth noting from the outset of the discourse that the legal texts, which should primarily regulate the fate of widows, often do not aim to solve and regulate specific problems of the situation but rather issue a more general call to the male members of society to show grace and goodwill towards widows.[132] We can observe this broader call in the **Covenant Code**'s apodictic laws, among which the opening section of 22:20–26 contains specific laws regarding the treatment of the poor, serving as the opening verses of a pre-exilic sequence (22:20–23:19).[133] In this passage we can also narrow down our analysis to Ex 22:21–23, which specifically makes it clear that God favours the oppressed people who have no official representative before the law. This category includes widows and orphans in Ex 22:21.[134] In

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[130] Sneed, "Altruism or Ideology?", p. 504. According to Sneed, the insertion of foreigners served a rhetorical function and had political aims, as the ruling priestly and royal powers required the cheap labour of resident aliens (cf. 2 Chr 2:17, where Solomon builds the temple with the help of thousands of aliens). Additionally, speaking a foreign language offered job opportunities for the priestly-scribe circles, and it was also practical to regulate the presence of aliens to avoid constant legal disputes with them.

[131] Wright observes that although legal texts were rooted at one point in regulating the current situation, we must not forget that in many cases, these texts reflect the ideologies of the authorial groups, and a certain linearity can be observed within the regulations of different biblical legal corpora, which point toward evolving ideologies. Therefore, legal texts in many cases reflect more the ideology prevailing at the time rather than the practices of the era. David P. Wright, "»She Shall Not Go Free as Male Slaves Do«: Developing Views About Slavery and Gender in the Laws of the Hebrew Bible", in: B. Brooten (ed.), *Beyond Slavery. Overcoming Its Religious and Sexual Legacies.* New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010, pp. 125-142. p. 127.

[132] Gaplaz-Feller, "The Widow in the Bible", p. 232.

[133] David P. Wright. "The Origin, Development, and Context of the Covenant Code (Exodus 20:23–23:19)." In: Thomas Dozeman *et. al.* (eds), *The Book of Exodus. Composition, Reception, and Interpretation*, BRILL eBooks, 2014, pp. 220–244. p. 221.

[134] It is interesting to note that here we meet the dyadic formulation consisting of two elements (אַלְמָנָה and יָתוֹם), which is less a characteristic of biblical language, but which is more prominent in the literature of ANE, cf. Sneed:

their case, since there is no one else to formally avenge the offences against them, God punishes with his own hand, with a sword against the oppressors (Ex 22:23). This is not a special case, since in more than one place the Covenant Code speaks of God taking the administration and execution of justice in hand in all situations where earthly justice fails (see also Ex 21:6.13; 22:10.26).[135] Moreover, those who violate the rights of widows will themselves be punished with widowhood and orphanhood.[136] Houtman suggests that legal texts, as special revelation (see, for example, 22:21–23), lend a kind of ethical tone to the biblical texts, speaking out with a religious idealism in the sphere of social ethics for the protection of widows and orphans. However, these laws only projected an ideal situation, a desired state, and the violation of these was not punishable under any other law or harsh sanctions.[137]

Among the laws of **Deuteronomic Code** (Deut 16–26), there is a consistent emphasis on the individual's duties towards the weaker elements of society, including care for widows (Deut 14:28–29; 24:19–21).[138] Consequently, this obligation extends to the king as well (Deut 17:19), according to the rhetoric of this legal code. Additionally, Deuteronomy specifies that widows, as the oppressed of society, are under God's protection (Deut 10:18), and curses befall those who mistreat them (Deut 27:19). We can observe that, unlike the Covenant Code, the laws of the Deuteronomic Code not only mandate divine protection for widows but also contain exhortations for various segments of society to care for widows, from the common Israelite who hears the law read aloud to the king, who is also instructed to strictly adhere to it (see for example 10:18–19, 14:29, 24:19–22, 26:11–13). Also, one should look into this segment of the legal texts in the Bible for provisions aimed at improving the financial situation of widows. Even in the Deuteronomic Code we already find laws concerning the edges of fields and abandoned sheaves (Deut 24:21, see also: Lev 19:9–10, 23:22), laws of tithing (Deut 28:29; 24:28–29, 26:12–15; see also: Lev 27:30–33, Num 18:21–32), and laws concerning loans and pledges (Deut 24:17).[139]

"Altruism or Ideology?", p. 504. Though this passage of laws might be later additions to the Covenant Code, it still suggests a closer connection with the formulations of the literature of ANE based on this evidence.

[135] Gregory C. Chirichigno, *Debt-Slavery in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (JSOT Suppl. Series 141), Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993, pp. 167–168. Although I do not delve into the Wisdom Literature in the thesis due to reasons of length, it is worth mentioning that similar thoughts appear there as well. In the Wisdom Literature texts, widows appear as those in need of assistance and as individuals subjected to human wickedness, as their possessions are confiscated or they are enslaved. However, God always stands on the side of widows and the needy, aiding them (see, for example, Job 22:9; 24:1–4, 21; 15:25). Gaplaz-Feller, "The Widow in the Bible", p. 232.

[136] Gaplaz-Feller, "The Widow in the Bible", p. 232. cf. Ex 22:23 in BHS: וְחָרָה אַפִּי וְהָרַגְתִּי אֶתְכֶם בֶּחָרֶב וְהָיוּ נְשֵׁיכֶם אַלְמָנוֹת וּבְנֵיכֶם יְתֹמִים: פ

[137] Houtman, *Exodus: Chapters 20–40,* pp. 223–224.

[138] Fort he general introduction on Deut laws see: Gaplaz-Feller, "The Widow in the Bible", p. 232.

[139] Gaplaz-Feller, "The Widow in the Bible", pp. 238–239.

However, when it comes to regulating specific cases, the idealistic provision for widows seems to take a backseat. It's worth noting in this regard the specific text of Deut 25:5–10, the laws regulating *levirate marriages*. Recently, Ayelet Seidler proposed in her article, that the legislator formulating the law only seemingly left the levir the free choice to reject marriage with his brother's widow, but the casuistic nature of the legal text results in the rejection being equated with failing in his duty and leads to the "blotting out of the name" (cf. Deut 25:6, with its specific Israelite expression, missing from other ANE sources: ולא ימחה שמו מישראל) thus placing social pressure on the man and thereby favouring widows.[140] However, according to Galpaz-Feller's critical interpretation, the primary purpose of the legal text was not to protect widows, but rather to maintain the bloodline outside of the woman's family, thereby safeguarding the rights, name, and especially the estate of men in that era (cf. Leviticus 25:25–28).[141] Although men likely felt pressure to decide on fulfilling their family obligations according to the law, we still see that they had free choice in the matter, whereas the situation of widows depended solely on the goodwill of men, and apart from symbolic protests, they had no rights to decide about their situation. Therefore, it seems that the law still favoured male members of society.

Besides this law, the attentive reader can find in other legal texts provisions that not only fail to support widows, as might be inferred from the apodictic commands but actually reinforce their disadvantaged, marginalized position. Another legal text that implicitly supports the marginalized position of widows is Lev 21:14. The law specifies that the High Priest cannot marry a divorced woman or a widow, placing them in the same category as profane women or harlots.[142] Additionally, another provision in the **Holiness Code** (Lev 17–26) addresses the situation of widows and reinforces the assumption that widows who became widows childless could return to the family home (Lev 22:13, cf. Gen 38:11). This law also suggests that the child always belonged under the protection of the paternal household, as it was through the child that the paternal line continued. However, after the death of the widow's husband, she officially belonged to no one's protection anymore. The regulation in the Priestly Code regarding the vows of widows also supports the idea that widows essentially belonged nowhere, as no one could annul their vows.[143]

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[140] Ayelet Seidler, "The Law of Levirate and Forced Marriage—Widow vs. Levir in Deuteronomy 25.5–10." *JSOT* vol. 42, no. 4 (2018), pp. 435-456.

[141] Gaplaz-Feller, "The Widow in the Bible", 236.

[142] Ezekiel later expands the scope of those to whom the law applies, making it applicable to all priests (Ex 44,22). Gaplaz-Feller, "The Widow in the Bible", p. 235.

[143] Gaplaz-Feller, "The Widow in the Bible", pp. 237–238. The legal text does not address cases where a childless widow returned to the paternal home. Based on the arguments of Milgrom, Galpaz-Feller argues, that it is likely

In the Bible, numerous narratives feature widows as characters, often speaking up and sometimes central to the events. It is not a coincidence that we find a whole book dedicated to the story of a widow, as seen in the Book of Ruth. Galpaz-Feller's and Schellenberger's more recent work on the reconstruction of the widow's historical circumstances also draw assumptions about the topic from narratives. Nevertheless, in order to fully understand the position of the widow in 2 Kgs 4:1–7, we must take a brief look at other stories, which present widows with or without children and financial resources to understand their general position in society.

In significant portions of the biblical stories, widows had *male relatives*, under whose protection they stood (see, for example, Gen. 28; 2 Sam. 14:5–7, Ruth 2:1–23, 4:5, 1 Kgs 7:13–14). However, we also encounter stories where widows presumably had no male relatives (1 Kgs 17:8–24, 2 Kgs 4:1–7), placing them in a position of seeking assistance. From this, we can infer that these cases denote and underline more severe, socially vulnerable situations.[144] Hoffner also presents two other options, with which widows could ensure a position after the death of their husband, namely the possibility of remarriage with another man, or being unmarried and continuing a profession on their own.[145] However, for these two possibilities we don't find many examples in biblical narratives. Yee mentions prostitution as a way for women to support themselves, but only as a last resort and not as an actual position in society which would elevate the widow's situation, since "prostitution was thus interconnected with structural conditions of economic and gender inequality, which were reinforced in the hegemonic domain by various ideologies."[146] As other means of labour we find some examples in the ANE administrative records from Mesopotamia, but not in the Bible. In biblical texts, where widows appear as workforce, that is usually in the form of forced labour (cf. 1 Sam 8:11–13), or as being part of the self-supporting web of women as midwives or nannies.

Another significant aspect of widowhood strongly evident from the narrative texts is that the *age of the child* can also determine a widow's situation. Widows whose children were already adults could live in the house of their adult child, and it was the responsibility of the child to take care of them. If such a woman lost her son, her entire existence could be jeopardized (see 2Sam 14:6; Isa. 51:18; Ruth 4:15). Perhaps even more severe was the situation

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that in these situations, widows belonged only economically to the parental household and were not considered household members regarding the oath.

[144] Glapaz-Feller notes that in cases where there were male relatives, it was not guaranteed that these relatives would truly stand by the widow and bear the economic burden associated with taking in another person into the household. Gaplaz-Feller, "The Widow in the Bible"*, pp. 232–233.

[145] *TDOT*, vol 1, p. 290.

[146] Yee, "Thinking Intersectionally", p. 23.

when a woman was left widowed with young children. Not only did she often lack a male patron and could not return to the paternal home, but she also had to raise her children on her own (Gen. 38:11, 1 Kgs 17:12, 2 Kgs 4:7, Ruth 1:8–9).[147]

The biblical narratives also indicate that widows often possessed *wealth* (Judg 17:1–6, Ruth 4:3–9, 1 Sam 25:42, 2 Kgs 8:1–3). Galpaz-Feller primarily concludes, especially in light of the narratives, that widows fundamentally should not belong to the categories of the oppressed and inferior.[148] Schellenberg comes to a similar conclusion, but she links the situation of widows more to the adherence to inheritance regulations and laws, rather than solely relying on the goodwill of family members, however, their plight is important in achieving this material help and support.[149] Nevertheless, references to widows typically depict them in miserable situations. This oppressed state is not merely linked to personal grief and pain but stems from the resulting inferiority, as widows in paternal households were always outsiders, only being included if they were accepted and taken under the protection of their relatives (a fitting example of this is the case of the woman from Tekoa, who experienced hostility within her own family, see 2Sam 14:7).[150]

Based on the above, with a later dating in mind,[151] the question arises of what we know about the widow's background in her own time, through the text and the background studies preceding exegesis. Even with a later dating of the text, there may be a greater distance between some of the legal texts and those of the Ancient Near East (ANE), but the text indicates that the widow's situation does not paint a brighter picture than the one revealed in the earlier analysis. The widow speaks with a voice of despair in the story and cries out for help (see the use of the verb צעק). In the light of the background study, we can draw the following conclusions:

(1) *The widow supposedly did not have any male patron*: A woman who loses her husband fundamentally had two options: she could enter into levirate marriage with a relative (see Deuteronomy 25:5–10), or she could continue her life independently if she had property. Since the woman still had young children, she couldn't return to her

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[147] Gaplaz-Feller, "The Widow in the Bible"*,* p. 233. Perhaps it is precisely the severity of the situation that is evidenced by the fact that such widows are mentioned by name in the Old Testament stories, and alongside their children's names, the woman's name appears instead of the father's name, thereby showing respect for their efforts in raising the child. *TDOT*, vol. 1, p. 290.

[148] Gaplaz-Feller, "The Widow in the Bible"*,* p. 233.

[149] Schellenberg, "Hilfe für Witwen", pp. 181–182. See her reference on Num 27,8–10.

[150] Gaplaz-Feller, "The Widow in the Bible"*,* p. 234.

[151] I personally consider a later dating of the text, following Otto's argument, considering the genre of the text, which is a unique form within the Old Testament as a whole. In my opinion, it aligns more closely with the genre of Hellenistic miracle stories than with earlier narratives, whether in the cases of Elijah or Elisha. cf. Susanne Otto, "The composition of the Elijah-Elisha stories and the deuteronomistic history." *JSOT* vol. 27, no. 4 (2003), pp. 487–508. p. 505–506.

father's house (cf. Genesis 38:11), and her children couldn't support her due to their young age. Thus, in the story, we see the widow in the most exposed and vulnerable position among all the variants of widowhood outlined above.

(2) *The widow did not have wealth:* This becomes evident in a later verse of the narrative, where she specifies that the only thing her family owns is one jar of oil: אֵין לְשִׁפְחָתְךָ כֹל בַּבַּיִת כִּי אִם־אָסוּךְ שָׁמֶן: (2 Kgs 4:2).[152] It's also revealing that the woman and her children live under the threat of debt slavery after her husband's death, which may suggest that they were already struggling with financial difficulties prior to his death. Although the title of "son of the prophets" implies a kind of income source, it becomes evident within the story that this income source was not sufficient.[153]

Taking all this into account, we can say that the widow appears in the most exposed position imaginable, with only one real solution before her: to cry out for help to someone. As we have seen before, a peculiar feature of biblical narratives is that widows speak up about their own situations and appear as characters in the stories. The intersectional analysis of Yee on the text also proves that, although this story had a happy ending, the structural domains of power led to the zero-setting of the narrative to be unjust and depriving for the widow. After this analysis through the prism of intersectionality and historical reconstruction, we should take a brief look at the most contemporary contextual analyses of the story.

Samson Olusina Olanisebe published an article in 2015 with the title "The Plights Of Widows And Widowhood In Nigeria: Reflections On 2 Kgs 4:1–7", and as the title of his article suggests, he doesn't offer many newer insights about the narrative itself, but parallels the situation of the widow with the contemporary position of Nigerian widows within the socio-cultural frame of their existence shortly after the death of their husband. In his summary of the narrative, he depicts the widow as one being in a miserable situation because of three major factors: lack of inheritance; the threat of taking away her children, who were seen as property in that era; and the embarrassment caused by her position and lack of resources, since "it is what a man has that can be blessed and multiplied."[154] The desperate position is one taken by

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[152] Although oil was considered a relatively valuable commodity in that era, the story indicates that it was considered a staple in everyday life and served as a basis for sustenance. See: Ronja Jacob, "Oil", in: *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception Online*, edited by Constance M. Furey *et. al.* (eds), Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2023.

[153] The term "ben-hannabiim" fundamentally refers to an occupation, which likely involved some form of income, according to Sweeny (see also Amos 7:10-17 or 1 Kings 14:1–4). Sweeny, *II Kings*, p. 288.

[154] Samson Olusina Olanisebe, "The Plights Of Widows And Widowhood In Nigeria: Reflections On 2 Kings 4:1–7", *IJOURELS* vol. 5, no.1 (2015), pp.1-16. p. 4.

the widow as a result of social pressure. Just as the Nigerian widows in some cases. Olanisabe notes that if a woman expresses a wish to make a will, the family frowns upon it, as it is not socially accepted and the woman is accused of wishing her husband dead. If the husband dies young, the widow is usually accused of wishing for the death of her husband, and it is a socially accepted custom and expectation for the woman to bathe in the water used to wash her husband's body to find out whether she was guilty or innocent. In a country where the number of people infected with HIV has been increasing in recent years, this practice can actually be fatal. In addition, other mourning rituals are imposed on widows, such as shaving their hair, fasting after the death of their husband, and keeping the belongings of the dead for a certain period of time after the death. In addition, women continue to be responsible for supporting their families, while at the same time, women are statistically the most underpaid in society. As a solution, Olanisabe proposes practical steps to remedy the situation, and in this he returns to the story in a revelatory way: "Just as Prophet Elisha came to the rescue of the widow in question in our passage, the Church must continue to rise up to the challenge of supplying the needs of widows as many times as occasions demand."[155] According to Olanisabe, Elisha is the hero of the story and interestingly enough, he presents Elisha's charitable action toward the widow as an example for the church. Equating Elisha's "charitable" action with the responsibility of the church is a very novel and interesting linking of the figure of Elisha with the images and church practices of our time.

Sayuri Watanabe in her publication in 2023 serves as another contextual interpretation of the narrative, and strikingly, the first one where the widow appears as an antagonist, as the hinderer of her own blessing.[156] The contextual character of her work is evident from the very first point in her analysis, as she references the most common Japanese translation of the story, in which the first verse reads: "... one of the wives of the prophets".[157] From the very beginning, Watanabe states that the widow was not as helpless and in need as it seems, knowing that during in those circumstances, it is easily imaginable that the prophet was not living in a monogamous relationship. Moreover, the author states that the widows actually had a safety net that existed after the Kingdom period, where women were supporting each other, gathering to dye, spin, weave, and to help each other in childbirth and raising children as midwives or nannies. Watanabe states, that "the invisibility of the women in her background, the circle of care, might

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[155] Olanisebe, "Widowhood In Nigeria", p. 12.
[156] Sayuri Watanabe, "Bible Study on Hebrew Scripture: When the Oil Flow Stops (II Kings 4:1–7)", *In God's image* 42, no. 1 (Jun 2023), pp. 15-22.
[157] Watanabe, "When the Oil Flow Stops". p. 16.

be a literary technique to spotlight Elisha and her face-to-face encounter."[158] Contrary to this, the text speaks about the neighbours, and the fact the widow did not think of this group as primary source of help suggests a community in tension. The question in v. 2 of the story in Watanabe's interpretation in pointed toward the area of control of the widow, not simply her resources: „In this oil story, she could no longer have anything in the house that could be associated with her."[159] Elisha's role in the narrative is to call out the widow "to rebuild herself" by turning to the community she stays in conflict with, but the widow refuses this opportunity by sending her children to the neighbours. Children appear in a situation where their mother makes them even more exposed, as Watanabe observes, they go out to the streets and to the neighbours when they are threatened by capture. In her final argument against the widow, Watanabe stands in opposition with other commentators, who previously argued that the closed place emphasizes the secrecy of the miracle – the widow in fact was forced to stay inside and remain cut off from the resources which could have been offered by the neighbours. It is astounding how then the author draws a parallel with Japanese women during the pandemic of the past years, who had been cut off from their web of help, who had been burdened not only by domestic work but with the increase of domestic violence from their husbands, as studies show, and who have been forced to close the doors. The widow is in fact a desperate figure and remains one when the oil stops flowing. The interpretation of Watanabe is striking and powerfully contextualized. The two situations at hand are not directly comparable, but they can be linked analogically.

2.3.2. Slavery and children in the Bible and in 2 Kgs 4:1–7

Less attention than to the widow has been paid to the two young children who, due to the setting of the story, are in a cumulatively disadvantaged situation: their father has died, leaving them half-orphans, still minors, unable to lead a self-sustaining life, and the greatest threat to them is the threat of debt slavery, which deserves special attention in this thesis.

Julie Faith Parker gives a narrative-literary analysis of the story, with special emphasis on the individual characters, but with the main research question of how could the story change the life path of the children, or did it change it at all?[160] While the mother is named the "story's star" being in the narrative focus of the story, Elisha is defined as one, who "works an earthly

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[158] Watanabe, "When the Oil Flow Stops". p. 18.
[159] Watanabe, "When the Oil Flow Stops". p. 19.
[160] Julie Faith Parker, "The Debt-Collateral Children (2 Kings 4:1–7)." in: J. F. Parker, *Valuable and Vulnerable: Children in the Hebrew Bible, Especially the Elisha Cycle*, SBL Press, 2013, pp. 119–136.

wonder (...), less omniscient, but more personable".[161] Parker mentions amongst the characters the dead husband the debt collector as well, but in the same section, as these collectors peculiarly resemble in two aspects: neither of them is present in the story, but the influence of their departure and arrival makes their spectres loom large, and "both men have a claim on the children."[162] Nonetheless, the children get special attention in her analysis, more than any other commentator would give to them prior to her article. The first striking finding is the probability of one of the children being a daughter. According to Parker, both ילדים and בנים can indicate "children", and v. 6 explicitly talks about "her son", therefore the other child should have been a daughter. Since the widow is in charge of her children, the children must have been young, but still, they are the only children in the Old Testament who participate actively in the abolition of their enslavement.[163] In Parker's *childist interpretation*, the children get an even bigger role, as at one point of the story, they are the ones who are aware of everything that's happening, the prophet being outside the shut doors (v. 5a), the widow asking for the vessel, being unaware that there are none left (v. 6a), and the boy seemingly being the one "to trigger the end of the miracle; after he speaks, the flow of oils stops (v. 6b)".[164]

Another novel line of thought is that Parker raises two questions about the possible outcome of the miracle: "If she (the widow) did sell the oil, would the sale generate enough income to cover the money owed? Did the miracle serve to keep the debt collector away for a while, only to have him return and take the son and daughter after Elisha had gone?"[165] Parker offers a bittersweet but plausible translation for ואת ובניך תחיי בנותר. In the clause, the subject in is masculine plural (בניך) form paired with a feminine singular verb (תחיי), and to problematize the translation even more, Parker points out that the ב preposition could express accompaniment in the clause, which would then read: "you shall live with the remaining ones", therefore in the end of the story, the widow could have enough oil to pay back a smaller amount of the debt, but still, one of the children could have been kept as a slave. This would mean enough stability for the widow to continue her life on her own with the patronage of her remaining children (see the plural form) left with her, in the future, but slavery would inevitably become a reality for at least one child. Parker is aware that her interpretation is one against many, who stick with the more plausible (and maybe easily acceptable) translation, but that does not change the fact that the children are the most vulnerable characters of the story. To understand her point, it is best

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[161] Parker, "Debt-Collateral Children", pp. 120, 122.
[162] Parker, "Debt-Collateral Children", pp. 123.
[163] Parker, "Debt-Collateral Children", pp. 124.
[164] Parker, "Debt-Collateral Children", pp. 126.
[165] Parker, "Debt-Collateral Children", pp. 127.

to read her words: "Certainly the mother suffers in 2 Kgs 4:1–7, but the children have the most to lose. With little means of support, virtually no possessions, and without her children and their labor, the mother would find it extremely difficult (at best) to acquire the money necessary to pay the owed debt. This would leave the children enslaved indefinitely. The small children risk losing not only their family but also their home and their freedom. Seemingly to avoid this, they get busy working when Elisha offers a proposal. The boy reveals new information. These two small characters in 2 Kgs 4:1–7 play a pivotal role in a story that raises questions about poverty, debt, and child labor."[166]

After this statement, in the rest of her article, Parker turns her attention toward outlining some major information about the background of children and debt-svalery, for the presentation of which I include some other sources from the wider field of research on the topic. the literature on debd-slavery varies from small but significant individual studies to the unavoidable monograph of Chirichigno. A brief summary of what has already been said about child slavery and its application to the current narrative is presented below.

Child Slavery in the Ancient Near East[167]

From the legislative and narrative texts of the Bible, we know that slavery was practiced in Israel, and the legal texts also suggest that the most common form of slavery was debt slavery.[168] The victims of debt slavery always came from the poorer strata of Judeans and Israelites, who were forced by creditors to repay their debts as slaves.[169] The texts mainly testify that slavery, although a widely accepted phenomenon, entailed a miserable fate for the slave, who was often mentioned alongside other properties (see, for instance, Genesis 12:16; 20:14), and they often suffered harsh treatment (cf. the prohibitions in Exodus 21:20[170]), which sometimes resulted in slaves fleeing from their masters (cf. Deuteronomy 23:16).[171]

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[166] Parker, "Debt-Collateral Children", pp. 128.

[167] This section of my thesis does largely correspond to an exam paper I previously submitted to PThU in a course (*Overcoming Slavery and Racism in Theology* 2023-2024, Blok 2, T-V-SLV-2324-22), entitled "The meaning of slavery in the "black fire" and "white fire" of a Bibliolog on 2Kings 4:1–7." Prior to writing the exam paper, the course lecturers approved the paper to be recognized as work in advance for the Master's Thesises of the course participants. My thesis supervisors also approved the use of the exam paper in the thesis.

[168] It's important to mention that besides debt slavery, other forms of slavery also existed in Israel, as in other neighbouring societies in the Ancient Near Eastern world. These included cases such as someone being sold into slavery (Exodus 22:2), being kidnapped (Exodus 21:16), being a slave as a prisoner of war (Deuteronomy 21:10-14), or being born into slavery (Exodus 21:4-5). William H. Propp, *Exodus 19-40: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (The Anchor Yale Bible), Yale University Press, 2006, p. 186.

[169] Wright, "She Shall Not Go Free as Male Slaves Do", pp. 125-142.

[170] Chirichigno notes that the most common instrument used for punishing slaves was often a rod, but we also encounter the same instrument used for disciplining children, suggesting an interconnection between the two categories at this point. Chirichigno, *Debt-Slavery in Israel,* p. 171.

[171] Houtman, *Exodus: Chapters 20–40*, pp. 112–113.

Nevertheless, in the legislative texts, we do not see a real effort to improve the situation of slaves. Wright, in his discussion of the debt slavery laws in the Pentateuch (Exodus 21:2–11, Deuteronomy 15:12–18, Leviticus 25:39–46), observes that these laws re-evaluate their meaning in a way, shedding light on the fact that the legislations also serve to ideologically establish Israel's position and the identity of their God in the foreign environment in which they lived as a relatively small state. This is particularly exemplified in the law of Leviticus 25:44, which regulates the circumstances of post-captivity Israel and allows foreign peoples to live among them as chattel slaves, strengthening their fragile national identity in that era.[172] In addition, Wright critically points out that although the concept of manumission appears in the texts of Exodus 21 and Deuteronomy 15, when compared to other Ancient Near Eastern regulations (cf. §117–119 of the Code of Hammurabi), the manumission in these texts presents a much more repressive picture, in which the idea of sexual exploitation of debt-slaves may also arise, and the fate of children born into slavery may be sealed, especially in light of the regulations in Exodus 21.[173]

In the case of the text of 2 Kgs 4:1–7, we find only one reference suggesting that the background of the text involves a case of debt slavery, namely the mention of the creditor (נשׁא, meaning lending on interest; Qal participle form). Creditors fundamentally did not own the servants; they only purchased them as distrainees for the pledges.[174] Nevertheless, the concept is generally associated with negative connotations, and it is conceivable that in some cases, creditors took advantage of their rights towards the indebted person and exploited them as they would exploit chattel slaves as well.[175] However, the complaint of the woman in the text clearly indicates that the creditor intends to take the children away (לָקַחַת), thus leaving the woman in the most vulnerable position imaginable.[176] Interestingly, if we examine the regulations regarding debt slavery, we find no indication in the Scriptures that upon the death of the father, who is primarily the indebted person, the son or even the daughter should be responsible for repaying the debt. In the Ancient Near East and in the Roman era, child-slavery was known to be practiced, and it is likely that we would fall into the idealistic misconception that the situation

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[172] Wright, "She Shall Not Go Free as Male Slaves Do", pp. 139–138.
[173] Wright, "She Shall Not Go Free as Male Slaves Do", p. 133.
[174] Chirichigno, *Debt-Slavery*, p. 179.
[175] A. Bühler, "Moneylending". in: C. Furey *et. al.* (eds), *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception Online*. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2021. see also: Houtman, *Exodus 20–40*, p. 124. Houtman also considers the possibility where a so-called third-party person was involved in the relationship between the creditor and the indebted person. In some cases, individuals sold themselves or their family members as slaves to these third parties, and the money went to the creditor, thus creating a sort of slave market of the time.
[176] Widows without male relatives became completely marginalized members of society because the presence of a male child served as a sort of assurance that the mother could later reside in the household of the grown son or perhaps earn money by working to support the household. Galpaz-Feller, "The Widow in the Bible", p. 233.

in Israel was different or better if we assume that child-slavery was not practiced there.[177] However, the story does not support this, and it unveils the reality of child slavery in the ancient world of Israel.

The enslavement of the children would mean that they have to grow up as slaves, and their mothers would be completely resourceless and marginalized.[178] The meaning of slavery therefore could be referred to as helplessness and despair, in the biblical background.

2.4. Genre of 2 Kings 4:1–7

The literature on the story usually focuses on the figure of Elisha, the widow, and the children, but as we have seen earlier (see Watanabe's article), the story has more complexity, with intertwining threads of characters and supporting characters, and the story as a whole needs to be deciphered as a miracle story. In this section, I will address the more specific questions that revolve around seemingly non-essential elements, but which essentially define the story as a whole.

Without exception, all sources treat the story as a miracle story. As far as the genre is concerned, Gerd Theissen's comprehensive work is unavoidable, and although he focuses mainly on New Testament stories of Jesus, Old Testament narratives are also mentioned in his work.[179] As Theissen defines gift miracles, one must sense that even from the very beginning this story has something to do with the genre, as gift miracles "make material goods available in surprising ways; they provide larger-than-life and extraordinary gifts, food transformed, increased, richly available".[180] The other name, given by Theissen to the form is *material culture miracles*, and by giving this label to the stories, he implies that the narratives always deal with situations concerning human labour. The story, as we have seen, presents a widow dealing with the problem a self-sustenance in a patriarchal society, where her possibilities to work and provide for her family are limited. The story also shows connections with the formal and thematic elements enlisted by Theisen when it comes to this material.

> 1. *The spontaneity of the miraculous action*: This might be the most problematic element to be linked to the story. Nevertheless, Theissen also reflects to this problem, and

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[177] The book by Chirichigno provides numerous examples of slavery practices in the Ancient Near East, among which the phenomenon of child slavery also appears., see: Chirichigno, *Debt-Slavery*, pp. 75–76 or 88. For a detailed and comprehensive summary of the Roman practices underlying the background of the New Testament era, see: Christian Laes, "Child Slaves at Work in Roman Antiquity.", *Ancient Society* vol. 38, 2008, pp. 235–283.

[178] Sweeny notes that the widow seems to be outside the sphere of interest of the creditor in the story. According to Sweeny, the widow's children are mentioned as being in threat of debt-slavery because they can be put to work more effectively, as during the six years of slavery, they grow into adulthood. Sweeney, *I & II Kings*, p. 289.

[179] Gerd Theissen, *The Miracle Stories of the Early Christian Tradition*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983.

[180] Theissen, *Miracle Stories*, p. 103.

although his work is mainly concerned with the New Testament gift miracles of Jesus, at this point he brings into the discussion the miracle stories of Elijah and Elisha, and states, that "the victims of hunger do not approach the prophets with pleas: there is only one resigned complaint (1 Kgs 17,12)".[181] The fact that he mentions the story paralleled to our narrative but leaves out the miracle in 2 Kgs 4:1–7 might be due to the popularity of Elijah narratives and to the fact that the stories are seen as doublettes. The fact that the story at hand contains an explicit plea is undeniable. But does the widow indeed expect a gift miracle from Elisha? The widow's complaint is focused on the threat of slavery as a problem to be solved, and not explicitly on the lack of resources. The fact that Elisha asks about material resources and suggests a way of their multiplication suggests that he is indeed the one "coming up with the idea", taking the initiative, and being the miracle-worker to surprise the widow with his action.

2. *The unobtrusiveness of the miraculous event*: According to Theissen, the miraculous event is not a miraculous "action", in case of gift miracles, as there is a strong motif of obscurity, the cause and the means remain hidden, and the story does not want to answer the "how?" question when it comes to the details.[182] The fact that there are some instructions does not count as the miracle worker using a miraculous formula to perform the miracle. In our narrative, it is even more striking that only the instructions are given by Elisha, the miracle happens behind closed doors, and the miracle-worker is not present, therefore the "how?" question becomes even more unanswerable. The story stands in the line of miracle stories performed by Elisha with the intent of legitimization, but the unobtrusiveness lies in the fact that miraculous techniques, manipulation, or miraculous words are missing from this story from his part, or from any other character in the story.

3. *The absence of central motifs*: Gift miracles are characterized by a lack of vividness, detailed description, and obviousness. Compared to healings, exorcisms, and rule miracles, the visual basis is missing, and Theissen argues, that there might not have been a parallel to this in the background of the text, in ordinary practices. In the story of 2 Kgs 4:1–7, the description of the activities performed to obtain the miraculous flowing of oil is relatively lengthy. However, the range of activities remains in the domain of everyday household activities, and the way how the oil is multiplied is not described explicitly in the text. A similar gift miracle exists in rabbinic tradition, where the wife

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[181] Theissen, *Miracle Stories*, p. 104.
[182] Theissen, *Miracle Stories*, p. 105.

of Hanin ben Dosa is approached by her neighbour's wife and has to face the shame of their meagre livelihood.[183] In the story, household chores, especially the use of the oven (cf. with the use of vessels), play a significant role in the daily lives of women. A typical Sabbath event becomes the scene of a miracle when the usually empty oven fills with loaves of bread. Similarly, the oil that the widow pours during her everyday household chores miraculously overflows.

When it comes to the meaning of these stories, Theissen mentions: "...these miracles can be understood only if the longing they express is taken seriously, the longing for unlimited quantities of bread, fish and wine, in short for food for a multitude; they can be understood only if we do not feel ourselves above the longing for the goods of this world to be available without toil and in sufficient quantity. The gift miracles also particularise the experience of a boundary: situations of material want are transcended and a particular negativity is overcome."[184] Can the form be a hermeneutical key to understanding the narrative? With the meaning attested by the form-critical analysis, the longing of the widow should be interpreted and seen as a silent cry for overcoming poverty and the sudden situation of need.

2.5. Conclusion

The chapter has become the longest chapter of my thesis, and even so I cannot say that it fully exhausts the background knowledge that can be said about this text of a few verses. The history of interpretation of the text is rich: it covers almost everything from the associative world of patristic interpretations to critical works exploring the tensions of the inner lives of marginalized groups. The historical background has become increasingly colourful over time, and the characters increasingly multidimensional. It is a good question whether the bibliolog can add anything to this? But scepticism aside, let us now look in the next chapter at how the bibliolog entered into the story and what, if anything, it has added to this rich interpretative background.

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[183] The text is cited by Theissen, see: Theissen, *Miracle Stories*, p. 104.
[184] Theissen, *Miracle Stories*, p. 105.

3. Empirical Research on a Bibliolog with the Text of 2 Kings 4:1–7

In this chapter of my thesis, I present empirical research demonstrating how the bibliolog broadens the interpretation of biblical narratives. After presenting briefly the theoretical background of bibliolog in the first chapter and diving deeper into the literature on the text of 2 Kgs 4:1–7 exploring some existing interpretations of the text in the second one, I will now turn my attention to the bibliolog on the text, which took place in Groningen, during my studies and preparation for thesis writing.

All verbal elements of the bibliolog can be read in the attached transcript. However, the bibliolog is more than just the words spoken during it. The following presentation of the empirical research conducted on the bibliolog aims to provide the reader with a general overview of what happened and what can be derived about the content of the bibliolog, and meanings attached to the narrative of 2 Kgs 4:1–7.

3.1. Method and methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design, which is well-suited for exploring complex, context-dependent phenomena such as thematic associations in the bibliolog sessions. Qualitative research allows for an in-depth data analysis, providing a nuanced understanding of the participants' perspectives and the meanings they ascribe to their experiences and the biblical story.

3.2. My position: researcher and participant

Throughout the wider framework of this research, my focus and perspective are hermeneutically oriented. Therefore, my stance in the research can also be defined within the interpretive paradigm, in an attempt to interpret the meaning attributed to the story and events by the participants in the bibliolog's internal triadic structure and its interaction with the structural factors (e.g. group-dynamics), using the background of reader-response hermeneutical theory.

I was present at the bibliolog as both the researcher and a participant. As a result of my involvement and engagement, I can give a participant's perspective on the bibliolog. Being a participant and being acquainted with the majority of the participants' group prior to the bibliolog enabled me to keep my perceptions contextualised throughout the bibliolog. My analysis must therefore be read through the lenses of my involved perspective, nonetheless,

with a degree of critical awareness.[185] In my analysis, I will not reflect on my previous knowledge of any of the participants, as the answers are anonymized, and only the data collected during the bibliolog will be the source of my analysis.

3.3. Conductor

The session was led by a trained conductor. In addition to being skilled in the bibliolog method, the conductor also had a BA in drama therapy and MA in Theology and Intercultural Studies. She has also used the benefits of drama and communication through drama in the mission field during her approximately ten years of mission work abroad. Currently, she is an instructor at an institute for mission, and her main research interests include rethinking communication in mission, the role of orality in missionary work and drama theology. She is a middle-aged European female scholar. Her experience in both bibliolog and teaching in a culturally diverse environment during her missionary work made her an ideal fit for our group's facilitator role. Not only is she a trained bibliolog conductor, but her wider knowledge from the field of drama allowed her deeper access to the text in the setting of a bibliolog and the group process, which is based on the above mentioned identification and "role-play" with narrative characters.

The conductor was unknown to the participants until the bibliolog. I, as the researcher, had met her previously and we agreed on the content and parameters of the research. The researcher had met the participants only at the beginning to the bibliolog, where a brief introduction took place. In the case of the conductor, the introduction covered her professional skills and specifically highlighted that she was qualified as a conductor in the field of bibliolog. In the order of introductions, each participant introduced themselves by their name. The conductor, after setting up the room, also noted in her introduction to the participants that for the purpose of research, the session would be conducted "according to the rules".[186] This was

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[185] Although this statement seems contradictory, a newer paradigm in empirical research and methodology allows for this dialectical stance. Dreyer argues in line with Recoeur's dialectical views on belonging and distanciation that both qualitative and quantitative research must promote both stances when it comes to the position of the researcher: from the insider/engaged participant's position the researcher can truly hear the voice of the researched, and from on outsider/detached observer's position, these voices must be critically analysed with a degree of self-distancing. Jaco S. Dreyer, "The Researcher: Engaged Participant or Detached Observer?", *Journal of Empirical Theology* vol. 11., no. 2 (1998), pp. 5–22.

[186] The conductor put the conversation into a more informal framework. As the research was completely anonymous, the personal nature of the introduction meant that it could not be included in the transcript. The audio recording, to which the participants contributed, began with the prologue of the session and the bibliolog. In this prologue, the following was heard from the conductor, discussing the issue of sitting: "Thank you for being here and also for this sitting. We could also do it at the couches, but for a real experience, according to the rules, this is better. And since it is for this research, we thought we'd just do it according to the rules." (see. Appendix)

an indication that she was the skilled party in the group who knew the rules, but that she was also subject to the rules, as everything had to be done according to the rules for the research.

3.4. Recruitment and participants

The research was conducted in the form of a bibliolog, consisting of a conductor (see above) and a group of participants. Participants were selected by convenience sampling. The bibliolog consisted of an accustomed community of people who had been living in a house community and studying theology at the PThU since the beginning of September. This existing group was joined by a few participants who were invited for the specific occasion of the bibliolog. I reached out and personally invited participants whom I knew from our shared studies and living environment. I informed them ahead of time that the bibliolog was part of a research project and that the event would be recorded, but that the transcription would be anonymous. I also made clear that participation was voluntary, indicating that non-participation was fine too. In addition, to meet the requirement of an ideal number of participants on the bibliolog, I also created a poster for the wider PThU student body, which was sent by e-mail to those who follow the PThU internal e-mail system.

Following a personal invitation and advertising by poster and e-mail, 14 people attended the event. The group of participants was very diverse. The participants were approximately between 20-60 years old. In terms of gender, nine women and five men participated. It should be noted that the group was mixed in terms of ethnicity and nationality, with participants of African (3), Asian (3), and European (8) origin as well. In the case of all the participants, English was their second language, which they mastered at a good level (required to participate in the Masters of the PThU).

These aspects of recruitment helped to create an engaged group of participants, who were not strangers to the environment and setting. They presumably found it easier to tune in and open up to each other from the first moment. The core group, who knew each other due to taking the same courses, had been participants of one bibliolog, facilitated by another conductor, in the first month of their stay in the Netherlands. Therefore, for more than half of the participants, the method was known already. As my research was limited to a single bibliolog, engaging the participants most actively and directly as possible was important. Another characteristic of the group members was that they were all connected to the PThU, most of them being international students at the PThU. Out of convenience, the occasion was also advertised as an open event at PThU to gather as many participants as possible. Thus, a significant number of the participants were theology students.

I am aware, that his factor could have influenced the research, and this influence could be twofold: either engaging or limiting. It could be considered engaging, when participants, given their theological knowledge, are more provocative and critical of the text than with non-theological participants in a bibliolog, leading to a higher level of theological discourse or looking beyond the evident theological meaning and finding the depth of the text. It could be considered limiting. when participants provide essentially theological responses, which, because of their background knowledge, may correspond to the meaning that the exegetical endeavours provide, but this background knowledge may lose the depth of the bibliolog.

Since the central question for me was how the bibliolog broadens the horizon of interpretation and how it is different from previous or other interpretational endeavours, I do not consider theologians being involved in the research to be a limiting factor. With their current knowledge, a more distinct picture may emerge of the potential additional value that bibliolog could offer. At the same time, there was also the possibility that the participants, despite their qualifications, would not provide overly theological answers. How theologians were present in the bibliolog and how it influenced the research will be described below.

3.5. Data collection

The setting was also chosen for convenience. The venue was the student residence Casa Mundo, which is the student residence of a Christian organisation in Groningen. The location was considered suitable because it had a large meeting room and was easily accessible for many people, being relatively close to the station and the university building. In addition, for most participants, the event here occurred in a familiar environment. Casa Mundo, functioning as a university dormitory in Groningen, provides a safe haven for theologians. At the conductor's request, we transformed this familiar, comfortable, and secure place into the space of the bibliolog. We arranged the chairs in a circle, in pairs. The arrangement of the chairs initially seemed odd; however, it ultimately conveyed the impression that we were not alone at the event, everyone had a partner, symbolically reinforcing that our opinions and contributions were equal to those of the person sitting next to us, yet they did not stand alone but complemented each other.[187]

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[187] These are the words of my personal reflection following the occasion. As I later learned, the chairs were not placed in this way for symbolic reasons, but simply out of practical reasons, since for 14 participants the room was not spacious enough to be seated separately. Nevertheless, the fact that the seating gave this feeling suggests that the arrangement of the chairs is not always just an externality, but can also have a symbolic value, even a message to our subconscious.

Everybody present in the room was participating in the bibliolog, there were no observers. The event was audio-recorded that was transcribed verbatim, which is the primary source for this research. The transcript was anonymised, which meant that names of participants or places were left out and only relevant data, like the gender of the participants, was written down. The recording of gender was justified by the fundamental gendered character of the biblical story. As I was a participant at the bibliolog and not an observer, I was unable to take field notes. Hence, the field notes I wrote were based on my retrospective reflection on the bibliolog. The duration of the audio recording from the whole bibliolog is 46:16 minutes. This includes the justification of the setting and the introduction to the method. The introduction to the biblical story started at 3:48 minutes.

3.6. Data analysis

Within the wider palette of qualitative analysis methods, the most suitable method for my inquiry is the thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method in which the data within the text is analysed in the form of themes, including predefined ones, and processed in a way where the involvement of the researcher is higher in the interpretative process.[188] The selection of this method is justified by my inquiry into the meaning-making processes of bibliolog since according to the definition of Guest et. al. "a thematic analysis is still the most useful in capturing the complexities of meaning within a textual data set".[189] In my research the themes were predefined by the text and the existing exegetical work on the text presented in Chapter 2. The five themes which became distinct are (1) widows and widowhood, (2) child slavery and orphanhood, (3) gift miracles and the providence of God, (4) Elisha and the prophetic circle and (5) the economic status. Meanwhile, I did not know yet how these themes would play a role in the bibliolog. Also, the role of the conductor seemed paramount in the process, and therefore I will start by describing her role.

Though there were predefined themes for the analysis of the bibliolog which were kept in mind, there were no data saturation parameters set prior to the bibliolog. In the case of bibliolog, data saturation is a tricky question. The bibliolog does not count on correct or sufficient answers, but expects responses, each of which brings the individual and the group closer to the world of the text. In our case, there were occasions when silence set in, and there were explicitly dynamic moments. The quality of each bibliolog depends, however, on the

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[188] For the introduction to the method see: G. Guest *et. al.*, *Applied Thematic Analysis*, SAGE Publications, 2012, pp. 9–10.
[189] Guest et. al., *Applied Thematic Analysis,* p. 10.

group dynamic, which is difficult to control, since all the responses must be voluntary. When preparing the bibliolog, we hoped that the occasion would be a dynamic and content-rich occasion, and we can say that it was indeed.

3.7. Findings and interpretations of the findings

3.7.1. The presence and prompts of the conductor

As we have seen in the first chapter, the role of the conductor is of great importance in bibliolog. I had no insight into or say in the conductor's work, or more precisely in the preparation of the bibliolog. In what follows, I will describe and interpret the part of the conductor's work that took place during the bibliolog and that determined the course of the bibliolog. It is important to note here that the bibliolog is lead by the conductor and unfolds along questions.[190] The way these questions are formulated also determines the themes along which the answers unfold, the ideas that become more prominent and the focus of attention.

The conductor was present on the occasion as an unaffiliated person. The choice of text was her decision, but she considered the preferences I conveyed. She was thus able to conduct the occasion in a way that was partly independent of the course of the research. I believe that, as far as I can judge in the absence of training, the conductor did a decent job, the occasion was easy to follow, her instructions were precise, and both the introductory instructions and the presentation of the historical background, as well as the questions asked and the echoing, maintained the dynamics of the group process.

The bibliolog had a prologue ach and an introduction to the biblical story (2 Kgs 4:1–7), selected by the conductor. The conductor then guided the bibliolog along four prompts for broader questions. In each case, the questions were preceded by a verbatim quotation of the biblical text. The questions, or more precisely, prompts for identification, were the following:

Questions of data collection / Prompts for identification:	
Question 1 (2 Kgs 4:1)	Imagine you are the widow, and we don't know your name. We don't know how old you are, but we know that you recently lost your husband. And beside the grief in your heart, you also have to deal with the fact that there are debts and that you have to pay bills. And the creditor is saying that he wants to take your sons. And so you got up and you went to Elisha,

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[190] Although I talk about the bibliolog as a series of questions and answers throughout much of this thesis and onwards, I am aware that the bibliolog is not just a series of questions and answers, but a much more complex process. Nevertheless, I use these terms to distinguish between the different elements.

	the prophet and the teacher of your husband, and there you are, you're standing there and you tell him your situation. What do you expect from Elisha? What do you hope he will do? What do you expect and hope?
Question 2 (2 Kgs 4:2–6)	You are one of the sons and there is a lot at stake for you. Your whole future is in the hands of other people. And you saw your mother leaving this morning and she came back from Elisha, and then she told you and your brother to go to the neighbours and collect all these empty jars, and you did. And then she shut the door and she took this little jar of oil and she started to pour. And there she is – pouring the oil into the jars that you and your brother collected. Son. When you see this what your mother does and all these jars, what does this to you? How do you experience this situation?
Question 3 (2 Kgs 4:6–7)	Imagine you are the oil. The widow had sold everything. There was nothing left in her house except you. And she reached out to you standing there alone on this shelf. And then she started to pour you into the jar, and you flowed and you flowed, and you flowed to all the jars before. Or what does this moment mean to you? And how do you experience your role in this story? How do you see your part in the story?
Question 3 (*imaginary aftermath of the narrated events*)	You are one more time the widow and some weeks have passed. You're at home and you're preparing some dinner and you reach out for this little jar of oil. And of course you remember what happened some weeks ago, and you're making this dinner for three people, not just for yourself. And after all these weeks, what insight has become most important for you from this event? Has it changed your faith? And if so, how? What has become most important for you? How has it affected your faith?

In the introduction to the text, the conductor first sketched a gendered picture of the circumstances described in the story.[191] At first, the conductor states: *"And actually in these times, it's men and the prophets who are showing the character and the will of God in their deeds and in their words. And one of these prophets is Elisha, and he speaks with authority. He has done already some miracles, and there are even some man disciples who follow him, who*

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[191] Since the introduction is a longer text, I will not quote it, merely the relevant passages. The introduction to the entire text see Appendix.

want to learn from him.” The introduction follows the traditional view of Elisha as the protagonist of the story, who is at the centre of the story as a powerful male figure. Authority is attributed to him, and the conductor also ascribes a prominent role to the male prophet circle surrounding Elisha. "Men and prophets" emerge as divine intermediaries as the sole sources of help. The introduction to the story thus makes it very difficult to see the widow having any agency in the story. This is compounded by the dark description of the widow's situation: *"And a woman in this time is not allowed to work for pay. I mean, she's allowed to work, but she is not allowed to earn salary, and her voice has no right in the court. So widow has no chance to earn money or to somehow get money if there are debts."* The widow is presented here without any agency, and the complete anonymity is reinforced by the first question addressed to the widow: *"Imagine you are the widow, and we don't know your name. We don't know how old you are, but we know that you recently lost your husband."* The widow is not defined in her own right, but in relation to her husband, and is only given a relational definition.

With the first question, the conductor drew the attention of the participants to the widow's figure and invited them to identify with her. The person of the widow appears in a cumulatively problematic situation: "grief in your heart", "have to deal with the fact that they are debts and that you have to pay bills", "creditor is saying that he wants to take your sons". The prophet appears as the source of solution for the widow, and in the relationship with him, in fact, two emotional spheres appear, the sphere of hope and the sphere of expectation. The three questions reiterate this concept: "What do you expect from Elisha? What do you hope he will do? What do you expect and hope?".

The second question focuses on the figure of the child, whose situation, as described by the conductor, is significantly hopeless („You are one of the sons and there is a lot at stake for you. Your whole future is in the hands of other people."). The question here is more at the cognitive level, where the child is asked to report on how he or she "experiences" the situation.

In a similar way, identification with oil is targeting more at the affective or experimental level: "Oil, what does this moment mean to you? And how do you experience your role in this story? How do you see your part in the story?"

The last prompt for identification contains a complex series of questions. The conductor describes the ideal situation of the widow in the future. Here there is no biblical reference before the questions. The widow, however, is again left with a single jar of oil in the situation depicted. The questions invite the participants to identify and respond on several levels: cognitive ("And after all these weeks, what insight has become most important for you from this event?"),

theological ("Has it changed your faith? And if so, how?"), and affective/emotional ("What has become most important for you? How has it affected your faith?").

3.7.2. Thematic analysis

The thematic analysis is twofold, based on methodological considerations. On the one hand, I draw conclusions from participants' answers, and on the other hand, I do not do this question by question, but by grouping the answers thematically concerning a particular aspect. The themes that will be outlined below are those defined by the questions. Since the identification is made with three characters, the themes given are widows and widowhood, child slavery and orphanhood, and miracles and the providence of God (through the identification with the oil). Reading the transcript, two more themes emerged that had not been pre-determined, one of which is the theme of Elisha and the male characters and the economic situation, which is also reflected upon. It was also observed during the research that in very many cases the responses did not only contain factual data, but also had an emotional involvement. These signs of emotional/spiritual involvement are mentioned for each of the themes.

Widows and widowhood

It can be observed that although Q1, which was first addressed to the widow, evoked positive emotional and cognitive content (hopes and expectations), the responses reflected in a fundamentally negative way on the widow's situation. The first two responses came with some difficulty, after a long pause. Nonetheless, the first male respondent jumped right into the topic: "I need a miracle from God". The participant reflected on the widow's helpless situation and the only resource she has, as provided by tradition, from God. Another comment reflecting on the issue of the widow and widowhood was made later, also by a male participant, who reflected on the widow's solitude and loneliness in society in his response: "I'm in a big trouble. There is none of my late husband's family that will help me, and I'm alone." The round was finally closed by a female voice, who, in the case of the widow, drew attention to the issue of agency and articulated that the widow had both the duty and the opportunity to speak up for herself, giving an emotional motivation for the cry for help: "I have to speak up for myself because I need help and I need somebody to help me with this because I can't handle this on my own". Interestingly, although the respondent was impersonal about the source of help, in the echoing, the conductor directed the focus to Elisha: "...and I need to go to Elisha". At the same time, the echoing also gave the widow's words additional meaning by including the concept of

"strength": "I have to be strong. I have to speak up." She sensed that the widow's next step was self-empowered and she acted independently despite all the hopes and expectations that basically implied the widow's passive attitude from the very beginning. The multidimensional character of the widow can also be seen in the fact that she was mentioned as a figure in questions Q2 and Q3.

When we look at the emotional involvement, we see that the widow's persona was associated with a very diverse range of emotions throughout the bibliolog. However, the male participants added little to this palette in Q1. Nonetheless, during the echoing, the conductor already articulated in the first response that the widow's situation was problematic: "I am in despair", and this is later coloured by the other female voices who expressed in their response an interesting way of anger at the male prophet, Elisha: "I'm also very angry at him because he is one of the reasons that we have that much debts", and they also reflected on the pain of mourning and the need for unhealthy repression of mourning with a mournful undertone: "I am mourning but I feel like I could not be sad"; in the echoing: „My heart is full of grief"; the solitude and lack of familial relations in the echoing: "I'm very alone"; and ultimately the emotional overwhelm that transcended the person: "...too much for me, ... I can't handle this on my own"; in the echoing: „This is too much the grief and the danger".

Interestingly, in the case of Q2, the first response was not a reflexive utterance, but an address to the mother in the imagination: "Mother! This is strange. (...) Mother, what do you think of all this?". The response suggested that the participants speaking in the role of her children also assumed a close relationship between mother and children in the story. For Q3, the oil is more critical: "If only the woman and I knew that I'm going to be valuable as this, possibly she'll have collected a lot of jars, and I have opportunity to flow. More than this. Both of us are ignorant", and the male participant responding perceives the mother's negligence in not having managed to collect enough pints. In the echoing, the conductor perceived the blaming tone well and refined it: "So if we had known, she probably would have collected more jars."

In the retrospective Q4, the widow's figure was once again in the focus of the participant's attention. The widow's fate as described in the story was also portrayed negatively in retrospect: "I was truly without hope and without a husband. I thought there was no one to take care of me in my life anymore"; but the focus is on the future, which shows a change, as it is associated with a sense of gratitude: "I'm so grateful for the small things now"; and a sense of duty in a positive direction, with a desire to support those who are still marginalised: "And I feel that I have a duty. I should go to other poor people, to other members and other widows of

the society, of our town." Some pointed out the problematic nature of the story, noting that there was no real change in the widow's situation and that her situation did not change after the miracle: "I am just where it all started. I'm here with my two sons and I have just a little oil - but I'm still here. I still have my sons and I still have oil." The problem seems to be prompted by the formulation of Q4 which is reminiscent of the situation, in which the conductor has outlined where only one small pot of oil is left in the widow's possession. The question is rightly raised by the participant: was not the situation the same in the initial situation, where the widow had little oil to live a self-sustaining life? The female voice again demands justice for the widow. And the resolution comes only in the form of a theologising response: „And even if I don't see how or when, or in which direction, I know it will. And it's not because of me, but because of miracles happen."

Slavery and orphanhood

While I sketched slavery and orphanhood as deeply problematic elements of the story in one of the previous chapters, it is noticeable that they do not feature in many responses. It is all the more interesting that there is even less mention of it when identifying with the role of the child. One reason for this may be that the question to the child (Q2) is not directed at this, the child is addressed in the face of the miracle and not before it.

It should be noted that most of the references to slavery in Q1 were made at the time of identification with the mother, which also reinforces the reciprocity and interconnectedness within the mother-child relationship: e.g. "...my sons will be taken into slavery, and my future will be in disaster", "What lies ahead of me is actually my future, entails my children." The future as a place of hopelessness before the miracle in the threat of slavery means the absence of children for a widow and a mother. The participants evoked the image of a dark future beyond the notion of slavery in their responses. The female respondents, speaking from the role of mother, spoke out against the injustice of the fractions: "Do my sons have to be enslaved for these to be cleared? Can the law be broken?"; and a kind of emotional value system emerges in the case of another female respondent, where the threat of slavery overrides the grief following the death of her husband, the child taking precedence over the loss of the husband: "I am mourning, but I feel like I could not be sad for my husband's death, because it is overtaken by the situation at hand where my sons could go, could be enslaved." Following the miracle, female respondents also emphasised the value of restored family integrity: "But it is all these simple things, being able to eat together, cook together with the family, that's the most important."; and also that freedom from slavery is not a significantly better life, and the situation is not

essentially resolved for the widow: "And I would want to ask, if you kept them from slavery, will you give us a better life than that?".

There is also a sense of childlike disbelief in the child's responses to the miracle, and the liberation is seen as a direct consequence of the miracle: "Oh, this is a miracle. I can't believe it. Can we sell this to pay off our father's debt? Are we free now?". Of particular note is a response voiced by a participant, placing the severity of the father's absence over the threat of slavery: "And I'm not afraid of the slavery and of death. I'm afraid of being raised without a father." The contradictory nature of this response must be noted. In the case of the mother, we have seen that the grief is pushed into the background and the threat to the child becomes the focus of attention, but here, identifying with the role of the child, we can observe a contradictory statement. From the child's perspective, orphanhood is more painful and serious than the unknown but threatening slavery.

Miracles and the providence of God

The group, being mainly theology students, had already encountered the miracle story genre in their personal Bible reading or even in their academic studies. The story, however, prompted them to identify with a person who encounters a miracle not only as a reading experience, but in imagined reality. The interpretation is no longer linked to the story but to the miracles themselves. God's intervention and the miracle gave rise to a wide variety of responses to the subject. It is worth interpreting the question at the temporal level, as answers were given in terms of what expectations are held about the miracle (Q1), what is felt and perceived when confronted with the miracle (Q2 and Q3), and retrospectively how the miracle is valued by the participants (Q4)

Q1 is the only question where the question did not ask about the miracle, but only the hopes and expectation of the widow was probed. Still, it is interesting to note that the need for miracle is also outlined in the answers of three male participants, namely through the intervention of Elisha: e.g. "I really need God's miracle through you, my prophet, my pastor.", "I'm looking up to God, and possibly through Elisha can help me".

In Q2 and Q3, the participants were asked to reflect on how they perceived the miracle. In a series of answers, the relationship of the participants to the miracle appeared, by expressing feelings and the attitude toward the experience: e.g. "... this is amazing"; but predominantly the participants expressed an initial sense of doubt, disbelief, and failure of correct perception: "This is strange... Do you think it's going to work for us?", "I can't believe it", "We have a lot of oil now, but it's a bit suspicious. I'm afraid when I open the door and we bring up the oil, it

will be gone.". The clash of the rational and irrational can also be noted among the responses, which resulted in answers, such as: "I thought my mom was going insane when she asked me for all these jars. And now I think I might be going insane when she's filling in and I see them all being filled up with oil. The only thing I really want to know is how, how did she do that? How, how does this work?".

In the retrospective evaluation (Q4), we can observe that the miracle was situated in the broader theological horizon of the participants. This is supported by the fact that a very large number of respondents in Q4 had reflected on miracles and the providence of God in the broader biblical tradition, and almost without exception recalled Old Testament stories: e.g. "I feel like that God is still doing miracle to us, today. What he did to Moses."; "Maybe I've thought like Abraham. When he was going to sacrifice Isaac and the son asked him, "Where is the lamb?" And Abraham said, »God will provide«. Maybe I also have thought in that way.", cf. Gen 22:8; "... they say there's a husband for the widows. And indeed - God is a husband for the widows." (cf. Ps 68:5). Other respondents highlighted the certainty gained through a miracle as an essential element: e.g. "I know that God has power and really do miracles.", „And I know that life will go on from now on. And even if I don't see how or when, or in which direction, I know it will. And it's not because of me, but because of miracles happen.".

Reflections on Elisha and the prophetic circle
We have already seen in the introduction that the conductor described to the participants a picture of a highly hierarchical system in which the prophets, as God's people, were given a prominent role. With this image in mind, the participants were asked to answer the question of what their hopes and expectations were in the role of the widow. And in several cases, the answers depicted this gendered character.

As we have seen before, in the case of Q1, prior to the miracle Elisha appeared in responses of mostly male participants as a miracle worker, helper, and a person who can help overcome the situation at hand. Yet, one female participant also articulated a particular thought, with outrage in her voice and the „anger" she spoke of earlier: "I need to be very careful when I speak to Elisha because I'm also very angry at him because he is one of the reasons that we have that much debts. If he had not spent all his time with the prophet, then he could have earned money. And I was not in that situation, and my children would not be in such a great danger. So I hope that he can see that and take his responsibility somehow." Anger, as a powerful emotion when identifying with the widow, is directed at none other than Elisha, the person who had previously been presented as a man of God, but who had in fact contributed by

his actions, in the respondent's understanding, to the widow's situation being so difficult. The response is not unique and individual. In Q2, another female voice makes a similar point, now placing the responsibility on Elisha in the role of the child: "But wait, my father worked for the prophet. The prophet never provided all this for him and our family before. What is different today? Was he waiting for my father to die?".

Nonetheless, in their retrospective evaluation in Q4, there were participants who insisted that Elisha had played a meaningful role in the miracle and that their gratitude was due to him: e.g. "I thought there was no one to take care of me in my life anymore. But I guess I was wrong. There's still one man taking care of me." In the echoing, the conductor refines the answer and says: "But now I know there is someone who takes care of me. And there is hope."; "I would find it wisdom to really do something out of this oil and send to the prophet for him to fulfil [*the needs of,* BB] these".

Economic status

At first, the question on economic status and money did not seem relevant to me, especially when reading the story, but we can observe that in a significant part of the answers, the question of financial resources, means, income and economical status were prominent. Particularly in Q3, where oil as a resource needed to be discussed and its role in the story clarified.

When identifying with the mother, the question of money also looks to the future perspective and is a solution to maintain the integrity of the children and the family, even outside the miracle: "We have some resources that can actually earn me some money. I can sell out to raise some funds to be able to meet [*the needs of,* BB] this kid."). Later, however, this picture becomes more and more nuanced. In the case of Q2 we have a contrasting picture. While one participant articulated the child's wish accompanied by laughter: "But I wish I had gotten more jars. We could have been rich."; the next participant spoke in a sombre voice and said: "Oh, but wait, just as remembered of my father, I became very angry and I want to break all these jars because we started to think about wealth and money, and we just started to forget our dad." Once again, grief takes a prominent role that transcends the desire and aspiration for material security, a deep emotional process that takes on greater significance in the identification with the child.

The way in which participants related to material goods also emerged in a contrasting way in Q3. Identifying with oil as a source of material wealth and blessing, many interpreted their own role as "valuable", "precious", "happy that... I'm useful". At the same time, there

were voices which criticised the way the oil was used and sensed in it the depravity of material exploitation and materialism. One of the respondents to the story also reflected on the modern experience of existence: "But wait! At the same time, I am very disappointed in myself because when I was a »child oil«, I made a plan. I was dreaming that in me, they will make meat and everything and good foods. But look at this moment, I'm going to be exchange for money. And this monetary thinking of the society took everything from me that I was dreaming for when I was a child. And I'm disappointed." The disappointment is echoed by another response, but one that is more inward looking, noting that oil loses its value when it is sold: "I feel that actually they don't need me. What would they do with so much oil? I mean, if I'm good for money, they can sell me and that's good for them, but they don't actually need me as I am or what I can offer." Earlier we observed that more people perceived that the widow's fate was not actually resolved. An accompanying element of this, which also manifests itself in a strong emotional response, is the unsettled state of the widow's financial situation: "But now - the anxiety hit me. I start to think about the future. I need to do something because sooner or later this all will be finished. What should I do after this?", or. "The oil actually looks small, what's left. I would find it wisdom to really do something out of this oil and send to the prophet for him to fulfil these." The economic status is an accompanying element of the story as a whole, and although it is not a prominent theme in the story, it is nevertheless present in the responses and thoughts of many of the participants, often in a very specific way.

Thematic analysis proved that participants were involved in the bibliolog both emotionally, both on a cognitive level. The diversity and complexity of the responses presented above demonstrate that the story is likely to have the same complexity. The bibliolog gave space for this to unfold. Within an occasion, there were many consonant responses, but also many different responses when identifying with the same character. How these responses relate to the data about the story presented earlier will be explored in the next chapter.

4. A Comparative Study of Exegesis and Bibliolog on 2 Kgs 4:1–7

In the first chapter, we saw what bibliolog is and what hermeneutical principles it operates on. A method has emerged in which the text is binding, and yet, in the process, new meanings can be added as participants immerse and engage with the text. By the second chapter, we have already seen, with a concrete example of the exegetical endeavours on the text of 2 Kgs 4:1–7 that enormous changes in interpretation can occur within quite a short time when scholars interpret the text through specific lenses and methods of exegesis. Finally, in the third chapter, we have also examined, in the form of an empirical research, the meanings that have been given to the same text in the course of a bibliolog.

To answer the question of how my interpretation of participants' interpretations of the text relate to interpretations offered by different exegetical approaches and what are the strengths and limitations of the respective readings, it is necessary to carry out a specific comparative analysis. Comparison could be done thematically along the themes of the thematic analysis, moving verse by verse along the thread of the biblical story, or even along the questions posed by the conductor. However, I think it would be most useful to attempt the comparison considering the complexity of the different methods and approaches, the multidimensional character of the biblical narrative, and the theoretical background of our inquiry, aiming to do it from a meta-position as a researcher.

4.1. Different character of the data sources

First and foremost, it is important to note that different methods of approaching a text inevitably lead to different kinds of results. How the different exegetical interpretations and the approach of bibliolog differ and how they diverge will be outlined below, with examples from the process of research.

Exegesis, as we saw earlier in Thisleton's broader definition, "denote(s) the actual process of interpreting texts".[192] However, this broad definition needs further refinement. The most distinctive feature of exegesis, which becomes particularly pronounced in the light of newer methods of interpretation, is that it always approaches biblical texts with a certain critical prerequisite. The various paradigms of exegesis, which we have seen in the above analysis, are not incidentally called critical approaches (e.g. historical-critical methods, literary criticism, textual criticism, ideological criticism). In many of these, the critical lens through which the

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[192] Thiselton, *Hermeneutics,* e-book edition.

researcher approaches a text also determines the hermeneutical underpinning of exegesis. However, the very fact that exegesis essentially covers a critical and analytical process suggests that the researcher, as an interpreter, makes the text an object of a critical inquiry. This is particularly true of historical-critical, textual and even literary methods. In the case of ideological criticism, as the name suggests, there is already a strong emphasis on the contextuality and positionality of the researcher, next to the general critical nature of the academic approach. This can be nicely observed in the above presented interpretation of Sayuri Watanabe's contemporary analysis of the text of 2 Kgs 4:1–7,[193] drawing a parallel with the post-covid isolation of women within the Japanese society, or the intersectional analysis of Gale A. Yee accompanied with her positionality statement at the beginning of her Presidential Address, in which she confesses that her positionality as a woman of colour influences the way a story such as 2 Kgs 4:1–7 is interpreted.[194] Despite this, ideological criticism remains on the ground where interpretation is done according to rules and procedures, aiming for an intersubjective agreement, and intended to impart knowledge on an academic level. This also entails what may seem obvious, yet it is important to note that the exegetical works presented above are all written sources and within that written in the form of mostly peer-reviewed scholarly publications, which also includes a certain procedure of evaluation that might lead to changes or pre-emptive self-censuring by the authors. Therefore, these are all fixed texts, intended to be received by a wider public and adapting a certain level of academic language and style.

By contrast, bibliolog, although it fits into the broader definition of exegetical methods given by Thiselton, shows several differences from what might be called "traditional" exegesis. First and foremost, there are no critical prerequisites for the bibliolog. In bibliolog, it is stated from the very beginning that every contribution is valid and equal. The interpretation of the bibliolog is not rooted in a quest for objectivity in accordance with critical and analytical aims but is primarily concerned with subjective and personal interpretation. As Pohl-Patalong explains it, the "white fire" is nothing more than filling the gaps of the "black fire" with "participants' reservoir of life experiences".[195] The very form of the different interpretations reveals this, since the participants always formulate them in the first person, and step into an

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[193] Sayuri Watanabe, "Bible Study on Hebrew Scripture: When the Oil Flow Stops (II Kings 4:1–7). *In God's image* 42, No. 1 (Jun 2023), pp. 15-22.

[194] Gale A. Yee, "Thinking Intersectionally: Gender, Race, Class, and the Etceteras of Our Discipline". JBL 139, no. 1 (2020).

[195] Pohl-Patalong, *Bibliolog*, p. 89. See also: Uta Pohl-Patalong, "Lebensrelevante Lektüre? Zur Hermeneutik erfahrungsbezogener Zugänge zur Bibel", *Praktische Theologie* 49, no. 3 (2014), pp. 158–165.

imaginative process, called the trance of bibliolog by Pitzele, which is rooted in the process of identification. What this process entails will be discussed below in detail.

It is also a significant feature that the bibliolog is not a written genre but is strongly characterised by orality. The sources are therefore not only distinctive in their nature and content, but also in their form. It is inherent to orality that responses are instantaneous, that the revision of the response is much more limited than in the case of a written text that is revised repeatedly, and that there is a higher degree of spontaneity.[196] Moreover, interpretation in the bibliolog is not the privilege of those who have studied theology on an academic level, but leaves room for all kind of varied comments, observations and perceptions.

How though can one compare the exegetical results and the responses in bibliolog to the same text? The answer to this question is contained in the question itself. If two methods serve the same purpose, then the two methods can be compared. Both exegesis and bibliolog aim to interpret and understand the text, i.e. the "black fire". Pohl-Patalong highlights the same relationship when she tries to bridge the gap between the methods. She also calls bibliolog an interpretive method, and within it an experience-oriented approach, in which historical-critical findings also find a place, and where she sees the biggest difference as being that the current form of the text is the focus of attention, and the actuality of that text becomes the reinterpretation, rather than its single "scope".[197] The expected difference between the exegetical and "bibliological" responses is therefore primarily that while the former attempts a more in-depth examination of the text from a critical-analytical perspective, the bibliolog draws from the repository of life experience and subjectivity, and adds an actualizing meaning to the text. Whether this was true for the bibliolog performed for the research is what this chapter aims to find out.

4.2. Rethinking the trance and the different forms of identification in bibliolog

For those who encounter bibliolog for the first time, the most novel aspect of this biblical interpretation will certainly be the possibility of identifying with the characters in the text during the so-called trance. Whereas previous interpretations have looked at the world of the text from the outside, in bibliolog the participants gain an insider's perspective, and every comment on the text bears the specificity of this perspective. As Dreyer argues based on Ricoeurian

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[196] To investigate the difference between orality and written sources would invite a field of research into the thesis, which could itself be a subject of research. For the purposes of this comparison, I will highlight only the most important elements between written and spoken texts, in the knowledge that the issue is much more complex and could yield interesting results in future research.

[197] Pohl-Patalong.,"Lebensrelevante Lektüre?". pp. 163–164.

hermeneutical presuppositions, the distancing (cf. critical-analytical exegetical methods) and the belonging (cf. here the insider/immersed perspective of the participant) as different perspectives lead to different findings.[198] In bibliolog, belonging to the world of the text is intensified (though never reaches totally), and all attempts at interpretation of the text derive from the world inaccessible to the outside observer, the basic condition of which is belonging, in this case belonging to the world of the text, and specifically, to its characters.

Pitzele calls this phenomenon trance, but instead of using it as a terminus technicus to define what is happening when identification occurs, he only considers it one element of the method. Pitzele defines the trance as the "experience of make-believe, of pretending, of letting ourselves enter an imagined world."[199] Pitzele describes the state of the trance as one created and sustained by the conductor, in which the participants willingly sustain their critical faculty, and their emotions take the central stage and enhance the experience. Nevertheless, according to Pitzele, the trance can be broken when participants are invited to think rather than to feel.[200] Pohl-Patalong, on the other hand, uses the term trance in a broader sense, and in her interpretation, trance covers the whole process of identification, and has as much room for intellectual involvement as for emotional. Pohl-Patalong defines this trance as follows:

> "Verbally, the threshold to the Bibliolog itself is marked by the words »You are ... « Peter Pitzele calls the state of being engrossed in the text a trance, which is not be confused with the word's other associations regarding the subconscious. (...) Trance means that the participants step into the story and identify with the biblical characters. This, however, does not mean that participants suppress their rational and reflective thoughts but rather that they choose to put them aside for the moment."[201]

Identification appears as a concept in the definition, and thus the bibliolog is unspokenly included in another theoretical discourse, which, although it has not been given much importance in the literature of the bibliolog so far, I believe, has a great influence on the way the bibliolog operates and adds new meaning to the interpretation of texts. Identification theory focuses on the conceptualization of the process of identifying with individuals, fictive characters or groups of people. First, the notion was theorized in the field of psychology, as

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[198] Dreyer, "The Researcher: Engaged Participant or Detached Observer?", pp. 12–13.
[199] Pitzele, *Scripture Windows,* p. 137.
[200] Pitzele also presents this breaking of the trance in one of his case studies presented in the handbook. He also argues that moving from emotion to intellect is driven by the law, that "the more the head – the intellectual faculty – is involved, the less the emotions will be stirred and engaged." Pitzele, *Scripture Windows,* pp. 232–234.
[201] Pohl-Patalong, *Bibliolog,* p. 27.

Freud developed the theory of identification in developmental psychology.[202] However, a theory of unconscious identification processes that looks at the whole human life can hardly provide a conceptualization of identification facilitated by the conductor and practiced by the participants out of willingness during the bibliolog. However, identification has not only been conceptualized in the field of developmental psychology but also in the disciplines of media and culture studies and social psychology, where a kind of identification theory has developed that is closer to what happens in the bibliolog.

The notion of identification was studied in media and culture studies with the aim to understand and analyse how audiences engage with characters. The theory operates on the idea of Coleridge of the "willing suspension of disbelief", which occurs when a person encounters art in form of literature, media content, etc. and is willing to respond emotionally and immerse oneself in the world offered.[203] Interestingly, Pitzele brings Coleridge's theory to bibliolog when discussing the warm-up, and states that "the 'suspension of disbelief' is the climate necessary for the imagination to begin to work and see and sense."[204] Since Pitzele seems to approach bibliolog on a similar theoretical basis, it is worth approaching identification theory from this perspective, as identification with characters of a mediated world. The most important elements of Cohen's definition outline identification as an imaginative process, in which a mediated text evokes an affective response to the character and an empathic understanding of the text both on an affective and on a cognitive level, gaining deeper access to the feeling of the characters and their motives.[205] Cohen details, that in this process, viewers can incorporate knowledge from the extra-textual world and are influenced by personal characteristics, such as values, perspectives, and views. The higher the relevance of the issue presented in the mediated context, the easier identification follows. If we take this definition, we can easily see the similarities of it with what happens in bibliolog. Identification as described by Cohen is similar

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[202] For an overview of the Freudian theory of identification see: Urie Bronfenbrenner, "Freudian Theories of Identification and Their Derivatives." *Child Development* vol. 31, no. 1, 1960, pp. 15–40.

[203] Jonathan Cohen, "Audience Identification with Media Characters." In J. Bryant & P. Vorderer (eds), *Psychology of entertainment.* Routledge: 2006. pp. 183–197.

[204] Pitzele, *Scripture Windows,* p. 136. He also mentions the theory when talking about the trance, cf. p. 137.

[205] The full definition if the following: "Identification with media characters is an imaginative process that is evoked as a response to characters presented in mediated texts. Mediated texts construct worlds in which characters are seen to operate. Viewers often respond to such texts by feeling as if they are part of these fictional worlds, and are experiencing the events occurring in them from within the text. Identifying with a character means feeling an affinity toward the character that is so strong that we become absorbed in the text and come to an empathic understanding for the feelings the character experiences, and for his or her motives and goals. We experience what happens to the characters as if it happens to us while, momentarily at least, forgetting ourselves as audience members, and this intensifies our viewing experience. Thus, identification has both affective (empathy) and cognitive (understanding goals and motives, perspective taking) components." Cohen, "Audience Identification", pp. 184–185.

to how Pohl-Patalong defines what happens in bibliolog, when both emotional and cognitive responses are evoked and these responses are influenced by experiences from the personal lives (cf. also the above-presented reader-response theory as the hermeneutical underpinning of bibliolog). Moreover, the role of the conductor both in mediated texts and in bibliolog is crucial, as he or she is the one who creates a world where the participants want to "willingly sustain disbelief" and identify with the characters.[206]

Identification can also occur on a social level, and since bibliolog is a method practised in different groups of people, social aspects of what identification is must be considered as well. Henri Tajfel, the father of Social Identity Theory in social psychology, among the elements of the theory names social identification. Social identification is one of the psychological processes amongst social categorization, and social comparison, which implies "the realization that the self is included in some social categories, and excluded from others.".[207] Social identification has both a cognitive element of realization and an emotional significance for the individual, and implies a strong reflection on the self. Identification thus is not the process of becoming a member of a certain group but the process of internalizing a sense of belonging or distancing oneself from the given group.[208] In bibliolog, since the most distinctive feature of the method is the possibility of interpretation from within through the experience of belonging, social identification happens. Group members, however, identify with categories presented within the narrative, in our example these categories are the widows or the children of the Ancient Near East. The identification is facilitated by the conductor and again, tackles both the cognitive and the affective involvement of the participants.

Another interesting feature of the bibliolog we held was that the participants had to identify not only with persons, but with one inanimate object as well, namely the oil. However, this phenomenon can be problematized in the light of identification theory. In the light of social identification theory or developmental psychology, identification is impossible, since these theories are linked to persons or groups of persons. However, media studies allows for a freer interpretation in its definition, when it speaks of *actors* within the mediated environment, who play a role in the development of the story. And oil is an essential actor in the story for the miracle story. The example also showed that, although at the beginning the participants were noticeably surprised by the situation and laughter accompanied the responses, the role of the oil

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[206] Cohen, "Audience Identification", p. 185.
[207] Naomi Ellemers & Alexander S. Haslam, "Social Identity Theory", in: *Handbook of theories of social psychology.* London, United Kingdom: Sage Publications, 2012, pp. 379-398.
[208] Ellemers & Haslam, "Social Isentity Theory", p. 382.

was interpreted as a significant role. Even more interestingly, oil, although not given much prominence in later commentary literature, was one of the most significant associations in patristic literature to enrich the meaning of the story as the "grace of God".[209] Similarly, the participants identified themselves somehow as the same agents of delivering the grace through the miracle ("valuable", "precious", "happy that... I'm useful").

To conclude, we can state, that the notion of trance introduced by Pitzele does not cover sufficiently the process that takes place during the bibliolog. In Pitzele's understanding, trance is only an emotional involvement, but as identification theory specifies, identification is a complex process in which the individual can identify emotionally and cognitively with the actors of a mediated environment (in the bibliolog, the world of the text) and, beyond the individual actors, with the social categories represented. How this influences the textual interpretations produced by the bibliolog can perhaps be better understood through the text of 2 Kgs 4:1–7.

4.3. The historical-critical scope of the text and the scope of bibliolog

Before turning our attention toward the differences between bibliolog and exegetical interpretations, which I believe mainly derive from the identification driven interpretation of bibliolog, we must evaluate how bibliolog is similar and representative of the critical exegetical methods. One of the biggest critiques, as Pohl-Patalong pointed out and we discussed above is that the bibliolog, compared to specifically the textual and historical-critical methods remains on the surface of the text by presenting the final and translated form of it to the reader.[210] In most cases, exegesis in biblical scholarship begins with the analysis and translation of the original text, not only because the translation itself can be considered a form of interpretation, but also because the text very often bears traces of the period in which it was written. A historical-critical inquiry on a text, especially in Old Testament scholarship since the turn initiated by Gunkel toward the original meaning of a text, graspable in the "Sitz im Leben" through the text and through different historical sources, moreover, the inquiry not only tells us more about one specific text, but about the historical background of biblical times in general. Biblical scholarship since the Critical turn tends to look for the scope of the text within its

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[209] Fort he patristic literature's interpretations see Chapter 2.
[210] Pohl-Patalong, "Lebensrelevante Lektüre?", p. 164. I would argue, that in some cases this might be an issue, as biblical translations sometimes cannot reproduce the exact meaning of the text and mistranslate it. However, speaking of comparison, I should note here that in the case of the bibliolog I examined, there was no significant discrepancy between the text I translated from the original language (see section 2.1. of this thesis) and the NIV translation used and quoted by the conductor.

original context. Does that context have any relevance in the bibliolog, or can that truly be presented in the framework of a bibliolog?

Pohl-Patalong argues that historical-critical findings have relevance and a legitimate place in bibliolog, and the introduction should reflect on the historical-critical background of each narrative. Considering our case study, the first element of comparison can be this introduction to the bibliolog on 2 Kgs 4:1–7 with the exegetical findings on the historical background of the text. The introduction prepares the participants to enter the trance by introducing the miracle, setting the scenery, mentioning the most important historical and socio-historical aspects influencing the narrative, and by the end of the introduction, highlighting the one character which will follow to be discussed during Q1.[211] Moreover, Cohen, when discussing identification theory also mentions that directors of media content have a very strong influence over how the identification can take part, how much they tell or show to the viewers, and how they leave space for the imagination and identification – context of the scene is crucial.[212] When considering the two types of introduction, being either specific by naming the biblical passage from the very beginning, or being more general by simply mentioning some key information about the setting of the text, the introduction delivered by the conductor can be considered general by its outline, nevertheless, it contained some particular references, which should be reviewed.

The first striking feature of the introduction was dating the narrative. "So the story we want to look at together happened around 2500 years ago." – starts the conductor her introduction. This would place the narrative at 500 BC, corresponding to the early post-exilic period in Israel's history. This dating however is inaccurate, and although we know that the introduction did not aim for specificity and punctuality, and the word "around" was consciously used, here we must do a critical examination during the comparative phase. The next sentences of the conductor suggest that the events must have happened long before the exile, during the Omridic dynasty's reign, right before the conquest of Samaria by the Neo-Assyrian Empire: „And it happens in Israel, and the golden age of King David and King Solomon has long passed. And now it's almost not worth remembering the names of the kings because they come and they go. Within months, the kingdom is divided." As we have seen before, dating the text in the time of the Omridic Dynasty (cca. 880–840 BC) appears in literature,[213] together with the dating toward the end of the Samarian Kingdom (second half of 8th century BC), which also includes

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[211] Pohl-Patalong, *Bibliolog*, pp. 71–74.
[212] Cohen, "Audience Identification", p. 185.
[213] Sweeney, *1&II Kings,* pp. 288–289.

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[213] Sweeney, *1&II Kings,* pp. 288–289.

original context. Does that context have any relevance in the bibliolog, or can that truly be presented in the framework of a bibliolog?

Pohl-Patalong argues that historical-critical findings have relevance and a legitimate place in bibliolog, and the introduction should reflect on the historical-critical background of each narrative. Considering our case study, the first element of comparison can be this introduction to the bibliolog on 2 Kgs 4:1–7 with the exegetical findings on the historical background of the text. The introduction prepares the participants to enter the trance by introducing the miracle, setting the scenery, mentioning the most important historical and socio-historical aspects influencing the narrative, and by the end of the introduction, highlighting the one character which will follow to be discussed during Q1.[211] Moreover, Cohen, when discussing identification theory also mentions that directors of media content have a very strong influence over how the identification can take part, how much they tell or show to the viewers, and how they leave space for the imagination and identification – context of the scene is crucial.[212] When considering the two types of introduction, being either specific by naming the biblical passage from the very beginning, or being more general by simply mentioning some key information about the setting of the text, the introduction delivered by the conductor can be considered general by its outline, nevertheless, it contained some particular references, which should be reviewed.

The first striking feature of the introduction was dating the narrative. "So the story we want to look at together happened around 2500 years ago." – starts the conductor her introduction. This would place the narrative at 500 BC, corresponding to the early post-exilic period in Israel's history. This dating however is inaccurate, and although we know that the introduction did not aim for specificity and punctuality, and the word "around" was consciously used, here we must do a critical examination during the comparative phase. The next sentences of the conductor suggest that the events must have happened long before the exile, during the Omridic dynasty's reign, right before the conquest of Samaria by the Neo-Assyrian Empire: „And it happens in Israel, and the golden age of King David and King Solomon has long passed. And now it's almost not worth remembering the names of the kings because they come and they go. Within months, the kingdom is divided." As we have seen before, dating the text in the time of the Omridic Dynasty (cca. 880–840 BC) appears in literature,[213] together with the dating toward the end of the Samarian Kingdom (second half of 8th century BC), which also includes

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[211] Pohl-Patalong, *Bibliolog*, pp. 71–74.
[212] Cohen, "Audience Identification", p. 185.
[213] Sweeney, *1&II Kings,* pp. 288–289.

a theological undertone, since according to Wijk-Bos miracle stories placed to this period suggest the idea that although the historical facts show otherwise, Israel will have a future through the providence of God.[214] Nevertheless, dating of biblical narrative is not an easy task, especially if we consider the later development of biblical scholarship which tends to lean toward a later dating of historical narratives, placing the Elijah-Elisha cycle's redaction to the Deuteronomic period (cc. 530). Susanne Otto deals with this question in detail. Otto suggests, that one should not link the majority of the stories about Elijah and Elisha to the original work of the Deuteronomist (in the DtrG, based on the largely accepted theory of Martin Noth).[215] According to her, the biggest part of the Elisha stories was the latest interpolation into the Deuteronomistic historical framework of the 1–2 Kgs (and the DtrG in general), and the stories existed prior to the insertion in an older collection of miracle stories.[216] It is suggested that this tradition, associated with the end of the Kingdom, was documented and incorporated into the composition at a very late stage, leading to a dating even later than the 500 BC, to which the relative dating of the conductor might allude. This raises the question of whether it is necessary to introduce the question of dating in the introduction to the bibliolog at all. I believe that, in the absence of more detailed and unnecessary background information, it was not disruptive to mention the date. Nevertheless, since there is no consensus in research as to when a text can be dated, the question of dating becomes superfluous. The description of the background was nevertheless accurate in the introduction, and the context of the text does indeed paint a turbulent historical period for the reader, where the role of kings is eclipsed and the prophets enter the scene as the acting instruments of JHVH.

Can this be called inaccurate dating? Does the claim that there is a place for historical-critical findings in the introduction fail? Is the dating in the introduction relevant to the later part of the bibliolog or to the interpretation of the story? The historical-critical analysis clearly argues that the dating is decisive because it is in the light of the ideological currents of the time that it is possible to understand exactly what the scope of the text is. However, it is not the aim of the bibliolog to reveal this scope explicitly, or even to get participants to decipher the exact dating of the text. In fact, it could be argued that since the bibliolog aims to explore the actual relevance of the text, a similar question or even a more precise definition by the conductor could

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[214] Wijk-Bos, *1–2 Kings*, e-book edition.
[215] Otto, "Elijah-Elisha stories", p. 494.
[216] The proof of this editorial work on the Elisha narratives is found in the parallel acclamation in 2Kgs 2:12 and 2Kgs 13:14 which frames the cycle, the similar pictures of Elijah (2Kgs 2:11) and Elisha (2Kgs 6,15b–17), and in the editorial notes regarding the wandering of the prophet Elisha in 2Kgs 2:23a.25a and 4:38a. Otto, "Elijah-Elisha stories"*,* pp. 505–506.

even be a distracting factor during the bibliolog, as the participants' attention could be distracted or lost in the details. The aim of the bibliolog is therefore not to achieve story-critical accuracy, but to explore the relevance of generalisable factors. This is done when the conductor later sketches the background of the story with a gendered picture, which was analysed in Chapter 3.

Neither could we state that the answers of the participants contradict any information which was relevant from the historical context of the narrative. Rather, the participants correctly reflected on historical elements which were supported by the exegesis and historical analysis presented earlier. One such case was when, without the conductor specifically addressing the legal situation of the widow and her late husband, one participant recognised the serious consequences of the lack of a supportive family ("There is none of my late husband's family that will help me..."). Likewise, when asked to reflect on the fate of the child (Q2), despite the fact that the exact rules for this were not mentioned, some participants brought the idea of the Old Testament law into their response, thus showing that the obligations of the law are implicit in the texts in the Old Testament world ("Do my sons have to be enslaved for these to be cleared? Can the law be broken?").

It follows that the historical context of the story is important in bibliolog through the way in which participants enter into that particular historical context. This does not always overlap with the dating and historical context outlined in commentaries, the cause of which can be that while commentaries consider the whole of the Elisha-cycle when dating and analysing the text, bibliolog treats only a snippet of it. Nonetheless, in the bibliolog, this narrative and its context and supposed background become the scene of identification. From the background, those elements that determine the development of the story become relevant, and help the participants identify with the characters not only on an affective level, but also on a cognitive level, understanding and exploring intentions and motives possible within the given scene/historical context. It should be noted again that the group that participated in the research was a group of theologians. Nevertheless, the fact that background knowledge was brought into the discussion that had not been previously discussed demonstrates that the bibliolog may be staying closer to the original, historical background of the story than might be assumed, and within that, trying to actualise the meaning. Though I believe bibliolog stay on the surface of historical-critical inquiry and does not bring many new insights into the discussion of biblical stories on a historical level, due to the thorough preparation of the conductor, the answers do not deviate from the historical results in a decisive way or even in a way that completely overrides the meaning.

4.4. Agency and a deconstructive reading of the narrative

As the examples above demonstrate, and as the exegesis and thematic analysis have shown, the text contains elements that make it challenging for interpretation: such as widowhood, child slavery and orphanhood. A deconstructive reading of the narrative would inevitably question the legitimacy of the textual depiction and presence of these characters. And so does the bibliolog in many cases. More recent exegetical efforts, as reflected in the commentary literature, have included feminist, childist, and intersectional approaches to the story, all of which have focused on the question of agency. And it is this question, precisely because of the problematic nature of the text, that we need to reflect on in the bibliolog, too.

Agency should not only be interpreted as one's "capacity to act", but it is a more complex concept which requires a broader lens of analysis when trying to trace it down in the bibliolog.[217] Merz and Oegema reflect on two important aspects of agency when synthesizing the existing definitions: First, the agency is not a remote capacity to act of an individual, but rather there is always an interconnectedness between the acting individual, his or her environment and the opportunities they create - therefore, agency can be traced in e.g. navigating the social structure, response and decision making when faced with challenges, imaginative problem-solving.[218] Second, agency does not only consist of an individual confronting what appears to the outside observer to be repressive, nor is it restricted to taking active action, but can be distinguished in several forms, next to the so-called "resistance agency", practices which seemingly underline the gender-traditional and sometimes repressive systems can also be the signs of agency, when they are the consequences of individual choice and are taken as such.[219] Due to this multidimensional approach, we also have to pay attention to forms of agency in the bibliolog analysis that seem subtle or complying at first.

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[217] For the following discussion on agency, I build on Merz and Oegema's work on children's agency in New Testament and early rabbinic parables, in which they also present some key features of the notion of agency in light of newer research which spread over numerous disciplines and is finding its place in biblical scholarship as well. See: A.B. Merz & Albertina Oegema. "Honouring Human Agency and Autonomy: Children as Agents in New Testament and Early Rabbinic Parables", in: Eric Ottenheijm, Marcel Poorthuis, Annette Merz (eds), *The power of parables. Essays on the comparative study of Jewish and Christian parables* (Jewish and Christian Perspectives Series, vol. 39), Leiden - Boston: Brill, 2024. pp. 223-248.

[218] Merz & Oegema. "Honouring Human Agency", pp. 229–230.

[219] Merz & Oegema. "Honouring Human Agency", pp. 230. The authors emphasize this idea especially in the case of feminist theories, where both sociological and religious scholarship has recognized that for religious groups, the adoption of religious customs and traditional forms of religious practice often empower women, and women show willingness to conform to the norms - thus, practicing agency with this.

First, we look at the issue of female agency. As we saw in Chapter 3, the conductor begins with a strongly gendered introduction, with the central motif of the widow being bound by social norms. In the introduction to Q1, these bonds are repeated without value judgement: "And a woman in this time is not allowed to work for pay. I mean, she's allowed to work, but she is not allowed to earn salary, and her voice has no right in the court. So (the) widow has no chance to earn money or to somehow get money if there are debts." It is in the light of the above definitions that agency manifests itself in this very socially bound situation that is depicted, and if we read the participants' responses as thinking within this given framework, it becomes very clear that different forms of female agency are present in the story. One female participant testified that the acknowledgement of weakness on the part of the widow is also a strength and part of her own agency and in fact it is from this acknowledged need that she realises the need to speak up ("... I just feel that this is too much for me and I have to speak up. I have to speak up for myself because I need help and I need somebody to help me with this because I can't handle this on my own."). In the same way, female agency is reflected through the words when several female participants see the way of action in turning to Elisha for help (e.g. "But Elisha is the prophet. He can actually do this. So I'm just going to pray and go to Elisha. He will do something."; "The only thing I can ask is to go to Elisha and ask him, because after all, he is God's prophet who can do miracles."). Behind their words, in fact, lies not surrender and helplessness, but acting out of the socially bound situation described by the conductor: "And actually in these times, it's men and the prophets who are showing the character and the will of God in their deeds and in their words." And in this situation, the agency of the widow is perhaps crystallized in prayer, in navigating the possibilities and chances of her situation, and why should not one of the most powerful means of female agency be to turn to God and the "man of God" in the story.

As we have seen before, children in this narrative are in a particularly vulnerable position. Not only do we learn that the children have recently lost their father, a situation the conductor reveals could affect the whole family in the social structure of the time, but also that the family's financial situation is causing them to be taken into slavery. The conductor also seems to use the order of the questions as a way of showing that the child is helpless in this situation, since the wording of Q2 shows the mother as the main actor and asks the child a simple question: "When you see this what your mother does and all these jars, what does this do to you? How do you experience this situation?". The person of the child, who is voiceless in the story, can nevertheless be heard, and we see in the responses that there were those who, through identification, also evoked the child's agency. It is interesting that although the question

was addressed to the child, one participant, almost without hesitation, addressed the mother of the child ("Mother! This is strange. (...) Mother, what do you think of all this?"), suggesting that it is part of the child's agency to speak out towards his mother, to ask questions, and to address her. Also, when the prospect of liberation is at hand, the child recognizes their own role in it in one of the participant's response, using a plural form ("Can we sell this to pay off our father's debt? Are we free now?"). Another very interesting response, which could be said came from one of the "child" figures, is a response to the Q3, when the prompt was to identify with the oil. One participant said: "…when I was a »child oil«, I made a plan (…) And this monetary thinking of the society took everything from me that I was dreaming for when I was a »child«." Perhaps the answer was formulated in this way because the child had to speak up earlier. In the challenge to speak from the person of an inanimate object (the oil), at this point in the biblical story, the roles are intertwined and a "child oil" is born, the personified source of the miracle, but here his voice is one of discontent. The topos of growing up, however, appears behind the words, and the perhaps real-life rooted and actualized experience that "monetary thinking" makes the process of growing up bitter, as the agency which is reflected in the form of dreams is lost in it.

As the above examples illustrate, the story focuses on people who were deprived of agency within the known historical social structures, and this may be true in many cases of widows, orphans and child slaves in the current times. This is confirmed by the exegetical and historical works presented here, moreover, many of the scholars place the notion of agency in the hands of the widow or the children in an amplified way (see e.g. Wijk-Bos presenting the widow as the actual agent of the miracle,[220] who acts independently, or Sayuri Watanabe presents the children as acting and promoting the miracle while the mother is inactive[221]). The bibliolog, however, remains more reserved and subtle in passing the agency. Nonetheless, as the above-cited responses show, although from the part of the conductor, the possibilities of female or child agency seemed limited, the participants found ways in which they could create opportunities for the widow and the son. This is where the power of identification as a process in interpretation makes a huge difference, when the people involved in the process experience the fusion of the social situation of the characters and the groups represented by them and their cognitive patterns regarding values and views, and hence use their imagination and experiences to find what can and could be done by them, exploring possible intentions and their agency. What we have seen in this example can be understood in a broader understanding of agency,

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[220] Wijk-Bos, *1–2 Kings*, e-book edition.
[221] Watanabe, "When the Oil Flow Stops", p. 16.

since the bibliolog is not testing the participants' "capacity to act" - in bibliolog, one can only act through words. However, words show that the participants though the process of identification take seriously the task of navigating the imposed social structure in their own way, giving voice to the voiceless, and questioning what has to be questioned and criticised.

With this in mind, I believe that the bibliolog's interpretive horizon is perhaps closest to that of ideological criticism. In addition to the "hermeneutics of confidence", the "hermeneutics of suspicion", which was discussed earlier in the discussion of the hermeneutical background, is also prominent in the bibliolog. Newer methods of exegesis, amongst which feminist, childist, or even intersectional criticism appear to operate on this line, and in bibliolog there is an even more empathic possibility for the unspoken words in the text to be given voice, for underrepresented actors to appear behind the events and to gain space in terms of agency. In this, of course, the role of the conductor is very important, but the fact that this is achieved in the bibliolog is a testament to the affinity of the conductor in the case study. But by provoking the participants to identify with female and underage characters, regardless of the participant's gender or age, the conductor opened a door for an intersectional approach to the text even for those who would not approach the text in such a way. Moreover, the bibliolog did not only address the issues of the characters introduced by the conductor, but other marginal characters and critical topics also appeared in the responses, such as the situation of neighbours and the unjust nature of monetary thinking. It is especially interesting to mention here how participants sensed the need of others in the narrative ("I should go to other poor people, to other members and other widows of the society, of our town. And I should tell them that, collect those jars because God does miracles."), a topic which was touched upon on commentary literature, and although the conductor did not choose to make one of the neighbours speak during the bibliolog, participants were aware of the presence of "others", in both literal and symbolic way.

4.5. Emotional complexity

The comparison so far suggests that the diversity of data sources does not exclude overlaps. Just as some of the earlier commentary literature was concerned with historical background and then with ideological criticism, so in the bibliolog we have before us an interpretation bounded by historical facts, in which there is equally room for challenging this apparently normative background and for individual decisions. Moreover, whereas in the earlier commentary literature, an author usually highlighted one aspect of agency in the case of both widow and children, the bibliolog, by taking multiple perspectives, has highlighted several possibilities in a single occasion. Beyond this, where the bibliolog added more, and where the

personal emotions and involved life experiences manifested themselves in a surprisingly specific way, was in the emotional saturation of the bibliolog. According to identification theory, identification is primarily an empathic understanding of the story presented, where the reception of the text does not only imply the understanding of motives but an understanding of the feelings of the characters as well.[222] While exegetical inquiry sometimes aims to trace the motives behind actions of characters, emotions are scarcely mentioned when the text itself does not include any reference to them. Bibliolog in this regard seemingly does justice to the narratives, by

The biblical story of 2 Kgs 4:1–7 does not contain a single phrase that refers to emotions. The story is verbally dry, and only implicitly, along the internal dynamics of the story, does it express some of the tension, sadness, grief and ultimately joy that the participants in the biblical story put into words. It was observed that emotions generally changed from question to question as we progressed through the story. While for Q1, the underlying mood was sombre and sad ("I'm in despair", "I am mourning/My heart is full of grief", "I'm very alone", "too much for me"), for Q2, it had started to ease, with surprise and excitement ("... some excitement coming up", "I think I might be going insane"), in the case of Q3, the occasion was accompanied by laughter and contentment ("I'm the best part of this", "I am a blessing", "I'm happy", "I still have a value"), and even in the case of the reflective Q4, some positive emotions still showed (e. g. "I am happy to have you", "I feel that I have a duty/calling"[223], "My life and the life of my sons have value").

Even though the bibliolog had a common underlying mood, the most extraordinary thing was the way different participants reacted to the same basic situation with different emotional responses. It was here that the interpretations diverged most strongly, and it was here that it became clear how multidimensional characters truly are. While during Q1 the widow's sadness was the central emotion, there was one female participant who expressed her anger towards the prophet and towards injustice in general: "I need to be very careful when I speak to Elisha, because I'm also very angry at him because he is one of the reasons that we have that much depth." While there were some, where a sense of grief was expressed, there were also some who articulated that "I could not be sad" and threat was the dominant emotion rather than grief because of the slavery in the person of the mother. Where the son was allowed to speak (Q2),

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[222] Cohen, "Audience Identification", p. 184.
[223] In this case, it is worth noting that while the participant used the term "duty", the conductor changed the word to "calling". The change seems to place a theological emphasis on the inner feeling that was being articulated in the participant and deepens the experience that the participant was implicitly articulating.

and where, as expected, perhaps this threat should have been more strongly expressed, the pain of grief was dominant: "Oh, but wait, just as remembered of my father (...) And he's dead. And I'm not afraid of slavery and of death. I'm afraid of being raised without a father." In the case of oil (Q3), contentment was replaced by disappointment ("I am very disappointed in myself"/"I feel degraded", "I feel a little dirty", "I feel like I am limited by their vessels"), and where one would expect joy to dominate in the resolution of the story, anxiety appeared ("But now, anxiety hit me. I start to think about the future").

All these variable and multifaceted responses are legitimate responses. The text does not give a clue as to what would be the norm for emotional responses, supposed something like that exists at all. However, the way in which some actors responded emotionally and exercised empathic understanding widens the understanding of the characters, and swifts the exegetical tradition to a previously unseen direction. For example, the possibility of a widow feeling angry at one of the most important prophets of the Old Testament may be unacceptable during a historical-critical inquiry. Similarly, even in the light of newer scholarship and specifically slavery studies, stating that an orphan's grief can predominate emotionally the fear of slavery and its burden could be read as a striking comment. Historians of Atlantic slavery use the term "critical fabulation" do denote the process of reconstructing the situation of slaves, as their voices were missing from historical sources. Bibliolog does a similar thing. The responses on this level were challenging and brave and proved that involvement and identification function as a critical inner voice from within the narrative, rather than the critique of the story from the outside, looking at it only as the object of our inquiry.

4.6. Group dynamics as a manifestation of emotional involvement

So far, to keep the bibliolog's structured nature, we have spoken of questions or prompts of identification and answers. However, the bibliolog is not just a succession of questions and answers. The bibliolog we looked at also had an internal dynamic, and although the respondents' manifestations were indeed structured by an introduction and a prompt for identification linked to four questions, the answers between the questions represented a particular way in which the participants were present in the occasion and able to identify. The different and often divergent responses also may have resulted from the way in which the participants connected with each other through their responses. When the widow responded, she was not alone, and when the child spoke, she or he was heard by other children.

This dynamic can be traced in cases where counter-identification occurred. In all instances, this occurred on an emotional level. Some participants introduced their words which

they felt contradicted what was previously said with terms such as "*But* I also…" or "*But* wait!". The remark on the anger of the widow was introduced in such a way ("I need to be very careful when I speak to Elisha, because I am also very angry at him") or the anger of the child ("Oh, but wait, just as I remembered of my father, I became very angry and I want to broke all these jars because we started to think about wealth and money…"). In other cases, it could be observed that members tried to harmonize their answers. Such a case could be observed when the round of identification of the oil slowly comes to an end (it could be felt in the room that most participants expressed their thoughts), and after the line of grateful and content answers about feeling valuable, one participant said with disappointment in her voice: "I feel that they don't need me (…) they don't actually need me as I am or what I can offer". The next responses sounded comforting and reassuring, which followed and closed the round: "So I still have a value! Why wouldn't the prophet suggest water, why oil?". I found this a beautiful example of how the group navigates the differences in views and emotions triggered by the same story and try to cooperate in the process of interpretation.

The conductor was present during the whole process as a supporter through the echoing. When words to express emotional state did not suffice, the conductor expressed the hidden emotion behind what was uttered (e.g. form the echoing, in which cases the emotions were not mention prior: "I'm in despair", "I'm very alone", "… some excitement is coming up", or "I grieve and I feel guilty"). With this, not only did the feeling become legitimate but they were expressed, as the feelings present in the group. Nonetheless, the conductor did not add her own takes to the story. The conductor's role, as I would describe it was to identify with the characters present in the room – the widows and children, who were before the bibliolog students in Groningen. Therefore, identification is a complex phenomenon present in the bibliolog, and though the communal character of bibliolog, in is manifested on multiple levels.

Thus, I believe the difference between a coherent interpretation with one dominant author in exegetical literature and the multifarious interpretation in bibliolog are obvious. The key word in describing what bibliolog has as an addition should be multidimensionality, diversity of voices, and a special internal perspective, which is exclusive to bibliolog and other biblio-methods. What can we take away with ourselves after this inquiry, will be discussed in the following and last chapter of my thesis.

Conclusion

An open question guided my work throughout the process of research and writing. From my first experience with bibliolog, I was eager to find the answer. How is this more than what we are used to? The question was not whether is it "more" or not. It is hard to imagine that anyone has tried the bibliolog method and not been positively surprised by its refreshing and often surprising experience. With my research, I wanted to go beyond personal experience and explore the world of bibliolog on a theoretical level. The aim of the research ultimately crystallized in a single research question, which was formulated as follows: *what does the method of bibliolog with the miracle story of 2 Kgs 4:1–7, through processes of interpretation and identification of participants, add to different exegetical approaches?* The answering process to this question took the form of four chapters.

In the first chapter, we saw a brief summary of what the *"method of bibliolog"* covers. Without being exhaustive, the first chapter was intended to give lay readers, such as myself at the beginning of this work, an insight into the secrets of the method. From the "mythical" origin story onwards, we see that bibliolog, as a method of interpretation and as an interactive method, is gaining ground in European theological scholarly circles. Beyond the method's definition and its main elements, we have formulated the simple yet essential conclusion that the method operates within a triadic system of text-conductor-participants relations, which results in a complex interpretative process. The description of the hermeneutic background was intended to look deep into this complex process, and since the research question is primarily intended to explore the possibilities of text interpretation by bibliolog, the mapping of the hermeneutic background deserved further attention. Within this, we could see that the midrashic roots should be treated with caution and that the hermeneutical background of reader-response theory is the framework for effectively interpreting the text ("black fire") and the possibilities of interpretations by readers ("white fire"). Nevertheless, the text has a binding force. Therefore, the question arises here whether, in addition to the fact that the bibliolog states that texts are meaningful through his theory of the "hermeneutics of confidence", there is space for the "hermeneutics of suspicion" in the process. An attempt was made to answer this question through a case study.

Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 explored the meaning behind the short seven verses of the Old Testament story of *2 King 4:1–7* in two parallel strands but in a single investigation. While in Chapter 2 we saw in the historical overview of the research how *different exegetical methods* (patristic, historical-critical, narrative-literary, feminist, childist and intersectional) shed light

on different aspects of the story in many different ways and from different perspectives, in Chapter 3 we examined in an empirical research how the bibliolog method, as a single occasion and as a single process, enriched the world of the text with similar and contrasting meanings as well. Chapter 2 revealed that the story is more than a simple narrative of the great prophet Elisha performing a miracle on the widowed woman: it is a story of a widow who finds her agency in the circumstances of her time and despite her marginalized situation, of children who are present and active in the story despite the threat of slavery, and of a miracle story that can be placed among the stories that testify to God's providence through the involvement of material objects in both the Old and New Testament worlds. Chapter 3, on the other hand, used a thematic analysis to explore the themes that emerged along Chapter 2 in the biblical story, and with their emergence finding new meanings that participants attached to a theme.

Chapter 4 has become a specific comparative research based on these two chapters. What is the surplus and what makes the Bibliolog special? How does the "magic" lie beyond the "myth"? The comparative research started with a comparison of data sources and then looked at what happened from a meta-perspective. The final conclusions emerged from this chapter.

When I synthesise the answers to the sub questions, I can now answer the main research question, which was: *What does the method of Bibliolog with the miracle story of 2 Kings 4:1–7, through processes of interpretation and identification of participants, add to different exegetical approaches?* While the hermeneutical background is important in bibliolog research, and it is the process by which the method generates new meaning that is important, there is another concept to consider. The concept of *identification* seems to be the key to understanding how the method of bibliolog broadens the horizon of interpretation. While the hermeneutic process focuses on the limited nature of the text and observes the participants through the text, the process of identification is a process that takes place within the participants but can only be carried out in the world of the text. The direction of the movement changes, and so does the attention. Undoubtedly, the method has a hermeneutical base line in how it treats biblical texts. But next to the interpretation of the text there is one more process going on, and not only on one level. The complexity of the bibliolog is reflected in the complexity of the notion of identification. During the bibliolog, interpreting participants identify with the characters and identify with the groups represented by the characters. And in bibliolog, these groups are not only present in the story lines but are also enlivened through the participants when a steps into the shoes of one of these characters.

Ultimately, it is in the process of identification that the interpretations become the reader's/receiver's interpretations. While it can be said that some exegetical methods are equally based on reader-response theory, it cannot be said that earlier exegetical methods took identification theory into account and applied it to such an extent in the interpretation of the text. Nevertheless, both theory and practice have demonstrated that in the identification facilitated by the bibliolog method, participants are able to relate to the world of the text in both affective and cognitive ways. The interpretation thus becomes an inward interpretation, and emotions, motivations, thoughts and forms of agency are revealed that are not accessible in an outward interpretation. Hence, in short the research question could be answered as follows: bibliolog offers participants deeper access to the world of biblical narrative through the process of identification, which promotes an empathic understanding.

Future Research

From this theoretical standpoint through the concept of identification, research in the field of bibliolog can take new directions. In my work, I have merely highlighted the importance of identification as a component of bibliolog, but the interconnectedness of identification theory and bibliolog should be further examined. Further research questions could be: What are the potentials and limitations of identification in the method? Which groups of the multitude of biblical stories would require a deeper understanding, perhaps made possible by bibliolog? Which biblical characters, motifs and themes are easier or more difficult for contemporary participants to identify with, and what is the background to this and how can the gap be bridged?

Given that bibliolog also involves participants affectively through identification processes and promotes an empathic understanding, what does this imply for the participant? Here, I strongly believe that bibliolog would be effectively linked to another branch of "biblio-methods", which, although not yet given enough space in the discipline of tehology, is particularly closely related to bibliolog, namely bibliotherapy. Bibliotherapy is a method with the use of "literature to bring about a therapeutic interaction between a participant and facilitator".[224] The definition already tells us that bibliotherapy is based on a triadic system of

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[224] The definition can be found in the most important handbook published so far by the authors Arleen McCarthy Hynes and Mary Hynes Berry. For he book see: Arleen McCarthy Hynes & Mary Hynes Berry. *Bibliotherapy: An Interactive Process*. Routledge: e-book edition. 2018. I have previously studied the method of bibliotherapy and my MA thesis at the Protestant Theological Institute of Cluj-Napoca examined the possibilities of bibliotherapy in the practice of congregational pastoral care with biblical texts. The brief summary presented here draws on the knowledge I have thus acquired, recognising the potential for interaction between methods.

relationships (facilitator–text–participant/group of participants), just like bibliolog, but while the primary aim of bibliolog is to discover the meaning of the text, bibliotherapy always looks at the self and seeks to work on self-understanding through texts. And the biblical text, in my view, can be "meaningful and salvific" not only in the theological sense, but also in relation to the personal life story. The personal life story is always connected to the world of the text, both bibliolog and bibliotherapist acknowledge this, but it is also worth asking the question from the bibliolog's perspective: why did a particular thought stick to the mind of the participant? Why was it easier to identify with some characters than with others? What does this say about the participant's self? The bibliolog can thus not only become an effective tool for interpretation but can also be used as a tool for therapeutic processes or even as a tool for pastoral care. Nonetheless, we must also reckon the

Last, but not least, it is worth asking how the valuable knowledge that the bibliolog offers through insight into a story can be put to good use in the field of biblical studies. The bibliolog is more than an entertaining activity and, I believe, more than a simple exploration of the biblical texts. Bibliolog offers new interpretive possibilities that can shed light on what is the message we need to hear and can hear from the lines of the text today, from the encounter between the modern reader and the world of the text. However, one limitation of the method must be taken into account here. It should be noted that in the group of "modern readers" mentioned above, there may be persons who, due to mental limitations, cannot access the method itself (e.g. people with certain types of autism spectrum disorder might not understand the prompts for identification clearly and face challenges during the process). In these cases, where the imaginative identification process may cause difficulties in understanding, the method can only be used with reservations. This, the question is again one that deserves more attention in further research.

I finish this thesis with some practical implications that stem from the findings and insights discussed in this thesis:

- I would promote an awareness among conductors of the importance of a deeper discussion following the bibliolog. I know there are already practices for this to be done,[225] but since gaining a better understanding at how identification works in bibliolog and how empathic understanding fosters an emotional involvement of the participants, targeted questions (used by the method of bibliotherapy) and a structured form of a follow-up discussion could be even more beneficial for the participants.
- I would promote the method more urgently among pastors and church workers, seeing that the empathic understanding the method promotes is not only between the reader

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[225] Pohl-Patalon, *Bibliolog*, pp. 76–77.

alone and the text but has a wider social dimension. How we interpret texts, and specifically the way we do it, influences how we read our daily lives, relationships, and the world in general.[226] Since identification and hermeneutics are at the core of bibliolog, we must assume that the inclusive and deconstructive character of the method seen above could promote such an understanding of the world as well. And an atmosphere of acceptance, understanding and emotional attunement should also be a prerequisite for church communities.

- Creating Bible study groups which use the method of bibliolog specifically for pastors preparing for sermons would be a nice opportunity for them to connect with the text on a deeper level and to gain a deeper understanding of it, before delivering the sermon on the story. I myself, as a pastor would join such a group, knowing the value of the internal perspective, as well as the value of the different perspectives that others would articulate. I believe that the resulting sermons may be able to reach a wider community because of their polyphonic nature, which is fostered by bibliolog. Nonetheless, this could not replace a deeper, exegetical and homiletical study of the text, only enrich it with what Pohl-Patalong called "life-relevant" ("Lebensrelevante").[227]

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[226] When Gina Hens Piazza applies the theory of subaltern studies, she starts from the sociological claim that the way texts are read (e.g. subaltern, inclusice os exclusive) influences how we interpret the world and how we read different aspects of it. For a detailed description of the theoretical background of the claim see: Hens-Piazza, "Artifact os Scenery or Agents of Change?", pp. 201–203.
[227] Pohl-Patalong, "Lebensrelevante Lectüre", p. 165.

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Appendix: Bibliolog – 2Kings 4,1–7

Transcript

Prologue

Thank you for being here and also for this sitting. We could also do it at the couches, but for a real experience, according to the rules, this is better. And since it is for this research, we thought we'd just do it according to the rules. But of course you can also do it in a church, you know, with benches, and you could do it sitting on the ground. But today we do it like this. And as you have not experienced any bibliolog, I will explain it a little bit. And for some maybe 'bibliolog', I don't really find that name so inspiring because it's, you know, what it is, but the idea is that it is actually a dialogue with the Bible text, and I love it because it's not me giving the answers, but you will give answers, you know? So it is really looking for the wisdom in the group and for ideas we have, and to explore the text together. And we are not talking about the text, but we will almost diving into the text. So what we do is that I will have a short introduction into this Old Testament Bible text, and then I will start reading it. And at a certain point, I stop, and then I will invite you to imagine being one character of that story, and you are all the same character. And then I will ask you a question, as the character. So it's a very open question. There is no right or wrong answer. That's very helpful, you know, so it's really that there can be different answers, and there can be even answers that are opposite to each other. And that's fine. They're all welcome, they're all meaningful and enriching. And so if one person says something, another person can say something else. But it's also that you don't have to answer. So you are most welcome to answer and invited to, but if you just don't want to answer, then you can also do this bibliolog in silence. If you want to answer, please do it in the character. So if I would ask you to be Moses, to imagine being Moses that you would answer as if you are Moses, you know that you say, 'I'm Moses, I did this…', and not about Moses, but as Moses. Please also raise your hand so that I can come beside you. And that's where we need the spaces, you know, so that I can stand beside you and I will repeat your answer in my own words again. And I have to say that I'm unfortunately deaf on my left ear. So if I don't understand you, I just have to ask again. So that happens sometimes. But yeah, so also maybe speak loud so that this recording can get everything, that's also helpful. And then I repeat it, and then someone else is giving an answer. And I will just go on like this. And if I feel there are no more answers, then

we go on in the text. So that's in principle all, so that you're all invited to join, but you are also free to just listen to what others say and be enriched by it. So that's the idea.

Introduction to the biblical story (2Kings 4,1–7)

So the story we want to look at together happened around 2,500 years ago. And it happens in Israel, and the golden age of King David and King Solomon has long passed. And now it's almost not worth remembering the names of the kings because they come and they go. Within months, the kingdom is divided. And actually in these times, it's men and the prophets who are showing the character and the will of God in their deeds and in their words. And one of these prophets is Elisha, and he speaks with authority. He has done already some miracles, and there are even some man disciples who follow him, who want to learn from him. And one of these men died. And a woman in this time is not allowed to work for pay. I mean, she's allowed to work, but she is not allowed to earn salary, and her voice has no right in the court. So widow has no chance to earn money or to somehow get money if there are debts. And if the debts are not paid, often the creditor comes and takes everything which is there. And if their children, sometimes the children have to work for the creditor or even sold into slavery. And exactly that is the situation. This disciple of Elisha's has died, and he left not only a wife and two sons, but he also left debts, and the widow cannot pay it. And so she gets up and she decides to go to Elisha. And that is where the story starts.

Bibliolog

The wife of a man of the company, of the prophets cry down to Elisha, "Your servant, my husband is dead, and you know that he revealed the Lord, but now his creditor is coming to take my two boys as its slaves."

Imagine you are the widow, and we don't know your name. We don't know how old you are, but we know that you recently lost your husband. And beside the grief in your heart, you also have to deal with the fact that they are debts and that you have to pay bills. And the creditor is saying that he wants to take your sons. And so you got up and you went to Elisha, the prophet and the teacher of your husband, and there you are, you're standing there and you tell him your situation. What do you expect from Elisha? What do you hope he will do? What do you expect and hope?

– I, the widow, really expect a miracle of God. If God does not have me in this situation, my sons will be taken into slavery, and my future will be in disaster. So I really need God's miracle through you, my prophet, my pastor. (M)

I am the widow here, and I'm in despair, humanly speaking, there is no hope. I don't know what to do. So what I need is actually a miracle, and I hope that the prophet Elisha will do a miracle and that it will change my life.

– Prophet Elisha! Can you really help me out? I may need a miracle, or we have some resources. We have some resources that can actually earn me some money. I can sell out to raise some funds to be able to meet [*the needs of,* BB] these this kid. What lies ahead of me is actually my future, entails my children. Either a miracle or anything you think you can help out, any way you think you can help out… (M)

Honestly, I'm not very precise in my expectations. A miracle, yes, or maybe just Elisha has some funds or resources. What I want and hope for is help that he helps me, my future and my sons are at stake. So I don't care how, but I hope that he helps.

– I need to be very careful when I speak to Elisha, because I'm also very angry at him because he is one of the reasons that we have that much depth. If he had not spent all his time with the prophet, then he could have earned money. And I was not in that situation, and my children would not be in such a great danger. So I hope that he can see that and take his responsibility somehow. (F)

I stand here and talk about my situation in front of Elisha, and I hope that I'm not too angry because I am in my heart. I'm very angry because of him, my husband couldn't work. He couldn't care for his family. And now we have these depths, and I hope that Elisha sees that he has some responsibility and that he, he needs to take that responsibility and do something with it.

– As I just walk out… What could Elisha do to me? What alternatives do we have? Do my sons have to be enslaved for these to be cleared? Can the law be broken? But Elisha is the prophet. He can actually do this. So I'm just going to pray and go to Elisha. He will do something. (F)

I don't know what Elisha will do, but he has to do something. And I pray, and I hope that Elisha knows what to do, but I have nothing to lose. And so I go to him.

– I am mourning, but I feel like I could not be sad for my husband's death, because it is overtaken by the situation at hand where my sons could go, could be enslaved. And I don't know how long it'll be. It might take forever for them to be free. How do I deal with this? The only thing I can ask is to go to Elisha and ask him, because after all, he is God's prophet who can to miracles. (F)

My heart is full of grief. I lost my husband, but actually I don't really have time to grieve. I need to act and I need to save my sons. And there are so many thoughts in my head and my heart, and I don't know what to do. But Elisha is the man of God, and I feel that he can help and I have to go to him.

– I'm in a big trouble. There is none of my late husband's family that will help me, and I'm alone. I'm looking up to God, and possibly through, Elisha can help me. Maybe I should go to him. (M)

The truth is I'm very alone. There's also no one from my husband's family and no one who can, no human, who can help. So my only hope is in God, and I look at God, and then I think Elisha is God's prophet. So that's why I am going to him.

– All these questions and all this grief, and I just feel that this is too much for me and I have to speak up. I have to speak up for myself because I need help and I need somebody to help me with this because I can't handle this on my own. (F)

This is too much the grief and the danger that I lose my, my sons. And actually I would love if someone would come to me and help me, but that is not happening. So I have to be strong. I have to speak up. I have to get up, and I need to go to Elisha.

Thank you widow.

Well, whatever the widow expected or hoped for, this is what happened. Elisha replied to her, "How can I help you? Tell me, what do you have in your house?" "Your servant has nothing there at all." – the widow replied, – "except a little oil." Elisha said, "Go around and ask all your neighbours for empty jars. Don't ask for just a few. Then go inside and shut the door behind you and your sons and pour oil into all the jars. And as each is filled, put it to one side." So the woman left him and afterwards shut the door behind her and her sons, and they brought the jars

to her. And she kept pouring. When all the jars before she said to her son, "Bring me another one." But the son replied, "There is not a jar left."

You are one of the sons and there is a lot at stake for you. Your whole future is in the hands of other people. And you saw your mother leaving this morning and she came back from Elisha, and then she told you and your brother to go to the neighbours and collect all these empty jars, and you did. And then she shut the door and she took this little jar of oil and she started to pour. And there she is – pouring the oil into the jars that you and your brother collected. Son. When you see this what your mother does and all these jars, what does this to you? How do you experience this situation?

– Mother! This is strange. I've never witnessed this kind of thing before. Do you think it's going to work for us? Is this going to be a way out of the dilemma we found ourselves? Mother, what do you think of all this? (M)

I'm standing here as a son and I see this and I have a lot of questions. Is this the way out? Is this the solution? And I would like to ask my mother what she thinks. I don't have the answers yet.

– I sit here looking as my mom poured out all the oil, and this is amazing. But I wish I had gotten more jars. We could have been rich. (F)

You know, I'm here and I see how the oil is flowing and one jar is filled and the other one is filled. And I mean, it's amazing. But I also think: stupid me! You know, I should have collected more jars. It could have been rich. Bummer.

– Oh, this is a miracle. I can't believe it. Can we sell this to pay off our father's debt? Are we free now? (F)

Wow. I noticed that there's some excitement coming up. This is a miracle. And I can imagine we can sell the oil and we can pay the debts and we will be free. And this is the solution. And it's amazing.

– Oh, but wait, just as remembered of my father, I became very angry and I want to broke all these jars because we started to think about wealth and money, and we just started to forget our [dad, *inaudible,* BB]. And he's dead. And I'm not afraid of the slavery and of death. I'm afraid of being raised without a father. (M)

You know, I feel convicted because looking at this oil and the jars, I suddenly, suddenly started to think about money and wealth. And I forgot about my dad, that he died and that my future is without him. And I think my real problem is that I'm an orphan now that I don't have a father anymore. And I grieve and I feel guilty.

– We have a lot of oil now, but it's a bit suspicious. I'm afraid when I open the door and we bring up the oil, it will be gone. (F)

You know, it's a little bit like a fairytale, you know, all this oil, and it's so great, but it's also suspicious. I don't know if we open the door maybe it all just was a dream. So I have doubts. It looks good, but we have to see,

– I thought my mom was going insane when she asked me for all these jars. And now I think I might be going insane when she's filling in and I see them all being filled up with oil. The only thing I really want to know is how, how did she do that? How, how does this work? (F)

And this is all very crazy, you know, I thought my mother is somehow insane when she said, collect all the jars, you know, but I was obedient. I did it. And now I think I'm insane, you know? And "woo, woo". I mean, wow, what is happening here?

– But wait, my father worked for the prophet. The prophet never provided all this for him and our family before. What is different today? Was he waiting for my father to die? (F)

You know, I am excited about the oil, but I don't understand why the prophet didn't do this miracle when my father was still alive. Did my father have to die, so that we experience this? I don't like the timing.

Thank you, son.

Well, there they are, the three, this small family and all the oil around them. And this is how it continues. "Bring me another one." – the widow said, but the sun replied, "There is not a jar

left." And then the oil stopped flowing. So the widow went and told the man of God, and he said, "Go sell the oil and pay your debts, and you and your son can live on what is left."

Imagine you are the oil. The widow had sold everything. There was nothing left in her house except you. And she reached out to you standing there alone on this shelf. And then she started to pour you into the jar, and you flowed and you flowed, and you flowed to all the jars before. Oil, what does this moment mean to you? And how do you experience your role in this story? How do you see your part in the story?

– I didn't even know I was capable of doing this. (F)

Honestly, I'm surprised. I had no idea I'm capable to do this. So how does it feel?

– Amazing. Yeah. To help someone else. (F)

Yeah, it's amazing, especially that I can help a family out of the problem.

– Oh, it feels so good. And I think I'm the best part of this… (F)

You know, it feels really good. And actually, I think I'm the main character

– … Because, through me, this widow can pay off. And if I don't exist, then I, I can't even imagine what would happen to her. (F)

You know, because of me, the widow is able to pay her debt and to keep her sons. Without me? I don't know how the story would end.

– Am I this precious? I have always devalued myself. How good of me to serve such a family. I hope everyone else in this community and beyond can get a chance to use me to serve their situations, whatever situations they go through. I am a blessing. (F)

Actually. I always look down at myself, and now suddenly I see I can be a blessing for this family. And I hope I can be a blessing for the whole community.

– But wait! At the same time, I am very disappointed in myself because when I was a child oil, I made a plan. I was dreaming that in me, they will make meat and everything and good foods. But look at this moment, I'm going to be exchange for money. And this monetary thinking of

the society took everything from me that I was dreaming for when I was a child. And I'm disappointed. (M)

You know, I'm here. I will be sold for money. And I really, I'm really disappointed. My dream was always to be oil that provides delicious food and has fellowship value and is, yeah, not this monetary value. I feel degraded. I almost feel a little dirty. It's not what I think about.

– If only the woman and I knew that I'm going to be valuable as this, possibly she'll have collected a lot of jars, and I have opportunity to flow. More than this. But both of us are ignorant. Who knew, that I'll be as much valuable as this? (M)

I think this is a story of surprise for the woman and for me. We both were ignorant. We had no idea of my capacity to flow and flow and flow… So if we had known, she probably had collected more jars, but as it was, we didn't know. So we keep it with what it is.

– I am surprised because I did not know that I had so much in me, and I'm happy that even though I was hidden for so long, such a long time, now I'm being put to use and I'm useful. (M)

You know, I had no idea that this was in me. I thought I'm common oil, normal. But now something of me that was hidden came out. And I'm actually glad about it. I like it.

– If they only brought more jars, I could have gone on and on and on. I feel like I'm not done yet. (F)

You know, I'm quite sad that they didn't bring more jars, because I feel there is more. I'm not done yet. I could go on, I could give more. So I'm limited by their limited vessels.

– I feel that actually they don't need me. What would they do with so much oil? I mean, if I'm good for money, they can sell me and that's good for them, but they don't actually need me as I am or what I can offer. (F)

You know, here I am in this room with all these vessels and I fill them all and they all seem to be very happy. And yes, I will be the tool to pay the debts, but I don't feel seen as what I am. I'm just the mean to pay the debts. But I'm oil. I want to be precious for them, not just the things I give.

– So I still have a value. Why wouldn't the prophet suggest water, why oil? (M)

You know, I'm here and I do have my questions and I do feel that I have value because, you know, the profit also could have to suggest that just fill the jars with water, you know? I mean… But no, he said. Use the oil. So I have some importance, I think.

Thank you oil.

And the woman went to Elisha and told everything, and he said, "Go sell the oil and pay your debts. You and your sons can live on it, on what is left."

You are one more time the widow and some weeks have passed. You're at home and you're preparing some dinner and you reach out for this little jar of oil. And of course you remember what happened some weeks ago, and you're making this dinner for three people, not just for yourself. And after all these weeks, what insight has become most important for you from this event? Has it changed your faith? And if so, how? What has become most important for you? How has it affected your faith?

– I truly was without hope, without a husband. I thought there was no one to take care of me in my life anymore. But I guess I was wrong. There's still one man taking care of me. (F)

You know, I felt very lost after my husband's death. And I felt I'm alone. There's no one who cares for me. There's no hope. But now I know there is someone who takes care of me. And there is hope.

– As a whole, there is this little jar of the oil that is left in this kitchen. It reminds me that a few weeks ago, we wouldn't be here, my sons and everyone here right now, if these jars were not here, if the jars were not filled with oil, if we were not able to sell the oil that we sold, it reminds me – they say there's a husband for the widows. And indeed – God is a husband for the widows. And that He has taken care of me. And I am happy to have you. All my sons here, we can eat together and have merry. (F)

While I holding the small jar oil in my hand. I remember everything that has happened, and I'm so grateful that I have my sons here and that we have something to eat. And I really see that when the prophets say there is a God who is a husband for the widows. I can say "yes, that is true". I have experienced it.

– Thanks to the Lord. I feel like that God is still doing miracle to us, today. What he did to Moses. (M)

I feel all these stories, we have heard about God doing miracles when Moses was alive or these other people, suddenly come alive. And I feel God is still the same. He still does miracles today.

– What God has done to me and my family through Elisha was really great. We could pay our debt and still have something to survive until we stay. But now – the anxiety hit me. I start to think about the future. I need to do something because sooner or later this all will be finished. What should I do after this? (F)

You know, I look at the oil and I think, wow, yeah, that was really nice and it helped, but it only helped for a while. And at some day this oil will be finished. And so I still worry. I'm still afraid of the future. Honestly, nothing much has changed.

– There is one certain thing that has changed now after this miracle. I know that God has power and really do miracles. And I feel that I have a duty. I should go to other poor people, to other members and other widows of the society, of our town. And I should tell them that, collect those jars because God does miracles. And those who don't have will have and who have will have more. (M)

When I look back, I think I learned two things. One thing is that God does miracles and he cares, and I trust him. And the other thing is that I feel I have a duty, a calling. I need to go to all these other poor widows, and I need to tell them, and I need to tell them to collect jars. And if you don't have, you will receive. And if you have, you will get even more. And, yeah, that's my calling.

– The oil actually looks small, what's left. I would find it wisdom to really do something out of this oil, and send to the prophet for him to fulfil [*the needs of,* BB] these. And on these major needs, I think is important that we share from the oil. (M)

I look at this little jar oil, and suddenly I think maybe I should send some of the oil to the prophet. You know, I should not keep it for myself. I should share it. And maybe he multiplies it again.

– What's a great lesson this has taught me. Not to despise little thing. This oil has been there. Even when my husband was alive, I would never thought any good thing can come out of it. Oh, I never thought of that. Maybe I've thought like Abraham. When he was going to sacrifice Isaac and the son asked him, "Where is the lamb?" And Abraham said, "God will provide". Maybe I also have thought in that way. (M)

I learned something from the event. And the first thing is that I should not despise little and small things. And the second thing is that I now understand when Abraham said, "God will provide", that it's true. I can also say "God will provide". I know that.

– Now you've shown that my life and the life of my sons have value. I want to ask you, God, what do you want me to do with this life? And I would want to ask, if you kept them from slavery, will you give us a better life than that? (F)

I'm here. And I, I see and know now that my life and the life of my sons have value. God sees it. But I also wonder, God, what do you want us to do? How should we use this life? You have given us the freedom.

– As I hold this small bottle of oil, I'm reminded of the time when Elisha did this miracle. And I was very suspicious. I was a little doubtful, but I did it, because I had to. And now I realise how, how even a little faith can God use. And if it was not for this, I cannot imagine that how my life would be. I'll be alone. I'll be in despair. I'll be crying all night wondering where my sons will be. But it is all these simple things, being able to eat together, cook together with the family, that's the most important. And this oil has taught me this, not to take everything for granted, and I learned that God will, in spite of our despair, in spite of my despair, God will take care of the future. Now I can rest in this, in him. (F)

You know, honestly, I had doubts when Elisha told me to do this with the oil, but I obeyed. And I'm so glad I did it because the life has changed and I'm so grateful for the small things now. So I don't take the small things for granted anymore. And I also trust that God will provide and help. I learned that.

– I am just where it all started. I'm here with my two sons and I have just a little oil – but I'm still here. I still have my sons and I still have oil. And I know that life will go on from now on.

And even if I don't see how or when, or in which direction, I know it will. And it's not because of me, but because of miracles happen. (F)

Now, you could look at my life and you could think, well, nothing changed. Still the same. I'm here. My sons are here. The oil is here and problems are here. But a little bit has changed because I know life will go on and miracles happen.

Thank you, widow.

Well, this is where the story ends. Of course, we read more about Elisha, but the Bible doesn't tell us anything more about this family and the sons. And so we stop here.

Thank you widow.

Thank you son.

Thank you oil.

We leave that house of the widow.

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We leave Israel and the time of the prophets, and we come back to Groningen, rainy day in December, 2023. And you can move maybe a little bit sitting differently, arriving back in your life, because I will read the text one more time and I invite you to listen to the text with your ears and with your life situation. And yeah, see what the text has to tell you in your life.

2King 4,1–7

[1]The wife of a man from the company of the prophets cried out to Elisha, "Your servant. My husband is dead and you know that he revered the Lord. But now his creditor is coming to take my two boys as his slaves." [2]Elisha replied to her, "How can I help you? Tell me, what do you have in your house?" "Your servant has nothing there at all," the widow said, "except a little oil". [3]Elisha said, "Go around and ask all your neighbours for empty jars. Don't ask for just a few. [4]Then go inside and shut the door behind you and your sons and pour oil into all the jars. And as each is filled, put it to one side. [5]So the widow left him and afterwards shut the door behind her and her sons. They brought the jars to her and she kept pouring. [6]When all the jars were full, the widow said to her son, "Bring me another one." But he replied, "There is not a

jar left." Then the oil stopped flowing. [7]So the widow went and told the man of God and he said, "Go, sell the oil and pay your debts. You and your sons can live on what is left." Amen.