

ON THE NECESSITY OF THE “THIRD COVENANT”
AND INTERRELIGIOUS UNDERSTANDING:
CONFESSIONS OF AN IDEALIST

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This is slightly enlarged speech delivered at the opening session of the workshop entitled: *The Bible in Modern China: The Literary and Intellectual Impact*, June 23-28, 1996, at the Maiersdorf Faculty Club, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem on Mount Scopus. Its aim is to point out the importance of one of the most weighty problems of our times: the spirit of inter-religious understanding on the basis of the biblical legacy.

Not all workshops or conferences can boast as being the first in history as this one having for its topic the most important work of world literature – the *Bible* and its connection with China, one of the most important parts of the world culture with the duration of a few thousand of years. We thank God of all us, Jews, Christians and also of those who are not here, who made it possible that we met here, in the heart of the Promised Land, in the City of David, 3,000 years since it began to be the Capital of Israel and Judah. As I am not an expert on the *Bible* and never studied many problems to be discussed at this workshop, I shall say here a few words that would reveal my inner feelings and thoughts about one of the most important and difficult problems of our contemporary world – that of intercultural and inter-religious understanding – which is so important for this City, its inhabitants, but also about longer and shorter prehistory of this workshop, as a part of my and your story.

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I was born in a small village in the Western part of Slovakia (formerly a part of Great Moravia, later Upper Hungary, then Czecho-Slovakia) at the beginning of the Nazi reign in Germany in 1933. My parents and grandparents were rather poor, es-

pecially in those years of the worldwide economic crisis, and in our houses there was really only one precious book, the *Bible*, better to say its Catholic digest, but with famous illustrations by well-known German wood-cut artist Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld (1794-1872). In his late age he devoted himself to the creation of 240 woodcuts presenting the legacy and stories of *Old* and *New Testament* with the aim of teaching the people about “the realm of moral and religious life”.¹

As a young boy seven or eight years old I did not know that it was an expurgated edition. I do not blame Schnorr von Carolsfeld or Slovak translator for that. Reading of the *Bible* of this kind was a pleasure, it was my *ABC* with wonderful pictures following the traditions of Raffael’s paintings in the Loggias of the Vatican Museum and Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel. I became acquainted with Hebrew history and literature much earlier than that of my own people. I was enthralled with the woodcuts presenting the heroic deeds by Samson, although not with Delilah’s treachery. I was extremely fond of Jacob’s dream about “the ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it”.² As a peasant boy I knew what ladder in reality meant. But here it was staircase maybe of polished marble and the angels with sweet faces and curled hair in the presence of God surrounded by the clouds. Another story I liked, was that of Jacob’s wrestling with an angel at the place called Peniel (The Face of God), where he was given a new name: Israel (A Prince of God), for according to the King James’ *Bible*: “for a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed.”³

For a few decades an old Jew with the name of Jacob Glass and his two daughters lived in our village. He was daily visitor in the house of my grandparents where I stayed most of the time. During the cold winter days he sat down at the kitchen stove and read for me the fairy tales. In reality he translated them for me *exromptu* from the German version. Franz Kafka would call this book a “bubácka kniha” (monster book).⁴ I was afraid of those stories, although they attracted me. During one sunny summer day he and his two daughters, were taken to the next railway station and from there they were escorted to one of the concentration camps as future victims of the holocaust and never returned again. I was told by a neighbour, an old lady in her nineties just now, that the old gentleman and one daughter, did not even reach the place of destination and died of hunger and suffering on the journey they never planned to do. Behold, an example from millions of those who have prevailed against the angel, and had power with God and with men!

¹ SCHNORR VON CAROLSFELD, J.: *Betrachtungen über den Beruf und die Mittel der bildenden Künste*. In: *Die Bibel in Bildern*. Dortmund, Harenberg 1983, p. 5. First published after 1860. I used for reading Slovak copy entitled: *Písmo sväté v obrazoch*, Trnava, Spolok sv. Vojtecha 1936.

² *Genesis*, 28, 12. All biblical quotations are from King James’ version.

³ *Ibid.*, 32, 28.

⁴ MENG WEIYAN : *Kafka und China*. München. Iudicium Verlag 1980, p. 61.

My native village is called Igram. Igram comes from *igríc*, meaning of which in ancient Slavic language was a bard, *Spielmann*. According to the oldest written source accessible to us from the year 1244, it was called Igrech and characterized in Latin as “villa ioculatorum castri Poson” (village of jesters of Bratislava Castle).⁵ The inhabitants of the village and the fields belonging to it were the property of the Hungarian kings and their duty was to dance, sing and probably also to recite epics in front of their feudal lords. There is a woodcut in our family *Bible* presenting king David bringing the ark of covenant to Zion: “And as the ark of the Lord came into the City of David, Michael Saul’s daughter looked through window, and saw king David leaping and dancing before the Lord; and she despised him in her heart.”⁶ And David told to his wife after he returned to their home after this performance: “*It was before the Lord, which chose me before thy father, and before all his house, to appoint me as a ruler over the people of the Lord, over Israel; therefore will I play before the Lord.*”⁷

Especially these words, albeit they excited me in my young age, too, led me in the last decade of our multicultural age and of the strains having for aim broad intercultural understanding, to a conviction that the first covenant made between Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, their descendants and God, just as the second covenant, as we are informed from the *New Testament*, are not satisfactory anymore for nations, national minorities, ethnic groups and religions of our democratic age. All human beings, inhabitants of this “blue” planet, are sons and daughters of the same God and there could not be a difference between the Jews, Christians, Muslims and all other believers or non-believers. In spite of the conviction of Judaism that the covenant of God with Abraham, and renewed through his descendants, was an eternal one and in spite of the belief of Christians repeated unceasingly in the Catholic mass about the “chalice of blood” as a symbol and reality of the “new and eternal covenant”, the world needs a new kind of contract or treaty which could serve as a guarantee of peace, social progress, cultural and religious understanding.

I have nothing against the first and the second covenants and I have a high esteem for both of them. But in the last four or five thousand years the world changed a lot and the God of Abraham or Jesus, even if the same in his Epiphany to modern human beings with different knowledge, political, economic and cultural setting, must possess different traits. The God of the Hebrew patriarchs, the Warrior God of the first centuries of Canaan, the Ethical God of the postexilic period, the God of Love of Jesus Christ, could not be the same as God of our age who is God of all without difference regarding the race, nation, colour, richness or poverty.

⁵ *Súpis pamiatok na Slovensku* (A Catalogue of Slovak Memorabilities). Vol. 1. Bratislava, Obzor 1967, p. 487.

⁶ *II. Samuel*, 6, 16.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 6, 21.

This God of all is the God of mutual respect, interreligious and cultural understanding. As his children we have to behave ourselves in relation to Him as his sons and daughters. As brothers and sisters in God we should live, if not in love, then at least in mutual respect. I don't suppose that this is fully possible in this Holy Land for the time being.

Especially the contradictions between Jews and Muslims are of that kind that it will need decades to overcome them. The stronghold of Zion did not fall into the hands of king David without violence. Nearly the whole later history of this piece of land was a long history of wars, often lost, exile and dispersion. There are some sparkles of hope just these last years but they are always superimposed by the dark clouds of killing of innocent people. The outcome of the militant fundamentalism is obvious in the everyday life of the contemporary state of Israel.

Before participation at the international conference "Chinese Literature and European Context", organized by me in June 1993 at the Smolenice Castle near Bratislava, Irene Eber, chief organizer of our workshop, asked me in one of her numerous letters about a small present she should bring to me for that occasion. I wrote her back that I would appreciate a reproduction of a painting with King David dancing in front of the ark of the covenant and the people of Israel just like the jesters from Igram did in front of the king and queen of Hungary. She was very sorry, but she was not able to find anything like that and she brought for me a reproduction of the famous drawing entitled *The Psalm of David* from the year 1966, now in The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, known mostly from the Verve edition of the *Bible*. This was not what I wanted to have, although from the artistic point of view Marc Chagall's piece is probably more precious. I desired to own a picture with a modern understanding of David's message taking into account our *fin de siècle* and probably also of later time, of *Le' David yateh einayim, Hoo ro'eh ba shoshanim*,⁸ of David dancing like crazy in the face of God and the inhabitants of Jerusalem and Israel and enjoying God's grace and blessing.

Irene Eber has got a special place in my story. Long before she asked me about the present and brought me Chagall's David, we discovered our common interest. She wrote to me through an English intermediary (it was not allowed during the Communist regime to write to Jerusalem directly from my country) on December 18, 1989. At that time she was working on her excellent article on Bishop Shereshevsky's translation of the *Old Testament*⁹ and I was just pondering over the little known and at that time completely unknown work by the modern Chinese writer Wang Meng (1934-) entitled *Shizijia shang* (On the Cross). At first I read some passages of it in Wolfgang Kubin's translation.¹⁰ During a visit to Peking in October

⁸ Hebrew text on the back of the reproduction written by Irene Eber.

⁹ EBER, I.: *Translating the Ancestors: S.I.J. Shereshevsky's 1875 Chinese Version of Genesis*. Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, LVI, 1993, 2, pp. 219-233.

¹⁰ *Minima sinica*, 1, 1989 (Bonn), pp. 136-139. Wang Meng's work originally appeared in the journal *Zhongshan*, 3, May 15, 1988, pp. 45-58.

1989 I saw Tiananmen Square after the Massacre of June 4 with the army still patrolling on all the roads leading to it, and after coming home I asked Kubin for an original copy. “The most terrible lies still in the hearts of people,” I wrote to him. “Wang Meng’s *Apocalypse* made a deep impression on me. How could the term pale horse or *equus pallidus* be translated into German? Probably Wang Meng’s ‘Ox Kingdom’ on this world is even more terrible than the vision of John. I believe that you are suspecting why.”¹¹

I read and analysed it during the strikes of our students and citizens after November 17, 1989. I repeatedly pondered over it during a cold spell and a snow-flurry, when I stood among over many ten thousand demonstrators on the main Bratislava square during the last days of November and the first days of December. Those days, as is generally known today, were the concrete realization of our Czecho-Slovak “velvet revolution” and helped to overthrow the totalitarian régime over there. But have they definitely floored the Ox Kingdom? I asked this question in 1989, and I repeat it also today. I do not think that they did.

What the Ox Kingdom mean according to Wang Meng? All of you who hear my voice here and also probably those who will read it after the Jerusalem workshop, know the famous “four riders” of John rendered in so masterly a manner by Albrecht Dürer in his woodcut from 1498 (now nearly 500 years old), to be seen at the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg. In the *Apocalypse* ascribed to St. John, there is the most impressive scene relating to the “fourth rider”. While the other apocalyptic riders symbolized, or rather allegorized cruel discharges, a ferocious strength and social injustice, the last rider represented the death of nations: “And I looked, and behold, a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him.”¹² The kingdom of the “forth ox” was different: the modern realm of absurd reality was for me so shocking that I did not try to analyse it at first. In the slaughter-houses of that kingdom “not people slaughter oxen, but oxen slaughter people. Not oxen draw ploughs in the fields, but human beings, or tigers or cats, and masters oxen sit snug at their cushy jobs, sipping cognac of the brand Martel from human skulls...”¹³ That is a terrible picture of a part of the present-day world reality.

Among the demonstrators I was certainly the sole exception hearing not only the speeches, slogans, old and new songs, the tinkling of the keys as passing bells

¹¹ Quoted from my undated letter from the end of October or beginning of November 1989.

¹² *The Revelation*, 6, 8.

¹³ Cf. WANG MENG: *Shizijia shang*, p. 57 and my translation in *Wang Meng’s Mythopoeic Vision of Gogotha and Apocalypse*. *Annali* (Istituto Universitario Orientale, Naples), 52, 1992, 1, p. 78. This article appeared also in German translation by Raoul D. FINDEISEN: *Mythopoetische Vision von Golgatha und Apocalypse bei Wang Meng*. *Minima Sinica*, 2, 1991, pp. 55-82.

for the communist world order but also pondering over the diatribes of the “four oxen”, each more absurd than the previous one. How happy we were at that time although we expected danger at any moment! The parallel with the fall of Jericho came to my mind. “So the people shouted when *the priests* blew with the trumpets: and it came to pass, when the people heard the sound of the trumpet, and the people shouted with a great shout, that the wall fell down flat, so that the people went up into the city, every man stright before him, and they took the city.”¹⁴ We did not shout much except for some words of agreement with the speakers that the walls of the communist strongholds over the world should crush. We even did not dance like David, we were mutually shaking our hands as a sign of friendship and singing a song: “We promised to be fond of each other... we promised not to give up.” There were, of course, the differences between the sons of Israel and those who wanted to abolish communist régime on the squares of the towns of former Czecho-Slovakia. According to the *Book of Joshua*: “And they utterly destroyed all that *was* in the city, both man and woman, young and old, and ox, and sheep, and ass, with the edge of the sword.”¹⁵ There was only one exception: Rahab the harlot and her family, since she helped the descendants of Jacob in their victory. No window pane was broken in Czecho-Slovakia, no one was wounded or killed although so many were killed or suffered under the communist yoke.

Did Wang Meng foresee the coming of the June 4, 1989? In his *On the Cross* he called for the love among the people (*renai*), modesty (*qianbei*), respect (*qianjing*) and mostly for forgiveness (*kuanshu*), for the second coming of Isaiah and Jesus Christ. *The Four Gospels* were the most important source of his argument. According to my opinion it was certainly an alternative to the class struggle proposed by the Marxists. Deng Xiaoping and his people reached out for the violent option. A peaceful manifestation ended in the bloodshed. Wang Meng began his fictional work on Apocalypse with these words: “Blessed are those who believe in these things and draw from them a *qianxude jielun* (modest conclusion).”¹⁶ A number of beasts should be aware of that. It is not necessary to point out who these beasts were.

In Sacramento, a typical town of the American Wild West, I met in 1990 Professor Lewis Stewart Robinson who gave me his extensive monograph *Double-Edged Sword* with the subtitle *Christianity & 20th Century Chinese Fiction*. My eyes were widened with a surprise just like those of Dr. Peter Lee, Director of the Studies and Programme at the Tao Fong Shan Ecumenical Centre, Shatin, Hong Kong, when

¹⁴ *Joshua*, 6, 20.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 6, 21.

¹⁶ Cf. WANG MENG: *Shizijia shang*. p. 56 and my translation in: *Parody and Absurd Laughter in Wang Meng's Apocalypse. Musings over the Metamorphosis of the Biblical Vision in Contemporary Chinese Literature*. In: SCHMIDT-GLINTZER, H. (ed.): *Das andere China. Festschrift für Wolfgang Bauer zum 65. Geburtstag*. Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz 1995, p. 461.

browsing at first and later studying it.¹⁷ The next year in the private library of Professor Tak-wai Wong in Hong Kong, I discovered two fundamental books by Professor Liang Gong¹⁸ and a short bibliography of *Studies of the Bible as Literature in China: A Chronological Bibliography (1980-1990)*.¹⁹ Professor Wong asked me to take Professor Liang's books home and to write an article about the situation of the reception of the *Bible* in Mainland China. After quite long time of searching for material and study I published an article on the subject.²⁰

The symposium at Smolenice Castle three years ago was a good opportunity to discuss the topic of this Jerusalem workshop. Five of those who are here, also met there over a cup of coffee or glass of red wine: Irene Eber, Knut Walf, Francis So, Raoul D. Findeisen and me. Eber and I were responsible for the "ideological" content of the workshop and its organization, Knut Walf for the extremely important financial problems, Francis So represented the Asian world in its interest for the *Bible*. Professor Chan Wing-ming who was there and tried to participate, did not succeed in doing so, but he ran even faster than all of us: he organized in February of this year a conference entitled: *Religion and Chinese Fiction*, as the first in a series *Religion and Chinese Literature* at the Hong Kong Baptist University, where the problem of the *Bible* and modern Chinese literature literature was spoken about in more wide framework on the Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian background. This workshop is the first of its kind in history. Three thousand and one hundred years after Duke of Zhou, father of Chinese spiritual civilization and great model of Confucius, Chinese, European and American sinologists meet in Jerusalem to discuss the impact of the *Bible* on China in the last centuries.

Probably it would be difficult to find a country in the world where the contradictions between the spiritual basis of Judaism and Christianity on one side, and the original Chinese religious teachings would be so deep and extensive. In spite of them, especially from the beginning of the twentieth century it is possible to see a quite conspicuous *approchement*.

There is as yet not the time for a renewal of King David's or my ancestors' dance. There is still much work to do and a long time to go. There is still much to learn in the realm of intercultural and interreligious understanding. Worldwide globalization enhanced the fundamentalist tendencies of different world religions which, combined with the nationalist feelings in different ethnically mixed countries caused troubles, terrorist activities and even wars, including those in this state

¹⁷ Hong Kong, Good News Printing Company 1986, p. v.

¹⁸ *Shengjing shige* (Poetry from the *Bible*). Tientsin, Baihua wenyi 1989 and *Shengjing wenxue daodu* (An Introduction to Reading of the *Bible*). Guilin, Lijiang chubanshe 1990.

¹⁹ LIANG GONG and TAK-WAI WONG: *Studies of the Bible as Literature in China (1980-1990)*. Chinese/International Comparative Literature Bulletin (Hong Kong), 2, 1990, pp. 35-36.

²⁰ GÁLIK, M.: *The Reception of the Bible in Mainland China (1980-1992)*. *Observation of a Literary Comparatist*. Asian and African Studies (Bratislava), 4, 1995, 1, pp. 24-46.

of Israel. Ecumenical tendencies within Christianity were especially active in the 1960s and 1970s, but their success was rather meagre. Not the fundamentalist, but the ecumenical spirit may lead to a better future. This goes also for the land of Canaan if she should become real spiritual Promised Land of all of us, or better to say of our descendants. I wonder whether any of us, even the youngest, will be able to dance in front of the “third covenant”. But I hope that this vision will not die together with me or with you.

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Let us hope that our Jerusalem workshop will contribute to this goal and make a bit shorter this far-away journey. The germs of this ideal state of humankind are certainly in the *Bible*, the target of our reflections. On the other hand, our opponents, may find there arguments for their contrary convictions. As in the case of the capture of Jerusalem after David was appointed king over Israel: “And David and all Israel went to Jerusalem, which *is* Jebus; where the Jebusites *were*, the inhabitants of the land. And the inhabitants of Jebus said to David, Thou shalt not come hither. Nevertheless David took the castle of Zion, which *is* the city of David. And David said, Whosoever smiteth the Jebusites first shall be chief and captain. So Joab the son of Zeruiah went first up, and was chief... So David waxed greater and greater: for the Lord of hosts *was* with him.”²¹ Warrior God could extoll only the warriors and it is nothing extraordinary that the chronicler after depicting of the capture of Jerusalem enumerates David’s mighty men²² comparable to that of Samson I shall speak about in my contribution.²³ The Lord God of our times is no longer the Lord of hosts, for Christians he should be equivalent of Love²⁴ and for all others, if not more, than certainly not less: God of mutual understanding. This is, at least, my deep conviction. And I hope, that you agree with me.

Tomorrow on Monday evening, July 25, you may see from the windows of your rooms, the splendid fireworks over Jerusalem and Zion under your feet, commemorating the day when Jebus fell into the hands of David fighters. Let this old Chinese invention not mean for you the symbol of triumph, but a promise of future joy. Let us hope that my vision of universal dance, that of a dreamer up to this day, will sometime become a reality for the inhabitants of this abode of Jews, Christian and Moslems (in chronological order) who are all its legitimate heirs.

Peace, *shalom*, *selam* to this Sacred City on the eve of its fourth millennium!

²¹ *I. Chronicles*, 11, 4-9.

²² *Ibid.*, 11, 10-47.

²³ GALIK, M.: *Mythopoeic Warrior and Femme Fatale: Mao Dun’s Version of Samson and Delilah*.

²⁴ *I. John*, 4, 8.