THE 'ONE-LIKE-A-HUMAN-BEING' (DAN. 7) IN THE TWO-ONE CHRISTIAN BIBLE
REFLECTIONS ON THE HORIZON OF INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

Georg Steins

In the beginning – a little theory

The motto for the 57th International Jewish-Christian Bible Week 2025 reminds us of the core task of biblical interpretation: 'Consider the word and understand the vision' (Dan. 9:23). What is required is 'mindfulness'! That is more than a buzzword from the lifestyle-scene. Only by way of a systematic, patient and exact approach in reading is it possible to have access to understanding Sacred Scripture. And when we are dealing with something as unusual and possibly life-changing as a vision, the scientific virtues just named are all the more appropriate. One thing is certain: Looking closely (Greek: 'the critique') and working methodically promise better insights, allow one to expect viable learning.

A *methodical study of biblical texts* is however not enough. For a critical attitude there is along with the systematic and methodical approach always a second thing: since every person reads 'wearing their own glasses', one's own perspective also has to be clarified. This side of critique is traditionally called *'hermeneutics'*. They deal with the framework conditions and the goals of our reading.

Even if in interpreting the Bible the question of method is usually in the foreground, it is appropriate to begin with hermeneutics because there the frame for work with the text is set out and described.

I recently once again came across a phrase in an older text by Pope John Paul II on Jewish-Christian dialogue that could become a key to a reflected, dialogically inspired reading of the Bible. When John Paul II visited Germany in 1980 and met in Mainz with representatives of the Jewish community, he spoke of Judaism as the 'people of God of the Old Covenant that was never revoked'. This turn of phrase caused quite a stir und was intensely discussed. It was an important step in the renewal of Christianity's relationship with Judaism.

From hermeneutical points of view, the context of this now famous statement is particularly interesting to me. The pope spoke of *a 'first dimension of dialogue'* – and he situated this within the Church, more precisely: *in the dialogue 'between the first and the second part of its Bible'*.

That is to say: Interfaith dialogue already begins in one's own Christian Bible. The formal division into two parts (it would be better to speak of the *Two-Unity of the Christian Bible*!) between the traditionally so-called Old Testament and the normally so-called New Testament is not to be understood as an expression of Christian exceeding or correction or even rejection of the first part of

the Bible, but *as a dialogue-constellation that has become Scripture*. This is the papal thesis, which I join. There is in this both a truly interfaith and a Bible-hermeneutical programme.

The temptation to prevent the dialogical nature that is held in the Christian Bible through a Christian know-it-all-attitude was and is (!) great. (By the way, the closer context of the papal statement quoted is also not entirely free of this; but I can't discuss that here.).

What is important to me is rather this fundamental insight: *Dialogue begins for Christians already 'at home', before going toward the other.* When they open their two-one Bible, they have a chance for dialogue, but they also have an obligation to pay attention to both parts of the two-one Bible of the Old and New Testament and to read Sacred Scripture dialogically.

This 'obligation from the very beginning' is what I want to unfold sketchily, because it will become our guideline when we look at Daniel 7 right away.

1 It is required to look, to actively listen. For the temptation to register what 'one already knows' is great. This is true not only for the Old but also for the New Testament. Indeed, what is closer is often more strange than what is far away.
2 The polyphony must be kept. Various perspectives are enriching when we give them validity.
3 Interpretations can be very creative, can detach themselves far away from the point of departure. Often sticking to the letter doesn't help to move on, it becomes barren biblicism. A text doesn't have a (fixed) meaning, it receives meaning in the contexts of life (and of literature = life 'that counts'). Boundaries can only be drawn by sharing about the texts.
4 Uncertainties, ambiguities are to be borne; in them literature's vitality can be seen. The (increasing) Christian fundamentalism with its imperialism regarding meaning kills the letter and the spirit.
5 It is important to discover with open eyes the appreciation of Israel's Bible also in the New Testament; already respect for the partner in dialogue and for their appreciation of Scripture demands this.

Daniel 7 – a 'sorting' reading

Daniel's great vision in Daniel 7 is one of the chapters in the Bible that over the centuries has been given the greatest attention. Christian interest in this chapter only diminished in modern times, but it has continued through marginal groups (and sects). In my talk I want to pick out a central theme, but in so doing I won't lose sight of the chapter as a whole.

Let's first get an overview of the chapter's structure. The diagram you received from me should be a help in this; for the chapter's structure is on the one hand simple – but with a closer look, it is nevertheless somewhat 'tricky'. We can see this in many biblical texts in which appearances or visions touch so to speak heaven and earth, so chapters in which something unusual and highly significant is discussed.

Daniel tells in the first person of a vision of his own that he had in a dream. Daniel first describes his vision, then he tells how he looks for an interpretation, but with this search he remains in the vision. The superior interpreter of foreign dreams in the first half of the Book of Daniel thus becomes a visionary, starting with chapter 7, who himself needs help in interpreting.

A side remark: Daniel 7 has a remarkable parallel in Daniel 2: There as here, *Daniel recounts both the dream and the interpretation*, but Daniel 2 is dealing with a foreign dream (that of Nebuchadnezzar), and in Daniel 7 the dream needs a foreign interpreter (a heavenly figure).

Part I: Daniel 7:1-14

The first part (vv. 2-4) consists of three interconnected visions that each begin with almost identical words: 'I saw in my vision by night' (Dan. 7:2, 7, 13). *First* Daniel sees how monsters rise up out the ocean that is agitated on all sides. A being 'like a lion' with eagle's wings; then a being like a bear that (as can be understood) is raised up on one side, finally a monster 'like a panther' with four heads and bird's wings.

But these three are only the vanguard of a 'terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong' animal (v. 7), that stands out from the three before him. The 4th animal is not again compared to a known predator. It is monstrous, with 'large iron teeth'; it eats and destroys. Above all, it has many horns (sign of power) and a conspicuous small horn that turns against the others, a horn with eyes 'like human eyes' and a 'mouth speaking arrogantly'.

What is noticeable here and in the whole text of Daniel 7 is the back and forth between figurative and comparative speech, symbolic language ('horn' traditionally stands for power) and wordplays (possibly with the syllable '*rab'* – 'much' or 'big' – which resonates with the number '4' – *rᵉbiʿy*, cf. vv. 7-8).

In the second vision's process that had begun with seeing the 4th animal, the image changes abruptly, but so does the style of language: In solemn double lines a gathering around God, the 'Ancient One', clothed in white and with white hair, is described. God as judge has taken his seat with the royal household to pass judgment. Through the rapid succession of the repeated 'I saw' we as readers are literally drawn into the dramatic situation. The 4th animal is killed – in the context of the judgment it says: punished by death; the other animals are disempowered.

Everything is said succinctly, the only one who is described in more detail is the lord of the court on his high throne, surrounded by serving crowds of beings who are not identified more closely. Everything strives toward the *third act of Daniel's vision by night*. What is important is to notice that the next act is removed from the court scene. A new process is described: Now a figure comes 'with the clouds of heaven' (the exact circumstances are not said, e.g. whether with a vehicle riding over the clouds), this figure which looks like a human being. So a heavenly figure that is brought to an audience before the Ancient One. The judgment is over, the heavenly figure has no role in it. But the previous section left an important question open: that concerning the location of the power that had previously been withdrawn from the 4th monster and the three others. The 'one-like-a-human-being' who comes on the scene from heaven now takes over the rule, or more precisely: 'it was given him' (*passivum divinum*: the power is a divine gift).

We again have poetry, not prose; Daniel 7:14 is designed particularly solemnly, corresponding with the important content: the power given to the heavenly figure is described comprehensively (pleonastically) through 3 times 3 terms:

Subject	*Power*	*Honor*	*Royal rule*
Extent	*All peoples*	*Tribes*	*Tongues that serve him*
Duration	*His power is an eternal power*	*Will not be taken away / will not yield*	*His royal rule that will not be destroyed*

Thus, the text is dealing with the royal rule that is unlimited in space and time, universal and eternal, so – in the traditional language of the Bible – it is about 'the kingdom of God'.

Part II: Daniel 7:15-28

Daniel's dream continues. He is shaken and seeks an 'interpretation' or 'explanation' that is 'reliable', as is especially emphasised. For this, Daniel – still in the vision – turns to one of the heavenly beings surrounding the divine throne. This figure is not further qualified.

The interpretation of the dream, which is presented with 'heavenly' authority, comes in two stages. The first stage thereby already opens the theme. It deals with the transfer of the rule of the 4 monsters, which mean kings, to 'the holy ones of the Most High' – a definitive taking possession 'for all eternity', as is said repeatedly in Daniel 7:18.

But the second stage of the interpretation, starting in verse 19, is more important: From now on it is all about the 4th animal that is not only described in its brutality (v. 19: 'to deavour', 'to grind', 'to trample': three actions!), but a development is again told about it in coded form: Everything revolves around regrowing horns on this animal that also fall off leaving one horn that has obvious human characteristics, that is, eyes and a mouth that speaks presumptuously.

At this point it becomes 'tricky', as I already hinted! For now Daniel – who is still speaking with one of the 'surrounding heavenly beings' – has another vision. This makes us prick our ears and forces us to pay very close attention to the wording!

Again it is told that through a judgment by the Ancient One, the rule is withdrawn from the special 'horn' that is connected with the 4th animal and transferred. But now the text no longer – as we would expect parallel to the first vision – speaks of 'one-like-a-human-being', who receives the rule from the Ancient One, but of 'the holy ones of the Most High' taking possession of the rule.

What is also new in Daniel's vision is that 'the holy ones' are fought directly and even overcome by the one particularly brutal horn, so they are in utmost distress. The detached description of a transfer of rule becomes the vision of salvation from acute need – through the intervention of the Ancient One's court. But this means: The heavenly figure of the 'One-like-a-human-being' in the original vision has become entirely superfluous; the subject is no longer this figure as bearer of the universal and eternal royal rule. And at the same time as this shift, the need moves more strongly into focus – but also the salvation of the holy ones of the Most High through divine judgment. The new short vision in Daniel 7:21-22. sums up in a certain sense the first vision in the chapter and the following interpretations: Here, together with the acute distress of the holy ones, Daniel also sees their salvation.

Starting with verse 23, the following interpretation by one of those from the heavenly court who is standing around adds a series of aspects to the deciphering of the machinations of the one horn and the effect of these on the holy ones of the Most High, but overall it stops with hints. Those who want to know it exactly might be disappointed.

When I speak of 'interpretation' or 'explanation' in the sense of Daniel 7:16, this does not imply a *complete* resolution of the figurative and symbolic language. The interpretation starting with Daniel 7:19 becomes in my opinion more clear (only) in two places: The subject is always the theme of power, more specifically: the pursuit of (royal) rule. And this power is transferred – at a 'certain' but not more closely specified time – to a group that is particularly close to God: 'the holy ones of the Most High'.

The machinations of the final (secular) bearer of power and the transition of that power are described through triads of synonymous expressions; we are already acquainted with the style from verse 14 (cf. the table above):

Machinations of the 4th animal	*V. 23: to deavour the whole earth*	*to smash*	*to crush*
	V. 25: to speak words against the Most High	*to mistreat the holy ones of the Most High*	*to change times and the law*
Consequences of the judgement	*V. 26: power is taken away,*	*in order to destroy it (the power)*	*and to annihilate it definitively*
	V. 27: the royal rule	*and the power*	*and the magnificence of all royal rules under heaven is given to the people of the holy ones of the Most High*

Now the foundations have been developed so as to be able to say something about the much discussed 'son of man' in Daniel 7.

A cipher – 'one-like-a-human-being'

When Daniel 7:13 refers to the 'son of man', this is a biblicism, a translation convention, which does indeed give the Aramaic text 'literally', but in fact it is not correct or at least highly misleading. This translation convention is supported by the New Testament's use of '*ho hyyos tou anthropou'* = 'the son of man'. The phrase occurs 82 times in the New Testament (further details will follow below).

- The Catholic German *Einheitsübersetzung* of the year 2016 translates Daniel 7:14 'einer wie ein Menschensohn' ('one like a son of man'),
- the Luther Bible in the 2016 edition a little more careful 'einer wie eines Menschen Sohn' ('one like the son of a human being'),
- the always more precise Zürcher Bibel of the year 2007 'einer, der einem Menschen glich' ('one who resembled a human being'),
- Carol A. Newsom's commentary on Daniel (London 2014) similarly has 'one in the likeness of a human',
- the extensive commentary to Daniel by John Collins (Minneapolis 1993) has 'one like a human being', thus also in the Jewish Study Bible of 2014.

The *Aramaic expression k^{e}bar $^{'ae}$nasch* is grammatically *singulativ* (as is the Hebrew *ben 'adam*), since *$^{'ae}$nasch and 'adam* are used collectively ('human being' in the sense of 'humans' or 'humanity'). The preposition serves to compare. Thus the expression translated means: 'a human being' and with the comparison: '*one like a human being*'.

Thus the expression fits into the series of the preceding names of the first three monsters: 'like a lion' (v. 4), 'similar to a bear' (v. 5) and 'like a panther' (v. 6). The 4th animal stands out; it is literally 'unparalleled' in its bestiality.

These monster-animals come out of the choppy sea, they are figurations of chaos. But the one who looks like a human being belongs to the heavenly sphere, to the divine area. This is underlined by the clouds as 'theophany props'. The more precise role of the clouds and the manner of the movement remain open. It is only said about the point of origin of the movement and its destination: out of heaven to before the Ancient One. There is no hint anywhere that the court met on earth. It is a vision which does not serve such concrete needs for information. On the contrary, the framing as a vision makes it possible to relate earthly and heavenly realities to one another, to go back and forth without becoming more precise.

The intensive use of encrypted, pictorial and highly symbolic language and the imaginary complexes thus evoked build up a fantasy of their own which allows one to look 'higher' (so to say 'as high as heaven') and 'farther' ('into eternity'). This is why the speaking in the interpretative part is no different to the actual vision, for the interpretation remains in the context of the vision. *An ecstatic vision is in fact not followed by a sober interpretation that explains everything.* The text's form as a whole must be noted, even if our need for information would like it to be different.

On this background, as I understand it, all attempts to 'identify' the figure of the one who is similar to a human being are forbidden. In Daniel 7, there are exactly two elements of information regarding him: Firstly, he is totally distinguished from the monster-animals; and secondly, the universal and eternal royal rule (of God) is transferred to him. What his name is, whether this is about an angelic being or about some other figure from the Ancient One's court – all this is left open, because the text also functions without this 'information'. The 'one similar to a human being' is more a role than a person – and in the interpretative part of the vision he is explicitly 'replaced' three times by a collective, by 'the holy ones of the Most High' or 'the people of the holy ones of the Most High'. Nor is the heavenly figure in Daniel 7:13 introduced as the leader of this collective.

Daniel sees a transition of rule – that is, to the 'one-like-a-human-being' (beginning of the vision) and to the 'holy ones of the Most High' (in the further part of the vision). In the interpretative part, starting with verse 15, it is perfectly clear that this is one and the same transition, for that is exactly what Daniel sees, and it is confirmed two more times by those from the heavenly court who are 'standing around'!

Before I continue with this thought, a brief side remark on grammar: in the Aramaic original of the expression 'the holy ones of the Most High' it is striking that the designation of God is in the plural form. Literally we would therefore have to translate: 'the holy ones of the Most Highs'. But nothing speaks for this; already in the Septuagint the designation of God is translated in the singular. There are two plausible explanations for the plural: In so-called *constructus* connections, the plural *can* also be formed by both nouns going into the plural (cf. the grammar book: GKG § 124q). According to the other explanation, the plural of the Aramaic designation of God simply imitates the Hebrew plural of *''elohim'*.

Regarding the phrase 'the holy ones of the Most High', there is discussion about whether it is talking about something heavenly or about a human group (so Israel or parts of the people). I believe that this alternative is not present in Daniel 7. Here it is again important to note that it is ultimately a vision, and all statements remain ciphers and hints, as corresponds with a vision relating to the transcendental, to God and God's doing. The comforting message for those reading is the transition from the rule of beastly earthly powers to God. But the circumstances of this transition remain entirely open. God's kingdom will come for 'his holy ones' in heaven and on earth. Even if now 'the holy ones are overwhelmed', as verse 21 says.

In this connection, the one similar to a human being is according to Daniel 7 no saviour figure, no redeemer! He does not act! He remains a placeholder (I don't have a better expression!) in a place in a process that is grasped in multiple steps in a vision. That must be emphasised against (hasty) entries for example from New Testament connections.

'Son of Man' in the New Testament – an impulse for dialogical openness

In the first three Gospels there are no less than five allusions to Daniel 7:13: in Matthew 24:30; 26:64; Mark 13:26; 14:62; Luke 21:27. But we have to look closely: The text is talking about 'the Son of Man' (literally in Greek: 'the son of the human being'); the expression is doubly determined, the comparison particle has been dropped. In the more than two hundred years between

the Book of Daniel and the Synoptic Gospels, the vaguely contoured placeholder in Daniel's vision became the representation of a heavenly figure that plays a fixed role in God's eschatological restoration of the world (traditionally we speak of the 'last judgment').This designation becomes in the Gospels a so-called 'title of majesty', that is to say, to a designation for the special role and position of Jesus of Nazareth (other titles of majesty are: 'Son of God', 'the Anointed One', 'Lord').

This use of titles documented in the New Testament must not be taken backwards and put into Daniel 7. That would not only be historically wrong because it would turn developments upside down; it would also deprive Daniel 7 of its own message, so would be theologically fatal, virtually a disregard of the Word of Scripture.

But a second thought – another stop sign, so to speak – is important to me. I know this thought is somewhat speculative; I bring it tentatively at the end of my reflections. What is important is to pay exact attention to the use of the title 'Son of Man' for Jesus of Nazareth *as the gospels draw him*. Jesus always speaks of the Son of Man in the third person: 'When the Son of Man comes ...'. He never says 'I' in this connection, so he does not identify *explicitly* with the Son of Man. Does this show a consciousness still alive that the historical Jesus of Nazareth did not equate himself with the Son of Man?

A word of Jesus like Mark 8:38 seems to suggest such an assumption: 'Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.'

Everything depends on whether we perceive the fine cracks, breaks, imbalances everywhere in the Bible. They are entries into the open spaces of biblical thinking about God. What is not developed to the end, the images that are not harmonised, the contradictory thoughts mirror our irrepressible diversity as human beings and as people seeking God – and at the same time, they reflect the greatness and otherness of God that cannot be grasped.

The goal of all longing and of all efforts is clear but can only be communicated as a cipher: God's eternal and universal rule. Dialogue could mean to rejoice together ever more over the energies set free by the biblical texts in order to resist the monsters and demons, so they don't 'overwhelm' us (cf. Dan. 7:21), and even more, so that we ourselves don't become like the monsters. God forbid!

Translation: Sr Katherine Wolff nds

Gefördert durch:

Bundesministerium des Innern und für Heimat

EVANGELISCH-LUTHERISCHE LANDESKIRCHE HANNOVERS

Bistum Osnabrück

aufgrund eines Beschlusses des Deutschen Bundestages