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THESES

In a mirror

Biblical intertextuality in Babits Mihály's poems

– in the light of the poetic path

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1. Background to the research

From the theological point of view, we see that there is a growing interest in how to use the tools of fiction and biblical interpretation in practical theology. Initiatives are mainly in the area of preaching and religious education. In Rudolf Bohren's book (*Predigtlehre*, 1971) we can read about the fiction too, especially in relation to illustration, citation, language.¹ But Bohren proposes to use montage and collage and Bertold Brecht's alienation techniques for the preaching,² also fiction as a tool for the meditation phase of preaching.³

Georg Langenhorst in his work (*Gedichte zur Bibel. Texte – Interpretationen – Methoden. Ein Werkbuch für Schule und Gemeinde*, 2001) has divided the reception of the Bible of German literature into eight main types, based on how biblical texts are interpreted.⁴ He examined how to incorporate these interpretations and practices into religious education.

Tanja Gojny in her book (*Biblische Spuren in der Lyrik Erich Frieds. Zum intertextuellen Wechselspiel von Bibel und Literatur*, 2004) went further and examined the poetry of a specific author, Erich Fried, how fiction and the Bible are intertwined.

Kelevéz Ágnes describes in her study on intertexts („*Szántszándékos anachronizmusok*”. *Idézésfajták időjátéka Babits műveiben*) how Babits deliberately used guest texts in his works, especially in his early works, and expected the reader to recognize them.

The complete poetry of Mihály Babits is dealt with in two major monographs, in the second half of the 20th century (Pál Kardos: *Babits Mihály*, 1972 and Rába György: *Babits Mihály*, 1983). For an analysis of the tone and style of Babits' poetry, including the biblical idiom, we can draw on the work of Katalin J. Soltész (*Babits Mihály költői nyelve*, 1965). After the regime change, Lajos Sipos's monograph (*Babits Mihály*, 2008) is authoritative in looking at Babits's biography and life's work.

The critical edition of Babits's poems from 1906 to 1910 (*Babits Mihály összegyűjtött versei 1906–1910*, 2022) summarizes an extraordinary amount of research material and early poetry is also described in detail in another monograph by György Rába (*Babits Mihály költészete 1903–1920*, 1981) and the book by Ágnes Kelevéz (*A keletkező szöveg esztétikája. Genetikai közelítés Babits költészetéhez*, 1998), which examines Babits' manuscript (Angyalos könyv).

The relationship of Babits' poems to the Bible is reflected in several studies. The most important of these for my thesis are: Péter Dávidházi's two studies on poem *Esti kérdés* and *Jónás könyve* (*Az Esti kérdés*

¹ BOHREN 2020, 139–145., 192–215.o.

² BOHREN 2020, 206–215.o.

³ BOHREN 389–395. o.

⁴ LANGENHORST 2001. These types are: retelling, psychologising-historicising painting, dramatizing, perspective alienation, interpretation or alienation by reinterpretation, alienation by language, updating, free-associative configuration

és a Jónás könyve, 2009a and „És sorsot vetének". *A kihagyás poétikája Babits Jónás könyvében*, 2009b); Gábor Schein: *A szatíra, a megbocsátás és a humor kérdései Babits Jónás könyvében* (2017); István Jelenits: *Miért nagy vers Babits Mihály Miatyánkja?* (2007); Zoltán Szénási's studies (*A harmadik zsoltár. A Fortissimo, a Zsoltár gyermekhangra és a Zsoltár férfihangra kompozicionális kapcsolatáról*, 2022a and *Az Énekek éneke vajon saját ének-e? Kísérlet egy Babits-mű státuszának meghatározására* 2022b; and *Háborús valóságvonatkozások és szövegközi kapcsolatok*, 2022c).

György Rónay and his son, László Rónay have specifically examined traces of Christian faith in the work of Hungarian poets such as Mihály Babits, and they show how Mihály Babits gradually reaches the point of attachment to God (*Babits hite; Isten nem halt meg*, 1970 and *A huszadik századi magyar spirituális líra*, 2002).

I have based my analysis of types of intertextuality on the works of Gérard Genette (*Transztextualitás*, 1996),⁵ Manfred Pfister (*Konzepte der Intertextualität*, 1985) and Éva Gerőfiné Brebovszky (*Intertextualitás és bibliaértelmezés*, 2020). Finally, I have also used Old Testament and New Testament commentaries.⁶

The dissertation is situated at the border between two disciplines, theology and literature, intertextuality connects the two, so my aim is to use my knowledge within the two disciplines to examine Babits' lyrics, how, when the Bible comes to the fore in certain periods of the poet's life, which biblical passages emerge, how they relate to the New Testament and the Old Testament books and their parts, and why they are given the role of being expressive in Babits' hands in his own time.

My aim is also to see if, and how, the poem draws the attention of the reader with biblical knowledge to some element or message of the biblical text, even though this is not its original purpose. In other words, does it reflect the biblical text in the same way as if the reflection were the original, or does it reflect only one aspect of the biblical text, perhaps enlarged, miniaturized or even inverted.

⁵ I use in the dissertation the term intertextuality instead of transtextuality, but I have adopted the terms paratextuality, metatextuality, hypertextuality and architextuality.

⁶ These can be found in the bibliography of the dissertation.

2. The methods of the research

The dissertation takes an inductive approach to the poems, letting them ‘speak’, exploring their relationship to biblical places, expressions and literary methods. I have selected the works analysed in my dissertation, from among those in which some biblical connection can be found, on the basis of the degree to which the poem is connected to the biblical text. I have tried to select poems that have as many intertextual links to the Bible as possible. On the other hand, the selection of the works was also based on the aim of providing the reader with an insight into some important phases of Babits' poetic career.

The selected works, ordered thematically and considered the most relevant to the topic, were then analysed in terms of their intertextual relationship to the Bible. The poet himself also contributed with his essays, confessions and other poems.

Then I compared the interpretation and application of the poems revealed in the course of the analyses, which can be linked to specific biblical passages, with the traditional interpretation of the Bible, again limiting myself to the verses appearing in the poems, in order to explore in what ways Babits' fictional application and interpretation of the Bible differs from the traditional theological explanations, and in what ways it agrees with them, despite the fact that his poems are works of fiction and not theological works. And also whether the poem draws the attention of the reader with a knowledge of the Bible to a certain element or message of the biblical text, again despite the fact that this is not its original purpose.

For the indication of intertextuality in my dissertation, I used the types of Gérard Genette, but on the theological side, I also tried to look for the types of Langenhorst's biblical reception in the poems, as well as to mark where the intertextual impact on the reader is greater.

My hypothesis was that Babits was approaching the Bible with a sense of poetic freedom, and that therefore his poetic interpretation of the Bible is different from his theological one. And that poetic interpretation thus sheds light on an aspect of the biblical message from a different perspective.

And that, although the poetic interpretation is different from the theological, the realisation of what is biblical can open up a new perspective for the reader through the intertextual effect. That is, for a reader with a background in biblical studies, a particular poem can highlight an aspect of the message of the biblical text by pointing to the original text from a different perspective.

3. Theses

Babits deliberately incorporated guest texts into his poems.⁷ We can also assume, that the poet knowingly used the the Bible, that Babits took it for granted that readers knew the Bible.

The study showed that the Old and New Testaments are closely intertwined in Babits' poetry.

Although Babits initially had different views on the two parts of the Bible, and was against the Old Testament, many poems are still connected with the Old Testament, especially the Wisdom Literature, the Psalms and the Prophetic Books, even in the early stages of his career. In his late poetry, the Old Testament is even more explicitly present through the prophetic role.

The types of intertextuality in Babits' poems are varied. Particularly in his early poetry, but also later on, many kinds of markers (for example title, motto, allusion, paraphrase, or montage, etc.) help the reader to recognise the intertextual relationship with the Bible.

In the poems, the types of biblical intertextuality intermingle to create both an intense intertextual relationship with the Bible and an intertextual impact on the reader through the poetic perspective. The intertextual impact on the reader is also intense in those poems in which clear marking promises less impact, as Babits' text creates tension through its deviations from the biblical.

We can find examples of the types of biblical reception formulated by Georg Langenhorst in Babits's poetry, and these are mixed with types of intertextuality in the poems, just as Langenhorst's types are mixed with each other in Babits's poems.

And the Langenhorst's types can be further supplemented by the fact that when *Esti kérdés* ('Evening question') plays on the Parable of the Sower,⁸ it can also be interpreted as a kind of logical alienation, which draws attention to the opposite meaning of denial in the light of biblical knowledge.

In the light of the career of Babits, it can be noticed that in his early poetry, in the shadow of the world war, as well as in his late poetry, biblical intertextuality is present, even if he approaches the Bible

⁷ KELEVÉZ 2009a, 482. o.

⁸ BABITS 2022, 547. o.

in different ways: he plays a game of style, sings of love, uses it as a mask, complains, cries for peace, shows the way, searches for truth and faith, or resigns himself to his fate.

The natural way in which the Bible became a source for Babits is probably due in large part to his religious background and his great education.

Babits has the Bible and Christianity in the background of his early poems, but it is hidden by the many masks. Over time, they slowly come to the surface. Throughout his life he searches for the “star”, seeking the truth, doubting until he arrives at it.

From the reader's point of view, the poems written in different periods point in different ways to different aspects of the message of the biblical text.

The poem, which is alive with perspective and linguistic alienation, draws attention to the biblical message through its unique point of view. It makes the reader think the Passion story through, while also feeling the suffering of the Saviour.

As the personal is more and more strongly expressed in the poems, the works also involve the reader more and more in the personal. For example the poem *Csillag után* (‘Following the star’) already speaks of the Saviour in a much more personal way than the *Golgotai csárda* (‘Golgotha Inn’), and thus brings him closer to the reader.

The biblical text is often a way of understanding a situation of existence in which the reader can also recognize himself, for example when the poem asks the meaning of existence or when it expresses the wish for peace.

In summary, Babits' poems reflect the author, his attachment to Christian culture and faith, his thoughts and their changes; they reflect the biblical text (knowing that even if we know the Bible well, and the unusual perspective opened by the poems calls attention to a detail, our knowledge may be fragmentary); finally, the reader sees himself in the mirror.

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