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Fleas and Other Arthropods

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Abstract. This essay, responding to articles by Tamás Fabiny and István Gégény, examines the cultural contexts of the political use of biblical texts and concepts through the example of the David and Goliath metaphor. It approaches the issue on three levels: the theological interpretation of the biblical text, the cultural patterns that emerge from it, and their political appropriations. The essay draws attention to the fact that such political appropriations are often embedded in cultural traditions that have developed over several centuries. Although the separation of the languages of theology, the church, and politics is an urgent and important task today, this separation cannot be fully achieved because of these cultural embeddednesses. The essay therefore argues for the creation of a discourse that reflects on the social use of biblical concepts and metaphors not by seeking to eliminate these cultural embeddednesses, but by deepening, clarifying, and interpreting them.

Keywords: culture; master narrative; Bible; politics; David and Goliath

Biblical Narratives, Cultural Patterns, and Political Co-optations

– Elephant here! Elephant here!
– Report, Elephant!
– Yes, sir. Elephant here!
– Speak quickly, Elephant, report!
– But it feels so good to say "Elephant"! After all, even a flea—or rather, a flea secret agent—can have an inner life, right?
– Drop the soul-searching, get to the point!
– Ah, that's different. So, I've infiltrated…

On April 23, I read Tamás Fabiny's article titled After Örkény, Freely on the Szemlélek website.[1] Evaluating the post-election situation, the author touched on some peculiar manifestations of political Christianity, including how politicians have turned themselves into self-appointed preachers in recent years and how they have distorted the message of Scripture to serve their own political purposes. At the end of the article, Fabiny also mentions that the new political power is not free from this habit either, citing as an example how a politician-pastor used the biblical story of David and Goliath to frame the victory of the Tisza Party.

A few days later, also on Szemlélek, I read István Gégény's analysis, which—based on the memorable David and Goliath parallel in Péter Magyar's victory speech—discussed how (and how not) to interpret the election results from a biblical perspective.[2] The problems addressed by the authors—namely the political use of Christian religious concepts and theological language, as well as attempts to appropriate certain concepts—have accompanied the functioning of Fidesz governments almost throughout. The question, therefore, is not only who uses which biblical story for political purposes, but also through what cultural pathways these stories become political metaphors.

In connection with the above-mentioned articles, it occurred to me that back in September 2019, I also wrote—within the limits of what was possible—about this issue in the pages of Református Lapja, at that time reflecting on Viktor Orbán's Tusványos speech and the attempt to reinterpret the concept of Christian freedom.[3] My article, which could hardly be called revolutionary, was only published after lengthy negotiations, as the leaders of our church and the shapers of its public discourse did not consider these phenomena problematic; rather, they found it problematic that I considered them—and their silence—problematic.'

> "The silence of the Church of the Word in cases of open abuse of the Word has persisted after the elections as well, so neither László Kövér's remarks about the victory of Satan nor Viktor Orbán's statements about alternative sources of the Word have really provoked any reaction.[4] The justification may once again have been something along the lines that one does not need to speak out about everything; these are minor communicative fleas, not worth turning into ideological elephants.

At this point, by way of a kind of free association, the dialogue quoted at the beginning of this article came to mind, which can be heard in the opening scene of Attila Dargay's animated film Captain of the Forest. It is not mentioned in the excerpt, but a few scenes later it also becomes clear that the secret agent, renamed

[1] https://szemlelek.net/orkeny-utan-szabadon-fabiny-tamas-valasztasi-helyzetertekelese/

[2] https://szemlelek.net/david-es-goliat-hogyan-ne-ertelmezzuk-biblikus-nezopontbol-a-valasztas-eredmenyet/

[3] https://www.nkzs.hu/szabadsag-marketing/

[4] Ezekről Gábor György írt saját közösségi média oldalán, illetve a Szombat folyóiratban fontos elemzéseket. Lásd pl. Gábor György: A „Fidesz-világ" és a „keresztény világ" azonosítása teológiailag bálványképző művelet, Szombat, 2026. május 14., URL: https://www.szombat.org/politika/a-fidesz-vilag-es-a-kereszteny-vilag-azonositasa-teologiailag-balvanykepzo-muvelet

from a flea to Elephant, bears the respectable civilian name Goliath. This Goliath is a fine little fellow. Self-sacrificing, he constantly risks his own physical safety for the Cause—that is, for the defeat of Evil; he is loyal to the Captain, and even if he cannot accomplish great deeds, he does what a flea can do: he bites. And although he remains a supporting character throughout, the Captain could hardly have defeated Evil without him. This Goliath is thus a truly David-like character.

How does a flea become Goliath—that is, how does a character in a 1987 Hungarian-Canadian-West German animated film receive a symbolic biblical name within the framework of a metaphorical game? Somehow in the same way as a large, high-performance long-lasting battery, a car-wash sponge that can tackle any stain, a tomato variety that produces enormous yields, a harbor gantry crane, or even one of the most powerful steam locomotives. So far, the idea is clear; everyone understands the reference, even those who, in 1980s Kádár-era Hungary, were not allowed to attend religious education. And I think this is where the core of the problem lies. The Bible as a whole, together with its grand narratives—as Gábor György, who has also dealt extensively with this issue, writes in one of his posts—is 'the master narrative of Western culture, with its recurring patterns that can be recognized again and again in the present.'[5]

The essence of a master narrative lies precisely in this recurring, constant presence, its recognizability, and its role in constructing meaning. These narratives form part of culture, yet it is not so much the narratives themselves—the concrete stories in their literal sense—that matter, but rather what they signify: how they become meaningful, and how, through them, culture-producing subjects create the framework that gives meaning to the events of their everyday lives.

According to Clifford Geertz, the recently deceased American cultural anthropologist, 'man is an animal suspended in webs of meaning he himself has spun,'[6] and this web is culture. Geertz's observation suggests that the things of the world do not possess universal meanings 'encoded' within them; rather, it is humans who continuously assign meaning to their actions, objects, environments, and stories. In this way, they create symbols, and through them, they produce culture—something they pass on and use as a form of preparedness for interpreting a changing reality. This web, therefore, on the one hand aids interpretation, but on the other hand it is subject to change, and for this reason humans often struggle with their own conceptual fabric.

The biblical King David has provided Western culture with several such grand narratives and cultural patterns. Beyond the story of Goliath, there is his struggle with Saul, the story of eating the consecrated bread, and Absalom—not to mention Bathsheba. These have become deeply embedded in the social consciousness, yet their use has often had little or nothing to do with the original biblical narratives.

[5] https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid06LcrF2ZrdNAkwaaJY6fg3K94xjP9PW3LEX91ArGZ54xnpYFeXYKr9K6SuncjKXp9l&id=100002038264412

[6] Clifford Geertz: *Az értelmezés hatalma. Antropológiai írások*, Budapest, 1994, Osiris Kiadó, 171.

In relation to the social use of biblical narratives, we can distinguish at least three levels. The first is the theological meaning of the biblical narrative. The second is the level of cultural patterns—mostly metaphorical or rather allegorical—associated with theological interpretations, while the third is their actualizing rhetorical and political use.

We (I would say Reformed, but this is characteristic of all confessional theologies) tend to identify our own theological interpretations with the 'original' meaning of the biblical narratives, and then, in this context, we evaluate the solutions of the other two levels. At least in an ideal case. In less ideal cases, our cultural practices, denominational traditions, or political goals reshape our theological interpretations. Thus, for example, the period of the forced organization of collective farms became the kairos of a 'deeper understanding' of Galatians 6:2 ('Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ') for pastors who agitated from the pulpit in favour of believers joining cooperatives.

The question is whether we have access to the original meaning.

There is, for example, the episode that precedes the confrontation with Goliath, in which David tells Saul that when he was a shepherd and a lion or a bear came and carried off a lamb from the flock, he went after it and struck it down; if the beast attacked him, he seized it by the beard and killed it (1 Sam. 17:34–36). This is often understood as a harmless confession in which David's faith is revealed: God helped him against the wild beasts, and will do so again now. But if we place lion-killing in its ancient Near Eastern cultural context, where the lion symbolized human and supernatural forces threatening civilization, and where killing it was the duty of the king and a sign of his power, and if we also consider that the scene's iconography eerily resembles the image of David gripping the lion by the beard, then the innocence of David's words immediately evaporates, and we begin to read his brother Eliab's earlier remark differently as well. Of course, we cannot know for certain how familiar Saul and those around him, or even David himself, were with this symbolism, so this remains only a hypothesis. But it is a good example of how difficult it is to access "original" meanings, and of how important it is to be careful not to distill David into the archetype of the good—not only in his later life, but even in the context of this particular story.

And how are such cultural patterns to be assessed? If we look only at perhaps the most famous artistic representation of David, Michelangelo's sculpture (1501–1504), we know that in the determined, battle-focused, muscular figure of David, Florence—freed from the Medici and standing up to the Papal States and other Italian cities—saw itself. That is why the statue was eventually erected at the center of the city's political life, where even its placement required one to look up at it, and with its height of 5.17 meters it towered above everyone else like a true Goliath, one might say.

As a counterexample, we could mention the three paintings by Caravaggio dealing with David and Goliath, from the years 1600–1610. In all three, David appears as a young, still-developing boy's body. The paintings have nothing to do with the

heroic David trope. One could say they are closer to David's "original" form, but especially in the case of the latest painting, the two competing interpretations among art historians raise many questions about the relationship between the image and the original story. Caravaggio painted his own self-portrait in Goliath, and according to one interpretation, in David we should see the boy with whom he had a homosexual relationship, while according to another, David is the young Caravaggio himself.

Both interpretations are closely tied to Baroque culture, both are thought-provoking, and both are far removed from the "original" narrative, however one defines it. At the same time, both Michelangelo's and Caravaggio's works, like the images of David in royal mirrors, the statues of David playing the harp on Protestant church organs in the Netherlands, the many prints of the repentant David in prayer books, and even Richard Gere's portrayal and many other cultural readings, all fed back into how biblical stories about David were read in a given social context and how the ideal ruler was imagined.

Turning to the third level, we see that the battle between David and Goliath is one of the oldest and most effective metaphors in political communication: a small, determined, morally just but seemingly hopeless figure, forced into battle for essentially ethical reasons, confronts a gigantic, aggressive, oppressive, and cumbersome "machine" (Goliath). Biblical parallels and metaphors are also important to us, Hungarian Reformed Christians, in national historical interpretation and identity formation.

It is enough here to refer to the narrative of the Jewish-Hungarian parallel of fate, which is also popular among Reformed preachers. On this foundation, the 19th-century romantic view of history also built the conviction that Protestants are the torchbearers of the cause of national freedom, and this idea meets the century's changing religiosity, in which concepts describing national identity gradually acquire a sacred character and, conversely, the nation—then forming in the modern sense of the word—becomes the privileged site for the experience of the sacred.[7] The seed of political communication then fell into this well-prepared soil. For if we look only at this period, the David and Goliath metaphor was used not only by the Hungarian press, but by the British and American press as well, in presenting the 1848–49 War of Independence; Kossuth—who was also given the title "the Moses of the Hungarians" at home—was called the David of the modern age during his American tour. The metaphor worked just as well in connection with Trianon and 1956. Why?

First, because it creates immediate emotional identification: people instinctively root for the weaker one, the "underdog," whom they immediately also place in a morally superior position, since the image suggests that spirit, courage, and justice prevail over brute force.

This is probably what Orbán's government also wanted to exploit when it applied the metaphor in its struggle against "Brussels." And nothing shows more clearly how far the use of the metaphor has drifted from its biblical roots than the fact that today

[7] A témához lásd Brandt, Juliane: Felekezeti és nemzeti identitás a 19. századi Magyarországon: a protestáns egyházak, *Századvég*, 8 (2003), 29, 3-36.

Palestinians fighting the State of Israel place themselves in the role of David and Israel in the role of Goliath.

The other important reason the metaphor works is precisely that, while its different levels can be analytically separated, in actual use those levels slide into one another and become connected. Political use builds on cultural patterns, refers to them, invokes them, and in a secularized, or more precisely laicized society—one that has largely lost knowledge of the confessional foundations of its own religion—that is enough. If theologians and church opinion-shapers then reinforce these interpretations, or at least do not dispute them, the result is also theological legitimation and a sacred character.

Why does all this matter? Because although I fully agree with Tamás Fabiny's and István Gégény's position, and I consider one of the most important long-term tasks to be separating religious-theological language from political language, I also think that a complete separation of the two is not achievable, and perhaps we should also reconsider whether that would truly be the best solution.

Around the turn of the millennium, as the popularity of Hungarian historical names steadily declined from previous decades, a few biblical names—among male names, especially David—suddenly became much more popular. Between 1995 and 1999, it was the most frequently given first male name. The situation has changed since then, of course: today David is in 17th place, displaced by Dominik, but even so, in the last ten years 8,505 boys have been given the name David.[8] The Davids are therefore still here, and the D-size battery, or the LR20 / MN1300 type, is almost only called Goliath here—along with Germany, perhaps because of the many Hungarians living there? This may not be the most exalted dimension of Christian culture, but we live in this culture so long as we use these names, concepts, and references as self-evident, without needing a dictionary or explanation, as part of the mental preparedness through which we give meaning to the ordinary things of our lives. And of course, we sometimes misunderstand them, and there are and will be those who exploit them.

In other words, we are unlikely to be rid of the David-and-Goliath metaphor, or its political use, for quite some time. And when that does happen—because changes in our culture, such as the decline of church-based religiosity and confessional-theological awareness, may easily lead to such an outcome—then Christianity's social position will also be very different.

For the time being, I think it would be best if this phenomenon were surrounded by a strongly reflexive and critical discourse. Creating and sustaining that is one of the greatest failures of the past decades. Most church leaders and theologians have often deflected calls to speak out by referring to broader social debates about the separation of church and politics, saying that the church does not need to speak on every issue because otherwise its statements would lose their weight. (We are not

[8] https://magyarnevek.hu/nevek/utonevstatisztika/2025

doing well with these arthropods; we have not known how to deal, from a Reformed perspective, with the bedbugs that have flooded public discourse either.)

While the obvious truth of this reasoning cannot be denied, it nevertheless launched a kind of process of "flea-ification": more and more often, every such issue was dismissed as a flea not worth mentioning. It was better not to speak out (we did not speak out), which was, from one angle or another, clearly advantageous; but in the meantime we let go of the discourse of cultural pattern formation, and this fed back into the church's biblical interpretation and into how it related to politicians who had slipped into the role of preachers. So the fleas became embedded.