

Article: JAL020

## CONFRONTING LITERARY REALISM IN THE BIBLE

This article first appeared in the Practical Hermeneutics column of the *Christian Research Journal*, volume 30, number 5 (2007). For further information or to subscribe to the *Christian Research Journal* go to: <http://www.equip.org>

A Christian writer adduces what he considers “just a cursory list” of the atrocities that the Bible depicts, in the following paragraph:

...blasphemy (2 Kings 18:28–19:5), vulgar insults (1 Kings 12:10), sex orgies (Exodus 32:3–6), gang rape (Judges 19:22–25), prostitution (Genesis 38:12–19) . . . decapitation (1 Samuel 17:51), disemboweling (Judges 3:21–22) . . . cannibalism (2 Kings 6:28) . . . gouging out of eyes (Judges 16:2).<sup>1</sup>

That is approximately a third of the author’s unsettling list.

I suspect that most Christians would be shocked to discover that the complete list of horrors that the quoted author has compiled is actually in the Bible. This is a way of saying that most Christians know the Bible as a “sanitized” book that, while it portrays the misery and disappointments of life as well as its beauties, is largely devoid of sordidness.

**The Bible as a Realistic Book.** The literary principle that I discuss in this article is known by literary scholars as realism. Realism in the Bible is something that Christians need to confront and explain, if for no other reason than that certain segments of our culture have put it on the agenda.

Literary realism has multiple definitions. One thing it denotes is the choice of common experience and ordinary people as the subject matter for a story or poem. When compared to other ancient literature like Homer’s epics, the Bible is distinctive by virtue of its celebration of the commonplace as the sphere within which the crucial events of life occur. This is in contrast to the aristocratic bias that prevailed in western literature before the rise of the novel.

There is another aspect of literary realism, however—the choice of sordid and shocking experiences as the subject matter of literature. The byword of realism is that it portrays life “as it really is.” In practical terms, this means a refusal to overlook what is negative in human experience. In its actual manifestations, this refusal to overlook what is bad in human experience has produced two huge branches of story material—sex and violence.

How much of this type of realism is there in the Bible? A lot. We do not need to make a complete tabulation of instances in order to prove the point; all we need are some notable examples.

Surely one of the most heightened examples of realism in the Bible is the story told in Judges 19:22–30. It is the story of proposed homosexual rape and then actual group rape of a traveler’s concubine to the point of death. When the master of the concubine finds her dead on the door step the next morning, he dismembers her body into twelve pieces and puts the body parts on display in the twelve tribes of Israel. This is probably worse than would be displayed in any of the media today. The story of retaliation that follows (Judges 20) and the subsequent seizing of virgins as wives (Judges 21) are hardly less shocking to our sensibilities.

Another example of sexual realism combined with violence is the story of David and Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11). It is a story of implied seduction by King David (or mutually consenting adultery), followed by pregnancy. Then the action escalates into a temporarily successful cover-up, abuse of power by the king over his subjects (Uriah the husband of Bathsheba and Joab the military captain), and finally murder.

Much of the violence recounted in the Bible occurs in the military milieu of the Old Testament historical chronicles; because of this, it might be easy to get the impression that the New Testament is kinder and friendlier, but that is not really true. The shocking details of the torture of Christ during the passion form an extended horror story.

Even a familiar story like Jesus' altercation with the scribes and Pharisees over the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1–11) follows the familiar contours of literary realism. The very choice of adultery as story material represents an intrusion of unidealized experience into our awareness as we read. Part of the mix is the hatred of the religious establishment for Jesus, and their reduction of the woman to an impersonal object and weapon in their controversy with Jesus. As with realism generally, the story of the woman caught in adultery compels us to confront an unpleasant experience that we normally would choose to avoid.

**The Problem Posed by the Realism of the Bible.** Before we turn to the hermeneutical question of how to deal with the realism of the Bible as we read and interpret it, we need to take stock of what the realism of the Bible says about the Bible. For starters, and depending on how comprehensively we read it, the Bible is a book that regularly unsettles us and even shocks us. Rape, dismemberment, and murder are (or should be) shocking to our sensibilities, but still the Bible puts these experiences before us to read about them.

By temperament we want the Bible to be a comforting book; yet we encounter much that makes us uncomfortable, including the kind of realism that I have noted above. The degree to which we sanitize the Bible from what is sordid is the degree to which we reduce it to a lightweight "condensed version" of the Bible, not what the apostle Paul called "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27). Such distortion is a problem that needs to be countered.

Modern literary realism has posed legitimate problems for Christians for at least a century. It is thus at some level distressing to see that very realism in the book that Christians accept as what we loosely call a "sacred book." What Christians rightly repudiate in its excessive form in various media is right there in the Bible.

**Toward a Hermeneutics of Realism.** Hermeneutics (the theory of interpretation) becomes practical when it shows us what is present in a text and then helps us make sense of what we have uncovered. To be practical, hermeneutics must help us solve the problems that we encounter. To the extent that literary realism poses a problem, practical hermeneutics offers solutions.

The first task of interpretation is to illuminate a text in a way that lays all aspects of it out to view. This begins with description or observation. The goal is to make sure that we do not overlook anything that is in a text. Fiction writer Flannery O'Connor wrote famously that "the writer should never be ashamed of staring."<sup>2</sup> The interpreter, too, should never be ashamed of staring.

If we apply this principle to the literary realism of the Bible, the first result is that we neither hide nor exaggerate the realism that is present. Either extreme is possible. If we stare at the entire Bible, we (as noted above) will be shocked by much of what we find. Consider the following, for example: "This woman said to me, 'Give your son, that we may eat him today, and we will eat my son tomorrow.' So we boiled my son and ate him" (2 Kings 6:28–29 ESV).

If, however, we contextualize the realism of the Bible, comparing it to extreme forms of realism that we regularly find in contemporary literature and the media (including, let us be aware, the daily news), we also find some differences. This comparative function is another practical contribution that hermeneutics can make. Unlike the literary realism in much of modern literature and the media, the Bible does not contain a preponderance of such material, nor do biblical writers go into the graphic detail that modern realism does. Biblical writers use an appropriate reticence in their portrayal, without, of course, abandoning the truthfulness to real life that is the hallmark of realism.

To be of practical use, hermeneutics must begin at the descriptive level—making sure that nothing gets overlooked, but it also needs to offer a satisfying explanation of what is in the text. It is a plausible

conclusion that the realism of the Bible is present because it tells us something important that we need to know. What is that “something”? Two answers suggest themselves immediately: realism shows us (1) the depravity of the human heart and (2) the evil and suffering to which the human race is subject in a fallen world.

There is also a corrective aspect. For people who are selectively familiar with the Bible, it is easy for the Bible to take on the character of a tame and “nice” book. Literary realism shatters that illusion.

Might there be an apologetic angle as well? I recently taught a Sunday school lesson on realism in the Bible, and afterwards a class member told me that the realism of the Bible had been instrumental in his coming to faith because it authenticated the Bible as being a truthful book. He then asked a provocative question: what kind of book would the Bible be without its realism?

— *Leland Ryken*

## NOTES

1. Brian Godawa, “Redemption in the Movies,” in *The Christian Imagination: The Practice of Faith in Literature and Writing*, ed. Leland Ryken (Colorado Springs: Shaw Books, 2002), 436.
2. Flannery O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), 84.