

Tarnished Heroes

I have always felt uneasy whenever some modern author, under the guise of scholarship, has felt the need to tear down one of history's heroes. While I fully realize that there has never been a perfect man, I am okay with leaving heroes on their pedestals. I don't need to read about all the prejudices, moral lapses and hypocrisies of our founding fathers, great men of science or beloved war heroes. Every person I have ever known has prejudices, moral lapses and hypocrisies, and every person who has ever known me could say the same thing. We need our heroes, so, I don't see any great value in rooting around in closets for their skeletons.

On the other hand, I realize that I have sometimes been prone to take this tendency for protecting heroes to the extreme, especially, when it comes to heroes of the faith. Those who are skeptical toward the Bible delight in pointing out the foibles of its greatest characters. For instance, why does the Bible wink at Abraham's marriage to his half-sister? Why does God not roundly condemn the marriage of Jacob to two sisters?

Inevitably, I would find myself scrambling to use the accepted norms of the culture at large as a means of rationalizing the behavior of the great men that God used to bring about His purposes. And, of course, Abraham and Jacob predated the Law of Moses, so how could they be bound to it? That was before I understood that sin is sin, whether it predates the Law or not. The function of the Law was simply to define some things more precisely. For some reason, I had an insatiable need to prove that the seemingly distasteful things that great men of faith did were somehow not as distasteful as they appeared to be on the surface. And, I'm not the only one who does this.

In a strange passage from *2 Kings*, the prophet Elisha is making his way to Bethel when some rowdy youth start poking fun at his bald head. In response, Elisha calls down a curse upon the youth, and two bears descend from the hills to maul forty-two of the youngsters. The story sure reads as if Elisha was teased and took it very personally.

Some scholars say that this was simply an abuse of God-given power. God endured Elisha, but did not necessarily endorse him. In other words, he sinned.

But, Elisha is also heartily defended by other scholars who point out that these were not little children and that a harsh rebuke was in order because Elisha was heading into a particularly apostate region of Israel. Some even suggest that he had probably shaved his head as a part of a vow or in mourning the death of his mentor, Elijah. In other words, his actions were righteous and he probably wasn't even really bald. (Can you imagine how wounded some follicle-impaired saints would be if their preachers felt the needed to "explain away" Elisha's baldness?)

Elisha was either the instrument of the Lord's wrath or a poor manager of his own. My reflex would be to defend him. The reflex of others would be to bring him down a notch. The problem is this: the whole story is only two verses long, and there is evidence in the surrounding contexts to support either point of view, especially, if evidence for one's point of view is what one is looking for. Still, the fact remains, there is so little to the story beyond its basic facts. It is almost as if the chronicler of the event wanted to avoid committing himself to a judgment one way or the other.

The Bible is filled with such stories, stories of men of renown who may have acted sinfully, or they may have acted righteously, but we just cannot quite tell because the story is presented in such a matter-of-fact manner and with no commentary provided. What I have learned is that if a Bible hero is reported to have done something that smacks of sinfulness, then, it is not out of bounds to at least consider, “If the action in question walks like a duck, swims like a duck and quacks like a duck ...” Nothing vital in the story of the Bible is undermined either way.

The finest men of faith in the Bible were sinners. The finest men of faith today have feet of clay. We can never celebrate sin, our own or that of heroes from the past. But, we can realize that God’s purposes for redeeming mankind are not undone by human failings. God used sinners to bring about His plan of redeeming sinners, because, frankly, that’s all the human race has ever given Him with which to work. So, even if I find myself disappointed in a hero of the faith or unsure of whether I should be disappointed or not, I never have to be disappointed in the grace by which they and I have been saved.

We can try to tarnish heroes, and we can try to rehabilitate sinners. But we can never tarnish the God of grace and glory.

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