

Harry Potter and Deuteronomy

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Reading

In the first chapter of the first Harry Potter Book (Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone) Harry's uncle Mr. Dursley bumps into a strange old man. The stranger has been walking along elated with some good news and Mr. Dursley almost knocks him down.

"Sorry," he grunted, as the tiny old man stumbled and almost fell. It was a few seconds before Mr. Dursley realized that the man was wearing a violet cloak. He didn't seem at all upset at being almost knocked to the ground. On the contrary, his face split into a wide smile and he said in a squeaky voice that made passersby stare, "Don't be sorry, my dear sir, for nothing could upset me today! Rejoice, for You-Know-Who has gone at last! Even Muggles like yourself should be celebrating, this happy, happy day!"

And the old man hugged Mr. Dursley around the middle and walked off.

Mr. Dursley stood rooted to the spot. He had been hugged by a complete stranger. He also thought he had been called a Muggle, whatever that was. He was rattled. He hurried to his car and set off for home, hoping he was imagining things, which he had never hoped before, because he didn't approve of imagination.

(J.K. Rowling, Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone, p.5, Scholastic Books edition)

Sermon

Those of you who are familiar with the Harry Potter novels will know immediately that the strange, happy old man is a wizard and that a Muggle is an ordinary human being without magical powers. Muggles or wizards can be good or bad or in between, and the You-Know-Who who the old man is so glad has gone at last is a very bad wizard, and not quite gone yet as the reader will discover. Mr. Dursley is a particularly sorry example of a Muggle, one who cannot even enjoy the magic of imagination.

A generation ago, John Fowles' bestselling novel The Collector and the film version starring Terence Stamp and Samantha Eggar introduced us quite imaginatively to a character who does not approve of imagination. Do you remember the story? A withdrawn, reclusive young man kidnaps a young woman art student and holds her captive in a basement dungeon lined with soundproof material. Upstairs the walls of the house are lined with his huge butterfly collection.

The Collector has no plans to force himself on her sexually from the start. He wants her to love him, and can't imagine any other way for this to happen. He feeds her, keeps her room tidy, comes every day to talk to her. He provides her with new clothes of his liking, makes her discard her old ones, and she must change her hair as well. He believes he is treating her decently, and that he deserves her love. When she learns to love him the sex will follow properly. He's an extremely repressed and conservative young man, we all see right away.

Of course the woman understands that she has been collected like the butterflies upstairs. She tries to get inside the Collector's head to find a way out of his basement, but finds an even worse dungeon there. She shows him the art books she was carrying when he abducted her and tries to explain some modern paintings. In the film version we can see the young man's discomfort with these artworks grow into rage until he shouts, "Real people don't look like that!"

It's the most frightening moment of the film, when we see how profoundly disturbed and offended he is by the imagination of the woman he has collected, and even more by imagination itself.

To him, only the "real thing," pinned down and possessed, under glass and dead, can begin to satisfy. We can see that this won't end well for the woman, and it doesn't. Near the end of her life we will see her approach her captor for some kind of human contact, since he's the only other human in her world and there's no one else to turn to. He is of course completely unable to respond. He has no respect for her life; he covets to own it like a butterfly pinned under glass already but somehow not dead (at least, not too dead for sex.)

I can recommend The Collector, the book and the film, to adults. But I had started to talk about books for young readers.

J.K. Rowlings' bestselling novels about the young wizard Harry Potter have many children reading with new enthusiasm. Have any of you seen this happen? Harry is an orphan whose parents were killed mysteriously when he was an infant, in an incident which he alone of his family mysteriously survived. The books tell the story of Harry's adventures at a sort of boarding school for wizards, to which he is mysteriously admitted and is requested to attend on his eleventh birthday. Besides their classes in transformations and spells and magic potions, Harry and his friends at the school learn of the struggles in the adult wizard world, of the right application of magical powers and the consequences of using them wrongly or selfishly.

The reaction of a few organizations to books which feature magical powers and adventures has been sadly predictable, however. Keep them out of schools! They promote belief in witchcraft and the occult! They are anti-Christian! Ban them, not just for my kids, but for all kids!

One parent leading the charge against the books in Bend, Oregon,

"...describes himself as a born-again Christian, [and says] the fun facade of the books hides an immoral plot. [He] objects to the practice of witchcraft, which he said is disrespectful of God. And the books encourage children to be disrespectful of their parents, [he] said, adding that he has read parts of the books..." (From the Bend Bulletin newspaper, January 1999)

Parts of a book, out of context, can be very useful to those who want the whole book condemned. The leader of a South Carolina group quoted in a Christian Broadcasting Network news release said:

"Our child came home; it was being read in his class. The concern we had with the books was the violent tones in here. There's evil, there's death, there's lack of respect for human life, and there's the occult." For example, the concerned parents say consider this passage from Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone: "...Harry could see (Quirrell's palms) looked burned, raw, red, and shiny. Then kill him, fool, and be done!" screeched Voldemort. Quirrell raised his hand to perform a deadly curse!" (A misquote, actually--sentence continues and doesn't end in exclamation point.)

As for the charge of teaching children to disrespect parents, it is instead true that Harry honors the memory of his dead parents, and wishes to do right by their legacy--they were

wizards, too! As for “violent tones” in the book, the Christian parents’ group managed to locate the one truly violent passage in it, but they don’t bother to place it in context. Here’s the context. Harry is trying to keep the Sorcerer’s Stone away from the two bad wizards, who are trying to kill him to get it. The Stone has the power to make them immortal, and powerful, and fabulously rich.

The fellow who is trying to kill Harry finds that every time he touches the boy, his hands burn. The fellow ordering him to attack is You-Know-Who, who was supposed to be “gone at last!” and whose disappearance had made good wizards (like that little old man in the purple cloak in the first passage I read) so happy. His real name is Voldemort, and he’s the evil wizard who killed Harry’s parents in the first place. Later we learn that the power protecting Harry is his mother’s love, something evil wizards can’t understand but that you’d think good Christians might mention.

Harry may have a bit of a problem respecting his guardian uncle Mr. Dursley and his aunt Petunia, who don’t approve of imagination. They also force Harry to live in a cupboard at the bottom of the stairs, underfeed and ignore him and openly favor their own nasty little son. They do whatever is in their power to stifle Harry’s understanding and interests. “*Don’t ask questions--that was the first rule for a quiet life with the Dursleys.*” (p.20, ibid.) They don’t care much for reading, and would certainly not like books that asked too many questions. I can imagine they’d prefer books of rules all laid out, like Leviticus or Deuteronomy.

The South Carolina parents who want Harry Potter out of the schools quote some rules from Deuteronomy 18:10-12:

"There shall not be anyone found among you who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, one who uses divination, one who practices witchcraft, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, or one who casts a spell, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead. For whoever does these things is detestable to the LORD...."

The book of Deuteronomy forbids a lot of things and also permits quite a few. It has plenty of rules covering both, and I wonder if those parents in Bend or South Carolina think that all of those rules are binding. I wonder if they ever got to the next page after their quote, to Deuteronomy 21:12-14, which gives permission to take a “comely woman” from among the captives of war into one’s own house,

“where she shall shave her head, pare her nails, and discard the clothes which she had when captured. Then she shall stay in your house and mourn for her father and mother for a full month. After that you may have intercourse with her; you shall be her husband and she your wife. But if you no longer find her pleasing, let her go free. You must not sell her, nor treat her harshly, since you have had your will with her.”

Are there some “violent tones” here as well? What other images does this woman call to mind, with her shaved head, her own clothes removed and replaced with the clothing her captors give her? I think of concentration camp victims, or images of the members of certain cults with their shaved heads and the garments they’ve been issued (Heaven’s Gate, the Manson ‘family’.) I think of Africans brought as slaves to the United States. You can even see a grotesque parody

of birth here. With her head shaved bare as a baby's, stripped naked then covered in new clothes, she'll have the look of one who's been "born again" whether she wants to be or not.

I'm also reminded of The Collector here, and again, as I read "...she shall stay in your house and mourn for her father and mother for a full month. After that you may have intercourse with her..." Whoever *you* are, I guess if *you* let her cry for a full month, what *you* do next is not just some form of legal rape. Maybe after that amount of time she'll find that she has no one to turn to for human contact except *you*. When *you* get tired of her, let her go--out into a world where she has no family or home anymore. Don't worry, *you* have done just fine by her, as long as *you* don't beat her or sell her. Presumably, *you* are then free to go do it all over again, which, by the way, is just what the Collector does after his first victim dies of pneumonia.

I'd rather try to explain the creepiest passage of Harry Potter than this strange 'rule' on a Sunday. It seems pretty certain to me that the one who is receiving permission to have intercourse with this poor woman had something to do with killing her parents, whom she mourns. It's clear as a bell that Deuteronomy doesn't expect you to give a damn about *her* parents or honoring *their* legacy. Is this an accurate depiction of the treatment of captives in ancient Israel? Is this a legacy, a faith tradition, of which one could wish to be a part?

It's best, maybe, to chalk this one up to a religious imagination trying to picture what it would be like to have the power to pick and choose and take from the world around, instead of feeling isolated, powerless, repressed. That would make it something like fantasy, the same genre of literature as the Harry Potter novels. That would also help to explain this passage which comes one rule after the last one (Deuteronomy 21:18-21) :

18: "If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son, who will not obey the voice of his father or the voice of his mother, and, though they chastise him, will not give heed to them,
19: then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his city at the gate of the place where he lives,
20: and they shall say to the elders of his city, 'This our son is stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton and a drunkard.'
21: Then all the men of the city shall stone him to death with stones; so you shall purge the evil from your midst; and all Israel shall hear, and fear."

It's one thing to fantasize about treating your wayward child this way. Nothing wrong with that if you don't dwell on it. Fantasy lets us explore all kinds of possibilities, from easy ways of getting sexual partners to punishing the wrongs that our enemies or our loved ones do to us. I doubt there's much evidence that many parents in ancient Israel actually had their adult children stoned to death. One thing to fantasize, another to do it. It's important to be able to distinguish fantasy from reality.

Most children whom the newspapers have interviewed about the Harry Potter controversy seem to have no problem understanding that these are books of fantasy. They enjoy them without actually believing they can fly on broomsticks or turn people into pigs. The other morning, my two year-old son got a hold of some little glass fruit, and was playing at eating

them. Daddy got worried and started telling him to be careful, but he turned and said calmly but firmly, “Pretend, Daddy! Pretend!”

Most young Harry Potter fans really take the witchcraft and occult parts much less seriously than some Deuteronomy-quoting, book-banning adults. Those adults seem to really believe in these things at least as seriously as they believe in God.

Maybe these parents can only imagine teaching as teaching to believe. I’m reminded of the Collector again, when he looks at his victim’s abstract paintings and shouts, “Real people don’t look like that!” What he wants is something he can be sure is real, a real butterfly under glass in a frame, a real woman under his house dressed in the clothes *he* believes are proper for a real lady. There’s a brutality to this kind of literalism. It’s not an approach to education that I’d ever want to see prevailing in our schools. Encouraging children (or adults) to think, and imagine, is so much more than teaching to believe.

One chapter of Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone is concerned with a magic mirror called the Mirror of Erised, which is ‘desire’ spelled backwards. It will show whoever looks into it attaining whatever it is that they desire, but also cautions that this may or may not really happen, so beware! Beware! Don’t *believe* what you see, but rather *use* this magic mirror to know yourself! I propose that most people would do better to learn to use the Bible in the same way.

I’m not suggesting that the Bible is entirely a collection of creepy or violent fantasies, or that it should be somehow replaced with the much more gentle fantasies of the Harry Potter books. We can find passages throughout the “Good Book” which seem to permit rape; or teach contempt for other people’s parents; or to encourage us to solve problems with our own children by having them stoned to death. We’ll do best to look into the book as into a magic mirror, one that reflects the fantastic desires of a whole community, of generations and generations over thousands of years.

Here we see fantasies of cruelty and slaughter and vengeance for all the wrongs we’ve suffered. Is this what you really desire? Here we see fantasies of peace, and immense faith, and the deepest kind of love. Is this what you really expect? Look inside, and see yourself attaining what you desire, but beware! Beware! There is much in the Bible which is to be profoundly hoped for, and even believed, and even worth moving slowly from the realm of imagination into the realm of law. There is also a great deal that is horrific, bloody, the work of an imagination that quite often turns creepy.

Of course, the thrust of the Bible has much more to do with living a life of justice than it does with being creepy. So does the thrust of the Harry Potter books. The values you’ll find in them are in the end the same values most of us affirm: Fair play, kindness, love, loyalty, earnest study and careful work, and a real suspicion of the pursuit of too much money or power. Harry learns at the end that the world is better place without a Sorcerer’s Stone to make you live forever on a pile of money.

I hope we can all learn that the world is better off without stones to throw at our children when they take a different path from our own, or choose a different book from ours to set their

imaginations flying. I want a world where all God's children can struggle with each other over what's the better vision in the books we read, not over the freedom and the power to read them. Without the power to pick, and choose, and take from the worlds of imagination we find in both, we'll never know the good news that makes another walk along, too elated to watch where they're going. We'll just knock each other over without even a "Sorry!", much less a hug around the middle and an invitation to rejoice together.

That would be a sorry state of affairs, for wizards and Christians and Muggles and the rest of us, but sorriest of all for our children, who are the real wizards in our world at imagining-- and rejoicing. Remember, that's what the funny old man said at the beginning of the story, "Don't be sorry! Rejoice!" Rejoice! Re-joice: leave sorrow and return to joy again! And how do you get there? My son suggested one method to me the other day when he corrected my misapprehensions and said, "Pretend, Daddy! Pretend!" Trust imagination more, heart and mind at play! I'm going to try to take his advice to heart.

Now I've shared it with you.

Amen.