

Reading the Bible, sex and all

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Since starting seminary I've had the opportunity to read through the Old Testament with a thoroughness I haven't used since my evangelical youth group days. While building biblical literacy is something evangelicals do very well, reading the Old Testament now reminds me how my context shaped how I read the Bible. And it all had to do with sex.

The Old Testament is a pretty racy text. From rapes and seductions to concubines and harlots, it's hard to avoid the presence of physical bodies and sex, often illicit.

Unless you're an evangelical teenager. One of my strongest memories of that time is how hard our youth leaders worked to convince us that the sex passages actually have nothing to do with sex...like when the most beautiful virgin in the land [is selected](#) to lie with an elderly King David to keep him "warm." We were told the story has nothing to do with her trying to get him to respond sexually (even though in the ancient Near East a king's power was tied to his virility). Instead, she literally is chosen to raise his body temperature, since elderly people often get cold.

Or when Rehoboam [tries to assert](#) his prowess in comparison to his father Solomon, saying that his little finger is bigger than his father's sexual organ. According to my youth group leaders, the Bible would never include something so base--so Rehoboam is actually talking about his father's waist or thigh.

When we heard the story of the Israelite spies' [visit to Rahab](#), the leaders made sure we understood that the spies only visit a prostitute because it's a good place to gather information. Ruth [getting under the covers](#) with Boaz and lying at his "feet" has no sexual connotations whatsoever--she just wants to get him to listen to her. Other leaders even tried to tell us that Esther's [one night](#) with the king was just a beauty contest.

Although we were told that we had to read the Bible literally, my church's attitude toward sex forced us to read those passages as meaning the opposite of what they seem to. We were told to consider sexual purity the highest virtue--and any sexual deviancy was condemned in publicly humiliating ways.

There was no way biblical heroes could ever be seen as dallying in inappropriate sexual behavior. Granted, it was hard to avoid the most obvious stories, but these usually are directly connected to some dire consequence (as with David and Bathsheba). As Christian teenagers our primary spiritual command was to be pure, and so our study of the Bible had to be just as pure.

Returning to the text now, I find it freeing to encounter stories full of people with passions and flaws. Instead of idealizing hollow heroes, I see that real people wrestled with how to follow God. This is far

more helpful as I struggle to do the same.