



Actual Love: A Novel Inspired by True Events

Kevin Logan

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Actual Love is a novel with historical range that highlights the importance of fidelity, especially in trying times.

Kevin Logan's *Actual Love* is a modern love story with a biblical twist, an academic epic that jumps between times to show how much people stand to learn from the past.

Episcopal priest Dave, depressed by his collapsing marriage and craving academic accolades, receives a life-changing call from a colleague who's on a dig near Masada. Where they expected to find nothing, they found parchment. Dave rushes to Israel for a period of hurried translation work, and finds a measure of solace in the task.

The scroll contains the account of Mary, one of the leaders of the resistance at Masada. Imparting hope is, as it turns out, one of Mary's aims. Between journal entries, which often serve to calm her fears and warm her up to her central narration, she relates the love story of the prophet Hosea. Her writing consciously addresses an unknown future readership, and serves as a cipher for persistence in both love and faith.

As stories bounce between ancient history and modern troubles, parallels arise, most notably between Dave's cheeky wife, Colette, and Hosea's beloved, the temple prostitute Gomer. Feminine and audacious, both women appeal to, and consume, men who are otherwise lost in their work.

But whereas self-centered, somewhat spoiled Dave fails to see Colette beyond his own immediate needs, the thoughtful Hosea finds a way to honor his wife through his faith—a lesson that Dave sorely needs to learn, and that works its way into him, slowly, through Mary's scroll. Characters are developed in concert with one another, in a manner that is both subtle and illuminating.

With Mary's scroll, complex sentences are a nod to Dave's admission that he, whose Hebrew is "rusty," has taken poetic liberties with his translation. Questions of precision and of reliability may nip at her narrative as a consequence. But Dave's musings over how personal motivations impact translators also make for interesting subcommentary, capturing the pedantic and adventuresome dualities of a translator's work.

Though the book draws upon Jewish history, from the prophet Hosea to the siege at Masada and into contemporary Hebrew Bible study, its themes are decidedly evangelically Christian. Dave makes a name for himself by tendentiously "disproving" the Documentary Hypothesis for Christian biblicists; Colette finds Jesus in her darkest moments. There's even a Christian among the last standing at Herod's fortress.

These moments are a departure from standard approaches to Masada, particularly once they call into question the faithfulness of the martyrs, and may lead to some theological discomfort. There are connected moments of preachiness throughout that culminate toward the end, when stories get submerged beneath Dave's internal struggles for redemption. The tone shifts from that of a novel more to that of a tract, and the book's original charm is lost in the mix.

Formatting oddities are a persistent distraction, particularly with Mary's entries, which are presented in a hard-to-read scripted font. Flashbacks are sometimes accomplished through shifts in perspective, which are also interruptive.

"Worship is giving worth," says a character on Masada, even when judgment seems more natural; that lesson is central to the relationships of *Actual Love*, a novel with historical range that highlights the importance of fidelity, especially in trying times.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (December 15, 2016)

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