

Count Belisarius Short Guide

Count Belisarius by Robert Graves

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Characters

Eugenius, the character who narrates the novel, asserts that "Count Belisarius had . . . a simple devotion to virtue, from which he never declined."

Some critics complain that Belisarius' unwavering integrity makes him an unrealistic and one-dimensional character. A well-rounded character, according to this view, would have more flaws than does Belisarius. Graves was contemptuous of this criticism and asserted that Belisarius is "a really good man" and that those critics who disliked the characterization of Belisarius were merely unwilling to accept the idea that someone could be genuinely good.

Belisarius may be seen as a reflection of Claudius in *I, Claudius* (1934). In the *Claudius* novels, virtuous people are either murdered or forced into treacherous intrigues. Claudius himself survives by hiding his virtues, such as his intelligence and love of liberty. On the other hand, Belisarius' virtues are obvious and open. He is a good Christian who honors his pledges and serves both his emperor and his fellow citizens. His honorable conduct is rewarded with cruelty. Thus, Belisarius is emblematic of the ideal Christian. As Eugenius puts it, "Those of you for whom the Gospel story carries historical weight may perhaps say that Belisarius behaved at his trial before Justinian very much as his Master [Christ] had done before Pontius Pilate, the Governor of Judea — when unjustly accused of the very same crime, namely treason against the Empire; and that he suffered no less patiently." Belisarius' role as a Christ-figure would seem to confirm complaints about his unrealistic treatment; it is hard to make a symbol seem anything but remote and unhuman.

Even so, Belisarius' religious beliefs provide motivation for his conduct. For instance, he would not engage in the sort of deceptions that save Claudius in *I, Claudius* because they would be deceitful and therefore against his concepts of good Christian behavior. In addition, Belisarius does have flaws.

He is a proud man, whose upright demeanor invites hostility from those who would prefer he showed some humility. Furthermore, he too often puts his honor ahead of the well-being of his wife Antonina. Overall, Belisarius is a man who tries to be a good Christian, a good military man, and a good subject of the Byzantine Empire, and the novel is largely about his efforts to remain a good man in an amoral world that is filled with temptations and treachery.

Justinian is portrayed as cruel and selfish. The household slave of Antonina, Eugenius, may reasonably be expected to praise Belisarius and to condemn Justinian. Of the Emperor, he reports this story: "They say that Justinian's end was both noisome and weird; and that as he finally gave up the ghost, squeaking with terror, the voice of the Father of Lies rang through the Palace rooms, in sinister parody of the Scriptures: 'This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.'" Even so, Eugenius declares that Justinian "was very zealous for the Christian faith" but had only learned how to deal with

evildoers, not virtuous people like Belisarius. Justinian is thus tormented by suspicion as well as envy of Belisarius' straightforward virtue.



Social Concerns/Themes

The events of Count Belisarius take place in the sixth century in the Mediterranean region. In the society of that time and place, religion, especially Christianity, was often regarded as a political matter, with not only individual people but whole populations shifting from one religion to another when political or military power shifted from one religious faction to another. Views on morality were also different from modern ones. The historical Empress Theodora was once a prostitute; although some pious Christians would have objected to Emperor Justinian marrying her, most citizens of the Byzantine Empire would have seen nothing extraordinary in her profession. The world of Belisarius' day was one of palace intrigue, shifting alliances, and universal treachery.

In his foreword to Count Belisarius, Graves points out that the armies of Belisarius' time were much different from the armies of Julius Caesar's era: "Belisarius . . . is a Christian commander of mail-clad Household knights, nearly all of barbarian birth, whose individual feats rival those of King Arthur's heroes." Belisarius' soldiers are gallant romantic knights, who protect the empire and its people from foreign enemies. They ride large, heavy horses, fight with lances and swords, and give their allegiance to their military commanders rather than to nation or religion.

The principal themes of Count Belisarius involve ingratitude and nobility.

Emperor Justinian is always jealous and suspicious of Belisarius. Although Belisarius serves his emperor faithfully and unselfishly, he is repaid with calumny and cruelty, and eventually the emperor has his eyes pierced "with red-hot needles." In spite of the evil done him, Belisarius remains a faithful subject. His noble conduct wins him the admiration of the public. In him is played out the conflict between virtue and corruption.

Techniques

Graves studied hard before writing *Count Belisarius*, as he had for *I, Claudius*. He was sick during much of the writing and struggled to meet the deadline for completion of the novel to which he and his publisher had agreed.

The story is told as if it were a biography by Eugenius, beginning with the childhood of Belisarius and ending with Eugenius' musings about the merits of Belisarius' life. Graves himself called the book "a military manual," perhaps because of the many detailed accounts of battles and derring-do. But the novel is more than a fictionalized biography or a sensational account of ancient wars; it has a tone of fresh immediacy, as if its events happened only yesterday. Eugenius travels with Belisarius and Antonina on the military campaigns, and he writes as if each new event were only a day old, giving the narrative a "you are there" tone. The wealth of details about Belisarius' era blend into the novel's plot, enhancing the effect on the reader of visiting a very real, although unfamiliar, culture.

Literary Precedents

Perhaps the most famous novel about conflicts between religious faith and public duty in the ancient world is Lew Wallace's *Ben Hur: A Tale of Christ* (1880), which focuses on a man's discovery of faith in the Roman Empire during the era of Christ's ministry.

Another such book is *The Robe* (1942) by Lloyd C. Douglas. These books and *Count Belisarius* have in common fast, often violent, action and cruel tribulations for their main characters.



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