

DELIVERANCE, COVENANT, PRESENCE

The process of biblical analysis is called exegesis. As a fledgling seminary student, I was taught that there were a number of methods that scholars can use to perform an exegesis on a given passage. But you can narrow down those methods into three overarching methods. First there is the historical/ critical method. This method attempts to place the story in its historical and cultural context. Secondly, there is the textual/ critical method. In this method the scholar looks at differences in the text itself that occur between different ancient manuscripts. If you think about it, people in the ancient world did not have the printing press. Every copy of the scripture was copied by hand, so inevitably there were differences in the way those scriptures were written. Textual critics study those differences.

Finally, there is the literary/ critical method. The literary/ critical method seeks to analyze scripture as a piece of literature. It encompasses a number of techniques, including translation from the original languages, analysis of the grammar and syntax of the text, and analyzing the literary elements of the story.

Several years ago, I came across a book that I feel really enhanced the literary critical process; this book really helps me appreciate the gospel story as a story. This book is entitled The Seven Basic Plots. The title is a misnomer. There are actually nine plots listed in the book. The premise of the book is that all books really follow one of these basic storylines- or they should, if they expect to survive.

These seven basic plots are overcoming the Monster, Rags to Riches, Voyage and Return, the Quest, the comedy, the Tragedy, Resurrection stories, Mystery stories, and the Rebellion against the One. Understanding the elements of these seven basic plots helps me to understand the flow of any passage in the scripture that might be regarded as a story. This passage is no exception. This passage has the elements of at least two of these stories: the rags to riches story and the voyage and return story. Actually, this passage might be seen as a voyage and return story nestled within a rags to riches story.

The rags to riches story generally works like this. The main character is born into poverty and faces adversity on every side. However, possessing a superior intellect and an overwhelming desire to succeed the main character overcomes the obstacles in his or her path, sometimes with the help of faithful companions and ultimately rises to wealth and fame.

There are several rags to riches stories in the scripture. The purest example I can think of is the story of David. David was the youngest son of Jesse. We don't know, or at least I don't know, how wealthy Jesse was, but it stands to reason that as the youngest of Jesse's seven sons, he didn't stand to inherit much. Even his father gave him the dirtiest, nastiest job available- tending the sheep. Yet, he becomes the king of all Israel.

Moses actually takes this journey twice in the scripture. He is born a slave and under threat of death. He is set adrift in the Nile where the daughter of Pharaoh plucks him from the river and adopts him as her own son: slave to royalty, rags to riches.

Then when he finds out who he really is, and he kills one of Pharaoh's guards to protect a Hebrew slave. He is caught and cast out into the wilderness: royalty to outcast, riches back to rags. Finally, he meets God in the wilderness. Rags back to riches- though the riches are of a different kind. He has the favor of God.

Which brings me to a point. Rags to riches stories don't always have to be about money. Jesus never really enjoys the kinds of success the world values. He never had much money or political power or much social standing. A lot of people considered him to be a little bit crazy. However, He does enjoy a following as a prophet and healer, but his life ends in disgrace. It's only after his death that he is recognized by the world for who he really is. Nevertheless, his life is a rags to riches story. He is rich in the favor and power of God.

The Exodus as an event might be seen as a rags to riches story. The main character in this story is the Nation of Israel. They are poor. They have nothing. They are a nation of slaves. Yet, they are the chosen nation. They are delivered from the poverty of bondage and led to the wealth of a Promised Land where they can serve Yahweh. They receive the rich reward of God's promise: "I shall be your God, and you shall be my people."

It is at this point that the story takes on the nature of the voyage and return story. The basic plot of the voyage and return story goes like this. The main character, either alone or, perhaps, in the company of others, voyages to a strange land where the fundamental laws of nature are drastically different than they are in our world. Then the main character returns to the real world to relate his story. Examples of this kind of story abound in literature. Gulliver's Travels and Alice Through the Looking Glass are but two such examples. I might also mention The Seven Voyages of Sinbad is this kind of story.

This story also occurs in scripture. For example, the Revelation of John from chapter four to the end might be seen as such a story. John receives a visitor who has him write letters to seven churches. After these letters are written John is invited to step through a door that has miraculously appeared, and as soon as he does, he finds himself in a world where everything has radically changed. He finds himself in the presence of God and he has visions of these things yet to occur in this world.

Now, as we begin this passage Moses and the Nation of Israel have arrived at the foot of Mount Sinai. In ancient Israel it was believed that the sky was solid and God lived behind that solid dome. Mountains were the pillars that held up the sky. The Commentary Feasting on the Word puts it this way. "The mountain or high place is the bridge between Earth, the realm of the humans, and the heavens, the realm of the gods. As such, the mountain is a place for a divine encounter."

Moses has brought the people to the base of this mountain. They're poor, they've been slaves but not only that. They have yet to receive the word of God. So, they are in two sense a people in rags.

Moses instructed the elders to wait at the base of the mountain while he and Joshua ascended to the top. This sounds like a voyage and return story. While they were there a cloud covered the mountain and the glory of the Lord settled on the mountain for six days, and on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. The scripture says that the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire. Moses was called from this world into a strange world where the normal laws of nature didn't apply. After forty days and forty nights on the mountain he returned back to Earth to share what God had given him. This reads like a voyage and return story.

The Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann sees a three-fold movement in the Exodus story: deliverance, covenant and presence. God delivers the Nation of Israel out of bondage, makes a covenant, or more precisely a series of covenants with them, and draws them into the divine presence. God takes them from the rags of a life of bondage to a richness of a divine covenant and in so doing draws them into the strange reality of a divine presence where there are literally no limits.

The thing is that God does that throughout history and continues to do so today. I submit to you that our lives today are really a sort of bondage. We are bound by our own sin. We live in a world that is bound by its own sin. The world we live in is very seductive and very dangerous. But the truth is the success it offers carries a price. We can be bound by so many things in our lives: wealth, fame, status, power, or security can all become so important to us that they crowd out other things, even things like character, principles, ethics, or morals.

Yet God delivers us from the consequences of our own. God delivers us from that bondage. He does this through a covenant. Not through laws written on tablets of stone as in this story. Rather, through the atoning sacrifice of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, Our Lord. We are delivered from the rags of our own sin to the riches of salvation through the grace of his atoning sacrifice. This is the covenant we have with God for eternity.

And through this covenant we are able to approach the presence of God in which all things are possible. We can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. Some of those things may seem strange, as if we are in a whole new world. But the laws of the old world don't apply here. The laws that apply here are the laws of the Kingdom of God, because we are in the presence of the living God.

We have this same Two-fold application to our own lives. The story of our lives reads the same way. It's a rags to riches story. Out of bondage- the bondage of our sin- and into grace. It's also a voyage and return story. We leave a world behind- a world that has its own laws- and we move into a strange new world where God is in charge. We live under covenant, we live under deliverance, and we live in God's presence. That is our life in a nutshell.