



Moses' Birth, the Abandoned Hero Motif, and Form Criticism

By Isaac Alderman

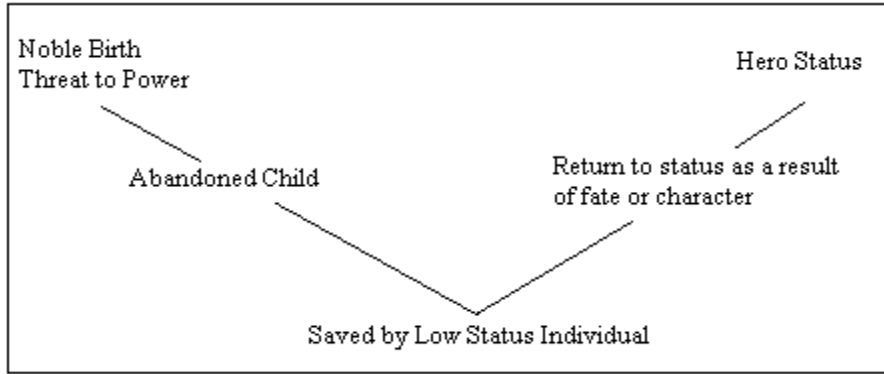
If you hear a story beginning with "Once upon a time..." you know that you are being told a fairy tale. In fact, you already know how the tale will end: "They lived happily ever after." However, what would you think if you heard a fairy tale, with all the usual elements, but ended: "No one lived happily ever after"? Wouldn't the normal response be to wonder what the story teller intended by the manipulation of a very familiar form? Perhaps the story teller intended to surprise you or make a point by saying the unexpected. The reflection on how and why the story was changed, and what that change means is what scholars call **form criticism**.

Just as there is a usual way to tell a fairy tale, there is also a common way to tell the story of an ancient hero's childhood. When accounts such as Oedipus, Romulus and Remus, Heracles, Cyrus and Sargon are examined, it becomes clear that there is a common childhood pattern, which can be called the abandoned hero motif (AHM). It has long been noticed that the story of Moses' birth and early life has parallels to these ancient stories and so form criticism can be applied to the birth story of Moses (Exodus 1-3).

In this exercise, groups of students will use summaries of these stories to determine the abandoned hero motif. This activity can be shortened by teaching the motif, rather than allowing the students to discover it themselves. Some important elements of AHM which will emerge are:

- Noble or divine birth
- The infant is a threat to power
- The power tries to rid itself of the threat by abandoning the child
- The child is found by a lower class individual
- The child, now a man, cannot remain in obscurity because of fate or the force of his character
- The man emerges as a hero

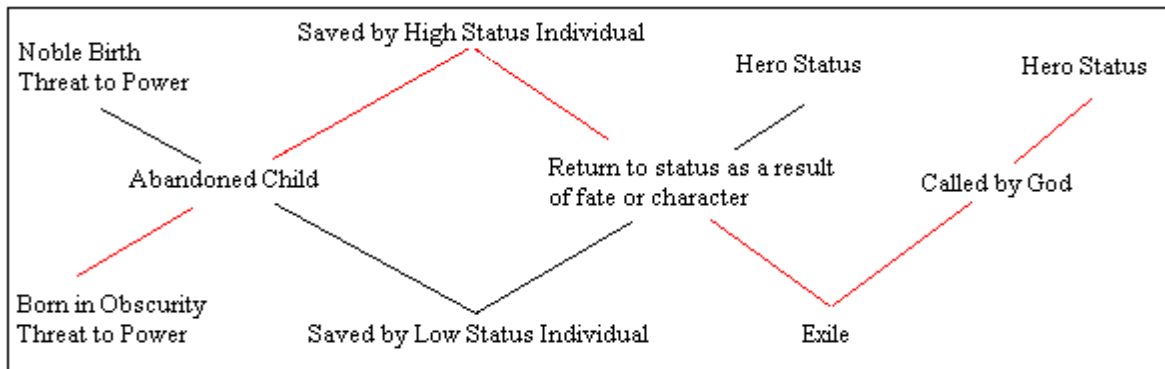
These elements can be diagrammed on the board. Here is how the AHM looks when I diagram it:



Once the form is understood, the students return to groups and find the commonalities and differences in Exodus 1-3. Some important elements are:

- Moses was born into obscurity
- He was a threat to power
- He was put in the river
- He was found by royalty
- He killed the Egyptian and returned to obscurity in exile
- God calls him at the burning bush

This can then be diagrammed over the previous diagram.



We can see that the Moses account is a manipulation of the AHM. The purpose of pointing out these differences is to reflect on why the storyteller told the story in this way.

Some examples of important elements are:

- The hero comes from the oppressed rather than the powerful.
- The threat comes from an oppressed rather than a noble child.
- The threatened one inadvertently saves the threat.
- Moses must flee into exile when he kills the Egyptian.

When Moses flees, he returns to his original status and the pattern ends with him in obscurity. At this point, a new pattern begins as God lifts Moses out of obscurity; this is not due to fate or Moses' character, but to God's choice. It is only after demonstrating that Moses does not fit the pattern of a hero that God calls him to be one. The story is not about the powerful, but the oppressed with whom God sides. The storyteller is trying to tell us that it is not who the hero is, or where a person comes from that is important; rather, it is about who God is and whom God chooses to be a hero.

Links and resources:

Another comparison, just for fun: Moses and Superman!

http://www.myjewishlearning.com/culture/2/Literature/Jewish_American_Literature/Into_the_Literary_Mainstream/Comic_Books/Superman.shtml

One look at the relationship between Moses and other abandoned heroes, focusing on the differences.

http://www.myjewishlearning.com/texts/Bible/Torah/Exodus/Moses/Abandoned_Hero.shtml

In this article, Sigmund Freud believes that the Bible incorrectly told the story; Moses was an Egyptian found by the Jews in the river. He argues this because he knows how a proper story is told! Edmundson, Mark. "Defender of the Faith?" *New York Times Magazine* (Sep 9, 2007).

Glossary:

Form Criticism: An exegetical method which uses the presupposition that social settings generate recurring literary conventions in order to examine the history and meaning of a text.

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