

Appendix: Eastern Storytellers

Family histories and important events are preserved in eastern cultures through storytelling. Families would sit around small fires, enjoying one another's company with their elders telling the stories about the exploits and adventures of their ancestors. Likewise middle eastern sages used the same technique to convey their wisdom. The proof of the skill and wisdom of the sages was their ability to use puns and imagery to captivate and entertain their audiences while teaching poignant principles. Jesus taught using this centuries old and culturally embedded technique. As his crowds grew, so his reputations as a teacher. He employed every known device to hold the attention of his audiences.

One such technique is like the old magic trick of the “spring snakes” in the jar. Once the lid is removed, the spring snakes leap out surprising the holder. Jesus' stories have twists and surprises at the end but only if you understand the cultural setting. His stories, like all Easterners' parables, have a typical pattern of three parts. First is a drawing into the scene. The listener is drawn into a familiar scene, common in village life. This is the opening line of the story. A good story teller will accomplish this in a sentence or two. Second, a crisis or drama is built in which the listener begins to suspect that a decision will be needed from the characters of the story such as, “What should he do?” Third, the listener is required to reflect on the story, consider the surprise ending. We do not try to “decode” the story elements, assigning meaning to each and every little part, nor emphasize a minor or implied element but instead, reflect on the overall drama and resolution. Each story has a single main point and that's the point of focus and the listener is to reflect on that point only.

It is not just the gospels that are filled with such stories either but the entire New Testament is filled with stories and comparison figures drawn from the local culture. The way to read these is to consider the main teaching point only and not read meanings into every element of the story. Do not “decode” a mystery which is not there (Jewish mystics are guilty of this). Inserting new or supposed hidden meanings, decoding the elements, distorts the main point. Western theology is fraught with this error and then it uses the distorted story to propound their own view, a view not intended by the storyteller. Whole doctrinal positions and even

Christian Essentials

denominations have been built this way: failure to comprehend Eastern storytelling or a failure to comprehend a storytelling comparison figure of speech. This is disastrous for comprehending the message and mission of Jesus and the first apostles! Such mis-perceptions distort the real historical Jesus and his teachings. Such mis-perceptions introduce “Another Jesus” to the faithful.

There are so many examples of this western misunderstanding of simple stories and comparisons that a whole series of books could be written on this mess alone! Western misrepresentation of comparison stories can be found in many writings, books and Internet websites claiming to be ministries of truth. Just a few examples should serve to make the point.

A few Internet searches on some pet doctrinal phrases results in hundreds and even thousands of websites revealing western confusion. Consider a passage specifically written To Israel by a Hebrew prophet and exclusively about Israel. But I found a confused view on a website with the title “*I Am Married To Christ.*” This was his spring board passage:

Hosea Chapter 2 [19] And I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. [20] I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. And you shall know the LORD.

From this, the author proceeds to teach how the modern day Body of Christ, Post-Pentecost believers, are married to Christ and especially the preacher himself. This is a completely foreign concept that was imported backwards in time, place and forced unto the prophet Hosea by a personal and privately conceived allegorical interpretation. This was absolutely not the intent of the original storyteller and represents a gross bastardization of the prophets words, perverting God's Promise to Israel of their future.

Another popular passage is given the same mistreatment by gentiles:

Ephesians Chapter 5 [22] Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. [23] For the husband is the head

of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior.

What is the main point? Subjection to Christ! That's the point of focus in this comparison, the main point. Marriage is used as the strongest storytelling *image* to make the point. Paul, in the Eastern storytelling manner, is using marriage as an *image*, not a pragmatic fact of the believer's relationship with Christ as a bride. Why do westerners miss the point? Because our casual marriages and easily breakable vows are forced into an Eastern village marriage *image*. Again, why do we miss the point? Because we "decode" the elements which are not a part of the main comparison and focus on our inventions, missing the storytellers main point. Westerners decode the passage to grind their own theological ax.

No, only the main point should be considered: subjection to Christ. In the Middle East, women call their husbands Lord and live in fear of crossing them. Breaking a betrothal or subverting your husband was just unthinkable so it serves as an *image* of how unbreakable should be your subjection to Christ. Westerners miss the comparative phrase "*even as*" which identifies the statement as comparative figure of speech, not pragmatic fact of marriage to Christ literally. Further, if Paul had meant Jesus is the bridegroom, why does he avoid that and say "head of the church [assembly], his body..."? Simple, he doesn't mean bridegroom at all. If you want to grab any point which is not the main one, grab the pragmatic statement: head of the assembly, his body. Jesus is head of his body *even as* the Eastern man is the head of his Eastern wife in an Eastern village marriage and family. It's a comparative figure of speech, nothing hidden, obscure or vague. It's plain and simple.

Staying on this marriage cultural image, consider another teaching by the same apostle. Romans 7:1-6 speaks of being released from the Mosaic Law. It concludes with this statement: "*But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive.*" But in the midst of this line of reasoning, the cultural image of is of a woman whose husband has died. This fact introduces the real life image that she is released from her marriage vow. In like manner, since Jesus' work is complete, we also are released from the Mosaic Law by his death in which he fulfilled the

Christian Essentials

Mosaic Law. There is only one main point of the passage: release from the Law. But westerners find in this passage more proof of how Jesus is the bridegroom and the church is the bride. That is just inexcusable from just a simple literary point of view without even condemning it from an Eastern storyteller's point of view!

Yet, this is common in western Christianity. Any wonder so many people are agnostic about the Christian faith or just don't take churches seriously? Modern western expositors and preachers engage in an atrocious use of literature and make laughable the teachings of the Master Storyteller. Christians present themselves as being illiterate as though they could not read at all. With this sort of illiterate treatment of the wisdom of the ages it is any wonder that anyone with a literary education would spur Christianity?

If I might insert a personal experience, my son made this point to me when he excitedly came home from a class in college. He had signed up for a class called, "*The Bible as Literature*" at his liberal arts college. One lecture especially excited him. The professor had given an over view of the book of Job. He expertly portrayed the crisis of the story and the efforts of Job's friends to reverse Job's view of his crisis. What the excitement was all about was that the professor's presentation was the most riveting and inspiring presentation of Job my son had ever heard. But his professor was a self proclaimed agnostic! He professed no faith at all! So how did this happen? The professor treated the wisdom of the story as a story in the finest tradition of Eastern storytellers, not as theology and so this agnostic thrilled the Christian students beyond the sermons and teachings of their pastors and Sunday School teachers by treating the story as literature.

To get the real message, to "rightly handle" passages (II Timothy 2:14-15), the reader must gain a sense for the real cultural images, like the way Eastern villagers would have seen them. (I just used a comparative figure, I didn't say to *become* an Eastern villager. LOL ;) To gain the real sense of a passage it must be first treated as real literature, not theological dissertations. The holy writings must be understood first as writings and

Appendix: Eastern Storytellers

stories, then the message intended by inspiration of holy spirit will start to shine through as you listen to the storyteller.

All this plays into understanding Jesus' message and mission. The reader must understand that Jesus starts with his heritage proceeding from the Hebrew prophets of old and presents his teachings with the Eastern storyteller's methods using the Judean experience of his audience's surroundings for story images. Now, if you can wrap your head around these ideas, all at once, it might be possible to grasp what the master teacher and fulcrum of all history had to say. All of mankind's history balances on the Master Teacher, his message and mission. To miss his message or his mission is to fail to gain a balanced view of the whole of man's history and future ... and your's.