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Jesus and the Syrophenician Woman: A Case Study in Inclusiveness

HOLLY J. CAREY

Biblical teaching on women comes from a variety of genres within scripture. The Epistles in the New Testament, for instance, give explicit commands to believers about how women should behave in worship and also contain inferences about the possible roles of women by the examples of female Christians in the early church. These are the kinds of passages to which one usually turns when studying Biblical teachings on women.

However, we should not limit our study to just the Epistles. Narratives also have the capacity to teach, albeit often implicitly. Furthermore, most of what we know about Jesus—the one whom Christians are supposed to emulate in both faith and practice—comes from the New Testament Gospel narratives. Thus, when it comes to teachings on women, we can look to examples of Jesus’ interaction with women in order to learn something about them and their place in God’s kingdom. The story of the Syrophenician woman in Mark 7.24–30 is one such example.

GENTILES, WOMEN AND INCLUSIVENESS IN MARK 7.24–30

This story is one of the most intriguing healing accounts in the Gospels. The primary elements of the narrative that have made it so are: (a) on first glance, it appears to present a narrow-minded Jesus, who has limited his mission to only one small segment of humanity; and (b) it seems to narrate a battle of wits between Jesus and the Syrophenician woman—one which Jesus loses!

Given these two preliminary observations, it might not appear that this would be a prime passage on inclusiveness, as the title of my paper suggests! However, I do not think that either of these observations are the best readings of the text. In this paper I suggest that Jesus’ actions toward the woman (his initial response and eventual healing of her daughter) are not all that they seem on the surface. Not only that, but the purpose of Mark’s narrative here is, in fact, to underscore Jesus’ subversion of cultural boundaries and highlight the inclusive nature of God’s kingdom. But first, a brief summary of the narrative and some comments on several elements are in order.

Jesus tries to escape notice by going beyond his normal locale for ministry to the region of Tyre. Mark tells his readers that Jesus does not want anyone to know that he is at a house in that region. This is consistent with Mark’s emphasis on “gospel message control” (Mark 1.43–44; 3.12; 5.43). Although many scholars like to make much of the privacy of Jesus’ meeting with the Syrophenician woman, Mark is not actually explicit about whether Jesus’ private time includes or excludes the disciples. It may be that they are silent witnesses to his interaction with her. Regardless of his audience (or lack thereof), Mark chooses to focus solely on Jesus and the woman, not on anyone else that might be there.

When a Gentile woman approaches Jesus, bows at his feet, and asks him to exorcise an unclean spirit from her small daughter, Jesus initially refuses by way of a riddle-like statement: “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs” (Mark 7.27, NRSV). Rather than

turning around and going home, the woman responds in such a way that impresses him: “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs” (Mark 7.28–29). Mark ends the account by telling his readers that the woman went home to a healed daughter (Mark 7.30).

This story centers on the dialogue between Jesus and the woman, and so this is where most scholars have focused their attention. Mark is guiding his readers to interpret the miracle in light of this exchange, and it tells much about Jesus. Two major questions arise from this dialogue. First, what does Jesus’ initial refusal mean? Second, did Jesus lose a battle of wits and thus genuinely change his mind?

To grasp the meaning of Jesus’ initial refusal of the woman’s request, we must understand the meaning of the riddle itself, and then try to make sense of the fact that Jesus utters it. Jesus clearly identifies the “dogs” with the woman and her “Gentileness,” while the “children” represent the Jews. There is some debate as to how harsh this term is intended to be. Mark uses a diminutive term (*kynariois*), which means, literally, “little dogs.” It could be possible that this is an attempt to soften the harsh rejection of the riddle, but seems more likely that it merely matches the request of the woman for the healing of her “little daughter” (*thygatrion*, Mark 7.25).¹ The overall effect of the riddle, however, does not bring to mind compassion. It is a clear rejection of the woman, her daughter and her request for healing. There is nothing flattering about being labeled a “puppy” rather than a “child.”² In addition, dogs in Jewish culture were not considered pets, but were unclean.³ This, combined with the posture of the woman (begging for healing), may have inspired Jesus to label her kind as scavenger dogs.⁴

The form of Jesus’ response to the woman’s request is not insignificant. Riddles are never quite what they appear to be, which is what makes them intriguing. Perhaps there is something more, not only to the words themselves (as the woman recognizes when she “plays along” with Jesus’ riddle), but also to its function in the narrative. Perhaps we should not read this story on the surface level (this is Jesus’ response to the woman’s request and nothing more). Perhaps there is something more subtle and sophisticated going on. If so, then there should be some narrative clues that can guide us in the right direction.

THE PLACE OF THE STORY IN MARK’S NARRATIVE

Unfortunately, Mark does not give the reader any explanation as to why Jesus responds to the woman with rejection. There is nothing explicit in the text that betrays his motivation for acting with such a lack of compassion. The best suggestions are ideas that are derived from the narrative context. What happens in Mark’s Gospel before we get to this story? Is there anything that prepares the reader for Jesus’ harsh response to a Gentile woman in need? Rather than reading the story in isolation, we must read and interpret it in its narrative context, just as the earliest Christians would have heard it read on the heels of Mark 1.1—7.23.

Some solid observations that we can make as readers of Mark’s narrative are those that involve the characters that he has introduced thus far. We know nothing about the Syrophenician woman, save that she is a Gentile with a need and has the gumption to track Jesus down (while he is trying to remain incognito) and beg for a miracle. We do, however, know something about these types of women—women who are strong despite their sufferings, and who are determined that Jesus should do something about those sufferings—because we have seen this kind of scenario before in Mark 5.24b–34 (the hemorrhaging woman). Satan and his demons are alive and well, and challenge Jesus and his mission, but have no real

1. David Rhoads, “Jesus and the Syrophenician Woman in Mark: A Narrative-Critical Study,” *JAAR* 62 (1994): 356–57.

2. Morna D. Hooker, *Gospel According to Saint Mark* (BNTC 2; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 182, admonishes scholars for attempting to soften Jesus’ harsh expression.

3. Rhoads, “Narrative-Critical,” 356. Larry Hurtado, *Mark*, 119, NIBC (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), however, argues that the term indicates that the analogy is about household pets, not scavenger dogs.

4. Rhoads, “Narrative-Critical,” 351.

recognize Jesus' true identity as God's Holy One (Mark 1.24). By the time the reader gets to our story, then, he/she knows that Jesus has the power to eradicate her daughter's unclean spirit.

Jesus' constant companions are absent from the story. Mark does not feel the need to explain where they are when Jesus' dialogue with the woman takes place. It is possible that he has gone into hiding without his disciples (like the times when he prays alone, Mark 6.46), or that they are silent witnesses to his encounter with the woman. Their general lack of understanding (Mark 4.13; 6.51–52) does not have a bearing on this passage. The Jewish religious authorities, with whom he has just done battle (Mark 7.1–23), are also not participants in this story. However, they are fresh in the mind of the reader, as Jesus has recently had a heated dispute with them. This conflict is not something new in Mark, as he consistently portrays them as people who combat Jesus' teachings and find offense at almost everything he says and does. As we have seen from the previous passage, these men are interested only in a kingdom that consists of people that look just like themselves.

The reader has already known Jesus for seven chapters now, and has come to expect him to teach with authority, combat the views of the religious leaders, and heal freely. This rejection of the woman, then, is not the type of response that anyone familiar with the Markan Jesus would have expected! There has been nothing in Mark's narrative up to this point that would prepare the reader for this type of reaction. It is possible that Jesus' response is more shocking to Mark's readers than it would have been to the woman herself!

The key lies in the use of Jesus' riddle and its function in the narrative. In other words, what is Mark doing with the riddle? Is he conveying Jesus' personal views on the secondary role of Gentiles in the kingdom, or is this, perhaps, a reflection of the views of another group? We might ask ourselves: Whom have we encountered in Mark's narrative thus far that would reject the request of a Gentile woman for the healing for her doubly unclean daughter? The answer comes in the preceding pericope: the religious authorities.

The Jewish religious leaders of Jesus' day have not seen eye to eye with him since the beginning of his ministry (e.g., Mark 2.6). This tension comes to a head on the issue of purity in the first part of Mark 7, when Jesus allows his disciples to eat without ritually cleansing their hands. In the exchange that follows, Jesus accuses the scribes and the Pharisees of picking and choosing the Mosaic laws to which they will adhere. He goes on to declare that there are no foods which are unclean, but rather, it is what comes from the hearts of men that can defile them. In declaring this, Jesus proceeds to break down an important barrier between those who follow the law (Jews), and those who do not (Gentiles). One of the identity markers of "holiness" for the Jew has been judged unimportant:

The narrative presents Jesus with an understanding of God and uncleanness which is different from that of the leaders of Israel. As depicted in the narrative, the leaders of Israel believe God and God's holy people will be protected from defilement by withdrawing from what is unclean. By contrast, Jesus does not act as if God or God's people will be defiled by what is unclean. Instead of withdrawing, God is an active force which renders clean what was unclean.¹

So, if Jesus had just abolished one of the barriers between Jews and Gentiles in God's kingdom, why would he then hold fast to this division by rejecting the woman's request for healing? His statement only makes sense if it is uttered, not as his own view, but as the faulty view of his opposition. If this is true, then Jesus' initial rejection is meant to make the reader pause and ask, "Why would he say that?" The answer is derived from the narrative context: He wouldn't!

1. *Ibid.*, 364. This is an important observation of Rhoads, but unfortunately he does not allow this to impact his interpretation of Mark 7.24–30. Rather than allowing Jesus' distinct views on purity to influence his interpretation of our passage, he assumes that Jesus changes his mind due to the Syrophoenician woman's persistence, indicating that Jesus' views were actually similar to that of the religious authorities with regard to the boundaries of Jew and Gentile relations (352).

The idea that Jesus is playing devil's advocate by first presenting the (faulty) position of his adversaries makes sense of Jesus' uncharacteristic change of mind in the story. The woman's response is not so clever or so powerful as to change a deeply-held belief about the trajectory of his mission. On the level of the narrative, it provides the opportunity for Jesus to attack the stance of the religious authorities once more, albeit in a more subtle fashion. Jesus' role as devil's advocate allows the woman to utter the very truth to which he holds, and which is modeled in his own ministry and in the later mission of the church.

The effect of Mark's story telling is this: Instead of reflecting Jesus' own views, it highlights the extreme difference between his perspective and that of the religious authorities on this matter. The reader would expect this type of rejection to come from a Pharisee, but not from Jesus, especially as it follows his statements of inclusiveness in Mark 7.1–23!² The intent of the narrative is not to portray a Jesus who had wishy-washy views about his mission; one who was once exclusive, but became inclusive by means of a clever retort. Instead, the way that the narrative is told allows Mark to contrast the narrow-minded and exclusive stance of Jesus' enemies with his own broad and inclusive views of the beneficiaries of God's blessings in his kingdom, which is reflected in his healing of her daughter and his continued mission to the Gentiles he encounters (Mark 7.31—8.10).

HOW DOES THIS SPEAK TO THE ISSUE OF BIBLICAL TEACHING ON WOMEN?

All of these observations point to one important aspect of the narrative: It is not primarily about the supplicant's gender! The narrative emphasizes the fact that she is a *Gentile*, not a woman. Jesus' refusal in the Markan narrative is not based on her gender, but on her ethnicity.³ And yet, the significance of the *insignificance* of her gender should not go unnoticed. The point of the narrative (if my reading is correct) is that Jesus does not make decisions based on the accepted barriers of his time. Her ethnicity might have been a problem in the eyes of the religious establishment, but it was a non-issue for Jesus. How much more so her gender, which gets no real attention from the narrative!

It is also important to recognize the unlikely strength of this woman. She manages to find Jesus when he would rather be in seclusion. She approaches him for a request, knowing that he is a Jew, and may not be inclined to grant it. When she is refused, she funnels that determination into "reasoning" with him, a significant trait to possess as a woman in that culture. In a world based on hierarchy, a woman was thought to possess less-developed reasoning than a man. Thus, she would not have been expected to be on the same intellectual footing as Jesus. This woman had all these strikes against her, yet she was still able to reason with—and on the level of—a man. Whatever Jesus meant by what he said (whether he was playing the part or genuinely rejecting her request), it does not negate the cleverness of her retort. If she is really battling the minds of the religious authorities, then she wins that battle by showing that the blessings of God's kingdom can fall *simultaneously* to the Jews and the Gentiles.

She does this by playing along with the riddle, rather than rejecting its suppositions outright. In fact, she plays the game well, changing slightly Jesus' word for children (*teknon*) to a term of endearment for children (*paidion*). She does not angrily contradict him or try to shame him. She responds in the way she

2. In Matthew's version of the story, the disciples respond to the woman with irritation, urging Jesus to reject her (Matt 15.23).

3. Within the narrative, this should not be surprising, since he has a significant amount of interaction with women (for example, he has close contact with them while healing, Mark 5.25–34; and allows women to follow him, Mark 15.41). However, in his sociocultural context, this is fairly progressive.

needs to in order to get a positive reaction.⁴ This is highlighted by the fact that Mark credits her “word” — rather than her faith—for inspiring Jesus to heal her daughter (Mark 7.29).⁵

THE EFFECT OF MARK’S STORYTELLING

By playing the part of the religious authorities, Jesus actually highlights the *absurdity* of exclusion based on superficial issues such as ethnicity and gender. God’s kingdom breaks down such outward barriers and judges persons based on what dwells inside of their hearts. This story, then, is a prime example of Jesus’ subversion of exclusive boundaries based on surface issues and is an outworking of those views that he had previously espoused in Mark 7.1–23. This new community is an inclusive one where a Gentile woman can fully experience the blessings of God.

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4. Rhoads, “Narrative-Critical,” 359: “The cleverness of her response is that she honored his rejection and still found a place for her request.”

5. This is unlike a similar healing story (Mark 5.34), where it is the faith of the woman that has healed her. Matthew’s version of our passage, on the other hand, credits the woman’s faith as the driving force behind her daughter’s healing (Matt 15.28). I would not, however, make so much of Mark’s use of *logos* here (Mark 7.29) to suggest that the woman is somehow carrying God’s word to Jesus (as if teaching him), *contra* Rhoads, “Narrative-Critical,” 361.