

Jesus and the Syrophenician Woman in Mark: A Narrative-Critical Study¹

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Narrative criticism analyzes the formal features of biblical narratives: point of view, plot, character, setting, style, standards of judgment, and rhetoric. Analyses of the formal features of the Gospel of Mark have shown this narrative to be of remarkably whole cloth: the narrator maintains a unifying point of view; the standards of judgment are uniform; the plot is coherent; the characters are introduced and developed with consistency; stylistic patterns persist through the story; and there is a satisfying overall rhetorical effect. Recurring designs, overlapping patterns, and interwoven motifs produce a rich texture of narrative.² Joanna Dewey's description of the Gospel of Mark as an "interwoven tapestry" is quite apt.

Most Markan studies employing narrative criticism have dealt with the Gospel as a whole or with some feature that ranges across the entire narrative, such as Mark's technique of foreshadowing. Yet it is also important to provide narrative studies of individual episodes, studies that show how integral each episode is in the overall design of the Gospel. The episode of the Syrophenician woman lends itself well to such a study. Our purpose, then, is to interpret the episode of the Syrophenician woman as an integral part of the whole narrative. In light of current directions in narrative-critical studies, this analysis will keep before us the overall rhetorical effect of the narrative on a hearer or reader.

The Episode

Now arising from there
he went off to the territory of Tyre.
And entering into a house
he wanted no one to know,
but he could not escape notice.
Instead immediately hearing about him
a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit
came and fell at his feet.

1. Originally published as "Jesus and the Syrophenician Woman in Mark: A Narrative-Critical Study" in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 62 (1994): 343-375. Copyright © 1994 Oxford University Press. Reproduced by permission. No further reproduction allowed without the written permission of the publisher.

2. Norman Petersen, *Literary Criticism for New Testament Critics*, (Fortress Press, 1978); David Rhoads, "Narrative Criticism and the Gospel of Mark," 411-434.

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Now the woman was Greek A'
a Syrophenician by birth,
and she asked him
to drive out the demon from her daughter. B'
And he told her,
"Let first the children be satisfied
for it is not good to take the bread of the children a
and throw it to the little dogs." b
But she answers and tells him,
"Lord,
even the little pups under the table b'
eat [some] of the crumbs of the little ones." a'
And he told her,
"Because of this saying — go on off! a
[The demon] has gone from your daughter b
the demon." c
And going away to her house a'
she found the little one thrown on the bed b'
and the little demon gone out. c'

The episode in the larger story world: Manifestations of the kingdom

In order to grasp how this episode fits into the overall narrative, we must remember that the original hearers of Mark encountered this Gentile woman after a period (half-hour or so) of narration. The hearer has already entered the story world, heard Jesus of Nazareth announce the kingdom of God, followed this Jewish Rabbi around the Galilean countryside, seen his healings and exorcisms, experienced debates with the Jewish leaders, met Jesus' dense disciples, made evaluations about what/who is good and bad in this story, been in the dark about the mysteries of the kingdom, experienced the suspense of knowing who Jesus is while the characters in the story do not know, and much more. Only when we view the episode of the Syrophoenician woman in light of the full weight of the narrative leading up to it and indeed following it, have we begun to comprehend the episode itself.

The episode of the Syrophoenician woman fits tightly into the overall story, particularly in relation to the presentation of the kingdom of God. The establishment of God's rule over the world is the force that drives the whole plot of the narrative. Here are four ways in which this episode relates to the kingdom of God in Mark.

Display of the kingdom

Jesus announces early in the narrative: "the kingdom of God has arrived." The Markan story that follows this programmatic announcement displays that kingdom. All subsequent healings, exorcisms, and miracles are expressions of the kingdom of God. These works of power by Jesus are a string of incredible happenings in which each event appears to the hearer to be different and more astounding in its own way—healing by touch, healing by word only, exorcising a legion of demons, calming a storm, healing someone by her touch of him, raising a child from the dead, providing bread in the desert, and so on. In our episode, Jesus exorcises a demon when the demoniac is not even present. Thus, the healing/exorcism stories are a major vehicle for conveying the activity of the rule of God as it comes in and through Jesus and his disciples. Each healing reinforces, enriches, and expands our understanding of the power of the kingdom.

Display of faith

After Jesus announces the arrival of the kingdom, he says: "Repent, and put faith in the good news." Faith is the correlate to the power of the kingdom. It is the proper human response to the governance of God now available through Jesus. Because "everything is possible to God" (10:27), therefore "everything is possible to one who has faith" in God (9:23; 11:22-24). Faith is access to the power of God. As such, the narrative that follows this initial announcement of Jesus displays the responses of faith. Those who come to Jesus in faith represent a major vehicle in the story to express this human response to the kingdom. The appearance of each new suppliant with faith expands and deepens our understanding of faith in Mark's narrative. The Syrophoenician woman, for example,

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reveals the faith of a Gentile and shows how cleverness can express the persistence of faith.

The kingdom hidden and revealed

The healing stories in Mark convey the hidden/revealed dimensions of the kingdom. For while the suppliants respond with faith to the kingdom, they do not know the identity of Jesus as Messiah. In the first line of the Gospel, the narrator tells the hearer that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of God (1:1), but this knowledge is not available to the characters in the story, not even to the disciples. Much of the suspense in this story results from this difference between what the hearers know and what the characters in the story (do not) know. Thus, while the suppliants are reliable in their faith that Jesus will grant their requests, they are unreliable in their knowledge/beliefs about Jesus. While the Syrophoenician woman has faith that Jesus will answer her request, she does not know that Jesus is the Messiah. It is not even clear that she believes in the Jewish God. Thus, some aspects of the kingdom are revealed and others are hidden.

The plot line of the suppliants

In the display of the kingdom, the plot line of the suppliants intersects the plot lines of other characters. There are three main plot lines in Mark: Jesus in conflict with suppliants and demons; Jesus in conflict with the authorities; and Jesus in conflict with his disciples. The plot line with suppliants functions mainly to display the kingdom and faith, and it involves little suspenseful conflict with Jesus.

At the same time, the suppliant plot line interweaves with the other plot lines, sometimes together in the same episode and at other times providing a contrast by the juxtaposition of stories (2:1-12; 3:1-6). For example, the faith of the suppliants contrasts with the rigid resistance of the authorities. In our episode, the insistence of the Syrophoenician woman that her daughter be healed despite the uncleanness of her condition contrasts with the concern of the Jewish authorities to guard purity rules, as evident from the episode that precedes this one.

The plot line with the suppliants also intersects with that of the disciples. The suppliants are foils for the disciples. They carry

out functions, such as proclamation, that are otherwise expected of the disciples, despite Jesus' commands to the contrary: Jesus tells the leper to tell no one, but he proclaims freely (1:43-45); Jesus tells the demoniac to tell his family, but he proclaims throughout the Decapolis (5:19-20); Jesus tells Bartimaeus to go off, but he follows him to Jerusalem (10:52); and so on. This intersection complicates the story in light of the observation that the disciples themselves often do not carry out the proper functions of their role, nor do they behave as Jesus expects they should. The story of the Syrophoenician woman intersects with that of the disciples. On the one hand, the disciples have failed to understand a riddle of Jesus (as narrated in the preceding episode). On the other hand, the Syrophoenician woman understands Jesus' riddle and even responds with a riddle of her own.

Thus, the hearers experience the story of the Syrophoenician woman at a certain point in a larger narrative, in the context of a developing plot, in interaction with characters who have been introduced and revealed, and in light of the larger designs of the kingdom.

The immediate context in the plot

One might think that it makes no difference where a particular healing episode occurs in the overall narrative. Because there is no developing conflict between Jesus and the suppliants, one might think that their individual stories are interchangeable. On the contrary, despite the general similarities of the suppliants and the overall role of the healing stories in the framework of Mark, each of these suppliants is integral to a particular place in the plot development. No suppliant is interchangeable with any other, because each one plays a unique role in the precise context in which she or he appears in the plot. The particular importance of each episode may be provided by the setting or by the type of ailment or by the character of the suppliant or by Jesus' manner of healing or by the reaction of the crowd or by any combination of these. For example, the exorcism in Capernaum follows shortly after Jesus has encountered Satan in the desert (1:12-27). The blind man touched twice follows the manifestation of the disciples' blindness and precedes Peter's insight that Jesus is the Messiah (8:14-30). Bartimaeus' cry to Jesus as son of David sets up the entrance to Jerusalem (10:46-11:11).

So too is the episode of the Syrophoenician woman integral to its immediate context in the plot. The episodes before and after are in the following sequence:³

- A Jesus feeds 5,000 Jews in a desert in Jewish territory and walks on water
- B then heals those who come to him,
- C after which he has a controversy with Pharisees over eating food with defiled hands.

3. I have labeled the episodes in this way not in order to suggest that they form a Markan chiasmic pattern but only to show more clearly the progressive and pivotal nature of the central episodes.

The episode of the Syrophoenician woman is the point at which the breakthrough to a mission among Gentiles occurs. As such, our episode, with its particular details, is not a generic healing that could occur anywhere else in the story. Rather, it is the turning point in an important sub-plot of the Gospel.

- D and teaches his disciples privately, *declaring all foods clean*.
- C' Then he immediately goes off to the unclean Gentile territory of Tyre where he grants the request of an unclean Gentile woman by driving out an unclean spirit,
- B' after which he goes to other Gentile territory of the Decapolis where he heals a deaf and tongue-tied man
- A' and subsequently feeds 4,000 Gentiles in a desert in Gentile territory.

The central episode here—the declaration that all foods are clean—provides the conditions for a transition in the plot from a feeding in Jewish territory to a feeding in Gentile territory. As we shall see, the following episode of the Syrophoenician woman is the point at which the breakthrough to a mission among Gentiles occurs. As such, our episode, with its particular details, is not a generic healing that could occur anywhere else in the story. Rather, it is the turning point in an important sub-plot of the Gospel.

The type-scene of healing: “Suppliants with Faith”

The narrator develops the plot lines of the Gospel by means of recurring type-scenes. A type-scene is an episode with certain characters and interactions that is repeated throughout the narrative. The type-scene sets up a convention, thus providing familiar patterns of expectation for the hearer. There are many type-scenes in Mark: healings, exorcism, nature miracles, conflicts with authorities, call scenes, and so on. The episode of the Syrophoenician woman is one instance of a type-scene. When the narrator tells us that the Syrophoenician woman hears about Jesus, comes to him, falls at his feet, requests an exorcism on behalf of her daughter, overcomes Jesus' resistance to her request, and receives the healing, the hearer is already very familiar with the basic pattern of these events. The hearer has encountered similar scenes featuring a leper, four men who lower a paralytic through a roof, a woman with a hemorrhage, a synagogue ruler named Jairus, among others.

The healing type-scene

We might call the healing type-scene in Mark “A Suppliant with Faith.”⁴ There are eleven examples of this type-scene in Mark: Simon’s mother-in-law (1:29-31); the leper (1:40-45); the paralytic (2:1-12); the man with the withered hand (3:1-6); Jairus’ daughter (5:21; 35-43); the woman with the hemorrhage (5:24-34); the Syrophoenician woman (7:24-30); a deaf and mute man (7:31-37); the blind man at Bethsaida (8:21-26); the father who brings a boy with an unclean spirit (9:14-29); and Bartimaeus (10:46-52). Sometimes the crowd as a whole functions as suppliant with faith: in Capernaum (1:31-34); at the seaside (3:7-12); and at Gennesaret (6:53-56).

Such a type-scene differs from the type-scene of “A Demoniac who Confronts” (1:21-28; 5:1-20; 9:14-27 are hybrids). In the Markan story world, people possessed by demons cannot have faith. Therefore, in the exorcism type-scene, the demon itself confronts Jesus in fear and hostility, and Jesus drives it out. The story of the Syrophoenician woman does not belong to the exorcism type-scene, even though the malady of the child is demon possession. When a surrogate with faith pleads with Jesus on behalf of a possessed child, the story belongs to the type-scene of “A Suppliant with Faith.” As such, the exorcism of the daughter is embedded (implied) within the healing type-scene.

What follows are the basic Markan features of the healing type-scene of a suppliant with faith.

1. Setting of place and/or time: in a house (2:12); in the synagogue (3:1); or by the sea (5:21).
2. The suppliant has heard about Jesus (2:1; 3:8). Sometimes this is simply implicit.
3. The narrator introduces the suppliant and the malady: a leper (1:40); a synagogue ruler, Jairus (5:22); the son of Timaeus, Bartimaeus, a blind beggar (10:46).
4. The suppliant comes to Jesus for healing.

Often the suppliant with faith is a surrogate for someone who cannot act in faith for themselves: the four men carry the paralytic (2:3); Jairus come for a daughter near death (5:23); people bring a blind man (8:22).

Only on the Sabbath does Jesus himself take responsibility for initiating an act of healing (3:1-6).

5. The suppliant kneels before Jesus, as the leper did (1:40), or falls at his feet, like Jairus (5:22).
6. The suppliant makes a request.

The request may be in direct speech: the leper (1:40); Jairus (5:23); and Bartimaeus (10:47,48).

The request may be in indirect speech: those who request on behalf of the deaf and mute man (7:32) and the blind man (8:22).

On the one hand, the type-scene sets up a pattern of repetition for the reader. On the other hand, variation in a type-scene introduces new elements into the story. “Repetition with variation” is a predominant stylistic feature and rhetorical strategy of Mark’s narrative.

Other requests are unspoken. In one case, the request is an inside view of a suppliant’s thinking, as with the woman who had the internal hemorrhage (5:28). In another case, the request is simply implicit in the act of getting to Jesus through a roof (2:5).

7. The suppliant overcomes an obstacle to get the request met: the leper overcomes Jesus’ possible unwillingness to touch him (1:40); the people who bring the paralytic dig through a roof because of the crowd (2:4); Jairus overcomes the news that his daughter has died (5:35-36); the woman with the hemorrhage gets to Jesus through the crowd despite her condition of uncleanness (5:27); the man who brings his demoniac son has faith despite the initial failure of the disciples (9:18); and Bartimaeus gets Jesus’ attention despite the efforts of the crowd to silence his pleas (10:48). Thus, the suppliants embody *persistence* of faith.
8. Jesus fulfills the request: a healing or an exorcism or a restoration. He does so either by touching the person (1:41) or by laying on hands (8:23) or by grasping the hand (5:41) or by speaking a command (2:11; 3:5) or by giving a word of affirmation after the healing takes place (5:34).
9. The healing occurs. The narrator usually describes the healing in words that mirror the words of Jesus’ command or the request of the suppliant. The verbal repetition affirms that the request was met precisely as it was made and precisely as Jesus commanded it.
10. Jesus gives a further command. Jesus commands people to go off (10:52) or to go to their house (5:19) or to be quiet (1:43) or to tell no one (7:36) or not to go into the village (8:26). These commands to go away and to be silent stand in contrast to Jesus’ commands to his disciples to follow him and to proclaim. In Mark, Jesus never asks anyone whom he has healed to follow him, thus distinguishing those whom he calls to be disciples from those whom he heals or restores.
11. The suppliant ignores Jesus’ commands. Instead of going home or keeping quiet, some suppliants go out and proclaim

4. Robert Tannehill, “The Gospel of Mark as Narrative Christology,” 57-95.

broadly (e.g., 1:45). In so doing, the suppliants carry out actions otherwise expected of the twelve disciples. For example, in the episode when Jesus heals the deaf and tongue-tied man, Jesus' futile commands to silence people only make them more determined to proclaim (7:36).

12. The reaction of observers: observers express amazement (5:42); they glorify God and say, "We never saw anything like this" (2:12); the opponents go off to plot Jesus' destruction (3:6).

These elements comprise the type-scene of the "Suppliant with Faith." The type-scene functions in two ways. On the one hand, the type-scene sets up a pattern of repetition for the reader. On the other hand, variation in a type-scene introduces new elements into the story. "Repetition with variation" is a predominant stylistic feature and rhetorical strategy of Mark's narrative.⁵ In each familiar recurrence of the type-scene, the basic pattern remains the same but the details of the episode—time, place, characters, malady, manner of healing, and so on—differ markedly. In addition to variations in the details, there are variations in the form and features of the type-scene: the emphasis falls on different features; the order of the features varies; some features do not appear; or the functions of the features differ.

The Syrophenician Episode as a Healing Type-Scene

In regard to the episode of the Syrophenician woman, here are the variations introduced into the type-scene, correlated with the features set out above.

1. The setting is Tyre in Gentile territory, and Jesus goes into a house seeking to be unnoticed.
2. The story implies that the woman has heard about Jesus from the crowds who flocked to him from the regions of Tyre and Sidon earlier in the story (3:7). She hears of Jesus' presence in Tyre despite his efforts to hide.
3. The suppliant is a Gentile—a Greek, a Syrophenician by birth. The repetition places emphasis on this feature. The absence of her name adds to the focus on her depiction as a Gentile. This feature occurs after the report that she comes and kneels.
4. 5. 6. She comes, kneels, and begs. The posture of the woman in begging for a healing is integral to Jesus' depiction of her as a scavenger dog.
7. After she succeeds in getting to Jesus, her main obstacle is to overcome his refusal to heal her, which is here couched in the form of a riddle. This is the centerpiece of the story, and great emphasis falls here. As a result of the woman's clever persistence, Jesus changes his mind and there is a shift in the plot.
8. Jesus announces the exorcism of a person who is not present.

9. The exorcism itself is not narrated, but the demon is gone and the child is thrown on the bed, evidence of the struggle and exit of the unclean spirit.

10. 11. Jesus commands the woman to "go off." Here, however, the suppliant does not disregard this command. In this case, the command to "go off" relates to the woman's concern for her daughter. The disregard of commands in the Markan type-scene usually results in the suppliant's carrying out activity that is a foil to the disciples. Here, however, the activity that contrasts with the activity of the disciples takes place earlier in the episode, when the woman comprehends the riddle.

12. There is no reaction from observers, because the setting is private. Also, the narrator is not seeking to show an increase in popular support for Jesus in Tyre. Rather, the narrator develops this popular response in subsequent episodes in the Decapolis, which is also Gentile territory.

Thus, the story of the Syrophenician woman reflects typical features of the Markan narrative, both in terms of the repetition of the type-scene and in regard to the introduction of variations. The fresh details stand out for the hearer because the narrator introduces them into a type-scene with which the reader is already familiar.

Rhetorical/stylistic techniques

We may now focus on the episode itself. We turn first to matters of style. In the Gospel of Mark, there are some stylistic devices that recur throughout the narrative. An indication of the embeddedness of this episode in the Markan narrative is the presence of these recurring stylistic patterns. We will deal here with four stylistic features: two-step progressions, suspense, parallelism, and allegorical riddles.

Two-step progressions

Two-step progressions are examples of repetition with variation. When Mark introduces the Syrophenician woman, he refers to her as "a Greek, a Syrophenician by birth." This repetition is a two-step progression in which Mark repeats something in order to get the hearers to notice it. The first step gives a generality, while the second step, the repetition, gives more specific detail and usually contains a crucial element. A single instance of the two-step progression can be significant, but the accumulative impact of many occurrences leads the hearer to be attentive for a repetition. For example, "when it was evening, when the sun set," appears to be needless repetition (1:32). The first step is general. However, the second element, "when the sun set," leads the reader to pay attention to the precise moment when the Sabbath ended and people could bring the sick and possessed to Jesus for healing. Compare also "everywhere, throughout the whole countryside of Galilee" (1:28), "outside, in deserted places" (1:45), "to the other side, to Gennesaret" (6:53) and "in Bethany, at the house of Simon the Leper" (14:3). Such two-step progressions pervade every level of

5. Robert Tannehill, "The Disciples in Mark: The Function of a Narrative Role," 386-405.

the narrative.⁶ So here too, in our episode, the narrative leads the hearer to notice that the suppliant was not only Greek-speaking, but more specifically a Gentile by birth—unquestionably not a Jew, but an outsider. This specific information, so emphasized, sets the stage for the scene to follow. Again, the hearer has no problem with this two-step progression, because it is already familiar.

Parallelism

Parallelism is another form of repetition in Mark. Such repetition occurs in phrases, in sentences, and in the structure of episodes. In setting out the episode at the beginning, I charted the parallelism of lines. Note how the two lines by which the narrator introduces the woman are subsequently dealt with in turn in the remaining two parts of the episode—that she was a Gentile and that she asked Jesus to drive the demon from her daughter. This repetition follows an A B A'B' pattern. Then note that Jesus' rejection of her request is subsequently paralleled by the woman's answer to Jesus' riddle, but this time it is in a chiasmic a b b' a' pattern. Finally, there is the parallelism between Jesus' final words to the woman and the subsequent report of the results in a pattern of a b c a' b' c'. In regard to this last parallelism, the command to "go off" corresponds to the phrase "And going away to her house." Then the two parts of Jesus' announcement of the exorcism, referring in turn to "your daughter" and to "the demon," correspond to the two parts of the narrator's report that "from the little one" the "demon" had gone out. Such intricate parallelism is present in virtually every episode of Mark's Gospel.⁷ Repetition is a common trait of oral storytelling, and it is so carefully developed in Mark's work as to be one of the main webs that hold together this tightly woven narrative.

Suspense

The introduction of the woman as "a Greek, a Syrophenician by birth" provides for hearers information that enables the next statement to be a surprise: "And [but] she asked Jesus [a Jew!] to drive the demon from her little daughter." Both the introduction and the request create suspense, leaving the hearer to wonder how Jesus will respond. The tension is intensified by the detail previously given that when Jesus had entered a house he did not want anyone to know where he was. Jesus is trying to hide, and a Gentile requests healing. What will happen? The conflict is initially resolved when Jesus refuses her request. He views her request as illegitimate because she is outside certain spatial and temporal boundaries. She is outside the spatial boundary, because she is a Gentile and not a Jew. Therefore she is not entitled to the benefits he offers, at least not now. And she is outside the temporal boundary, for this is the time for Jews to be satisfied "first." The time for Gentiles has not

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yet come. However, while Jesus' refusal resolves the tension, it also increases the tension, because it is unexpected and uncharacteristic of what we know so far in the narrative about Jesus as healer. Of course, the suspense is further intensified when the woman does not accept his refusal. Again, the rhetorical devices so carefully developed in this episode to create suspense are present in many Markan episodes and are typical of the narrative as a whole. Here again, the whole narrative prepares the reader to expect twists and turns, suspense and surprise—culminating, of course, in the shocking ending of Mark's whole Gospel.

Allegorical riddles

When Jesus responds to the woman, he does not reject her request in direct manner. Rather, he answers indirectly in the form of a parable. In Mark, the parables are consistently allegories that, like riddles, have to be deciphered in order to be understood.⁸ In every case, the Markan parables are allegories by which Jesus is explaining to other characters what is going on around them in the story world: the undivided kingdom explains Jesus' exorcisms (3:23-27); the sowing riddles tell about Jesus' preaching and the responses to it (4:1-20); the clean-unclean riddle explains why Jesus does not walk according to the traditions of the elders (7:14-15); the vineyard riddle explains to the high priests Jesus' identity, mission, and fate (12:1-11); and so on. We infer this interpretation of the Markan parables from the explanations given in the narrative itself for some of the riddles, such as the sower riddle and the clean-unclean riddle. We can understand the rest of the riddles, those that have no explanations, by using the same principles of interpretation. The characters hearing them (and the hearers of Mark's story) must decipher the allegorical riddles in order to understand them. For those characters who hear and understand, the riddles clarify further; for those who do not understand, the riddles further obscure (4:10-12).

In this episode, Jesus' riddle is a carefully crafted allegory explaining to the woman why he will not heal her daughter. The following scheme represents the elements of the allegory. In the left column is the riddle itself. The middle column displays the allegorical application as it pertains to the characters and events in this episode. On the right is the application of the allegory to the larger dynamics of Mark's whole story.

6. David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel*, (Fortress, 2012), 49-51.

7. David Noble, "Structure of Mark's Gospel"; Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie, *Mark as Story*, 47-55.

8. David Rhoads, "Narrative Criticism and the Gospel of Mark," 411-34; Mary Ann Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel: Mark's World in Literary Historical Perspective* (Fortress Press, 1989).

Jesus' Riddle

<i>The Allegory</i>	<i>Applied to the Episode</i>	<i>Applied to the Whole</i>
First	At this time	While Jesus is alive?
let the children	let the Jews (not this Gentile woman)	let the Jews
“be satisfied,”	“have the benefits from God available,”	have the benefits of the kingdom
for it is not good to take	for it is not good to take	for it is not good to take
the bread	the benefits (here an exorcism)	“healings, exorcisms, restorations, resurrections, miracles—benefits of the kingdom”
for the children	for the Jews	for the Jews—
and throw (it)	and carelessly give them (it)	And carelessly give them
to the little dogs.	to the Syrophenician woman and her daughter.	to Gentiles.

We can see how the riddle relates to the story. The allegory is an extended comparison of one scene with another. The primary scene is the peasant house setting in which children are being fed. There are dogs nearby waiting to get scraps from the food. These dogs are not pets. In ancient Israel, dogs ran in packs scavenging for food. Jews considered dogs to be unclean, because dogs did not fit the category of clean animals and because dogs had contact with and ate things that were unclean. It is for this impurity that Jews referred to Gentiles as dogs. Clearly this was meant as an insult. In addition to referring indirectly to the uncleanness of this Gentile woman, Jesus also appears to be playing on the depiction of the dog as a scavenger, because this is precisely the role that the woman is playing in asking for what does not properly belong to her. She is begging for food like a scavenger dog might do. Jesus says it is not good to take the bread for the children and throw it to the little dogs.

The narrator may be depicting Jesus as being playful with her by referring to Gentiles not as dogs but as little dogs. In the Greek language, the diminutive often carries with it a note of endearment. Some translations attempt to capture this nuance of endearment by rendering the diminutive as “pup.” Such a diminutive might have played down the unpleasant and unclean dimensions of this insult by referring to Gentiles as young dogs. Her response shows that she has not only understood the riddle but that she is also clever enough to play upon that small element of compassion suggested by this note of endearment.

However, one should be cautious about softening the harshness of Jesus’ rejection. After all, this woman had not asked for a healing for herself but for a little child, and Jesus has denied her request on behalf of “God’s” children. His rejection forces her to beg. The Markan Jesus may have referred to “little dogs” simply as a parallel to the woman’s “little daughter.” The fact that Jesus has referred to her as a little dog rather than a dog may not be any less of an insult.

In any case, it is this last phrase of Jesus, “the little dogs,” that the woman picks up in her response. Here is the allegorical interpretation of the woman’s reply.

The Woman’s Riddle

<i>The Allegory</i>	<i>Applied to the Episode</i>	<i>Applied to the Whole</i>
Even	Even now	At this time
the pups	I and my daughter	Gentiles
down under the table	at the margins	who live in/near Israel
eat	(should) benefit from	(should) benefit from
some	just one exorcism	some of the works of power
of the little crumbs	from among the many benefits	from the benefits of the kingdom
of the children	for the Jews	for the Jews

In her response, the Syrophenician woman extends Jesus’ riddle. She does not oppose what Jesus has said. Rather, she develops the scenario of Jesus’ allegory so that she and her daughter have a place in it. The scene now focuses not on scavenger dogs but on puppies, which (though no less scavengers) were permitted, apparently because of their dearness, to be near the children and to eat whatever crumbs inadvertently fell from the sloppy eating of the small children. Thus, the woman accepts Jesus’ (diminutive) reference to Gentiles as “little dogs.” In addition, she uses a different Greek word to refer to the children. This different Greek word is a diminutive that refers to “little children” and connotes fondness, here rendered as “the little ones.” Thus, in her response, the Syrophenician woman not only stays within the Jewish perspective of Jesus’ riddle, she even refers to the Jewish children of God with a term of endearment.

This interchange is a repetition of the type of allegorical riddles that Jesus has spoken to this point in the narrative. The narrative has already shown the hearers how to interpret them. Hearers are to decipher the allegorical riddles as “stories within a story” that explain the story world. The innovation in this particular episode is that the woman shows she has understood the riddle and responds with a riddle of her own. At the same time, this novel interchange occurs as a feature of the Markan type-scene of “A Suppliant with Faith,” for the riddle to which the woman responds is the obstacle

that she as a suppliant with (persistent) faith overcomes to receive her request.

The conflict in the episodic plot

We are now in a position to see clearly the nature of the conflict that drives the plot of this brief episode. Conflict analysis considers the circumstances of the conflict, what or who initiates the conflict, how it escalates, what the complications are, and what the resolution is.

Jesus goes to Gentile territory to retreat, not to heal.⁹ The occasion for the conflict is that a Gentile woman requests from Jesus an exorcism for her daughter. Jesus rejects her request because it is not yet the time for Gentiles to benefit from the kingdom. He does so in the form of an allegorical riddle. This complicates the conflict. The woman then counters his denial with an amplification of his riddle. This response of the woman is a classic example from the ancient Near East of the clever request by an inferior to a superior in which there is an exchange of proverbial sayings. The woman clearly treats Jesus as a superior, for he is a healer and a male. She came, fell at his feet, and made a request. He rejected her with a proverb: “It’s not good to give the children’s bread to dogs.” As an inferior, the woman’s response honors all that he says in his rejection and says nothing to contradict or shame him. She calls him “lord,” recognizing his right to accept or reject her request. She responds with a proverb of her own that does not contradict but extends and qualifies his proverb: “Even little dogs get crumbs.” The cleverness of her response is that she honored his rejection and still found a place for her request. Thus, not only has this woman been clever in gaining access to Jesus despite his efforts to hide, she has also cleverly made use of the dynamics of honor and shame in order to get her request granted. The conflict is resolved when Jesus grants her request and the daughter is restored.

As we have seen, the plot of the episode of the Syrophenician woman is typical of the plots in most healing stories in Mark; that is, there is an obstacle to be overcome. In the case of the Syrophenician woman, the obstacle is Jesus’ initial refusal of her request. When the obstacle has been overcome, the conflict is resolved: the request of the suppliant is granted, and the episode comes to an end. What is left unresolved, as we shall see, has to do with the implications of this exorcism for Jesus’ subsequent activity among Gentiles in general.

9. Why Jesus went there to retreat is not clear. This uncertainty represents one of the many gaps of causation and motivation evident throughout the Markan narrative. Cf. David Rhoads, “Performing the Gospel of Mark” in *Body and Bible: Interpreting and Experiencing Biblical Narratives* (Trinity Press Int’l., 1992). Appreciating such gaps and seeking to interpret them is much of the task of criticism. Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Howard Univ. Press, 1980); Stephen Moore, “Are the Gospels Unified Narratives?” 443–458; Stephen Moore, *Literary Criticism of the Gospels: The Theoretical Challenge* (Yale Univ. Press, 1992).

It is rather amazing how many traits of each character are revealed in these brief depictions.

Characterization

Characterization is another way in which this episode is integral to the Markan story. There are basically two characters in this episode, Jesus and the woman. We infer their character traits from what they say, what they do, and what others say about them or how others react to them. It is rather amazing how many traits of each character are revealed in these brief depictions.

The Syrophenician woman: A stock character

We may distinguish among types of characters. Stock characters have basically one trait. Flat characters have several consistent traits and are predictable. Round characters have many complex and/or conflicting traits and often are unpredictable. In Mark, Jesus and the disciples are round characters. The authorities are flat characters. And the minor figures are stock characters.

Within the type-scene of the suppliant who requests, there appears a stock character of the Markan narrative, “the suppliant with faith.”¹⁰ The narrator does not announce that the suppliant has faith. Rather, the narrator shows the faith to the hearers through the actions and the dialogue of the characters. For example, when the four men lower the paralytic through the roof, the narrator tells us that Jesus “saw their faith” (2:5). In another case, Jesus admonishes the suppliant, “Only have faith” (5:36). At another time, Jesus says, “Everything is possible to one who has faith” (9:23).

In Mark, faith is embodied in action. When Jesus “saw the faith” of those who brought the paralytic, it was not because he had some spiritual insight into the hearts of the four. Rather, he observed them digging through a roof to get to him for healing, and he perceived that action as faith. Embedded in the actions of the characters—coming, kneeling, asking, persisting—is the implicit trust that healing will take place. Also, Markan faith has little to do with beliefs about Jesus. For example, none of the suppliants knows that Jesus is the Messiah. Many in the crowds think he is John the Baptist or Elijah or one of the prophets (6:14). Bartimaeus inappropriately calls him “son of David” (10:47–48). In regard to the Syrophenician woman, it is irrelevant to the narrative whether she believes in the Jewish God. The focus of faith in Mark is “trust that a request will be granted.” Such trust is embodied in action, so that the coming, the kneeling, the asking, and the persisting *are* the faith. That is why, in response to the “touch” of the hemorrhaging woman (5:34) and later in response to the “begging” of Bartimaeus (10:52), Jesus says, “Your faith has restored you.”

10. Robert Tannehill, “The Gospel of Mark as Narrative Christology.”

Given the expectations established by the familiar trait of the stock supplicants in the type-scene, the hearers know that a major trait of the Syrophoenician woman is her faith—even though the word “faith” does not occur in this episode. She comes to him, falls at his feet, and asks him to drive the demon from her daughter. These are all actions of faith in the Markan scheme. Also, Jesus’ response to the Syrophoenician woman—“For this word, go off. The demon has gone from your daughter”—is similar to his response to the woman with the hemorrhage, “Your faith has restored you. Go off in peace, and remain free of your ailment” (5:34). We infer that Jesus interprets the request and the persistence of the Syrophoenician woman as faith.

Yet the woman’s persistence really goes beyond faith. We might expect Jesus to say, “Because of your faith...,” but he says, “Because of this word...” Jesus acknowledges, with the suggestion of surprise on his part, the insightfulness of the woman’s answer. Jesus recognizes in her response the “word,” a term that has been used throughout Mark to refer to the gospel (e.g., 2:2; 4:33). Again, the narrator uses repetition with variation. The hearer knows from previous supplicants with faith that also this woman has faith. Yet that faith is manifest by the woman’s intelligence and wit in the service of getting her daughter healed. And, as we shall see, she also succeeds in changing Jesus’ mind.

Despite the cameo appearance of the woman as a suppliant with faith, her characterization is remarkably developed. We have seen that she is intelligent and clever. She has persistence in her actions on behalf of her daughter. Furthermore, in coming on behalf of her daughter, she reveals her loyalty and compassion. And her willingness to humiliate herself on behalf of the daughter shows her willingness to be least on behalf of another. The Markan Jesus even suggests that she bears God’s word to him (2:2; 4:33). All these factors contribute to making this unnamed character quite remarkable and memorable. She is a rather complex stock character!

Jesus: A round character

In a sense, the Syrophoenician woman “steals the scene” in this Markan episode. However, Jesus is also central to this story, and the narrator reveals much here about the character of Jesus. Jesus’ initial refusal to heal the woman seems somewhat out of character. The Jesus of Mark has consistently responded favorably to requests for healing. Some commentators deal with Jesus’ refusal by arguing that his initial response to the woman is merely a put-on statement by which Jesus is testing the woman’s faith. I would argue, instead, that Jesus is portrayed here as having a genuine change of mind. He begins the scene by assuming that the kingdom is for the Jews now and only later is it for the Gentiles. He ends the scene with a willingness for Gentiles to benefit significantly from the kingdom even now.

We can perhaps see the narrative roots of Jesus’ initial refusal to heal this Gentile woman by looking at his single earlier encounter with Gentiles in Mark. He had crossed the lake in a storm after teaching a huge crowd by the sea (4:15-41). Upon arriving in the

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Gentile territory of the Decapolis, he was confronted by a demoniac from whom he exorcised a legion of demons (5:1-20). All the people there were frightened of Jesus and responded by pleading with Jesus to go away from their territory. In other words, Jesus was not welcome among Gentiles. He then left Gentile territory, following his own later advice to his disciples: “Whatever place does not receive you or hear you, go away from there...” (6:11). At the beginning of our episode, then, the Markan Jesus appears to have the view that Gentiles will not receive the benefits of the kingdom until the Jews (the children) have been fed “first.”

Such an attitude may explain why the Markan Jesus, when he retreated to Gentile territory, went into a house in order to escape notice. In Mark’s portrayal, he has had no reception among Gentiles and does not therefore make himself available to them. This is the point of view Jesus expresses in his riddle. Yet after the Syrophoenician woman shows faith by answering in such a way as to lead Jesus to see things differently, he immediately goes back to the Decapolis. This immediate return “up the middle of the territory of the Decapolis” clearly shows to the hearer the connection between our episode and Jesus’ previous unsuccessful foray into Gentile territory of the Decapolis.¹¹ Upon returning to the Decapolis, Jesus is immediately approached by characters who want a deaf and mute man healed. By implication, the people bringing the deaf and mute man have heard of Jesus from the man freed from the Legion of demons, because the healed demoniac had gone throughout the Decapolis telling everyone what Jesus had done for him (5:20). The proclaiming (sowing) that this man did was now bearing fruit.

At this point, a pattern of crowd response recurs in Gentile territory similar to that which occurred earlier among Jews: Jesus heals someone (a deaf and mute man); Jesus commands people to tell no one; nevertheless, they spread the word; so, people hear about him and a huge crowd gathers; and Jesus feeds the crowd. The repetition of this pattern of crowd response shows the Mar-

11. To Galilean or Syrian hearers of Mark’s Gospel, Jesus’ entrances into the Gentile regions of Tyre or the Decapolis may have been just as memorable as forays into Canada or Mexico from the USA would be to modern readers.

kan Jesus engaging in a major ministry among Gentiles similar to that which he had done among Jews. Hence, as a result of the encounter with the woman in Tyre, Jesus now makes the benefits of the kingdom widely available in nearby Gentile territory. Note that, in Mark's portrayal, the result of Jesus' change of mind was not merely a granting of an exception for this woman (contrast Matt 15:21-28). Rather, his return to the Decapolis to heal and to feed four thousand Gentiles shows that his change of mind resulted in a major change of strategy in mission.

This change of attitude on Jesus' part is confirmed by the verbal threads that run through three related episodes: (1) the first feeding (in Jewish territory), (2) the story of the Syrophoenician woman, and (3) the second feeding (in Gentile territory). The key verbal threads are: "take," "bread," "be satisfied," and "eat." (1) In the feeding in Jewish territory (6:30-44), Jesus "took" "bread," and the crowds "ate" and were "satisfied." (2) Then, in our episode (7:24-30), Jesus tells the Syrophoenician woman that the children are to be "satisfied" first and that it is not right to "take" the "bread" for the children and throw it to the dogs. The woman replies that even the pups "eat" the children's crumbs. (3) In the subsequent feeding in Gentile territory (8:1-13), Jesus "took" "bread" and people "ate" and were "satisfied." This last episode shows Jesus doing what he initially had said to the Syrophoenician woman that he would not do, before he changed his mind. Verbal threads are a major means by which Mark weaves the tapestry of his narrative. The threads running through these three episodes confirm the role of the Syrophoenician woman in leading Jesus to make this major shift to a mission in Gentile territory.

As Mark portrays it, Jesus does not completely abandon the larger eschatological framework. He still considers in general that Jews should be satisfied. Yet Jesus has changed his mind and even now allows Gentiles to share the benefits of the kingdom. These episodes clearly foreshadow a later Gentile mission projected into the future of the story world. For before Jesus dies, he will tell his disciples, with a key verbal echo of our episode, that before the end comes "the good news must *first* be proclaimed to all the Gentile nations" (13:10).

Settings: The crossing of boundaries

We are now in a position to see the most important focus of this narrative in the larger plot of Mark's story. This episode is fundamentally about crossing boundaries. We have already mentioned the settings in this episode. Jesus goes to Gentile territory, and he heals the daughter of a Gentile woman. Both in terms of the physical settings and the attendant social relationships, Jesus crosses boundaries.

Purity and defilement

One of the major conflicts across the Gospel of Mark is the conflict between the differing attitudes toward physical and social boundaries by Jesus and the leaders of Israel.¹² In Mark's portrayal,

the leaders of Israel see boundaries as lines to be guarded in order to protect the holiness of God's people against the pernicious influence of impurity. They refuse to eat with sinners, wash hands before eating, prohibit unclean foods, keep Gentiles from the temple, and so on. By contrast, Jesus makes an onslaught upon boundaries, because he sees holiness as a reality that *spreads* purity. Jesus touches a leper, eats with tax collectors, pardons sinners, drives out "unclean" spirits, heals on the Sabbath, is touched by a woman with a flow of blood, grasps the hands of a corpse, goes to a cemetery in Gentile territory where he drives out a legion of unclean spirits into a herd of pigs. The climax of this development in the plot comes with the series of episodes we have been considering—in which Jesus declares all foods clean, heals Gentiles, and feeds a Gentile crowd in the desert. All these boundary-crossing events began with Jesus' baptism in the Jordan, when God crossed the boundary between heaven and earth by sending the holy spirit to empower Jesus to spread the kingdom.

The narrative presents Jesus with an understanding of God and impurity that 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 seeing God as one who withdraws from impurity, Jesus sees God as an active force that renders clean that which was unclean. The *holy* spirit spreads wholeness and purity. Thus, instead of avoiding contact, Jesus makes contact and brings wholeness.¹³ So when Jesus touches the leper, instead of being rendered unclean by the contact, Jesus cleanses the leper. When Jesus is touched by the woman with the flow of blood, instead of being rendered impure, Jesus makes the woman whole. When Jesus touches the corpse, instead of being defiled, Jesus makes alive.

Jew and Gentile

In the narrative, Jesus crosses many culturally established boundaries internal to Israel. However, the external geographical and social boundary separating Israel from the Gentiles is the boundary against which all internal boundaries are hedges.¹⁴ Once Jesus has abrogated the food laws, the door to contact with Gentiles is wide open. Immediately after Jesus declares all foods clean, he goes to (unclean) Gentile territory and encounters the Syrophoenician woman. We see the same sequence in the Acts of the Apostles, where immediately after Peter has a vision in which all foods are declared clean, he goes to the (unclean) house of Cornelius and inaugurates the mission among Gentiles (Acts 10:1-48). Just as the Cornelius episode is the breakthrough in the Acts of the Apostles,

128; David Rhoads, "Social Criticism: Crossing Boundaries," in *Mark and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, (Fortress Press, 1992), 135-161.

13. Marcus Borg, *Conflict, Holiness, and Politics in the Teaching of Jesus* (Trinity Press, Int'l, 1998).

14. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, (Routledge, 2002), 269.

12. Jerome Neyrey, "The Idea of Purity in Mark's Gospel," 91-

so Jesus' contact with the Syrophenician woman in Mark is the point at which the fundamental social boundary is crossed. The subsequent feeding of 4,000 Gentiles in the Decapolis is the outcome of this breakthrough.

Rhetorically, the episode has great force with the hearers, for Jesus' own reluctance to heal a Gentile may represent the resistance to Gentiles that Mark expected the hearers of his gospel to entertain. When Jesus the Jewish protagonist changes his mind in response to the woman's faith, heals her, and then retraces his steps to the Decapolis, heals a man there and feeds a crowd in the desert, the hearers are led to follow. At the point in the narrative when this feeding of bread to Gentiles takes place, all of the boundary-crossings preparatory to a world mission have been resolved. Immediately after this second foray into the Decapolis, Jesus returns to Jewish territory to resume his mission there and to begin the journey to Jerusalem. Later, it comes as no surprise to the hearer when Jesus tells his disciples that between the time of his death and his return in glory, "the good news must first be proclaimed to all the Gentile nations" (13:10). Our episode thus represents a major shift of strategy within the narrated plot and foreshadows the future of the narrative world when the disciples are to proclaim to all the Gentile nations.

The standards of judgment

Standards of judgment are those values embedded in a narrative by which the hearer is led to judge the goodness or badness of the characters and their actions. The standards of judgment represent the moral fabric of a narrative.

Two Ways

Mark has woven his narrative tightly in this regard, for the whole gospel reflects a moral dualism in which there are two ways, each of which mirrors the other as its opposite. These two ways are identified in the story as "thinking the things of God" and "thinking the things of people" (8:33). These two ways represent "what God wants of people" as a contrast to "what people want for themselves." The key features of each way of life can be set out as follows.

The Things of God

faith
courage
losing one's life for the good news
being least
being servant
doing good

The Things of Humans

lack of faith
fear
saving one's life
being great
lording over people
doing harm

When we look at the Markan characters, we see that they embody one choice or the other. Jesus embodies the things of God, while the authorities embody the things of people. The disciples vacillate between the two ways, for they want to follow Jesus but they do not want to give up their cultural values. The minor characters—the little ones who have faith—share with

In her willingness to be identified as a little dog, she is "least" on behalf of her daughter.

Jesus the positive values of the rule of God: for example, the faith of the woman with the flow of blood (5:25-34), the persistence of Bartimaeus (10:46-52), the willingness of the widow to contribute "her whole living" (12:41-44), the service of the woman who anoints Jesus (14:3-9), the courage of Joseph of Arimathea (15:44-47), and so on. The Syrophenician woman embodies the things of God in several ways. She exemplifies faith. In coming on behalf of her daughter, she is serving and bringing life. In her willingness to be identified as a little dog, she is "least" on behalf of her daughter. When we thus see her behavior in the context of this larger moral fabric of Mark's narrative world, we see even more clearly how fully integrated this episode is within Mark's gospel.

Least of all

Particularly significant to this story is the portrayal of the Syrophenician woman measuring up to the Markan standard of being "least." Later in the story, Jesus tells the disciples that if they wish to be great, they are to be "least of all and everyone's servant." For Mark, being least is never an end itself, much less an expression of humility for its own sake. Rather, it is always a means of elevating others of lower status or serving others with less power. Here the woman humbles herself to serve the needs of her daughter.

There are eight diminutives in our episode, a signal of the narrator's development of this motif of least-ness: "little daughter" occurs once, "little dogs" twice, "crumbs" once, and "little ones" twice. In addition, the regular word for demon, used twice here, is itself a diminutive, thus depicting an unclean spirit as "a little demon." This is an extraordinary number of diminutives in such a brief episode.

We can now see how the woman is "least" on behalf of her daughter. In her approach to Jesus, the woman was kneeling, begging, and giving honor as an inferior. The diminutives in her response to his rejection reinforce the picture of the woman humbling herself on behalf of her daughter: "even the little dogs down under the table eat some of the crumbs of the little ones." Thus, she diminishes herself by being willing to be identified as a little scavenger dog, down under the table, eating some of the little children's crumbs—in order to get her daughter healed. In so doing, the Syrophenician woman anticipates Jesus' teaching about the greatness of being least. Later in the narration, when hearing Jesus' teaching about greatness, the hearer may recall the Syrophenician woman and her daughter and include them among the "the little ones who have faith" (9:42). In fact, at the end of our episode, the narrator picks up on her depiction of the Jews as the "little ones" and refers in turn to the woman's Gentile daughter as the "little one," thereby including her as one of the "children" of God.

Gender and the subversion of dominance

I have kept the issue of the gender of the suppliant until the end of our analysis. I have done this because the femaleness of the suppliant is not essential for the story to work as a crossing into Gentile territory. Gender is not essential to this episode, as it is, for example, in the episodes with the woman having a flow of blood and with the poor widow. The story would have worked if a Gentile male had come on behalf of his daughter or son. Yet this observation makes the presence of a woman here all the more remarkable, and it changes everything. It is a woman who finds Jesus, a woman who approaches Jesus in a house, a woman who challenges Jesus' words, a woman who gives "the word," a woman who gets Jesus to change his mind, a woman who paves the way for the whole mission to the Gentiles.

The role of women in Mark is a complex matter. On the one hand, Mark's narrative is clearly androcentric: male-preference language refers to people in general, male pronouns represent the many, and masculine language depicts God and Satan. The author often identifies women by their relationship to a male: Simon's mother-in-law, Mary the mother of Jesus, Jesus' sisters (who unlike the brothers are not named), the wife of Herod, Mary the Mother of James and Joses. There are a limited number of women. They approach Jesus mainly in houses. Most are not followers of Jesus but are recipients of healing. Few women have speaking parts. In fact, women sometimes appear as people about whom males talk, such as in the cases of the woman who anoints Jesus and of the poor widow. In these cases, women are held up by the male Jesus as models for male behavior.

Yet many aspects of the Markan narrative may be somewhat uncustomary for the times. Jesus has public contact with women. He heals women. The narrator does not depict all women by their relationship to males: the woman with the flow of blood, the Syrophenician woman, the one who anoints him, the widow, Mary the Magdalene. The narrator tells us that the disciples leave sisters and mothers as well as brothers and fathers in order to follow Jesus. In turn, those who do the will of God are mothers and sisters as well as brothers to Jesus. Although there are none among the twelve, women "follow" Jesus, "serve" him throughout Galilee, and "come up with him" to Jerusalem—language that is used to depict discipleship (15:40–41). When the twelve have fled, women are present at the crucifixion and then go to anoint his body after the Sabbath. In the end, the burden of proclaiming the good news is laid on the women when the twelve male disciples were nowhere to be found.

Also, Mark is anti-patriarchal. Jesus teaches that the disciples are not to lord over anyone, not to exert authority over anyone. Jesus makes no provision for communal roles that would authorize some to exercise authority over others. The narrator never mentions Jesus' own father (6:3). His followers leave fathers, but they do not receive fathers (10:29–30). This paves the way for women, slaves, and children to be the models for all followers. Women are models of faith (the woman with the flow of blood), serving (Simon's mother-in-law, the woman who anoints, the women at

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the grave), being least (the poor widow), and giving their lives (the poor widow). The few women who respond negatively to John and Jesus in Mark are connected with the wealthy upper classes: Herodias, her daughter, and the maid of the High Priest. Apart from these exceptions, the women in Mark exemplify what the lower classes in general also exemplify in Mark. As such, the women play a similar role to other minor characters, the Markan 'little people.'

By depicting minor characters, particularly women, in such positive roles, Mark subverts any presumption to dominance by the other group characters. In contrast to the destructiveness of the leaders, Mark shows the service of the minor characters. In contrast to the failures of the disciples, Mark depicts the minor characters performing the responsibilities of disciples. In contrast to the Jewish people as a whole, Mark shows some Gentiles just as eager with faith as some Jews are to receive the benefits of the kingdom. Finally, in contrast to the patriarchy of males, Mark displays women as models for discipleship. In a sense, the story of the Syrophenician woman is so significant because it subverts pretensions of all these groups. Here is a model for leaders about how to serve. Here is a non-disciple who understands Jesus' riddles. Here is a non-Jew who has persistent faith. Here is a Gentile "dog" who is least in the esteem of Jewish culture, but who in the eyes of God and of God's agent Jesus (and the narrator) is truly great. Here is a woman who models the values of the kingdom.

Complexity of the episode

The episode of the Syrophenician woman is an integral part of the fabric that comprises Mark's narrative. In order to explain this one passage, it becomes necessary, in a sense, to repeat the whole narrative of Mark from beginning to end. In terms of what precedes this story in Mark's narrative, the hearers come to this episode after a period of experiencing type-scenes, character revelations, plot developments, thematic interweaving, stylistic devices, and rhetorical strategies. In terms of what follows, the episode of the Syrophenician woman continues to provide echoes in the hearing of the audience throughout the rest of the (hour and a half of) narration. When the whole narrative is completed (or repeated), the hearer recalls this single episode as an integral part of the interwoven tapestry of Mark's gospel.

Much of what contributes to the complexity of this episode is that so many Markan motifs and patterns run through the episode. In light of this complexity, we can see how reductionistic it is to offer one title to this episode (as provided by some translations) when any number of titles could be given: Another Healing of the Kingdom; Exorcism from a Distance!; A Gentile with Faith; A Clever Foreigner; Finally, A Riddle Understood; A Foil for the Disciples; Jesus Changes His Mind; The Kingdom Shared with Gentiles; An Outsider Becomes an Insider; Crossing the Final Boundary; The Beginning of a Mission to Gentiles; Foreshadowing the Mission to the World; The Least are the Greatest; The Family of God's Children is Extended; The Syrophenician Woman.

Rhetorical impact in historical context

When we interpret this episode in light of the themes of the whole story, we are also able to see more clearly the rhetorical impact this story may have had on an ancient audience as a boundary-crossing narrative. If the Gospel of Mark was written in Galilee from a peasant perspective, this passage may well reflect realistically the hostility between Galileans and Tyrians, especially during or just after the Roman Jewish War of 66-70 CE, the time when Mark was most likely written. At the opening of the war, Tyrians assaulted Jews in the city of Tyre and in the villages under their aegis. These actions may have reflected the hostility between Jews and Gentiles of Tyre already present at that time and probably represented the Tyrian fear of Jewish aggression against them for long standing oppression.¹⁵ Galilee would have been affected by these animosities. Galilee served as the breadbasket for Tyre. Tyrians were able to eat well because wealthy Tyrians could afford food from Galilee when the poor Jewish peasants of the villages in Galilee may not have had enough to eat for themselves.¹⁶

In this context, Jesus' proverb might have expressed the actual views of the Galileans toward the Tyrians at the time Mark was written: "Let our children be satisfied first. It isn't good to throw away our children's bread to the dogs." Ironically, the woman's proverb may well have expressed the despair of the Galileans themselves, that (unlike we Galileans), "Even dogs get crumbs." The followers of Jesus in Mark's audience may have shared a Galilean hostility toward Tyre implied by these proverbial sayings.¹⁷

In such a context, Mark's story of the Syrophenician woman functioned much like the story of the Ninevites who repented to Jonah's reluctant preaching or like the parable about the (oxymoronic) good Samaritan. The story challenges the audience not to set limits on the universality of the good news of the kingdom of God. The entire first part of Mark's story prepares the hearers to

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go with Jesus across this final boundary to Gentile territory. To portray Jesus himself expressing the hostility that Mark's audience may have had toward Tyrians and then changing his mind in response to the cleverness and faith of this Gentile woman from Tyre enables Mark to make the point in a most graphic way. In the narrative, the Syrophenician woman defuses the initial rejection of Jesus by accepting the epithet of "little dog" and by referring to the Jewish children with the endearing term of "the little ones." In this way, a story set in Jesus' time defuses and disarms the hostility of hearers in Mark's time.

Conclusion

This extraordinary little story attacks presumptions and limits on many fronts: this is a Gentile who gets her daughter healed; this is a woman who disdains status more than the men do; this is an insightful suppliant who understands better than the disciples do; this is an impure person who has greater access to God than the 'pure' (narrative) leaders of Israel; this is a woman whose story leads hearers to overcome a presumption and a hostility that would limit the kingdom to the Jewish children of God. In this episode, Mark seeks to attack the very heart of human resistance to the universality of the gospel and in so doing calls his hearers to sow the seeds of the kingdom everywhere.

15. Theissen, *The Gospels in Context: Social and Political History in the Synoptic Tradition*, (Bloomsbury: T & T Clark, 1999).

16. Ibid. Theissen argues that the economic disparity between wealthy Tyrians and Jewish peasants was represented in the story by the depiction of the woman as a cultural Hellene who was wealthy (note reference to the daughter's bed as a "bed" rather than as a peasant's "mat") and therefore a member of the free-citizenry of the city of Tyre.

17. Ibid.