



Moral Agency at the Borders: Rereading the Story of the Syrophoenician Woman

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From there [Jesus] set out and went away to the region of Tyre....A woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him....Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter."

—Mark 7:24-30

Recent scholarship in New Testament studies affords new insight into the character of the Syrophoenician woman in the Gospel of Mark, where she argues with a reluctant Jesus, urging, "Even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." New insights build from materialist approaches to Scripture, and taken together, the figure of the Syrophoenician woman as set in her likely social-historical context is suggestive for understanding moral agency today.

The passage as a whole has been interpreted in various ways. Some traditionalist Christian readings have found a moral about the power of faith, humility, and

Was the Syrophoenician woman a person of low position seeking sustenance or an urban member of the ruling class seeking advantage? Our reading will be informed by our own situation. In our approach to Jesus, we can be the Syrophoenician woman as we risk solidarity and difference.

persistence, suitable for women in the face of desperation and insult.¹ One commentary from the late 1950s refers back to John Calvin on this point. Calvin attributed the greatness of the Syrophenician woman's "faith" to the fact that she "pursued her course steadily, through formidable opposition; [and] suffered herself to be annihilated."² Countering such conventional "male-stream" readings, some feminist interpreters like Sharon Ringe and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza have embraced the idea that the Syrophenician woman bests Jesus in the repartee,³ calling Jesus to account, even teaching him something about the nature of his own mission. Aside from the gendered subtext, most commentators agree that the passage in its literary context is intended to address the early Jewish-Christian mission to the Gentiles,⁴ which was of issue in the early church and placed here into Jesus' ministry.⁵

My analysis of the passage emphasizes moral agency in relation to underlying historical power dynamics, particularly those historical reconstructions that highlight ways that our assumptions about first-century gender and political economy shape the verbal exchange. By agency, I mean the capacity to effect change at the bodily, interpersonal, and social-ecological levels. Moral agency incorporates a dynamic, life-giving sense of power. Agency is a matter of creative and unfinished potential. Moreover, I use the rubric of "border crossing" to capture the sense of agency at play in the Syrophenician woman story and to relate agency to the social and economic constraints that may well have been assumed by early Christian audiences.

"we can think of our lives in terms of border crossing whenever we meet communities of difference"

Current academic dialect frequently uses the metaphor of border crossing to describe the actions of one who stands between communities of interest. Over a decade ago, Gloria Anzaldúa appealed to "borderlands," and by extension, "border crossing," as a way to represent the marginalization and multiple identities characteristic of what is known in Spanish as *mestiza* life, Chicano-Native American exist-

¹Hugh Anderson acknowledges that the term "faith," which appears in Matthew's version, does not appear in Mark's, and yet he still insists, "but for Mark her faith is no less real": *The Gospel of Mark* (London: Oliphants, 1976) 191. See also Eduard Schweizer's supersessionist interpretation contrasting the "faith" of the Gentile woman to "Jewish legalism," while also acknowledging that the word "faith" does not occur: *The Good News according to Mark*, trans. Donald H. Maduig (Richmond: John Knox, 1970) 151, 153.

²C. E. B. Cranfield, *St. Mark: An Introduction and Commentary* (London: Cambridge, 1958) 249.

³Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1992); Sharon H. Ringe, "A Gentile Woman's Story," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Letty M. Russell (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985) 65-72.

⁴R. Mark Shipp, "Bread to the Dogs? Matthew 15:21-28 and Tensions in Matthew's Understanding of the Gentiles," *Koinonia* 2 (1999) 107-129.

⁵Amy Jill Levine makes this point in her analysis of Matt 15:21-28: "The Matthean Program of Salvation History: A Contextual Analysis of the Exclusivity Logia" (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1984).

tence in the contemporary U.S. Southwest.⁶ More recently, Henry Giroux has presented border crossing as the mark of postmodern cultural production.⁷ We can think of our lives in terms of border crossing whenever we meet communities of difference: churches meeting mosques, affluent people encountering welfare recipients. When we encounter difference, the apparent homogeneity of groups turns out to be very suspect. No simple cultural homogeneity exists within the Lutheran church, for example. There are Spanish-speaking as well as Scandinavian, gay as well as straight Lutherans. As it applies to the story of the Syrophenician woman, border crossing broaches how lines of difference are represented and transgressed between Jesus and this Gentile woman.

FIRST-CENTURY BORDERLANDS

To access the proximate “borders” of life in first-century Roman Palestine, the likely point of origin for our story,⁸ exegetical work must bring together at least three prevailing social structures of the ancient world: patronage, honor-shame, and purity. These frameworks define material and ideological boundaries important for agency in the New Testament and provide lenses for mediating our understanding of the social construction of difference in relation to our own, otherwise very different, historical situation.⁹ A full overview of the political and cultural landscape would delineate all of these. For purposes of this essay, however, I will pick up on patronage, mentioning honor-shame and purity systems only in passing, because I believe that a materialist approach—one that begins with economic structures and their embedded cultural systems—allows for the freshest rereading of the text and provides a meaningful context for gender and cultural difference in the story.

⁶Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987).

⁷Henry Giroux, *Border Crossings: Cultural Workers and the Politics of Education* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992). See also Becky Thompson, “Time Traveling and Border Crossing: Reflections on White Identity,” in *Names We Call Home: Autobiography on Racial Identity*, ed. Becky Thompson and Sangeeta Tyagi (New York: Routledge, 1996) 93-109.

⁸The prevailing assumption is that a specific community and its problems contextualized the narrative. Mary Ann Tolbert challenges this assumption on the grounds that the narrative components of the gospel, unlike particular issues in Paul’s letters, did not necessarily emerge organically out of a specific community and were not necessarily geared to a specific community’s needs: Mary Ann Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel: Mark’s World in Literary-Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) 303-305. Still, others, like Ched Meyers, side with an agrarian Palestinian origin to Mark’s gospel. Meyers dates Mark as pre-70 C.E., finding a “structural symmetry” between the time of Jesus and Mark, which would allow Mark to interpret the life of Jesus while “insert[ing] interests of his period into the story”: Ched Meyers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988) 42. I would offer that many of the pertinent associations with the region and city of Tyre do not strictly require a rural context for Mark’s gospel. Even if one placed the writing of Mark in a Roman-occupied city, mid-first century, the economic plight of Jewish peasants, who were agriculturally based and suffering under heavy taxation, surely would have been known to the gospel writer. Hence the underlying economic and political themes within the story are not, strictly speaking, contingent on exact point of origin.

⁹Acknowledging the problems of historicism here, I realize that gospel stories do not transparently present history, but instead provide an ideologically informed representation. These frames, gleaned in part from gospel texts, nonetheless lend some insight into meanings for storytellers, gospel writers, and their first-century audiences, and so for current interpretations as well.

The patronage system in the historical context of early Judaism under the Roman Empire routinized economic dependency and shaped imperial and cultural domination. It was a system that supported Roman patriarchal colonialism, and for our purposes, serves as a window into the Jesus movement as a renewal movement within Judaism. With only a very small upper class and a vast lower class, influence in ancient Roman societies was mediated by roles of patron and client. Dominic Crossan argues that patronage-clientage extended to Mediterranean Jewish life in the first century.¹⁰ Certainly economic patronage imposed by Roman colonialism quickly penetrated the retainer class of Jewish society and even in Palestine formed the overarching economic structure within which less-formal social and economic exchange took place.

“carpentry in the Greco-Roman world would have indicated lower-class status”

Where might Jesus have fit within this patronage system? One need only acknowledge the “portrait gallery” of Jesus, to borrow N. T. Wright’s phrase,¹¹ to realize that Jesus’ status and healing miracles are interpreted in myriad ways. Within a structural-materialist hermeneutic, I concur with biblical scholars who stress political and economic dynamics when rereading the Jesus traditions. In Mark, Jesus is described as the son of a carpenter. Carpentry in the Greco-Roman world, unlike our modern conception of middle-strata, skilled labor, would have indicated lower-class status, but for very different reasons. According to Crossan, in an agrarian society, artisans like carpenters ranked below farming peasants, “because they were usually recruited and replenished from its dispossessed members,” those who were forced off their lands by debt, disease, or drought.¹² In the ancient world at the start of the Christian era, the only status below artisan was that of outcast. Socially and economically, this places Jesus’ origins well outside of the ruling and retainer classes of the Roman protectorate and within the most marginal of rural peasantry. Jesus’ status delimits the economic and social boundaries within which his sayings and practices are to be interpreted. As Ched Meyers puts it, we must “appreciate the forms of political expression available to the uneducated and poor majority who were structured out of the dominant mechanisms of social power.”¹³

Anthropological studies of honor-shame provide another cultural-theoretical

¹⁰John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994) 95-96.

¹¹N. T. Wright, *Who Was Jesus?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992). See also E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

¹²Ramsay MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations: 50 B.C. to A.D. 284* (New Haven and London: Yale, 1974) 17-18, 107-108, 139-140, 198; as cited in Crossan, *Jesus*, 24-25. As further evidence of Jesus’ low status, Crossan (p. 27) points to the pagan philosopher Celsus who, writing in the late second century C.E., challenged the divinity of Jesus on the basis of class snobbery.

¹³Meyers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 58.

lens for understanding the moral universe of ancient Palestine. Based on patterns observed in communities in historical and geographical continuity with the ancient Mediterranean world, the honor-shame model is consistent with what we know of biblical communities in the region and provides a useful supporting heuristic from which to evaluate agency.¹⁴ One aspect of this honor-shame motif—the dyadic worldview—is particularly relevant here. Honor and shame were experienced within a communal culture very different from the pervasive individualism of our own post-Enlightenment West. Group affiliation was paramount in the other-oriented culture of first-century Judaism. Honor and shame accrued through public and quasi-public exchanges like those typical of patronage. They were not simply attributed to a single individual, but to the pertinent social group as a whole.¹⁵ This is central to dyadic culture and, I think, critical for understanding the symbolic representations and interactions between Jesus and the Syrophenician woman.

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Societies tend to display coherence among the spheres of order: social, physical, and cosmological.¹⁶ Crossan makes this point in terms of the “symbolic interaction” of “body-society parallelism,” meaning, “social symbolism is always latent in bodily miracle and that bodily miracle [in the New Testament] always has social signification.”¹⁷ In this way, a miracle healing of a single individual across lines of social difference may be viewed as subversive of the established order and an act of political-social, even economic, resistance.

AGENCY AT THE BORDERS

Turning back now to the Marcan story and to Jesus’ curious epithet, his initial refusal to help, how are we to understand and appropriate the story in light of first-century borders? Up to this point, I have argued that Jesus was located within and may have symbolically represented the rural peasantry of Jewish Palestine. But what do we know about the Syrophenician woman in terms of her means and

¹⁴Honor-shame culture in the New Testament world easily presupposes the patronage system and its attendant hierarchy of wealth and status. Both operate at the same time and function as mutually supportive sets of practices and means of social regulation.

¹⁵Bruce Malina and Jerome Neyrey, “First-Century Personality: Dyadic, Not Individual,” in *The Social World of Luke-Acts*, ed. Jerome H. Neyrey (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991) 67-96. The importance of ascribed honor associated with inherited social position can be seen in New Testament genealogies, for instance: Bruce Malina, “Honor and Shame in Luke-Acts: Pivotal Values of the Mediterranean World,” in Neyrey, *The Social World of Luke-Acts*, 29.

¹⁶Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), as cited in Ched Meyers, “The Socio-Historical Site of Mark’s Story of Jesus,” in *Binding the Strong Man*, 39-87.

¹⁷Crossan, *Jesus*, 58-59.

kinship affiliation? Two alternative readings of her relative status lend different connotations to the verbal exchange.

The first reading, and by far the most pervasive among late-twentieth-century feminists, understands the Syrophoenician woman to be poor, needy, and of lesser status than Jesus. At the outset of the story, Jesus goes “away to the region of Tyre” where he meets a woman, “a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin.” The Gospel of Mark is generally thought to have originated somewhere between northern Palestine and Rome. As alluded to earlier, I have assumed a rural-Jewish, northern Palestinian origin to the gospel, prior to the destruction of the temple. This location would mean that the underlying economic situation in the story is one of rural poverty and would indicate structural symmetry between the time of Jesus and the Gospel of Mark. Such prevailing conditions of economic scarcity might suggest that the Syrophoenician woman was poor, and, taken together with the fact that the story is set in the outlying areas belonging to the city of Tyre, may indeed mean that the woman belonged to the peasant class that inhabited the area.

Supporting evidence of the Syrophoenician woman’s low position is derived from textual clues and the fact that she is a woman. Though we cannot know definitively the Syrophoenician woman’s economic status, one might infer from the fact that she goes out alone for help that there is no one else to send, no male relative to lend support or to represent her interests in public. In the midst of rural poverty and large-scale displacement from family lands, accentuated by the contrast to the urban wealth of Tyre, deprivation would be a given. The Syrophoenician woman as single mother in the rural area outlying Tyre would know scarcity as a daily reality. Perhaps she would put together scraps for a meal in order to feed her daughter. It is the intelligence of survival. The poor see the crumbs. For her, the crumbs are enough, or at least something of real value that will provide much-needed sustenance.¹⁸

If this is indeed the sort of struggle that early audiences would have associated with the Syrophoenician woman, then Jesus’ actions, refusing his healing power to a desperate woman and her ailing daughter and comparing them to dogs, with all the connotations of impurity, are morally indefensible.¹⁹ Moral agency as border crossing would focus on the Syrophoenician woman and her willingness to step out of feminine modesty, to speak in public, and to intrude upon men’s company, as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has noted.²⁰ The fact that Jesus learns something

¹⁸A parallel can be drawn with the bleeding woman in Mark 5. There, time was scarce. Jesus was hurrying to reach Jairus’s failing daughter in time when the hemorrhaging woman touched Jesus from behind. Instead of rushing onward toward Jairus’s house, Jesus stopped to speak to the woman, and as a result Jairus’s daughter died before Jesus arrived. In the end, though, time does not limit the power of God. Jesus raised Jairus’s daughter from the dead. Similarly, here in chapter 7, scarcity does not limit the sustaining power of God. I thank Brigitte Kahl for mentioning this connection.

¹⁹Jesus’ remark is most certainly insulting, as Sharon Ringe argued in her well-known feminist interpretation of the passage in the mid-1980s: Jesus’ comment is “flippant, even cruel, defying justification”: Ringe, “A Gentile Woman’s Story,” 69.

²⁰Fiorenza, *But She Said*, 103-104.

from a lowly woman and publicly acknowledges that learning is also an instance of transgressing convention, whether that learning is about the nature of his mission or an economy of scale with respect to the value of a few crumbs.

But this is not the only possible reading. Tyre was a predominantly Gentile city with an extensive relationship with its Jewish neighbors. Commentaries almost uniformly interpret the characterization of the woman as a Syrophoenician as meaning Greek or Hellenistic in culture,²¹ and we also know that Tyre was hellenized prior to the first century. The combination of the proximity to Tyre and the woman's Syrophoenician ancestry recalls the story of Ahab, Jezebel, and Elijah in 1 Kgs 21, where Jezebel, a Phoenician princess, was condemned to be eaten by dogs.²² A Syrophoenician woman from the region of Tyre, from a first-century rural-Jewish perspective, might well represent an urban member of the ruling class whose interests were in opposition to the interests of rural Jews.

Tyre is mentioned several other times in the New Testament. In Acts, Paul visited a Christian community in the immediate vicinity of Tyre (Acts 21:3-7); Herod supplied food to Tyre and Sidon (Acts 12:20); and Paul visited by ship from the west (Acts 21:3). These references suggest that Tyre was a well-known commercial center with significant trade relations along the Mediterranean. Gerd Theissen takes the point further, arguing that Tyre was a rich city, dependent for foodstuffs upon the agricultural production of its outlying areas, including its neighbors in northern Palestine.²³ Tyre would have owned surrounding territories and could have claimed agricultural proceeds from these, but it would also have used its considerable clout and wealth to acquire surplus from Jewish villages, sometimes leaving less than enough for those who actually worked the land. One can imagine that the exploitative situation was exacerbated during times of drought and famine; urban centers likely took their allotment of food first, leaving shortages of food in the countryside.²⁴

If the Syrophoenician woman's designation as a Greek together with the setting near Tyre indicate that the woman was indeed a member of an urban elite whose life presumed the exploitation of the Jewish peasantry, then the verbal exchange between Jesus and the woman takes on a different nuance. Given these underlying power dynamics, Jesus' household metaphor in which the bread goes first to the children of Israel would be understood by early listeners as a reversal of the reigning order. His initial speech act and subsequent healing might have served to acknowledge the legitimate grievance against certain practices like the diversion of harvests to wealthy urban centers. As Theissen observes, this would explain the metaphorical shift from sickness and healing to food and chronologi-

²¹See, e.g., Douglas R. Edwards, "Tyre," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6:691; Shipp, "Bread to the Dogs?" 111.

²²In the 1 Kings story, Jezebel was condemned for having Naboth killed so that Ahab could take over his vineyard (v. 23).

²³Gerd Theissen, *The Gospels in Context: Social and Political History in the Synoptic Tradition*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 69, 73.

²⁴*Ibid.*

cally ordered feeding.²⁵ Note also that the woman's witty retort accepts this restructuring. In the end, we still must contend with Jesus' apparent callousness toward the daughter's suffering and his play upon gender and impurity, but the structural social and economic relations, again within this range of assumptions, might explain a dimension of Jesus' reluctance.

Whether the passage is interpreted as a chastising of wealth and a reversal of the reigning social order or as a celebration of an uppity woman is, in the end, a matter for Christian communities to decide. Such decisions are not made strictly for the sake of historical accuracy, but also for the sake of speaking to our present-day concerns from within particular locations. As New Testament scholar Louise Schottroff says of her materialist hermeneutic, meaning in biblical texts derives in part from questions that emerge from contemporary movements. Authority resides in the liberatory faith and practice to be discerned in the biblical witness and "not so much in the biblical text itself."²⁶ Likewise, as Larry Rasmussen argues from a Lutheran perspective, we must notice the impact of readings on the agency of readers, including implications for moral communities shaped by Jesus' teaching.²⁷

“from the perspective of Christian communities in North America today, the Syrophoenician woman story is best interpreted as weighing against unchecked social advantage and in favor of a border-crossing agency”

In keeping with these liberationist hermeneutics, I would argue that, from the perspective of Christian communities in North America today, the Syrophoenician woman story is best interpreted as weighing against unchecked social advantage and in favor of a border-crossing agency. This interpretation accounts for alternative historical reconstructions that lend meaning to the passage and, at the same time, contextualizes gender within ethnic-cultural and economic institutions of the first century—institutional perspectives, which, in turn, can be recognized from our late-capitalist, postmodern vantage.

Jesus and the Syrophoenician woman defy first-century conventions of power and deference, suggesting potential renewal in the form of new commitments to social and economic cooperation. At the level of social signification, to transgress boundaries and to heal bodies challenges the status quo and reworks relations of power. Here Jesus and the Gentile woman act in the full context of everyday life. Their respective moral capacities and responsibilities are not clear-cut

²⁵Ibid., 65.

²⁶Louise Schottroff, *Let the Oppressed Go Free: Feminist Perspectives on the New Testament*, trans. Annemarie S. Kidder, foreword by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993) 12-15.

²⁷Bruce C. Birch and Larry L. Rasmussen, *The Bible and Ethics in Christian Life* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989) 17, 33-34.

givens established apart from their historical context. Rather, moral capacity is creatively realized in and through conversation across ethnic-cultural, economic, and gender lines, where these borders indicate a real base in the lived world.

On best reading, then, the healing miracle at the end of the story is premised upon a new social relationship, one that emerges through engagement with—if not in overcoming—difference. Parties associated with long-standing and opposing interests work out healing (salvation) between them. Today we might think of people speaking up for themselves: small farmers fighting to save their family farms, laypersons in the churches absolutely demanding that their voices be heard in the wake of abuse, indigenous and immigrant communities resisting obliteration within dominant cultures and expanding market economies, and people who keep solidarity with them who aren't themselves directly victimized. As Christians looking to the Jesus traditions for moral guidance in times of social unease and increasing disparities of wealth, attention to basic conditions of survival and well-being is good moral practice.

Such a reading is both hopeful and humbling for those of us in the contemporary churches. Who are we in this story? Can we reasonably identify with the long-suffering disenfranchised? Or can we more reasonably identify with the representative of a wealthy, ethnically-privileged group? If the Syrophenician woman, by her very identity as a Greek-speaking person culturally allied with urban rulers, represented power and privilege vis-à-vis early Jewish-Christian audiences, her willingness to engage the other, to hear Jesus' rebuke, and to answer back on his terms, all without relinquishing the legitimacy of her claim, offers a positive model of agency as border crossing for those of us who share some measure of status and influence. So too does her witty retort if she is understood to be of lesser means. Either way, we can be the Syrophenician woman insofar as we risk solidarity and difference. ⊕

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