



# Moving Bodies and Translating Scripture: Interpretation and Incarnation

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When the woman in the river of blood<sup>1</sup> swims up behind Jesus in the crowd (Mark 5:21–43), which she does every summer in the year of Mark, preachers might be forgiven for being glad that all they have to deal with are words. Words lend themselves to theological abstractions, and theological abstractions allow interpreters to stage theological disputations on familiar, safe grounds, where the sermonic outcome is already known ahead of time. All the audience is waiting for is to see how the preacher pulls off the trick of challenging them and comforting them in the course of a stirring ten-minute sermon. All the preacher needs to do is to figure out how these words, these clean abstractions, may be made to speak to ideas the congregation is ready to reflect on. We have all learned how to do this. We rightly distinguish law and gospel; we listen for death and enact life. When the woman in the river of blood is a theological construct, dead until she can be made

<sup>1</sup>The word *ρῶσις* most often is translated as “flow,” and for good reason. The word, however, also means “river,” and given that the woman’s whole life had been washed away by the unceasing flow of blood, I have chosen to translate *ρῶσις* as “river.” I have discussed this passage at some length in my commentary: Richard W. Swanson, *Provoking the Gospel of Mark: A Storyteller’s Commentary* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2005).

*A central tenet of Christian faith—the Word made flesh—suggests that a “fleshly” or embodied interpretation of biblical texts will offer new insights to the interpreter and the audience. Our bodies are real and significant just as Jesus’ body was real and significant—even for biblical interpretation.*

alive, she is friendly and agreeable. She is a vessel of uncleanness from whom Jesus takes away everything, including her sin (to quote an idea-filled sermon I heard recently), so that he can fill her with life and salvation. Words and abstractions make this easy.

Bodies, however, are inconvenient, especially when translation is involved. Translation, of course, has behind it a physical metaphor: things are moved from place to place (trans-lated). This act of carrying (in this case, from the Gospel of Mark into the pulpit) is easy when we are talking about abstractions; because they have been pulled completely out of gross physical reality, abstractions weigh nothing and are therefore easy to carry up into the pulpit, even those old traditional pulpits that require the preacher to climb ten or twelve steps into the air.

Bodies are different, and inconvenient, if only because of gravity. It is not a simple thing to carry a body from one place to another, and this becomes clear when one tries to translate Mark 5:21–43 from a text on a page to a scene performed by bodies in space. For more than a decade, I have worked with a group of actors, the members of the Provoking the Gospel Storytelling Project, and we have together explored what it might mean to imagine that the stories in the Bible take place, not in our heads, but in real places: in the real world, involving real people, with real bodies. Together we have explored texts in front of audiences at regional and national meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature, at the Festival Gathering of the Network of Biblical Storytellers, at Synod Assemblies, and in workshops for pastors and for local congregations. Out of our shared work has come a series of performance commentaries on the gospels<sup>2</sup> and a method for exploring biblical texts that preachers have found useful.<sup>3</sup> In this short article, I hope to illustrate this value.

## BODIES COMPLICATE EVERYTHING

### *Bodies crowd together*

Bodies are different, and inconvenient. For starters, translation of this little scene into real bodies will require figuring out the realities of pushing through a crowd. The storyteller informs us that the crowd crushed against Jesus. That this is difficult may be seen in any depiction of Jesus engaged in performing a miracle. Think of the religious art you have seen. Think of the picture Bible you had as a child. In these portrayals, whether in the work of Rembrandt or the Egermeier Bible Story Book, the crowd parts like the Red Sea before Jesus so that the artist, possessed of an idea, can allow the audience to focus on Jesus alone. Mark's storyteller has Jesus engulfed in a crowd that swallows him up. Jesus is not alone, no matter what our theological ideas tell us. This is difficult.

<sup>2</sup>Each volume has the phrase, "Provoking the Gospel," in the title.

<sup>3</sup>Richard W. Swanson, *Provoking the Gospel: Methods to Embody Biblical Storytelling through Drama* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2004). The reader may be forgiven, noticing that this book also incorporates the phrase "Provoking the Gospel," for wondering if I am onto something or just out of good ideas for titles.

The woman is engulfed in the same crowd. This also is difficult, if only because it complicates a customary sermon move. Interpreters, possessed of the idea that sinners (all of us) must approach Jesus prostrated and humble, frequently latch onto the notion that the woman wants only to touch the fringe of Jesus' garment and so place her on the ground behind Jesus. Anyone prostrated on the ground in a milling crowd would be trampled. Bodily realities require us to translate this woman's audacity, not her (imagined) humility. She pushes through the crowd and catches up with Jesus, no small feat because he is on a mission. To catch him, she either has to be physically assertive or very lucky in guessing his random route through a packed public square. What do you have to do to get to the door of a packed subway car if no one else is getting off? What happens when you hurry through an airport during the holidays, late for your plane? All of those bodily realities crowd into translating this little scene for real bodies.

*Bodies bleed*

The storyteller does not tell us anything about the nature of the flow of blood, other than that it is persistent, consistent, and exhausting. That's enough. Twelve years she has been held in the grip of a double mystery: blood itself is a holy mystery (the life is in the blood, as Torah makes clear), and the fact that the flow will not cease adds a conundrum on top of that. For twelve steady years the blood has drained from her, and along with it all her property, all her substance. The physical fact that life has flowed out of her for twelve years must also shape the way she swims upstream in the crowd behind Jesus. The twelve years will have taken a lot out of her.

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It does not necessarily matter what sort of hemorrhage has afflicted her. Blood itself, any blood at all, is a holy mystery that deforms the ordinary world. Because of Judaism's reverence for life, contact with blood (which contains the breath [*ruach*] first breathed into a human nose in Eden) requires a person to perform rituals that mark the return to ordinary life. Though the rituals are described as being effective at removing "uncleanness," the operating notion is not that blood makes a person filthy. Far from it. People with ordinary jobs (ditch-diggers, blacksmiths, offensive linemen) come home covered with ordinary dirt, and there is no suggestion that such people, who may in fact be filthy, are "unclean." But hands that touch a Torah scroll are rendered unclean (*Shabbat* 14), as are hands that touch blood. There is something extraordinary about both blood and the Bible, and contact with either requires rituals of becoming ordinary again.

The woman would never have had that opportunity; she will have remained mysteriously extraordinary for the whole twelve years of her plight. She carries the weight of that reality in her body as she translates herself through the crowd. This

enormous weight makes her the center of gravity in this little scene. She is touching a holy mystery.

That she is swimming through a crowd is extraordinary, because, as Paula Fredriksen points out, matters of this kind of “cleanness” are entirely governed by self-control.<sup>4</sup> Her twelve-year contact with holy blood does not make her “sinful and unclean” in any sense that Christians tend to recognize; it does not render her visibly different from anyone else in that crushing crowd. Matters of “clean” and “unclean” are matters that people manage privately for the sake of the stability of the community that reverences God. There were no “uncleanness police” that stood at the door of the Temple and asked everyone whether or not they had been in contact with blood or other bodily discharge. People of faith regulated themselves individually; it was part of what it meant to be a faithful member of the community.

But that means that the woman’s action in swimming through the crowd is even more striking. She touches people, bringing them all into contact with blood. All are drawn into an unexpected orbit around the holy mystery of life because of her desperate desire to become ordinary again. Those people are not harmed by the contact; they are just marked by the extraordinary mystery of blood until the evening. But how many people will she have touched? We can’t guess, but every one of them will have been drawn into the river of the mystery of life with her. The scene becomes heavier, more massive. No wonder Jesus is forced to orbit, turning and turning around in the crowd, looking for the woman who had touched also him.

And because (as Jacob Neusner points out) “uncleanness” is an “analogical fluid,”<sup>5</sup> flowing from place to place, and from person to person, when Jesus dithers in the crowd, he also spreads the “uncleanness” around. The gravity of the situation becomes greater.

### *Bodies bleed “like that”*

Bodies complicate things further if we are to assume, with the majority of interpreters, that the flow of blood is indeed menstrual. When Jesus has thoroughly tangled things by turning about in the crowd, the woman falls at his feet and tells the whole truth. The whole truth is twelve years long and (if this be menstrual blood) involves a particular kind of bleeding that had cultural consequences, if ancient texts are to be believed. Male bodies appear to be very nervous about female bodies. This shows up at middle-school dances. It shows up also in ancient (male and patriarchal) writing about menstruation. Blood is holy, but menstruation appears to scare men. Some ancient Jewish texts claim that a menstruating woman can curdle milk. Worse still (at least for the poor, dear men with their big, big worries), if a menstruating woman touches a man, she can make him impotent.<sup>6</sup> The

<sup>4</sup>See her discussion of “uncleanness” in Paula Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews : A Jewish Life and the Emergence of Christianity*, 1st ed. (New York: Knopf, 1999).

<sup>5</sup>Jacob Neusner, *The Idea of Purity in Ancient Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 1973).

<sup>6</sup>See Amy-Jill Levine’s “Discharging Responsibility: Matthean Jesus, Biblical Law, and the Hemorrhaging Woman,” in Amy-Jill Levine and Marianne Blickenstaff, *A Feminist Companion to Matthew* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2004) 70–87.

word for “sexual potency” is δυνάμις [power, potency], and that is precisely what the storyteller tells us Jesus noticed was drained out of him when the woman touched him. Any ancient audience would have caught the double meaning in this scene and would have understood, physically, the way male bodies got nervous around menstruating bodies. Bodies complicate everything.

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It simply will not do, therefore, to treat Jesus’ draining power as a mere theological abstraction, as if he had some sort of “Power-o-Meter” on his wrist that he could consult and note that he had just discharged 72.5 “Theo-Volts” of energy, probably just enough to have healed a hemorrhaging woman, who must be somewhere in this milling crowd (“Battery low: recharge soon”). To translate this properly, to carry the ancient bodies out of the text and into the present world, an interpreter is going to have to embody both the unexpected drain and the cultural panic that any ancient audience would have heard in the words alone. Anything less than that decides that the Word didn’t fully become flesh. Instead, the Word became only words, which would mark a serious diminution of the force of Christian theology.

#### BODIES REVEAL

*Because they do not vanish*

There is one more moment that makes the business of bodily translation complicated and eye-opening. Up to this point, pretty much all of this could be discovered through diligent library work, which requires, to pick up an old German physical metaphor, not *Fleisch* [body or flesh], but *Sitzfleisch* [diligence, the stubborn thoroughness required to sit still and stick to a task until it is properly done, pictured in the form of “flesh to sit on”]. This discovery requires *Fleisch*, actual bodies. The first time I played this scene with my actors, the revelation came in a flash, a bodily reality that I had not seen, though I had studied the passage diligently for many years. The revelation comes, once again, from the presence of the body of the woman in the scene with Jesus.

The woman touches Jesus. Jesus searches distractedly in the crowd. The woman falls at his feet. She tells the whole truth. At this point Jesus speaks to her, and affirms her audacious determination as faithfulness. Now the Markan “sandwich scene” can resume. The storyteller has interrupted the scene involving Jairus’s daughter to tell this little story about blood, and now rejoins the previous story, already in progress. If the Bible were only words, this transition would be simple and clean, in a Monty Python sort of way: the storyteller as much as says, “And now for something completely different,” and the story leaps back and resumes its previous flow of ideation. Words are like that, abstractions even more so. They are volatile, vanishing once they have transpired.

Physical events may transpire, but bodies do not evaporate. Bodies are revelatory because they do not disappear. The woman is kneeling in front of Jesus. Jesus is speaking words that ratify what has already happened: she had indeed already been healed and rescued from the river of blood. When the messengers arrive with news, *the woman is still there*. She cannot magically vanish.

*Because they have faces*

When the people from Jairus's house arrive and speak while Jesus is still speaking, real bodily death rudely elbows its way into another human life. Death interrupts even Jesus, shoves its way into the crowd and points out that too much time has been wasted in the crowd of bodies.

The woman who had been bleeding is still on the ground in front of him, and she hears the message. The words of the text may move on quite quickly to the house and the chamber where the girl's body lies, but not before they point out this striking moment with bodies frozen in time, cut off in mid-abstraction. While the woman whose body had been bleeding is still listening, she hears that she had detained Jesus too long. His dithering, caused by a touch that had drained him of potency, caused by a woman's desperate audacity, had led directly to the death of a girl at the brink of the adult promise of fertility. The girl's body lies dead. The woman hears this, and we do, too. Her body reveals what the message means.

Bodily translation requires that we see the woman as she hears these words. Bodily translation requires that we notice what happens to her face when the words sink in. Perhaps she reacts with deep shock and her horror increases the tension in the scene. She had no idea that there would be such consequences to her touch. Perhaps her face shows a nervousness related to the possibility that she had depleted the power [δυναμις] that would have allowed the girl to be healed, so perhaps her face reveals the awkward mix of joy and shame and shock that one sees on the face of the families who go home together from ICU waiting rooms when they encounter the families who will go home alone. Or perhaps she reacts with a kind of hopeful anticipation that is rooted in recognition that anyone who could pull her out of a twelve-year river of blood could also be expected to be able to pull someone out of death. Whatever she hears in the bad news, we see it in her face.

*Because they meet face to face*

Translation for bodies becomes distinctly revelatory when face encounters face. It is in this encounter, Emmanuel Levinas taught us, that ethics are born, because when we meet face to face we discover both challenge and responsibility.<sup>7</sup> Did she catch Jesus' eye at just this moment?

If she did, this face-to-face encounter provides the audience with a commentary on the delay in the crowd. Even if the woman is hopeful for the outcome at Jairus's house, still she knows that the delay caused the parents unspeakable pain.

<sup>7</sup>See the essays collected in Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).

The girl died, and therefore the delay was not merely a delay, it was a deferral of σωτηρία, of the saving rescue for which God's people have had to wait too long. When biblical writers cry, "How long, O LORD?" they are not asking for a train schedule. How long? Once again, too long. If the woman catches Jesus' eye (and how could she not?), the look that will pass between them will place her squarely in a very old, very deep and powerful stream of biblical questioning. She will ask, face to face, "How long, O LORD, until there is enough healing to go around in the world you created?"

*Because they touch each other*

What happens then? The standard-issue Jesus who arrives in too many of my sermons would pat her on the head and reassure her that all is well. He is Jesus, after all. If he does this, I would advise Jesus to be careful. The woman who swam through the crowd to touch him is courageous, even audacious, and one does not pat such people on the head, theologically or otherwise. If the touch contains even a grain of condescension ("It's okay, honey, I know what I'm doing"), the woman's response (in the real, physical world) is likely to be ferocious. Her question, "How long?" was not an idle inquiry.

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This encounter, if it is played with honesty and integrity, will reveal the complexities of hope and absence in the real, physical world. Theologians may be forgiven for stopping at this point to reflect on the implications of a crucified messiah as the only messiah God has sent to the creation. Theology of the cross does not grow out of condescending calm. It discovers tragedy and hope twisted around each other and recognizes that any attempt to minimize either one of these will kill the other. One touch will carry this to the audience better than a long, idea-filled abstraction.

If Jesus pats the woman on the head, the outcome will not be good. But if Jesus turns on his heel and rushes away, leaving the woman who touched him abandoned on the ground, the audience will draw conclusions from the refusal of touch that will be devastating for their opinion of Jesus. And if Jesus takes the time to extend a hand to help the woman as she rises to her feet, physical honesty probably requires the woman to react with at least irritation, since Jesus is, yet again, delaying because of her. But the negotiation around the matter of touch will be crucial to the translation of this scene. When bodies on stage touch each other, everybody in the audience feels the contact. When characters touch each other, they create a world in which there are consequences, not just corollaries.

The world of touch in this scene is rich and complex. The crowd crushes together in the kind of anonymous public touch that we all learn to negotiate. The

woman touches Jesus, and potency drains from him. Jesus perhaps touches the woman before departing. This touch would complete the dramatic arc that started when the woman touched Jesus, but it would also remind the audience that too many bodies touching had contributed to the delay on the way to Jairus's house. And when Jesus arrives in the room where the girl lies dead, he will grasp her hand before he speaks to her. This will mean that he, like the family that has suffered such a horrifying loss, now partakes of corpse-uncleanness, the mysterious reality that Jews encounter when the life-giving blood no longer flows and the body lies eerily inert.

### TRANSLATING BODIES

Embodied performance requires paying exquisite attention to all the words, all the features of text. It explicitly requires that every-body be taken seriously. In some interpretation, only Jesus matters and all the rest (setting, people, and even words) is only stage dressing that surrounds the Dominical Sayings that are the only important thing in the text in the first place. This is a crime against the incarnation. If Jesus' body is real and significant, then it is so because *our* bodies are real and significant.

Physical translation requires figuring out all of this and much more. For example, how does Jesus react in the presence of a woman? Like the ultraorthodox? Like Buddy Christ?<sup>8</sup> Like a disembodied icon? Perhaps more importantly, physical translation requires figuring out how we react; in fact, it validates how honest people react to the events that transpire in the text, or how they would react if they were not shamed into having the "right" religious reaction. Each of these moments when bodies encounter bodies will shape the translation of the scene. Each requires careful reflection and the gathering of our best theological abstractions. But each requires, most significantly, that a body touch another body. This simple act healed the woman. Perhaps it will strengthen our interpretation of the Bible. Working with actors, with bodies in space, has been a gift and a demanding discipline. It has changed the way I interpret the Bible, changed the very meaning of translation. Bodies discipline interpretation. Theologians of incarnation should expect no less. ⊕

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<sup>8</sup>The reference, of course, is to the movie, *Dogma*, and George Carlin's clergy character who invented a new, more marketable, Jesus: "Buddy Christ."