

24. The Syrophenician Woman

Mark 7:24-31

Judaism had always had a certain attraction for high-minded non-Jews, who might sit in on synagogue meetings; the Jews called them "God-fearers." They grew acquainted with Scripture. Whatever they thought of "Israel," they liked the moral part. And also the monotheism part: their world was full of weird gods, some of them worshiped in indecent ways. These God-fearers sought something more philosophically satisfying.

Jesus' message of national renewal was meant for Jews alone, since only their repentance could have any effect on the righteousness of Israel and thus precipitate the return of God. But these "God-fearers" also took note of the message of Micah: that God cares only for how you treat your fellow man, and not for a lot of sacrifices or other devotions. What Jesus, following Micah, had done to Jewish doctrine was to make it less specifically Jewish. Anyone, of any tribe or nation, might obey those rules, and so hope for eternal life at the end. Thus began what amounted to a second wildfire: the adherence of the Gentiles.

It took the Jesus movement leaders by surprise. To help them adjust, it would be good if Jesus himself could be shown as having accepted Gentiles. And so this incident was composed by Mark and added to his Gospel, to bring his "Jesus" up to date with what was happening.

And from thence he arose, and went away into the borders of Tyre and Sidon. And he entered into a house, and would have no man know it; and he could not be hid. But straightway a woman, whose little daughter had an unclean spirit, having heard of him, came and fell down at his feet. Now the woman was a Greek, a Syrophenician by race. And she besought him that he would cast forth the demon out of her daughter. And he said unto her, Let the children first be filled: for it is not meet to take the children's bread and cast it to the dogs. But she answered and saith unto him, Yea, Lord; even the dogs under the table eat of the children's crumbs. And he said unto her, For this saying go thy way; the demon is gone out of thy daughter. And she went away unto her house, and found the child laid upon the bed, and the demon gone out.

And again he went out from the borders of Tyre, and came through Sidon unto the sea of Galilee, through the midst of the borders of Decapolis.



Reflections

Of the many stories in Mark, this is the only one where Jesus admits that someone else is right. The spunk the woman shows in refusing to be refused has been much admired. What has been less noticed is that Jesus here grants that Gentiles may benefit, at least incidentally, from his message of salvation.

Don't get distracted by the "dogs" bit. Readers of the Mishnah will recall that non-Jews really *are* outside the system of that text; not subject to the Law, and not liable to the rewards that come from following it. They are nonbeings. Mark and a few others may have accepted the Gentiles without much trouble, but some others in the movement, which until now had been wholly Jewish, had to be persuaded. This is Mark's way of persuading them: to show Jesus, however grudgingly, accepting Gentile adherents, and arouse sympathy for the woman by displaying her respect, *but also her courage*. When it comes to it, who would deny a little sick child the benefit of Jesus' powers of healing?

Nobody. That insight is the basis for the way Mark put this story together. The appeal is to the spontaneous, untaught, human sympathy of the reader.¹

The common idea that Mark cobbled his Gospel together out of stuff he got from somewhere else meets with big trouble here. Was there a free-floating story which Mark had up to now ignored, but which, once it had become relevant, he went back and included? Not likely. He wrote it himself, going for inspiration to his earlier story of Jesus raising Jairus' daughter from a coma. Mark was the Gospel tradition's first chronicler. What he wrote, the Jesus movement of that day would read. That is why it was so necessary to update it; to have it speak to the new conditions in which his readers found themselves.

And as Gentile acceptance increased, Mark made further additions to his Gospel to register, and legitimate, that process. As his last touch, he put in a line showing that the Gentiles were not only *acceptable*, but *necessary*, to the plan. The longed-for End Days *would not come* until the Gentiles were in:

And the Gospel must first be preached to all nations. (Mark 13:10)

Paul had come to specialize in preaching to Gentiles, but he had trouble getting his Jewish converts to share a common meal with those they regarded as unclean, namely, his Gentile converts. This produced a crisis. The problem was the food rules, which at least some Jewish converts insisted on retaining. And so Paul appealed to Jerusalem for a ruling.

¹See Mencius 2A6. The system of Mencian ethics is based on the spontaneous move of a bystander to keep a small child from falling into a well – "not to curry favor with the parents, or to earn the praises of his fellow villagers and friends;" with no ulterior motive of any kind. There is something or other fundamentally benevolent at our core, a selfless concern for others, and Mencius and Mark are both reaching out to it.