

The Canaanite Woman: Meeting Jesus as Sage and Lord: Matthew 15:21-28 & Mark 7:24-30

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Abstract

This article looks at the encounter between Jesus and the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15 and Mark 7 as a spiritual formation event in process, and examines Jesus' 'offending' comment as a wisdom saying. Viewed in this way the Canaanite woman's encounter is not with a rude healer from Nazareth, but with the sage and savior who throws everything out of balance so that she can discover her true balance.

Key Words

Canaanite woman, Syrophenician, sage, wisdom, *masbal*, proverb

Expository Preaching and a Hard Saying

Among the hard sayings of Jesus, hard because they are difficult to understand, to preach, and to live into, are these two accounts of Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman, or the 'Syrophenician lady' as Mark calls her.¹ The 'scandal' is, of course, in verse 27 of Mark and verse 26 of Matthew: 'He said to her, "Let the Children be satisfied first; it is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs"' (NEB). And, 'To this Jesus replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs"' (NEB). The presupposition of most sermons and commentaries is that Jesus' words were chauvinistic. Working from the presupposition that Jesus' remark was racist

the preacher rushes to provide some justification by which people can integrate this 'insult' with a kinder Jesus.² The most frequent speculations one meets are:

- Jesus learned something new here – learned something new about acceptance and inclusivity.
- This is the day Jesus was bested in an argument.
- Jesus' remark is not as bad as it sounds. It was simply good-natured banter with a person of wit.
- Jesus was tired and wanted to get away. Pressured, he became irritated and responded

² Some efforts are aimed at minimizing the stature of Jesus. See my on-line essay on 'debunking' as a manifestation of personal anxiety. <fatherlarry.org> *Journal of Contemplative Living*. 'Fundamentalism of Both Kinds in Light of the Via Media.'

¹ John R. Donahue, S.J. and Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., *The Gospel of Mark: Sacra Pagina Series*, Volume 2 (ed. Daniel J. Harrington, S.J.; Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2002), 233.

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in a way that was out of character. The woman's clever reply brought him back to himself.

The Context of Intention

Mark begins his account: 'And from there he (Jesus) arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And he would not have anyone know it; yet he could not be hid' (Mark 7:24 RSV). When Mark refers to 'entering a house' he signals what follows is to be instruction for the disciples (5:37-38; 6:10-11; 7:17; 9:28; 9:33).³ Since no direct teaching follows this entrance into the house, we may construe Mark as meaning this whole pericope is instructional. In this case what might be of interest to us is the very method of the instruction itself – how the sage imparts wisdom.

Matthew says, 'And Jesus went away from there and withdrew into the district of Tyre and Sidon' (Matthew 15:21 RSV). In introducing this narrative Mark further alerts us to the weighty significance of what follows in saying, Jesus 'arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon' (7:24 RSV). Mark uses *anastas*, meaning literally 'rising up', when Jesus embarks on a significant new activity.⁴ For Mark this story pointed to something substantial. When we treat it like an American television reporter playing 'Gotcha', we are focused on the trivial and inconsequential. Further, Jesus' excursion into this region where Jews were fiercely hated shows a certain purposefulness. I have to confess I doubt Jesus' intention was to take a vacation among unpleasant people in order to insult them when they annoyed him with a desperate cry for help -- an absurdity that does not fit with the psychological or spiritual character of Jesus.

Jesus as Context

One way poorly written literature shows its inferior quality is in the development of characters who do or say things that do not fit with what such characters would likely say or do. Whether one believes the Gospels to contain real history or to be works of fiction, the rude Jesus some find here is too far out of

character from the Jesus of the remainder of the canonical Gospels to be an accurate interpretation.⁵ How anyone can believe the Jesus of wisdom, compassion, and acceptance, the Jesus who includes someone like Levi the Tax Collector among his closest disciples and eats with sinners, the Jesus who shows so much concern for what is in the heart and so little for outward matters of ritual purification, and who has already healed the Gerasene demoniac in Gentile territory, can suddenly lapse into bigotry is quite beyond me. One would think it would occur to any trained expositor that if he or she has found an incident that does not fit, clinically speaking, the psychological maturity, the emotional level of differentiation, the intellectual development, or the spiritual stature of Jesus then perhaps one's interpretation is mistaken.

The woman is persistent, and any genuinely spiritual life requires persistence – 'a long obedience (a long listening) in the same direction',⁶ She is a person, as seen by her reply, who is not only quick witted, but who is also unusually perceptive. Above all she shows humility, that self-emptying humility which is the essence of all spiritual progress. The point made in the story is not that she thinks of herself as a dog, but that she is willing to receive as a child (Mark 10:15). There can be little doubt that with his uncanny perceptiveness of human nature (John 2:25; 4:7-29), Jesus recognizes these qualities of receptivity and works with them. It is not the quality of this woman's persistence, will power, or quick intellect we should most appreciate, any more than we should admire ourselves for such qualities, but the emergence of a deeper spiritual awareness.

It is the person of Jesus that furnishes the basic context of this story in a very extraordinary way. The woman asks help for her daughter, and Jesus starts talking about bread. Bread, or *artos* is, of course, a complex Jewish and Christian symbol. Bread is, in fact, an archetypal symbol. It would be very difficult to miss the Eucharistic theme here with its deep and manifold implications;⁷ or, to not see its connection

³ Robert A. Guelich, *Mark 1-8:26: Word Biblical Commentary*, 34 (gen. ed. David A. Hubbard, Glen W. Barker; (Nelson Reference and Electronic: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989), 383-384.

⁴ Donahue and Harrington, 322.

⁵ Elton Trueblood, *Confronting Christ* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1960), 65.

⁶ Eugene H. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipline in an Instant Society* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 1980), 11-17.

⁷ Harrington refers here to his comments on Matthew 14:13-21, 'Matthew is careful to place the wilderness banquet in

to the Wilderness manna, the feeding of the five thousand before this encounter, and the feeding of the four thousand after (Mark 6:33-44; 8:1-20). But of special significance is the way in which the Gospels see Jesus not merely as the bread giver, but as the bread itself – the bread of heaven (John 6:26-58). What Jesus wants to give this woman is not only healing for her little daughter, he wants to give her the gift of himself – the gift of participation in his own life, the gift of participation in the divine life. That is the unfathomable context of this encounter.

The Context of Jesus as Sage

Jesus was obviously recognized by his contemporaries as a person of unusual wisdom – a teacher of wisdom. Ben Witherington and others, refer to Jesus as a sage,⁸ and like sages of all great wisdom traditions his method of teaching helped people to see more complex connections than they had ever realized before. The man with many possessions asks, ‘What good thing must I do to be saved?’ He expects the conventional answer that he should obey the Decalogue. That is, of course, the response he initially gets, but he persists, ‘What lack I yet?’ Jesus’ reply throws him into depths and swells for which he is not prepared, ‘If you would be perfect (if you want to pursue your question to its furthest end) sell everything, give it to the poor, and come and follow me’ (Luke 18:18-34). To one who attempts to evade the immediacy of his call saying, ‘First let me go and bury my father’, Jesus confronts with the proverb, ‘Let the dead bury the dead’ (Matthew 8:18-22). He turns the question, ‘Who is my neighbour?’ to the deeper and more probing implied question, ‘Whose neighbour can I be’ (Luke 10:30-37)? And Nicodemus suddenly finds himself confronted with cosmic questions he had not intended to explore – ‘except you are

born again’ (John 3:1-15). We might outline the method of the sage like this:

- 1) The teacher waits for the right moment to emerge, and may seem unresponsive to inquirers and disciples who must themselves wait for the *kairoic* moment (John 11: 6,7,21).
- 2) The sage poses questions that require resolving paradox (John 3:1-21).
- 3) Rather than giving an explanation of a concept, the wisdom teacher invites disciples into an experience of the reality or truth itself (Matthew 5:1-7:29).
- 4) Utilizing stories, metaphors, signs, and symbols the sage teaches through a sort of ‘indirection’, circumventing psychic defences erected against any deeper awareness of spiritual reality (Luke 15:1-32).
- 5) The wisdom teacher fosters an enlightenment experience in which one sees everything differently because he or she is different (John 9:1-44; Luke 19:1-10).
- 6) Sages encourage the toleration of ambiguity and the anxiety it produces through teaching trust over control (Matthew 6:25-34).
- 7) Sages teach more through the quality of their presence than through conventional techniques (Mark 1:22; 10:42).⁹

It is not possible within the scope of this paper to develop each of the above in detail, so briefly observe the following: notice how Jesus waits and allows the Canaanite woman to wait as she wrestles with her crisis, offering no quick or easy resolution in terms of a definite ‘no’ or ‘yes’. In Mark she keeps asking Jesus to heal her daughter (7:26). And in Matthew she follows Jesus and the disciples around shouting after them (15:23). Jesus certainly never shows himself elsewhere to be under-assertive. He could have ended the whole matter at any point, but instead waited, and left her waiting, for the right moment.¹⁰

line with the Last Supper and the Church’s Eucharist. The way in which the story is told relates it to God’s feeding of Israel in the wilderness. . . Other developments. . . take the reader beyond the confines of past and present experiences to the banquet that celebrates the fullness of God’s kingdom.’ Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., *The Gospel of Matthew: Sacra Pagina Series*, Volume 1 (ed. Daniel J. Harrington, S.J.; Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 222.

⁸ Ben Witherington III, *Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989).

⁹ Donahue and Harrington, 232, 233, note: ‘Frequently in Mark Jesus seeks privacy or anonymity only to be discovered or proclaimed. By this technique Mark heightens the power and numinous presence of Jesus (see 1: 43-45; 3:11-13; 7:36,37; 8:29,30).’

¹⁰ The Hebrew *qavah*, ‘to wait,’ originally referred to the braided strands of a cord or rope. It is the tension of not knowing or possessing. It is that quality of detached waiting described in *The Cloud of Unknowing*. It is not that the Prophets, Psalmists, and Apostles were waiting for

Secondly observe that Jesus presents her with a paradox or a problem she must resolve. And thirdly, see this whole event as an experience into which she enters with Jesus and emerges different.¹¹

The Wisdom Context

Jesus' words in Mark 7:26 and Matthew 15:27 are in the form of a wisdom saying – a proverb or *mashal*. A proverb or *mashal*, according to Harvey H. Guthrie Jr., 'refers to a form of words, short or long, prose or poetry, descriptive or allusive, in which some attribute of the givenness of life is verbalized and manifested for what it is.' The formulation of a *mashal* requires shrewdness, perceptiveness, nimble use of the imagination, and unusual and practical insight into the workings of life; that is, a *mashal* vividly pictures some aspect of life and reality so that it can be responded to sensibly.¹² My contention is that

the consummation of history, but for the God who is the fulfilment of all things. See, Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), 149-152.

¹¹ 'She has been challenged to show her request is grounded in authentic faith and is more than a self-seeking hope in magic.' W.D. Davies and D.C. Allison, *Matthew 8-18: International Critical Commentary* (gen. ed. J.A. Emerton, C.E.B. Cranfield and G.N. Stanton; Great Britain: T&T Clark Ltd, 1991), 550. See Ulrich Luz who points out that the Reformation discovery of the exegetical power of faith became a doctrine that could be transmitted, and 'the story that Matthew told a doctrine in narrative form.' Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8-20: Hermeneia – A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible* (trans. James E. Crouch; ed. Helmut Koester; Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2001), 342.

¹² Although I use terms somewhat interchangeably, Guthrie states that a *mashal* is actually more than a proverb. Harvey H. Guthrie, Jr., *Israel's Scared Songs: A Study of Dominant Themes* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1966), 172. Vawter, among others, calls it a 'proverb'. Bruce Vawter, C.M., *The Four Gospels: An Introduction*, Volume One (New York: A Doubleday Image Book, 1969), 274. Witherington seems to prefer 'counter order aphorism' (164). Ulrich Luz says Jesus' image must be understood allegorically, (341). Also see Collins: 'It is a hybrid objection quest in which the objection must be overcome for the quest to be successful. Quest stories are unique in that the quester is given a prominent role. This emphasis on the quester evokes empathy with that character and interest to see whether the quest succeeds or fails. The quester is often the object

Jesus' phrase: 'It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs', is actually a proverb – perhaps a form of the fourth proverb idiom described by R.B.Y. Scott in his commentary on *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*. This particular type of proverb focuses on 'what is *contrary to right order*, and so is *futile* or *absurd*'. 'Can the sea be ploughed with oxen' (Amos 6:12)?¹³

But what aspect of first century life in the Middle East does Jesus realistically picture with this *mashal*, or proverb, so that it can be dealt with 'sensibly'?¹⁴ On the immediate level it vividly portrays the wall of hostility between Jew and Gentile. For Jews and Gentiles, then and now, enmity is not a theoretical issue; it is a reality of every day life. But at the soul level, might it not have to do with the universal estrangement of human beings from one another, and beyond that to our alienation from God?

However, it is not just my contention that Jesus' words constitute a *mashal*, but that the Canaanite woman's response adds to Jesus' *mashal*. Proverbs are not simply witty folk sayings; they are a way of offering instruction in spiritual formation. As Scott points out, the literary form of proverbs may even be altered to serve the interests of sound instruction. For example, 'In place of short, pointed and picturesque sayings, often characterized by alliteration, we find formal couplets in poetic parallelism. The second line may point a contrast, or it may carry forward what is said in the first line.'¹⁵ What I am suggesting is that Jesus was inviting this Syro-Phoenician woman to add to the proverb in a way that moves it forward.¹⁶ Guthrie writes something that is pertinent here:

of prejudice, and the stories function to create openness for such people in the community.' Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: Hermeneia a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible* (ed. Harold A. Attridge; Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2007), 363). I see Jesus' objection as spiritually purposeful.

¹³ R.B.Y. Scott, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes: Introduction, Translation and Notes: The Anchor Bible*, Volume 18 (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1965), xix, 4,6,8,9.

¹⁴ Guthrie, 172.

¹⁵ Scott, 8,9.

¹⁶ See Davies and Allison who say, 554, 'Her words take Jesus' parable and extend it.'

Imagine a circle of men gathered at a village gate in the evening to review events of the day and evaluate them by reference to folk wisdom handed down through the generations, someone now and then coining a new *marshal* to cover a new situation, all the members of the village contributing to it so that it embodied their collective wisdom.¹⁷

What parent is there among us who does not feel the woman's desperation? But she has neither heard nor faced the question of faith as 'ultimate concern' until Jesus confronts her with this proverb, or what is the first half of a proverb she extends so that it looks like this:

It is not right to throw the bread of the children to the dogs under the table.

Yet, even the puppies eat the crumbs that fall from the table.

That Jesus' words are an invitation for the woman to engage in self-reflection and thought about the human community, is seen in that Jesus' answer is not a definitive 'no', but a proverb, perhaps an existing saying, cast as an argument that invites further response.¹⁸ Of course, there may have been other aspects of this exchange that, had they found their way into Matthew or Mark, would have given us further insight into this encounter as a spiritual formation event in process.¹⁹

Playfulness and Paradox as Context

I once pointed out to a colleague that some people believe Jesus' remark was meant humorously; and, therefore, was not to be understood as racist. He

replied that even if humour were involved, and the diminutive form of the word 'dog' used, it was still a bigoted comment. I don't believe that is the case. I think full context is everything in determining the level of bigotry or racism in a remark.

It is not possible to conclusively prove high humour was involved in this encounter. It probably wasn't, but it is possible to claim a certain playfulness that is part of eliciting the woman's response; indeed, that suggests her response is part of the playfulness. It is unreasonable to believe that if Jesus intended to be harsh he would have used the word *kynarion* – 'little dogs', meaning, not the scavengers that roam the streets, but house dogs.²⁰ If I were reading a novel and did not pick up on the difference between throwing a bone to a pack of snarling strays in an alley and tossing one to a family pet under the table you would think me awfully dense. Either the words in a story perform some function or they do not.²¹ If they are used by an author with no real intention in mind then there is no point in bothering to exegete the passage – its meaning is totally idiosyncratic. The use of *kynarion* is meant not only to soften the tone, but also suggests a quality of playfulness -- an enticement to enter the 'game'.²² The seriousness with which we approach a problem may cause more difficulties than the problem itself. Seriousness presents a paradox in that if one is not serious about his or her responsibilities greater instability or even chaos may result. But seriousness may also exacerbate a problem. There is a kind of seriousness that is an orientation embedded in chronic anxiety that blocks the ability to move in new directions. 'If we assume any chronic condition we are persistently trying to change will, perversely be supported *not to change* by our serious effort to bring about change, then it is logical to consider the possibility that one way out of the paradox is to be paradoxical.'²³

¹⁷ Guthrie, 172.

¹⁸ Contrary to Luz, 336, *The Expositor's Greek Testament* does not see Jesus' answer as a categorical refusal: (1) As an argument it invites further discussion. (2) It is bantering in tone, 'a parable to be taken *cum grano*' (3). Its harshest word *kynarios*, which compares Gentiles to the household dogs and not those of the streets, furnishes a 'loophole'. Alexander Balmain Bruce, *The Synoptic Gospels: The Expositor's Greek Testament*, Volume I (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Printing Company, Reprinted 1979), 217.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 391.

²⁰ Harrington, 235. Also, Trueblood, 65-66.

²¹ Buttrick asks rhetorically, 'Is it possible that all Scripture is plotted language intending *to do*, is performative language?' Buttrick also notes that preachers must ask not only what the words of the ancient text mean, but how they mean. David Buttrick, *Homiletics: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 301, 263.

²² Bruce, 391. Also Trueblood, 65-66.

²³ Edwin H. Friedman, *From Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York and London: Guildford Press, 1985), 50, 51.

That is to say, one way of dealing with seriousness as a systemic problem is to introduce a particular kind of playfulness that focuses on the relational process rather than on content issues, and finds its remedial power in an ability to break the vicious feedback cycle that fuels the problem.²⁴ This is precisely what Jesus does here. He introduces a quality of playfulness, a collaborative *marshal* in the form of a paradox that for this woman breaks the feedback cycle of alienation at all levels.

The Context of Transformation

It is for the woman a transformative moment in which all her relationships are altered. 'Because of this word' points to the woman's response as one of 'great faith'. She comes to Jesus in desperation, recognizes Jesus as someone who has the power to exorcize her daughter's demon,²⁵ pleads his help, and in her final reply in Mark addresses Jesus as 'Lord'. As Guelich notes 'Lord' as used here most likely has 'confessional overtones';²⁶ that is, she yields to Jesus as the one in whom the God of Israel is at work for the good of all. And finally in forming her answer she enters a new reality. This is her faith as 'ultimate concern'. Ulrich Luz quotes from a sermon of Luther's: 'Christ presents himself here as the heart feels it to be. It thinks there is only *no*, and yet that is not true. Therefore the heart has to turn away from its feelings and must comprehend and hold fast to the deep secret *yes* that is under and above the *no* with solid faith in God's word, as this simple woman does.'²⁷

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Luz, 339, 'By addressing Jesus as "Son of David" the woman shows she is turning to the Messiah of Israel.'

²⁶ Guelich, 388.

²⁷ Luz, 338.

Reorientation Through Disorientation

Jesus' words may be understood not as an insult at all, but as spiritual direction akin in some ways to a modern psychotherapeutic confrontation – a 'reorientation through disorientation'.²⁸ In her short story, '*A Good Man is Hard to Find*', Flannery O'Connor writes of The Misfit right before he shoots the grandmother through the chest three times:

'Jesus was the only one that ever raised the dead . . . and he shouldn't have done it. He thrown everything off balance. If he did what he said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow him. If He didn't then it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can – by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him.'²⁹

For the Canaanite woman this is not the day she met a rude healer from Nazareth, but the day she encountered Jesus as the Sage and Saviour who threw everything off balance so that she could find perfect balance.

²⁸ A psychotherapeutic confrontation may sound insulting but be 'an act of grace'. See John C. Hoffman, *Ethical Confrontation in Counselling* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1979). From more of a spiritual direction perspective Witherington, 172, says, 'Jesus was a sage who practiced reorientation through disorientation.'

²⁹ Flannery O'Connor, *A Good Man is Hard to Find* (Orlando, Austin, New York, San Diego and London: A Harvest Book, Harcourt, Inc.1955, renewed 1983), 21.