

THE STORY OF THE SYROPHOENICIAN WOMAN (MARK 7:24-30): ARGUMENT FOR AN INCLUSIVE GOSPEL

By

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Abstract

This paper critically examined the text of Mark 7:24-30 in view of understanding the nature and scope of Jesus' mission. Mark 7:24-30 established that Jesus visited a non-Jewish territory where he encountered a non-Jewish woman who presented her problem to him. This is in contrast to the tension between Jews and non-Jews in relation to God's blessing. Thus, this paper evaluated Jesus's mission in relation to its universal nature. Therefore, it argued that the story of the Syrophenician woman in Mark 7:24-30 provided justification for an inclusive gospel. The historical-critical method of biblical exegesis was deployed. This paper discovered the following: That Mark 7:24-30 is the only account of exorcism from a distance in the gospel of Mark. That Jesus' initial response presented the theological believe that God's blessing where restricted to the Jews only. That the woman insisted that she can be part of the blessing. That her insistence was a show of great faith which also implied that faith in God is not restricted to Jews alone. That Jesus's

positive response to her, meant that salvation was for all humanity. Furthermore, this paper identified universality of salvation, faith beyond boundaries and mission as points from the text that justified inclusive gospel. This paper concluded that the goal of Jesus' mission was for the salvation of all regardless of race or status and that Jesus' mission shows his love for humanity which impresses on all who accept him to join in the propagation of his inclusive gospel.

Keywords: Syrophoenician, universality, salvation, inclusive, mission, territory

Introduction

The ministry of Jesus was one that centered essentially on the proclamation of the message of salvation. Jesus in proclaiming his good news, performed signs and wonders and these were not end in themselves but significantly, furthered the proclamation of the good news. The mission of Jesus therefore, was geared towards establishing a new era, a time where God reigns supreme and all who accept and believe in him would experience the glory of God. Jesus appointed twelve disciples to be with him so that he might send them out to proclaim the good news. The message of the good news thus, was to be carried far and wide by the disciples of Jesus who would break new territories and bring the message of salvation to new cultures and new peoples. It becomes clear that the message of salvation was not intended to be the exclusive reserve of a few. The good news by nature is meant for all, it is for all peoples regardless of their statues, race, background or orientation and belief systems. It was as it remains an inclusive message, one that would guarantee that all who hear and accept it would be saved. This paper titled "The Story of the Syrophoenician Woman (Mark 7:24-30): Argument for an Inclusive Gospel", studies the

text of Mark 7:24-30 critically with the view of arguing that the Gospel of Christ is an inclusive gospel and not one restricted or directed only to a select group of people. Therefore. This paper argues that the story of the Syrophoenician woman in Mark 7:24-30 could be deployed as an argument for the inclusive nature of the gospel of Christ.

1.1 The Background to the Text

The story in the text is set in the region of Tyre, Phoenicia, North of upper Galilee. It should be noted that Galilee and Judaea, were the principal Jewish areas of Palestine which were surrounded by Gentile territories. Furthermore, the general knowledge about the coming Messiah is that, when he comes, his mission will focus on the Jews and their restoration. Jesus himself in the text of Mark 7:24-30, appears to confirm this fact in his response to the woman, thus, aligning himself to the mainstream Jewish thoughts. The text nonetheless, shows Jesus leaving Jewish territory, outlining events that show Jesus visiting the Gentiles (pagans) territory. Apart from the encounter with the Syrophoenician woman, Jesus heals a deaf man with speech impediments and feeds a Gentile crowd.

1.2 Literary Consideration of Mark 7:24-30

1. Delimitation

The text of Mark 7:24-30 can be studied as an independent and smaller unit within the larger pericopes of Mark 6:35-7:30 and the one that follows it. Mark 7: 24-30 appears to be a natural sequence of Mark 7:1-23¹. It should be noted that the entire subunit is linked by the theme of bread (cf. 6:41, 52; 7:2, 27) with the exception of Mark 6:53-56. Consequently, the faith exhibited by the Syrophoenician woman in Mark 7:24-30, contrast greatly to the determined unbelief of the Pharisees in Mark 7:1-23².

Thus, from this perspective, this contrasting show of faith³ (Lane 259), makes the text of Mark 7:24-30 an independent unit of study. Furthermore, the text of Mark 7:24-30 can be studied as an independent unit when the adverb '*ekeithen*' (from that place) (Mark 7:24), marks or shows a break from the proceeding unit of Mark 7:1-23 which is about defilement. The adverb principally serves as a temporal marker indicating change in time or shift from the previous episode showing the beginning of a new thought pattern, new event. In terms of its composition and arrangement, the text of Mark 7:24-30 can be studied as an independent unit of study because it has a clearly identifiable beginning, middle and closing. From the point of view of genre, it can be called a miracle story woven around controversy. Therefore, considering the text as both a miracle story and a controversy it can be studied independently. Thus, in the text, we see Mark establishing a formal precedence in breaking boundaries by Jesus⁴.

2. Literary Genre and Structure of Mark 7:24-30

The text of Mark 7:24-30 is one that combines both controversy and miracle event together. That is, Mark 7:24-27, presented the controversy between the woman's request and the response of Jesus which quite appears to be unfriendly. Mark 7: 28-30 on the other hand, presented the miracle of the healing of the woman's daughter. Thus, the text can be classified as a miracle story and controversy. Furthermore, the text is structured in a thematic and systematized way that carefully buttresses the message of the author of the text. A thorough consideration of the text shows that it can be divided into three parts, namely: The introduction which is further divided into two parts, the body and the conclusion.

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| 1. Introduction A- | Mark 7:24
(The Geography of the Text) |
| | B- Mark 7:25-26
(The Woman's Identity and her request) |
| 2. Body | Mark 7:27-29
(The Controversy and Miracle) |
| 3. Conclusion | Mark 7-30
(The Woman returns Home) |

1.3 Mark 7:24-30 in relation to its Parallel Passages in Matthew 15:21-28

Basically, this story or narrative is reported in Mark 7:24–30 and Matthew 15:21–28 and in both, one sees Jesus internationally crossing social, cultural, ethnic and religious boundaries to demonstrate his passion for reaching out and spreading the message of salvation. Consequently, the following are common to both Mark 7:24-30 and Matthew 15:21-28:

1. Jesus venturing into Gentile territory (cf. Matt 15:21; Mark 7:24)
2. Jesus initially refusing to attend to the woman and employing harsh language to address her (cf. Matt 15:24–26; Mark 7:27)
3. The fact that this story constitutes the only recorded case of an exorcism from a distance in the Gospels (cf. Matt 15:28; Mark 7:29–30)

However, reading through both accounts, certain dissimilarities become obvious and they are:

1. While Mark 7:24 emphasizes that Jesus did not wish that his presence be known or announced, Matthew 15:21 remained silent about this fact.

2. Mark 7:26, gives a detailed account of the woman's identity, mentioning her nationality and place of birth. The parallel in Matthew, only identified the woman as a Canaanite who is from the vicinity of Tyre and Sidon.
3. Matthew 15:22 mentioned that the woman recognized Jesus as Son of David as she approached him to plead for mercy. In Mark, this title was not mentioned rather, it only mentioned that she fell on her feet.
4. The text of Matthew (7:23), mentioned the disciples of Jesus in its account and Mark omits it completely.
5. The text of Mark 7:29 reads 'because of what you said' as Jesus' response to the woman's faith. Matthew 15:28 appears to be richer as it reads 'woman great is your faith'.

1.4 Analysis of Mark 7:24-30

1. Introduction (A): The Geography of the Text (Mark 7:24)

Jesus proceeded or withdrew to the region of Tyre and according to Lane, this was to secure rest which had been denied him or interrupted in the wilderness of Gennesaret⁵ (cf. 6; 53-56). Tyre itself was an ancient Phoenician city with a large mixed population⁶. This area generally is identified as the Hellenistic environment. Phoenicia as a city was tangent to Galilee and some twenty miles northwest of Capernaum⁷. Lane argues that this journey into the Hellenistic environment, was Jesus' "only excursion beyond the ancient borders of Israel and throughout his ministry he avoided having much contact with the Gentiles"⁸. It is important to stress that the house provided a place of retreat for Jesus and his followers and within the gospel of Mark, those who approached Jesus within a house are presented "sympathetically as having full confidence in the Lord"⁹ (cf. 2:1-5, 3:20, 7:24-30).

Thus, from the start of the story, Mark sets the stage for an encounter that will conclude in a show of faith from the woman and compassion from Jesus.

Introduction (B): The Woman's Identity and her Request (Mark 7:25-26)

Mark gives or provides a vivid description of the woman's identity and here, she is called a Greek, a generic term, which does not mean that she is ethnically Greek but refers to non-Jews generally. Furthermore, it would be applicable in this context to someone who has assimilated fully the Greek culture¹⁰. In addition, Mark goes ahead to identify her as a Syrophoenician, which explains that she is from Phoenicia in Syria; a description which clearly distinguished her from the Libo-Phoenicia, which is used to designate Phoenicians from North Africa¹¹. Furthermore the phrase *de gūnē* (the woman) (cf. Mark 7:26), reflects her social status and class. Parosch commenting on the woman's status writes "as a Hellenized woman, it is possible that she was of high social class, since "Hellenization had first affected the people of higher status everywhere"¹². This is supported by the Pseudo-Clementines, a third-century fictional work, in which she is described as a woman of means who "buys shipwrecked boys as slaves and gives them a Greek education"¹³. Essentially, this woman immediately came to Jesus on hearing that Jesus was in town. The use of the participles *akousasa* (having heard) and *elthousa* (having come) in rapid succession (cf. Mark 7:25), show the urgency in the woman's request and how hurried her action was. The daughter was possessed by *pneuma akathartos* (unclean spirit or a demon) (cf. Mark 7:25) and in her gesture of prostrating, she showed great grief and humility before Jesus¹⁴.

2. The Body: The Controversy and the Miracle (Mark 7:27-29)

Precisely, Mark 7:27 introduces a very controversial aphorism which has led scholars and commentators to debate largely if the text is authentic in relation to the claim that the historical Jesus could not have uttered such words or aphorism. It is considered harsh¹⁵ and in some quotas, it is considered insulting and morally problematic¹⁶. In any case, the aphorism was Jesus' statement of refusal and here, he developed a comparison between the children and the dogs of the household. Primarily, the theological meaning or implication of the aphorism used by Jesus can be interpreted from the background of the Old Testament and later Judaism where the people of Israel are designated as the Children of God. Essentially, this point argues that the Israelites are the privileged people of God and affirms that the time has not yet come for blessings to be extended to the Gentiles¹⁷. The clause *aphes proton chortasthēnai ta τέκνα* which is translated as "let the children first be fed" (Mark 7:27a), has reference to God's election of Israel and his appointment that the message of salvation be preached first to the Jews and then the Gentiles (cf. Rom 1:16, Acts 3:26, 13:46)¹⁸. Therefore Mark 7:27b which reads *ou gar estin kalon labein ton arton tōn teknōn kai tois kūnariois balein* (for it is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs), clearly shows the difference in the claim the Israelites have upon his ministry when compared to the Gentiles¹⁹.

However, questions have been raised as to whether the woman in the story, understood the deep theological implications and meaning of Jesus' aphorism (Israel's divine election). The text insists that she is a Hellenist and it is most likely that she did not understand the theological

dimension that Jesus referred to²⁰. Thus, it is important to consider the domestic scene within the Hellenistic community and the application of such aphorism to the possible understanding the woman might have attached to it. In this context, the aphorism would mean that: the table is set and the family is gathered. It will be inappropriate for any form of interruption of the meal that would enable the pet dog to carry the children's bread²¹. This been a possible life situation, means that it is intelligible for the woman to grasp. The aphorism therefore does not intend any new meaning other than what it is intended for within the domestic scene in the Hellenistic household²².

The above interpretation fits into the story in in Mark 7:24 and as expounded above that Jesus' retreat to the region of Tyre and Sidon was to rest and would not have anyone disrupt this retreat or rest²³. Interestingly, the woman's attitude or response to the aphorism, clearly indicated that she does not have any issues about it. Rather, the woman moved very quickly to counter the obstacle before her²⁴. The Greek text shows the use of double verbs *apekrithē* (she answered) and *legei* (said) (cf. Mark 7:28) and here, the woman moves to turn the situation to her advantage. Thus, the woman's reply *kai ta kunarion hūpokatō tēs trapezes esthiousin apo tōn psichiōn tōn paidiōn* (but even the dogs under the table feed on the children's crumbs), shows that she did not deny the truth in Jesus' aphorism but took the possibility of the truth to another level²⁵. She adapted it to her own situation, her reply counters the exclusive right of the children to food and appealed to the custom of children feeding pet dogs while eating²⁶. The woman simply appeared to be saying that both the children and the dogs can eat at the same time. That is, while the children are eating on the table, the dogs under the table can be allowed to remain under

the table and eat the crumbs that would fall to the ground. By extension, she clearly advocates that there is no need for any form of interruption of the meal process and she only makes a request of crumbs and not the whole meal²⁷. In addition to the above, the woman's reply shows how much she looked up to Jesus and believed that Jesus can intervene and bring a resolution to her daughter's predicaments. It is a statement of faith and confidence, a deep and majestic show of believability in the person of Jesus.

The opening words of Mark 7:29, sets the stage for the healing and exorcism to take place. Jesus said to her, *dia tauton ton logon* (because of what you say), and in this phrase, Jesus shows the faith exhibited in the words and reply of the woman in verse 28²⁸. Here, the healing takes effect because of the faith shown by the woman. Also, the text shows that there was no formal encounter between Jesus, the daughter and the demon. It was a healing from a distance. Mark stresses the fact that the healing and exorcism was completed in the past and this is heightened by the use of the perfect indicative *exelēlūthen* (has gone forth) which also, heightened the power of Jesus. Donahue and Harrington suggests that the Markan community might have read the healing from a distance as a hope for the power of God and his gospel to the Gentile world²⁹. Nsiah summarizes the above as follows:

Jesus acknowledged the greatness of the woman and finally healed the unnamed daughter based on the words of the woman. Her words may be said to be her confession of faith, which is rightly pointed out by Matthew (15:28). This is one of the few healing miracles from a distance, without physical contact and this is to heighten the power of Jesus. Jesus has broken the ethnic and

*religious barriers between Jews and gentiles and
by implication for all people*³⁰

3. The Conclusion: The Woman returns home (Mark 7:30)

The woman yielded to the instruction of Jesus in verse 29 to return home. The imperative present active *hūpage* which means ‘go’ (cf. Mark 7:29), remains a formula deployed by Jesus in Mark whenever he senses a genuine and profound faith in those who seek for healing (cf. 2:11; 5:34; 7:29; 10:52)³¹. In consonance with the faith she has maintained, she departed only to find her daughter healed when she got home. The Greek text uses the perfect participle *exelēlūthos* translated as ‘having gone out’ which corresponds to the perfect indicative in verse 29 *exelēlūthen* (has gone forth), to highlight the effectiveness of the power of the word spoken by Jesus. Thus, the perfect participle *exelēlūthos* (having gone out) serves as a confirmation of the miracle³² as it is the case in miracle stories. The woman got home and found her daughter on the bed. The word for bed in the Greek text is *klinēn* and here, it is an indication to the status of the woman in the society. Donahue and Harrington commenting on the above writes: “the woman went home and found her daughter lying in a couch (*klinēn*), which reminds one of the healing of the paralytic (cf. 2:1-12) who was lying on a *krabbatos* (mat) which was perhaps for the poor and simple, while a couch denotes some amount of the wealth of the woman (cf. kings 4:32)”³³. The daughter was well, sound and better and this confirmed the miracle, which indicated that the demon had gone.

1.5 Defining Inclusive Gospel

Inclusive gospel is the Christian understanding or theological perspective that salvation proclaimed by Jesus

is universal and available for all. That is, inclusive gospel stresses the truism that Jesus and divine grace is available for all. Thus, inclusive gospel as a theological perspective holds that one's nationality, cultural or ethnic background, statues in life, gender, personal story or history cannot constitutes obstacles to the salvation promised by Jesus. Interestingly, "at the heart of the Old Testament is a tension which must remain in any Christian understanding of inclusivity: the focused, particular electing grace of God which chooses one rather than others but which does so in order to become universal in its scope"³⁴

Inclusivity in this sense is rooted in the covenantal promise between God and Abraham in the Old Testament (cf. Gen 12:3) and in the Great Commission (cf. Matt 28:16-20) wherein the proclamation of the gospel message of salvation is given a universal pivot or scope. While the Old Testament might appear to speak of the election and calling of Israel as God's choice, there exist God's clear intention of the salvation of those outside Israel (cf. Pss 86:9; Isa 2:3)³⁵. Therefore, the Church in the New Testament is not oblivious of the understanding of the Old Testament that those excluded would in the future ultimately be included in the plan of God's salvation. This point becomes clearer when on the Pentecost day, Peter in addressing the crowd alluded to Joel 2:28, insisting that the prophecy was been fulfilled at that material time³⁶. It was indeed the election and calling of all peoples regardless of their background or race. The ministry of Jesus more than anything else established the universal scope of the gospel and his death was the ultimate price he paid for the redemption of all humanity regardless of race or culture and in his resurrection, all who will believe in him, conquer death and will live forever in his glory. The Church continuing in this universal scope of the gospel

holds that all “have the right to know the riches of the mystery of Christ, riches in which she believes that the whole of humanity can find, in unsuspected fullness, everything that it is gropingly searching for concerning God, man and his destiny, life and death, and truth”³⁷

1.6. Mark 7:24-30 in the Context of Inclusive Gospel

With the definition of Inclusive Gospel established above, this paper now attempts to establish the fact that the story of the Syrophoenician woman speaks to the truth of Inclusive Gospel. Essentially, the woman’s interaction with Jesus clearly establish the fact that the door is not closed for anyone and everyone who may hitherto not belong to the fold but opened. Therefore, certain points from the narrative provide justification and support for Inclusive Gospel.

1. Universality of Salvation

In discussing the Universality of Salvation within the context of the text of study, it is important to first accept the truth that there is Jewish priority in Jesus’ missionary activities and this is in fulfilment of the covenant promises to Abraham³⁸. However, the mission of Jesus to bring salvation to all mankind would certainly be extended to all humanity regardless. This follows too that Gentiles who confess their faith are included in the covenant community of God. And as the text of Mark 7:24-30 shows, the Syrophoenician woman’s faith, is a metaphor for the faith of all non-Jews who would believe in Jesus and subsequently be saved. The text thus shows that Jesus redefined the boundary of his ministry to show the place of Gentiles in his missionary activities. In the text, Jesus abolished ethnic, religious barriers that are not productive and beneficial³⁹. Therefore, Jesus announces in the text that his mission for the salvation of the world is universal,

not determined and or restricted by culture or class or race but based on the fact that all share common heritage in being sons and daughters of God, created in his image and likeness. The woman becomes as it were, a metaphor for all non-Jews, Gentiles and her encounter with Jesus clearly establishes the claim that:

The liberation from evil that was promised to the children is now to be made available for non-Jews. Since the table fellowship with the Gentiles was one of the most divisive areas in early Christianity (Gal 2:11-14), the woman articulates the Gentile perspective. The benefits of God's reign proclaimed and enacted thus far by Jesus and given first to the Jews (Rom 1:16) are to be made available to "the little dogs"⁴⁰.

Indeed, the universality of God's love for humanity is manifested in the narrative and this love corresponds to the eternal plan of God for the salvation of humanity. Thus, the gospel is the gospel of love, it is the gospel of salvation and it is the gospel for all humanity.

2. Faith Beyond Boundaries

The theme of faith is central to the story and it is deeply connected to inclusive gospel. It appears like the narrative was arranged in such a way as to emphasize the place and role of faith in every meaningful relationship and encounter with Jesus. Also, the text appears to be arranged in such a way as to point to the fact that apart from the Jews, faith in Jesus as well can be found among non-Jews, Gentiles. Thus, faith in the text is the marker and the foundation to enter into any form of relationship with Jesus and to experience his awesome power. Furthermore, the text clearly speaks of the fact that race or culture or status does not count when it comes to encountering the power of Jesus rather, faith is what is required. The faith

exhibited by the woman challenged and broke Jewish exclusivity. That is, faith in God is the condition that guarantees an experience of the glory of God, connecting humanity to the promise of salvation. Interestingly, faith is planted, nurtured and developed with the propagation of the gospel and as such, a restricted gospel would not encourage growth in faith. Evidently, Jesus' movement into the Gentile region showed an extension of the gospel from the Jewish territory into the Gentile territory. This movement brings the proclamation and propagation of the gospel to all regardless of race, building their faith and increasing their capacity to rely and trust in the power of God.

3. **Mission**

The theme of mission is one that is central to the text of study. The entire composition and arrangement of the sub-unit brings out the theme of mission clearly. As verse 24 highlighted, Jesus moved from the Jewish region or territory to the non-Jewish territory. He is an embodiment of the gospel of salvation and with no doubt, his movement into the Hellenistic territory would imply him being ready or prepared to spread the message of salvation. The text thus, is mission oriented especially when one considers mission to involve the dissemination or spread of the gospel message from one point to another. Mission therefore, is the mechanism for the spread of the good news, which is evangelization itself. Mission understood properly, is the mechanism for an inclusive gospel. Mission breaks territorial boundaries, it converts exclusivity to inclusivity, it brings the gospel to new territories, new cultures and new people. Mission significantly helps the gospel to reach the ends of the earth. The Christian faith is intrinsically missionary and it is missionary by nature; such that a denial of this, would amount to a denial of its very

raison d'être⁴¹. Jesus therefore in the text of Mark 7:24-30, could be said to embark on a mission to the Hellenistic world with the aim to propagate the good news of which he himself is its physical manifestation. Intrinsically, one sees an establishment of a strong connection between evangelization and mission; with mission being the driving force for evangelization and consequently both lead to faith, faith in God and the one he sent, Jesus Christ.

Interestingly, mission as a theological theme from Mark 7:24-30 could be seen as foreshadowing the future or later mission of the Church which significantly, would be to spread the gospel message to the ends of the world. The church therefore is the instrument for evangelization, proclaiming the gospel which is inclusive⁴². The church thus, "is born of the evangelization activity of Jesus and the Twelve. She is the normal, desired, most immediate and most visible fruit of this activity; Go therefore, make disciples of all nations"⁴³. The church therefore continues in the propagation and proclamation of the gospel that brings "all peoples of all times"⁴⁴ together regardless of their race, colour or background, "into the community of salvation"⁴⁵. The Syrophoenician woman (Mark 7:24-30) becomes a metaphor for all outside the Jewish culture and orientation who would be evangelized through the mission of the church and subsequently, would become part of the church and also, participate in the propagation and proclamation of the gospel⁴⁶.

Conclusion

The mission of Jesus Christ was one that was focused on the redemption of humanity. While it is correct to hold that the mission targeted Israel at first, its logical end point was to bring all (Jews and Gentile) together into one fold. Thus, the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus death on the cross was

not exclusive just as the mission was not exclusive but an inclusive selfless sacrifice that emancipated humanity from the law of sin and death. The story of the Syrophoenician woman in Mark 7:24-30 is a vivid example of Jesus' intention, an intention that saw the propagation and proclamation of the good news to all regardless of colour of skin or race, status or even personal story or history. The inclusive nature of Jesus' gospel speaks to his love for humanity and place the baton on all who have been called into the fold to become propagators of God's universal love to all.

Endnotes

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- ²⁹ Donahue and Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, 235.
- ³⁰ Nsiah, “Breaking the Ethnic Barrier,” 163.
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