

Center for Feminist Theology and Ministry in Japan

Number 73

May 2014

c/oKyofu Kaikan
Shinjuku, Tokyo, Japan
home page: <http://cftmj.cocolog-nifty.com>

The 52nd regular seminar (January 14, 2012)

The Story of the Syro-Phoenician Woman (Mark 7:24-30)¹

Hisako Kinukawa

Introduction

Mark sets the story of the woman on an occasion when Jesus “went away to the region of Tyre” (v.24). In speaking of the “region of Tyre,” Mark indicates that Jesus did not visit the city of Tyre, which is located on an island just off the coast in the Mediterranean Sea, but the rural hinterlands surrounding the city of Tyre. The woman is introduced as “a Greek, of Syro-Phoenician origin” (v.26). The story begins with the woman’s plea for the healing of her little daughter who has an unclean spirit.

Issues We Deal With

At first glance, the story rouses several questions in our minds, but we will focus on the two questions which are interrelated. 1) Why does Mark put in Jesus’ mouth such harsh words responding to the woman’s plea? Jesus says 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” (v.27). The children represent the Jews and the dogs imply foreigners, including the woman and her daughter. The expression is therefore Jesus’ overt rejection of accepting her plea. 2) Why does Jesus then employ the language of bread, even though he knows her main concern is in the healing of her sick child? How does Mark relate the healing issue with that of the table fellowship? The two questions themselves are already implicative of the story not being told for the sake of reporting a miracle story for its own sake. Our focus will be to locate the social location of the story and uncover the power relationships at work that may cause the structure of dominant and subordinate relationships in the story.²

Social Location of the Story

In the time of Jesus, both Galilee and Tyre were part of the territory occupied by the Roman Empire. Their cities and regions were under imperial control and oppressed by colonial politics. Despite this fact, the cities of Tyre and Sidon were two of the wealthiest and most important ports on the coast. In contrast, the residents of Galilee, mainly peasants, suffered under a threefold oppression: 1) Roman imperialism, 2) the Herodian monarchy which fawned on Rome and 3) Temple politics in Judea. Jonathan L. Reed draws our attention to the fact that the city of Tyre was closer to Capernaum than Capernaum was to Jerusalem. Tyre, especially its regions, might not sound too foreign or distant to those residing in Galilee.³ Actually villages inhabited by Jews could exist right next to the villages inhabited by Syrians and Phoenicians where the hinterland of Tyre intersected the hinterland of Galilee, with no clear borders separating the two. We may plausibly imagine that villages of different ethnic groups were intermingled in such areas.

The Woman as a Greek

The woman is introduced culturally Greek and ethnically Syro-Phoenician. The use of “Greek” may imply she would have known Greek and probably was thoroughly integrated in Hellenistic culture. Then her social status could have been of the upper class. But the word may simply have been intended to indicate that she was not a Jew, but a foreigner, which is consistent with usage of the term by most New Testament writers.⁴ Mark may have used the word simply to make a clear distinction between the woman as a foreigner and Jesus as a Jew for the purpose of suggesting the possibility of Jesus’ foreign mission. Since Mark specifies that Jesus was in the “region of Tyre,” it is possible that the woman may be from one of the peripheral villages of Tyre, where people’s lives were not as easy as the lives of those in the urban cities.

The Devouring City of Tyre

The city of Tyre on the island was well known for “its wealth based on metal work, the production of purple dye and an extensive trade with the whole Mediterranean region. Its money was one of the most stable currencies in circulation at this period... This was certainly one reason why the temple treasury was kept in Tyrian coin, even though this meant accepting the fact that the coins of Tyre depicted the god Melkart.”⁵ Because the city of Tyre had very little space for farming, it depended on importing agricultural products from Galilee and other places.

“The Galilean hinterland and the rural territory belonging to the city (partly settled by Jews) were the ‘breadbasket’ of the metropolis of Tyre.”⁶ Most of the produce was purchased by rich city dwellers while the peasants in the hinterlands were always in want.⁷ Galilean peasants must have been resentful when they saw their ruling class selling their produce to the highest bidders from urban Tyre. Agricultural crops produced by the peasants did not return to their daily table to satisfy their own basic need. The peasants experienced a constant shortage of food and money, even though they labored from dawn to dusk all through the year. Under the exploitation

beside the threefold oppression, the Galilean peasants were deprived of a stable life.

Impact of the Harsh Words Given by Jesus

Taking into consideration the bitter economic relationship between the affluent city of Tyre and exploited Galilee, we can see that Jesus' bitter words thrown to the woman would have had a powerful impact. The saying, which is so offensive to the woman, would reflect the humiliating power relationship that Galileans had to endure with respect to urban Tyrians. The words could mean: "First let the mouths of the poor people in Galilee be satisfied. For it is not good to take poor people's food and throw it to the rich Tyrians in the city." The words overtly express the reality of the destitute Galilean peasants and show their resistance against the power exercised by the urban people of Tyre. Those Tyrians who hungered for and devoured the agrarian produce of Galilee are analogized to "dogs" by Jesus. Jesus' reply may represent the popular feeling of the Galilean peasants toward the Tyrians whom they viewed as rich and representing the Hellenistic culture of the elite.

The Woman as a Syro-Phoenician

Yet if the Syro-Phoenician woman in this story is from one of the villages in the hinterland of Tyre, which is plausible, the village is surely peripheral from the perspective of the urban elite in the city of Tyre. Compared to them, the woman might not be so rich or so privileged. It is more plausible to say that the woman with her sick child is from the hinterland with only limited access to the life of the urban rich and is socially ostracized because of the unclean spirit in her child. Then it is easier for us to understand why she is not knocked down by Jesus' words. From her attitude we learn she does not identify herself with those to whom Jesus' harsh words are thrown and whom he criticizes. She is from a village in the vicinity of Galilee where the life may not be so different from that of the Galilean peasants.

She enters the house where Jesus is and falls down at his feet, asking for a favor. Just like the demon possessed man (5:6) and Jairus, the synagogue leader (5:22-23), she assumes a subordinate position in relation to Jesus. However, in contrast to his reaction to these two men, Jesus shows great reluctance to respond to her request. Mary Ann Tolbert describes Jesus in this scene as using "a highly disparaging metaphor, likening her to a dog."⁸ As I have already mentioned, if this metaphor reflects the power relationships between Galilee and Tyre, Jesus only sides with the Galilean destitute peasants and thus defends them over against the Tyrians who benefit from the Galilean peasants.

Some find the reason for the rebuff in the fact that the Syro-Phoenician woman is a foreigner, but we have read earlier in Mark that Jesus has healed a foreigner, the man with an unclean spirit in the country of Gerasene in the Decapolis (5:1-20). Some say she is rebuffed because she is a woman and see in this the sexism of the time. Yet the analyses above indicate that there are

other concerns besides gender at work in this story. Tolbert offers another view, suggesting, “His rebuff provides the opportunity for her faith to be fully revealed, for she takes his metaphor and turns it back on him.”⁹ Her religious identity is not apparent from the representations given in the story. She may believe in the Tyrian god Melkart and other gods. We do not hear her own voice in this respect. Although the story may imply that the woman has faith, the woman’s response indicates that her interest is focused on her child’s need to be cured. As Kwok Pui-lan says, “The woman, though denigrated by Jesus, speaks in a supportive and affirmative way, for she is concerned with maintaining the relationship.”¹⁰

Toward a Dialogical Interdependence

Since she resides in a hinterland part of Tyre, she identifies herself more closely with the Galilean peasants. She does not succumb to Jesus’ words that rebuff the populace of Tyre as a whole. In response, she says, “Yes, it is so, but, sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs” (7:28; literal translation of the original by this author). She acknowledges the primacy that the Galilean peasants ought to have. At the same time, she reminds Jesus, who is more concerned about the Galileans who have scarce food to live on and critically reveals the dominant relationship of the Tyrians over the Jews through his harsh words, of the fact that there are the other kinds of dogs (people of Tyre destitute like her and her child) that also need to be fed. In this expression, we may see her raising a serious question to Jesus: “Can Jesus totally ignore a sick child while talking about feeding the “children” of Israel?” If Jesus defends the children of Israel, the woman insists, then she and her sick child should also be defended. She insists that Jesus’ harsh words do not apply to her and her child. To the contrary, she and her child will be exploited by Jesus if he will not feed them, since they also are suffering. Therefore she does not give up. She is leading the dialogue toward and interdependent relationship of the two.

Listening to Jesus, she is made aware of the fact that she is from Tyre, a city noted for depriving even the smallest bits of food from Galilean peasants who are forced to sell their produce to Tyre.

On the other hand, in hearing Jesus protect the “others” in Galilee, she is made aware of the fact that she is also one of these “others” in the society of Tyre. Therefore she keeps asking Jesus to expand his primacy to the “others” in Tyre. She questions how it is possible for Jesus to exclude her and her child from his table community. She asks for Jesus to be consistent in putting the primacy on the marginalized wherever they are and showing an egalitarian spirit toward those who are destitute. Had she not experienced being the “other” in her society, she would not be able to be as confident as she is in asking Jesus’ help. Her tenacity can be read as evidence that she is neither rich nor privileged.

Change in the Equilibrium of the Power

Jesus responds to her with words that fully accept her request, “For your words, you may go”

Jesus affirms her, as if he has learned a new lesson from her. In the first part of the encounter between Jesus and the woman, the equilibrium of the power is apparently in favor of Jesus. Toward the end it becomes reversed. The last verse, “So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone,” does not say anything about her faith, conversion or religion. We must abstain from concluding she has become the first foreign woman Christian regardless of how much Mark wants the audience to read the story in this way. We also must admit that it is Mark’s redactional intention that puts the story in the context of table fellowship. This story is not originally about table fellowship, but about the power relationships between Tyrian urban people and Galilean peasants.

Conclusion

Two elements - - the political and economic relationships between the regions of Tyre and Galilee, and the oppressive power of Tyrians over Galilean peasants - - provide a context for understanding why Jesus throws such bitter words at the woman. His words reflect the urgent need of Galileans to secure food for their daily lives. His words, then, reveal the story to be about a most basic issue: the unfair distribution of food among rival colonies within the Roman Empire.

The woman’s words, however, demonstrate that she rejects being used as a foil in Jesus’ conflict with the affluent urban Tyrians. Her words reveal that Tyrian society also is hierarchical and therefore Tyrian people are not monolithic. She identifies herself, instead, with the destitute Galilean peasants in the sense that she also is one of those whose needs must be met. When Jesus heals her daughter, he acknowledges her claim. In the same way, only after we see her need taken care of may we begin talking about the story encouraging a table fellowship inclusive of all those in need, wherever they are.

1 More detailed discussion is found in my article published in *Global Bible Commentary* (Abingdon, 2004).

2 The research on the cultural context and historical situation of the regions of Tyre and Galilee given by Gerd Theissen (See *The Gospels in Context: Social and Political History in the Synoptic Tradition*. Translated by Linda Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 61-80) and the recent archaeological research done by Jonathan L. Reed (See *Archaeology and the Galilean Jesus: A Re-examination of the Evidence* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2000), 163-64, 185-86.) are very helpful.

3 Jonathan L. Reed, *Archaeology and the Galilean Jesus: A Re-examination of the Evidence* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2000). Also see, Masahiro Yamaguchi, *Iesu Tanjo no Yoake*. (Tokyo: Nihon Kirisuto Kyodan Shuppankyoku, 2002).

4 It is interesting to observe this is the only place where Mark uses the word, “Greek” in his gospel, and no other synoptic gospel writer uses the word at all. In the whole Christian Testament, the word is used 27 times. Half of them are found in Acts and the other half are in Pauline letters as easily expected. Exceptions are in John 7:35 and 12:20, and in Colossians 3:11. In almost all the cases the word is used to designate foreigners in contrast to the Jews.

5 *Ibid.*, 73.

6 *Ibid.*, 74.

7 *Ibid.*, 72-75. Pointing out that popular coins used in Israel were with Tyrian imprint, Reed says they “were a daily reminder of Tyre’s economic influence to Galilean commerce.” *Ibid.*, 186. Paula Fredriksen, in her book *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews: A Jewish Life and the Emergence of Christianity*. NY: Alfred A. Knopf,

1999 also points out that the Temple in Jerusalem relied on the Tyrian coins and so there were money changers that converted the various currencies of pilgrims from various places to this standard coinage (208).

8 Mary Ann Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel: Mark's World in Literary-Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 185.

9 Tolbert, *Ibid.*, 185.

10 Kwok Pui-lan, *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 74.

(Hisako Kinukawa and Shannon Clarkson collaborated in the translation of this issue.)

Editor: Hisako Kinukawa