

Mark – The First Gospel

017 – Did Jesus Really Say That? – Mark 7:24-37

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First Thoughts

We enter the second half of a carefully constructed section in which Jesus' ministry moves from the Jews to Gentiles. Most scholars describe this section not as chronological or sequential, but thematic. We cannot use Mark's ordering of the stories to map out Jesus' journey, but rather it is meant to be seen revealing his theology of mission.¹

The two "miracle" stories show two very different ways in which Jesus interacted with people requesting his help. Throughout Christian history, the first of these has been particularly troubling to read and interpret. Many ways of reading it have been suggested to soften what is seen as rather offensive in the story. The second too, contains some odd actions that are puzzling.

Did Jesus Use a Racial Slur?

7:24 And from there he arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And he entered a house and did not want anyone to know, yet he could not be hidden. 25 But immediately a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit heard of him and came and fell down at his feet. 26 Now the woman was a Gentile, a Syrophenician by birth. And she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. 27 And he said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." 28 But she answered him, "Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." 29 And he said to her, "For this statement you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter." 30 And she went home and found the child lying in bed and the demon gone. (ESV)

Parallel Story in Matthew

Matthew 15:21 And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. 22 And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon." 23 But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, "Send her away, for she is crying out after us." 24 He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." 25 But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." 26 And he answered, "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." 27 She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' "

¹ *Feasting: Mark*, location 7661. "Given the exceedingly lengthy and unlikely route Mark describes, scholarly consensus appears to be that Mark knew next to nothing of the actual geography of the Holy Land, and that geography was not important to him. Mark's traveling details are only there as punctuation, as devices to move the story along."

table.”²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, “O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.” And her daughter was healed instantly. (ESV)

Discussion

1. What are some key differences between the two gospel accounts of the same incident? What does this tell us about what Mark might want to emphasize?^{2 3}
2. Does this story remind you of any earlier stories in Mark? What might Mark intend by this? What are similarities and differences?^{4 5}
3. Jesus initially refuses the mother’s request. He says, “Let the children be fed first...” This is not found in Matthew. Why did Jesus say this and why did Mark include it?⁶
4. Jesus then implies that the mother is a “dog.” What did Jesus intend by this?⁷

² *Reading Mark*, Mark 7:24-8:9. “Although most of the comment on this pericope has focused on the problem of Jesus’ apparent insult to the gentile woman, this concern misses the point of the story. Jesus is not testing the woman’s faith; unlike the author of Matthew, the writer of Mark never mentions faith in this pericope. In any case, the woman has already demonstrated adequate faith according to the Markan understanding of faith; she has come with a request, confident of Jesus’ power to cast the demon out of her daughter.”

³ *Feasting: Mark*, location 7429. “Some commentators note the woman’s faith, but the word “faith” is conspicuously absent in the passage.”

⁴ *Feasting: Mark*, location 7418. “The parallel with the story of Jairus in 5:22 is clear. The contrast is also clear: Jairus is Jewish, male, and named (a rarity in Mark’s narratives); she is pagan, female, and unnamed.”

⁵ *Feasting: Mark*, location 7479. “Others have tried to make light of Jesus’ name-calling. The actual Greek word used here for “dogs” is written in a diminutive form, signifying “little dogs” or “puppies” or “doggies,” and could suggest that Jesus was being playful or only joshing. However, at the remove of two millennia and having only the text to work with, we cannot even make an educated guess about Jesus’ tone or intention... Therefore, we would do best to set aside all such well-intentioned attempts to reduce the harshness of Jesus’ words and accept the text for what, to all appearances, it is: a stern, even insulting rebuke to the woman’s plea of desperation.”

⁶ *Feasting: Mark*, location 7327. “Again, perhaps the Gospel writer here is offering a lesson to his audience about their own prejudices: Jesus may be articulating a belief he himself does not hold, and inviting the woman’s response, in order that his listeners may be convicted by their own limited view of God’s mercy. In either case, Jesus is portrayed as wise rabbi who knows exactly what he is doing in this troubling interaction... Some more recent interpreters, however, have suggested that in this passage we glimpse the fully human Jesus, limited by his own culture with its prejudices.”

⁷ *New International Commentary: Mark*, 7:27-28. “Moreover, while Gentiles are sometimes described as dogs by the Jewish tradition, particularly with reference to their vices, there is no parallel to the use of the pet dogs of the household in this pejorative sense. Yet Jesus’ statement and the woman’s reply depend upon the nuance in the diminutive “little dogs” (which are admitted to the house and can be found under the table at meal time in contrast to the yard dogs or the stray scavengers of the street). It is therefore doubtful that Jesus intended a reference to the Gentiles or that the woman understood his statement in this sense. On the contrary, he alludes to a current domestic scene, particularly in a Hellenistic household. The table is set and the family has gathered. It is inappropriate to interrupt the meal and allow the household dogs to carry off the children’s bread.”

5. What does the mother's response and Jesus' response to the mother reveal about the nature of her conversation with Jesus?^{8 9 10 11}
6. How does this story fit into the overall arc of Mark chapters 6-8?
7. This story uses yet another mention of *food* to bring home a point. *Food* is a major motif in chapters 6-8. What is Mark's message?¹²

Did Jesus Heal a Mute Man Only to Tell Him Not to Speak?

7:31 Then he returned from the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. 32 And they brought to him a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment, and they begged him to lay his hand on him. 33 And taking him aside from the crowd privately, he put his

⁸ *Reading Mark*, Mark 7:24-8:9. "The closest parallel in antiquity to the conversation between Jesus and the Syrophoenician woman is the riddle contest in which the solution of the riddle gains for the protagonist access to the desired reward or status (e. g. Jdgs 14:12- 18; Oedipus and the riddle of the Sphinx). So the woman does not so much win an argument as solve a puzzle."

⁹ *Reading Mark*, 7:24-8:9. "The woman solves the riddle by changing the terms. In her answer the "descendants" (*tekna*) become "little children" (*paidioi*), and the street curs become puppies "under the table" (7:28).

¶ Unlike the Jews, the Greeks and Romans kept house dogs, as we know from literary sources (e. g. Plutarch, Aemilius Paulus 10, 4; Pliny Letters 4, 2. 3), relief sculptures (Payne 1931, 302, pl 27, n. 780), and vase painting (Becatti 1967, 33). In reliefs and vase paintings of meal scenes it is common to find a dog depicted as sitting or lying under the diner's couch or table, sometimes munching on a tidbit apparently claimed from its master.

¶ Thus, by changing the cultural context, the Syrophoenician woman solves the problem of priority by replacing the image of sequence and implied scarcity (the dogs eat last if there is anything left) with an image of simultaneity and abundance. The puppies will do fine on what the children feed them from their own plates. In addition, the woman's image transforms the Jewish believers from *tekna*, jealously standing on their privileges to *paidia*, those with no status or claim who alone will receive the reign of God (10:15)."

¹⁰ *New International Commentary: Mark*, 7:27-28. "She felt no insult in the comparison between children of the household and the pet dogs. Instead she neatly turned it to her advantage: the crumbs dropped by the children, after all, are intended for the dogs! Jesus' comparison is not rejected but carried one step further, which modifies the entire scene: if the dogs eat the crumbs under the table, they are fed at the same time as the children (and do not have to wait, as implied by the affirmation in verse 27a). Indeed, let the children be fed, but allow the dogs to enjoy the crumbs. There does not have to be an interruption of the meal, for what she requests is not the whole loaf but a single crumb. The acceptance of the comparison, the clever reply, and the profound respect for Jesus in her address show that her confidence in his power and good will has not been shaken."

¹¹ *Feasting: Mark*, location 7425. "She parries his aphorism with a clever play on words: "even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs" (v. 28). She turns mongrels into the house pets that eat the scraps under the table. Jesus has been bested in a Gospel in which he usually has the last word... "Faith" is the expected word here, but Jesus says instead, "For this saying" (my trans.), signaling that the woman has bested him in the verbal dual. In that sense "this saying" is a sign of her confidence."

¹² *Understanding the Bible Commentary: Mark*, 7:24-30. "In seeing this passage properly in its Markan context, we should note how the subject of food appears at several points in the narrative near this incident. In 7:1-5, there is the question of eating in a state of ritual purity. In 7:14-23, Jesus discusses food, whether some foods make one "unclean." And now there is the reference to food (bread) as the symbol of the blessings of the kingdom of God. Indeed, elsewhere Mark uses food as a symbol of these blessings. Particularly important are the two feeding miracles, the prior one in 6:30-44, which portrays Jesus bringing the promised blessings of salvation to Israel, and the other feeding miracle in 8:1-10, which, we shall see, may be designed to complement the first feeding by hinting that Jesus' "bread" was to be given to Gentiles as well in the future. If this suggested relationship between the two feeding miracles in Mark is entertained for the moment, then all the material in Mark 7, and particularly the present incident in 7:24-30, may be understood as part of Mark's effort to get the reader to see that Jesus' ministry in Israel was a preparation and basis for a later, wider proclamation of the gospel."

fingers into his ears, and after spitting touched his tongue. ³⁴ *And looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.”* ³⁵ *And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.* ³⁶ *And Jesus charged them to tell no one. But the more he charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it.* ³⁷ *And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, “He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.”* (ESV)

Discussion

8. A crowd brings the deaf and mute man. Jesus takes him away in private. What might this reveal about Jesus?
9. The actions taken by Jesus could be seen as “magical.” Why might Jesus go through what seems like ritualistic motions in order to heal, when previously he has healed with simply words?¹³
10. Why did Jesus “sigh”?
11. Jesus heals and allows the man to speak clearly, yet he commands him (and those who witnessed it) not to say anything. Odd or not?
12. Jesus’ command to them clearly was not heeded. In fact the very opposite appears to be the case: “the more he charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it.” What do you make of this?
13. Commentators suggest that this incident is an allusion to Isaiah 35:5-6. What do the story and allusion reveal about the kingdom of God?¹⁴
14. How does this story fit into the overall arc for chapters 6-8?¹⁵

Additional Reflections

- a. What do these two stories reveal about the gospel? Who is the gospel for? What does the gospel do?¹⁶

¹³ *Feasting: Mark*, location 7610. “This particular story is unusual in the tradition because it appears to employ magic... The significance of the spittle is unclear. Some evidence indicates that the Greco-Roman culture viewed it as having curative effects,¹ while other evidence from Jewish texts indicates that it is an unclean discharge.² This would actually make a difference in how one views the healing act. Given that Mark has been picturing Jesus breaking boundaries, I would suggest that it is viewed in the Jewish fashion as unclean. By an unclean act Jesus heals; this makes the boundary breaking even stronger.”

¹⁴ *Reading Mark*, 7:24-8:9. “The second part of the response of those who witness the miracle makes a clear connection between the work of Jesus and the eschatological exodus of Isaiah. In an allusion to LXX Isa 35:5-6 their unison acclamation, like the speech of the chorus in a Greek drama, interprets the significance of the action for the audience.”

¹⁵ *Feasting: Mark*, location 7641. “This healing story serves as a pivot: it concludes a cycle of four healings and initiates a second cycle revolving around blindness or deafness.”

¹⁶ *Feasting: Mark*, location 7444. “So while both of these stories anticipate and justify a Gentile mission, they both indicate the great boundary that had to be crossed to start that mission. Often forgetting that Jesus crossed that boundary for our sake, we Gentile Christians institute new boundaries between us and them. Mark intends the kingdom as radically inclusive; we often reconstitute it as exclusive... The story of the Syrophenician makes explicit one more boundary that had to be crossed: she was a woman... Even more, Jesus, as a Jewish male of honor, must give up some of that honor to meet the woman’s request. The first must become the last and slave of all (9:35).”

- b. What do these stories reveal about Jesus and his values?^{17 18 19}
- c. What do these stories reveal about the kingdom of God?^{20 21}
- d. What do these stories reveal about what might have been of pressing concerns to Mark and his Roman audience?²²

¹⁷ *Feasting: Mark*, location 7345. "Finally, this story prompts reflection on the role of women in Jesus' ministry, and thus the role of women in the Christian community today. Is this woman a model of persistent faith, or does she perpetuate harmful stereotypes of how women are to behave? Gentile that she is, and with a demon-possessed daughter, she is already marginal, and she lowers herself even further by first bowing down at Jesus' feet and then accepting his designation of her and her daughter as dogs."

¹⁸ *Feasting: Mark*, location 7493. "From the perspective of those who believe that Jesus manifests God's presence, this story stands in the long and worthy Jewish tradition of "arguing with God," which has deep roots in the Old Testament Scriptures."

¹⁹ *Feasting: Mark*, location 7545. "First, "Jesus does not stigmatize persons with illnesses, diseases, and impairments." He enters into their presence, disregarding purity codes and seeking their good... Second, in the ancient world, sickness was not just an individual matter, but had an effect on the entire community. Thus, "sickness causes social isolation and alienation, interfering with a person's sense of being in community... Third, the healing narratives are not primarily about "curing," which is restoration of physical function, but about "healing," which is a restoration of wholeness, a gift of abundant life."

²⁰ *Feasting: Mark*, location 7521. "Why does Jesus seek such privacy? This has perplexed interpreters for centuries. Perhaps this is a sign of Jesus' humility, showing him as one who "did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself" (Phil. 2:6-7). Perhaps his failed attempt at secrecy is Mark's narrative strategy to show that the kingdom of God cannot be hidden. Even when he tells them not to say anything, the people cannot control their proclamation of the good news. Finally, this "messianic secret" in Mark may be related to the unexpected nature of Jesus' messiahship. While many expected a messiah to bring in God's reign, no one expected that messiah to be crucified."

²¹ *Feasting: Mark*, location 7651. "The unit 7:1-37 radically expands the inclusiveness of the kingdom of God. It includes a redefinition of cleanliness, a major value in the Jewish and Greco-Roman worlds, breaks out of the boundary of Galilee into Gentile lands, and crosses boundaries between male and female, even showing Jesus' honor being challenged by a witty Syrophoenician woman. If we miss all this boundary breaking and the inclusiveness of the kingdom, we miss the gospel's essence."

²² *Reading Mark*, 7:24-8:9. "The problem requiring a solution appears to be the result of a misreading of Isaiah, the prophet so important to Mark's community. Isaiah had been a major source for the interpretation of Gen 12:1-3 as a prediction of the conversion of the Gentiles to Yahwism after the restoration of Israel from exile (Isa 2:2-4; 11:10; 19:21-25; 25:6; 42:6). This, then, became the "Jews first, then gentiles" mission strategy reflected in the writings of Paul and the author of Luke-Acts. But in Acts 6:1 we find a suggestion of a problem that could easily have arisen in many early Christian communities. If in Jerusalem the Hellenized Jewish Christians could be neglected in favor of the "Hebrew" Christians, how much more likely that in racially mixed communities the Jewish Christians might claim pride of place over gentile Christians? After all, hadn't Isaiah portrayed the former idolaters as Johnny-come-latelies in the covenant community? (Isa 56:8; 61:5-11; 66:18-21). ¶The author of Mark resists this transformation of salvation history into privileged status for some Christians over others. But he resists it, not with a rhetorical sledgehammer, but indirectly with a contest of riddles. He has Jesus pose the problem: It isn't right to deprive God's chosen people in favor of gentile outsiders. Let the descendants of Abraham be taken care of first. Didn't God choose them first? Then the narrator allows the Syrophoenician woman, representing the voice of the gentile Christians, to solve the riddle."