

Women in Scripture



A Dictionary of
Named and Unnamed Women in the
Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books,
and the New Testament



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Mark 7:10–13 Mother (and Father) to Be Honored

In Mark 7:1–5, some Pharisees and scribes ask Jesus why his disciples eat without first washing their hands, ignoring the “tradition of the elders” (v. 3). Jesus counters that the Pharisees and scribes honor human tradition, but violate the divine command to honor mother and father (Exod 20:12; Deut 5:16) when they dedicate to God resources they would otherwise have provided for their parents. In so doing, Jesus suggests, they speak evil of their parents, an act deserving death (Lev 20:9).

Whose interpretation of the commandments is truly authoritative is cast as the heart of the debate. Why Jesus counters with the example of the commandment to honor one’s parents is not immediately apparent. Conceivably, it is connected to the identification of the “tradition of the elders” with the traditions of “the fathers,” a phrase common in ancient Jewish sources. It may also be that, in this particular instance of Markan anti-Pharisaic polemic, it is the author who has chosen to cast the Pharisees as violators of the most basic and common ancient moral principles of filial piety.

Once invoked, the injunction of Exodus and Deuteronomy dictates that the dispute be couched in terms of mothers as well as fathers. Jesus’ response could be understood to suggest that, in the land of Israel in the first-century C.E., mothers and fathers did not always receive the necessary financial support from their adult children, something that could easily have had a disparate impact on women. If, however, the driving force here is anti-Pharisaic polemic that posits Jesus himself, we should be cautious in drawing such specific conclusions about social conditions from the narrative.

ROSS S. KRAEMER

SEE ALSO Part II: Women in the Decalogue (Exod 20:8, etc.); Mother (and Father) to Be Honored (Matt 19:19); (Mark 10:19); (Luke 18:20); (Eph 6:2–3).

MARK 7:24–30 Syrophenician Woman

By her bold faith and persistence, her courage and cleverness, the Syrophenician woman effects not only the healing of her daughter by Jesus, but also a significant shift in Jesus’ attitude toward Gentiles. In Mark, her story is part of a larger narrative segment (6:45–8:21) that recounts a “detour” through which Jesus leads his disciples after they fail to go on ahead of him to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, to gentle Bethsaida. During the “detour” the expansiveness of Jesus’ teaching, feeding, and healing power not only for Jews, but also for Gentiles, is made manifest. Jesus’ encounter with the Syrophenician woman is presented as key to this transformation of boundaries.

The Markan narrator informs the audience that Jesus’ intention in going north to the gentle city of Tyre is not to seek out more crowds to heal, but to escape public notice. The fact that the Syrophenician woman seeks out the secluded Jesus is just the first indication of her persistence on behalf of her demon-possessed daughter. The Markan Jesus rebuffs her initial request, and he does so with a powerful and degrading metaphor: “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food [bread] and throw it to the dogs” (7:27). The children are Israel. She is a dog, and she yaps right back! Two can play at metaphors. “Sir [or Lord], even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs (7:28).” She has him. She has risked a second rebuke and won her daughter’s health. “For this saying, [“word,” *logos*]” (7:29, RSV), Jesus says, you may go home to a healed child, a healed gentle child. And Jesus, too, seems to have experienced healing in the widening of his initial view of God’s power and care.

This story is bothersome in several ways. The fact that not the Syrophenician demoniac, but the Gerasene demoniac (5:1–20), is the first Gentile healed in Mark’s Gospel bothers biblical critics who want the text to be logical and consistent. Jesus has already moved beyond his Jewish community in exorcising a gentle demoniac in chap. 5, so what is

the problem with healing a gentle child in chap. 7,¹ they ask. Such critics compensate by talking about Mark's compilation of oral sources. The fact that Jesus' initial response to the woman is rude and parochial bothers faithful readers who want Jesus to be a perfect model of morality and courtesy, untouched by his patriarchal culture and human nature. They compensate by talking about how Jesus, who always planned to heal the daughter, was "testing the faith" of her mother, or about how the diminutive form in the Greek (7:27, *kynariois*, "little dogs") minimizes the insult. But in the Markan narrative, it is first the woman who is bothered by Jesus' narrow view of God's power coming through him, and then Jesus who is bothered by the expansive truth of her observation. They continue by talking to each other, and healing is shared. The Markan narrator continues talking to the audience about the abundance of bread and healing through Jesus, proclaimer of God's ruling activity, until the disciples finally do reach gentle Bethsaida, where, although it takes two stages, even the blind can now see (8:22–26).

Like Jairus (5:21–24, 35–43), the Syrophoenician woman seeks healing not for herself, but for her daughter. Her non-Jewish status is as highly marked (7:24, 17re; 7:26, Gentle, Syrophoenician) as the Jewish status of Jairus (5:21, "crossed again"; 5:22, "one of the leaders of the synagogue"). Both persevere in their faith: Jairus after his daughter dies, the woman after Jesus' initial rebuff. Together their stories portray a Jesus who listens to the pleas of both mothers and fathers and who heals both Jews and Gentiles.

The Syrophoenician woman knows when not to take "no" for an answer. In addition to her intense desire to be a channel of healing for her daughter, she senses the fuller implications of Jesus' ministry of healing: he heals what is broken — broken bodies, broken spirits, and broken relationships, including the broken relationships between Jews and Gentiles, insiders and outsiders. The Syrophoenician woman, an outsider as a Gentle (Greek) and as a woman, achieves her goal — and more — because of her "saying," not because of her faith alone

or her reasoning alone, but because of her speaking up and speaking out — because of her action. Jesus gracefully reacts with the maturity that empowers change and enables inclusivity.

ELIZABETH STRUTHERS MALBON

SEE ALSO Part II: Canaanite Woman (Matt 15:21–28);

Daughter of the Canaanite Woman (Matt 15:21–28);

Daughter of the Syrophoenician Woman (Mark 7:24–30).

FOR FURTHER READING: Malbon, Elizabeth Struthers.

"Faillible Followers: Women and Men in the Gospel of Mark."

———. "Narrative Criticism: How Does the Story Mean?"

Tolbert, Mary Ann. "Mark."

MARK 7:24–30

Daughter of the Syrophoenician Woman

The demon-possessed "little daughter" of the Syrophoenician woman is healed at a distance by Jesus, who credits the bold and clever "saying" (RSV, Greek *logos*, 7:29) of her mother as she successfully challenges Jesus to include Gentiles as well as Jews in his healing power. In the patriarchal culture of the first century, it would be more usual for a girl's father to seek help for her from someone outside the family — as Jairus does for his "little daughter" (5:21–24, 35–43). But in the case of the daughter of the Syrophoenician woman, no father is mentioned. Whether the father is unwilling or unable to seek help for her is not known. The mother may be a widow, or she may be unwed. Her daughter may be her only family. The mother may simply be more willing to take the risk of presenting the request to this Jewish healer. As a woman, her status is already lower — lower if she is a widow, lower still if unwed. Thus she has less to lose — and her daughter's health to gain.

The mother does, however, seek out Jesus in a house, a more usual domain for a woman than the public space of a street or market area. Yet it is not

her house, and she is not an invited guest but an intruder on Jesus' seclusion — as well as it turns out, on Jesus' conviction about to whom his gift of healing should be extended. Her love for her daughter impels her to break with social norms that would not sanction her initial speech to Jesus, much less her snappy comeback. Following her lead, the Markan Jesus too breaks conventions, not only speaking to her, but also listening to her. The mother's bold love and faith are rewarded by Jesus' exorcism of the demon from her daughter, without his ever seeing the daughter, the only healing at a distance in Mark's Gospel.

Her story complements the raising of the "little daughter" of Jairus, a synagogue ruler (5:21-24, 35-43). As a Jewish father perseveres in pursuing Jesus' help for his daughter, despite an initial setback (her reported death), so a gentle mother does the same for her daughter, despite an initial setback — Jesus' refusal to help. But while Jairus is encouraged by Jesus to resist fear and believe (5:36), the Syro-phoenician woman has to overcome Jesus' resistance on the strength of her own fearlessness and wit. For Jairus, Jesus is always a helper; for the Syro-phoenician woman, Jesus is at first an antagonist. Jairus must struggle with his fear; the Syro-phoenician woman must struggle with Jesus. Both daughters benefit, and their stories, taken together, portray a Jesus who listens to mothers as well as fathers and heals and restores gentle as well as Jewish children.

ELIZABETH STRUTHERS MALBON

See also Part II: Canaanite Woman (Matt 15:21-28);

Daughter of the Canaanite Woman (Matt 15:21-28);

Syro-phoenician Woman (Mark 7:24-30).

MARK 10:2-12

Divorced Wife

Mark 10:2-12 combines two sayings of Jesus on divorce. In 10:2-9, Pharisees ask Jesus whether it is "lawful for a man to divorce his wife," paraphrasing Deut 24:1 as a biblical proof text for the permissibil-

ity of divorce (later rabbis based their divorce law on Deut 24:1-4). Jesus counters with Gen 1:27 ("God made them male and female") and 2:24 ("one flesh") as proof texts for his prohibition of divorce. In Mark 10:10-12, Jesus instructs his disciples privately that a man who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against the prior wife. So, too, a woman who divorces her husband and marries another commits adultery against the prior husband. The connection between divorce and remarriage is also found in Deut 24:1-4, which presumes the practice of divorce (effected through a written document) and is actually concerned with whether a man may remarry a wife he has divorced if she has remarried in the interim (the passage forbids it).

Jesus' prohibition of divorce changes the definition of adultery. According to ancient Israelite law, adultery was committed when an Israelite man had sex with the wife of another Israelite man (see Deut 22:22). A man did not commit adultery against his own wife by having sex with a prostitute, a foreigner, a slave, a divorced woman, a widow, or a virgin. Further, polygamy was allowed and did not constitute adultery. The wife of an Israelite man, in contrast, committed adultery against her husband by having sex with any other man. Jesus alters and equalizes the definition of adultery by claiming, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her" (Mark 10:11; compare Matt 19:9), as if a man could in fact commit adultery against his own wife. Jesus also extends the concept of adultery to include looking lustfully at a woman (Matt 5:27-30).

Mark, who presupposes women's power to initiate divorce, prohibits both women and men from initiating divorce, whereas Matthew's prohibition extends only to men. Some scholars believe that Mark adapted Jesus' prohibition to Greek and Roman law, according to which women had the power to divorce, whereas Matthew remained closer to Jesus' own formulation. We can, however, better explain the discrepancy between Matthew (and Luke) on the one hand and Mark (and Paul) on the other as reflecting the different strands of legal

See also Part II: Sister(s) of Jesus (Mark 3:32–35); Sisters of Jesus (Mark 6:3).

men, but the thesis lacks textual and even strong cultural support.

AMY-JILL LEVINE

MATT 14:6–11

Young Dancer Who Asks for the Head of John the Baptist

Virtually all ancient manuscripts of Matthew identify this dancer simply as the daughter of Herodias. Although some ancient manuscripts of Mark share this identification, others describe her as Herodias, the daughter of Herod (probably meaning Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee and Peraea, 4 B.C.E.–39 C.E.). Tradition has long identified the young dancer as Salome, but neither Mark nor Matthew (the only Gospels that narrate this famous tale) ever identifies her by this name. Rather, the name Salome is supplied from the first-century C.E. Jewish historian, Josephus, who tells us that Herod's wife, Herodias, had a daughter, Salome, by her first husband (also named Herod).

ROSS S. KRAMER

See also Part I: Herodias 1; Herodias 2; Salome 2.

MATT 14:21

Women Fed by Jesus

Following the first miraculous feeding, Matthew alone among the Gospels notes that five thousand (men) ate, "besides women and children." The same addition appears in Matt 15:38. The reference complements Matthew's other recognitions of women's presence among Jesus' followers (for example, 9:20–22, 10:35, 24:41, 27:61, 28:1–10). It may also evoke the reading of "besides children" in the enumeration of the people in the wilderness (Exod 12:37; see also Philo, *Life of Moses*, book 1, section 147, and Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 1.317). Some scholars suggest that Matthew envisions the women and children as seated separately from the

MATT 15:4

Mother (and Father) to Be Honored

In a passage paralleling Mark 7:1–15, Matt 15:1–9 narrates a dispute between Jesus and some Pharisees and scribes over the custom of washing one's hands before eating. Jesus contends that his opponents honor human traditions, but violate divine commandments by allowing people to dedicate to God resources they would otherwise have provided for their parents, thus negating the commandment to honor father and mother (Exod 20:12; Deut 5:16). Jesus' response may suggest that, in the land of Israel in the first century C.E., mothers and fathers did not always receive the necessary financial support from their adult children, something that could easily have had a disparate impact on women.

ROSS S. KRAMER

See also Part II: Women in the Decalogue (Exod 20:8, etc.); Mother (and Father) to Be Honored (Matt 19:19); (Mark 7:10–13); (Mark 10:19); (Luke 18:20); (Eph 6:2–3).

MATT 15:21–28

Canaanite Woman

On the border of Tyre and Sidon, a Canaanite woman solicits Jesus' healing powers on behalf of her demon-possessed daughter. Jesus first ignores her, then rebuffs her by insisting his mission is only to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt 15:24), and finally insults her by stating, "It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs" (15:26). Through her persistence, cleverness, and, as Jesus observes, her "faith" (15:28), the mother receives her request.

Matthew's account, the first instance in the Gospel of a woman's direct speech, significantly differs from its parallel in Mark 7:24–30. Mark's woman is a "Greek, a Syrophenician by birth" (7:26) who approaches Jesus inside a house in gentile territory; her daughter has "an unclean spirit" (7:25), and Jesus performs the exorcism because of her words. In Matthew, the woman is a Canaanite; she comes out of the pagan area to meet Jesus in public space; no reference is made to anything unclean; and the healing, which occurs only after extensive conversation, transpires because of the woman's faith (whether only in Jesus' miraculous abilities or in his divine sonship as well is never made explicit).

Like Mark, Matthew omits the woman's name; rather than an indication of sexism, anonymity is characteristic of those for whom Jesus performs mighty works. For this story, it focuses attention on the woman's ethnicity. The term "Canaanite" is both a geographic indicator (see Jdt 5:9–10; Bar 3:22; 1 Macc 9:37) and a reference to the population of the land promised to Abraham and Sarah's descendants. Although the Book of Joshua emphasizes Canaan's conquest, it also records the account of the Canaanite woman Rahab, who protects Joshua's spies, misdirects Jericho's leaders, and recognizes Israelite theology and history. Matthew's mention of "Canaanite" in 15:22 recollects the Matthean genealogy (chap. 1), which lists Rahab (1:5) as well as another Canaanite woman, Tamar (1:3). All three Canaanite women overcome hesitancy or lack of initiative in Hebrew/Israelite/Jewish men; all three acknowledge whether implicitly or explicitly, Israel's priority in salvation history; all three achieve their goals through clever speech and action.

These Canaanite women also foreshadow another gentile woman, Pilate's wife (27:19), as well as the Jewish woman who anoints Jesus (26:6–13) over the protests of the disciples (compare 15:23), and the Jewish women at the cross and the tomb, who, unlike Jesus' male followers, remain faithful.

The appearances of these gentile women reinforce rather than compromise Matthew's insistence on Israel's priority in salvation history. The Ca-

naanite woman not only calls Jesus "Lord" (Greek *Kyrios*) three times, but also she concedes Israelite superiority by referring to him as "son of David" (Mark's Syrophenician does not employ this epithet). The combination of titles highlights the political implications of her speech. Whereas Mark's Jesus states that the children must "first be fed" (Mark 7:27), Matthew avoids mention of a "first" (thereby eliminating indication of a second, gentile stage during Jesus' ministry). Mark's Syrophenician notes that even the dogs eat the "children's crumbs" (Mark 7:28), while the Canaanite woman's response, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table" (Matt 15:27), reinforces the "mastery" of Jesus and so of Israel.

The Matthean account is even more jarring than Mark's: for Jesus to ignore a desperate parent is already problematic; to insist on the restricted nature of his mission is of little help to the woman in need; to call her a "dog" is offensive. Numerous explanations, many of them apologetic, have been proffered.

The story is frequently viewed as a remnant of Jewish-Christian exclusivity, which the evangelist felt constrained to repeat. However, the restricted mission is consistent with Matthew's presentation of Jesus' own behavior (he does not make a concerted effort to preach among Gentiles), and it echoes the missionary instructions in 10:5b–6:23. Therefore, it appears to be a Matthean theme. Confirming this theory, Matt 15:21–28 matches 8:5–13, the Gospel's other explicit healing of a Gentile. In each case, the ailing child (the centurion's *Pais* could be translated as either "son" or "servant") is absent; Jesus initially rebuffs the supplicant; both parental figures acknowledge Jesus' authority through detailed comment; and Jesus remarks on the faith of each. In neither story, finally, do the Gentiles follow Jesus.

On this last point, the woman provides a contrast to the Jewish blind men of 20:29–34. Like her, the men address Jesus as "son of David" and "Lord," they ask for "mercy," they are restrained by Jesus' disciples, and they have to make clear, in response

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to Jesus' question, what they desire. Unlike the woman, they follow him to Jerusalem.

Scholars have also proposed that Matt 15:21-28 is the evangelist's attempt to convince Jewish Christians that Gentiles are worthy of church membership; in this scenario, "dog" is viewed as an insult customarily directed by Jews at Gentiles. This theory again posits the story's origin in Jewish-Christian exclusivity, even though Jewish-Christian debates over the gentle mission were less a matter of whether it should happen than of the terms under which it should take place (for example, Torah observance). Moreover, "dog" is a term of disapprobation not only in Hebrew (1 Sam 17:43; Prov 26:11; Isa 56:10-11), but also in Greek thought; it is not ethnically coded (see Matt 7:6; 2 Pet 2:22; Rev 22:15).

The insult may suggest an aural connection between "Canaanaite" (Greek *Xananiai*) and "dogs" (Greek *kynaria*); the latter is the origin of the name of the group of Greek philosophers called the Cynics; this name reflects, among other things, public presence, wit, and social criticism. Benevolent interpretations of Jesus' equating the woman with a dog—that he is "testing her faith," that he is speaking with a smile on his lips, and so on—do not account for either the lack of such insults elsewhere in the Gospel or the unseemliness of such rejoicing when a child is ill. One argument holds that the use of the word for "household dogs" rather than "wild dogs" softens the insult, but this hardly makes a difference—"little bitch" is no improvement over "bitch."

Perhaps Matthew depicts Jesus as both reluctant to heal and debasing in attitude in order to highlight his change of heart. If so, the story would be consistent with both Jewish and pagan accounts of leaders called to task by their subordinates (often women). Matthew's main point would then be the excellence of Jesus' leadership: as "Lord" and "son of David," he listens well to his "subjects."

The conventionality of these scenes argues against another common interpretation of Matt 15:21-28: that the woman's appearance in public apart from her male protector and her addressing a strange man are actions that subvert propriety.

Also, Matthew elsewhere depicts unaccompanied women (such as the hemorrhaging woman in 9:20-22, the anointing woman in 26:6-13, women in partables, and the women at Golgotha in 27:55-56), but never suggests they are anomalous. Third, because the Canaanite woman's actions match those of the centurion in 8:5-13, any sense of indecorum is mitigated. Finally, the Canaanite matches a model established by Jeroboam's wife, who approaches the prophet Ahijah (1 Kgs 14:1-14), and the great woman of Shunem, who approaches the prophet Elisha (2 Kgs 4:18-37). A similar tale of "a little woman pleading for her boy . . . who had been possessed by a demon for the past two years" is found in the *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*. Apollonius was a philosopher and wonder worker of the first century C.E., whose life, miracles, and teachings are strikingly similar to those of Jesus in many ways.

AMY-JILL LEVINE

See also Part I: Rahab; Tamar; Part II: Syrophenician Woman (Mark 7:24-30); Daughter of the Syrophenician Woman (Mark 7:24-30).

FOR FURTHER READING: Levine, Amy-Jill. "Matthew's Advice to a Divided Readership."

Ring, Sharon H. "A Gentle Woman's Story, Revisited." Mainwring, Elaine M. "Not Without My Daughter: Gender and Demon Possession in Matt 15:21-28."

MATT 15:21-28 Daughter of the Canaanite Woman

Unnamed, like most beneficiaries of Jesus' miracles, the daughter is "severely possessed" (15:22; contrast Mark 7:25's "unclean spirit"); Matthew avoids implications of impurity. Like the "ruler's" daughter (9:18-26) and epileptic boy (17:14-20), she requires parental intercession; a Gentile, like the centurion's son or servant (8:5-13), she is healed at a distance.

AMY-JILL LEVINE

See also Part II: Canaanite Woman (Matt 15:21-28); Syrophenician Woman (Mark 7:24-30); Daughter of the Syrophenician Woman (Mark 7:24-30).

FOR FURTHER READING: Levine, Amy-Jill. "Matthew's Advice to a Divorced Readship." Ringe, Sharon H. "A Gentle Woman's Story, Revisited."

MATT 18:25 Wife (and Husband and Children) Sold to Pay Off Debt

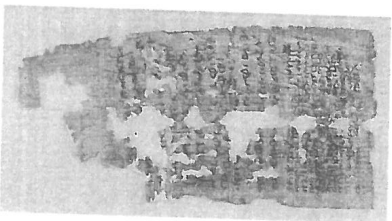
Discussing forgiveness, Jesus tells of a king who orders his indebted slave to be sold "together with his wife and children." It is unlikely that the money accrued for the sale would cover the slave's debt of ten thousand talents. The practice of selling family members to creditors appears in Israelite (compare 2 Kgs 4:1) and Roman contexts. The Mishnah (c. 200 C.E.) prohibits selling a wife for debt. The early sources speak more frequently about selling children and even the debtor himself, rather than about selling wives. Evidence is scarce concerning the fates of these enslaved family members.

AMY-JILL LEVINE

MATT 19:3-9 Divorced Wife

Matthew's version of a dispute between Jesus and some Pharisees over the question of divorce follows the Markan narrative (10:2-12). The order of the discussion is different, and Jesus' private teaching to the disciples in Mark 10:10-12 becomes integrated into his response to the Pharisees. Two differences, though, are particularly significant.

First, in Matthew, Jesus allows for an exception in the general prohibition against divorce, in cases of *porneia*, a term usually translated as "unchastity," and often understood to mean that divorce was permissible when a wife had committed adultery. *Porneia* can also refer to marriages forbidden by the incest laws of Lev 18:6-18, and the use of an analogous term in one of the Dead Sea Scrolls suggests that *porneia* might also have referred to marriages



A first-century C.E. Jewish bill of divorce written in Aramaic on papyrus, found at the Wadi Murabba'at near the Dead Sea. See Divorced Wife (Matt 5:31-32; Matt 19:3-9; Mark 10:2-12; Luke 16:18).

with spouses outside the community (see also 1 Cor 7:12-16, which allows for divorce if the spouse is a nonbeliever and does not wish to continue the marriage, but recommends against it).

Second, in Mark, Jesus teaches that if either a woman or a man divorces the other and remarries, each has committed adultery. In Matthew, however, Jesus gives only the instance of the man who divorces his wife; the parallel instance of a wife who divorces her husband is absent. The same difference may be seen in Matthew's version of a Q saying on the same subject (Matt 5:31-32).

BERNADETTE J. BROOTEN

SEE ALSO Part II: Woman Being Divorced (Deut 24:1-4; etc.); Divorced Wife (Matt 5:31-32); (Mark 10:2-12); (Luke 16:18); Married Women (and Men), Unmarried Women (and Men), and Women (and Men) Married to Unbelievers (1 Corinthians 7).

MATT 19:19 Mother (and Father) to Be Honored

In Matthew (19:16-22), Mark (10:17-22), and Luke (18:18-23), a wealthy man asks Jesus what he must