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High & Low Christology: Examining "Jesus & the Syrophoenician Woman"

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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"In this pericope, Jesus and his disciples headed to Tyre, where Jesus continued his ministry in another location. When Jesus entered the house, the gospel writer claims that he wanted no one to know about his presence. However, in that line the gospel writer said that Jesus could not escape notice. Perhaps it was Jesus' intention all along to be noticed. He was calling people to him—in this case, the Syrophoenician woman."



Jodi Schott

High & Low Christology: Examining “Jesus & the Syrophenician Woman”

(Mark 7:24-30)

Introduction

The purpose of this work is to examine the pericope from the gospel according to Mark about the Syrophenician woman. First, I will use a high Christological lens to examine the pericope. Then, I will use a low Christological lens to examine the pericope. Overall, my intention is to understand the Christ of Faith and Jesus of History from this pericope, using the two different methods of high and low Christology.

Pericope

“From the place he went off to the district of Tyre. He entered a house and wanted no one to know about it, but he could not escape notice. Soon a woman whose daughter had an unclean spirit heard about him. She came and fell at his feet. The woman was a Greek, a Syrophenician by birth, and she begged him to drive the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, ‘Let the children be fed first. For it is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs.’ She replied and said to him, ‘Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s scraps.’ Then he said to her, ‘For saying this, you may go. The demon has gone out of your daughter.’ When the woman went home, she found the child lying in bed and the demon gone.”

Mark 7:24-30

Part One: Christology From Above

In this pericope, Jesus and his disciples headed to Tyre, where Jesus continued his ministry in another location. When Jesus entered the house, the gospel writer claims that he wanted no one to know about his presence. However, in that line the gospel writer said that Jesus could not escape notice. Perhaps it was Jesus' intention all along to be noticed. He was calling people to him—in this case, the Syrophenician woman.

The Syrophenician woman heard about the healing power of Jesus and decided to visit him and ask for his healing power for her daughter. Normally, for a Greek woman to approach Jesus, a Jew and Son of God, this would be unusual. However, Jesus was anticipating her arrival and puts her faith to the test. This woman approached Jesus and begged him to heal her daughter. The Syrophenician woman is like many others who seek healing for themselves or loved ones. In her begging of Jesus for his help, her necessity to heal her daughter becomes evident.

Putting her faith to the test, Jesus posed her a riddle: "Let the children be fed first. For it is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs." Prior to this encounter, Jesus limited his interactions and his ministry to the Jewish community, reminding the chosen ones about God's promise to them. In his encounter with the Syrophenician woman, Jesus realized that he may now open his ministry to the non-Jewish world. This woman symbolizes all non-Jewish people; she represents the world outside of Judaism. Her answer, her testament of faith in Jesus the Christ, renders her and the non-Jewish people ready to experience Jesus' healing power and the Kingdom of God. Her words, "Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children's scraps" demonstrated her faith in Jesus and his power of healing. In calling Jesus "Lord" she is recognizing his power and healing ability. She is affirming his ministry and establishing

the readiness of the non-Jewish people to accept and understanding Jesus' message and mission—the Kingdom of God, both in heaven and on earth.

In confirming her faith in him, Jesus grants the Syrophenician woman's request by healing her daughter. He said to her, "For saying this, you may go. The demon has gone out of your daughter." Jesus sought from this woman an obedience of faith. In her compliance, Jesus removed the demon from her daughter and sent the woman home to find the child well. The ability of Jesus to heal the daughter with a mere statement proves his miraculous power. Rather than being in his presence, the daughter is healed with his words on the faith of her mother. The profoundness of Jesus' healing through words alone, without the presence of the demonized girl, illustrates his authority to help the entirety of humanity.

The Syrophenician woman is a character in this gospel who shows absolute faith in Jesus. Jesus went to Tyre, called this woman to him, challenged her faith in him, and healed her daughter. Thus, his ministry to the Jews and now non-Jews was public in this encounter with the Syrophenician woman. This woman demonstrates that faith in Jesus provides for his miraculous healing power and establishes Jesus' message and mission of the Kingdom of God found both in heaven and in Jesus' miraculous works on earth.

Part Two: Christology From Below

Jesus and his disciples had been ministering to people in Gennesaret, where the Pharisees challenged some of the disciples for their table fellowship—eating with those who were unclean. After this encounter, Jesus decided to go to the district of Tyre, for a moment of reprieve and much needed rest. As the pericope states: "He entered a house

and wanted no one to know about it, but he could not escape notice.” Unfortunately, Jesus’ rest—probably quality time spent in prayer with God—was short lived.

For her daughter, the Syrophenician woman approached Jesus, seeking his miraculous healing power that she had heard about. Being a Greek, the unnamed Syrophenician woman would have been familiar with those who practiced healings, or “magic”, that were similar to the stories this woman heard about Jesus. Perhaps she had already sought help from others to heal her daughter. However, this woman chose to approach Jesus, challenging his reputation as healer, searching for the means to heal her daughter’s affliction. In her begging for help, she is recognizing Jesus’ societal status as a Jewish healer who can help not only Jews, but also non-Jews.

In Mark’s gospel, this is a literary turning point in Jesus’ ministry; for before this moment, Jesus’ focus and message of the Kingdom of God relied on his interactions with the Jewish, chosen people. Now, this unnamed, un-Jewish woman challenges his ministerial vision and work, extending the notion of the Kingdom beyond the boundaries of the Jewish people. Jesus confirms this viewpoint in his words to the woman, “Let the children be fed first. For it is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs.” Clearly, Jesus’ development, until this moment, and his vision for his ministry continues to be limited to helping the Jewish people, who he calls “children” ; whereas he refers to this woman’s daughter as “dog”—an unfriendly term for anyone.

Along with being unnamed and Syrophenician, the woman displayed her cleverness in her remark to Jesus. Perhaps this cleverness and courageousness comes from her desperation to heal her daughter; yet it is still a pivotal moment, the catalyst, in the expansion of Jesus’ earthly ministry from ministering solely to the Jews to including

non-Jews. Her comment, “Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s scraps,” recognizes her lesser role in society—a woman speaking to a man—while challenging Jesus to validate and act upon her need. She uses the term “Lord” to demonstrate to Jesus he is indeed in the position of power in this encounter; yet, her cunning answer to his riddle confronts the limited view given by Jesus in his prior statement. In a sense, the woman reverses power from Jesus, who she deems “Lord,” by challenging the very core of his ministry and healing action.

In response to the woman’s confrontation of his ministerial view and action, Jesus commends the woman for her cleverness, persistence, and courageousness. In response to this role reversal—the exchange of power from Jesus to the woman—Jesus recognizes the need to heal the daughter, which once again reverses the power of the situation, giving Jesus the ability to heal. “For saying this, you may go. The demon has gone out of your daughter.” Whether Jesus chose to heal her daughter due to the power reversal from the woman’s actions or because of her persistence and cleverness does not impact the overall outcome of this encounter. Rather it is the very action of healing the daughter that expands Jesus’ ministerial horizon, sanctifying the power of Jesus’ healing and ministry for all. Often in Mark, minor characters, like the Syrophenician woman, tend to have integral roles in the narrative structure. According to Rhoads, the Syrophenician woman is a stock character in the gospel of Mark: “in coming on behalf of her daughter, she reveals her loyalty and compassion. And her willingness to humiliate herself on behalf of the daughter shows her willingness to serve as one of the least on behalf of another. . . . Jesus is portrayed here as having a genuine change of mind.”²⁷ Not only

²⁷ David Rhoads, “Jesus and the Syrophenician Woman in Mark,” *Reading Mark: Engaging the Gospel*, (2004): 83.

does the impact of the Syrophenician woman's actions influence her individual role in the narrative, she also influences Jesus and the development of his character.

Upon returning home, the woman finds her daughter lying in bed and the demon gone just as Jesus stated. This affirmation confirms Jesus' ability to heal, along with the validation the nameless Syrophenician woman experienced in her dialogue with Jesus. This woman challenged the societal roles of men and women, Jew and Greek, in her dialogue with Jesus, creating a revelation in the Jesus of Mark's gospel, allowing the spread of the Kingdom of God to reach beyond the borders of Israel.

Conclusion

Clearly, one can analyze this pericope using high or low Christology. The methodology used is a lens to interpret the pericope for readers. In both instances, an understanding of the Jesus of History and Christ of Faith forms an accurate, although varied, understanding within the church and contemporary theology. Ultimately both methodologies render the duality of Christ's natures, while focusing on one and moving toward the other.

