

## The Syrophenician Woman (Mark 7:24–30) and the Tradition of Enigma

### 1. *Odyssey* 15.387–388

ἄνδρες δυσμενέες νηυσὶν λάβον ἠδ' ἐπέρασσαν  
τοῦδ' ἄνδρὸς πρὸς δῶμαθ', ὁ δ' ἄξιον ὦνον ἔδωκε.

...did hostile men take you in ships and cross you over  
to the house of this man, and he gave a worthy price?

### 2. *Odyssey* 15.427–429

ἀλλά μ' ἀνήρπαξαν Τάφιοι λιῖστορες ἄνδρες  
ἀγρόθεν ἐρχομένην, πέρασσαν δέ με δεῦρ' ἀγαγόντες  
τοῦδ' ἄνδρὸς πρὸς δῶμαθ'. ὁ δ' ἄξιον ὦνον ἔδωκε.

But Taphian pirate-men seized me as I was  
coming from the field, and sold me, bringing me here to  
the house of this man: and he gave a worthy price.

### 3. Mark 7:24-30

24 Ἐκεῖθεν δὲ ἀναστὰς ἀπῆλθεν εἰς τὰ ὄρια Τύρου  
[καὶ Σιδῶνος]. καὶ εἰσελθὼν εἰς οἰκίαν οὐδένα  
ἤθελεν γινῶναι, καὶ οὐκ ἠδυνήθη λαθεῖν· 25 ἀλλ'  
εὐθύς ἀκούσασα γυνὴ περὶ αὐτοῦ, ἧς εἶχεν τὸ  
θυγάτριον αὐτῆς πνεῦμα ἀκάθαρτον, ἐλθοῦσα  
προσέπεσεν πρὸς τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ· 26 ἡ δὲ γυνὴ ἦν  
Ἑλληνίς, Συροφοινίκισσα τῷ γένει· καὶ ἠρώτα αὐτὸν  
ἵνα τὸ δαϊμόνιον ἐκβάλῃ ἐκ τῆς θυγατρὸς αὐτῆς. 27  
καὶ ἔλεγεν αὐτῇ· Ἄφες πρῶτον χορτασθῆναι τὰ  
τέκνα, οὐ γὰρ καλὸν ἐστὶν λαβεῖν τὸν ἄρτον τῶν  
τέκνων καὶ τοῖς κυναρίοις βαλεῖν. 28 ἡ δὲ ἀπεκρίθη  
καὶ λέγει αὐτῷ· Κύριε, καὶ τὰ κυνάρια ὑποκάτω τῆς  
τραπέζης ἐσθίουσιν ἀπὸ τῶν ψιχίων τῶν παιδίων. 29  
καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῇ· Διὰ τοῦτον τὸν λόγον ὕπαγε,  
ἔξεληλυθεν ἐκ τῆς θυγατρὸς σου τὸ δαϊμόνιον. 30  
καὶ ἀπελθοῦσα εἰς τὸν οἶκον αὐτῆς εὗρεν τὸ παιδίον  
βεβλημένον ἐπὶ τὴν κλίνην καὶ τὸ δαϊμόνιον  
ἔξεληλυθός.

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 [Ἑλληνίς], 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. [slightly modified  
English Standard Version]

### 4. 1 Kings 17:8-10, Elijah and the widow of Sarepta (NETS translation of Septuagint by McLean and Taylor)

(8) καὶ ἐγένετο ῥῆμα κυρίου πρὸς Ἡλίου (9) Ἀνάστηθι  
καὶ πορεύου εἰς Σαρεπτα τῆς Σιδωνίας· ἰδοὺ  
ἐντέταλμαι ἐκεῖ γυναικὶ χήρᾳ τοῦ διατρέφειν σε.  
(10) καὶ ἀνέστη καὶ ἐπορεύθη εἰς Σαρεπτα εἰς τὸν  
πυλῶνα τῆς πόλεως, καὶ ἰδοὺ ἐκεῖ γυνὴ χήρα  
συνέλεγεν ξύλα·

8 And a word of the Lord came to Eliou, 9 "Arise, and  
go to Sarepta of Sidonia; behold, I have commanded a  
widow there to feed you."

10 And he arose and went to Sarepta, to the gateway of  
the town, and behold a widow was there gathering  
sticks, ...

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### 5. Genesis 38, Judah and Tamar (NETS trans. of Septuagint by Hiebert, slight rev.)

37:26 Then Ioudas said to his brothers, “What advantage is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? 27 Come, let us sell him to these Ismaelites, but let our hands not be upon him, because he is our brother and our flesh.” And his brothers listened. 28 And some Madienite traders were passing by, and they drew out and brought up Ioseph from the pit and sold Ioseph to the Ismaelites for twenty gold pieces, and they brought Ioseph down to Egypt. ... 31 Then taking Ioseph’s tunic, they slaughtered a kid of the goats and stained the tunic with the blood. 32 And they sent the variegated tunic, and they brought it in to their father and said, “This we have found; **recognize** whether it is your son’s tunic or not.” 33 **And he recognized it and said**, “It is my son’s tunic! An evil animal has devoured him, an animal has seized Ioseph.” ...

38:1 Now it came about at that time that Ioudas went down from his brothers and came as far as to a certain Odollamite. ... [Judah has 3 sons, marrying the first to Tamar; the first 2 sons die...] 11 Then Ioudas said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, “Stay as a widow in the house of your father until my son Selom becomes full-grown”—for he said, “Lest perhaps he too should die just like his brothers.” And Tamar, after she had departed, stayed in the house of her father. 12 Now the days were multiplied, and the wife of Ioudas, Saua, died, and after Ioudas had been comforted, he went up to Thamna to those shearing his sheep, he and his shepherd Hiras the Odollamite. 13 And it was reported to his daughter-in-law Tamar—they were saying—“See, your father-in-law is going up to Thamna to shear his sheep.” 14 And taking off from herself the garments of her widowhood, she clothed herself with a light summer garment and adorned herself and sat down near the gates of Ainan, which is on the way past Thamna, for she saw that Selom had become full-grown, yet he did not give her to him as a wife. 15 And when Ioudas saw her he thought she was a prostitute, for she had covered her face, and he did not recognize her. 16 Then he turned aside to her from the way and said to her, “Allow me to come in to you,” for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. And she said, “What will you give me, if you come in to me?” 17 And he said, “I will send to you a kid of the goats from the flocks.” And she said, “If you give a pledge until you send it.” 18 And he said, “What pledge shall I give to you?” And she said, “Your ring and your small necklace and the staff that is in your hand.” And he gave them to her and went in to her, and she became pregnant by him. 19 And getting up she went away and took off from herself her light summer garment and put on the garments of her widowhood. ... 24 Now it came about after a period of three months that it was reported to Ioudas—they were saying—“Your daughter-in-law Tamar has played the whore, and see, she is with child by whoredom.” Then Ioudas said, “Bring her out, and let her be burned.” 25 But as she was being brought she sent to her father-in-law, saying, “By the man whose things these are, I am with child.” And she said, “Recognize whose is the ring and the small necklace and this staff.” 26 **Then Ioudas recognized them and said**, “Tamar has been justified rather than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Selom.” And he did not continue to know her anymore. ...

39:1 Now Ioseph was brought down to Egypt...

#### Notes:

38:25-26 Ἐπίγνωθι, [*haker-na*] τίνος ὁ δακτύλιος καὶ ὁ ὀρμίσκος καὶ ἡ ῥάβδος αὐτή. ἐπέγνω [*vayaker*] δὲ Ἰουδας...

- echoing 37:32-33 ἐπίγνωθι εἰ χιτῶν τοῦ υἱοῦ σου ἐστὶν ἢ οὐ. καὶ ἐπέγνω...

Alter p. 10 “The Holy One Praised be He said to Judah, ‘You deceived your father with a kid. By your life, Tamar will deceive you with a kid.’ ... The Holy One Praised be He said to Judah, ‘You said to your father, *haker-na*. By your life, Tamar will say to you, *haker-na*’” (Bereishit Rabba 84:11, 12)

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### 6. Philo, *On the Unchangeableness of God*, 131-138 (Loeb trans.)

μεμίμηται δὲ τοῦτο καὶ ἡ ἐν ταῖς βασιλείαις ἐντυγχάνουσα τῷ προφήτῃ γυνὴ <χήρα> (III Reg. 17, 10)· χήρα δ' ἐστίν, οὐχ ἦν φαμεν ἡμεῖς, ὅταν ἀνδρὸς ἐρήμη γένηται, ἀλλὰ τῷ χηρεύειν τῶν φθειρόντων καὶ λυμαινομένων παθῶν τὴν διάνοιαν, ὥσπερ καὶ ἡ παρὰ (137) Μωσῆ Θάμαρ· καὶ γὰρ ταῦτη προστέτακται χηρευοῦσα καθέζεσθαι ἐν τῷ τοῦ μόνου καὶ σωτῆρος οἴκῳ πατρὸς (Gen. 38, 11), δι' ὃν αἰὲ καταλιποῦσα τὰς τῶν θνητῶν συνουσίας καὶ ὀμιλίας ἡρήμωται μὲν καὶ κεχήρευκεν ἀνθρωπίνων ἡδονῶν, παραδέχεται δὲ θεῖαν γονὴν καὶ πληρουμένη τῶν ἀρετῆς σπερμάτων κυφορεῖ καὶ ὠδίνει καλὰς πράξεις· (5) ὅς ὅταν ἀποτέκη, τὰ κατὰ τῶν ἀντιπάλων αἴρεται βραβεῖα καὶ νικηφόρος ἀναγράφεται σύμβολον ἐπιφερομένη φοίνικα τῆς νίκης· Θάμαρ γὰρ (138) ἐρμηνεύεται φοῖνιξ. λέγει δὲ πρὸς τὸν προφήτην πᾶσα διάνοια χήρα καὶ ἐρήμη κακῶν μέλλουσα γίνεσθαι· „ἄνθρωπε τοῦ θεοῦ, εἰσηλθες πρὸς μὲ ἀναμνήσαι τὸ ἀδίκημά μου καὶ τὸ ἀμάρτημά μου“ (III Reg. 17, 18)· εἰσελθὼν γὰρ εἰς τὴν ψυχὴν ὁ ἔνθους οὗτος καὶ κατεσχημένος ἐξ ἔρωτος ὀλυμπίου καὶ διηρεθισμένος τοῖς τῆς θεοφορήτου μανίας...

XXIX. We have a parallel to this in the widow in the Book of Kings who discourses with the prophet (1 Kings xvii.10). She is a widow, not in our sense of the word, when the wife has lost her husband, but because she is widowed of the passions which corrupt and maltreat the mind, like Tamar in the books of Moses. Tamar was bidden to remain a widow in the house of her father, her one and only saviour (Gen. xxxviii.11), for whose sake she has left for ever the intercourse and society of mortals, and remained desolate and widowed of human pleasures. Thus she receives the divine impregnation, and, being filled with the seeds of virtue, bears them in her womb and is in travail with noble actions. And when she has brought them to birth, she wins the meed of conquest over her adversaries, and is enrolled as victor with the palm as the symbol of her victory. For Tamar is by interpretation a palm. [To return to the Book of Kings.] Every mind that is on the way to be widowed and empty of evil says to the prophet, “O man of God, thou hast come in to remind me of my iniquity and my sin” (1 Kings xvii.18). For when he, the God-inspired, has entered the soul—he who is mastered by celestial yearning, stirred to his very depth by the irresistible goads of god-sent frenzy...

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### 7. Table of shared elements

Phoenissa <i>Odyssey</i> 15	Syrophenician woman Mark 7.24-30	widow of Zarephthah/Sarepta I Kings 17	Tamar Genesis 38
female outsider (/kidnapper!)	female outsider	female outsider	female outsider?
Phoenician	Phoenician [note affiliations of "Syrophenician" with prostitution; Standaert]	Phoenician (Sarepta in Sidonia)	Canaanite? not clear in Gen.; name means "palm"
[no bed - but context is sex]	sick child on bed	sick child on bed (verse 19) (after feeding miracle)	[tricking Judah into sex]
[Something similar could be said of Odysseus here... but.]	Jesus disgusted with everyone (long list of sins)	Elijah disgusted. Context = culmination of sinfulness, Ahab/Jezebel (Phoenician)	Judah goes down to Canaan, perhaps disgusted with everybody
Puzzling why we are going to extreme "turnings of sun" location	Jesus up and goes to Tyre for no reason	God sends Elijah to Sarepta (in Phoenicia) for no reason	... but for no ostensible reason (awkwardness noted by all commentators)
hero in disguise (but recognized?)	Jesus wants to stay hidden - but recognized		Tamar in disguise
	bread οὐ γὰρ καλὸν ἐστὶν λαβεῖν τὸν ἄρτον τῶν τέκνων ... crumbs τῶν ψιχίων	bits of bread - vs 11-12 ψωμὸν ἄρτου... handful of meal, δροῦξ ἀλεύρου	
tossing hero's word back at him	tossing hero's word back at him		tossing hero's word back at him [+ signet etc.]
	pointed comment about "the word" (logos)	pointed comment about "the word" (8 ῥῆμα Κυρίου; 13 κατὰ τὸ ῥῆμά σου 24)	
	context in Mark 6 and 8 = miracles of bread	miraculous amounts of bread	
	feeding 7:27 χορτασθῆναι dogs actually ἐσθίουσιν	feeding - vs 9 God sends Elijah there for a widow to feed him διατρέφειν	
	feeding "first"	Elijah tells her to feed him bread "first" (v. 13), herself and her children "last"	which baby came out "first" (v 28)
	ἀναστὰς ἀπῆλθεν εἰς τὰ ὄρια Τύρου)... vs 31 Καὶ πάλιν ἐξεληθὼν ἐκ τῶν ὁρίων Τύρου ἦλθεν διὰ Σιδῶνος	9 Ἀνάστηθι καὶ πορεύου εἰς Σάρεπτα τῆς Σειδωνίας ... 10 καὶ ἀνέστη καὶ ἐπορεύθη εἰς Σάρεπτα	38.1 κατέβη Ἰουδας ἀπὸ τῶν ἀδελφῶν αὐτοῦ... 38.12 Ἰουδας ἀνέβη
slavery/ escaping slavery — paying price for human being			Joseph has been sold into slavery; payment for Tamar's body
	claiming right to healing (Christian interp -- Gentile mission)		claiming the birthright/ covenant - like other Genesis stories
Phoenissa hides things in her cloak			deception by means of cloak
tables	table		
necklace 15.460 ὄρμου			necklace ὀρμίσκος, vv 18, 25

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