

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

This paper argues for a connection between a repeated line within the *Odyssey* and a passage in the Gospel of Mark, and between two minor characters in those texts.

At Mark 7:24–30, Jesus, not wanting to be recognized, is asked by a Syrophoenician woman to heal her daughter. Jesus tells her, “Let the children be satisfied first, for it is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs. The Syrophoenician woman “flips” Jesus’s words, replying, “Yes, Lord, but even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” Jesus, seemingly pleased with the verbal skill of the woman’s answer (Landy Ch. 2), heals her daughter. Discussion of this passage often focuses on the ethnicity of the woman: why she is a Syrophoenician. The woman seems to be both an outsider but also part of a “dominant, oppressive group” (Boring, 209). The disciples’, and the reader’s, ideas about ethnicity are somehow being negotiated (Smith).

Such verbal “flipping” is characteristic of competitive oral poetry and other oral traditions (Martin, Collins). One notable Homeric instance involves the Phoenician kidnapper of Eumaeus, called only “Phoenissa,” “Phoenician woman.”

The disguised Odysseus asks Eumaeus how he got to be Odysseus’ swineherd, ending with the lines:

...did hostile men take you in ships and cross you over

to the house of this man, and he gave a worthy price?

Odyssey 15.381–388

Eumaeus, in telling how his nurse was seduced by a fellow Phoenician, has her repeat Odysseus’ lines:

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.

Odyssey 15.427–429

Eumaeus has flipped Odysseus' line about paying a worthy price, putting it into the mouth of a woman who is not content to be a commodity; there is no worthy price (Kretler Ch. 4). The woman's being "Phoenissa" (plus Eumaeus being from Syrie) and other contextual similarities (e.g. both "heroes" are in disguise, "faith" is being tested) raise the question, could the story be modeled on the *Odyssey* passage?

MacDonald makes a connection between the Syrophenician woman and the *Odyssey*'s Phoenician—but for a different reason, not connected with verbal flipping. It forms part of his argument that the reason for the "Messianic secret" is that Mark is imitating another text where a salvific king is in disguise: the *Odyssey* (Macdonald 2015:260). MacDonald's approach has been thoroughly criticized (Mitchell). For one thing, why would Jesus want to align himself with Odysseus?

Even if one rejects MacDonald's overall thesis, either Mark 7 does echo the *Odyssey* directly or both texts draw on a tradition of enigmatic Phoenician interlocutors. This makes further sense (going beyond Aitken 2004) of the Phoenician in a later text, Philostratus' *Heroikos*. MacDonald does not note that both women are "flipping" the words of the ostensible hero, and he concludes that the Syrophenician woman is "content with second best" just like Eumaeus. But Eumaeus, through his character, Phoenissa, is flipping the whole notion of paying a price for a human being. Similarly through the Syrophenician woman Mark upturns the idea

that outsiders' lives are less worthy and are outside God's healing power. Recognizing the connection highlights the social critique in both texts.

Bibliography:

- Aitken, Ellen Bradshaw. 2004. "Why a Phoenician?" In *Philostratus's Heroikos: Religion and Cultural Identity In the Third Century C.E.*, ed. Jennifer K. Berenson Maclean. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature.
- Boring, M. Eugene. 2006. *Mark: A Commentary*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Collins, Derek. 2004. *Master of the game: competition and performance in Greek poetry*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Hellenic Studies.
- Landy, Joshua. 2012. *How to Do Things with fictions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- MacDonald, Dennis R. 2015. *The Gospels and Homer: Imitations of Greek Epic in Mark and Luke-Acts*.
- Martin, Richard P. 1989. *The Language of Heroes: Speech and Performance in the Iliad*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Mitchell, Margaret. 2003. "Homer in the New Testament?" *The Journal of Religion* 83: 244–260.
- Rhoads, David. 1994. "Jesus and the Syrophenician Woman in Mark: A Narrative Critical Study," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 62: 343–75.
- Smith, Julien. 2012. "The Construction of Identity in Mark 7:24-30: The Syrophenician Woman and the Problem of Ethnicity." *Biblical Interpretation* 20:458–481.