

# an ecological reading of the gospel of mark

*In this fifth part in the series Elaine Wainwright unpacks the story of the Syrophenician woman in Mark 7:24-30*

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*From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice,<sup>25</sup> but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet.<sup>26</sup> Now the woman was a Gentile [Greek], of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.<sup>27</sup> He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."<sup>28</sup> But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."<sup>29</sup> Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter."<sup>30</sup> So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.*

[Mark 7:24-30 NRSV used with permission.]

In the first of this series, I explored how we might read scripture ecologically. Such a reading attends not only to the human and the holy that readers generally notice, but also to habitat. Place, space, together with all the elements of the natural and built environments, invite our scrutiny. They are mixed in with the holy and the human.

An ecological reading is a justice-oriented approach because it uncovers structures and practices of injustice in the entire more-than-human community. We find these injustices

woven into Mark's text from its first century context as well as from millennia of readings. In keeping with the prophetic tradition, it is important to undertake this critique together with our re-reading of the text for our times. These two tasks, critique and re-reading, can be interwoven into an ecological interpretation.

## borderland place

The Markan story of the encounter between Jesus and a woman who is identified only by her ethnic and geographic location (Mk 7:26) is grounded in place. As the story opens, Jesus leaves a place designated very generally by the adverb "there". The last place named in the story was Genessareth (Mk 6:53) where Jesus was healing (Mk 6:53-56), alerting ecological readers to the bodiliness associated with such healing as bodies touched. The place also encodes the materiality of the plain along the north-western side of the Sea of Galilee, rich in agriculture as the bread basket of the region.

The entanglement in habitat continues as Mk 7:24 unfolds. Jesus moves to the region of Tyre on the Mediterranean coast which borders upper Galilee. It is a borderland space where ethnicities and access to material resources were in complex interrelationship. Historically, Israel had shared a tense relationship with Tyre, which had a history of wealth.

However, as an island city it needed not only its own hinterland to supply its inhabitants with food (bread) but also the land of its most immediate neighbor, Galilee. We find encoded in this opening verse bread and boundary, and the economic power that functions in relation to them.

As contemporary readers we will recognise the permeable nature of many borders for humans and other-than-humans today and the complex interrelationships across borders.

## tangles of meaning

The attention shifts in Mk 7:25 to an unidentified woman (later tradition will call her *Justa*, the just one) who is described in relation to her daughter who, in her turn, is described in relation to her body — she has in her body an unclean spirit. (The daughter is identified twice in this way.) That is all we know of each of them at this point. The description given to the woman's daughter could evoke a number of different bodily ailments or malfunctions that were attributed to evil or unclean spirits. Spirits and humans were thought to inhabit the same sub-lunar realm in first century cosmology. Spirits were believed to attack the human body and to damage social relationships. Given the complex material and socio-cultural relationships already identified with the border location, as readers we might well consider how

much of this is projected onto the body of the young girl. The woman, desperate for her daughter's healing, falls at Jesus' feet. This accentuates the socio-religious, cultural and gender differentiations inherent in this story as well as a recognition of Jesus' healing power.

### bread and dogs

It is only in Mk 7:26 that the woman herself is identified and then it is in relation to her ethnic origins and geographic location. She is Greek, *Hellēn*. "Syro-Phoenician" makes her ethnically Phoenician and geographically from the Syrian coast or hinterland. While she is located in place she has no name. However she acts decisively. She asks ("begs" in the NRSV translation) Jesus to heal her daughter. The text further highlights the impact of the border location.

The gospel reader is shocked by Jesus' response to the woman: "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs" (Mk 7:27). This resonates with the tone of an ethnic insider looking from his own side of the border and naming the neighbouring peoples with words that encode in the text material elements used as symbol — "children's bread" and "dogs".

Bread is a daily staple that can represent a parent's care for his or her child. Earlier in the gospel narrative Jesus has fed a multitude of men with bread ("not counting women and children" the Matthean narrator will add, indicating that they too were fed — Mk 6:30-44; cf Matt 14:21). The phrase in Jesus' statement, "and throw it to the dogs", puts a negative construction on dogs. They are presumably outside the house and bread is thrown to them, rather than given with care, and then only after the children, insiders, have been fed first. This establishes a hierarchy that impacts into the human and other-than-human worlds.

### hierarchy rearranged

But the words and imagery of the woman's reply upturn this hierarchy. She brings the dogs from outside to a place under the table (not yet at the table) where they share the children's crumbs. Her words are consistent with illustrations on first century reliefs showing dogs present at the dinner table and being offered food by children. An ecological reader will understand both the "bread" and the "dogs" of Mk 7:28 not just metaphorically but will *critique* the way they are used in support of

hierarcy and *reclaim* them in their interrelationship.

### healing and wholeness

As a result of the unnamed woman's word/*logos*, Jesus proclaims that her daughter has been freed of the demon. It is the woman, not Jesus, who has been able to see a world healed of borders and boundaries that exclude, and of gendered relationships that oppress in word and deed. The materiality of place, or space on the edge, or at the in-between, is the context for such healing. And human bodies, bread and dogs are actors encoded in its unfolding. Healing happens to an individual and happens in relationships — grounded in space, time and in all that is material and social in them.

What the text does not say but seems to imply is that in this encounter Jesus was healed too. Then he was able to see with an inclusive vision as children and dogs moved to new places in relation to house and table. Indeed the demon was gone. ■

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