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BUT WHAT DID JESUS SAY? A DECONSTRUCTION OF THE  
FEMINIST RECONSTRUCTION OF MARK 7:24-30

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## BUT WHAT DID JESUS SAY? A DECONSTRUCTION OF THE FEMINIST RECONSTRUCTIVE INTERPRETATION OF MARK 7:24-30

### Introduction

What do women matter? For centuries women worldwide have had little to no voice. Historical accounts are indisputably biased towards men while women are virtually left unnamed. Women may have more of a voice today than they did one hundred years ago, but they still haven't "broken the glass ceiling" in the words of Hillary Clinton, and are forced to continue the "bitter patience practiced by so many generations of women" before them.<sup>1</sup> What is more, with the recent #MeToo movement and the firestorm of sexual assault allegations on the front page of every news outlet, the matter of the treatment of women is foremost in the series of current issues. A concerning theme that is threaded through the evolution of the feminist movement, however, is that the Bible takes part in this, perhaps is even culpable for it.<sup>2</sup> Some have used certain passages to raise the question of whether Jesus might have been a chauvinist. A passage that has been used as an example of this is Mark 7:24-30,<sup>3</sup> the story of Jesus and the Syrophoenician woman with the demon possessed daughter. Jesus, the great hero around whom the whole of the Bible revolves, is demeaning and speaking derogatorily to a woman. The narrative concludes with Jesus, seeming to finally be fed up with her, doing as she asks to get rid of her.

The remark of Jesus in the text is clearly what is so problematic for the feminist reader. One influential feminist, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza has undertaken a mission to "re-read"<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Alter, Charlotte. "Hillary Clinton Collides Again With the Highest Glass Ceiling," n.p. [cited 5 December 2017] *Time Magazine* (November 2016) Online: <http://time.com/4564142/hillary-clinton-gender/>.

<sup>2</sup> This perceived bias of Scripture caught Elizabeth Cady Stanton's notice in the late 1800's. The problem, Stanton thought, was that so many women still considered it authoritative. This prompted her to produce an edit of the Bible entitled *The Woman's Bible*. She recognized the Bible's vital role in Western society and faulted it and traditional interpretation of it for the ingrained denigration and treatment of women. In the introduction to her edited Bible, she wrote, "The canon and civil law; the church and state; priests and legislators; all political parties and religious denominations have alike taught that woman was made after man, of man, and for man, an inferior being, subject to man." Stanton, Elizabeth. C. *The womans Bible*. (New York: European Publishing, 1985). P.7

<sup>3</sup> The parallel passage is found in Matthew 15:21-28.

<sup>4</sup> Fiorenza believes that the *ekklesia of women* (the church of women, past and present) must be at the center of re-interpretation of the Bible. Since the Bible has always been interpreted by men, we have a lopsided

Scripture in order to liberate women from its traditional handling.<sup>5</sup> She speaks of a history of women being silenced, of being forced to adopt male language, and the need to “break through the traditional mindsets of male-defined spirituality and patriarchal hierarchy.”<sup>6</sup> One of her particular concerns is the Christian woman who still believes and submits to the authority of Scripture, believing that she is a woman in bondage who must be freed.<sup>7</sup> Fiorenza has given this controversial pericope in Mark significant attention and has even based the title of her book on it. Her belief is that a better interpretation of the passage is to see the defiance and craftiness of the woman who essentially changes Jesus’ mind and the direction of his mission.

The aim of this paper is three-fold: (1) properly understand the nature and purpose of Jesus’ behavior through a careful look at the context; (2) deconstruct the feminist reconstructive reading of the passage; (3) argue that a proper understanding of the pericope, with the authority of Scripture as starting point, lends to a truer liberation than Fiorenza’s method can know.

### **The Context of Mark 7:24-30**

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. But immediately a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit heard of him and came and fell down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, a Syrophenician by birth. And she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. 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.” But she answered him, “Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.” And he said to her, “For this statement you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter.” And she went home and found the child lying in bed and the demon gone.<sup>8</sup>

The lens one brings to a passage plays an integral role in the resulting interpretation. All too often, personal circumstances and cultural mindset blur the authorial intention for the given

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understanding of Scripture that has led to the oppression and silencing of women. See Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth. 1986. "A feminist critical interpretation for liberation: Martha and Mary: Lk 10:38-42." (Religion And Intellectual Life 3, no. 2: 21-36), 23.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 21-22.

<sup>7</sup> Elisabeth Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2006), 2.

<sup>8</sup> All Scripture quotations are from the ESV unless noted otherwise.

passage.<sup>9</sup> A secondary consequence is obvious; the “personal lens” approach provides endless possibilities for interpretation.<sup>10</sup> This happens frequently with the passage we are examining. For example, a social rights activist sees this passage as ultimately intended to herald the blurring of racial and geographical borders in God’s economy.<sup>11</sup> Another, approaches this passage arguing that it addresses the issue of ethnic identity and exposes “the notion that the gospel obliterates ethnicity as a component of social identity”.<sup>12</sup> As will be examined more closely later, the feminist comes to this passage with the lens of an oppressed woman and interprets from that place. None of these disciplines are necessarily bad in and of themselves, and it is true that there are points of application to be gleaned from this story for each of these concerns. But these concerns cannot be the starting point; they cannot be the primary means or method of interpretation. If Scripture is the inspired word of God (2 Tim 3:16), there must be an intended meaning to every passage and it is not up to individual whims or agendas.<sup>13</sup>

With this in mind, prior to appropriating application for the modern world, we must understand the message and application for the original audience.<sup>14</sup> We will proceed with the following method: (1) we will consider the lens of the original recipients of the Gospel containing the pericope; (2) we will examine the mindset of the characters *in* the narrative, which would most certainly play an important part for the audience (3) we will look for themes in the broader context that might give clues as to the intended message; (4) we will take into consideration the actual words and actions of the characters themselves.

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<sup>9</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart. *How to read the Bible for all its worth*. (London: Scripture Union, 1994), 22.

<sup>10</sup> In their introductory guide to interpreting the Bible, Gordan Fee and Douglas Stuart point out that the reader cannot help but interpret the text while reading. “We invariably bring to the text all that we are, with all of our experiences, culture, and prior understandings of words and ideas.” *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>11</sup> This is another rising interpretative method that has largely become popular in the last 20 years. Cf. Jane E. Hicks, “Moral Agency at the Borders: Rereading the Story of the Syrophoenician Woman.”

<sup>12</sup> Julien C.H. Smith. “The Construction of Identity in Mark 7:24-30: The Syrophoenician Woman and the Problem of Ethnicity.” (*Biblical Interpretation* 20, no. 4/5: 458-481. Religion and Philosophy Collection), 2012

<sup>13</sup> A. Berkeley Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 3.

<sup>14</sup> Mickelsen comments, “all biblical interpretation has two dimensions. The first is concerned with discovering the original meaning of a statement, while the second takes account of changes in meaning which contemporary readers may attach to the same words.” *Ibid.*, 5

As to the first task, the lens of the original recipients, it is very likely that the intended audience of the Mark’s gospel was predominantly Gentile.<sup>15</sup> This conclusion is drawn from various factors, one being how Mark seems to feel the need to explain Jewish customs and traditions, explanations that would be unnecessary if his anticipated audience were Jewish.<sup>16</sup> Kenneth Bailey points out that our modern Western mindset is markedly different from that of the recipients of the Gospel. He argues that for the New Testament context, the community in the narrative is “critically important”. He comments that while Descartes says “I think therefore I am,” African theologians reply, “I am, because we are.” Bailey argues: “In the stories from and about Jesus, the surrounding community (on- or offstage) is a critical component in all that takes place and its presence must be factored into any interpretive effort.”<sup>17</sup> Many modern, Western readers would miss the this. But Bailey goes on to discuss the presence of the disciples who are “on stage” at the onset of this story.<sup>18</sup> This makes them key factors in the drama. He continues, “Jesus is not simply dealing with the woman, he is also interacting on a profound level with the disciples. This double interaction needs to be monitored throughout the story.”<sup>19</sup> The Gentile readers would have been well aware of the disciples’ presence and role in the account. Thus, as this story is read, there are three perspectives at play that the Gentile reader would have recognized: The Jewish perspective of the disciples, the desperate, Gentile mother, and how Jesus, the Savior and Teacher, is interacting with both.

The very first word of verse 24, *εκεῖθεν* (*from that place*), calls the reader back to the preceding verses and the larger thematic plotline. It reminds of the context in which the story has been placed, of which we will briefly summarize. Prior to Jesus’ journey to Tyre, he had spent time in the Temple and denounced the traditional view of uncleanness.<sup>20</sup> The placement of this

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<sup>15</sup> Ben Witherington, *The Gospel of Mark: a socio-rhetorical commentary*. (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 2001), 35.

<sup>16</sup> For additional handling of the issue of authorship, see *Ibid.*, 20-31.

<sup>17</sup> Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern eyes: cultural studies in the Gospels*. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008), 218.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Mickelsen, 5.

<sup>19</sup> Bailey, 219.

<sup>20</sup> Although certain details are presented slightly differently, it is notable that Matthew’s account of the same story also falls after the purity teaching. For additional study on details added by Matthew, see David E.

pericope suggests that it should be considered a continuation of purity instruction.<sup>21</sup> In the preceding verses, Jesus is speaking to the Pharisees and condemning them for their elevation of tradition over the law of God.<sup>22</sup> Jesus quotes Isaiah the prophet saying, “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far away from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.” (Mk 7:7) As noted previously, the disciples are witnesses to all of this. Fast forward several verses and we find Jesus gathering the crowd and explaining that it is not what is on the outside of man that defiles him as the Pharisees emphasized with their purity laws, but rather it is what comes out of his heart. (14-15) The disciples still do not understand and have to ask Jesus for further clarification when they finally have him alone. (17-23)

When examined in context, this account marks a significant shift in Jesus’ focus. In the first half of Mark, Jesus is surrounded by and delivers his teaching primarily to crowds of people. He is proclaiming his message to the people of Israel. As Jesus teaches and performs miracles, he cannot escape them. Everywhere he goes, the people follow. But it becomes clearer as Mark’s gospel progresses that the people, even the disciples, are missing the point of Jesus’ ministry.<sup>23</sup> In the preceding chapters, Mark reveals that Jesus has been rejected by his own people. Now in chapter 7, the concentration is shifting from the crowds to show Jesus’ concentration on his disciples and his “Retirement Ministry” as Hendrickson refers to it.<sup>24</sup> As the cross looms nearer, Jesus begins to make his salvific message clearer for the disciples. There are lessons they must understand.<sup>25</sup> This is a fascinating and telling sequence. Jesus begins by teaching the religious leaders, he moves to the general crowds, and then zeros in on the disciples. It is this sequence and teaching that leads up to the story of the Syrophoenician<sup>26</sup> woman.

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Garland, *Reading Matthew: a literary and theological commentary*. (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Pub., 2001), 161-169.

<sup>21</sup> R. A. Guelich, *Word biblical commentary: Mark*. (Texas: Word Inc. 1989), 383.

<sup>22</sup> See William L. Craig, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 259, for additional discussion of the relation of the text to Jesus’ purity teaching

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Mark 4:13, 40; 6:52; 7:18; 8:17; 9:10

<sup>24</sup> William Hendriksen and Simon J. Kistemaker. *New Testament commentary*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1975), 293.

<sup>25</sup> Hendriksen and Kistemaker, *New Testament commentary*, 293-94.

As Jesus enters the region of Tyre,<sup>27</sup> Mark notes that he enters a house with the intent of escaping notice.<sup>28</sup> As is so often the case, he cannot be hidden,<sup>29</sup> and it isn't long before Jesus' solitude is disrupted by desperate pleas from a local woman. She casts herself at Jesus' feet, a posture of utter humility and an act of desperation. The last individual to behave thus was Jairus in 5:23. And while their statuses could not be more starkly contrasted, their need for Jesus' aid is the same, and Jesus does not see status but need.<sup>30</sup> She passionately intercedes for her "little daughter," (θυγάτριον), a notably tender rendering by Mark in the Greek.,<sup>31</sup> who is afflicted with a demon. The Gentile reader of the story would be aware of the disciples' perception of the woman's behavior. There are four things they couldn't miss: her gender (female), her race (Gentile), the fact that her daughter is possessed with a demon, and lastly her people's history of conflict with the Israelites (Tyre). We will briefly examine each of these.

The societal attitude of the day, speaking both of Jews *and* the larger empire, was not altogether favorable towards women.<sup>32</sup> This is more than mere speculation with plenty of evidence to support it.<sup>33</sup> As feminists are quick to point out, women are scarcely mentioned. When they are, it is often in association with or in the sense of belonging to a man. Good wives are praised and valuable, but bad wives are spoken of in severely negative terms and are often

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<sup>26</sup> See Witherington for additional discussion of how Mark's use of the term Syrophenician here plays into discussions of authorship and audience. Witherington, 21.

<sup>27</sup> There are a great number of manuscripts that include "and Sidon", but some scholars think this is a later addition to bring Mark into harmony with Matthew and the later reference in Mark 7:31. See Edwards, 216.

<sup>28</sup> France, 297.

<sup>29</sup> Some have been fixated on this issue of Jesus attempting to hide himself and there are numerous attempts to explain what is going on. Hendricks wisely observes, however, that "all that is necessary is to point out that due to the fact that some – perhaps many- of the Phoenicians had already had contact with Jesus and/or heard about him, it was impossible for him to remain concealed for any great length of time. Hence, this period of rest and concealment soon came to an end. He himself, because of his great love for sinners, allowed the "discovery" to take place. There was a repetition here of 6:34." Hendrickson, 296.

<sup>30</sup> Edwards, 218.

<sup>31</sup> Hendrickson, 298.

<sup>32</sup> Ferguson agrees that it was not particularly favorable, but does suggest that it was not as extreme as is often depicted. For his discussion on the role of women in society, see Ferguson, 77-80.

<sup>33</sup> An interesting series of citations from various ancient documents provide a glimpse into this ancient chauvinism in Hurley's *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 61-66.

blamed for the downfall of their husbands, as in the case of Adam and Eve.<sup>34</sup> There is no husband mentioned in this text which is unusual.<sup>35</sup> Men were considered the superior sex as is made clear in an oft quoted comment from Josephus which reads “the woman is inferior (cheiron) to the man in every way.”<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, it was not appropriate for men and women to speak in public. This is a cultural practice that remains unchanged to this day in the certain parts of the Middle East. That Jesus was a teacher made the impropriety of her behavior even greater. Bailey notes that rabbis don’t even speak in public to female members that are in their own families, let alone strangers.<sup>37</sup> But even this wasn’t all she had going against her.

A second thing to observe is that she was a Gentile. The Jews anticipated Jesus’ coming to bring blessings and liberation for the Jewish people. Ferguson points out that “the Jews held a strong conviction of the necessity of being a member of the chosen race by pure descent in order to share the future blessings. Thus, a great deal of attention was given to racial purity.”<sup>38</sup> This Gentile woman seeking Jesus’ aid was preposterous.

This leads us to a third observation which is that this woman was a native of Tyre.<sup>39</sup> This origination intensifies her unfavorable position. The Israelites had an extensive and antagonistic history with inhabitants of Tyre.<sup>40</sup> Edwards remarks that it “probably represented the most

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>35</sup> Hendrickson makes an interesting observation that if this woman is a widow, the passage has may have allusions to 1 Kings 17, the story of another widow from the same region. Hendrickson, 298.

<sup>36</sup> Hurley, 61.

<sup>37</sup> Bailey, 220.

<sup>38</sup> Ferguson, 539.

<sup>39</sup> Some critical scholars consider Mark’s differing information from Matthew as problematic. Where Matthew refers to the woman as a Canaanite, Mark refers to her as a Syrophoenician. But biblical scholars have argued convincingly that this is not a discrepancy. Calvin in his commentary remarks: “The woman, whom Matthew describes as of Canaan, is said by Mark to have been a Greek, and a Syrophoenician by birth. But there is no contradiction here; for we know that it was the prevailing custom among the Jews to call all foreign nations Greeks, and hence that contrast between Greeks and Jews, which occurs so frequently in the writings of Paul.” Calvin, Jean, and William Pringle. *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*. (Edinburgh: The Calvin Translation Society, 1846)

<sup>40</sup> “Tyre (modern Lebanon) which lay directly west and north of Galilee, was a Gentile region ... The region of Tyre (formerly Phoenicia) had been the home of Jezebel, who in Elijah’s day had nearly subverted the Northern Kingdom with her pagan prophets and practices (1Kgs 16:31-32). During the maccabean Revolt in the second century B.C., Tyre, along with the Ptolemais and Sidon, fought in the side of the Seleucids against the Jews

extreme expression of paganism, both actually and symbolically, that a Jew could expect to encounter.”<sup>41</sup> The disciples would have equated the people of Tyre with the epitome of uncleanness and impurity. Of all the people to seek Jesus’ aid, the people of Tyre were the most undeserving. From a readers’ perspective, and even from the perspective of the disciples as observers, that this story follows on the heels of Jesus’ conversation with the Jews about purity laws only gives it additional weightiness and significance.<sup>42</sup>

The evidence of the historical context that has been considered demonstrates that everything that Jesus did in the subsequent verse was appropriate by Jewish standards and in keeping with what Gentiles would have expected. The woman had no right speak to Jesus in public, and certainly no rights to the blessings and benefits of Jesus’ ministry. After her ethnicity and gender, however, there is one more obvious factor going against her that should be mentioned: that her daughter was possessed with a demon. The disciples would have been completely comfortable with Jesus’ initial treatment of the woman.<sup>43</sup>

Just like the Gentiles reading Mark’s account, the woman could not have been unaware of her unusual and provocative behavior. A woman, and a Gentile, originating from Tyre, and demon possession further defiling her family, now addressing a rabbi in public. Her behavior is completely unacceptable.<sup>44</sup> But perhaps she, like so many in Tyre, had heard stories about Jesus’ miracles (Mk 3:8), and was familiar with Jesus and his mission.<sup>45</sup> Perhaps she had some concept

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(1 Macc 5:15ff). The prophets decried the wealth and terror of Tyre (Ezek 26:17; Zech 9:3). Josephus concluded opprobriously that the inhabitants of Tyre were “notoriously our bitterest enemies” (*Ag. Ap.* 1:13). Edwards, 217.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> France, 297.

<sup>43</sup> Bailey notes that in Jn 4:27 the disciples marveled that Jesus was talking to a woman. “When Jesus did not respond to the woman’s plea, he was no doubt seen by the disciples as acting in an entirely appropriate manner. That is, by ignoring the woman’s desperate cries he appears to endorse views toward women with which the disciples were comfortable.” Bailey, 221.

<sup>44</sup> This point has been belabored so the reader will not miss the unusualness of this encounter. As Edwards observes, “an encounter between this woman and a scribe or Pharisee would be hard to imagine in the ‘tradition of the elders.’ Of all the people who approach Jesus in the Gospel of Mark, this individual has the most against her from a Jewish perspective.” Edwards, 218.

<sup>45</sup> Mark does not cite most of the woman’s actual words, but her greeting is provided in the Matthew account and it would seem to support this theory that she knew about Jesus and his mission. In Matthew 15:22 she cries out, “Lord, Son of David.” Bailey comments her use of the “relatively rare Jewish messianic title, Son of David,’ implies some contact with Judaism.” Bailey, 220.

that Jesus had extended his ministry to Gentiles and women.<sup>46</sup> Despite the unconventionality of her behavior and the discouraging lack of response,<sup>47</sup> the woman persists, and at last Jesus answers her: “Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs” (27). Jesus’ response is less than complimentary, and seems to offer little encouragement. Not only does Jesus brush her off, he refers to her as a dog, no minor insult in the 1<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>48</sup> Jesus’ use of a term of abuse<sup>49</sup> sounds either racist, sexist or perhaps even both to the modern ear. Is he caving to societal expectations and pressures? There is no evidence that would support this and for Jesus to consider her a *dog* would fly in the face of all he has been trying to teach the disciples.<sup>50</sup> There are many possible explanations, one being noted by Lane that with the pervasiveness of “miracle workers” who gained followers solely for the benefits expected, Jesus is testing her to reveal the nature of her beliefs about him. Lane continues, “The power of God... is properly released not in a context of superstition and magic but in response to faith.”<sup>51</sup> Thus, Jesus’ test was to see the depth of her faith in a world where superstition prevailed. Also note the significant use of *first* ( $\pi\varpi\tau\sigma$ ). Jesus is not ruling out help for Gentiles altogether but seems to be indicating that the time has not yet come.<sup>52</sup>

She may have some hope from the implication that with blessings intended in the scope

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> France observes that Jesus’ response in this passage “though nowhere as brutal as in Matthew”, is still highly offensive and leaves the audience believing that Jesus will not help her. France, 297.

<sup>48</sup> Jesus’ equation of the woman to a dog has received substantial attention on its own. France observes that the use of  $\kappa\upsilon\omega\pi\alpha$  (dog) makes Jesus’ statement all the more offensive. In ancient times, dogs did not hold the status they do in America. “To refer to a human being as a ‘dog’ is deliberately offensive or dismissive (cf. 2 Sa. 16:9; Ps. 22:16; Phil. 3:2); Jews typically referred to Gentiles as dogs.” While some have argued that the way Jesus uses the term in Mark gives it an endearing thrust, this is of little comfort. “It does not remove the harshness of picturing the Gentiles en masse as ‘dogs’ as opposed to ‘children’.” France, 298.

<sup>49</sup> Frederick F. Bruce, *The hard sayings of Jesus*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 111.

<sup>50</sup> Edwards says, “It would be hard to imagine Jesus so strenuously opposing the rabbinic view of defiled things in 7:1-23 while maintaining a perception of defiled people here.” Edwards, 220.

<sup>51</sup> William L. Lane, *The gospel according to Mark*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 262.

<sup>52</sup> The reader will recall that this is not the only time Jesus said it was not yet his time. At the wedding of Cana in John 2 Jesus seemed to brush off his mother in a similar manner saying “My hour has not yet come.” (2:4) Though it sounded as though Jesus was not going to work a miracle, he did turn the water into wine. While that miracle preceded Jesus’ public ministry to the Jews, *this* miracle marks a shift in Jesus’ ministry to the Gentiles. It may be purely coincidental, but it is an interesting parallel.

of Jesus' mission at some point, Jesus might be persuaded to be merciful to her now rather than waiting until later.<sup>53</sup> Regardless, she persists, in what almost seems like the manner of Jesus' parable of the Persistent Widow,<sup>54</sup> and pleads with him to remember that even the dogs under the table are privy to the crumbs the children leave behind.<sup>55</sup> For some reason, Jesus' response does not cause her to give up.<sup>56</sup> Was there something in the way he said it that gave her hope? Was it merely because of her desperation? Also significant is how she responds; she agrees and more or less affirms her status of *dog*. As Witherington observes, the woman "submits to the category Jesus gives her."<sup>57</sup> This response shows a high level of humility combined with a desperate recognition that Jesus is her only hope. She is asking for mercy and an extension of grace, resourcefully finding a way that even the dogs can be fed. Oh that every man and woman would come to Christ with this posture. She recognized her lowly status, but pleaded and petitioned for his mercy and grace because she knew there was no remedy for her plight but Christ. With this posture of a creature before her Creator, she passes Jesus' test for her and is blessed.<sup>58</sup> Says Bailey, "the student who struggles through such ordeals acquires the honor accrued to the student who passes a challenging exam."<sup>59</sup> Jesus' test was not an insult, but an opportunity that is found

<sup>53</sup> See France, 298. He suggests that the πρῶτον is an illusion to the sequence of the Christian mission. While there might be blessings that extend to the Gentiles at some point in the future, the Jews must be fed first. France references Romans 1:16: "Ιοναδαιω τε πρῶτον καὶ Ἐλληνι. This was, of course, the actual sequence of the Christian mission in the apostolic period, and indeed as a salvation-historical programme it recapitulates the biblical concept of mission based on the special choice of Israel as centre from which God's blessings will spread out to other nations, as it is expressed from Gn. 12:2-3 onwards (cf. Is. 2:2-4; 49:6, etc.).

<sup>54</sup> In Luke 18:1-8, Jesus tells the story of an unrighteous judge who finally answers a persistent widow's pleading for help, not out of any kindness of heart, but because of his desire to silence her. "Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily." (18:6b-8a) With this parable, Jesus intended to encourage the disciples to persist in their prayers and to not lose heart. If the unrighteous judge who had no love for the woman finally answered, would not God answer all the sooner?

<sup>55</sup> Witherington points out that the woman might actually be quoting a well-known proverb of the time and points to Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* 1.19). Witherington, 232.

<sup>56</sup> Frederick Bruce, *The hard sayings of Jesus*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 111.

<sup>57</sup> Witherington, 232.

<sup>58</sup> Bruce comments on the absence of the word 'faith', "The Word 'faith' is not mentioned in Mark's account of the incident (as it is mentioned in Matthew 15:28), but the woman's reply expresses just the kind of faith that Jesus so greatly appreciated and that never failed to receive what it asked from him." Bruce, 111.

<sup>59</sup> Bailey, 220.

being administered throughout the Gospels. Furthermore, if the woman's understanding of Jesus' teaching and her clever response in verse is compared with the disciples' in verse 17, it reveals a comprehension of Jesus' teaching that far surpasses that of the disciples.<sup>60</sup> Jesus' test for the woman gives her an opportunity to be an honored example of great faith for the disciples and all future readers of her story.

This survey of the various contextual aspects has served an important purpose in this paper. Understanding the historical context demonstrates that unlike feminists' typically argue, Jesus was not merely conforming to societal norms. In fact, were there time to examine the whole of the Gospels, this would only be further illuminated.<sup>61</sup> Instead, while at the same time administering a life-changing exam to the woman, Jesus was also teaching the disciples an important lesson about true purity and providing encouragement to the future Gentile Christians that they too could be reassured of their stake in the blessings of Christ's ministry. His praise of the Gentile woman and honoring of her faith in contrast with the Jewish leaders gives another glimpse of the equal footing Jesus gives men and women.<sup>62</sup>

To summarize what we have learned, this pericope along with the Gospel of Mark is to be read through the lens of the Gentile Christians that received it. This has shown that Jesus was involved in a dual-interaction: on one level he was engaging with the woman; on a second level, he was teaching the disciples who were witnessing the event. We further established that the text *must* be studied alongside the greater teaching in which it has been strategically and logically placed:<sup>63</sup> the series of Jesus' teaching on what it means to truly be pure of heart.<sup>64</sup> Understanding the historical Jewish and Gentile relations has illuminated the significance and heightened the

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<sup>60</sup> William L. Lane. *The gospel according to Mark*. (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1974), 259.

<sup>61</sup> Hurley provides an example, "The evangelists' descriptions of his response to his family tell us something of major importance about Jesus' teaching. Jesus stretches his hand out in the direction of his *disciples* (Mt. 12:49-50) or the *crowd* (Mk. 3:32-35) and says that whoever does the will of his father is his mother, sister and brother. Women were in the crowd and apparently identified as 'disciples' in a general sense. They, as the men, could be his 'family'. From this text we learn that Jesus, unlike the rabbis, taught women, willingly receiving them among his followers. They were persons for whom he had a message and were treated as such." Hurley, 83.

<sup>62</sup> For additional reading on Jesus' view of women as shown in Mark, see R. Allan Cole, *The Gospel according to St. Mark: an introduction and commentary*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 74-48.

<sup>63</sup> Matthew's account of the Gentile woman also follows Jesus' purity teaching. See, Matthew 15:21-28.

<sup>64</sup> Guelich, 382-83.

implications of the Jesus' teaching. Therefore, this encounter with the Syrophoenician woman was another stage in the lesson for the disciples with encouraging implications for the Gentile recipients of the letter. Jesus' salvific purposes do indeed extend beyond the Jewish race.

There is so much more that could be said about this text. But even the brief study we have given it has made apparent how important is the diligent study of the Word before establishing conclusions. It has hopefully been persuasively shown that the numerous aspects of the context must be examined before attempting to draw life applications and worse, conclusions about Jesus' behavior.<sup>65</sup>

### **The Feminist Reconstruction of Mark 7:24-30**

With the previous study of the passage, we discussed the need to change our lens to that of the original recipients of the gospel. What lens does Fiorenza adopt when she comes to this passage? Fiorenza comes to the text with the belief that "all women are bound into a system of male privilege and domination".<sup>66</sup> She argues that the *ekklesia of women* must be at the center of the feminist interpretive method. Within her hermeneutic she advocates for a "re-reading" of Scripture that promotes women as equal voices and authorities. She goes on to say that she has no interest in preserving "the rights of patriarchal texts." Her goal, and what ought to be the goal of every reader of the text, is to "change the timeless word of God 'engraved in stone' into nourishing and sustaining bread in our struggles for liberation and justice."<sup>67</sup> This is her starting point and the lens with which she analyzes the text. We now turn our attention to Fiorenza's handling of Mark 7:24-30.

Fiorenza's hermeneutic does recognize that context is important. She rightly draws attention to the social setting and the culturally unacceptable nature of the Syrophoenician woman's behavior.<sup>68</sup> She also describes the distinct emphases of the Mark and Matthew accounts and notes how both reveal that the woman's behavior is entirely unacceptable. Fiorenza applauds

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<sup>65</sup> This principle holds true for interpreting any given pericope or passage in Scripture. Many misunderstandings have arisen from extracting passages from the intended context.

<sup>66</sup> Fiorenza, "A feminist critical interpretation", 22

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 23

<sup>68</sup> Fiorenza, *But she said*, 103

the woman's determination to acquire equal rights to Jesus' healing power: that which society would deny her, but justice would award. From here, Fiorenza's attention shifts slightly to speak of the oppression of the patriarch; the Patriarchal Structure that would prohibit the woman from speaking and deny her access to Jesus' ministry. But it is here that Fiorenza plants herself. She believes this woman represents the breaking of silence that has been forced upon women for centuries. Because the mediators of divine revelation and grace are women as well as men, she writes, "[Feminist theology] seeks to interrupt the theological silence and ecclesial invisibility of women so that God's grace and power may be revealed among us in its fullness."<sup>69</sup> For Fiorenza, we are missing a significant portion of the revelation *because* women have been silenced.

Fiorenza's narrowing of context can be attributed to an underlying supposition that the New Testament Gospels are collections of disparate pericopes and compilations of stories with little logical progression apart from authorial agenda.<sup>70</sup> The evidence of this is seen in part in the contrasting accounts of the same stories. For example, Fiorenza points out that Mark's account refers to the woman as Syrophenician, while Matthew refers to her as a Gentile. Rather than different angles of the same story as most Evangelical scholars argue,<sup>71</sup> she hints that the variations are contradictions resulting from authorial agendas or perhaps scribal redaction. In discussing the difficulty of the statements of Jesus in verse 27, she suggests that Mark made the

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<sup>69</sup> Fiorenza, "A feminist critical interpretation", 22.

<sup>70</sup> The feminist scholar points to the perceived theological contradictions throughout Scripture contradictions that disprove the doctrine of inerrancy, and subsequently the authority that has been attributed to Scripture. Cf. "The rich diversity and contradictory character of the Bible elaborated by historical critical scholarship has proven that, taken as a whole, the canon cannot provide an uncontested theological norm. In light of such scholarship, it becomes difficult to sustain the traditional doctrine that the canon forms an inerrant unity which in principle rules out theological inconsistencies." Fiorenza, *But She Said*, 145.

<sup>71</sup> Hendrickson remarks, "To this story each of these two evangelists makes his own specific contribution. Nowhere is there any conflict. Each uses his own style and reports the happening so as to suit the needs of his own readers. Matthew calls the woman a Canaanite. The Jews who read Matthew's Gospel had heard much about these wicked people (Gen. 12:6; 13:7; 38:2; and see especially Josh. 9:1; 11:3 f.). They had caused a great deal of trouble in the days of Joshua and even later. What? Was there salvation also for *them*? Matthew's account is somewhat more dramatic than that of mark. The woman addresses Jesus as "Lord, Son of David," and asks him to "take pity" on her. Though from the very beginning she identifies her sorrow with that of her daughter – "Take pity on *me, my daughter...*" – that process of identification increases in intensity, reaching its climax when the mother drops all mention of her daughter, and simply blurts out, "Help *me*." According to Matthew, the woman address Jesus three separate times, and also in each case that evangelist reproduces her very words by means of direct discourse. Matthew introduces the disciples. Characteristically they ask Jesus to get rid of the woman. Mark in his account never mentions the disciples. Matthew states that at first Jesus did not answer the petitioner and that afterward he said to her, "Only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel was I sent." In view of the people to whom Mark is writing does not surprise us that Mark does not contain that item." Hendrickson, 295.

comment of Jesus less offensive by adding προτον (first). What is clear in Fiorenza's writing is that, while Jesus *might* be an exception, although this is dubious, the editors or writers of Scripture were male and thus the accounts we have were written with a male mindset.

A normative practice of Feminist scholars, and deconstructionist methods in general, is the abstraction of pericopes from the larger and intended authorial context. Although there are occasional references to broader themes that are briefly mentioned, and although Fiorenza does compare parallel passages, there is little “big picture” study in the feminist method. This fundamentally stems from a low view of Scripture. Obscured by the feminist’s engagement with the Scripture and lofty advocacy of racial and women’s rights is an agenda that precedes the place of Scripture. As noted previously, the starting point of interpretation for women is “self” and her authority is her experience. What she does not grasp, is that Scripture is the very Word of God. Is she unaware of the texts that make this claim (Cf. Ps 18:30, 19:7; Is 40:8; Matt 24:35; Lk 11:28; Jn 7:38; 2 Tim 3:16; Heb 4:12), or does she ignore them for the sake of her feminist agenda? It must be one of these two options, because Scripture’s claims to be the Word of God, not mere men, (2 Pet 1:20, 21) are inescapable. Paul says that “*whatever* was written in the former days was written for our instruction” (Rom 15:4)<sup>72</sup>

The key for the feminist scholar is the woman’s behavior and response to Jesus. Whether the feminist scholar believes the primary problem here is her gender or her race,<sup>73</sup> focus is shifted to this woman who defiantly disregards social expectations and engages with Jesus in unprecedented ways. Another concerning feature one cannot help but notice is that there is a drastically different understanding of salvation.<sup>74</sup> There is no interested reference to sin or the helpless condition of the heart. The need for salvation is externally focused. The enemy is not sin but rather male oppression and inequality. It would be difficult to make a case that male oppression is the primary emphasis in Scripture, and Scripture has solemn warnings for those

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<sup>72</sup> Emphasis mine.

<sup>73</sup> Most feminists see themselves as more than just advocates for gender equality. They also take on racial issues. For more on the border issues, Cf. Leticia A. Guardiola-Sáenz, 1997. "Borderless Women and Borderless Texts: A Cultural Reading of Matthew 15:21-28." *Semeia* 78, 69-81).

<sup>74</sup> Bloesch observes that “[salvation] is reconceived to connote liberation from male oppression or from the patriarchal tradition. It is the discovery and celebration of womanhood. It is the fulfillment and realization of human potential or feminine potential. Jesus Christ becomes only a great prophet with enlightenment views on human relations or a pioneer in feminism.” Bloesch, 19.

who would make changes to God's word.<sup>75</sup> It is no wonder that the feminist scholar cannot make sense of the Syrophoenician woman's humble posture. The Syrophoenician woman understood a greater need than the cultural suppression of her sex. The tragedy of the feminist movement is that they are oblivious to their greatest problem and their greatest need. Although the #MeToo movement is evidence that there remains a major problem of oppression and sexual abuse, it is not men that hold women in bondage, it is sin, of which men are equally held captive.

### **The Role of Authority in Interpretation**

In 1906, the first edition of Albert Schweitzer's *The Quest for the Historical Jesus* was published. In this provocative book Schweitzer deconstructed the arguments of the previous questers and demonstrated how each had brought his own presuppositions and ultimately found the Jesus he was looking for.<sup>76</sup> M.E. Kostenburger aptly observes that just like the generations of questers preceding them, this is the very trap that feminist scholars fall into resulting in a Jesus that conforms to their preconceived ideas. Because feminists have varying agendas, a natural consequence is that even they cannot agree among themselves about who Jesus is.<sup>77</sup> Where is the cohesion?<sup>78</sup> The starting point, and ultimately the "authority," for the feminist is *self* and personal agenda, and whomever or whatever has the authority will ultimately determine the application and interpretation.<sup>79</sup>

In contrast, one ought to come to Scripture as a student; a student of what it is that Scripture, the very Word of God, has to say to him or her. This student starts with the premise that if "All Scripture is inspired by God", then Scripture is not to be picked apart and selectively believed. Furthermore, "[all Scripture] is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for

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<sup>75</sup> Cf. Deut 4:2, 12:32; Prov 30:6; Rev 22:18-19,

<sup>76</sup> Albert Schweitzer, *The quest of the historical Jesus: a critical study of its progress from Reimarus to Wrede*. New York: Macmillan, 1964).

<sup>77</sup> Köstenberger, 16.

<sup>78</sup> Kostenburger remarks, "These divergent understandings of Jesus found among feminists, in turn, raise concerns regarding the viability of feminism at large. Since feminists are not able to come to an essential consensus on Jesus' true identity, the validity of feminist biblical interpretation itself comes into question." *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> Bloesch observes, "Authority in the feminist perspective is rooted primarily in human experience, particularly feminine experience, not in Scripture." Daniel Bloesch, *Is the Bible sexist?*. (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 19.

training in righteousness". Therefore, even the passages that are unsavory are there for a purpose and cannot be rejected. The Proverbs admonish, "Do not lean on your own understanding," (3:5-6) and the consequences for doing so are evident in the feminist interpretation. The words of Zephaniah the prophet regarding Jerusalem could almost be describing the feminist movement of re-reading, "She listens to no voice; she accepts no correction. She does not trust in the LORD; she does not draw near to God" (Zeph 3:2). Rather than transforming Scripture to *one's personal* agenda, one must conform his and her view to the teachings of Scripture. In fact, this is exactly what the Gentile woman did. Through her meek acknowledgement that she had no right to receive God's mercy and her humble acceptance of his treatment which was no less than she or any of us deserve, she exemplifies the posture we should all have in approaching Christ: fall at his feet, humbly yet persistently lift our supplications to him, recognizing that we deserve no less than judgement, but he is no less than our only hope for salvation.

### Conclusion

The answer to sexual abuse and oppression is not found in blurring the lines between gender roles. The woman's ultimate problem in Mark 7:24-30 wasn't social oppression, it was the sin that held captive her and her daughter. No social justice movement could have fixed that. The focus in this passage is her faith; her faith that Christ was the only answer to her problem. More than a re-reading of Scripture, women need a *true*, informed reading of Scripture which is the self-revelation of God.

Scripture is a gift given for our good (Rom 15:4), and though it has been miss-used and distorted by some, this is no reflection or deficiency on the part of the Author. Scripture has liberated the captive soul, it has provided comfort for the afflicted, it has convicted, and by it many have come face to face with Jesus. God is not some unreachable spirit who we can never know. God has revealed himself to us. Jesus came *as a man*. It was as fully God *but also fully man* (Heb 2:5-18) that he provided liberation and freedom without distinction for people of every race, gender and social status. (Gal 3:28) Clearly it is not the design of man or his role that is the problem, but the sin, in which women share, that distorts it (Rom 1:25). In this section of Mark, Christ makes it clear that where people go wrong is taking their own agenda and adding to Scripture (Cf. Mk 7:7, 7:29). The feminist movement does the very thing that Jesus condemned the Pharisees for (Mk 7:8-9). Any attempt on our part to change what God perfectly designed

(Gen 1:27, 31) will leave us in an age with no boundaries or definition of right and wrong (Rom 1:18-30). To rewrite what God has written will leave us with no Jesus at all. Beyond all the possible forms of injustice that men and women alike have endured, beyond all affliction and helplessness, no Jesus leaves them in the most terrifying form of captivity and bondage that they will ever find themselves in. What women need is not “what she said,” what women need is *all* that Jesus said.

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