

## Out of Wordlock: Autobiography and the Syrophoenician Women

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**Abstract:** This article accepts the challenges of autobiographical criticism by exploring the influences and commitments that have informed and shaped a long period of research, in an Australian context, on Mark's account of Jesus' interaction with the Syrophoenician women (7:24-30). In the process I argue for the realisation that the self that is given to research and the research itself are significantly informed by multiple agencies, and that writing is an unstable means for fixing the self or truth. Furthermore, I maintain that somatic realities are not only equally as constructive as words but are what the text of words yearns for and needs for its life. The Syrophoenician women emerge from the process as themselves delivering a challenge to objectivist writing as well as delivering an independence of identity beyond the limits of textualisation.

ONE OF MY FAVOURITE PASTIMES IN READING scholarly books is to peruse the dedications, the acknowledgements and the forewords. Somehow or other I feel that I gain a slight glimpse of the person who has performed the writing. Occasionally I glean an insight into the motivations for the scholarly work that demonstrates what I have long suspected, namely, that academic research and scholarly writing are deeply personal and are influenced by heartfelt concerns about the world, one's self, one's associations and commitments.

The force of the style of presentation of academic results, by and large, demands an objectivist stance that generates the impression that the views here delivered are clearly respectable, certainly beyond those other views which are refuted in the course of argumentation; and all this at a distance from the personal attitudes of the writer. This frequently intrudes on the dedications, at least so that not too much "is given away". Any writing, whether warm dedication or cold scientific treatise, can veil and unveil at the same time.

Some would say that critical writing “is a scrambled form of autobiography, which seeks to conceal the self”.<sup>1</sup> Others argue that even amidst the fabrication and fabulation, some truth about the personal may be found.<sup>2</sup> Still others push harder and argue that all the wording and wordiness is not merely coming from some flesh and blood preformation and – understanding but is actively seeking enfleshment and experiential understanding – a constant replication of the incarnation, a “sort of human theater where speech becomes action, takes possession of souls, leads bodies and gives rhythm to their walk”.<sup>3</sup> Others push equally hard in the opposite direction using the accusation, all too familiar in history-of-Jesus research, that the resultant Jesus bears “an uncanny resemblance to the researcher”, thereby adopting the rhetorical stance that not only are the reviewers immune from their own attack but that so also should be research.<sup>4</sup> Even so, whether dedication or critically distanced essay, the autobiographical keyhole (sometimes porthole or foxhole, rarely pothole) can offer both a partial albeit unstable view of the human being at work in discovery and a renewed appreciation of the written in life.

I read the dedication of that nineteenth century giant of New Testament commentators, Brooke Foss Westcott, to his 1901 book, *Lessons from Work*: “I had purposed to dedicate this book to my wife, for forty-eight years my unflinching counselor and stay: I now dedicate it to her memory.”<sup>5</sup>

Here I catch a glimpse of Westcott’s deep humanity, a counterweight perhaps to the meticulous intricacy of scholarship that exudes from his volumes. I read with deep appreciation Walter Wink’s opening to his *Manifesto for Biblical Studies* in which he writes of the loss of vibrancy in his relationship with the bible as he moved from his southern Methodist biblical foundations into the demands of critical biblical studies; of the crisis in his life that came as he attended a Jungian Institute’s approach to the bible that sought to integrate historical critical analysis with personal insight and change, and how, he, the learned, benignly

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1. W. Jouve, *White Woman Speaks with Forked Tongue: Criticism as Autobiography* (New York: Routledge, 1991) 37.

2. S. Egan, *Mirror Talk: Genres of Crisis in Contemporary Autobiography* (Chapel Hill NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1999) 32-40.

3. J. Rancière, *The Flesh of Words: The Politics of Writing*, translated by Charlotte Mandell (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2004) 4.

4. See, as but the latest in a succession of inquisitors, S. Barton, “Messages and Miracles”, in M. Bockmuehl (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 56-71, see p. 65. Curiously, there does not seem to be a consideration that perhaps these authors have modeled their lives and research on the Jesus they have seen.

5. B. F. Westcott, *Lessons from Work* (London: Macmillan, 1901).

bemused professor, listening to participants' foggy historical-critical renditions of the story of the paralysed man, was brought undone when a ball of clay was placed in his hands; seemingly beyond his control, Wink's hands fashioned a paralysed man in his own image.<sup>6</sup> And I read, in counterpoint to Wink's story, and one in close parallel to my own, of Lester Grabbe's beginnings in conservative, evangelical biblical devotion which nearly drowned his faith until it found rescue at the fortuitous hand of critical scholarship.<sup>7</sup>

The list could go on – of Daniel Patte's debt to his students, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's attentiveness to women's groups, Vernon Robbins' thankfulness for his earthy father, Daphne Hampson's liberation from Christianity – all remembered because of the resonance with my own story and a confirmation that not only is the personal rhetorical and political, it is also social. The question of whether it is epistemic must, at this stage, remain open.<sup>8</sup> But this essay is an effort to reflect upon my own exchange with a substantial focus of my academic research, the story of the Syrophenician women in Mark's Gospel (7:24-30) – the prompts to investigation, the interests that drove me and the challenges that impacted my sense of self.

#### THE ACCENT ON THE READER

In the last two decades, there has been a growth in the number and depth of such overt "disclosures" in the scholarly field of biblical studies;<sup>9</sup> not that it's a torrent, not that it's fixed into a structural formula, given that variations on confession, testimonial and self-critique all exist.<sup>10</sup> However, the increased accent on the significance of a

6. Wink's initial tract was re-published as *The Bible in Human Transformation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973) unfortunately de-personalising the impact of his own engagement with the story of the paralytic.

7. "Fundamentalism and Scholarship: the Case of Daniel", in B. P. Thompson (ed.), *Scripture: Meaning and Method* (Hull: Hull University Press, 1987) 133-52.

8. See C. A. J. Coady, *Testimony: A Philosophical Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992) 152-76.

9. Here autobiographical criticism is restricted to the intentional agency of the author, allowing that autobiographical criticism asserts that all writing is in some measure autobiographical, including the excess of autobiographical revelation that exists in autobiographically written criticism and also the larger meta-questions that haunt, hunt and inhabit a life. See, respectively, J. L. Staley, "The Father of Lies: Autobiographical Acts in Recent Biblical Criticism and Contemporary Literary Theory", in S. E. Porter and T. H. Olbricht (eds.), *Rhetoric, Scripture and Theology: Essays from the 1994 Pretoria Conference* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996) 124-160 and R. D. Maldonado, "Reading Malinche Reading Ruth: Toward a Hermeneutics of Betrayal", *Semeia* 72 (1995) 91-109.

10. Compare the approaches, broadly illustrative of these three accents, of Patrick D. Miller, "What I Have Learned from My Sisters", in L. Day and C. Pressler (eds.), *Engaging the Bible in a Gendered World* (Louisville, London: Westminster John Knox, 2006) 238-52; Gale A. Yee, "An Autobiographical Approach to Feminist Biblical Scholarship", *Encounter*

reader's receptive reading, not just of the text that is read, for the formation of meaning has bequeathed in some quarters a greater acknowledgement of the interactive dimensions between text and personal story that shape the representation of the text. The representation of the self may be suppressed beneath or hidden behind the appearance of objective methodology and objective results, such as through the use of "third person pronouns and passive verbal constructions".<sup>11</sup> But, as Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger writes, "Each given reading and interpretation is based on the effect a text has on its readers. This also holds true for those critics who consider themselves 'purely objective' and 'neutral'."<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, the interrogation of the reader has led to the dissolving of the autonomy of the text, just as it has dissolved the hidden autonomy of those who tried to model themselves, or rather their work of commentary, on that supposed autonomy. Although blame is often attached to the nineteenth century emphasis on scientific empiricism, others consider that belief in the autonomy of the text is "a holdover from print culture, and is fading rapidly in the Electronic Age".<sup>13</sup> Both are variations on the notion of autonomous knowledge, something as insecure for the "results" as for the "self" identified as achieving them.

Various forces have operated to bring this about. The history of interpretation has forced people to recognise that throughout church history, there have been multiple readings of the same passages all of which served some purpose and achieved some benefit in their time.<sup>14</sup> The history of interpretation has also awakened people to the recognition that the interpretation often touted as the plain and natural reading is nothing other than the inheritance of a particular community of readers across time, become natural and plain simply by repetition, the desire to belong, and assumed consent.<sup>15</sup> Textual studies have also worked to undermine the text's autonomy, not only by the recognition that a critically edited text is nothing other than a probable approximation of what any author wrote (and that privileging has itself been

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67 (2006) 375-90; and Mark G. Brett, "Self Criticism, Cretan Liars, and the Sly Redactors of Genesis", in I. R. Kitzberger (ed.), *Autobiographical Biblical Criticism: Learning to Read between Text and Self* (Leiden: Deo Publishing, 2002) 114-32.

11. J. C. Anderson and J. L. Staley, "Taking it Personally: Introduction", *Semeia* 72 (1995) 14.

12. I. R. Kitzberger, "Introduction", in Kitzberger (ed.), *The Personal Voice in Biblical Interpretation* (London, New York: Routledge, 1999) 6.

13. R. M. Fowler, "Taking it Personally: A Personal Response", *Semeia* 72 (1995) 237, n.7.

14. See my "The Fall, the Samaritan and the Wounded Man: an example of multiple readings of Scripture (Lk 10:25-37)", in S. Cowdell and M. Porter (eds.), *Lost in Translation?: Anglicans, Controversy and the Bible* (Thornbury: Desbooks, 2004) 155-84.

15. See J. A. Glancy, "House Readings and Field Readings: The Discourse of Slavery and Biblical/Cultural Studies", in J. C. Exum and S. D. Moore (eds.), *Biblical Studies, Cultural Studies: The Third Sheffield Colloquium* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998) 476.

problematised in recent times)<sup>16</sup> but also by the recognition that any one manuscript *was* the text of and for a particular community of faith,<sup>17</sup> albeit itself subject to the varieties of performance that continued to be required in a predominantly pre-literate church.<sup>18</sup> Cultural studies have made an enormous contribution to the identification of the reader in the construction of meaning. The complex interplay of influences on a reader, whether acknowledged or not, shows clearly that any interpretation reflects the variety of issues, values and commitments that belong to the sphere within which the reader operates. And finally, the technical apparatus provided by literary criticism, especially in its reader-response phase, has increasingly compelled the acknowledgment not of some posited ideal, implied or even real reader but of an actual reader who of necessity in a time-space continuum both enables and constrains the meaning of a text, and for whom the text is continually open – a “living word” because of a “living subject”. I suspect that the struggle in western scholarship has been between the privileging of the objective (whether grounded in historical, spiritual, grammatico-linguistic, reformed or magisterial guises) and the privileging of the individual. It has meant that individual writers have repeatedly asserted their own interpretations over those of others but have dressed them in non-personal language, placing the burden of their expositions on the text in pseudo-scientific terms, or very occasionally, on the methods used to interpret the text.

#### THE PERSONAL VOICE IN BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

The emerging criticism of the reader in the exploration of textual meaning is called by various names: personal voice criticism, autobiographical criticism, confessional criticism and so on. Such criticism reaches for more than the standardised identification of social location, along the lines of “I am a middle-class, white, anglo-saxon protestant heterosexual male” as if this distilled, politicised generalisation explains the content and motivation of an individual writing.<sup>19</sup> Such narrowed social locations rarely indicate how much fluidity and contextuality

16. See E. J. Epp, “Text-Critical, Exegetical, and Socio-Cultural Factors Affecting the Junia/Junias Variation in Romans 16,7”, in A. Denoux (ed.), *New Testament Textual Criticism and Exegesis, Festschrift for J. Delobel* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2002) 228.

17. M. F. Bird, *New Testament Greek Manuscripts: Variant Readings Arranged in Horizontal Lines Against Codex Vaticanus: 2 Corinthians* (Carol Stream IL: Tyndale House, 2005) xvi.

18. J. Dewey, “The Gospel of Mark as an Oral-Aural Event: Implications for Interpretation”, in E. Malbon and E. V. McKnight (eds.), *The New Literary Criticism and the New Testament* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994) 145-63.

19. Brett, “Self Criticism”, 115, demonstrates how supposedly “dominant” members of a given social system can yet be marginal.

there is to the "I" who is writing. The "I" is only notionally a cohesive, unitary, totally authentic self; in a reality itself dynamic and variable, the "I" is multiple, mobile, fragmentary, improvisational.<sup>20</sup> Hence, some prefer the term "positional analysis". While Dietrich Bonhoeffer's poem, "Who am I?" is often recalled as both demonstration and schema for these arguments,<sup>21</sup> a more rigorous broad-based analysis is to be found in Erving Goffman's sociology of "the performance of the self in everyday life".<sup>22</sup> The self changes according to the circumstances of its placement, precisely because it seeks to present a creditable and credible self in that location. Inevitably, it draws upon that location for its formation in order to contribute to it. Accordingly, the personal voice in biblical interpretation is as much a construction as objectivist linguistic performances, even if it identifies the self more overtly. Hence, those works that provide at least a partial foundation of autobiography for their motivation or structure are themselves, right at the level of autobiography, open to critical appraisal.<sup>23</sup>

Autobiographical criticism is not a high-sounding phrase intended somehow to exonerate (or dry-clean) drippy, devotional ignorance that explodes over text, reader and author with sugar-sweet *spumante*. It takes seriously a multiplicity of critical methodologies but it also affirms that the interests and experiences of the interpreter are inextricably formational of her/his representation of the text, just as the engagement with the text is a contributor to the formation of the writer. This criticism is therefore *critical*, in that the exegetical results are correlated with the "interested" nature of an interpreter's involvement with the text. It is dialogical or democratic, in that the temporal and cultural specificity of the results is therefore able to be related to other temporal and culturally specific results – say from a non-first world interpreter. Speaking for others yields to speaking with others. And it is ethical in the sense that an author acknowledges the critical place of her/his own commitments and interchanges with the text-in-interpretation, indicating the subjectivity that has been involved in the making of meaning. This in turn,

20. S. E. Henking, "Who Better to Indulge?: (Self) Indulgent Theorizing and the Stuff of Ambivalence", *Semeia* 72 (1995) 242.

21. See D. Patte, "The Guarded Personal Voice of a Male European-American Biblical Scholar", in Kitzberger, *The Personal Voice*, 12-23.

22. E. Goffman, *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, 1956).

23. See especially Staley's critical analysis of Marcus Borg, Sandra Schneiders and Mikeal Parsons in "The Father of Lies" (see n. 9 above). Needless to say, Staley himself can become subject to his own scalpel, for in his own inventive reconstructions of his subjects' autobiographies, he becomes almost insistent on a greater revelation, a desire perhaps for greater connectedness and friendship to compensate for the originating experience of victimisation that he himself admits (see pp. 127, 160).

means that interpretation is not just about the transmission of meanings, but the transmission of values.

Autobiographical criticism explicitly brings to the surface those values as something for which an author is to be accountable, not merely as a personal stance of identity or preference but as bearing effects upon others.<sup>24</sup> It is no longer possible, with autobiographical criticism, to hide behind the text and claim that, as one interprets it, others must be subject to it. So much of modern Western scholarship has mo(u)lded itself on the veiling of its interests and power. This has meant that its results have tended to ideologise certain established positions, providing a metaphysical written rationale for the very institutions that have provided training, support and an oligarchy for the interpreter. Mary Ann Tolbert comments, "the analysis of what it means to live as a more *privileged* person in relation to other people in the world is in general strikingly absent from most First World scholarship".<sup>25</sup> Recent recommendations that "Critical Race and Whiteness Studies" become a topic/course in universities are designed precisely to reveal such privilege.<sup>26</sup> Accordingly, the personal voice in critical academic discourse by its visible or auditory presence can invite the reader into her/his own ethical evaluation of meaning and stance relative to text and interpretation and text-in-interpretation.

But this is where there is considerable risk. Where the personal has been obscured in the course and style of writing, critics of the writing have as likely as not, decided that the supposed "objective" results can be radically and vehemently dismembered without regard for the writer, only to find that the writer has indeed been affected by the critical attacks, perhaps mortally. This mode of criticism delivers "the obligatory pat on the back before the stab in the entrails".<sup>27</sup> Most pronouncedly, the attack on a person's work can become lethal in intent and sometimes in result precisely because it dispenses, again under the

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24. Note generally, E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999); D. Patte, *The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: A Reevaluation* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995).

25. M. A. Tolbert, "Christianity, Imperialism and the De-Centering of Privilege", in F. F. Segovia and M. A. Tolbert (eds.), *Reading from this Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective Vol 2* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 356.

26. See, for example, S. Ahmed, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness", *Feminist Theory* 8 (2007) 149-68; E. Moreton-Robinson (ed.), *Whitening Race: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2004); P. McIntosh "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack", in P. S. Rothenberg (ed.), *Race, Class and Gender in the United States* (New York: Worth, 6th ed., 2004) 188-92. I am grateful to Jessica Cadwallader for steering me in this direction of thinking.

27. J. P. Tomkins, "Me and My Shadow", in D. P. Freedman, O. Frey and F. M. Zauhur (eds.), *The Intimate Critique: Autobiographical Literary Criticism* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1993) 26.

guise of objective analysis, a supposedly dispassionate disclosure of the author's personal life, real or constructed. It mimics the ancient philosophical practice of denigrating another's ideas by reference to his companions, his financial interest, his sexual practices, his failure to conform to accepted canons. And, occasionally, all these were applied to a "her" as well, as in Cicero's hatchet job on Leontion the Epicurean.<sup>28</sup> This does not bode well for the provision of personal information by the interpreter even when she/he feels a critical as well as an ethical invitation to do so. Being accountable is one thing; being held accountable by another person operating under another set of principles and possibly with the full force of some scrutinising institution behind him/her, is quite another thing again.

Accordingly, there will always be a certain political decision about how much personal voice is to be included and how to construct it. Conversely, an awareness is demanded that both critical engagement and readerly space can be sacrificed if the personal voice becomes nothing other than a self-aggrandising parade or an underhand effort to make one's own experience the new dominant paradigm for all. At the same time, the context of the interest in the personal voice is a construction of the self and a mode of disclosure that is decidedly Western. This calls for a massive philosophical discussion in its own right,<sup>29</sup> one which threatens to stall my preparation for the incorporation of autobiographical interweaving with the critical interpretation of a text. However, as we shall see, the confession of the self is not the only mechanism by which the self can be discovered and known, even if this is the dominant Western mechanism.<sup>30</sup>

#### ME AND THE SYROPHOENICIAN WOMEN Pulling back the Curtain

In all my long engagement with them, the Syrophenician women<sup>31</sup> (and it is time that we remembered there are two Syrophenicians mentioned in Mark 7:24-30) insisted that hiding behind the closed doors of objectivist results was unacceptable. At least at the level of gender, I initially felt a faint, almost apologetic resonance with the Jesus' character of the story, even if the overweening extolling of his "power of

28. Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* 1.33.93.

29. Note the critical observations on autobiographical approaches to Scriptural interpretation by A. C. Thiselton, "Review of Autobiographical Criticism: Between Text and Self", *Theology* 107 (2004) 436-37.

30. See M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality (Vol 1: An Introduction)* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990 [1978]) 20-22, 58-67.

31. The thesis is now reworked as A. Cadwallader, *Beyond the Word of a Woman: Recovering the Bodies of the Syrophenician Women* (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2008).

attraction" and "divine lordship" left me cold.<sup>32</sup> But Jesus secretes himself, not only behind closed doors (v.24b) but also behind a universal policy (v.27). "Speech", as Patrick Miller observed of the contention about the ordination of women, "could hide the culture",<sup>33</sup> and abrogate any responsibility for (and appearance of) personal decision behind a seemingly unchangeable and unchanging objective piece of traditional wisdom.

This goes precisely to the heart of Jesus' words of refusal to the woman seeking the healing of her daughter. Here lies a well-known proverb, embellished into two further formal well-known forms (maxim, enthymeme): "Let the children first be fed | It is not right | to take the children's bread and to throw it to the dogs."<sup>34</sup> The three-part combination places the rationale and responsibility for a decision on the fate of the woman and her daughter in a sequence of ancient rhetorical practices. Everything is "third person", pluralised, essentialised by the use of infinitives, removed to all appearances from the actual personal rebuff and abusive rebuke of the healer from Nazareth. He is simply the purveyor of universal, antique wisdom,<sup>35</sup> effaced from any personal responsibility by its manifest authority.

A mimetic (and textually authorised?) practice has imbued ecclesiastical protection of the Jesus of this Markan pericope. All manner of contortionist justifications (eliciting the faith of the woman, delivering puppy playfulness, speaking with irony, using non-consensually a Jewish proverb)<sup>36</sup> have been deployed in order to defend a Chalcedonian Christ from criticism, eviscerating if not further damning the woman in the process. Such (self?)-defence of the surety of tradition is not confined to nineteenth century commentators. Athol Gill, whose death in his mid-50s extinguished a notable Australian light of social reform and Second Testament scholarship, found it alive and well in the reactions of an Anglican Clergy Conference to his suggestion that a woman changed Jesus' mind or that there was a limited consciousness

32. As for example, in Robert Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 372-373.

33. Miller, "What I Have Learned from My Sisters", 239.

34. For the detail, see my *Beyond the Word of a Woman*, chapters 3 and 4.

35. Aristotle regarded proverbs as fragments of wisdom that had survived the destruction of an ancient civilization (*Philo.* fr.13). See J. Russo, "Prose Genres for the Performance of Traditional Wisdom in Ancient Greece: Proverb, Maxim and Apothegm", in L. Edmunds and R.W. Wallace (eds.), *Poet, Public and Performance in Ancient Greece* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997) 52.

36. See my "Dog-throttling: Nineteenth Century dogmatic/cultural constructions of the Syrophoenician Woman", in A. Cadwallader and V. Balabanski (eds.), *Hermeneutics and Scripture* (Adelaide: ATF Press), forthcoming.

in Jesus.<sup>37</sup> The reaction of an annual Anglican Bishops' Conference in 2003 to a similar suggestion of mine was to a significant extent the same. So much had I stretched many (though, thankfully, not all) mitres beyond the normative frame of acceptable meaning that they thereafter decided that bible studies should be conducted by one of their own. The house of Jesus' hiding is not merely a messianic secret; the whispers rustle in the house of bishops as well!

But the woman would have none of it. This mother spun the most brilliant reply in the Second Testament.<sup>38</sup> Some have portrayed her response as a "besting" of Jesus, but this is an inadequate, agonistic assessment. She rather forced Jesus to get personal rather than relying on distancing, objective ancient authority. Jesus' self-effacement, his hiding behind a saying as much as he hid in a house, was broken. She adopted not merely the key element of Jesus' saying and reinterpreted it according to her Greek cultural specificity where dogs were welcome *inside* the house. She also drew on another ancient form, that of the *kommata/antilogia*, that is, paired/antithetical sayings (cf. Prov 17:27-28, 26:4-5).

The consequence of such a combination is that a clash of wisdom is generated. Two universals cannot jointly stand, so the universal becomes relativised, the traditional is made contingent. For her, the *conjunction* of proverb with proverb, rather than the *supersession* of one by another, compels Jesus to give up hiding behind the policies, regulations, codes, traditions in which he has been formed, to which he gives obedience and behind which he shelters.<sup>39</sup> The particulars of the situation, a situation felt keenly by the mother but merely classified by Jesus, must now be addressed. Moreover, the dismissal of her personal interest and of her identity along with it (as Jesus, following ancient ethological comparisons, "caninises" the woman/women) must now be revisited. Her response, even if demonstrating her verbosity and lack of male embeddedness, yet demands dialogue (cf. Matt 15:22-28 where initial resistant silence, then repelling paradigm, are both overcome). She extends an invitation to see more than one's own monolithic viewpoint, more than one's own reflection, more than a narcissistic

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37. Personal communication (over a beer at Naughton's pub) not long before he died. He seems to have had a positive impact elsewhere however; see, R. Curtis, "The Social Location of Women in the Gospel of Mark", in D. Neville (ed.), *Prophecy and Passion: Essays in Honour of Athol Gill* (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2002) 221.

38. The reply is such a complex reworking of another ancient proverb that there is some doubt whether Mark could have composed it, at least going by the register of the language of the rest of the gospel. This has implications for the issue of the historical kernel of the story.

39. See W. Loader, "Challenged at the Boundaries: A Conservative Jesus in the Markan Tradition", *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 63 (1996) 45-61.

confirmation hidden behind the canons of ancient dogma. Of course, Jesus might merely reiterate his initial abusive dismissal;<sup>40</sup> the Church might continue to hide behind its dogmas; I might perpetuate my convoluted Latin syntactical accompaniment/reinforcement of objectivist criticism. But the Syrophoenician wit and grace serves to invite the personal to step forward, allows at least something of the person's identity to be seen in conjunction with language rather than hiding behind it; at least, she compels a person not to shirk responsibility for the presentation that is made, behind some chimere/a of a lack of power or tied hands.

#### The Interest in Culture

My initial foray into the story of the Syrophoenician woman came as a result of an adult education course in Mark's Gospel that I organised in Geelong, a regional city about an hour's drive from Melbourne. I simply pursued a simple question – what was the cultural appreciation of dogs in the ancient world? The age-old exchange or battle between culture and faith had long become my own issue and I had swung along almost the entire spectrum of Richard Niebuhr's classification of five emphases of their connection.<sup>41</sup> I was attempting to pursue an adult pedagogical model of finding some concrete engagement between life experience and the text. Dogs offered some potential.

Standard commentaries on the text were almost unanimous in sheeting home the slur "dogs" to Jewish attitudes to Gentiles. The story of the Syrophoenician woman was therefore but another instance of Jewish antagonistic characterisation. But I discovered that there were significant cultural differences between Jews and Greeks (amongst others) over dogs. The pariahs of the ancient world were despised by almost all nations, but Greeks and Romans also prized the faithful hound of the hunt and of the house. Over and again, Greco-Roman funerary monuments presented banquet scenes that included dogs beneath the tables. Literary texts spoke of dogs present at mealtimes in *triclinia* (dining areas). By contrast, Jews dismissed the dog as unequivocally unclean (Ex 23:31, Deut 23:18) and later rabbinical writings, regularly relied upon by commentators,<sup>42</sup> remind readers that dogs were to be outside, removed from domestic activities (e.g. bShab 155b). Jesus' words to the woman reflect the standard Jewish paradigm, even if

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40. Joel Marcus points out that the first half of Jesus' second reply does not necessarily remove a sense of his antagonism: *Mark 1-8* (AB27) (New York: Doubleday, 2000) 470.

41. H. R. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1951).

42. See, recently, A. Y. Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* (Hermeneia Series) (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 2007) 367.

the proverb appears to have begun life in a Greek context (warning against sacrificing the well-being of one's household to an all-consuming compulsion).<sup>43</sup> For Jesus, the children's bread inside was not to be thrown away or outside to the dogs. To this point in the exploration, the dogs remained a racist characterisation of a non-Jew.

The woman's answer to Jesus took on immense significance for me precisely because, at this first foray, it was built on a cultural value that shifted the way of viewing things. Effectively, she had answered Jesus not on his terms, not according to his Jewish background but from her own. Cultural distinctives had become crucial to the interpretation of the story for me. I remember a lecture in Ridley College chapel prior to my beginning the formal study of theology, delivered by the Anglican Dean and academic, Stuart Barton Babbage. The lecture took its lead from Tertullian: "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?"<sup>44</sup> In it, Stuart had lovingly and lavishly repeated one particular line: "The Gospel without culture is anaemic; culture without the Gospel is demonic." I might nuance his terse aphorism now, but the import of his affirmation resonated with me. Now it found a new expression, not by a reiteration of its general principle, but by the recognition that cultural perspectives were always particular and relative, expressive of particular societies and groups rather than undifferentiated and universal.

Yet, even a particular and relative cultural perspective had the potential to be gospel, a gospel addressed to Jesus (on which see further below).<sup>45</sup> This does not require that such a gospel or fragment of good news suddenly acquired the status of the very universal tradition that it had begun by challenging. This would be nothing more than a return to triumphalist displacement of a now-temporary hegemony. It would remove, discredit or marginalise any critique of the conflicted ideological attempts to herald the new beginning as in reality more primeval and deterministic than that which it had conquered.

This gospel, metaphoricised in the language of dogs who have moved from outcast place to domestic space, cannot be formed or have affective operation without its specific cultural genesis, even though almost all commentators<sup>46</sup> have wanted to establish a pre-existing

43. A. Schottus, *Paroimiai Hellenika Adagia sive proverbialia Graecorum ex Zenobio seu Zenodoto, Diogeniano & Suida Collectaneis* (Antwerp: officina Plantiniana apud viduam & filios Ioannis Moreti, 1612) 642-43; Aristophanes, *Wasps* 835; Tertullian, *On Prayer* 6.3.

44. Tertullian *Refutation of the Heretics* 7.9. The lecture was privately printed: S. B. Babbage, *Jerusalem and Athens* (Donald Baker Memorial Lecture No. 3), (Melbourne: Ridley College, 1973).

45. See J. Perkinson, "A Canaanitic Word in the Logos of Christ; or the Difference the Syrophoenician Woman makes to Jesus", *Semeia* 75 (1996) 61-85.

46. The exceptions are to be found in those operating from a post-colonial perspective. See L. A. Guardiola-Sáenz, "Borderless Women and Borderless Texts: A Cultural Reading

immutability for it. The woman's life situation glimpsed (but only glimpsed) in her actions and response to Jesus remains specific, for specificity is the motivation for and the result of her actions: the healing of her daughter. The gospel may therefore be contingent upon her cultural particularity but it is not less gospel for that, even if the problem of particularity will preclude or constrain its conversion into a universal for others (most especially in cultures where dogs are or have been unknown). Consequently, a slice of social location however fragmentary, may yet itself contribute to that liberatory impulse named as gospel. Hence more than ethics or apologetics, autobiography, even in its inevitably fragmented and constructed delivery, may yet be both revelatory and transformative.

#### The Powerful Word of a Woman

There were more discoveries to be made simply in the exchange between Jesus and the woman. In 1984, I had become an inaugural member of the Movement for the Ordination of Women in Australia. Feminist theology was becoming a staple for the movement and in wider circles. For me, it provided a faith perspective on awakenings that had begun long before at Monash University in the study of politics. The necessity to read and hear this foundational feminist biblical text<sup>47</sup> on its own terms, or at least to read and hear it in intertextual connection with *other* voices being raised,<sup>48</sup> broke an age-long conformity to an age-long interpretative tradition: there *was* no mention of faith in the story of the Syrophenician woman. That was the rendition of the story given by Matthew, one which had dominated the interpretation of both Mark and Matthew from patristic through to modern times.<sup>49</sup>

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of Matthew 15:21-28", *Semeia* 78 (1997) 69-81; S. Nelavala, "Smart Syrophenician Woman: A Dalit Feminist Reading of Mark 7:24-31", *Expository Times* 118 (2007) 64-69.

47. E. Castelli, "Rethinking the Feminist Myth of Christian Origins"; paper presented at Candler School of Theology, Emory University, 1994, 5, cited in K. E. Corley, "The Egalitarian Jesus: A Christian Myth of Origins", *Forum* (ns) 1 (1998) 302.

48. See J. Scarfe, "A Pastoral Charge to the Episcopate in the New Order Which Has Already Begun", in A. Cadwallader (ed.), *Episcopacy: Views from the Antipodes* (North Adelaide: ABCE, 1994) 201-11; E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1992).

49. See John Chrysostom, *Against Heresies* 60.746.25-6; E. S. Malbon, "The Major Importance of the Minor Characters in Mark", in E. S. Malbon and E. V. McKnight (eds.), *The New Literary Criticism and the New Testament* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994) 65; G. Theissen, *The Gospels in Context: Social and Political History in the Synoptic Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991) 63; C. D. Marshall, *Faith as a Theme in Mark's Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 228-29; W. Grundmann, *Das Evangelium nach Markus* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 8th ed., 1980) 197; G. Lüdemann, *Jesus After 2000 Years: What he really said and did*, translated by J. Bowden (London: SCM, 2000) 50.

Later, I would discover that, despite the posture of objectivity which commentators and preachers adopted to expound the text, they had a keen interest in making the story, Mark's as well as Matthew's, turn on faith. In the early Church, the faith of a Gentile offset the constructed intransigence of the Jews. The story became the paradigm story of the success of the Gentile mission over against the faithlessness of the Jews. The Sunday of the Canaanite woman early assumed a set day of the Lord in the liturgical calendar. In the nineteenth century, suffering the twin assaults of historical skepticism and the suffragette movement, the ecclesial authorities through their clerical intelligentsia maintained an emphasis on faith, both as an example for emulation against the encroachments of secularism and as a paradigm for upholding the correct Christian place for women.<sup>50</sup> Thus the efforts of women to gain the vote and to secure entry into universities were imperiously dismissed by a number of commentators by appeal to the story of the Canaanite/Syrophenician woman. James Wells, a "Free Church" minister in Scotland, the United States and Palestine, fashioned the story into this rebuke: "It is an interesting fact that, so far as we know, no woman ever opposed Christ in the days of His flesh. Some graceless women oppose Him in our day in public lectures; but this is a new horror, and a modern monstrosity."<sup>51</sup> Indeed, chipped in the Königsberg Professor, Hermann Olshausen, women were to abstain from all such disputations and to exemplify that "faith [which] is again obviously seen not as knowledge, not as the upholding of certain doctrines for true, but as an internal state of mind – the tenderest susceptibility for what is heavenly – the most entire womanhood of the soul".<sup>52</sup>

Moreover, the self-secure rightness of such attitudes gathered a missionary zeal, where the Gentile church now became curiously aligned with a de-semiticised Jesus in bringing the gospel to foreign lands. Again, faith became the central anchor for the conversion and civilisation of alien races. It was not difficult to see the precursors and indeed the shaping of an inherited assumption about the meaning of the story bearing down upon later women's efforts to persuade the church that women as well as men were legitimately to be ordained and consecrated, both in the mother-church and in the missionary field.

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50. H. Olshausen, *Biblical Commentary on the Gospels* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1848), Vol 2, 203; J. Ford, *The Gospel of S. Matthew* (London: Joseph Masters, 2nd ed., 1889) 284; H. M. Luckock, *Footprints of the Son of Man as traced by Saint Mark* (London: Rivingtons, 2nd ed., 1885) 261, 264.

51. J. Wells, *Bible Children: Studies for the Young* (London: James Nisbet, 1879) 216-217. Presumably, Christ was to be identified with franchised and educated men! See further, Cadwallader, "Dog Throttling", cited above.

52. Olshausen, *Biblical Commentary on the Gospels*, 2.203.

Indeed, the adoption of the values and interpretations of the missionary church by the missionised was not merely mimetically advantageous to the latter; it bolstered the self-deceit/conceit that those values and interpretations were acultural and hence universal.

Mark's distinctive emphasis therefore became central in this debate over women's ordination, precisely because the child was healed not on the efficient cause of faith but because of the *word* of a woman. Moreover, this was underscored in the introduction to the woman's reply (v. 28). Uniquely in Mark's Gospel, the saying is introduced by a double indicative rather than a single indicative with a dependent participle – literally, "The woman answered and she says to him." It has the effect of slowing down the introduction, bringing a gravity to what follows.<sup>53</sup> This prepares us for Jesus' recognition of the saying of the woman as pivotal.

Initially, I pursued the standard grammatico-linguistic analysis of biblical texts, in which I had been formed:<sup>54</sup> look at the words used and compare the usage through the remainder of the writing. The word usually translated "saying" is *logos* – not just of critical importance in the Christian lexical arsenal on a broad scale but an anchor in Mark's Gospel. In twenty of the twenty-three instances of *logos* in Mark's gospel, Jesus is the speaker. As regards the remaining three – in one instance (5:36), words (those of the Jairus' servants announcing the death of his daughter) are ignored; a second has a narrative accent of the leper's preaching (1:45).<sup>55</sup> But the only direct speech incorporating *logos*, outside of Jesus' own words, lies with this woman. She has delivered *logos*, the synonym of "gospel" (cf. Mark 8:32, 38)<sup>56</sup> to Jesus. What's

53. This preparatory accent for the word of the woman is lost in contemporary translations which tend to reduce it to a mere reply.

54. The erudite and amiable influence of Leon Morris towers over this period; see D. A. Hubbard, "Leon Lamb Morris: An Appreciation", in R. Banks (ed.), *Reconciliation and Hope: New Testament Essays on Atonement and Eschatology* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1974) 11-14; D. Hilliard, "Intellectual Life in the Diocese of Melbourne" in B. Porter (ed.), *Melbourne Anglicans: the Diocese of Melbourne 1847-1997* (Melbourne: Mitre Books, 1997) 40-42.

55. J. K. Elliott argued that there remained an ambiguity in the *ho de* opening the verse, suggesting that Jesus may well have been the preacher: "The Conclusion of the Pericope of the Healing of the Leper and Mark i 45", *Journal of Theological Studies* 22 (1971) 153-57; "Is *ho exelthôn* a Title for Jesus in Mark i 45?", *Journal of Theological Studies* 27 (1976) 402-405; cf. R. A. Guelich, *Mark 1-8:26* (WBC) (Dallas TX: Word, 1989) 72; J. R. Donahue and D. J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark* (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 2002) 90. James Swetnam's observation that *ho de* signals a change of subject (and hence means the leper in this case) has largely held sway: "Some Remarks on the Meaning of *ho de exelthôn* in Mark 1:45", *Biblica* 68 (1987) 245-49.

56. See G. D. Kilpatrick in J. K. Elliott (ed.), *The Language and Style of the Gospel of Mark: An Edition of C. H. Turner's Notes on Marcan Usage Together with other Comparable Studies* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1993) 166; V. Robbins, *Jesus the Teacher: A Socio-Rhetorical Reading of Mark* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984) 58-59.

more, Jesus recognises it. The request by Jesus to the chief priests, scribes and elders in 11:29 provides the striking counterpoint. The leaders are invited to give, literally, "one word" (*hena logon*). They refuse. Accordingly, the woman joins in the provision of the word; religious authorities do not.

The poignancy of the parallel with women's campaigns for ordination could not have been more acute. It was a poignancy with an added edge, given that, at that stage, I was ordained and struggling to work with and within the injustice of that ordering of the church. John Gaden, then principal of St Barnabas College in Adelaide, laid up his priesthood in solidarity with women in their thwarted vocation;<sup>57</sup> Graeme Garrett at St Mark's College in Canberra stalled his migration from the Baptist to Anglican church for the same reason. Me? I peered into the dialectical mirroring pain of the cup of suffering – accused as the unjust church and accusing back with pointed fingers of blessing – at each eucharistic celebration.

Later, the significance of the Syrophoenician woman's reply unfolded further. I had begun with the assumption that Jesus was the singular agent of healing in Mark, ignoring for a time the disciples' own acts of healing (6:13) and the exorcisms performed by some anonymous exorcist (9:38). But Jesus' second reply to the woman unwrapped an extra surprise. Again, the standard grammatico-linguistic resources yielded an astonishing result. Jesus did not heal/exorcise the young girl; he merely announced that she had been delivered. Unlike Matthew's retelling which has Jesus despatch the woman with the promise that it would be done for her as she wished, Jesus declares in Mark that the demon has *already* left the woman's daughter. The tense of the verb, repeated in participial form in the last verse of the pericope, is in the perfect. Consistently, the perfect tense acts as a kind of stative, an already constituted action that can be identified in retrospect in the present.<sup>58</sup> Jesus provides the rationale for his observation in the first half of his second reply: "For this word, go your way" – the woman's word has secured the healing of her own daughter.<sup>59</sup>

In the context of a specific earnest of women seeking ordination, this delivered a further sharp dialectic. The initial experience of greater wholeness that I felt at the deaconing and then priesting of women in

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57. D. Reid (ed.), *A Vision of Wholeness* (Alexandria NSW: E. J. Dwyer, 1994) 9-10, 199-202.

58. See S. E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2nd ed., 1994) 22; *Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the New Testament with Reference to Tense and Mood* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), 291.

59. See, now, E. Wainwright, *Women Healing, Healing Women: The Genderisation of Healing in Early Christianity* (London: Equinox, 2006) 129.

the Anglican Church of Australia was *not* the focus of the Syro-phoenician. She may well have challenged the male authority of the story by exposing and shaming his parsimonious, curmudgeonly behaviour – the indecency of his nasty-tongued abuse, his retreat from public space and the failure of vocational leadership connected with it, the dishonour of the lack of hospitality to the stranger. But this was not her prime objective. Hers was not a magdalenic appeasement and restoration of a wearied warrior such as is conveyed by the “everything’s all right” of the Webber and Rice caricature. Her prime focus was her daughter, her sister. The danger that potentially preyed in my response, as in the relief that so many clerics and prelates felt in the initial ordinations, was that the woman had been turned from a damned whore into God’s police.<sup>60</sup> From being a conflicted focus of desire and detestation, the woman was now to be an “angel of the house” confirming men in their proper vision and vocation. Either option still predicated its characterisation on a male anchor. The whole point of the final verse of the Markan pericope is that *a household of women* celebrates (on which see more below). Neither Jesus, nor a husband, father or brother, is present. Small wonder, then, that a number of male commentators have found this verse extraneous and of no consequence.<sup>61</sup>

#### The Initial Problem with the Acclaim of the Word of a Woman

Here a problem arose which would have devastating consequences for the traditional inherited meaning of the story, found only by reading at length into the understanding of *logos* in the ancient world. *Logos* of course has an enormous range of meanings but its primary accent was reason, which inevitably flowed into the expression of reason, namely speech, and thence sayings generally and of specific kinds. Reason was properly the ordering of the universe and hence was divine. Reason had been given to human beings in contradistinction to the animals who were called *aloga*, without reason, as in Jude 10. The primary focus of reason in humanity however was the male. Women, children and slaves were also declared (by Aristotle amongst others) as *alogoi*, also without

60. The title of a foundational Australian feminist text: A. Summers, *Damned Whores and God’s Police* (Ringwood Vic.: Penguin, rev. ed., 1994). The nineteenth century (then) historical radical James Seeley operated unself-consciously with just this construction in his analysis of the Syro-phoenician woman: *Ecce Homo: A Survey of the Life and Work of Jesus Christ* (London, Toronto: J. M. Dent, 1908 [1865-6]) 248-250.

61. B. Blackburn, *Theios anêr and the Markan Miracle Tradition: a critique of the Theios anêr concept as an interpretative background of the miracle traditions used by Mark* (Tübingen: JCB Mohr, 1991) 222-23; J. L. Staley, “Changing Woman: Postcolonial Reflections on Acts 16: 6-40”, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 73 (1999) 127, n. 36, cf. E. S. Malbon, “Fallible Followers: Women and Men in the Gospel of Mark”, *Semeia* 28 (1983) 34; Collins, *Mark*, 30.

reason, and, like animals, needing to be hedged, bounded and zoned by reason. For a woman and her daughter to be collated with dogs in Jesus' first reply was completely in accord with this ancient binary classification and would have carried no surprise to Mark's audience. Modernity might classify the use of dogs as "a metaphor", but, in the ancient world, it was closer to metonymy.<sup>62</sup> Accordingly, to an ancient audience, the astonishment came that one characterised as a dog was now to be acknowledged as speaking *logos*. This was new. What this did to the story was to shift the tensions to a more fundamental level – not that of race, but of gender. The battle was *not* between Jew and Greek, but between male and female.

Suddenly, the simple question, how can a woman who is a dog speak *logos*, opened up a vast new area for me. Modern ethology and sociobiology with their frequent naturalistic determinations for women had to be negotiated, precisely because they yielded a lens through which to explore ancient attitudes. Here was clarified the conjunction of science and cultural convention where frequent recourse was made to ancient literary forms (such as proverbs or myths) and to biologically justified hierarchies where male and female were asserted as the *primary* dimorphism of life. Given the hierarchical presumption, an inferiority was inevitably assigned to the secondary and contrasting element of any dyadic comparison with an associated need to assign territorial boundaries to maintain the proper order of things.<sup>63</sup> I became ferocious in my search for dogs in literature. It meant a scouring of the husbandry texts that often made judgements that were little more than the projection of androcentric commitments onto the screen of the animal world so that a viewing might occur of what was the naturally ordered relationship between male and female.<sup>64</sup> And it meant a search for the use of dogs in metaphors.

This last was especially revealing, as I found that the use of dogs in denigration and vilification was not primarily focused on race but on gender, even in Jewish circles. "Dog" was a general term of abuse that, when applied to a woman, indicated that she was regarded as a whore. Pilfering, promiscuity, deceit were the characteristics that the metaphor delivered, in this case to the point where the metaphor was so closely

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62. See, for example, Aristotle *Politics* 1.2.10-13 (1254b). I owe this recognition of the metamorphosis of metaphor into metonymy to Page duBois, *Sowing the Body: Psychoanalysis and Ancient Representations of Women* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1988) 34-36.

63. See my "When a Woman is a Dog: ancient and modern ethology meet the Syro-phenician woman", *Bible and Critical Theory* 1 (2005) 1-35.

64. J. J. Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire: The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece* (New York: Routledge, 1990) 23.

allied as to become metonymous. There is no mollification in the use of diminutive *kunarion* for dog in Mark 7:27-28. The abuse was in fact heightened by such infantilising morphology.

This spawned a deeper search into the cultural and contextual cues that Mark had loaded into the immediate passage and into the wider narrative beyond. In part, this had been prompted by the efforts of later scribes to adjust the manuscript transmission to sanitise the woman. There was something problematic about this woman. She became a widow in some Syriac manuscripts<sup>65</sup> or a law-observant righteous woman in the *Pseudo-Clementine Homilies*.<sup>66</sup> She turned into a compliant woman with the addition of "Yes" to "Lord" in Matthew and a number of Markan manuscripts assimilated to the Matthean text.<sup>67</sup> She became, thereby, loaded with christological insight<sup>68</sup> rather than armed with some tactical manoeuvre designed to gain a hearing if not a desired result.<sup>69</sup>

Each effort at exoneration only sharpens the contrary aspect in the critical reading of Mark. Unlike both earlier Markan stories involving daughters (5:21-24, 35-43, 6:14-29), this mother is singularly problematic: she has no husband; she occupies public space without even a crowd as a protective/constraining boundary; she goes into the house of a foreign man uninvited; she refuses to be silent even after her request had been rejected; she is from the territory notorious in both ancient and early Christian literature as a center of prostitution; she is described in stereotypical terms that to both Greek and Jew indicate a compromised character.

For Mark's initial hearers, the portrait is highly suggestive: the woman is a prostitute.<sup>70</sup> Given that she has her own home she is

65. sy<sup>s</sup>. See P-L. Couchoud, "Notes de Critique Verbale sur St. Marc et St. Matthieu", *Journal of Theological Studies* 34 (1933) 121; D. J. M. Derrett, "Law in the New Testament: The Syro-Phoenician Woman and the Centurion of Capernaum", *Novum Testamentum* 15.3 (1973) 164; G. Schwarz, "SUROFOINIKISSA – CANANAIA (Markus 7.26/Matthäus 15.22)", *New Testament Studies* 30 (1984) 626-28.

66. See my "What's in a Name? The Tenacity of a Tradition of Interpretation [Justus/a and the Clementine Homilies]", in P. Lockwood (ed.), *Festschrift for Victor Pfitzner, Lutheran Theological Journal* 39 (2005) 218-39.

67. The affirmation is retained in a number of contemporary commentators: see A. Stock, *The Method and Message of Mark* (Wilmington DE: Michael Glazier, 1989) 213; C. Waetjen, *A Reordering of Power: A Socio-Political Reading of Mark's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 135; T. Boomershine, *Story Journey: An Invitation to the Gospel as Storytelling* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988) 108, 109.

68. So M. Fander, *Die Stellung der Frau im Markusevangelium* (Altenberge: Telos Verlag, 1989) 75-6, 83-4.

69. So A-J. Levine, "Matthew's Advice to a Divided Readership", in D. E. Aune (ed.), *The Gospel of Matthew in Current Study* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2001) 36.

70. So A. Dermience, "Tradition et rédaction dans la péripécie de la Syrophénicienne: Marc 7,24-30", *Revue théologique Louvain* 8 (1977) 23; C. Osiek and D. L. Balch, *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches* (Louisville KY: Westminster John

probably slightly up-market: a courtesan. Accordingly, Jesus' first reply to the woman is as much a defence of his honour as it would be an expected and acceptable response amongst Mark's hearers (whether they agreed with it or not). What is certainly not expected is Jesus' second reply. A voluble woman in the ancient world confirmed her stigmatised unbounded status the moment she (re-)opened her mouth. But that a woman of such status and perceived contagion could speak *logos* is a radical realignment of who might impart gospel. Her words held enormous potential to give offence to a church bent upon aligning the pure gospel with purity of life.

However, for me, two disturbing implications accompanied the welcome realisation that gospel could flow from a spoiled identity as this woman was portrayed as possessing. These were marginal to the historical-critical consideration of the place of prostitutes in the early Jesus movement.<sup>71</sup> The first was decidedly Anglican: the Prayer of Humble Access; the second was decidedly androcentric: the use of women to think with. They proved to be not unrelated.

#### The Prayer of Humble Access

The Syrophoenician woman had provided inspiration for the most distinctive supplication in the prayer-book so defining of Anglicanism, the Book of Common Prayer. "The Prayer of Humble Access", as it is called, is still repeated in many parts of the Anglican Communion four hundred and fifty years after it was penned. The key allusive line in the prayer: "We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table" was the critical phrase that matched the kneeling posture demanded by the rubrics as well as the affirmation, also in the prayer, that the body is sinful. Commentators on the prayer were quite clear that the line was directly derived from the words of the Syrophoenician /Canaanite woman.<sup>72</sup> Hence, admission of wretchedness, expressed by

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Knox, 1997) 136; S. L. Love, "Jesus, Healer of the Canaanite Woman's Daughter in Matthew's Gospel: A Social Scientific Inquiry", *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 32 (2002) 17.

71. The debate continues as to whether there were actual prostitutes in the early churches or whether the perception of a deviant social movement merely drew the charge; see K. Corley, "Were the Women around Jesus Really Prostitutes? Women in the Context of Greco-Roman Meals", *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* (1989) 520-21; cf. J. Lieu, "The 'Attraction of Women' in/to Early Judaism and Christianity: Gender and the Politics of Conversion", *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 72 (1998) 20; S. Matthews, *First Converts: Rich Pagan Women and the Rhetoric of Mission in Early Judaism and Christianity* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).

72. See, for example, E. Daniel, *The Prayer Book: Its History, Language and Contents* (London: Wells Gardner, Darton & Co, 15th ed., nd.) 322; A. Barry, *The Teacher's Prayer Book* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 16th ed., nd.) 144a. The Oxford Movement's John Keble held, "We adopt her language in the deepest prayer of our Eucharistic Service." See

a sinful body in a grovelling position, was set by intertextual relationship to a woman who was recalled as one under the table, a dog. Priests, invariably male when they were required to lead the prayer in the name of the congregation, intoned about corruption via the woman. The hallmark of unworthiness, of sin, and of dependency on a higher mercy, was the woman. Man's entry into this state is portrayed as a descent into the feminine, or indeed, through the feminine to the bestial. In order to accentuate the destitution of the state, Jesus' *first* words to the woman are subtly restored: the *denial* of crumbs that he espoused is now accepted ("not worthy so much..."), even as that denial is blended with the woman's words confirming a position "under the table".

The perspective inculcated by the prayer was that redemption (ritually enacted by the movement from this prayer through the consecration prayer to the communion) consisted in moving up and away from the animal – the woman – indeed, away from the bodily being of woman. To receive bread was therefore to become a son not a daughter, just as Tertullian had argued.<sup>73</sup> Children and women disappeared from reference, seemingly collated with the animal recalled and left behind in the prayer's gospel allusion.

This socialisation of generations of Anglican worshippers had been achieved through a liturgical distortion of the gospel. A priest-led prayer reinscribed – and compelled a constant reiteration – of ancient constructions of woman, the body and the animal, and preserved a male identity and control, as of old, through the threat of effeminate degeneracy. The groveling self-denigration enjoined by the Prayer of Humble Access now seemed to me to be the antithesis of the gospel story that had been claimed for its wording.

#### Using the Syrophoenician Woman as a Literary Construct

The ongoing viability of biblical studies is frequently predicated on the ability to criticise previous interpretations. Again an objectivist façade characterises the metacommentary, as supposedly assured results are newly extracted from a text that retains the privilege of a continued unsullied existence. Feminist, Marxist and ecological criticisms, however, direct their challenge not merely to the history of hegemonic interpretation but to the text that hides (or is hidden) behind a policy of inscrutability (whether that be called the "inspiration of Scripture" or not) and yet itself sends off invitations to produce such hegemonic interpretation.

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*Sermons for the Christian Year* Vol. 4, Sermon 14, quoted by M. F. Sadler, *The Gospel according to St. Mark* (London: George Bell & Sons, 1892) 150.

73. Tertullian, *On Prayer* 6.3.

Whatever may be the historicity of the *identity* of the Syrophoenician woman, Mark manipulates her characterisation to achieve certain ends. The withholding of the stereotyping markers of gender, status, race and birth until verse 26 may be part of Mark's agenda to destabilise the prejudices and presuppositions of readers/hearers with the shock that such a person could then be affirmed as speaking *logos*. The risk is that this politicised rendition might be read not only as an essentialist description but as a warrant for such a use of women (and their characterisation) for "larger" ecclesial ends. The early churches bear sufficient witness to such agendas (such as using women to reinforce conventional family structures) to raise suspicions that Mark may be engaged in competition with other male leaders over the place and significance of women in Christian communities, even should one be sympathetic to Mark's liberationist impulse.<sup>74</sup> As one Episcopalian priest, Phoebe McFarlin, chided me,<sup>75</sup> "We don't need white knights; we want our voices." The criticism not only ran to me as a male interpreter working through my own engagement with women and feminist issues, whether correcting my own personal attitudes and behaviours or tackling institutional immutability; it also raised questions of Mark him/himself, questions that I was compelled to address.

Most particularly, it exposed the complexity in the affirmation of the word of a woman in verse 29. This is perhaps seen most poignantly in the shift that occurs in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's renditions of the Syrophoenician's story over a number of years. Initially, she argued that the woman had gained the "last word",<sup>76</sup> though later, perhaps acknowledging some correction,<sup>77</sup> restored this claim to Jesus "when read in an androcentric register".<sup>78</sup> A feminist construction might wish to privilege the Syrophoenician's word as "the last word" and thereby mount a critique of Mark's received text, through either an historical or imaginative reconstruction.<sup>79</sup> But at the metacommentary level, the arena for debate has remained unchallenged. Not only is the formal recognition of the powerful word of a woman retained by a male *in* the

74. See my "The Markan/Marxist Struggle for the Household: Juliet Mitchell and the Challenge to Patriarchal/Familial Ideology", in R. Boer and J. Øklund (eds.), *Marxist Feminist Criticism of the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2008) 165-66, 173.

75. At a field education training seminar, held at Belair, South Australia in 1997.

76. *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983, 1993) 137; *Discipleship of Equals* (London: SCM, 1993) 289.

77. See F. G. Downing, "The Woman from Syrophoenicia and her Doggedness: Mark 7:24-31 (Matthew 15:21-28)", in G. J. Brooke (ed.), *Woman in the Biblical Tradition* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992) 139, n. 35.

78. E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said 13; Sharing Her Word: Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Context* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998) 123-24.

79. Dewey, "Oral/Aural Event" (see n. 18 above).

story and probably by a male *writing* the story,<sup>80</sup> but the constraint of the significance of the woman to just her word runs the danger of perpetuating the accent on the word as the defining mark of privilege. Indeed, some commentators in patristic and modern periods maintained that the woman, as woman, had not changed from her bestial taxonomy (and hence the word she uttered was either exceptional or not her own). More subtly, any acknowledgement of her identity in relation to the word she delivered, was tied, as word, to the province where *logos* operated, that is the male. Thus, the *Gospel of Philip* construed her word as being, like the crumbs, no more than scraps.<sup>81</sup> A medieval catena turned the woman, at least at the moment of utterance, into a male.<sup>82</sup> The word threatened to become a straitjacket.

Mary Douglas nearly two decades earlier had argued that the body as a medium in its own right needed to be considered, "distinct from the words issuing from the mouth".<sup>83</sup> Elisabeth Grosz turned this to both literary and cultural advocacy. She lamented, "Even many so-called radical theories actively participate in a process of salvaging or resuscitating reason" and then proceeded to map the integrity of the body as an epistemic and communicating entity.<sup>84</sup> In no way was this to be a return to the ancient dimorphic duality that regarded reason as male as superior and body as female as inferior. Rather it was to subvert the entire hierarchy and structure, and restore to women and to epistemology the critical significance of the body, resistant to any machismic assumption of inscriptional, descriptive and prescriptive control over the body. It was the second Syrophenician woman who provided a glimpse of an alternative communicative universe, one which both relativised and reconfigured the previously monolithic male pedestal.

### The Problem of Privileging the Word

When I first began to consider doctoral studies, my attention had been drawn to children in the New Testament and to an ancient affirmation of Jesus as "The Child of God".<sup>85</sup> These were days of debate

80. So M. R. d'Angelo and E. Castelli, "Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza on Women in the Gospels and Feminist Christology", *Religious Studies Review* 22 (1996) 294; R. S. Kraemer, *Her Share of the Blessings: Women's Religions among Pagans, Jews and Christians in the Greco-Roman World* (New York, London: Oxford University Press, 1992), 132-33.

81. *Gospel of Philip* 82(130/102).21-24.

82. *Catena in Acta (Catena Andreae)* 176.6.

83. M. Douglas. "Can Dogs Laugh? A cross-cultural approach to body symbolism", in T. Polhemus (ed.), *Social Aspects of the Human Body* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1978 [1971]) 298.

84. E. Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion: The Politics of Bodies* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1995) 28.

85. See now F. Bovon, "The Child and the Beast: Fighting Violence in Early Christianity", *Harvard Theological Review* 92 (1999) 369-92.

in the Anglican Church (early 1980s) about yet another contested admission, this time the admission of children to Holy Communion. So much of the debate was a repetition of the ancient emphasis on reason being expressed through speech. It completely ignored both the import of baptism and, more particularly, the recognition that the mere repetition of words could never be the singular or even apex of human communication. One three year old, at a church where I ministered, came each week holding up his hands to receive communion, and each week watched those around him receive bread whilst he was patted down with a blessing. One Sunday it became too much for him and he burst into tears and howled and howled. The following Sunday the congregation became illegal in practice, though I believe we moved closer to Jesus' affirmation about children and the *basileia* of God.

The study never eventuated as a thesis but the concern for the voice or, better, the presence of children in the New Testament story remained. Two factors secured a place for the child in the story of the Syrophenician. First, the Czech New Testament scholar, Petr Pokorny, had recognised that the daughter is the anchor of the entire pericope, "the absent and passive actant who still caused all the actions and statements",<sup>86</sup> mentioned in different terminology seven times – the highest concentration in the Second Testament. His observation stood in marked contrast to the attitude of some interpreters that the child was peripheral to the story, indeed to the simple miracle form.

Secondly, contemporary feminist studies highlighted the problem of a narrow focus on "word" alone. This privileging of word – the red-letter syndrome – had dominated the interpretation of Mark's story in modern scholarship, though there has been a shift from a focus on the words of Jesus (usually to exonerate him of any unseemly response) to the words of the woman.

The focus on the word was locked into a debate about semantic content. It failed to weigh the narrative frame provided for the words – the movement, the courage, the gestures involved of blocking Jesus' movement (a very different interpretation of the action of the woman in falling at Jesus' feet).<sup>87</sup> From this perspective, the body was as crucial to

86. P. Pokorny, "From a Puppy to The Child: Some Problems of Contemporary Biblical Exegesis Demonstrated from Mark 7:24-30/Matt 15:21-8", *New Testament Studies* 41 (1995) 337.

87. A-J. Levine, "Matthew's Advice to a Divided Readership", in D. E. Aune (ed.), *The Gospel of Matthew in Current Study* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2001) 36. M. B. O'Donnell distinguishes *proskuneō* (as in Matt 15:25) and *prospiptō* (as in Mark 7:25), suggesting that the latter does not indicate full submissiveness: "Translation and the Exegetical Process, Using Mark 5.1-10, 'The Binding of the Strong Man' as a Test Case", in S. E. Porter and R. E. Hess (eds.), *Translating the Bible: Problems and Prospects* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999) 176.

the flow of the story through to the final verse, as the words of dialogue. The exercise of reason was dependent upon the use, positioning and exercise of a somatic presence. Here, critical to the efforts to destabilise the domination of word, were debates and discussion with my partner Robyn as she, in her thesis on a medieval saint's life,<sup>88</sup> exposed the male use of writing to impale women into submission and self-contempt.

More particularly, I realised that the preoccupation with words had actually neglected the somatically-dependent performantial aspects of verbal dialogue. There was a careful crafting of the words of both Jesus and the woman that relied on the irrational, or psychagogic, elements of language to create a response. The abusive rejection of the woman and her claim is received in the pre-conceptual, irrational experience<sup>89</sup> of the iambic metre and the harsh verbal constructions imbuing the proverb foundation of Jesus' saying.<sup>90</sup>

Just as surely, the woman weaves a brilliantly subtle response, far more sophisticated than that of Jesus, and reliant for its force on an oral delivery. It takes the harshness of Jesus and tones it into the mellifluous harmonies of long, smooth vowels and it combines a series of different rhythms – all an exemplary use of euphonics that can be applied to words to deliver something far beyond and preparatory to the mere semantics.<sup>91</sup>

### Recovering the Body

This accent on the dynamics of the story beyond the delivery of content caused a reassessment of the last verse of the story, a verse long forgotten in commentators' dismissal of its significance as simply a superfluous proof of the successful outcome of a miracle. The emphasis of the verse rests on discovery (*heuren* v.30) but traditional translations and interpretations had diminished the force of the miracle and the culmination of the woman's quest.<sup>92</sup> Various rendered as "lying/ thrown on the bed", the end of the story was anti-climactic. After all, the phrase was identical in this interpretation, to the state of the paralysed man *prior* to his healing, when he was carried and lowered to Jesus

88. R. Cadwallader, *The Virgin, The Dragon and the Theorist: Readings in the Thirteenth Century Sainte Marherete* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen, 2009).

89. J. Russo, "The Poetics of the Ancient Greek Proverb", *Journal of Folklore Research* 20 (1983) 124; J. Walker, *Rhetoric and Poetics in Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 128.

90. The detailed analysis will be found in Cadwallader, *Beyond the Word of a Woman*, chapter 3.

91. See Cadwallader, *Beyond the Word of a Woman*, chapter 5 for the details.

92. The dominance of the verbal exchange even in the frame of a quest story can be seen in R. C. Tannehill, "Varieties of Synoptic Pronouncement Stories", *Semeia* 20 (1981) 107.

“lying on his bed” (Matt 9:2). It was also reminiscent of the judgement on Jezebel in Revelation 2:22 who was to be “thrown on a bed”.

The interpretation has been built on a perfect passive participle in v.30. Here, grammatico-linguistic analysis came to serve rather than to suppress the retrieval. What had never been considered was that the participle could be tagged as a middle perfect participle (an identical form to the passive). On this grammatically supportable reading the child had engineered an action herself rather than being the continued site of contest (presumably by the departing demon, as many suggest). The word often translated “bed” can as readily be translated “couch”. This is the *klinê* of the triclinium, the arrangement of the dining room where food was eaten; it is the *couch* of one reading of Mark 7:4 where the accent lies on food, cleanliness and eating.<sup>93</sup> Hence, an alternate translation, equally sustainable grammatically and more appropriate as the confirmatory ending of a miracle story, is that the daughter was “reclined on the couch”.

The significance of this reading is that it shifts the accent on food to a new level, but *without* words, even if the narrator’s window on the scene must provide a verbal frame. The mother had won liberation for her daughter by a carefully crafted saying that posited a spatial access to food *beneath* the table. The daughter has now reclined on the couch – the stock phrase of being *at* the table for dining. Her body has become the silent means of communication and assertion about the gospel in a new day and a new place, just as surely as a wordless, howling three year old addressed a congregation more clearly than a dozen debates, compelling them to become the people that the word could only point towards.<sup>94</sup>

Hence, the story is not merely about the word of a woman but moves beyond the word of a woman to the self-possessed body of a child. Behind this remarkable story, therefore, was not just a mother but also a daughter: two Syrophoenician women who found their primary relationship not with the man Jesus but with each other. The quest of the mother was fulfilled in the finding of her daughter.<sup>95</sup> This was not a quest that demanded the securing of the self through confession (whether of sin or of the pre-eminence of Jesus), such as to abdicate power to a male-prescribed normalcy.<sup>96</sup> The liberation won by the

93. J. G. Crossley, “Halakah and Mark 7.4 ‘...and beds’”, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 25.4 (2003) 433-47. Crossley argues that this is the better reading.

94. See Rancière, *The Flesh of Words*, 4-5.

95. Jean-François Baudoz noted that in every other case in Mark’s Gospel, the verb *heuriskô* is tied to Jesus: *Les Miettes de la Table: Études synoptique et socio-religieuse de Mt 15, 21-28 et de Mc 7, 24-30* (Paris: J. Gabalda et Cie, 1995) 337.

96. See the critique of confession in J. Tambling, *Confession: Sexuality, Sin, the Subject* (Manchester, New York: Manchester University Press, 1990).

somatic action and/in oral performance of the mother was now extended, through a somatic initiative by the daughter beyond the initial breakthrough. Both Jesus and Mark the evangelist are withdrawn from mastery over the further life of these women.

So for whom did I write? In the end, it was for my three daughters. The gospel is theirs to shape and extend according to the fledgling liberation that their mother especially has determinedly secured for them. The daughter expands the liberation and so authenticates the woman's body and its courageous movement, not merely her brave words to a man. Moreover, if some of the deflection from the *primacy* of the word (over body) can be credited to the evangelist, then he has erased his own text as being sufficient for the life of the body (corporate and singular). His word and the words within that word are not enough. But in so doing, reflexively, he has drawn attention to the text itself *as a body* both in performance and in material production. The artefactuality of the text is as important as the text itself in a testimony through its own material presence (as book, scroll, inscription, textile, mosaic, painting) that this is precisely what the text hungers for, struggles to exceed itself for. The text hungers for embodiment (not merely oral performance where the body, whilst affirmed, is authenticated as a servant), sheer physical existence.

Moreover, this is so because of, perhaps underscored by, an embodiment that occurs *beyond* the text's parameters. For the text to realise this ambition, it must lose its descriptive and prescriptive textuality over the body; it must give up its life in order that *life* might come. In this sense, Levinas' "it is not finished" hangs over every text, just as it hangs over every memory that the text seeks to (re-)present.<sup>97</sup> For any autobiographical critical exercise this is just as well. The danger of the search for self through a work of textuality is that the body might actually be erased in the promethean effort of verbal examination – precisely what the Syrophenician women challenged. Life, the life of these women, was to be lived in meaningful relationship – in food, in *their* place, in movement, in discovery, in freedom – far beyond the words of exchange with Jesus and beyond the word that represented them.

The irony for me was not lost on my examiners. There was a multitudinous proliferation of words and footnotes thrown into the thesis, many of which survive into a severely trimmed book. For a work designed to undermine logocentricity and reassert the importance of somatic reality, the word remained volubly strong. The effort to totalise

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97. Compare E. Donato, *The Script of Decadence* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 191-207 and E. Blondel, *Nietzsche: The Body and Culture*, translated by S. Hand (London: Athlone Press, 1991) 201-238.

and master through words (and many of them) had proved as elusive and fallacious as the effort to capture the self as an autonomous, secure identity.<sup>98</sup> Both had faltered at the resistant and liberating dynamism of the body. Elizabeth Grosz recognised, that “What is mapped onto the body is not unaffected by the body onto which it is projected.”<sup>99</sup> The body moves, changes and interacts with other bodies, all of which impact upon the word (sometimes silencing or escaping it, even experiencing and expressing what the word cannot). But more than that, the body provides a dynamic enfleshment of the word, without which the word remains lifeless, even mortifying.

The continual prompts and challenges that delivered adult education worksheets, conference papers, and eventually thesis, articles and book had come from other selves, somatic agencies without whom my journey with the Syrophoenician women could not have occurred. But equally, no totalisation or mastery of these other selves can occur, including the Syrophoenicians themselves. Their own memories of any interaction may well construct the interrelationships quite differently. The self, the auto-biography of an identity, had proved as unstable and as socially dependent as the theorists had said. Moreover, the constant recourse to the garden, to music and to delights for the body, lingers in the memory reminding me that without them, no textual interpretation would have found even a contingent expression. The judgement and the release from textual bondage finally exacted a veiled reference to the family dog, Meg. I fictionalised her in a corner chewing on a fossil, the bones of my work, while I left my desk.

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98. See P. de Man, “Autobiography as De-facement”, *Modern Language Notes* 94 (1979) 921.

99. E. Grosz, “Inscriptions and Body-Maps: Representations and the Corporeal”, in T. Threadgold and A. Cranny-Francis (eds.), *Feminine, Masculine and Representation* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1990) 74.