

A DOG UNDER THE TABLE AT THE MESSIANIC BANQUET: A STUDY OF MARK 7:24-30

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Mark 7:24-30 records an encounter between Jesus and a Syrophenician woman. Nearly all commentators of this passage note the remarkable faith of this woman and underscore Jesus' breaking down of barriers between Jews and Gentiles.¹ Few, however, notice that the story follows one of the Gospel of Mark's leading motifs, the Messianic banquet.² The purpose of this article is to propose that Mark 7:24-30 is enriched when the Messianic banquet motif is applied.

The OT background that the Gospel of Mark draws upon for the Messianic banquet motif is illustrated most clearly in Isa 25:6-9 (NIV):

On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines. On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth. The LORD has spoken. In that day they will say, “Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us. This is the LORD, we trusted in him; let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation.”

This promise is made in response to God's victory over Israel's enemies; particularly here referring to the destruction of Tyre (Isa 23:1-18).

By way of contrast, however, the partakers of the Messianic banquet, as later shown in Isa 55:1-5, include

the righteous remnant within Israel along with the righteous of other nations. The banquet of these righteous ones represents the promised future prosperity of the messianic reign after Yahweh defeats the enemies of Israel. This future time of prosperity is extended to the righteous followers

¹See, e.g., Robert A. Guelich, *Mark 1–8:26*, WBC, 34A (Dallas: Word Books, 1989), 387; Canon R. A. Cole, *The Gospel According to Mark: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity, 1989), 188-189; PHEME PERKINS, *The Gospel of Mark*, NIB, 8 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 610; David E. Garland, *The NIV Application Commentary: Mark* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 289; Adela Y. Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007), 367.

²R. T. France noticed that “Bread here is an image for the blessings of the Messiah's ministry to his own people and, following on from this incident, among the Gentiles” (*The Gospel of Mark*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 296; R. Pesch argues that together with the two feeding stories, the present story depicts the banquet of salvation for Gentiles as well as Jews (*Das Markusevangelium* [Freiburg: Herder, 1977], 1:391).

of Yahweh from all the nations who are invited to participate alongside restored Israel in these blessings.³

During the Second Temple period, however, the Messianic banquet promised in Isaiah becomes exclusively reserved for the nation of Israel alone. The Gentiles were said to be “nothing,” as in 4 Esd 6:55-59: “O Lord, because you have said that it was for us that you created this world. As for the other nations which have descended from Adam, you have said that they are nothing, and that they are like spittle, and you have compared their abundance to a drop from a bucket.”⁴ Thus the future participation of other nations in the blessings of the Messianic age does not appear to be assured. According to Second Temple Jewish mentality, all Gentiles belong in the same category as the people of Tyre in Isaiah 23, who not only have no share in the Messianic banquet, but who will also be destroyed so that Israel as a nation can be vindicated.

In the Gospel of Mark, the Messianic banquet theme begins with the feeding of the five thousand in Mark 6:30-32⁵ and ends with the feeding of the four thousand in Mark 8:1-10. Between these passages are three stories concerning the partakers of the Messianic banquet: Jesus eats, or feasts, with his disciples (Mark 7:1-23); Jesus’ encounter with the Syrophenician woman (Mark 7:24-30); and Jesus’ healing of a deaf man (Mark 7:31-37).

In Mark 7:1-23, Jesus, the Messiah, eats with his disciples. However, the religious elite, the Pharisees and Scribes, who have made participating in the Messianic banquet to be their lifelong goal, appear to be totally unaware of the significance of Jesus’ actions. Instead of participating, they criticize Jesus and miss out on the banquet.

In Mark 7:24-30 and 31-37, however, the responses of the participants are significantly different. The Pharisees and Scribes, commonly regarded as the most holy among God’s holy people, were considered to be exemplars of those who have a place at the Messianic banquet and who have a share in the life to come.⁶ However, Jesus condemns them as unclean due to their sin-defiled hearts (Mark 7:20-23). The Gentile woman and the deaf man stand in stark contrast to these holy ones. They are among those condemned by the Pharisees and Scribes as unclean (*m. Toh.* 7.8), who by their very presence in a Jewish house make it ceremonially unclean (*m. Toh.* 7:6). According to the Pharisees and Scribes, they have no chance of attending the Messianic banquet. Nevertheless, it is these unclean Gentiles who participate in the

³Daniel S. Steffen, “The Messianic Banquet and the Eschatology of Matthew” (www.bible.org/page.asp?page_id=581, April 1, 2006).

⁴The texts quoted from Jewish apocalyptic writings in this paper are all taken from James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, Volume 1: Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments* (New York: Doubleday, 1983).

⁵Jesus’ walk on the sea can be considered to be a climax of the feeding of the five thousand.

⁶See the discussions of the rabbis in *m. Sanh.* 10.

Messianic banquet and who receive the Messianic blessings because of their faith in Jesus.

The location of the story of the Syrophenician woman is worth pondering. Could it be that Jesus intended to encounter this woman in this particular location of Tyre for the purpose of demonstrating that the Messianic blessings are not for the Jews alone, but for all people who believe in him? Could it be that he is drawing a parallel between the Messianic banquet of Isaiah 25 and the destruction of Tyre in Isaiah 23? The ancient land of Tyre, hostile to the people of Israel, becomes a land of blessings. This is the ultimate manifestation of the inclusiveness of the Messianic banquet. If Tyre could enjoy the blessings, couldn't anyone? Jesus' answer is, Yes.

This point becomes clearer when considering the underlying submotifs of the story of the Syrophenician woman. In the story, there are two submotifs, each containing two contrasting metaphorical expressions: the children and dogs, and the bread and crumbs. The woman apparently understands Jesus' metaphors, giving a response to him that appears to contradict Jesus' meaning. The bread-and-crums metaphors represent the Messianic blessings. Jesus' words, "First [πρῶτον] let the children eat all they want," acknowledges the fact that Israel is God's chosen nation and the blessings of the Kingdom are first of all for the Jewish people. The reference to dogs is a Jewish metaphor for the Gentiles. In the *Mishnah*, the Gentiles are often mentioned together with dogs in relation to clean and unclean matters.⁷ That the Jews viewed Gentiles in this manner was probably well known, as indicated by the woman's response to Jesus' remarks.

As noted, Mark places the story of the Syrophenician woman between the two miraculous feeding stories of Mark 6:30-32 and 8:1-10. In these stories, Jesus miraculously feeds fish and bread to thousands of people. However, the location of the two stories is different. The feeding of the five thousand takes place in a region populated by Jews. His statement to the Syrophenician woman correlates with this story, "First let the children eat all they want." However, the feeding of the four thousand takes place in the region of Decapolis, a Gentile-populated land, illustrating the woman's response, "Even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Thus the two miraculous stories of Jesus' provision of food are acted out in the story of the Syrophenician woman, illustrating the bounty provided by the Messianic King for both the children of Abraham and the Gentiles.

The woman's confident response to Jesus is puzzling. Why is she not discouraged by Jesus' apparently typical Jewish response to her request? Wasn't Jesus attempting to purposely insult her by his reference to dogs? Or was he showing that there are loopholes in apparently insulting language that provide opportunities even for the despised Gentiles?

There is an important clue to be found in Jesus' terminology. The Greek word for dog is κύων. However, the term that Jesus uses is the diminutive κυνάρια, meaning "little dog." The use of this form appears nowhere else in the LXX or NT writings, with the exception of the same story in Matthew

⁷See, e.g., *m. Ned.* 4:3, *m. Bekh.* 5.6, and *m. Toh.* 8:6.

15. The little dogs that Jesus refers to are not semiwild, homeless animals, but household pets.⁸ The affections and attachment shown by the ancient Syrophenicians to their household pets such as small dogs has been revealed to the surprise of modern archaeologists upon the excavation of a large dog cemetery at the site of ancient Ashkelon, a former Syrophenician city.⁹ About 60 to 70 percent of the 700 dogs buried there were small dogs, all proven to have died of natural deaths. Archaeologists called these pets the “Phoenician’s best friend[s].”¹⁰ One archaeologist comments on the burial of these dogs that “The proper burial of what in some cases were probably dog fetuses reflects an intense relationship between dogs and humans.”¹¹ So, by referring to them, Jesus presents a common household scene that would have been familiar to the woman. Perhaps the word conjures up in her mind the scene of her young daughter lying sick, with her beloved pet beside her. Or perhaps she remembers the animal receiving a treat from her daughter’s hand or its cleaning up the crumbs under the table. Such a creature would surely have become a member of the household, protected and cared for by the entire family.

Thus Jesus’ use of *κυνάρια* reveals his tender feelings, betraying his love for this Gentile woman. This single word is saturated with the gospel message to the Gentiles, announcing that they already belong to the household of God and are eligible to receive the Messianic blessings even though they are not considered to be first in the Kingdom by the Jews. Jesus’ words are an announcement to the woman to expect great wonders from him for her daughter.

The woman accepts this blessing from Jesus without further pleading, calling him “Lord.”¹² She understands his message. Perhaps the absence

⁸There are regulations in the Babylonian Talmud concerning the breeding of dogs, indicating that this practice was popular among the Jews (see, e.g., *b. Talmud Baba Kamma* 79b, 80a, 80b, 83a).

⁹For details of the report see Lawrence E. Stager, “Why Were Hundreds of Dogs Buried at Ashkelon?” *BR4* 17 (1991): 27-42. The same article also mentions that in classical Greek society dogs were greatly appreciated as household pets, with moving epitaphs written especially for them. The author gives one example: “The stone tells that it [the grave] contains here the white Milesian dog, Eumelos’ faithful guardian. They called him ‘Bull’ while he still lived, but now the silent paths of night possess his voice” (*ibid.*, 38).

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 33.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 38.

¹²The word *κύριος* could simply mean a form of address showing respect. However, it is also used as a designation and personal title for God (Matt 1:20) and Jesus Christ (John 20:18) in much the same way as the Hebrew name “Adonai” replaces the tetragrammaton YHWH in the public reading of the Scriptures (*Friberg Lexicon*, s.v., “κύριος,” [BibleWorks 5.0]). Thus, based on the context of the story, it is appropriate to consider the woman’s use of the word “Lord” in the sense of “Adonai,” making it a faith statement and public confession of her belief in Jesus as the Messiah. See also Robert H. Stein, *Mark*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament

of the word “Lord” from the beginning of this Markan story is deliberate, intentionally left out until the crucial moment to demonstrate the woman’s progression in faith. She sees Jesus’ use of κυρία, combined with πρώτου, to be revolutionary and extraordinary. Even a dog can be beloved. Actually, some scholars even suspect her answer to Jesus was her conscious repetition of what may have been a common Hellenic maxim:¹³ “dogs will clean up every scrap of what diners leave, a model of scavenging.”¹⁴ The picture of a household dog cleaning up the scraps under the table brings her hope that she too can be a partaker in the Messianic blessings. The faithfulness of God in fulfilling his covenant with Abraham (Gen 12: 1-3) to pour out Messianic blessings to all nations is demonstrated by Jesus’ words. Thus the woman could reply eagerly with an open confession of Jesus as Lord, “Yes, Lord, but even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”

(Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 353; see also Guelich, 388.

¹³See J. Duncan M. Derrett, “Law in the New Testament: The Syro-Phoenician Woman and the Centurion of Capernaum,” *NT* 15 (1973): 172; David Smith, “Our Lord’s Saying to the Syro-Phoenician Woman,” *ExpTim* 12 (1901): 320; Johannes Munck, *Paulus und die Heilsgeschichte* (Aarhus: Universitetsforlaget, 1954), 257, cited in Derrett, 172, n. 5.

¹⁴For the Hellenic evidence, see Philostratus, *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, trans. Christopher P. Jones, LCL (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 1:19, cited in Derrett, 172 n. 6.