

FOLLOWING THE CRUMBS: REVISITING THE AUTHENTICITY OF JESUS'S ENCOUNTER WITH THE SYROPHOENICIAN WOMAN

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Abstract: *Scholars have raised doubts concerning the authenticity of Mark's account of Jesus's encounter with the Syrophoenician woman. Gerd Theissen presents a formidable argument in favor of the story's historical core in light of the historical context of the encounter, a context many scholars have tended to accept. However, there have been significant advances in Galilee studies since the publication of his survey nearly thirty years ago, thus prompting a reevaluation of the historical, social, and economic relations between Upper Galilee and Tyre. Additionally, an analysis of the historical background embodies only one aspect of an assessment of a Gospel narrative's authenticity. In order to establish the story's essential historicity, the present study will offer a holistic analysis of Mark 7:24–30, first considering the historical background of the narrative, then discussing Jesus's aphorism in Mark 7:27, and finally reviewing the exorcism attributed to Jesus. For this analysis, different criteria of authenticity will be employed to assess the story. This study concludes that when the encounter is assessed holistically, the degree of probability for its authenticity increases.*

Key words: *historical Jesus, Syrophoenician woman, Galilee, Tyre, Theissen, criteria of authenticity*

The Markan Jesus is portrayed as intentionally crossing “social, cultural, ethnic, and religious boundaries to demonstrate his compassion for all in need of a physician.”¹ Jesus’s encounter with the Syrophoenician woman, reported in Mark 7:24–30 and Matthew 15:21–28, is one of the main examples of such an attitude. Correspondingly, scholars have raised doubts concerning the authenticity of the narrative because of various features within it, such as Jesus venturing into Gentile territory (Mark 7:24; Matt 15:21), Jesus initially refusing to attend to the woman and employing harsh language to address her (Mark 7:27; Matt 15:24–26), and the fact that this story constitutes the only recorded case of an exorcism from a distance in

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¹ Kelly R. Iverson, “Jubilees and Mark 7:24–37: Crossing Ethnic Boundaries,” in *Reading Mark in Context: Jesus and Second Temple Judaism*, ed. Ben C. Blackwell, John Goodrich, and Jason Maston (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 116. See also Robert A. Guelich, *Mark 1–8:26*, WBC 34A (Dallas: Word Books, 1989), 389; Donald English, *The Message of Mark: The Mystery of Faith*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), 149–50; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 295; Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 175–76; Rodney L. Cooper, *Mark*, HNTC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005), 120; Adela Y. Collins, *Mark: A Commentary*, Hermenia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 365.

the Gospels (Mark 7:29–30; Matt 15:28).² As such, scholars are broadly divided into three groups concerning the historicity of the pericope: those who consider it to be historical,³ those who find it to have at least a historical core,⁴ and those who deny that the story as a whole can be traced back to the historical Jesus.⁵ While “the majority of critics have accepted this journey as historical,”⁶ in contrast, John P. Meier has recently concluded that “the story of the Syrophenician woman is so shot through with Christian missionary theology and concerns that creation by first-generation Christians is the more likely conclusion,” thus affirming that “it becomes difficult to maintain that this story’s core is historical.”⁷ Conversely, Gerd

² Cf. discussion in Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 27 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 466.

³ W. D. Davies and Dale E. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew: Introduction and Commentary on Matthew I–VII*, 3 vols., ICC (London: T&T Clark, 1991), 2:544; Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 468; Stanley E. Porter, *The Criteria for Authenticity in Historical-Jesus Research: Previous Discussion and New Proposals*, JSNTSup 191 (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 162; John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 633; Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 415.

⁴ For a survey of form critical suggestions, see Guelich, *Mark 1–8:26*, 382–83. René Latourelle, for example, holds that “the original nucleus must have contained the following elements: ‘A pagan woman, hearing people speak of Jesus, hastens to him, falls at his feet, and asks him to cure her sick daughter. Jesus tells her that it is not fair to take the children’s bread and give it to the little dogs. The woman persists: Do not the little dogs share the crumbs that fall from the children’s table? Jesus marvels at the woman’s faith and declares that her child is cured.’” He concludes: “The structure of the story as thus reconstructed is solid.” René Latourelle, *The Miracles of Jesus and the Theology of Miracles* (New York: Paulist, 1988), 172–73. Some authors might more readily accept Jesus’s aphorism in Mark 7:27 (cf. Matt 15:26) as original but maintain the possibility that the miracle story was invented later by Mark. Part of the issue, as Gerd Theissen observes, is that “although the sayings and narrative materials are part of the same stream of synoptic tradition, we must expect to find that they were transmitted under differing conditions. For Jesus sayings, Jesus is supposed to be the author. But the fact is that stories about Jesus are always composed by someone else. Not one of them can claim Jesus as its author.” Gerd Theissen, *The Gospels in Context: Social and Political History in the Synoptic Tradition*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (New York: T&T Clark, 1992), 60.

⁵ As Walter Bundy notes, “Other critics, however, reject the journey to the north as historical and regard it as pure phantasy.” Walter E. Bundy, *Jesus and the First Three Gospels: An Introduction to the Synoptic Tradition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955), 279. See, e.g., W. Marxsen, *Der Evangelist Markus: Studien zur Redaktionsgeschichte des Evangeliums*, FRLANT 49 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1956), 36–61; Eduard Meyer, *Ursprung und Anfänge des Christentums*, 3 vols. (Stuttgart: J. G. Cotta, 1962); T. A. Burkill, “The Syrophenician Woman: The Congruence of Mark 7:24–31,” *ZNW* 57.1–2 (1966): 23–37; William Loader, “Challenged at the Boundaries: A Conservative Jesus in Mark’s Tradition,” *JSNT* 19.63 (1997): 51; Rudolf Pesch, *Das Markusevangelium*, HThKNT 2 (Freiburg: Herder, 2000), 1:390; M. E. Boring, *Mark: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 206–7.

⁶ Bundy, *Jesus and the First Three Gospels*, 278.

⁷ John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 2: *Mentor, Message, and Miracles*, AYBRL (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 660–61. Cf. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 3, *Companions and Competitors*, AYBRL (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 543. Such arguments are often based on the criterion of dissimilarity, according to which “individual units of tradition were shaped during transmission by the church, so that any Gospel tradition that cohered with church tradition was suspect as to authenticity.” Stanley E. Porter, “Criteria for Authenticity,” *DJG* 154. For discussions on this criterion, see Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 1: *The Roots of the Problem and the Person*, AYBRL (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 171–73; Porter, *The Criteria for Authenticity*, 70–76; Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009), 219.

Theissen has presented a formidable argument that “the story has a historical core,” concluding that:

The story is probably Palestinian in origin. It presupposes an original narrator and audience who are acquainted with the concrete local and social situation in the border regions of Tyre and Galilee. As a result, it now appears more difficult to trace the origins of the story exclusively to early Christian debates about the legitimacy of the gentile mission.⁸

Positions such as those taken by Meier and Theissen thus find significant instances of redactional intrusion into the text that fail to represent faithfully the actions and sayings of the historical Jesus.

Regardless of whether or not scholars affirm the authenticity of the account, they have nevertheless tended to accept Theissen’s portrayal of the historical context of the encounter.⁹ This historical context has been undeniably valuable in affirming the plausibility and antiquity of Jesus’s encounter with the Syrophenician woman. However, it may also be noted that since the publication of his survey nearly thirty years ago, significant advances have been made in uncovering the “historical Galilee.”¹⁰ These advances have implications for understanding the historical, social, and economic relations between Upper Galilee and Tyre where the encounter is said to have taken place, as well as implications for the historical Jesus more broadly. However, an analysis of the historical background embodies only one aspect of an assessment of a Gospel narrative’s authenticity. In order to establish the story’s essential historicity, the present study will offer a holistic analysis of Mark 7:24–30,¹¹ first considering the historical background of the narrative, then discuss-

⁸ Theissen, *The Gospels in Context*, 79; Theissen, “Lokal- und Sozialkolorit in der Geschichte von der syrophönischen Frau (Mk 7:24–30),” *ZNW* 75.3–4 (1984): 202–25.

⁹ E.g., Guelich, *Mark 1–8:26*, 381; Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 462–64; Ulrich Luz, *Matthew: A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 338; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 591; Boring, *Mark*, 209; R. A. Culpepper, *Mark*, SHBC (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007), 238–40; Collins, *Mark*, 365–67; Keener, *Matthew*, 415; Kim H. Tan, *Mark: A New Covenant Commentary*, NCCS (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015), 96–97; Hisako Kinukawa, “The Island of Tyre: The Exploitation of Peasants in the Regions of Tyre and Galilee,” in *Islands, Islanders, and the Bible: RumInations*, ed. Jione Havea, Margaret Aymer, and Steed Vernyl Davidson, SemeiaSt 77 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), 135–45; Emily J. Thomassen, “Jesus’ Journey into Gentile Territories,” in *Lexham Geographic Commentary on the Gospels*, ed. Barry J. Beitzel and Kristopher A. Lyle (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2017), 250; Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Mark: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC 2 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2017), 172–73.

¹⁰ Reflecting on developments in Galilee studies in recent years, Seán Freyne wrote: “More than once I have been tempted to make the fairly obvious comment that the search for the historical Galilee is about to replace the quest for the historical Jesus.” Seán Freyne, “Galilean Studies: Old Issues and New Questions,” in *Religion, Ethnicity, and Identity in Ancient Galilee: A Region in Transition*, ed. Jürgen Zangenberg, Harold W. Attridge, and Dale B. Martin, WUNT 210 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 13.

¹¹ This study will focus on the Markan version of the miracle story. The Matthean account differs in some details from Mark. In Matthew, for example, Jesus “withdraws” (*ἀνεχώρησεν*) to the “districts” (*τὰ μέρη*) of Tyre and Sidon, while in Mark he goes to the “region” (*τὰ ὄρια*) of Tyre. Matthew identifies the woman as a “Canaanite” (*Χανααίτις*; 15:22) in place of Mark’s “Greek, a Syrophenician by birth” (*Ἑλληνίς, Συροφονίαισσα τῷ γένει*; 7:26). Significantly, Matthew expands the interaction between Jesus and the woman by including the disciples’ request for Jesus to send her away (15:22b–25) and Jesus’s

ing Jesus's aphorism in Mark 7:27, and finally reviewing the exorcism attributed to Jesus.¹² For this analysis, a "convergence of different criteria" of authenticity will be employed to assess the elements of the story.¹³

HISTORICAL SETTING

An assessment of the socio-economic, political, and cultural setting of the border between Galilee and Tyre is integral to verifying the essential historicity of Mark 7:24–30. Methodologically, the criterion of historical plausibility and its corollary, the criterion of Palestinian environment, have been particularly helpful in mapping the authenticity of Jesus's encounter with the Syrophenician woman.¹⁴ The criterion of historical plausibility posits that "what Jesus has done and said must be consonant with Judaism of the first half of the first century in Galilee" and at the same time it "must be recognizable as those actions and words of an individual reflecting the Judaism of that time."¹⁵ Likewise, the criterion of Palestinian environment "affirms that sayings of Jesus that reflect concrete customs, beliefs, judicial procedures, commercial and agricultural practices, or social and political conditions in 1st-century Palestine have a good chance of being authentic."¹⁶ While Meier has relegated this criterion to secondary caliber,¹⁷ others have recognized the

saying that he "was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (v. 24; cf. 10:6). Though it is uncharacteristic of Matthew to expand Mark's healing stories, most scholars still consider Matthew's account to be a development of the Markan narrative, and his expansions a reflection of his theology. Matthew often displays an "interest in depicting gentiles as subservient to Jews" and portrays Jesus as sent primarily to Israel, thus accounting for some of the differences in Matthew's redaction; see Amanda Witmer, *Jesus, the Galilean Exorcist: His Exorcisms in Social and Political Context*, LNTS 459 (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012), 197–98. For comparisons of the Matthean and Markan accounts, see Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 73, 542–43; Latourelle, *The Miracles of Jesus*, 169–72; Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, WBC 33B (Dallas: Word, 1993), 439; Luz, *Matthew*, 337; France, *Matthew*, 592. On possible reasons for Luke's omitting the account, see Latourelle, *The Miracles of Jesus*, 173; Iverson, "Gentiles," *DJG* 305; Witmer, *Galilean Exorcist*, 191.

¹² Such a holistic analysis coheres with the main gains and objectives of the third quest for the historical Jesus: "(a) understanding the ethnically, religiously, and socially Jewish contexts of the historical Jesus; (b) recognizing Jesus' aims and mission; (c) approximating Jesus' self-understanding; (d) accounting for the specific nature of his death; and (e) interpreting the miracle stories, especially the resurrection." Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels*, 218.

¹³ Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 1:175. According to Meier, it is such a convergence of criteria that functions as "the best indicator of historicity" (175), a convergence that "is more an art than science, requiring sensitivity to the individual case rather than mechanical implementation" (184).

¹⁴ The criterion of historical plausibility is a fairly recent reworking of and reaction against the criterion of double dissimilarity, which seeks a minimalist Jesus who is unique in both his relation to Judaism and early Christianity. See, e.g., Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 1:171; Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels*, 219; Porter, "Criteria for Authenticity," 154.

¹⁵ Porter, *The Criteria for Authenticity*, 120–21; Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels*, 220–21; Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide*, trans. John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 116–18.

¹⁶ Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 1:180.

¹⁷ Meier's main critique is that "the Palestine inhabited by Christian Jews in A.D. 33 was not all that different from the Palestine inhabited by Jesus in A.D. 29." Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 1:180. However, if placed within the context of the earliest memories of Jesus and his movement, Meier's critique loses force. Still, the criterion of Palestinian environment should be understood in conjunction with the crite-

primary importance of understanding Jesus as “a person of his times,” and that when “features unique to Palestinian culture or environment” are identified, one may in fact be “in touch with tradition at least as old as early Palestinian Jewish Christianity, perhaps dating back to Jesus himself.”¹⁸ Theissen’s work in applying this criterion to the story at hand is noteworthy, demonstrating the story’s continuity with the socio-economic, political, and cultural setting of Galilee and Tyre. At the same time, this portrait can be refined by considering recent developments in Galilee studies.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTEXT

The socio-economic and geographic ties between Galilee and Tyre make Jesus’s journey to the region of Tyre and his encounter with a Syrophoenician woman plausible. Geographically, Upper Galilee is more “rugged” than Lower Galilee and is characterized by a “maze of valleys, gorges, basins, ridges and isolated peaks.”¹⁹ The land is fertile and bountiful for agriculture, yet because of its landscape it remained a rural region, “impervious to the attractions of urbanization even when official Roman policy was tending in that direction.”²⁰ Recent archaeological work has shown that there was a significant settlement wave in the region which was likely initiated during the Hasmonean period and which continued during the reign of Herod the Great and Herod Antipas.²¹ During this period, “the size of the settled area doubled” and “the number of sites reached its height.”²² These settlements were largely unfortified, especially in the agricultural areas, and were culturally Jewish.²³ These findings corroborate the view that on the borderland between Tyre and Galilee, an area lacking meaningful natural border markers, “there must have been Jewish villages, places that were still deeply rooted in the native Jewish culture.”²⁴ In this area, therefore, it is plausible that “both in the rural hinterland of Tyre and in the territory of the Decapolis, Jesus could find Jews living next to Syrians and Phoenicians.”²⁵

tion of historical plausibility, drawing together “in a creative tension a contextually plausible portrait of Jesus that is also unique against his historical backdrop.” Porter, “Criteria for Authenticity,” 158. While the application of this method remains somewhat subjective, it balances out Meier’s critique in that Jesus is still seen as an individual. After all, as Porter has pointed out, these criteria are not unique; rather, they reflect “a shift in emphasis rather than a genuine shift in method.” Porter, *The Criteria for Authenticity*, 121.

¹⁸ Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels*, 219–20.

¹⁹ Seán Freyne, *Galilee from Alexander the Great to Hadrian, 323 B.C.E. to 135 C.E.: A Study of Second Temple Judaism* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 12–13.

²⁰ Freyne, *Galilee from Alexander the Great to Hadrian*, 13.

²¹ Uzi Leibner, *Settlement and History in Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine Galilee*, TSAJ 127 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 333.

²² Leibner, *Settlement and History*, 333.

²³ Leibner, *Settlement and History*, 332–37.

²⁴ Theissen, *The Gospels in Context*, 67; Seán Freyne, *Jesus, a Jewish Galilean: A New Reading of the Jesus-Story* (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 54.

²⁵ Theissen, *The Gospels in Context*, 68.

Economically, Tyre depended on importation of agricultural goods since “its rural territory was limited by natural factors,” even though it was a wealthy city.²⁶ Many ancient sources report this Tyrian dependency on importation of wheat, wine, and oil, even from OT times, much of which was purchased from the fertile upper region of Galilee (cf. 1 Kgs 5:11; Ezek 27:17; Josephus, *A.J.* 8.54, 141; 14.206; *Vita* 71, 119). Significantly, the NT itself testifies to tense relations between Galilee and Tyre due to economic interactions: “Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon, and they came to him with one accord ... they asked for peace, because their country depended on the king’s country for food” (Acts 12:20).²⁷ Later rabbinic sources include discussions on tithing on grain caravans going to Tyre (y. Demai 1.3).²⁸ Intense financial exchanges between Galilee and Tyre are further evinced by the number of Tyrian coins found in northern Galilee,²⁹ although the large presence of these coins could simply be due to the mass production of Tyrian money.³⁰ It could be that, in Jesus’s reply to the woman, “let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs” (Mark 7:27), the economic interactions between Tyre and Galilee are implied.³¹

While it has been posited that the economic disparity between the rural Galilean population and the urban cities in the region of Galilee, Tyre, and Sidon would have contributed to strained relations between these two groups,³² recent archaeological and social studies in Galilee have led to a reevaluation of the economic situation of the province.³³ Now, the suggestion that even the unfortified, largely agri-

²⁶ Theissen, *The Gospels in Context*, 73. Pliny reports that “the entire renown of Tyre now consists in a shell-fish and a purple dye,” the production of which contributed to its wealth (*Nat.* 5.17.76 [Rackham]). He also refers to “Tyrian purple” several times (cf. *Nat.* 9.62.38, 9.65.41, 21.22.8). Similarly, Strabo writes that “the Phoenicians in general have been superior to all peoples of all times, and by means of their dye-houses for purple; for the Tyrian purple has proved itself by far the most beautiful of all ... it makes the city rich through the superior skill of its inhabitants” (*Geogr.* 16.2.23 [Jones]).

²⁷ All Bible quotations are taken from the ESV unless otherwise noted.

²⁸ See also Seán Freyne, *Texts, Contexts and Cultures: Essays on Biblical Topics* (Dublin: Veritas, 2003), 138; Freyne, *Galilee from Alexander the Great to Hadrian*, 116.

²⁹ “Standing out from all the other local points of supply, Tyre contributed the greatest corpus of city coins we have unearthed at our Upper Galilee locations.... We can safely say, then, that the Tyrian mint was the chief supplier of money for the Upper Galilee for three and one-half centuries of that four and one-half century span of time [2nd cent. BCE to 3rd cent. CE].” Richard S. Hanson, *Tyrian Influence in the Upper Galilee*, Meiron Excavation Project 2 (Cambridge: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1980), 52–53.

³⁰ “Earlier research interpreted high numbers of Tyrian coins at Galilean (particularly Upper Galilean) sites as evidence of extensive trade between the city and those specific communities. While there was indeed considerable exchange between Tyre and Galilee, the primary reason so much Tyrian coinage is found is because so much of it was struck. That is to say, the presence of a large number of Tyrian coins at a particular site might or might not be the result of direct trade with the city; it might simply reflect how widely used Tyre’s mass-produced coins were.” Mark A. Chancey, *Greco-Roman Culture and the Galilee of Jesus*, SN’TSMS 134 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 171. Cf. Freyne, *Texts, Contexts and Cultures*, 141–42.

³¹ Theissen writes, “This saying, which at first is so offensive, would have to awaken the following associations: ‘First let the poor people in the Jewish rural areas be satisfied. For it is not good to take poor people’s food and throw it to the rich Gentiles in the cities.’” Theissen, *The Gospels in Context*, 75.

³² Freyne, *Galilee from Alexander the Great to Hadrian*, 245–46; Theissen, *The Gospels in Context*, 78–79.

³³ Leibner, *Settlement and History*, 332.

cultural settlements in the Galilee region were relatively prosperous must be given due consideration.³⁴ While this does not necessarily negate the existence of prejudices and animosity between Galileans and Tyrians, such animosity cannot be entirely explained merely on the grounds of economic disparity between different social classes.

Finally, it is worth noting that the credibility of the existence of a significant flow of people and goods between Galilee and the region of Tyre is further supported by an analysis of the land and Roman road systems in the area.³⁵ Jesus's itinerary in Mark 7:31 has often been considered by scholars to be circuitous and nonsensical.³⁶ However, Michael Flowers has demonstrated through a study of geography and Roman roads in northern Galilee that "the journey is entirely plausible" and indicates "intimate familiarity with the cities, roadways, boundaries, and demographics of Galilee and other regions of first century Palestine."³⁷ Considering, then, the central function of lakeside Galilee as a "contact zone between the Mediterranean Sea and the Syrian hinterland,"³⁸ the socio-cultural connections Galilean Jews would have had to these rural, Jewish villages in the north, and the economic relations between Galilee and Tyre, an encounter between Jesus and a Syrophenician woman on a journey to the region of Tyre is plausible. All of these factors cohere with the socio-economic presentation provided in the account in Mark.

POLITICAL CONTEXT

If historical, Jesus's journey to the region of Tyre would have taken place under the reign of Herod Antipas (4 BCE–39 CE), the son of Herod the Great who inherited the territory of Galilee and Perea.³⁹ Politically, the reign of Antipas in the

³⁴ Morten Høning Jensen's work on Herod Antipas in Galilee has largely reached conclusions similar to those of Leibner: "Important perspectives on the urbanization programme of Antipas are found in the welfare of the regional villages and inter-regional neighbouring cities.... From the investigation of selected villages it turns out that rural Galilee was apparently thriving and expanding right up until the war of 66–70 CE. No decline can be attested. Instead, evidence points to an expanding rural village culture including different small-scale industrial activity, support of public buildings and use of differentiated housing units." Morten Høning Jensen, *Herod Antipas in Galilee*, 1st ed., WUNT 2/215 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 256.

³⁵ "The world around the lake, to name just one example, ... was more urban, more Hellenized and, above all, connected to the Greco-Phoenician and Greco-Semitic worlds to the west and to the east. The 'excursions' to Gadara and the area of Tyre and Sidon, as related in Mark 5–7, might in the end not have been too implausible." Jürgen K. Zangenberg, "Anchoring Ancient Galilee at the Lakeshore: Towards Re-Conceptualizing Ancient Galilee as a Mediterranean Environment," *Early Christianity* 10.3 (2019): 291.

³⁶ "In one summary that is not noted for its topographical accuracy the narrator succeeds in including all the surrounding gentile territory—Tyre, Sidon, Dekapolis, ending at the sea of Galilee (7:31)." Freyne, *Galilee, Jesus and the Gospels*, 55. Cf. Witmer, *Galilean Exorcist*, 196–97.

³⁷ Michael Flowers, "Jesus' Journey' in Mark 7:31: Interpretation and Historical Implications for Markan Authorship and Both the Scope and Impact of Jesus' Ministry," *JSHJ* 14.2 (2016): 177. See also Thomassen, "Jesus' Journey into Gentile Territories," 247; Michael F. Bird, *Jesus and the Origins of the Gentile Mission*, LNTS 331 (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 102.

³⁸ Zangenberg, "Anchoring Ancient Galilee at the Lakeshore," 291.

³⁹ David C. Braund, "Herod Antipas," *ABD* 3:160.

region of Galilee stands out as “relatively stable and calm” with “no known major upheavals apart from a couple of ‘low-threat’ incidents.”⁴⁰ It is assumed that Antipas was able to “achieve some kind of homogeneity of political life” in his territory, which included both Jewish and Greek populations from Perea to the Decapolis,⁴¹ and he was able to manage his subjects well, taking into account their different sensitivities.⁴² There is also evidence that “rural Galilee was apparently thriving and expanding” as a result of the political stability and urbanization projects taking place during Antipas’s reign,⁴³ which meant that “there was no need for direct Roman intervention in the internal life of the province.”⁴⁴

Such a description of Antipas’s reign conflicts in part with the survey offered by Theissen of the political and socio-economic situation on the border of Galilee and Tyre,⁴⁵ a survey adopted by many commentators.⁴⁶ On the one hand, as Theissen describes, Tyre’s expansionist tendencies toward Galilean territory, partly due to agricultural dependency on the region, would have certainly led to ongoing animosity between the two territories. Josephus, for example, describes how the city of Cydasa was “a strong inland village of the Tyrians, always at feud and strife with the Galileans, having its large population and stout defences as resources behind it in its quarrel with the nation.”⁴⁷ If strained negotiations on the price of wheat export are added to expansionist tendencies, it is understandable that Tyrians and Galileans would have had somewhat of a latent, “Cold War” type of relationship.

⁴⁰ Jensen, *Herod Antipas in Galilee*, 254; Freyne, *Galilee from Alexander the Great to Hadrian*, 68.

⁴¹ Freyne, *Galilee from Alexander the Great to Hadrian*, 70.

⁴² Jensen, *Herod Antipas in Galilee*, 254. According to Jensen, Josephus “is not able to come up with any real examples of cruelty or tyranny” (100), and his description of Antipas as a ruler is rather unremarkable (53–100).

⁴³ Jensen, *Herod Antipas in Galilee*, 256.

⁴⁴ Freyne, *Galilee from Alexander the Great to Hadrian*, 69. This does not mean that Antipas was an extraordinary ruler; rather, Jensen concludes that “Herod Antipas is best described with adjectives such as: minor, moderate, adjusted and unremarkable.... Herod Antipas was a minor ruler with a moderate impact.” Jensen, *Herod Antipas in Galilee*, 254.

⁴⁵ Such a description of Antipas’s reign counteracts older views held by Seán Freyne, for example, who argued that Antipas’s urbanization program led to increased tensions between the parasitic urban population and the impoverished rural population, ultimately resulting in the popular revolts and uprisings in later decades. Jensen has explored the problem of differing social models applied to Galilee studies and how the choice of model often has a “deterministic influence on the results” (34). Models such as the one used by Freyne have been questioned in recent times, especially since the results often conflict with material data. The use of newer methodologies that seek to harmonize social, archaeological, and literary data in a more critical manner has led to a more moderate understanding of the socio-political context of Galilee during Jesus’s time. While Theissen himself does not necessarily follow the models critiqued by Jensen, he still seems to presuppose significant conflict between the rural population of Galilee and the urban population of Tyre, as examined above. For further discussion, see Jensen, *Herod Antipas in Galilee*, 9–34; Marianne Sawicki, *Crossing Galilee: Architectures of Contact in the Occupied Land of Jesus* (New York: Continuum, 2000).

⁴⁶ See footnote 9 above.

⁴⁷ Josephus, *B.J.* 4.105 (Thackeray). On Tyrian expansionist tendencies, see also 1 Kgs 9:10–14; Josephus, *C. Ap.* 1.110; *B.J.* 3.35; *A.J.* 13.154.

On the other hand, Theissen completely passes over the political circumstances between Tyre and Galilee under Herod Antipas,⁴⁸ a serious omission considering that Antipas was the ruler during Jesus's lifetime. Under Antipas, the situation between Tyre and Galilee seems to have been relatively peaceful and uneventful.⁴⁹ In contrast, Theissen describes at length a series of assaults between Tyrians and Galileans, but none of them date to the time of Jesus or Antipas.⁵⁰ Josephus's description of Cydasa's ongoing feud with Galilee is within the immediate context of the Jewish War, during which tensions between Tyre and Galilee "exploded into the slaughter and imprisonment of Jewish citizens."⁵¹ It is highly questionable, however, whether such political and military conflict reflective of the war adequately corresponds to the time of Jesus.⁵² Undoubtedly, latent animosity and general dislike for one another would have been present, even during the time of Jesus, but not to the degree implied by Theissen. To be fair, Theissen's conclusion regarding the story of the Syrophenician woman is conservative, only asserting that it is "probably Palestinian in origin."⁵³ But the fact that he neglects mentioning the situation under Antipas, the reigning monarch during the time of Jesus, leaves Theissen room for assuming a later date for the origin of the story, even if still Palestinian. With all the data considered, however, a journey to the region of Tyre during the politically stable period of Antipas's reign in the 30s is much more likely than in the 40s or 50s, when rising tensions would have made such a journey potentially dangerous (cf. Acts 12:20).⁵⁴ Theissen's overall observations on the economic dependency and social tensions between Tyre and Upper Galilee are undeniably illuminating for interpreting the interaction between Jesus and the woman. But the likelihood of the account is increased when one properly situates it under the reign of Herod Antipas. The more moderate and stable political circumstances at the border during the reign of Antipas in the 30s, when the encounter between Jesus and the woman would have occurred, therefore strengthens the argument for historicity.

⁴⁸ Theissen writes, "Although King Herod had known how to keep on good terms with Tyre, the other Herodian princes lived in tension with that city." However, he then goes on to describe interactions between Tyre and Agrippa I and Agrippa II, and does not mention Antipas. Theissen, *The Gospels in Context*, 77; Theissen, "Lokal- und Sozialkolorit," 218–19.

⁴⁹ Jensen, *Herod Antipas in Galilee*, 254; Freyne, *Galilee from Alexander the Great to Hadrian*, 69.

⁵⁰ Theissen, *The Gospels in Context*, 77–78.

⁵¹ Witmer, *Galilean Exorcist*, 194–95.

⁵² Freyne, *Galilee from Alexander the Great to Hadrian*, 73, 118–19.

⁵³ Theissen, *The Gospels in Context*, 79.

⁵⁴ Witmer, *Galilean Exorcist*, 195. As supporting evidence for an earlier date, Theissen mentions the existing community of Christians in Tyre in Acts 21:3–6, probably in the 50s or 60s CE. The assumption is that if the story were compiled later by Christians, the account would have been set in the city rather than in the countryside. But this is as far as Theissen goes in terms of dating, which still leaves room for the story's composition in the late 30s or 40s. Theissen, *The Gospels in Context*, 66–67; Witmer, *Galilean Exorcist*, 195.

CULTURAL CONTEXT

The woman's description as "Greek" (Ἑλληνίς) and "Syrophenician by birth" (Συροφονίαισα τῷ γένει; Mark 7:26) gives further evidence of the author's (or his source's) familiarity with the social intricacies of the region. As Theissen demonstrates, it was not uncommon for ancient authors to refer to both a person's ethnic and cultural background.⁵⁵ So while the woman would have been ethnically Syrophenician, with the significant influence that Greek culture had in the region from the time of Alexander the Great, she may well have been culturally Greek, since "the citizen class of the Phoenician republics Tyre and Sidon considered itself Greek and was thoroughly Hellenized."⁵⁶ The possibility that she spoke Greek and interacted with Jesus in that language has also been suggested.⁵⁷

As a Hellenized woman, it is possible that she was of high social class, since "Hellenization had first affected the people of higher status everywhere."⁵⁸ This is supported by the Pseudo-Clementines, a third-century fictional work, in which she is described as a woman of means who "buys shipwrecked boys as slaves and gives them a Greek education" (cf. Ps.-Clem., *Hom.* 13.7.3–4).⁵⁹ Mark's choice of "bed" (κλίνη) as opposed to the more vulgar "mattress" (κράβαττος) in verse 30 could be further indication of a person of status.⁶⁰ If these indications are correct, the description of the woman as wealthy, Greek, and Syrophenician certainly coheres with what is known of Tyre's citizens. That such a person would lower herself to seek help from a humble Galilean peasant in the countryside of Tyre is therefore highly significant.⁶¹

JESUS'S APHORISM

Jesus's aphorism in Mark 7:27 (cf. Matt 15:26), "Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs," is considered by many commentators to be highly insulting and morally problematic,⁶² and therefore, "historical-critical exegesis has often relieved him of responsibility for it

⁵⁵ Theissen, *The Gospels in Context*, 69. Examples can be found in Josephus, *Vita* 427; *C. Ap.* 1.179–80; Philo, *Abr.* 251.

⁵⁶ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014), 142; Freyne, *Jesus, a Jewish Galilean*, 89.

⁵⁷ "The area evidenced widespread use of Greek, eradicating virtually all signs of the indigenous language." Porter, *The Criteria for Authenticity*, 151.

⁵⁸ Theissen, *The Gospels in Context*, 70–71.

⁵⁹ Theissen, *The Gospels in Context*, 71.

⁶⁰ Theissen, *The Gospels in Context*, 71–72; Boring, *Mark*, 210; Witmer, *Galilean Exorcist*, 198. The woman's high social class remains unconvincing for others: "That such elements point to the woman's elevated, opulent status ... remains speculative." Spencer, "Women," *DJG* 1007–8. Cf. Kinukawa, "The Island of Tyre," 143–44.

⁶¹ Matthew Malcolm, "Did the Syrophenician Woman Change Jesus's Mission?," *BBR* 29.2 (2019): 186.

⁶² "Jesus' answer is morally offensive." Theissen, *The Gospels in Context*, 61. Cf. Theissen, "Lokal- und Sozialkolorit," 202; Boring, *Mark*, 212.

by declaring the logion to be inauthentic.”⁶³ On the other hand, precisely because of its unusual harshness other scholars consider it unlikely that the saying would have been invented by later Christians.⁶⁴ Though Meier regards the encounter with the Syrophoenician woman to be a later Christian invention,⁶⁵ he nevertheless considers the fact that “nowhere else in the Gospel tradition does Jesus address a sincere petitioner with such harsh, insulting language” to be one of the best arguments in favor of its historicity.⁶⁶ Furthermore, disagreements exist regarding the transmission of the aphorism: whether the aphorism is more traditional than the story, whether the story is earlier, or whether both “have always belonged together.”⁶⁷ This section will first discuss the authenticity of Jesus’s saying in Mark 7:27, followed by an assessment of its relation to the story as a whole.

1. *The offensiveness and authenticity of the aphorism.* The primary difficulty in regarding the aphorism as authentic is its unusual offensiveness. Boring summarizes the problem: “*Kynarion*, ‘dog,’ is the troublesome word, difficult for interpreters to imagine as said by the historical Jesus. The word is harsh, even for Mark.”⁶⁸ The argument for inauthenticity based on the offensiveness of Jesus’s saying suggests that it does not cohere with the image of Jesus found elsewhere in the Gospels. Because of this, interpreters have sought different explanations for the use of such language on the lips of Jesus: either it is inauthentic, authentic but “not so harsh as modern readers think,” or it is authentic “as it stands in all its harshness.”⁶⁹ However, attempts to try to lessen the offensiveness of Jesus’s indirect reference to Gentiles as “dogs” remain unsatisfactory.⁷⁰ Even in the diminutive (*κυνάριον*), “dog” was “one of the gravest and most common insults in antiquity.”⁷¹ Thus, arguments for authenticity based on the premise of a mild or neutral saying are insufficient. Either Mark 7:27 is inauthentic because it does not cohere with the Jesus of the Gospels, or it is authentic despite its harshness.⁷²

The claim of inauthenticity based on alleged incoherence with the portrait of Jesus, however, is in this case unsatisfactory. It can plausibly be shown that such an initial rejection of Gentiles coheres with Jesus’s actions elsewhere in the Gospels. Craig S. Keener demonstrates that there are two examples of Jesus ministering to Gentiles in Mark, and “in both cases (if we read his initial response to the centurion

⁶³ Luz, *Matthben*, 337–38.

⁶⁴ “Mark would surely not have allowed Jesus to speak so harshly to the woman as he does in 7:27.” Flowers, “Jesus’ Journey in Mark 7:31,” 167. Cf. Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 2:660.

⁶⁵ Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 2:660–61.

⁶⁶ Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 2:660.

⁶⁷ Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 466; Theissen, *The Gospels in Context*, 60.

⁶⁸ Boring, *Mark*, 212.

⁶⁹ Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthben*, IBC (Louisville: John Knox, 1993), 176–77. Similarly: “The interpretation of the image of the dogs and the children oscillates among an excuse that renders the saying harmless and dismisses the insult of the comparison with the dogs, explaining it historically in terms of the social tensions of the area, and indignation over Jesus’ narrow-mindedness.” Luz, *Matthben*, 640.

⁷⁰ Bird, *Gentile Mission*, 48–49.

⁷¹ Keener, *IVP Bible Background Commentary*, 146.

⁷² Perhaps, then, one must agree with Joel Marcus that “despite the offensiveness of the saying, the most straightforward reading of it on the historical level is a literal one.” Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 468.

as a question) he first snubs the Gentile.”⁷³ According to Latourelle, “In this episode Jesus displays a radicalism, which, however, does not lessen the consistency of his behavior with his personality and mission.”⁷⁴ With his answer, Jesus affirms his mission as “directed primarily to Israel,” while also showing that faith makes it possible for Gentiles to share the blessings of salvation.⁷⁵ Michael F. Bird has argued that such an understanding of Gentile missions can be traced back to Jesus:

Although Jesus was concerned principally with the renewal of Israel, concomitantly, his aims and intentions articulated a vision of restoration that included the Gentiles as beneficiaries of Israel’s restoration and also provided the necessary impetus towards a Gentile mission in the nascent Jesus movement.⁷⁶

Additionally, a more natural reading of the text suggests that Jesus’s aphorism was meant as a test of faith for the woman.⁷⁷ This coheres with other episodes in Mark that portray Jesus testing the faith of his followers, especially within the immediate context of the miracles of the bread (6:37, 52; 8:1–3; cf. 9:19–25).⁷⁸ In other words, the aphorism in 7:27, despite its harshness, corresponds to the picture of Jesus found in the wider context of the narrative of Mark as well as with the ministry of Jesus portrayed in the Gospels as a whole.

Moreover, the offensive nature of the aphorism is, in light of the criterion of embarrassment, itself an argument in favor of its authenticity. According to the criterion of embarrassment, “actions or sayings of Jesus that would have embarrassed or created difficulty for the early Church” are considered more likely to be authentic.⁷⁹ Such “embarrassing material coming from Jesus would naturally be either suppressed or softened in later stages of the Gospel tradition.”⁸⁰ In other words, “embarrassing” material is included in the Gospels even though it does not

⁷³ Craig S. Keener, *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 144.

⁷⁴ Latourelle, *The Miracles of Jesus*, 174.

⁷⁵ Latourelle, *The Miracles of Jesus*, 174. While Bruce J. Malina’s criteria for assessing the authenticity of the words of Jesus may be lacking in nuance, he nevertheless affirms the view that a primarily negative attitude toward Gentiles is evidence of authenticity. He writes that “the theocracy Jesus proclaimed was an exclusively Israelite theocracy. Jesus either ignored non-Israelites or was insulting toward them. Statements like the one in Matthew, ‘Go nowhere except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel’ (Matt 10:4), are quite authentic.... Similarly, the repartees to non-Israelites are equally authentic (e.g. the Syro-Phoenician woman Matt 15:21–28; Matt 7:24–30; the proverb about dogs and swine Matt 7:6).” Bruce J. Malina, “Criteria for Assessing the Authentic Words of Jesus: Some Specifications,” in *Authenticating the Words of Jesus*, ed. Bruce Chilton and Craig A. Evans, NTTS 28 (Boston: Brill, 1999), 36.

⁷⁶ Bird, *Gentile Mission*, 46.

⁷⁷ Malcolm, “Did the Syrophenician Woman Change Jesus’s Mission?,” 186; Iverson, “Jubilees and Mark 7:24–37,” 120.

⁷⁸ Malcolm, “Did the Syrophenician Woman Change Jesus’s Mission?,” 180–83.

⁷⁹ Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 1:168.

⁸⁰ Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 1:168. Meier further notes the importance of “eyewitnesses to act as a check on fertile imaginations ... who might exercise some control over the developing tradition.... The fact that embarrassing material is found as late as the redaction of the Gospels reminds us that beside a creative thrust there was also a conservative force in the Gospel tradition” (170). At the same time, Meier notes that there is an inherent degree of subjectivity in the application of this criterion, considering that “the sensitivities of first-generation Christians may have been different from ours.” Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 2:660.

clearly “promote the author’s agenda” and moves “against the redactional tendency.”⁸¹ The offensive and therefore potentially embarrassing nature of Jesus’s aphorism in Mark 7:27 is the most-cited argument in favor of its historicity.⁸² As John Nolland states, “The fact that the statement is unexpected is an argument for its authenticity. It is unlikely that the early church would have invented and attributed to Jesus a saying that could reflect adversely upon him.”⁸³ Consequently, not only does the aphorism cohere with the portrait of Jesus elsewhere in the Gospels, but the fact that it was included in the final redaction of both Mark and Matthew despite its offensive nature could further indicate that, by way of the criterion of embarrassment, the aphorism is most likely authentic.⁸⁴

2. *The aphorism in context.* The historicity of Mark 7:24–30 is further supported by the coherence between the aphorism and its surrounding narrative. According to one scholar, the implausibility of someone creating “a story in such a way that the point of view voiced by Jesus ended up being refuted” points to “the basic historicity of the narrative.”⁸⁵ However, while some have defended the idea that Jesus’s encounter with the Syrophenician woman is “the lone case where someone prompts Jesus to change his mind,”⁸⁶ thus creating an impetus for Jesus to widen his ministry to include the Gentile world,⁸⁷ it is more in line with the Gospel of Mark to read the story as a test of faith, as has been argued above.⁸⁸ That the offen-

⁸¹ Porter, “Criteria for Authenticity,” 157.

⁸² Authors who mention the criterion of embarrassment in connection with Mark 7:27 include Theissen, *The Gospels in Context*, 63–64; Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 2:660; Porter, *The Criteria for Authenticity*, 162; Bird, *Gentile Mission*, 113–14.

⁸³ Nolland, *Matthew*, 121. See also the following statement: “The sheer offensiveness of these words supports their authenticity.” Witmer, *Jesus, the Galilean Exorcist*, 200.

⁸⁴ While the aphorism itself is viewed by many scholars as authentic, some consider the word *πρώτον*, or even the entire clause “Let the children be fed first,” to be redactional, because it seems to be “somewhat in tension with 7:27b: if it is wrong to give the children’s bread to dogs, what difference does it make whether or not the children have been fed yet?” Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 466. The theological implication of “first” to the Jew, then to the Gentile (cf. Rom 1:16) is considered to be evocative of “early Christian views of salvation history” (466), which might be “true in the horizon of Marcan theology, but not necessarily in that of the historical Jesus.” Bird, *Gentile Mission*, 51; cf. Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 2:660. For Bird, “Jesus’ ironic aside is met with recognition from the woman not merely of the priority of Israel, but the significance that Israel’s salvation holds for the Gentiles in the present. As the children of Israel are being fed, crumbs are *now* falling for the dogs.... In this sense, interpreting the pericope in terms of ‘Jew first and then Gentile’ fails to grapple with the significance that a partially realized restoration has for Gentiles.” Bird, *Gentile Mission*, 116; emphasis original. It is this attitude of sharing the blessings of Israel with Gentiles *already in the present* that, according to Bird, coheres with the vision of the historical Jesus; cf. Bird, *Gentile Mission*, 46. Regardless of whether *πρώτον* is redactional or not, “nothing in the narrative suggests that gentiles are to be excluded from the benefits of the kingdom.” Iverson, “Jubilees and Mark 7:24–37,” 120.

⁸⁵ Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 466. Cf. C. Focant, “Mc 7, 24–31 par. Mt 15, 21–29: Critique des sources et/ou étude narrative,” in *The Synoptic Gospels: Source Criticism and the New Literary Criticism*, ed. C. Focant, BETL 110 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1993), 39–75; R. Feldmeier, “Die Syrophönizierin (Mk 7, 24–30): Jesus ‘verlorenes’ Streitgespräch?,” in *Die Heiden: Juden, Christen und das Problem des Fremden*, ed. R. Feldmeier and U. Heckel, WUNT 70 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1994), 211–27.

⁸⁶ Spencer, “Women,” 1007.

⁸⁷ Spencer, “Women,” 1007; Porter, *The Criteria for Authenticity*, 162n97.

⁸⁸ Cf. Malcolm, “Did the Syrophenician Woman Change Jesus’s Mission?,” 174–86.

sive saying provides the woman with an opportunity to demonstrate her faith,⁸⁹ however, still supports the overall point that the aphorism must be read within the context of the narrative as a whole. This observation points to the same conclusion reached by Latourelle, namely that “without the dialogue between Jesus and the woman, which centers on her exceptional faith, the miracle in behalf of a pagan woman no longer has any explanation.”⁹⁰

Additionally, the aphorism makes the most sense when placed within the historical context of the socio-economic tensions between Galilee and Tyre, which is presupposed in the setting of the narrative.⁹¹ As Witmer summarizes,

If these tensions, rather than purely theological motives, were behind Jesus’ response, it would mean that he was initially expressing a prejudice toward the woman and refusing to heal her daughter because of the fact that bread (here symbolizing food in general) was literally being taken from Galilee (which was mostly Jewish) and put into the mouths of the inhabitants of Tyre.⁹²

The theological and historical layers of connections between the aphorism and the narrative, therefore, further support the essential unity of the pericope. In other words, not only is it possible to argue for the authenticity of Jesus’s aphorism, but one can go a step further and plausibly maintain the integrity of the story as a whole, combining both miracle and saying within the same tradition.

THE EXORCISM

The final aspect of Jesus’s encounter with the Syrophenician woman that must be assessed for its historicity is the exorcism itself. There are several issues with the exorcism account: other than Mary Magdalene, this is the only case in the Gospels “where a female is described as possessed by a demon, and the only case of a child being possessed except that of the boy with the spirit.”⁹³ Further, it is the only case of an exorcism “in which Jesus does not actually confront the demon, or even the possessed girl, directly.”⁹⁴

Nonetheless, in view of the larger perspective of Jesus’s healing and exorcism ministry, these issues are relatively minor. Several scholars have recognized that “healings and exorcisms form the centre of [Jesus’s] activity”⁹⁵ and that “there is little reason to suppose that Jesus would have developed a reputation as a wonder

⁸⁹ Keener, *IVP Bible Background Commentary*, 146; Iverson, “Jubilees and Mark 7:24–37,” 120; Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 468–69.

⁹⁰ Latourelle, *The Miracles of Jesus*, 172–73.

⁹¹ “The story of the Syrophenician woman is much easier to understand, it seems to me, if the tellers and hearers were acquainted with the situation in the border regions of Galilee and Tyre.” Theissen, *The Gospels in Context*, 78.

⁹² Witmer, *Galilean Exorcist*, 200.

⁹³ Witmer, *Galilean Exorcist*, 199.

⁹⁴ Witmer, *Galilean Exorcist*, 192; Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 2:659.

⁹⁵ Theissen and Merz, *The Historical Jesus*, 281.

worker if he did not engage in such activities.”⁹⁶ The criterion of coherence, according to which “Jesus tradition that coheres or is consistent with already established authentic Jesus material should thereby also be considered authentic,”⁹⁷ is thus often applied in favor of the historicity of Jesus’s exorcisms more broadly.⁹⁸

That this particular exorcism seems to differ from the norm does not detract from its overall coherence with Jesus’s healing and exorcism ministry. The negative argument that this is the only case in the Gospels “where a female is described as possessed by a demon [other than Mary Magdalene], and the only case of a child being possessed except that of the boy with the spirit”⁹⁹ could just as easily be formulated in a positive manner: there are at least two examples of females possessed by a demon, and two examples of a possessed child. Witmer notes that both the exorcism of the Syrophoenician woman’s daughter and that of the possessed boy in Mark 9 “involve a surrogate who intervenes with Jesus on behalf of the possessed individual, and they both involve children rather than adults.”¹⁰⁰ Additionally, Jesus’s encounter with the woman is not the first exorcism of a Gentile in Gentile territory in the Gospel of Mark (cf. 5:1–20).¹⁰¹ These parallels demonstrate that many of the elements found in the exorcism of Mark 7 do in fact cohere with details found in other accounts of Jesus’s exorcisms.

Furthermore, Meier notes the similarities between the story of the Syrophoenician woman and two other healing stories that happened from a distance: the healing of the centurion’s servant, who also happened to be a Gentile (Matt 8:5–13//Luke 7:1–10),¹⁰² and the healing of the royal official’s son (John 4:46–54):

In all three cases, (a) the person petitioning for the healing is a representative interceding for a beloved absent person who is suffering; (b) the dialogue, which is at the heart of the story, deals with some difficulty that might make one think that Jesus will not grant the request; (c) the dialogue reaches a climax in some

⁹⁶ Craig S. Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 1:24.

⁹⁷ Porter, “Criteria for Authenticity,” 155.

⁹⁸ Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 2:651; Theissen and Merz, *The Historical Jesus*, 292–93; Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels*, 282; Denis Edwards, *How God Acts: Creation, Redemption, and Special Divine Action*, *Theology and the Sciences* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 78–79; Witmer, *Galilean Exorcist*, 18, 128, 139; J. R. D. Kirk, *A Man Attested by God: The Human Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 414. Meier further mentions the criterion of multiple attestation in the context of Jesus’s exorcisms: “Granted this limited number of sources, one may conclude that, when it comes to exorcisms, multiple attestation of *forms* is as important as multiple attestation of *sources*: Q sayings join Marcan sayings and Marcan narratives in providing multiple attestation for the existence of exorcisms in the ministry of the historical Jesus.” Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 2:648.

⁹⁹ Witmer, *Galilean Exorcist*, 199.

¹⁰⁰ Witmer, *Galilean Exorcist*, 185.

¹⁰¹ Witmer, *Galilean Exorcist*, 192. See also Clinton Wahlen, *Jesus and the Impurity of Spirits in the Synoptic Gospels*, WUNT 2/185 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 101.

¹⁰² Witmer notes the suggestion that “several elements in the healing of the centurion’s boy are suggestive of exorcism. These include the assumed hierarchy of authority, symbolized by military images and represented by the centurion, and the fact that Jesus commands the illness and it responds, in the way a demon might. Thus, just as the centurion commands soldiers, Jesus commands spirits.” Witmer, *Galilean Exorcist*, 192n178.

word or deed that expresses the trust the petitioner has in Jesus' promise of healing, a promise that is given as Jesus sends the petitioner away; and (d) the fact of the healing is affirmed by the narrator at the end of the story. In this genre, the dialogue between the petitioner and Jesus, rather than Jesus' performance of the healing, stands at the center of the story.¹⁰³

Such similarities, not only to other exorcisms but to Jesus's healings in general, give evidence that the exorcism of the Syrophoenician woman's daughter is not so exceptional or extraordinary after all. The criterion of coherence therefore is further supporting evidence for the historicity of this encounter.

The success of the exorcism is reported in the Gospel, even though there seem to have been no immediate witnesses to the occurrence, since the girl was at home while her mother was meeting with Jesus. Considering the importance of eyewitness testimony for the Gospel accounts, this might be considered problematic.¹⁰⁴ However, the fact that "in the fifties, at the latest, there was a Christian community in Tyre" and Sidon (Acts 21:3–6; 27:3),¹⁰⁵ still within a generation of the Syrophoenician woman or, at least, her daughter, means that there probably would have been people in the region who knew the characters involved and could testify to the truthfulness of the story and the exorcism. When considered in this manner, the authenticity of the exorcism is supported by the criterion of coherence and by the probability of the existence of witnesses in the region who could "act as a check on fertile imaginations."¹⁰⁶

CONCLUSION

This paper has revisited Jesus's encounter with the Syrophoenician woman with a view toward establishing the essential historicity of the account. Gerd Theissen made a significant contribution in arguing for the account's probable Palestinian origin in light of the concrete socio-economic, political, and cultural setting of Upper Galilee and Tyre in the first half of the 1st century CE. While Theissen's overall argument stands, recent developments in Galilee studies have prompted a more nuanced approach to understanding the situation at the northern border of Israel. Nonetheless, these recent developments have strengthened even more the historical plausibility of the story during the reign of Herod Antipas, potentially narrowing down the probability of such an occurrence to the 30s CE.

Furthermore, when the encounter is assessed holistically, taking into consideration its historical setting, Jesus's aphorism, and the exorcism of the woman's daughter, the degree of probability for its authenticity increases. The harshness of Jesus's aphorism fits the criterion of embarrassment, and the theological implications of the saying and of the story as a whole cohere theologically with Jesus's

¹⁰³ Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 2:659.

¹⁰⁴ On eyewitness testimony in the Gospels, see, e.g., Craig S. Keener, *Christobiography: Memory, History, and the Reliability of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019); Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017).

¹⁰⁵ Theissen, *The Gospels in Context*, 52; Keener, *Historical Jesus*, 183.

¹⁰⁶ Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 1:170.

approach to Gentile missions elsewhere in the Gospels and with his practice of testing the faith of his followers. This theological continuity between the story and the aphorism further suggests that they might go back to the same tradition, rather than circulating independently before being combined by Mark or his source. And finally, the criterion of coherence and the likely existence of witnesses within the living memory of the woman and her daughter contribute to a positive assessment of the exorcism itself. Assessed in this manner, it is possible to maintain the essential historicity of Jesus's encounter with the Syrophenician woman.