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The Markan Narrative of the Hemorrhaging Woman: Injustice Through Systems Then and Now

Tim Riendeau

The story of the hemorrhaging woman has been taught to many as a simple healing story that portrays Jesus' ability to heal anyone with faith. While this idea is not being challenged directly, the text holds much more than that concept. The text itself involves a view into God's justice and God's view on the Jewish traditions of the first century. The abusive social structure in Judaism is challenged in the work of Jesus and his interaction with a hemorrhaging woman from Mark 5:25-34 which display God's justice and care for the oppressed and outcast.

World Behind the Text

Second Temple Judaism

In order to understand the social structures in place during Mark's gospel, one must first understand the historical setting of the narrative. The events of Mark's gospel all occur within the time period commonly referred to as the Second Temple period. The period of Second Temple Judaism begins in 586 BCE with the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon and ends with the destruction of Jerusalem by Rome in 70 CE.¹ The large span of time between the two temples causes a great deal of change in culture that can be confusing to the reader as he or she tries to traverse through the biblical narrative. Even amidst these changes, the emphasis on the Torah persisted and its instruction and obedience was expected by Jewish persons.²

Ceremonial Cleanliness and Un-cleanliness

The emphasis on obedience of Torah led to the continued understanding and following of cleanliness laws. These laws ranged from what could or could not be eaten to whom could be touched without defiling one's own cleanliness.³ While most of the cleanliness laws are found in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, some are scattered throughout the Pentateuch.

The laws involving physical touch often revolved around avoiding blood, a dead body, or a leper. To be in contact with any of these would defile the person and he or she would have to be subject to a ritualistic cleansing involving washing their bodies and clothes thoroughly.⁴ Anyone found to be "unclean" was to be avoided and considered an outcast to their contemporaries until found "clean" yet again.⁵ The unclean person was also excluded from worship. One should not misunderstand and believe that cleanliness was to be looked down upon for it happened to all people and could be easily treated. The only way a person could be entirely outcasted was to have a condition that made him or her perpetually unclean. Lepers, for instance, were treated as outcasts due to their constant unclean state; keeping them from God's presence in Temple.⁶

Women in the First Century

Concerning women in the first century, many assume today, that the culture of Israel was strictly “patriarchal”.⁷ This notion would place women in a place with little power or say in their lives, yet this is not entirely true. While the man claimed the right to make decisions for a family, the woman held some form of power.⁸ W. Dennis Tucker argues that women held power when it came to obtaining justice for themselves as seen in the stories of Deborah and other women leaders.⁹ If an extreme form of patriarchy existed, then such women could have never risen to such heights or been able to fight for their own rights such as the right to independence in the face of becoming a widow (Deut. 25:5-10).¹⁰

Even with this in mind, the value of a woman was less than that of a man.¹¹ A woman’s primary function was to bear children and maintain the private affairs of the family while the man handled the public affairs.¹² Due to the public nature of a man’s life a woman must therefore be careful to not shame a man.¹³ Shame could come from various ways, with one of the easiest being defiling a man through being “unclean”.¹⁴

Women and Cleanliness

The cleanliness laws greatly affected women due to the process of menstruation. The discharge of blood for a period of days would cause the woman to be considered “unclean” for the duration of the process and for a period of time afterwards.¹⁵ A woman, while on her menstrual cycle, could not touch or be touched by a man without polluting the man’s cleanliness.¹⁶ A woman with an irregular menstrual cycle, therefore, was to be considered ritually unclean constantly.

World of the Text

The Woman v.24-26

In the first verses on the passage the reader is introduced to a nameless woman that is said to have had bleeding for twelve years (25). Bleeding itself is a normal malady and, while the person would be considered unclean for a day or two, harmless to one’s social standing. This bleeding, however, has lasted for a considerable amount of time (an understatement) and its source is unknown. It can be deduced that the bleeding is most likely uterine bleeding due to Mark’s sheepishness in telling the exact location of the hemorrhage.¹⁷ This ailment has caused the woman to be on the outside of community and cultic activity due to her chronic ritual uncleanliness as discussed before.

The reader is told that the woman has sought treatment through multiple doctors with no success in healing her (26). It is likely that the treatments did more harm than good for the text reads that “she endured much under many physicians” (26). Mark’s emphasis on the additional suffering is important for in Luke’s version of the story this detail is omitted.¹⁸ Scholars believe that can be due to Luke’s own profession as a physician.¹⁹ The woman endured not only physical suffering but psychological suffering. Keeping in mind her sex and ritual uncleanliness, she would have been visiting multiple male doctors as well as exposing herself to them repeatedly creating a great deal of embarrassment and shame to herself.²⁰

The Act v.27

Her suffering has driven her to desperation and she then decides to take matters into her own hands. Having heard the stories of Jesus’ other healings the woman decides to seek his help in anyway possible (27). Mark writes that she “came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak” (27). The tactic of coming from behind is not without good reason; her uncleanliness would forbid her from touching even the fringe of Jesus’ clothes without making him unclean.²¹ Contact with Jesus’ clothes is not her only offense in this case as she has ignored the custom keeping her in isolation.²² The act challenges the social structure by blatantly breaking the laws surrounding her condition of chronic uncleanliness.²³

The Motive v.28

Mark presents the reader with an inside look into the mind of the nameless woman in 5:28. She is

recorded as believing that if she touches his clothes, she will be made well or whole (28). While modern medicine experts would scoff at such an idea, belief in the magical properties of a holy man's cloak or shirt was a common belief in the time of Second Temple Judaism.²⁴ Another instance of this type of healing is shown in Acts as Paul's handkerchiefs and cloths are used to perform healings during his ministry (Acts 19:11-12). The woman has heard of Jesus' healing powers and thus assumes that such power can be evoked through the touch of his cloak.

Leaking Power, Leaking Blood v.29-30

Readers are confronted with not only a confirmation of the woman's beliefs, but also the idea that the power stemmed from Jesus himself. To the original audience the idea that the woman would be healed from such contact is understandable, many other stories had reported the same results, yet there is an interesting twist to Mark's story; the power comes directly from Jesus, not the cloth.²⁵ Pulling the power from Jesus himself contrasts the common belief in the magical properties of the cloth rather than the person who has touched the cloth.²⁶ This is a reverse of the Levitical cleanliness laws. While contamination would be spread from the touch of the contaminated to an article of clothing, Jesus' healing acts in the reverse as the woman's touch of the garment brings forth healing and thus ritual cleanliness.²⁷

While the woman's becoming unclean was immediate with the start of the flow of blood, so it is ended with the flow of power from Jesus. This draws a parallel between Jesus and the woman when looking at both of their conditions. As the woman leaks blood so does Jesus leak power.²⁸ Opposite of each other, the two flows conflict. The woman's healing shows Jesus' power defeating the illness ravaging her. As the cleanliness laws bound the woman to twelve years of isolation, Jesus' own authority has set the woman free from her bondage.

The Dialogue v.30-34

Mark does not end the narrative with simply the healing. He has included a bit of dialogue that portrays the reason behind the woman's reversal of fortune. Upon realizing power has left him, Jesus turns around in the crowd to attempt to find the one who has drawn the power (30). The question itself is seemingly absurd, as his disciples point out, for he is surrounded by a sizable crowd based on the sudden disappearance of the woman (31). As Jesus continues to look about, the woman presents herself "in fear and trembling" (32,33). Her posture towards Jesus is understandable when one is faced by one they believe to be a theophany (embodiment of a god).²⁹ While the cultural norm would have Jesus condemn the woman for making him ritually unclean and disobeying standards, he rather acts in compassion towards her. Jesus uses familial, intimate language by calling her "daughter", creating a bond between the two (34).³⁰ The bond shows that Jesus does not recognize her as an outcast but as a close relative, a drastic change from the social norm. Within the same sentence Jesus also explains the cause for her healing and cleansing: her faith (34). Her confidence in the healing powers of Jesus' cloak (and authority) gave her the courage to defy the standards set before her in order to become well.³¹ The woman reached out in faith and was healed accordingly.

Mark's Narrative Sandwiches

Mark's style of writing is of great importance to the search for the correct interpretation of Mark 5:25-34 for it demonstrates his usage of narrative "sandwiches".³² The technique involves interweaving two stories that involve the same idea or message.³³ Both narratives are then enhanced and the purpose more clear than if only one was present.³⁴ In this case, the story of Jairus and his daughter (Mark 5:21-24, 35-43) is eclipsed by the story of the hemorrhaging woman (5:25-34). Both stories involve the healing of a person, yet the way that each story is approached is of note and needs to be explored deeper.

Synopsis of Jairus and God's Daughter

The story of Jairus and his daughter plays out in two parts separated by the narrative of the hemorrhaging woman. Mark introduces Jairus as a synagogue ruler that approaches Jesus, falling to his knees, he pleads for the healing of his sick daughter (5:21-23). Jesus accepts the request to go to her and it

is at this point that the story of the hemorrhaging woman begins as Jesus travels to Jairus' house. During the interruption, Jairus is told of his daughter's death from the illness (35). Jesus is undeterred from this change in events and tells Jairus to not fear but believe (36). The party discovers that the girl has been confirmed dead and mourners have gathered to wait for her (39). Jesus sends the mourners away and approaches the girl's body. He then takes the girl's hand and commands her to wake up and miraculously she revives and begins to walk about (41-42).

Jairus and the Woman

The contrast between the two "main" characters of the stories is simple yet very informative to the social structure of Second Temple Judaism. The most notable difference between the two lies in the names of the characters, or rather the name of one of the characters. Only Jairus is named in both stories, the woman and the daughter both are unnamed.³⁵ Mark has followed the patriarchal system of the time by naming the man instead of the two women, an interesting fact considering that the women were the ones healed. To further reiterate the patriarchy in place, only Jairus is given his position in the society.³⁶ Jairus is portrayed as a wealthy, influential man while the woman is noted as impoverished, lowly, and an outcast due to her bleeding.³⁷ Each contrasting point portrays the patriarchal system in place at the time of Mark's writing the story, as the man is seen with power, wealth, and name.³⁸ The bleeding woman is then not only seen as unclean but as lower than the man, nameless, and invisible. Her identity itself has been stolen by the systems in place during her lifetime.

Faith and Healing

There is but one point that the two do not differ on: their faith in Jesus' ability to heal. Both characters reach out to Jesus through their faith and Jesus responds compassionately towards both in turn. Jesus shows impartiality to either based on status, name, or otherwise. This healing by faith is a theme that runs through the whole of Mark and made even more beautiful in the combination of these two stories.

The Woman and the Daughter

While the woman and Jairus have such stark contrast between them, the woman and the daughter are similar in many ways. Besides the fact that they are both female by sex, the two are also at similar points in life.³⁹ The child is said to be twelve years old which would put the girl at the transition stage between childhood and womanhood.⁴⁰ Her age assumes that the girl will begin her own journey into the world of monthly ritual uncleanliness in short time while the older woman has been a part of it for at least twelve years. The two of patriarchy and ritual cleanliness systems would then begin to have full effect on her as she aged as is shown in the image of the hemorrhaging woman.

During the course of the stories, however, it is evident that the cleanliness system is in effect on both women, even if indirectly in one case. While the focus thus far has been on cleanliness regarding blood, to touch a dead body would also cause a person to become unclean. In both cases, then, Jesus should have been declared "unclean" if he were to touch them, yet he shows no qualms about *ignoring* the laws.⁴¹ It is through these contacts with the "unclean" that true cleansing springs forth in the form of healing and revival. It is important to note that he does in fact ignore the law and that he can do so justly due to his authority and power. He effectively conquers both systems by reversing them in both cases as the touch that should bring defilement brings restoration instead.

World in Front of the Text

Pulpit Exclusion

Systems designed to keep certain people away from influence and authority still exist today in churches around the world. Such a system involves the exclusion of women from participating in the role of pastor or other church authorities. A common belief in this system is that women should teach other women or children as it is improper for a woman to teach men Scripture.⁴² The system is excluding talented women teachers and preachers from spreading the Word of God to those who may benefit from it.

Women have a unique look on Scripture that men will miss and to lose the chance to hear this perspective cries injustice.⁴³ Women bring a new story, their story, to the church that it desperately needs as the church continues to grow and reach new audiences.⁴⁴

The Church has been losing influence in America rapidly. Growth in the Church has declined and people are beginning to leave due to the exclusion of women and the patriarchal system. Without women being able to teach and share as equals, the Church is beginning to show signs of illness and weakness. It is as the bleeding woman, suffering and in need of healing.

Unclean or Unfit

The systems of pulpit exclusion and the Levitical cleanliness laws are very similar in their systematic exclusion of a group of people based on specific criteria. With the Levitical law anyone who was considered unclean could not fully experience God due to his or her condition. As stated before, chronic uncleanliness then separated the person from the community and temple permanently. Pulpit exclusion faces the same unjust principles. Women are denied access to the pulpit, and thus their calling, due to their chronic ‘condition’ known as their sex.

It must be stated that both systems can be supported by Scripture, though the extreme to which they are enforced breaches the intention of each passage. Both systems were designed for the good of the church yet each was taken to an extreme that was beyond the benefits of the custom and mutated into a system of oppression.

God Above Systems

It is in the face of oppressive systems that God’s justice shines brightest. Looking back on the story of the hemorrhaging woman, there is hope. Jesus ignored the cleanliness laws in order to heal those who had called upon him in faith. God’s actions show God’s justice through the subversion of cultural norms of systematic oppression. He has put himself above all systems through reversing the effects of each. While the law said the woman was unclean and an outcast, Jesus calls her “Daughter” and brings true cleansing. In this way God has also begun reversing the system of pulpit exclusion. Women are being called to ministry in droves. God recognizes their worth as He did the unclean woman. Each woman called is God asserting God’s authority over any cultural norm or system that man can create. God’s power is reaching women regardless of the system just as God’s healing reached the woman through her uncleanliness.

Conclusion

The Church desperately needs to be healed and women are reaching out through faith in order to touch the hems of God’s wisdom and knowledge. Shall the church authorities and scholars restrain them or join them in reaching for a better understanding of God? Cultural norms cannot stand in the light of God’s authority and justice and thus the Church must also begin to see through the fog of oppression and into the light of new hope. The outcasts shall be delivered and systems shall be reversed through God’s justice.

Endnotes

- ¹ J. Julius Scott, *Jewish Backgrounds of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 73.
- ² Scott, *Jewish Backgrounds*, 65.
- ³ Catherine Clark Kroeger, and Mary J. Evans, *The IVP Women's Bible Commentary*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 554.
- ⁴ Scott, *Jewish Backgrounds*, 71.
- ⁵ David E. Garland, *Mark* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub. House, 1996), 220.
- ⁶ Garland, *Mark*, 220
- ⁷ Dennis W. Tucker, "Women in the Old testament: Issues of Authority, Power and Justice," *TET* 119 (2008): 482
- ⁸ Dennis, "Issues of Authority," 483
- ⁹ Dennis, "Issues of Authority," 483
- ¹⁰ Dennis, "Issues of Authority," 484
- ¹¹ Kroeger, Clark, Evans, *IVP Commentary*, 554
- ¹² Kroeger, Clark, Evans, *IVP Commentary*, 554
- ¹³ God'sako Kinukawa, "The Story of the Hemorrhaging Woman (Mark 5:25-34) Read from a Japanese Feminist Context," *BI:JCA* 2 (1994): 291
- ¹⁴ Kinukawa, "Story of the Hemorrhaging Woman," 291
- ¹⁵ Selvidge, "Reaction to Restrictive," 619
- ¹⁶ Garland, *Mark*, 219
- ¹⁷ Joel Marcus, *The Anchor Bible 27, Mark 1-8* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 357
- ¹⁸ Ezra P Gould, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Mark* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1896), 773
- ¹⁹ Gould, *St. Mark*, 773
- ²⁰ Kinukawa, "Story of the Hemorrhaging Woman", 288
- ²¹ Kroeger, Clark, Evans, *IVP Commentary*, 554
- ²² Marcus, *Mark 1-8*, 357
- ²³ Kinukawa, "Story of the Hemorrhaging Woman", 291
- ²⁴ C.R Moss, "The Man with the Flow of Power: Porous Bodies in Mark 5:25-34," *JBL* 129 (2010): 510
- ²⁵ Moss, "Flow of Power," 510
- ²⁶ Moss, "Flow of Power," 510
- ²⁷ Tremper Longman et al., *Matthew & Mark* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 221
- ²⁸ Moss, "Flow of Power," 516
- ²⁹ Marcus, *Mark 1-8*, 359
- ³⁰ C.E. Powell, "The "Passivity" of Jesus in Mark 5:25-34," *The Bibliotheca Sacra* 162 (2005): 74
- ³¹ Powell, "Passivity," 73
- ³² Powell, "Passivity," 68
- ³³ Powell, "Passivity," 68
- ³⁴ Longman et al., *Matthew & Mark*, 224
- ³⁵ Carol L. Meyers, Toni Craven, and Ross Shepard Kraemer, *Women in Scripture : A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical books, and the New Testament*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 424
- ³⁶ Meyers, Toni, and Kraemer, *Women in Scripture*, 424
- ³⁷ Meyers, Toni, and Kraemer, *Women in Scripture*, 424
- ³⁸ Meyers, Toni, and Kraemer, *Women in Scripture*, 424
- ³⁹ Meyers, Toni, and Kraemer, *Women in Scripture*, 424
- ⁴⁰ Meyers, Toni, and Kraemer, *Women in Scripture*, 424
- ⁴¹ Longman et al., *Matthew & Mark*, 225
- ⁴² H. Wayne House, *The Role of Women in Ministry Today* (Nashville: T. Nelson, 1990), 155
- ⁴³ Ella Pearson Mitchell, *Women : To Preach or Not to Preach : 21 Outstanding Black Preachers Say Yes!*. Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1991), 29
- ⁴⁴ Mitchell, *Preach or Not to Preach*, 30

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