Abstract
This is the full issue of Volume 3, Issue 1 of Verbum, published in Fall 2005 by the REST Club at St. John Fisher College. Articles from this issue are available as separate PDFs at http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/verbum/vol3/iss1/

This article is available in Verbum: http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/verbum/vol3/iss1/12
VERBUM

St. John Fisher College
Religious Studies Department Club

Fall 2005
Letter from the Editor

I am pleased to announce the publication of another edition of *Verbum*.

It is pleasing to see the Fisher community involved in this project with the submissions of articles, poetry, research papers, and varied essays. The pieces of writing that you will read in this issue are a reflection of the insights offered by this community to the larger world around. I encourage you to read this edition with an open mind and an open heart.

With this edition comes a new section of *Verbum*: poetry. We feel that by including religious poetry, we open the door to a new variety of submissions. Moreover, these submissions will add a new and stylish element to the publication. We hope that you enjoy this new element of *Verbum* and will perhaps consider writing your own piece for future issues.

I would also like to take the time to thank all of the people who helped make this edition of *Verbum* possible. Namely, the Faculty and Alumni submission review committees and the members of the Religious Studies Club who encouraged students to submit their work. I would also like to thank the people who chose to submit their writings. Whether or not the individual writings were chosen for this edition, it is their work that makes this publication possible.

We would also like to thank those members of the larger Rochester community whose support of this publication is appreciated.

I hope you enjoy reading this edition of *Verbum* as much as we did putting it together. May it inspire you to write and submit your own work for the Spring 2006 semester.

Best wishes to all.

Matthew Cotugno
REST CLUB President
Special Thanks to

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Alumni Corner

Contributions from the Department of Religious Studies Alumni
Living Our Faith

By Jodi Rowland

Recently I was at the Hands of Christ award ceremony, which is an award for current high school seniors who display leadership qualities within their catholic communities. At this ceremony, fourteen of the youth from Holy Trinity in Webster, where I am currently youth minister, along with hundreds of other seniors within the Diocese of Rochester, were honored for their service and leadership. During the ceremony, the celebrating priest asked how many of those seniors knew what he or she wanted to do with his or her life. A small amount knew exactly what he or she would do. Then, the priest posed the question to the rest of the congregation—parents and friends, those over 18—how many of us now are doing something different than what we thought we would do in high school? Of course I raised my hand. In high school, I wasn’t even catholic, yet. (I converted while in college). And, I wanted to be a veterinarian. Clearly a lot changed for me since high school; and not to get too sentimental or sound “mushy,” the reason is my studies at St. John Fisher College—where I found an academic thirst and hunger for religious studies.

As a youth minister, I have the privilege of working a job that is centered around my faith. Every day that I come to work, I come knowing that I am not just doing a job; I’m living my faith. Putting aside the fact that I work for a church, I know it is possible for me to live out my faith while working at another job. For example, if I do decide to become a veterinarian, or further pursue my love for creative writing, I could live out my faith through both. As a veterinarian, I would be helping animals and the families that own these animals. As a writer, I could express my faith and love for God, which in turn could inspire others. The same is true for others in the world who are currently living out
their faith through their careers. A nurse helps the sick and wounded. A lawyer can choose clients and cases based on morals. And so on.

To sum up what I’m trying to say is that it truly does not matter what career a person chooses to go into. What matters is the way that person does his or her job. For me, I am blessed with working with wonderful people, being surrounded by exuberant and exciting youth; and most of all, putting my education in religious studies and life to use—not just for me, but for all those I have the pleasure of coming in contact with. As a youth minister, I have the ability to continue growing as a person, intellectually, spiritually, and communally. Even though my career path went in a completely different direction than what I thought it would be, I am glad that I am here and that I have the knowledge and strength and courage to continue down this career/life path.
Brief Essays

*** Prize for Brief Essay  Provided by
David Mammano of

- Brief Essays reviewed by St. John Fisher College Alumni
  Jodi Rowland and Jonathan Schott
Love, a true fruit of the spirit

By Courtney Ren

Love. Where would we be without love? Love is a strong reoccurring theme in our everyday lives and in the Bible. It is one of those emotions that we can not live without. Love causes so many different reactions and sensations that sometimes it is very overwhelming in both good and bad ways. But then again love makes everything better and the world would be nowhere without love. This raises another question; what is love and how do we know if it is “true” love or not? The Bible and life have a few suggestions to that always unanswered, can’t really be explained, question.

Two of the most famous Bible verses are based on love and are meant to portray what love is and how one can know whether it is “true” love or not. In I Corinthians 13 the meaning and characteristics of love are portrayed. The chapter states,

“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. 2If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. 3If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

4Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. 5It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. 6Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

8Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. 9For we know in part and we prophesy in part, 10but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears.
11 When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. 12 Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

13 And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

According to this passage love is the very essence of living. Without love we would be nothing. Without love nothing is gained but everything is lost. Love is the most important fruit of the spirit.

In John 3:16 “true” love is exemplified. John 3:16 states, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son so that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.” How much more can someone love you? God sacrificed his own son so that we would always have his love. Moreover, God’s son, Jesus, was willing to accept the cross, sacrificing himself, so that we could live in love and happiness. If that’s not true love, then what is?

In society today many musicians try to portray through their music love, faithfulness and sacrifice for the one loved. Songs such as Dolly Parton’s “I will always love you”, Whitney Houston’s “Greatest Love of all”, and U2 with “Love And Peace Or Else”. All genres of music have that one great love song, whether is be about a specific person or the world in general, that everyone wants to hear over and over and over again no matter what. That song brings out of people emotions that they normally do not show. Music is a great way to help express how one feels about someone else. All of these songs allude to the values and characteristics that the Bible uses to speak about love. Love is everything good in the world. It is joy and happiness. It is what puts a smile on one’s face. It is peace.
So how do we know it’s “true” love and where would the world be without love? The later is easier to answer than the former. Where would we be without love? Nowhere. That’s the easy answer. Without God’s love we would never have been born, we would never have existed, and this topic would never even have been an issue. Without love the world would be in worse shape than it already is. The songs that express love help the world to be a better place. They help people to see what love really is. The Beatles got it right when they sang “All we need is love.” “True love” means sacrificing yourself for the other. It means putting that person above the rest. It means making yourself number two to the person you love. As Jesus did for all of us. However, the answer to the question “How do we know it’s ‘true’ love” is harder to explain. It’s different for everyone. It may be that feeling you get when you see the person walk through the door, it may be the smile on your face that you can’t seem to get rid of, or just the feeling of freedom, carefree outlook and security you have knowing that that person will always be there for you no matter what. Whatever it is “true” love, is a gift from God. It brought us here and it will keep us happy while we live the life that God set out for us. Remember, “Love conquers all.”
ORIGINAL ESSAY

*** Prize for Original Essay provided by Catherine Agar
Broken Truth on the Ocean Floor

By Jeff Fate

Introduction

The following paper will confuse you; there are several seemingly unrelated themes starkly juxtaposed throughout. The topics are thrown together in seemingly random order to mimic what we see on television everyday - coverage of genocide in Rwanda immediately followed by Michael Jordan in Hanes boxers. The world is far more confusing than this paper.

It will be helpful for the reader to know that Kursk refers to a tragic submarine accident that occurred several years ago. Most reports agree that it was some sort of missile exercise that went wrong. Many men were trapped in the submarine on the ocean floor, living for several hours after the explosion. During that time Dmitri Kolesnikov wrote a short note to his wife before the emergency lights went out. There is also an interview of his wife that is included in the paper.

All of the work throughout is heavily indebted to the writings of Hannah Arendt, and Simone Weil.

Kursk 1: None of us can get to the surface

An explosion, an earthquake underwater, an exercise gone wrong, the mundane turned horrific, flooded cabins, floating corpses, and “Dmitri Kolesnikov writing, ‘None of us can get to the surface’ before carefully wrapping the note in plastic and placing it in his pocket. There it remained, 354 feet underwater, for 2 _ months.” (LaFraniere, 24)

Is this a recurrence of Cupid and Psyche? Is it the soul that is trapped here in a blue/black cathedral tomb, with the lethal incense of carbon monoxide rising from a fire in the belly of the ocean? How far, how deep, has the soul sunk, and where is her love, her
redeemer? Where is she wandering now?

“Russian deputy Prime Minister Ilya Klebanov said today that although the note shows that a group of men survived at least a few hours at the back of the submarine, ‘there was no way to save the sailors.’” (LaFraniere, ) Political hand wringing, insincere apologies all around. Are we sorry that it was an accident? That they didn’t die in a real war? Are we crying because the soul was lost for something so trivial? What must it have been like to be eaten by the ocean? Who on earth was ever more alone, or distant, who was more detached than a small group of men dying in a steal tube on the ocean floor?

Perhaps this tragedy could serve as a metaphor for the current state of philosophy, or humanity in general. In the course of these few pages I want to meditate on the life of the soul in the body, and the body in the soul, in order to question the divide between contemplation and action, in hopes of finding a way to act as we think, and think while we act, to find a way to live in eternity, or as eschatology.

“It is only if we are no longer going to regard the flesh as the exclusive claimant to every satisfaction and an enemy of the soul, only if we reconcile it with the soul, that we shall be able, thus reintegrated, to recover peace with God and our fellow, helped by the example and power of Christ.” (Staniloea, 34)

We must dismantle Plato’s myth, the Manichaean myth, where the soul is cast as something that must be freed from matter in order to dwell in a blissful world of abstractions, a realm of light where thought can move without friction, never slowing or growing tired, but only after it is freed from the body.

“Everything that is, is meant to be perceived.” (Arendt, 19) “We appear and disappear from a pre-existent world.” (Arendt, 21) I am not necessary, which excludes the possibility of my being caused by necessity, but I exist in a body, a body that needs to be seen; it is meant to have interrelation with others, even with God.
I have skin, a face, a mask of ‘seeming’ or ‘semblance,’ that hides what is behind it, and at the same time it makes what is behind it meaningful. As I remember reading in a book by Annie Dillard, “You only have a face when other people are around.” I appear to be one thing but in reality I am something else, or maybe just something more. But how can what is within me, which by its very nature is invisible, be expressed without?

The life inside of the mind is a life of language, and therefore it is metaphorical and allegorical. We describe what is within by making comparisons with what is without, what we experience through the senses. These metaphors and analogies are not required by existence. All animals can communicate well enough without words. So it is only natural, with the advent of language, to begin to assume that thinking belongs to a different or higher order, and that metaphor is a means of detachment from the world; in the same way we could assume that an itch for religion is the same as an itch for drugs or pornography; it is a retreat into a private and unreal world.

This “two world theory,” as Arendt puts it, pits the soul against the body in an eternal polemic as though the one can and should exist without the other. According to this view the body is little more than a prison even though everything in reality seems to say otherwise. For instance, our inner organs support our outer appearance and life. The body cannot exist, cannot appear, without their largely silent and anonymous work. Like the temple enclosing the holy of holies within, or the bread of Holy Communion, what we appear to be encloses, enfolds, and makes present what we are. ‘I’ cannot exist without a body. Truly, to withdraw into the mind for contemplation, far from being a retreat, is to enter fully into active life; and to participate actively in life, in appearing knowingly, is to act in contemplation. What is the body without a skeleton? What is a skeleton without a body?
The Dove: Fixed signs through time.

Porcelain: shaped earth, petrified, made translucent by heat, worked into an intentional form, like a word. “It can enable us to think, that is, to have traffic with non-sensory matters, because it permits a carrying over, metapherein, of our sense experiences.” (Arendt, 110) What is in the mind crosses over the bridge of the body. The form can also fall into the wrong hands; it can be stolen; it is incapable of resistance or protest. Like words, it possesses a “majestic silence”, which perhaps gives the thoughts that led to its creation more credibility than they deserve. (Arendt, 112) In its innumerable shapes, so open to expression, it has an unending and ever growing vocabulary. When a piece of porcelain is fixed by heat it becomes a single word, to be seen but never read aloud, never making a sound. It takes on the form of a metaphor, analogous to a word. The thought is known in the Greek sense, it is seen, and it can only be heard when it is broken. The Logos is heard, when the Ikon is broken.

A Christmas ornament. My wife had a thin, delicate, porcelain dove, a sign of the descent of the dove, the Spirit of fire and peace coming down. It was a word made image, a gift that attached to itself so much more than the artist’s intent, so much more even than the sign itself. Think of the proliferation, the wealth of meaning and significance that the Sistine Chapel has accrued over the centuries, and with it the glowing smoky patina from ever burning oil lamps; or think of the worn away faces of saints, that have been kissed away from icons over the centuries. The meanings converge on the object, pushing against it until they break it and find a way through. That ornament that my wife had was a fixed, fired, convergence of many roads. One day it fell, and spoke when it hit the ground; it made a singular shrill sound, and lay in pieces. My wife started to cry.

How can we appear truly and authentically, and not merely as semblances? The world appears in the mode of “It seems to me”. (Arendt, 38) The sun will always appear to
rise and set, no matter how much science tells us otherwise. But is it entirely an illusion? Empirically we know that the sun doesn’t move, and yet we watch it move every day. The scientific truth and the senses are in conflict. One could become comfortable with the fact that the sun is still, and deny the senses their prominence in judgment, or one could assume that the sun is moving and still depend on how one likes to look at it or come at it from a different point and ask, “What does it mean?” Oddly, there seems to be no answer to this question, but it is the role of thought to ask it.

“Thinking annihilates temporal as well as spatial differences.” (Arendt, ) It is the opt-out of the man pushed by Arendt’s metaphorical past and future, or the man pushed in two directions by the evidence - the sun moves, but it is still. It is the jump into metaphor and analogy that comprises all of language which is a system of signs. The sun appears to rise but we know that it doesn’t move. Thinking goes to a different plane altogether and asks, ‘Why is it so beautiful?’ In other words, things like truth beauty love… can never appear in the realm of the senses. They can only be visualized as signs, as descriptions, that point to something beyond themselves. If we love the sign itself, the metaphor itself, the means by which we carry these immaterial entities into a world of appearance, sense, and bodily function, we commit idolatry, we worship words and things, and we sacrifice our children to the sun. Beauty is not made by language; it is carried over by language. So the real question is, how do these objects cross the threshold between silence and speaking, between invisible and visible? Only by being broken. An ideal speaks by being hit, broken, and mended.

Many things were broken in that tiny porcelain dove. The will breaks with the object of intent; at once there is a loss of many things in the bird’s shattered form, and yet porcelain can be glued back together. The almost imperceptible scars along its surface that can barely be seen but perhaps felt, can only lend the gracious dove more meaning. Like
when our marriage vows were broken, but were renewed again; and like when our Lord retained his scars but stood again alive in front of his disciples and Thomas fell down before him and said, “My Lord, and My God.” The true word is offended by breaking it, but it can be broken all the same. Can it be mended? It is truer if it can be mended? The truth appears when words are broken into actuality, when they offend or are offended, when they are smashed and obliterated. The truth is revealed in an apocalypse - the Logos breaking and mending. The wound of the porcelain dove, the wounded truth, is an unfolding disclosure of what is. When we refuse healing, meaning remains with the stone rolled over the tomb, dead and in pieces.

Poetry reveals an image through words.

“Poetry therefore even if read aloud, will affect the hearer optically; he will not stick to the words he hears but to the sign he remembers and with it the sights to which the sign clearly points.” (Arendt, 101) In the end, we think in signs, language is a system of signs. We “…turn the mind back to the sensory world in order to illuminate the mind’s non- sensory experiences for which there are no words in any language.” (Arendt, 106) Something happens deep within the body that is alien to the world but at the same time is at home within it, and existent because of it, because of the Spirit of God within it. We are animated earth - to borrow a phrase from St. Augustine. “It is clear that… it is not human reason or cognitive capacity that constitutes endowment from God, that gives humans life and makes them more than mere bits of dirt.”(Sapp, 55) The formation of the pain at the heart of this being (my self) into words is fundamentally an attempt to control and become the supreme arbiter of existence; cognition makes relativity the only unquestionable law. It is only at the level of groaning that cannot be uttered that we whimper the truth, at the level of the reactive question - “Why am I being hurt?” (Weil,315)- that we are born into.
Kursk 2: Widowed

“She recited from memory a poem he wrote her: “When the death hour comes/though I’m shooing these thoughts away/ I want to have time to whisper one thing: Darling, I love you.” He had also left his dog tags and a cross that he always wore, with her. When you know that you are going to die, what do you do? In the ninth chamber of a nuclear submarine exploded on its own in a battle against no one, with 23 other men and just enough dim emergency light to write within the lines and think of home, what do words mean? What does anything mean when we have wandered so far, so deep, so unquestioningly, into a blackness where we die for no reason or because we are too costly, or too much of an embarrassment to save, while later notes pile up and reveal that we suffocated hoping for escape?

+ 

So, “Why am I being hurt?” Perhaps this is the meaning of the first cry of a newborn. Language is entirely analogous images; letters are like dead metaphors - they used to be pictures. Each thought is linked with a sign that refers to something beyond itself, but the soul communicates without these signs. “Why am I being hurt?” is a pure perception that comes from within, it needs no external reference in the world of things. Remove the language, and the feeling still remains - Eli, Eli, Lama sabachthani? One needs no language to weep on the cross. The history of the despised body, the violent politic, the indifferent and unjust, is a history of idolizing the system of allegory, the relative law-made-god.

The highest truth or beauty is one that has been stripped of allegory and of authorship; it exists independently because it existed before its creator. The artist’s “personality has vanished.” (Weil, 318) As personality vanishes, so do words, and
something that is beyond words, which cannot be formulated in the mind because it lacks external sensory reference, emerges in action as soon as it is seen that action is linked to the soul as the body is to its internal organs.

“The tree is really rooted in the sky.” (Weil, 318) It is rooted in the source of its life, the object of adoration. The soul is rooted in meaning and the soul is without limit, therefore it desires an object without limit; it desires God. (Staniloae, 30) It desires to give worth, to worship an object beyond itself.

Man is not a rational animal, man is a worshiping animal.

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“Living With Other Gods” Contest

April 2005
Honorable mention winners
First Prize Winners

Jeffrey Goff and Brad Frith
Second prize winner

**Living With Other Gods**

By Utsav Bansal

We are all so different
And yet so utterly one, bound forever in our humanity.
Million leaves, but one tree. Multitude religions, but one God.
A banquet of diversity,
Creation celebrating its ingenuity, a dance of its unity.

Moses, Allah, Christ, and Ram
Manifestations of that one single entity.
The Synagogue, Mosque, Church and Temple, homes of our Beloved,
He beaconing us with bells and calls, an invitation to our purity.

I have experienced
Immense peace when lighting the menorah, in the memory of Etty Hillesum.
Remembering her joy of living, always brings to me exuberant alacrity.
Moses and the Ten Commandments, the Torah wrapped in piety,
B’rith Kodesh is just a step away, waiting for us in all humility.

Allah and Mohammed
I know you for long, have sought your blessings as a child, at the darga of Salim Chisti.
God boundless, everywhere, without a form, speaking to us through the words of the Koran.
Submission to your will, is all I ask of me, Oh God of great beauty,
The Islamic Center calls to us all, a place of amazing serenity.

I know the Trinity
Through Jesus, His arms flung wide to gather me in his embrace.
Love and kindness, without precedence, even heavens hath no such bounty.
The cross, the vine, the prayer, Mother Teresa, all pathways to eternity,
The Episcopalian Church, a place of Grace and spellbinding maturity.

Ganesh, all auspiciousness
Well, what can I say? I know no moment without you, not even a heartbeat away.
Brahma, Vishnu, Mahesh, Pure Awareness described as three.
Krishna and His Rasleela, an odyssey in ecstasy,
The Hindu temple of Rochester a place of rapture and creativity

So richly blessed, I share with you
My experience of Him touched by His presence and overflowing with His Love. Hold them close to your heart, and you will feel the same, drenched in His divinity. If you so desire, you may hold my hand and I will take you there. To a place where all differences dissolve, and where love is everywhere. A place of sublime Peace.
Siddarta G, he might have sat underneath his bodhi tree,
With the thoughts running in and out of his head.
And then he said; “I think what the world needs is a good teacher, a good preacher,”
“someone who could lay it all down for them.”
And then he thought; “Why not me? I could be that man as well as anybody else could
Be! Why not me? I’ll go and show them what they need to set them all free.”
Because it’s about time that we saw,
The human spirit is powerful.

There’s a god inside of me;
As strong as any god inside of you could be.
With all the people that you meet;
We’re living with other gods everyday that we breathe.

Confucius said, “I’m living in this world but I wish I was dead,”
“because society ain’t what it used to be to me.”
“I wish I could show them the way to go and the way to flow,”
“but who could tell them what to be or how to see?”
And then he thought; “Why not me? I could be that man as well as anybody else could
Be! Why not me? I’ll go and show them what they need to set them all free.”
Because don’t you know it’s time we saw,
The human spirit is powerful.

There’s a god inside of me;
As strong as any god inside of you could be.
With all the people that you meet;
We’re living with other gods everyday that we breathe.

I’m not talking about religion, or the things that we believe,
Or the things we teach or the things we see now.
I’m talking about the human spirit inside you and me,
And it’s begging to be free now.

Don’t ever underestimate
What you could do for, what you could do for,
All the people, all the people,
Living in this world.

And so you came to town and you saw the world spinning around,
A little off the way it’s meant to be.
The you said, “The people need someone or something,”
“to pick the up from the dust and put them on their feet.”
“Why not me? I could be that thing as well as anybody else could be.”
And then I say, “Why not me? I could show them what they need to set them all free.”
Because it's about time we saw,
The human spirit is powerful.

There’s a god inside of me;
As strong as any god inside of you could be.
With all the people that you meet;
We’re living with other gods everyday that we breathe.
Poetry Bend

*** Prize provided by the Religious Studies CLUB

- Poems reviewed by: REST Club Officers

***

“Holy Spirit”

Floridian sun descends behind virgin pines as blasts of orange bombard the sky, declaring in union with the three seated below God’s glory.

His heavenly symphony plays for all to hear
sweet sounds caress them who but listen—
patiently waiting, the seraphim serenade.

Falling darkness dampers not their spiritual exercises
panting and hustling to get closer to you,
brows dripping in devotion, like yours at Calvary.

Spirit like a pure dove enters in a grand crescendo
affirming the sanctity of this spot, these hearts—
united in Christ to serve—that gladly flutter for none like you.

-Justin Miller

Lord I am becoming incense
Rising
Before your altar,
A cloud
Wholly consumed by you.

Empty now
To approach you then
Plentiful in worship
When glory completes
My lack
Of sight.

As I strip off the old man here,
Adam left dead
At the waters edge,
Receive me body and soul
To wander
The desert with you.

- Jeff Frate
You made the windy nights that wail like a baby’s cry.
Sitting alone on the edge of the bed in a dark room
watching the trees toss helpless arms above their shaking heads,
the safely wholesome flesh that covers us in the day
is stripped away. No one laughs or eats or says, “I’m fine.”
We’re all the bones of a sorrow so bare we dare not speak;
the weeping, sobbing wind our voice.
You made the windy nights that strip away our flesh leave it tattered in the gale we are bones and rags, contorting like the trees so we cry your name
we say, “who are you?” and listen in the wind for a reply.

- Catherine Agar
Research Papers

*** Prize provided by Dr. Michael Costanzo

***
Surism: Islamic Mysticism

By James Smith

Part I- Introduction

Sufism is the esoteric aspect of Islam. The aim of Sufis is to gain direct knowledge of the eternal, in this life, as opposed to the exoteric, or traditionalist, aspect of Islam which focuses on achieving a state of blessedness after death by way of carrying out divinely prescribed works. The history of Sufism is a long one, some tracing it directly back to The Prophet Muhammad.

Sufi mysticism shares many things in common with mystics of other religions such as Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism and Zoroastrianism. This is one of the major critiques of Sufism by Muslim scholars, that its origins are not solely from Islam, but borrowed from other religions. Some of the thoughts expressed by myself may also be the same as other writers. Regardless of various critiques, Sufism is widely accepted by the Muslim community and is often referred to as “the heart of Islam.”

Part II- What is Sufism?

The word Sufi is derived from the Arabic word al-tasawwuf, which means “divine wisdom.” It has also been suggested that the term Sufi is a derivation of the Greek word for wisdom, sophia. Sufis--as practitioners of Sufism are called--see themselves to be on a spiritual journey toward God. While all Muslims believe that they are on the pathway to God and will become close to God in Paradise after death and the ‘Final Judgment’, Sufis also believe that it is possible to become close to God and to experience this closeness, while one is still alive. The mystic seeks to accomplish this by means of what he or she describes as the tar_qah (the path) that will lead a person to become one with the Creator. (Farah, 214)
Furthermore, the Sufis assert attainment of the knowledge that comes with such intimacy with God, Sufis assert, is the very purpose of the creation. Here they mention the hadith in which God states, "I was a hidden treasure and I loved that I be known, so I created the creation in order to be known." Hence, for the Sufis, there is already a momentum, a continuous attraction on their hearts exerted by God, pulling them in love towards God. They experience the joyful ecstasy of being gently drawn to their Eternal Beloved.

The path of Sufism can be broken down into stages, though the number of stages may vary depending on the Sufi master. “Sufi writers agreed, first of all, that the journey of the soul could be broken down into identifiable stages. ‘Attar’s seven valleys present an abridged version; most Sufi masters break the journey into many more stages. Many also distinguish between stations (maqamat), which the Sufi arrives at through discipline and effort, and states (ahwal), which are a pure gift of God’s grace and cannot be manufactured by human effort.” (Brown, 155)

The first station on the path is Mujahada, which means the greater jihad, or spiritual struggle. This struggle is for the Sufi a struggle against himself, against his habits and passions.

The second station is Zuhd, an ascetic renunciation. At this stage, the Sufi relinquishes all desires for worldly things, including permissible ones.

The next station is Samt, in which Sufis must remain silent and control their tongue. “There are two types of silence: outer silence and silence of the heart and mind. The heart of one who trusts completely in God is silent, not demanding any means for living. The gnostic’s heart is silent in the face of the divine decree through the attribute of harmony.” (Brown, 156)

The fourth station on the Sufi path to enlightenment is Tawakkul, which is defined as trust in God. It is the desire to remain absolutely content with God, despite one’s dependence on
worldly things such as food and drink. When a S_f_ reaches this stage on the path, he has complete faith that God will provide for him, and he will remain serene even in the face of privation.

The next stage on the path is ‘Ub_d_ya, which means to be a slave, or servant, of God. It is during this stage when the S_f_ builds the Abd (servant) and Mab_d (master) relationship. “It is intermediate between worship and adoration: ‘One who does not begrudge God his soul is in the state of worship, one who does not begrudge God his heart is in the state of servitude, and one who does not begrudge God his spirit is in the state of adoration’” (Brown, 156)

The sixth station is Ir_da, in which S_f_s replaces all their worldly desires with a desire for God. This stage is associated with Rida, which is a satisfaction with what one has and becomes peaceful.

The next station on the path is Dhikr, or remembrance of God. This is a state in which the S_f_ is constantly aware of God. “[Dhikr] is the very foundation of this path. No one reaches God save by continual remembrance of Him. There are two kinds of remembrance: that of the tongue and that of the heart. The servant attains perpetual remembrance of the heart by making vocal remembrance.” (Brown, 156)

The eighth station on the S_f_ path to God is Wil_ya. Wil_ya is the friendship with God. This stage can be likened to Sainthood, in that the S_f_ in the stage of Wil_ya has given himself entirely over to God. He has been granted protection from major sins and has been given the ability to perform miraculous deeds.

The ninth stage is Ma’rifa, which is characterized as having mystic knowledge. It is a form of revelation in which knowledge enters the heart directly from God. “[Ma’rifa is] the attribute of one who knows God (may he be exalted) by His names and attributes and is truthful
toward God by his deeds, who then purifies himself of base qualities and defects, who stands long at the door, and who withdraws his heart continually (from worldly matters). Then he enjoys a goodly nearness to God, who verifies him as true in all his states. The temptations of his soul cease, and he does not incline his heart to any thought that would incite him to other-than-God.” (Brown, 157) This stage is also considered the ascending path because it is at the stage of Ma’rifa that the S_f_ becomes very near to God.

The next station is Mahabba, the loving stage. In this state the S_f_ glorifies God and tries to gain His pleasure. He cannot bear to be separated from Him, urgently longs for Him, makes continual remembrance of Him, and finds no comfort in anything other than Him. It is at this stage that one gives himself over completely to God.

The eleventh and final station is Shawq. Shawq is a yearning or passionate longing for meeting the Creator. “Longing is the state of commotion in the heart hoping for meeting the Beloved.” (Brown, 157)

It is important to remember that there are many different versions of the stations on the path of S_f_ enlightenment. The steps listed above are only an abridged version; they are some of the more interesting stages of the tar_qah, as viewed by al-Qushayr_, an eleventh-century S_f_ systematizer. Al-Qushayr_ enumerates a total of forty two subsequent stations and states. “According to a had_th, there are as many paths to God as there are children of Adam, and although, needless to say, an indefinite number of paths did not come into being, over time a large number of turuq (pl. of tar_qah) did develop that were able to cater to different spiritual and psychological human types. Usually called S_f_ orders, these paths have protected and promulgated the esoteric teachings of Islam to this day and still constitute a vital element in Islamic society.” (Nasr, 81)
Part III- Tracing the origins of Sufism

During the eighth and ninth centuries C.E., a new emphasis began to develop within the religion of Islam. Modern research has proven that the origin of Sufism cannot be traced back to a single definite cause. “The truth is that Sufism is a complex thing, and therefore no simple answer can be given to the question how it originated.” (Nicholson, 9)

Early Sufis were actually ascetics rather than mystics. The search for deeper meaning began with a pietistic asceticism, which in turn led to the development of the popular mystical side of Islam. “An overwhelming consciousness of sin, combined with a dread—which it is hard for us to realize—of Judgment Day and the torments of Hell-fire, so vividly painted in the Koran, drove them to seek salvation in flight from the world.” (Nicholson, 4)

The first traces of Sufism can be found here. The Sufis themselves however argue against such origins. They claim that Sufism originated with the Prophet Muhammad, that Muhammad was the first Sufi. This is important, for if the Sufi spiritual quest is to be viewed as legitimate, even within Islam itself, it must be rooted in the Qur’an and the sunna of Muhammad. In defense of Sufi legitimacy, some Muslims argue that it was simply a response to the growing materialism in the Islamic world.

To fully examine the traces of Sufism in history, we must look to the influences of other religions on Sufism. Christian influences can be seen in Sufi practices and many Gospel texts and sayings of Jesus are cited in the oldest Sufi biographies. “We have seen that the woolen dress, from which the name ‘Sufi’ is derived, is of Christian origin: vows of silence, litanies (dhikr), and other ascetic practices may be traced to the same source.” (Nicholson, 10)

Evidence of Neo-Platonic ideas is also found in old Sufi literature. Aristotle, Plato’s student, was a dominant figure in Muslim philosophy. Aristotle and a member of the school of
Neo-Platonism, Dionysius, made available to Muslims the Greek mystical ideas, which they readily adapted to their own religion.

Buddhism may also play a significant role in the development of Sufism. “We hear of flourishing Buddhist monasteries in Balkh, the metropolis of ancient Bactria, a city famous for the number of S_f_s who resided in it. Professor Goldziher has called attention to the significant circumstance that the S_f_ascetic, Ibr_h_m ibn Adham, appears in Moslem legend as a prince of Balkh who abandoned his throne and became a wandering dervish—the story of Buddha over again. The S_f_s learned the use of rosaries from Buddhist monks, and, without entering into details, it may be safely asserted that the method of S_fism, so far as it is one of ethical self-culture, ascetic meditation, and intellectual abstraction, owes a good deal to Buddhism.”

(Nicholson, 16-17)

Influences of other religions can also be found in Sufism. Traces of Jewish mysticism, Gnostism, Hinduism, and Zoroastrianism can all be found in the practices and literature of early Sufism.

Part IV - Islamic Criticism of Sufism

As shown in the previous section, it is possible that the origins of Sufism were greatly influenced by outside (Non-Islamic) sources. This is the source for a common criticism of Sufism, that it is bid'ah (innovation) and thus is not authentically Islamic. The S_f_response to this criticism is often that the S_f_way is not bid’ah, but is rooted in the Qur’an and originates directly from the Prophet Muhammad. Muhammad often meditated for days at a time in the cave atop Mt. Hir_’ which overlooks Mecca. This is also the place where he received the first revelation from God. The Prophet’s night journey, in which he flew to Jerusalem on the winged
steed, Bur_q, had a mystical quality to it that represented a journey to God. According to Sufi doctrine a number of verses in the Qur’an provide clear support for their mysticism. Perhaps the most often quoted as a proof is Surah 24:35, “Allah is the Light of Heaven and Earth! His light may be compared to a niche in which there is a lamp; the lamp is in a glass; the glass is just as if it were a glittering star kindled from a blessed olive tree, {which is} neither Eastern nor Western, whose oil will almost glow though the fire has never touched it. Light upon light, Allah guides anyone He wishes to His light.”

Another of the criticisms often leveled at Sufis by their fellow Muslims is that they withdraw from social and political activity. This may or may not be true depending on geographic location. For example, S_f_s in Muslim central Asia often participate in public affairs, including warfare. Most S_f_ orders still hold true to the five Pillars of Islam, including the public and societal deeds that they entail. Despite the various criticisms of Sufism, it is widely accepted by Muslim communities worldwide.

**PartV- S_f_ Interpretation of the Qur’an**

Just as the Qur’an is the cornerstone of the Islamic faith, so the S_f_s interpret the Qur’an to their own purpose. Since Sufism is the inner aspect of Islam, its doctrine can be said to be a commentary on the esoteric nature of the Qur’an itself. Islamic scholar, Titus Burckhardt in his work, An Introduction to Sufism, writes: “It might be said that the ordinary exegesis of the Qur’an takes the expressions in their immediate meanings whereas the Sufi exegesis uncovers their transposed meanings, or, again, that while exotericism understands them conventionally the Sufi interpretation conceives their direct, original and spiritually necessary character. When, for example, the Qur’an says that he who accepts God’s guidance will be guided ‘for himself’
and that he who remains ignorant is so ‘on himself’ (‘ala nafsihi) (see Qur’an, xvii, 14 and also iv,104) the exoteric interpretation is limited to the idea of the recompense and punishment. The Sufi understands this verse of the Qur’an in the sense of the sayings of the Prophet: ‘He who knows himself (nafsahu) knows his Lord.’” (Burckhardt, 42)

In the eighth and ninth centuries there emerged two main categories of Qur’anic exegesis. The first and most widely used is the tafs_r, the exoteric interpretation. It is based on analyses of grammar, linguistics, historical context, and relation to earlier Judeo-Christian scriptures. The second method is ta’wil, the esoteric interpretation. This interpretation is associated with the Sh_’ah and S_f_ exegetes. “For Sufis, ta’wil unlocked the hidden (b_tin) mystical meanings of the Qur’_n.” (Katz, 139) The different interpretations of the Qur’an represent the wide spectrum of Islamic belief. On one end of the spectrum, the exoteric tafs_r is used by the traditional Sunni Muslims. The ta’wil interpretation was used by the Sh_’ah, who intended to focus on the hidden meanings of the Qur’an to legitimize the claims of ‘Al_ to the caliphate and to support the theology of the Im_m. On the other end of the spectrum, the S_f_ Muslims used ta’w_l to explore their mystical and spiritual theology. “Sufi ta’wil is predicated on the conviction that the Qur’_n is a living document, a ‘thou’ rather than an ‘it.’ Esoteric insight depends on the continued spiritual growth of the individual Sufi. The relationship between Sufi and sacred word is dynamic: as the Sufi achieves greater levels of spiritual insight, the word reveals more of its hidden meanings.” (Katz, 140)

Part VI- Conclusion

As we can see, Sufism is a very complex aspect of Islam. There is disagreement over the nature of its origins and the legitimacy of its claim to be part of Islam. The history of Sufism is a
very long and fascinating topic. S_f_s are very dedicated to the spiritual path to reach the Divine in this life. Oftentimes, mysticism is given a negative connotation, and mystics are considered to be insane or somewhat disturbed mentally. The S_f_s, however, play an important role in Muslim society as the esoteric, inner aspect of Islam and they are often considered to be the “Heart of Islam.” They have certainly shown to be very passionate, as is shown in the works of Rumi and other S_f_writers. Sufism is a widely popular and growing form of belief that will remain strong for many years to come.

I wish to close with a brief poem by perhaps the greatest of all Sufi poets:

“Dance, when you’re broken open. Dance, if you’ve torn the bandage off. Dance in the middle of the fighting.
Dance in your blood.
Dance, when you’re perfectly free.” (Rumi)
Works Cited


Faculty Essay
Crumbs, Dogs, and Border-Crossings: A Postcolonial-Feminist Rereading of the Syrophoenician Woman Story

By Jane E. Hicks

From there [Jesus] set out and went away to the region of Tyre….A woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him…Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go — the demon has left your daughter."

—Mark 7: 24-30 (NRSV)

Recent scholarship in New Testament studies affords new insight into the character of the Syrophoenician woman in the Gospel of Mark, where she argues with a reluctant Jesus, urging, “even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” New insights build from materialist approaches to scripture, and taken together, the figure of the Syrophoenician woman as set in her likely social-historical context is suggestive for moral agency today. The passage as a whole has been interpreted in various ways. Some traditionalist Christian readings have found a moral about the power of faith, humility, and persistence suitable for women in the face of desperation and insult.1

1 Hugh Anderson acknowledges that the term 'faith', which appears in Matthew's version, does not appear in Mark's, and yet he still insists, "but for Mark her faith is no less real." The Gospel of Mark, New Century Bible Series (London: Oliphants, 1976) 191. See also, Edward Schweizer's supersessionist interpretation contrasting the "faith" of the Gentile woman to "Jewish legalism," while also acknowledging that the word 'faith' does not occur. The Good News According to Mark, trans, Donald H. Maduig (Richmond, Va: John Knox, 1970) 151, 153
One commentary from the late 1950s refers to John Calvin on this point. Calvin attributed the
greatness of the Syrophoenician woman's "faith" to the fact that she "pursued her course
steadily, through formidable opposition; [and] suffered herself to be annihilated."\(^2\) Countering
such conventional “male-stream” readings, some feminist interpreters like Sharon Ringe and
Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza have embraced the idea that the Syrophoenician woman bests
Jesus in the repartee,\(^3\) calling Jesus to account, even teaching him something about the nature of
his own mission. Aside from the gendered subtext, most commentators agree that the passage
in its literary context is intended to address the early Jewish-
Christian mission to the Gentiles,\(^4\) which was of issue in the early church and placed here into
Jesus' ministry.\(^5\)

My analysis of the passage emphasizes moral agency in relation to underlying
historical power dynamics, particularly those historical reconstructions that highlight ways our
assumptions about first-century gender and political economy shape the verbal exchange. By
agency, I mean the capacity to effect change at the bodily, interpersonal, and social-ecological
levels. Moral agency incorporates a dynamic, life-giving sense of power. Agency is a matter of


\(^3\) E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston:
Beacon, 1992); Sharon H. Ringe, “A Gentile Woman’s Story” in *Feminist Interpretation of the

\(^4\) Mark Shipp, "Bread to the Dogs? Matthew 15:21-25 and Tensions in Matthew's

\(^5\) Amy Jill Levine makes this point in her analysis of Matt. 15:21-28. The Matthean Program
of Salvation History: A Contextual Analysis of the Exclusivity Logia. Ph. D. diss (Duke
University, 1984).
levels. Moral agency incorporates a dynamic, life-giving sense of power. Agency is a matter of creative and unfinished potential. Moreover, I use the rubric of 'border crossing' to capture the sense of agency at play in the Syrophoenician woman story and to relate agency to the social and economic constraints that may well have been assumed by early Christian audiences. The metaphor of border crossing in current academic discourse is used to describe the actions of one who stands between communities of interest. Over a decade ago, Gloria Anzaldúa appealed to "borderlands," and by extension, “border crossing” as a way to represent the marginalization and multiple identities characteristic of what is known in Spanish as mestiza life, Chicano-Native American existence in the contemporary U.S. Southwest. More recently, Henry Giroux has presented border crossing as the mark of postmodern cultural production. We can think of our lives in terms of border crossing whenever we meet communities of difference: churches meeting mosques, affluent people encountering welfare recipients. When we encounter difference, the apparent homogeneity of groups turns out to be very suspect. No simple cultural homogeneity exits within the Catholic Church. There are Latino as well as Anglo, gay as well as straight, Catholics. As it applies to the story of the Syrophoenician woman, border crossing broaches how lines of difference are represented and transgressed between Jesus and this Gentile woman.


First-Century Borderlands

To access the proximate “borders” of life in first-century Roman Palestine, the likely point of origin for our story,\(^8\) exegetical work must bring together at least three prevailing social structures of the ancient world: patronage, honor-shame, and purity. These frameworks define material and ideological boundaries important for agency in the New Testament and provide lenses for mediating our understanding of the social construction of difference in relation to our own, otherwise very different historical situation.\(^9\) A full overview of the political and cultural landscape would delineate all of these. For purposes of this essay, however, I will pick up on patronage, mentioning honor-shame and purity systems only in passing because I believe that a materialist approach — one that begins with economic structures and their embedded cultural

\(^8\) The prevailing assumption is that a specific community and its problems contextualized the narrative. Mary Ann Tolbert challenges this assumption on the grounds that the narrative components of the gospel, unlike particular issues in Paul's letters, did not necessarily emerge organically out of a specific community and were not necessarily geared to a specific community's needs. Mary Ann Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel: Mark's World in Literary-Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) 303-5. Still, others like Ched Meyers side with an agrarian Palestinian origin to Mark's gospel. Meyers dates Mark as pre-70 CE, finding a "structural symmetry" between the time of Jesus and Mark, which would allow Mark to interpret the life of Jesus while "insert[ing] interests of his period into the story" Ched Meyers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988) 42. I would offer that many of the pertinent associations with the region and city of Tyre do not strictly require a rural context for Mark's gospel. Even if one placed the writing of Mark in a Roman occupied city, mid-first century, the economic plight of Jewish peasants, who were agriculturally based and suffering under heavy taxation, surely would have been know to the gospel writer. Hence the underlying economic and political themes within the story are not, strictly speaking, contingent on exact point of origin.

\(^9\) Acknowledging the problems of historicism here, I realize that gospel stories do not transparently present history, but instead provide an ideologically informed representation. These frames, gleaned in part from gospel texts, nonetheless lend some insight into meanings for storytellers, gospel writers and their first century audiences, and so for current interpretations as well.
systems — allows for the freshest rereading of the text and provides a meaningful context for gender and cultural difference in the story.

The patronage system in the historical context of early Judaism under the Roman Empire, above all, routinized economic dependency and shaped imperial and cultural domination. It was a system that supported Roman patriarchal colonialism, and for our purposes, serves as a window into the Jesus movement as a renewal movement within Judaism. With only a very small upper class and a vast lower class, influence in ancient Roman societies was mediated by roles of patron and client. Dominic Crossan argues that patronage-clientage extended to Mediterranean Jewish life in the first century. Certainly economic patronage imposed by Roman colonialism quickly penetrated the retainer class of Jewish society and even in Palestine formed the overarching economic structure within which less-formal social and economic exchange took place.

Where might Jesus have fit within this patronage system? One need only acknowledge the "portrait gallery" of Jesus, to borrow N.T. Wright's phrase, to realize that Jesus' status and healing miracles are interpreted in myriad ways. Within a structural- materialist hermeneutic, I concur with biblical scholars who stress political and economic dynamics when rereading the Jesus traditions. In Mark, Jesus is described as the son of a carpenter. Carpentry in the Greco-Roman world, unlike our modern conception of middle


strata, skilled labor, would have indicated lower-class status. According to Crossan, in an agrarian society, artisans like carpenters ranked below farming peasants "because they were usually recruited and replenished from its dispossessed members," those who were forced off their lands by debt, disease, or drought. In the ancient world at the start of the Christian era, the only status below artisan was that of outcast. Socially and economically, this places Jesus' origins well outside of the ruling and retainer classes of the Roman protectorate and within the most marginal of rural peasantry. Jesus' status delimits the economic and social boundaries within which his sayings and practices are to be interpreted. As Ched Meyers puts it, we must "appreciate the forms of political expression available to the uneducated and poor majority who were structured out of the dominant mechanisms of social power."

Anthropological studies of honor-shame provide another cultural-theoretical lens for understanding the moral universe of ancient Palestine. Based on patterns observed in communities in historical and geographical continuity with the ancient Mediterranean world, the honor-shame model is consistent with what we know of biblical communities

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12 Arguments against Jesus' peasant status derive from archeological discoveries at Sephoris, a Galilean city some four miles from Nazareth. (Most scholars believe Jesus was born and raised in Nazareth.) Construction in Sephoris, a thriving Roman-influenced urban center, may have supported artisans in satellite towns like Nazareth around the time of Jesus' youth. Under these local circumstances, carpentry could have indicated a livable trade.

13 Ramsay MacMullen, Roman Social Relations: 50 B.C.E. To A.D. 384 (New Haven and London: Yale, 1974) 17-18, 107-108, 139-140, 198; as cited in Crossan, Jesus, 24-25. As further evidence of Jesus' low status, Crossan points to the pagan philosopher Celsus who, writing in the late second century C.E., challenged the divinity of Jesus on the basis of class snobbery. Ibid., 27.

14 Meyers, Binding the Strong Man, 58.
in the region and provides a useful supporting heuristic from which to evaluate agency.¹⁵ One aspect of this honor/shame motif — the dyadic worldview — is particularly relevant here. Honor and shame were experienced within a communal culture very different from the pervasive individualism of our own Post-Enlightenment West. Group affiliation was paramount in the other-oriented culture of first-century Judaism. Honor and shame accrued through public and quasi-public exchanges like those typical of patronage, and were not simply attributed to a single individual, but to the pertinent social group as a whole.¹⁶ This is central to dyadic culture and, I think, critical for understanding the symbolic representations and interactions between Jesus and the Syrophoenician woman.

Societies tend to display coherence among the spheres of order: social, physical, and cosmological.¹⁷ Crossan makes this point in terms of the "symbolic interaction" of "body-society parallelism," meaning, "social symbolism is always latent in bodily miracle and that bodily miracle [in the New Testament] always has social signification."¹⁸ In this way, a miracle healing of a single individual across lines of social difference may be

¹⁵ Honor-shame culture in the New Testament world easily presupposes the patronage system and its attendant hierarchy of wealth and status. Both operate at the same time and function as mutually supportive sets of practices and means of social regulation.


¹⁸ Crossan, Jesus, 58-59.
viewed as subversive of the established order and an act of political-social, even economic resistance.

**Agency at the Borders**

Turning back now to the Marcan story and to Jesus' curious epithet, his initial refusal to help, how are we to understand and appropriate the story in light of first-century borders? Up to this point, I have argued that Jesus was located within and may have symbolically represented the rural peasantry of Jewish Palestine. But what do we know about the Syrophoenician woman in terms of her means and kinship affiliation? Two alternative readings of her relative status lend different connotations to the verbal exchange.

The first reading, and by far the most pervasive among late twentieth-century feminists, understands the Syrophoenician woman to be poor, needy, and of lesser status than Jesus. At the outset of the story, Jesus goes "away to the region of Tyre" where he meets a woman, "a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin." The Gospel of Mark is generally thought to have originated somewhere between Northern Palestine and Rome. As alluded to earlier, I have assumed a rural-Jewish, Northern-Palestinian origin to the gospel, prior to the destruction of the Temple. This location would mean that the underlying economic situation in the story is one of rural poverty and structural symmetry between the time of Jesus and the gospel of Mark. Such prevailing conditions of economic scarcity might suggest that the Syrophoenician woman was poor, and, taken together with the fact that the story is set in the outlying areas belonging to the city of Tyre, may indeed mean that the woman belonged to the peasant class which inhabited the area.
Supporting evidence of the Syrophoenician woman's low position is derived from textual clues, including the fact that she is a woman. Though we cannot know definitively the Syrophoenician woman's economic status, one might infer from the fact that she goes out alone for help that there is no one else to send, no male relative to lend support or to represent her interests in public. In the midst of rural poverty and large-scale displacement from family lands, accentuated by the contrast to the urban wealth of Tyre, deprivation would be a given. The Syrophoenician woman as single mother in the rural area outlying Tyre, would know scarcity as a daily reality. Perhaps she would put together scraps for a meal in order to feed her daughter. It is the intelligence of survival.

The poor see the crumbs. For her, the crumbs are enough, or at least something of real value that will provide much needed sustenance.19

If this is indeed the sort of struggle that early audiences would have associated with the Syrophoenician woman, then Jesus' actions, refusing his healing power to a desperate woman and her ailing daughter and comparing them to dogs, with all the connotations of impurity, are morally indefensible.20 Moral agency as border crossing would focus on the Syrophoenician woman and her willingness to step out of feminine modesty, to speak in public, and to intrude upon men's company, as Elisabeth Schüssler

19 A parallel can be drawn with the bleeding woman in Mark 5. There, time was scarce. Jesus was hurrying to reach Jairus' failing daughter in time, when the hemorrhaging woman touches Jesus from behind. Instead of rushing onward toward Jairus' house, Jesus stops to speak to the woman, and as a result Jairus' daughter dies before Jesus arrives. In the end, though, time does not limit the power of God. Jesus raises Jairus' daughter from the dead. Similarly, here in chapter 7, scarcity does not limit the sustaining power of God. I thank Professor Brigitte Kahl for mentioning this connection.

20 Jesus' remark is most certainly insulting, as Sharon Ringe argued in her well-known feminist interpretation of the passage in the mid-1980's: Jesus' comment is "flippant, even cruel, defying justification." Ringe, "A Gentile Woman's Story," 65-72, 69.
Fiorenza has noted. The fact that Jesus learns something from a lowly woman and publicly acknowledges that learning is also an instance of transgressing convention, whether that learning is about the nature of his mission or an economy of scale with respect to the value of a few crumbs.

But this is not the only possible reading. Tyre was a predominantly Gentile city with an extensive relationship with its Jewish neighbors. Commentaries almost uniformly interpret the characterization of the woman as a Syrophoenician as meaning Greek or Hellenistic in culture, and we also know that Tyre was hellenized prior to the first century. The combination of the proximity to Tyre and the woman's Syrophoenician ancestry recall the story of Ahab, Jezebel, and Elijah in I Kings 21, where Jezebel, a Phoenician princess, was condemned to be eaten by dogs. A Syrophoenician woman from the region of Tyre, from a first-century rural-Jewish perspective, might well represent an urban member of the ruling class whose interests were in opposition to the interests of rural Jews.

Tyre is mentioned several other times in the New Testament. In Acts, Paul visited a Christian community in the immediate vicinity of Tyre (Acts 21:3-7); Herod supplied food to Tyre and Sidon (Acts 12:20); and Paul visited by ship from the west (Acts 21:3-7). These references suggest that Tyre was a well-known commercial center with

21 But She Said, 103-104.
23 In the I Kings story, Jezebel was condemned for having Naboth killed so that Ahab could take over his vineyard (v.23).
24 Edwards, Anchor Bible Dictionary.
significant trade relations along the Mediterranean. Gerd Theissen takes the point further, arguing that Tyre was a rich city, dependent for foodstuffs upon the agricultural production of its outlying areas, including its neighbors in Northern Palestine. Tyre would have owned surrounding territories and could have claimed agricultural proceeds from these, but it would also have used its considerable clout and wealth to acquire surplus from Jewish villages, sometimes leaving less than enough for those who actually worked the land. One can imagine that the exploitative situation was exacerbated during times of drought and famine; urban centers likely took their allotment of food first, leaving shortages of food in the countryside.

If the Syrophoenician woman's designation as a Greek together with the setting near Tyre indicate that the woman was indeed an urban elite whose life presumed the exploitation of the Jewish peasantry, then the verbal exchange between Jesus and the woman takes on a different nuance. Given these underlying power dynamics, Jesus' household metaphor in which the bread goes first to the children of Israel would be understood by early listeners as a reversal of the reigning order. His initial speech act and subsequent healing might have served to acknowledge the legitimate grievance against certain practices like the diversion of harvests to wealthy urban centers. As Theissen observes, this would explain the metaphorical shift from sickness and healing to food and chronologically ordered feeding.


26 Ibid.

27 Ibid., 65.
restructuring. In the end, we still must contend with Jesus' apparent callousness toward the daughter's suffering and his play upon gender and impurity, but the structural social and economic relations, again within this range of assumptions, might explain a dimension of Jesus' reluctance.

**Conclusions**

Whether the passage is interpreted as a chastising of wealth and a reversal of the reigning social order or as a celebration of an uppity woman is, in the end, a matter for interpretive communities to decide. Such decisions are not made strictly for the sake of historical accuracy, but also for the sake of speaking to our present-day concerns from within particular locations. As New Testament scholar Louise Schottroff characterizes her materialist hermeneutic in *Let the Oppressed Go Free*, meaning in biblical texts derives in part from questions that emerge from contemporary movements. Authority resides in the liberatory faith and practice to be discerned in the biblical witness and “not so much in the biblical text itself.” Likewise, as Larry Rasmussen argues from Lutheran perspective, we must notice the impact of readings on the agency of readers, including implications for moral communities shaped by Jesus’ teaching.

In keeping with these liberationist hermeneutics, I would argue that from the contemporary North American perspective, the Syrophoenician woman story is best interpreted as weighing against unchecked social advantage and in favor of a border-

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crossing agency. This interpretation accounts for alternative historical reconstructions that lend meaning to the passage and, at the same time, contextualizes gender within ethnic-cultural and economic institutions of the first century—institutional perspectives, which, in turn, can be recognized from our late-capitalist, postmodern vantage.

Jesus and the Syrophoenician woman defy first-century conventions of power and deference, suggesting potential renewal in the form of new commitments to social and economic cooperation. At the level of social signification, to transgress boundaries and to heal bodies challenges the status quo and reworks relations of power. Here Jesus and the Gentile woman act in the full context of everyday life. Their respective moral capacities and responsibilities are not clear-cut givens established apart from their historical context. Rather moral capacity is creatively realized in and through conversation across ethnic-cultural, economic, and gender lines, where these borders indicate a real base in the lived world.

On best reading, then, the healing miracle at the end of the story is premised upon a new social relationship, one that emerges through engagement with—if not in overcoming—difference. Parties associated with long-standing and opposing interests work out healing (salvation) between them. Today we might think of people speaking up for themselves: small farmers fighting to save their family farms, laypersons in the churches absolutely demanding that their voices be heard in the wake of abuse, indigenous and immigrant communities resisting obliteration within dominant cultures and expanding market economies, and people who keep solidarity with them who aren’t themselves directly victimized. As persons looking to the Jesus traditions for moral guidance in times of social unease and increasing disparities of wealth, attention to basic conditions of survival and well being is good moral practice.

Such a reading is both hopeful and humbling. Who are we in this story? Can we reasonably
identify with the long-suffering disenfranchised? Or can we more reasonably identify with the representative of a wealthy, ethnically-privileged group? If the Syrophoenician woman, by her very identity as a Greek-speaking person culturally allied with urban rulers, represented power and privilege vis-à-vis early Jewish-Christian audiences, her willingness to engage the other, to hear Jesus’ rebuke, and to answer back on his terms, all without relinquishing the legitimacy of her claim, offers a positive model of agency as border crossing for those of us who share some measure of status and influence. So too does her witty retort if she is understood to be of lesser means. Either way, we can be the Syrophoenician woman insofar as we risk solidarity and difference.