

Mark 5: 21-42 Exegesis

By Jason Strange, Spring 2025

Introduction

John Mark of Jerusalem authored the shortest and earliest synoptic Gospel (Cole, 1961). With Peter ageing in Rome (mid-60s CE), Mark's Gospel was written to supplement the apostle's preaching.

It is generally biographical and includes apocalyptic rhetoric aimed at ordinary Gentiles who converted as Roman Christians. During the time of Emperor Nero, Messianic Jews were blamed for a fire in Rome and summarily executed. Torture and Persecution were part and parcel of this passing apostolic age.

Mark's Gospel interweaves two contrasting stories: "The woman suffering from haemorrhage is the centre of a minor miracle of love and mercy set in the context of the healing of Jairus' daughter." (Cole, 1961, p. 101)

This stylistic device deliberately invites discerning juxtaposition, "...the delay caused by the healing of the woman is integral to the Jairus story." (Witherington, 2001, p. 184)

At this point in Jesus' ministry, where he interacts only with Jews, these two accounts of restoration of life involve two very different people. The interplay augments deeper issues of gender, class and respectability with potential cultural barriers to healing and resurrection. The story also features in Matthew and Luke:

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²¹ When Jesus had again crossed over by boat to the other side of the lake, a large crowd gathered around him while he was by the lake. ²² Then one of the synagogue leaders, named Jairus, came, and when he saw Jesus, he fell at his feet. ²³ He pleaded earnestly with him, "My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live." ²⁴ So Jesus went with him. (NIV, 2011)

We learn Jairus is one of the leaders in the synagogue. He is respectable, conventionally religious and married with children, but above all, he is male. When it comes to assessing privilege within his society, Jairus ticks all the boxes. No wonder it was enshrined until Mark wrote it down, including his name. Despite all Jairus's prestige, he is the first to fall at the feet of the obscure Galilean Rabbi.

A large crowd followed and pressed around him. ²⁵ And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. ²⁶ She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better, she grew worse. ²⁷ When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, ²⁸ because she thought, "If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed." ²⁹ Immediately, her bleeding stopped, and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering.

The stark contrast is an anonymous woman in the crowd. Regarding social respectability, she was nothing; she was also unclean and excluded from public acts of worship. (see Lev.15:25-30). She's bankrupt from years of medical costs and most likely divorced. Remembered for the sort of person she was, not for herself, not named. Yet, "In contrast, the true physician will cure this woman without charge." (Witherington, 2001, p.187)

³⁰ At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, "Who touched my clothes?" ³¹ "You see the people crowding against you," his disciples answered, "and yet you can ask, 'Who touched me?'" ³² But Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it.

³³ *Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth.* ³⁴ *He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering."*

She is the second person to fall at his feet: "The text says she told Jesus "the whole truth," which suggests that she understood that she had not approached the Master or dealt with this problem in a proper manner." (Witherington, 2001, p.188)

Something more societally palpable occurs through kneeling. Restoration appears to go to a deeper level, such as the Woman caught in adultery whose accusers retire, the Legion who requests to join Jesus, the Magdalene whose oil and tears predict her role at the tomb, and the Leper of Mark 1:40-45, whose testifying to common folk dwarfs instructions to present himself solely to the priesthood.

³⁵ *While Jesus was still speaking, some people came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue leader. "Your daughter is dead," they said. "Why bother the teacher anymore?"* ³⁶ *Overhearing^[a] what they said, Jesus told him, "Don't be afraid; just believe."*

The culture appears entangled within its protocols. Yet this Rabbi somehow circumnavigates convention. "But man's despair was God's opportunity. Christ had already shown he was Lord of nature; it was necessary that He here be shown as Lord of life. This is an important proof of Godhead..." (Cole, 1961, p.103)

³⁷ *He did not let anyone follow him except Peter, James and John the brother of James.* ³⁸ *When they came to the home of the synagogue leader, Jesus saw a commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly.* ³⁹ *He went in and said to them, "Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead but asleep."* ⁴⁰ *But they laughed at him.*

It's hard to conceive that professional mourners' were once a thing in antiquity.

After he put them all out, he took the child's father and mother and the disciples who were with him, and went in where the child was. ⁴¹ *He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha koum!" (which means "Little girl, I say to you, get up!").* ⁴² *Immediately the girl stood up and began to walk around (she was twelve years old). At this they were completely astonished.*

Perhaps the parents might have mistaken 'being asleep' to mean an opportunity for necromancy. Jesus was already accused of being in league with the devil (cf. Mark 3). However, the metaphor is short-lived; the girl rises, and all witnesses are stupefied.

Conclusion

Jairus discards his respectability, a pillar of society who falls at Jesus' feet and begs him repeatedly. Here, Jairus is just a father whose little girl is on the cusp. When he re-enters the room, she might be just a sleeping corpse. But on leaving, the mourners will face their own enigma!

The anonymous woman has quite different barriers to overcome. Ceremonially unclean, she is perhaps even met with violence for daring to be in public. She has to overcome her own internalised rejections, possibly justified, given the years.

Typically, commentaries highlight the 12-year-old girl and the 12-year bleeding. They are also nuanced with the 12 tribes and 12 disciples. Yet the connection between faith and healing must be witnessed and contrasted "...between veiling to those outside and disclosure to those inside" (Witherington, p.191).

Two thresholds of personal barriers required kneeling to cross. Jairus was made vulnerable in public, and the woman healed in secret. Jairus' daughter was resurrected secretly, and the woman was restored publicly.

The Hebrews regarded the knees as a symbol of strength, to bend the knee is, therefore, to bend our strength before the living God, an acknowledgement of the fact that all that we are we receive from Him. (Pope Benedict XVI, 2002).

For me, the knees have it.

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