

Models of Faith: Women in Mark's Gospel Interpreted by Jerome, Ambrose and Ambrosiaster

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SUMMARY: 1. The Woman with the Flow of Blood; 2. The Syrophenician woman; 3. The Poor Widow; 4. The Woman who Anoints Christ; Conclusion.

It is generally agreed that women play an important role in the Gospel of Mark. There are about fifteen different female characters, depending on whether we also count the “sisters of Jesus” (Mark 6:3), “many other women” (Mark 15:41), and other marginal references. Some women play a negative or ambivalent role, but in most cases they are mentioned in a positive context.¹ Four of them exhibit exemplary qualities of faith and discipleship: the woman with the flow of blood (Mark 5:25-34, par. Matt 9:20-22), the Syrophenician woman (Mark 7:24-30, par. Matt 15,21-28), the poor widow (Mark 12:41-44, par. Luke 21:1-4), and the woman who anoints Jesus (Mark 14:3-9, par. Matt 26:6-13; John 12:1-8; Luke 7:36-50).

In this paper, I will briefly explore references to these four female characters in Jerome, Ambrose, and Ambrosiaster, regardless of whether they comment explicitly on the Gospel of Mark, or on the parallel verses from other gospels.

1 Cf. *Witherington, Ben*: The Gospel of Mark. A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 54-55; *Edwards, James R.*: The Gospel according to Mark. The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 417; *Donahue, John R. – Harrington, Daniel J.*: The Gospel of Mark. Sacra Pagina Series 2 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2002), 29-34.

I. The Woman with the Flow of Blood

The woman with the flow of blood is mentioned only briefly. In Ambrose's treatise *On Virginitate*, she serves as a model of persistence and resilience. Even though tired and ill, she seeks Jesus unceasingly. Ambrose lends her the words of Jeremiah 17:16 (according to the Septuagint), *I did not labour when following you (Non laboraui sequens post te)*. He adds that those who follow Christ do not labour, because He summons all that labour and are burdened, and gives them rest.²

Jerome emphasizes her faith. Previously, she spends all that she has on doctors. Having lost everything she possesses, she cries out to the Lord in anguish: "Her touch on the hem of his garment was the cry of a believing heart." This is why Jerome calls her "the figure of the assembly of God gathered from all nations."³ Jerome also observes the progressive stages of her recovery: "As long as she was hemorrhaging, she could not come into his presence. She was healed and then came before him. She fell at his feet. As long as she had been cured, it was enough for her to cling to his feet."⁴

Similarly, Ambrosiaster mentions the woman in his polemical treatise *On Fate (Quaest. 115)*. The Lord says, *Ask, and it will be given*

- 2 Ambrose, *De virginitate* 16,103 (SAEMO 14/2, 82): "Hoc dixit illa mulier et stetit sanguis. Quamuis fatigata, quamuis aegra, quae diu quaesierat Christum, dixit tamen: *Non laboraui sequens post te; neque enim laborat quae Christum sequitur, cum laborantes ad se ut requiescant euocet. Ergo ipsum sequamur.*"
- 3 Jerome, *Tract. Ps.* 106 (CCL 78, 198): "Aemorrhousa totam substantiam suam inpendit in medicos: esuriens et sitiens anima eius in ipsa defecit. Sed quoniam perdidit suam universam substantiam, hoc est ecclesia de gentibus congregata, quia anima eius in ipsa defecit, clamavit ad Dominum cum tribularetur. Tactus fimbriae Domini, clamor credentis fuit." Trans. S.M.L. Ewald, *Hom.* 33, FOTC 48, 241.
- 4 Jerome, *Tract. Mc.* III (in Mc 5,30-43) (CCL 78, 471): "Quamdiu sanguinem fluebat, in ante uenire non poterat: sanata est, et in ante uenit. Et procidit ante pedes eius. Necdum audebat uultum aspicere: modo ut sanata fuit, sufficit ei ut pedes teneat." Trans. S.M.L. Ewald, *Hom.* 77, FOTC 57, 148, modified.

you... For everyone who asks receives... (Matt 7:7-8). If those who want to ask receive, no one can excuse oneself on the pretext of fate or necessity. According to Ambrosiaster, we are given the will to ask and to receive what we have asked. This is why Christ says to the woman: *Daughter, your faith has healed you* (Mark 5:34; Matt 9:22), which is not a result of fate but a benefit of her faith.⁵

2. The Syrophenician woman

Commentaries on the Syrophenician – or the Canaanite (according to Matthew) – woman are richer. Jerome sees in her three characteristics of the Church: faith, patience, and humility.

“Faith, by which she believed that her daughter could be healed; patience, by which she perseveres in prayer, after having been so often scorned; humility, by which she compares herself not with dogs but with puppies. (...) Note that this Canaanite woman with persistence first calls him son of David, then Lord, and finally she worships him as God.”⁶

- 5 Ambrosiaster, *Quaest.* 115,82 (CSEL 50, 348): “Si autem potestatis nostrae non essemus, quo modo diceret dominus: *petite et dabitur uobis; omnis enim qui petit accipiet?* si ergo qui uult petere accipiet, iam non est illud quod solet dici: ‘non quae uolumus, sed quae data sunt’, quia uoluntas a saluatore incitatur, ut petat et accipiat quod petierit. fati autem hoc esse dicunt, ut siue petat siue non petat, fati tamen quod aut malum aut bonum est consequatur. dominus autem hoc excludens ait: *filia, fides tua te saluam fecit*, ut non iam fati sit, quando fides percipit beneficium.”
- 6 Jerome, *In Matth.* II (ad 15,25, CCL 77,133) “*At illa uenit et adorauit eum dicens.* Mira sub persona mulieris cananitidis ecclesiae fides patientia humilitas, fides qua credidit sanari posse filiam suam, patientia qua totiens contempta in precibus perseuerat, humilitas qua se non canibus sed catulis comparat. (...) Nota quod ista cananitis perseueranter primum filium dauid deinde dominum uocet et ad extremum adoret ut deum.” Trans. T.P. Scheck, FOTC 117, 183.

Afterwards, Jerome casts the woman in opposition to the Jews, where she says: *Even the puppies eat from the crumbs that fall from the table of their masters* (Matt 15:27). Jerome explains:

“I know, she says, that I do not deserve the son’s bread. I am incapable of taking whole food or of sitting at the table with the Father. But I am content with what is left over for the puppies, so that by the humility of crumbs I might come to the greatness of the whole loaf. Oh, what a marvelous transformation of things! Israel was once a son, and we were the dogs. The arrangement of the titles is changed due to the difference in faith.”⁷

Ambrose emphasizes five qualities of the Canaanite woman: her faith, persistence, diligence, zeal, and humility. A contrast to the negligence and reluctance of the Jews is again emphasized. The woman arrives spontaneously from her remote country and assiduously begs for mercy. Her initiative and persistence are set as an example.⁸ In order to stress her perseverance, Ambrose notes that the kingdom of heaven is seized by the assiduous, not by the negligent (cf. Matt 11:12). The diligence of the former is rewarded; the obstinacy of the latter is rightly punished.⁹ *Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table* (Matt 15:27), she says. This means that the heathen, eager to earn the knowledge of the divine mysteries, are given preference over the negligent, even the insolent Jews. Jesus praises her zeal and humility because she does not immediately claim

7 Jerome, *In Matth.* II (ad 15,27-28, CCL 77,133-134): “*At illa dixit: etiam, domine, nam et catelli edunt de micis quae cadunt de mensa dominorum suorum. Scio me, inquit, filiorum panem non mereri nec integros capere posse cibos nec sedere ad mensam cum patre, sed contenta sum reliquiis catulorum ut per humilitatem micarum ad panis integri ueniam magnitudinem. O mira rerum conuersio. Israhel quondam filius, nos canes. Pro diuersitate fidei ordo nominum commutatur.*” Trans. T.P. Scheck, FOTC 117, 183.

8 Cf. Ambrose, *Expl. Ps.* 43,50 (CSEL 64, 296-297).

9 Cf. Ambrose, *Expl. Ps.* 43,51 (CSEL 64, 297).

the “depth of wisdom” (*profundum sapientiae*), but certain “crumbs of word of salvation” (*micas quasdam uerbi salutaris*).¹⁰

Ambrosiaster raises the question why the Lord, at first, refuses to give mercy to the Canaanite woman, even though he does not deny his favour to other strangers, such as the centurion (Luke 7:1-10) or the leper (Luke 17:11-19). The answer is that a profession of faith is essential. At first, the Canaanite woman “did not confess the God of Jews” and, therefore, “it would be absurd and unjust” to grant her a favour promised to people who acknowledge God. But, having confessed that the Jews are children of God and heathens are like puppies or servants, “she joined the faith in the Lord”. The leper and the centurion are also required to confess their faith first, after which they receive what they have asked for.¹¹

A brief reference to the story of the Canaanite woman is found in Ambrosiaster's explanation of the words of Qohelet: *a living dog is better than a dead lion* (9:4). The lion represents Christianity, while the dog represents paganism – as the Lord says, *it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs* (Mark 7:27; Matt 15:26). Ambro-

10 Ambrose, *Expl. Ps.* 43,52 (CSEL 64, 297-298): “Et ideo diligenter oportet intendi quid expresserit, qui cum dixisset: *non licet accipere panem filiorum et mittere catulis*, respondente Chananaea: *quia et catuli canum edunt de micis quae cadunt de mensa dominorum suorum*, studium eius humilitatem que laudauit, quae non sibi profundum sapientiae a primordio uindicauit, quamuis de finibus Tyri et Sidonis iam esset egressa, sed micas quasdam uerbi salutaris, quae de mensa dominorum suorum caderent, crederet colligendas.”

11 Ambrosiaster, *QNT* 33 (CSEL 50, 439-440): “Absurdum enim erat et ad iniuriam promissionis patrum proficiebat, si mulier, quae Iudaeorum deum confessa non fuerat, acciperet beneficium promissum genti confitenti deum. ideo inter initium negatum est illi, adubi autem ceruice flera saluatoris uerbis fidem non negauit, sed confessa est Iudaeos credentes esse filios, gentes autem canes uel seruos, per quod iunxit se fidei dominicae, quia serui dominum indicant et dominus non est sine seruis, unitas facta est subiecti et subicientis. hinc est unde meruit consequi quod precata est.”

siaster reports that one may hope that a pagan – a living dog – may receive faith sometime in the future and be saved. On the contrary, a Christian who abandons his faith – a dead lion – is worse than a pagan because “it is worse to lose salvation than never have.”¹²

3. The Poor Widow

Ambrose interprets the story of the poor widow on two levels of meaning. The moral interpretation explains that our mercy and generosity towards the poor should not be held back because of our own poverty. What counts is not “the amount of our possessions” (*cumulo patrimonii*) but “the disposition of giving” (*largitatis affectu*). On the other hand, “the rich should not flatter themselves that they seem to give more than the poor. (...) It is not the amount that is given but the amount that remains which is considered”.¹³ Then Ambrose turns to the mystical sense in saying that the value of her gifts does not lie

12 Ambrosiaster, *Quaest.* 39 (CSEL 50, 66): “Spem ergo in gentili esse quam in apostata, uult intellegi per id quod subiecit dicens: *melior est canis leone mortuo*, quia sicut leo omnibus feris fortior est, ita et Christianitas omnibus sectis. si quis ergo ab hac destiterit, amittit salutem, ita ut deterior gentili sit. potest enim fieri ut credat gentilis et adquirat salutem, quam perdidit apostata. ac, si non credat, peior est apostata, quia deterius est amisisse salutem, quam non habuisse. canem autem ‘gentilem’ significatum saluator ostendit dicens: *non licet accipere panem filiorum et mittere canibus.*” Cf. *QNT* 53 (PL 35, 2236).

13 Ambrose, *De uidiis* 5,27 (SAEMO 14/1, 268-270): “Docuit etiam libro eodem, sed alio loco, quam misericordem in pauperes et liberalem esse conueniat, nec paupertatis debere contemplatione reuocari; quia liberalitas non cumulo patrimonii, sed largitatis definitur affectu. (...) In quo moraliter dominus instituit uniuersos, ne quis a collatione ministerii paupertatis pudore reuocetur; nec sibi diuites blandiantur, quod plus uideantur conferre quam pauperes. Vberior est enim nummus e paruo quam thesaurus e maximo, quia non quantum detur, sed quantum resideat, expenditur. Nemo plus tribuit, quam qui sibi nihil relinquit.” Trans. P. Schaff, NPNF 2, 10. Cf. Origen, *Comm. Iob.* 19, 7,40-9,52 (SC 290, 70-80).

in the amount of two small coins but in joining “faith with mercy”. Christian widows should follow her example and “not hesitate to cast into the treasury the two mites, full of faith and grace”.¹⁴ This is how they bring forth out of their treasury the perfect image of the King. The treasury of a widow comprises chastity, righteousness, and good understanding (*castitas, iustitia, intellectus bonus*)¹⁵ and she should be rich in virtues, especially in mercy, faith, and chastity.¹⁶ In other words, Jesus prefers “love joined with zeal and generosity rather than the lavish gifts of munificence”. The widow is “rich in the mystery of faith” and mystically represents the church.¹⁷

Jerome also appreciates her generosity, faith, and good will: “Such gifts are valued not by their weight but by the good-will with which they are made”.¹⁸

14 Ambrose, *De viduis* 5,29 (SAEMO 14/1, 272): “Ne forte illa sit quae de fide sua ad subsidium hominum duo testamenta contulerit, et ideo nulla plus fecit. Nec quisquam hominum quantitatem potuit collationis eius aequare, quae fidem cum misericordia copulauit. Et tu igitur, quaecumque uitam studio uiduitatis exerces, ne dubites ad gazophylacium duo aera deferre, uel fidei plena uel gratiae.” Trans. P. Schaff, NPNF 2, 10.

15 Ambrose, *De viduis* 5,30 (SAEMO 14/1, 272): “Felix illa quae de thesauro suo integram regis imaginem profert. Thesaurus tuus sapientia, thesaurus tuus castitas atque iustitia est, thesaurus tuus intellectus bonus...”

16 Ambrose, *De viduis* 5,32 (SAEMO 14/1, 274): “Noli ergo uacua prodire in conspectum domini dei tui, uacua misericordiae, uacua fidei, uacua castitatis.”

17 Ambrose, *Ep.* 68,4-5 (CSEL 82/2, 170-171): “Iuxta quod sedens Christus, ut habes secundum Lucan, *duo aera* mulieris uiduae diuitum muneribus censuit praefenda, diuino uidelicet testimonio praefrens opimae praemiis largitatis sedulae liberalitatis affectum. (...) Pretiosa ista paupertas est, fidei opulenta mysterio. (...) Ergo et ista specie uidua, in typo ecclesia, hoc gazophylacio sacro conferendum putauit, quo pauperum sanarentur vulnera, peregrinorum ieiunia sedarentur.” Trans. S.M.M. Beyenka, *Letter* 84, FOTC 26, 469.

18 Jerome, *Ep.* 118,5 (CSEL 55, 442): “Paupercula uidua duo aera misit in gazophylacium et, quia totum obtulit, quod habebat, omnes dicitur in oblatione munerum dei superasse locupletes, quae non pondere sui, sed offerentium uoluntate pensantur.” Trans. P. Schaff, NPNF 2, 6.

Ambrosiaster observes that the value of a particular deed may be unequal depending on whether it is made by the poor or the rich. The virtue of mercifulness is one, but it counts differently for the poor and the rich. The poor are not afraid to give of their poverty and confide in God, which is what the poor widow does. The rich are praised if they give generously to the indigent, but the poor are praised much more; and their rewards shall not be seen as equal.¹⁹ (The same holds for theft, justice, pride, humility, instruction and study, pleasure, and chastity.)²⁰

4. The Woman who Anoints Christ

According to Mark (and Matthew), *a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head* (Mark 14:3; cf. Matth 26:7). In Luke (and John), the woman *stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment* (Luke 7:38; cf. John 12:3). Both Jerome and Ambrose are convinced that two different women are mentioned here, and (following Origen)²¹ they

19 Ambrosiaster, *Quest.* 124,1 (CSEL 50, 381-382): “Una est misericordia in diuite et in paupere, sed aliter inputatur diuiti et aliter pauperi, quia plus laudanda est in paupere quam in diuite. pauper enim de exiguitate sua largiri non timuit sperans a deo sibi retribui et in praesenti et in futuro. credit enim scripturae dicenti, quia *qui tribuit pauperibus non egebit*. unde et paupera illa diuitibus multa mittentibus sola meruit a domino conlaudari, quia de penuria sua largiri non timuit. diuites uero securi de diuitiis suis largiuntur, pauper autem securus de domino. bene igitur faciunt diuites, dum largiuntur egenis, sed multo melius pauperes. ac per hoc alia remuneratio pauperis et alia diuitis. diues enim, si hoc non fecerit, uapulabit; a paupere enim non exigitur tantum, ideo que laudabilis pauper est misericors.” Cf. *Quest.* 119,4 (CSEL 50, 360).

20 Cf. Ambrosiaster, *Quaest* 124,2-8 (CSEL 50, 382-384).

21 Origen, *Hom. Lc.*, fr. 10 ad Lc 7,37 (GCS 35 [OW IX], 236) = fr. 60 (H. Crouzel, SC 87, 506), trans. J.T. Lienhard, fr. 113, FOTC 94, 173. Cf. Origen, *Comm. ser. Matth.* 77 ad 26,6-13 (GCS 41/1, 181-186).

relate the women to different states of perfection, in that the woman anointing the feet of Christ is a prostitute and a sinner.

Jerome (commenting on Mark and Luke) addresses candidates of baptism, encouraging them to bathe the feet of the Saviour first, because they are still sinners, and afterwards to move to Christ's head.²² Ambrose (following Matthew and Luke), similarly, states that the different merits of the women may correspond to the different states of the sinner and the perfect, respectively.²³

In his treatise *On Repentance*, Ambrose compares Jesus to a physician who can heal the wounds of our sins. He knows our sins but he waits to hear our voice. The woman from the gospel is an example of perfect repentance. We need to be cleansed of the pollution we have caused by our deeds. While washing his feet with the tears of repentance, we can trust to cleanse ourselves.²⁴ Ambrose also shows understanding for weak people:

“But all are not able to equal that woman, who was deservedly preferred even to Simon, who was giving the feast to the Lord; who gave a lesson to all who desire to gain forgiveness, by kissing the feet of Christ, wash-

22 Jerome, *Tract. Mc.* X (in Mc 13,32-33; 14,3-6) (CCL 78, 498-499): “Sic et uos qui accepturi estis baptismum, quoniam omnes sub peccatis sumus, et ‘nemo est absque peccato, etiam si unius quidem fuerit diei uita eius’, ‘et aduersum angelos suos peruersum quid excogitauit’: primum tenete pedes saluatoris, lauete lacrimis, crine tergete; et cum hoc feceritis, postea uenietis ad caput. Quando descenditis in uitalem fontem cum saluatore, tunc habetis discere quomodo unguentum ueniat in caput saluatoris. Si enim caput uiri xpistus est, uestrum autem caput unguendum est, post baptismum unguimini.” Cf. *Tract. Mc.* II (CCL 78, 469); *Tract. Mc.* V (CCL 78, 477); *In Matth.* IV (CCL 77,246).

23 Ambrose, *In Lc.* VI,14 (CCL 14,179): “Hanc ergo mulierem inducit Matthaues supra caput Christi effundentem unguentum et ideo forte noluit dicere peccatricem; nam peccatrix secundum Lucam supra christi pedes effudit unguentum. (...) Potest etiam quaestio meriti et temporis diuersitate dissolui, ut adhuc illa peccatrix sit, iam ista perfectior. Etsi enim personam non mutet ecclesia uel anima, tamen mutat profectum.”

24 Cf. Ambrose, *De paenitentia* 2,8,66-67 (SAEMO 17, 264).

ing them with her tears, wiping them with her hair, and anointing them with ointment. (...) Nevertheless if we are unable to equal her, the Lord Jesus knows also how to aid the weak, when there is no one who can prepare the feast, or bring the ointment, or carry with her a spring of living water. He comes Himself to the sepulchre.”²⁵

Conclusion

To summarize, the four women are praised for their faith in various ways: first, for their activity in spite of difficulty, namely persistence, resilience, diligence, patience, and zeal; second, their humility and mercy in having a clear perspective of one’s place and of the place of other people in that context; third, chastity, righteousness and good understanding, generosity, and good will, which all interconnect with other virtues. Moreover, the two women who anoint Christ, i.e. his feet and his head, encourage us to begin in repentance as sinners, before proceeding to a deeper knowledge as more advanced Christians.²⁶

25 Ambrose, *De paenitentia* 2,8,68–70 (SAEMO 17, 264-266): “Sed non omnibus mulierem istam aequare possum, quae etiam Simoni, qui prandium domino dabat, merito praelata est, quae omnibus qui, uolunt ueniam promereri, magisterium praestitit, osculando pedes Christi, lacrimis lauando, tergendo crinibus, unguendo unguento. (...) Tamen si hanc aequare non possumus, scit dominus Iesus et infirmis subuenire, ubi non est quae possit parare conuiuium, quae deferre unguentum, quae *fontem aquae uiuae* secum portare, uenit ipse ad sepulcrum.” Trans. P. Schaff, NPNF 2, 10.

26 This study is a result of research funded by the Czech Science Foundation under the project GA ČR P401/12/G168 “History and Interpretation of the Bible”.