

Healing the Deaf

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Context

This section of the Gospel of Mark is bookended by two stories of a miraculous feeding of the crowds (6:34-44 and 8:1-10). While is some debate whether the accounts act as bookends or as introductions to new section, our attention remains on stories between. Last week's conflict with the Pharisees and Jerusalem scribes was preceded by the story of Jesus walk on the water and the healing of the crowds. What follows the conflict encounter of last week's gospel is the healing of the Canaanite child, the cure of the deaf-mute, and the second feeding of the crowds.

But notice that Jesus "*left the district of Tyre and went by way of Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, into the district of the Decapolis.*" The withdrawal of Jesus to the district of Tyre may have been for a rest (Mark 7:24), but he soon moved onward to Sidon and, by way of the Sea of Galilee, to the Decapolis. Jesus has moved from Jewish territory to the land of the Gentiles. This movement follows immediately upon the conflict with the Pharisees that declared all foods are "clean" and do not defile – and now Jesus moves into contact with the Gentile people, who under some interpretations, are themselves unclear. Thus, to have contact with them renders one unclean.

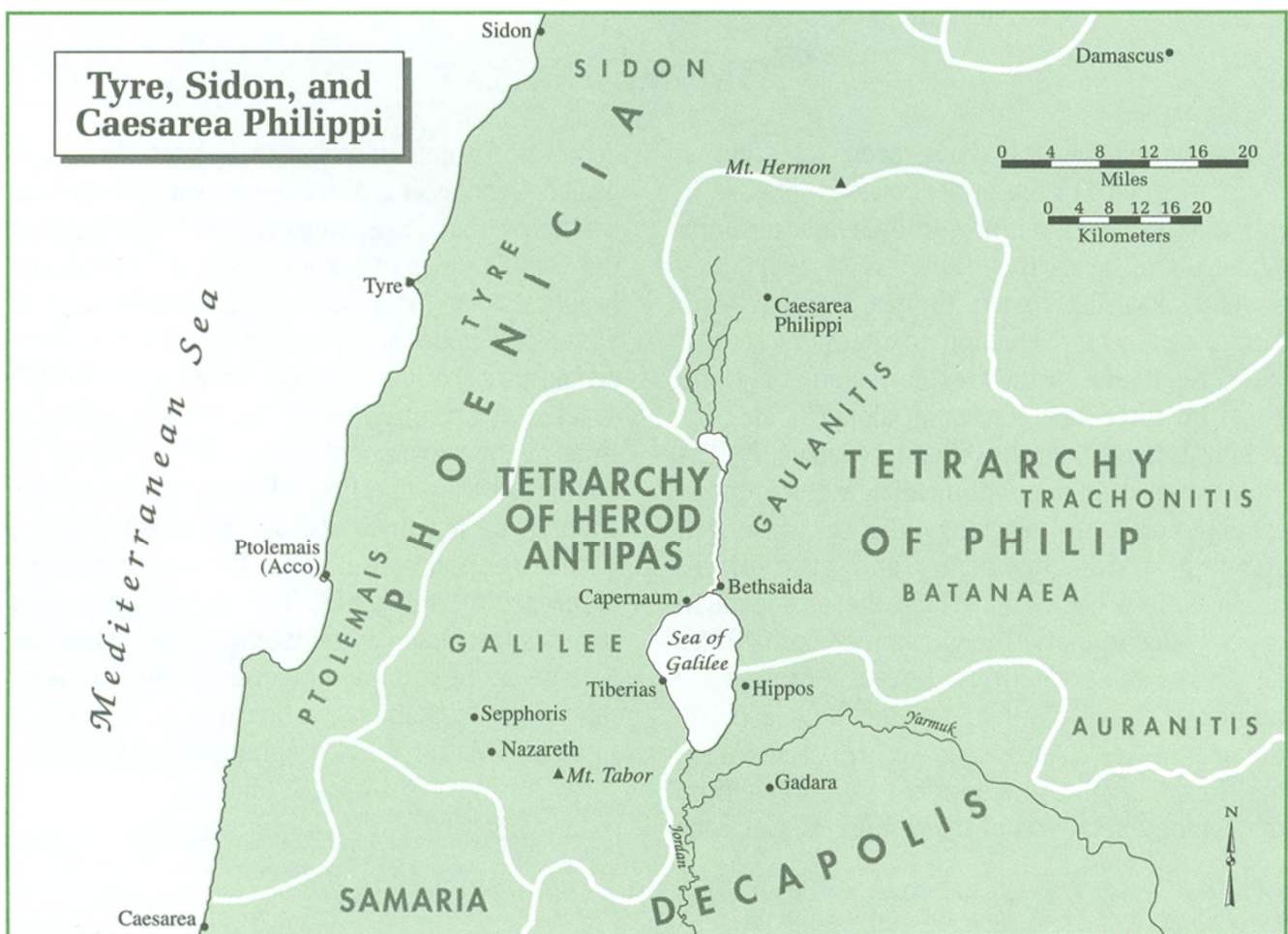
If in the preceding passage Jesus "declared all foods clean" (7:19), in the stories of Mark 7 he declares all persons clean, whether a Gentile woman in a pagan city or a man of indeterminate race in the unclean territory of the Decapolis. The stories are two examples of the same principle: Both advance Jesus' repudiation of traditional taboos.

Although not part of the Sunday gospels in Year B, Mark's encounter of Jesus and the Syrophenician woman (which precedes our periscope) is worth noting as regards traditions that are being overturned. Joachim Jeremias in *Jerusalem in the time of Christ* [360] describes the taboos associated with the interaction men and women: "... a woman was expected to remain unobserved in public. There is a recorded saying of one of the oldest scribes we know, Jose b. Johanan of Jerusalem (c. 150 BC): 'Talk not much with womankind', to which was added, 'They said this of a man's own wife: how much more of his fellow's wife!' rules of propriety forbade a man to be alone with a woman, to look at a married woman, or even to give her a greeting. It was disgraceful for a scholar to speak with a woman in the street. A woman who conversed with everyone in the street could, ... be divorced without the payment prescribed in the marriage settlement." An encounter between this woman and a scribe or Pharisee would be hard to imagine in the "tradition of the elders."

The woman's request of Jesus is that he drive an unclean spirit out of his daughter (7:25). As Stoffregen notes, while Jesus has just declared all foods clean (v.19), that does not mean that everything is clean. There are still unclear and evil powers in the world – but this Gentile woman is not among them. What is unclean is the demon that is driven out – "*what comes out.*" Perhaps this narrative is also meant to linguistically point back to Jesus' declaration, "*But what comes out of a person, that is what defiles.*" (v.20) even as "what comes out" from Jesus is the healing power of the divine.

When one considers the miracle of the healing of the deaf-mute, one should also note that the healing of the man changed “what came out” of his mouth from “*speech impediment*” (v.32) to “*speaking plainly.*” (v.35). In the Greek the change is from *mogilalos* (lit. “difficult speaking”) to *elalei orthos* (lit. “was speaking correctly”). In both the healing of the man and the woman, Jesus changes what comes out of a person.

A nod to geography also seems in order. The Phoenician republic of Sidon was located on the coast some twenty miles north of Tyre. Jesus seems to have journeyed northward to the district of Sidon and then turned southeastward through Philip’s territory toward a point on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee within the region of the Decapolis. While the way is not specific there are no natural topological reasons why to journey is such a route, but it may have been designed to preclude the necessity of entering Galilee. Jesus remained in territory with strong Gentile associations. Yet Decapolis had sizeable colonies of Jews in nearly all of the cities. It is difficult from the text to determine whether the crowd that approached Jesus was Jewish or Gentile or a mix.



Commentary

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impediment was removed, and he spoke plainly. ³⁶ *He ordered them not to tell anyone. But the more he ordered them not to, the more they proclaimed it.* ³⁷ *They were exceedingly astonished and they said, “He has done all things well. He makes the deaf hear and (the) mute speak.”*

As noted previously, Jesus’ arrival in the “*district of the Decapolis*,” while technically Gentile territory, was even in Jesus’ time, the home to many Jewish communities. The Decapolis (literally, “Ten Towns”) figures quite prominently in the ministry of Jesus (Mark 5:20, Matt 4:25, Luke 8:26). While many of the cities’ names would be foreign to our modern English ear (Gadara, Abila, etc.), one of the city names would be quite familiar: Philadelphia.

This narrative appears only in the Gospel of Mark, although Matt 15:29–31 contains a summary of Jesus’ activity along the Sea of Galilee that includes healing of those who are unable to speak. As in the story of the paralyzed man, friends bring the deaf man to Jesus. Unlike the friends of the paralyzed man, these friends begged Jesus to heal him. Like the story of Jairus’ daughter (5:42), Jesus takes the person away from the crowd to perform the healing. And like so many Markan accounts, Jesus commands the person to remain silent about the miracle (5:43) – and as in the other accounts, to no avail. But one should note that ignoring Jesus’ command for silence on the matter seems counter intuitive since only way for the deaf man to show that he is healed is to talk to others

The man suffers with defective hearing and speech. The man was not born deaf else he would not have been likely to learn speech. Thus, it is most likely that injury or illness robbed him of his ability to hear. Mark uses a rare word to describe the man’s “*speech impediment*” (v.32; Greek *mogilalos* literally “difficult speaking”). Many scholars find an certainly an allusion to Isa. 35:5 and following which celebrates God as the one who comes in order to clear the ears of the deaf and to provide song for the man of inarticulate speech.

What is Asked. *And people brought to him a deaf man who had a speech impediment and begged him to lay his hand on him.*

The request for Jesus to lay hands upon the person is not absolutely clear in what is intended. In the encounter with Jairus the intention is clear, as the request is specific: “*My daughter is at the point of death. Please, come lay your hands on her that she may get well and live.*” (5:35). So too when Jesus is rejected in Nazareth (6:5), “*So he was not able to perform any mighty deed there, apart from curing a few sick people by laying his hands on them.*” There is very warrant for assuming that healing is also being requested for the deaf man if one assumes that the crowd, friends, and the man are Jewish – but then they are in the district of the Decapolis, predominantly Gentile territory. In other traditions, the laying on of hands is primarily a blessing action. Is this important? Perhaps. Looking ahead to v.37 we read “*They were exceedingly astonished...*” If “they” refers to the crowds then astonished seems appropriate. But if “they” refers to the friends, then astonished only makes sense if they were (a) asking for a blessing and received a miracle, or (b) really did not think a miracle was possible but “no harm in asking.”

Personal. In Mark’s narration there is a common element to Jesus’ encounter with Jairus, the deaf man, and others – he often takes the people aside, away from the crowds. Lane [266-67] comments on this: “He [Jesus] regarded the personal relationship between himself and the sick to be of supreme importance, and in this instance all of his actions are intelligible in the light of the necessity of communicating with a person who had learned to be passive in life. Through touch and the use of spittle Jesus entered into the mental world of the man and gained his confidence.”

The actions described lend themselves to the intimacy of the encounter: “*He put his finger into the man’s ears and, spitting, touched his tongue.*” These are actions that can only be done in a very personal one-to-one encounter. All the actions of vv.33-34 were mirroring the man’s present need, the process of healing, and the source from which such healing alone could come, in a way which even a deaf mute could understand. Jesus’ gestures are “sacramental” in that they effect what they symbolize, the opening of the

man's ears and the loosening of his tongue. This is all very personal.

There is even the suggestion of intimacy in the other of Jesus' actions: "*then he looked up to heaven and groaned, and said to him, "Ephphatha!" (that is, "Be opened!")*." The gesture of "looking up to heaven" is less one of prayer than a sign of Jesus' intimacy with God (cf. 6:41; Jn 11:41; 17:1). Similarly, Jesus' "sighing"; it might simply be a sign of his deep emotion over the man's condition. But then as some scholars hold, it may be a sign of Jesus' transcendence, which is constrained by human limits foreign to it. In other words, the sighing might reflect a deeper longing for a return to the Father where Jesus too can experience the fullness of existence.

Mark has retained the Aramaic *ephphatha*. Its Greek equivalent, *dianoigō*, relatively rare in the NT, occurs 33 times in the LXX, most notably in Ez 24:27: "*Your mouth shall be opened, and you shall speak and shall no longer be dumb.*" The act of healing itself was accomplished with the word of liberation addressed not to the defective auditory organs but to the man as a whole person. The results of Jesus' actions are simply described: the ears were opened, the tongue was loosened, and the man began to speak clearly.

The Reaction

They were exceedingly astonished and they said, "He has done all things well. He makes the deaf hear and (the) mute speak." This allusion to Is 35:5-6 brings out the theological lesson of the cure: the age of Messianic salvation, announced by Isaiah, has arrived with Jesus.

Final Thoughts

From PHEME PERKINS [613]:

Hearing and speech have a symbolic role to play in Mark's narrative. The Syrophenician woman was so skilled in speech that Jesus healed her daughter. Jesus' disciples, on the other hand, have shown increasing difficulty in understanding what Jesus is telling them. They clearly need some form of healing that will enable them to truly hear—that is, to understand.

Understanding, on the other hand, can be expressed to others only if we speak. Young children learn how the world around them works, whether that is the physical world or the world of human interactions, by repeating everything they hear. Schoolteachers once required that pupils recite their lessons. Now that such training has become rare, college and graduate students often fail to understand what they read, and trying to explain it without using the words of the source material creates havoc. It is fair to say that unless people can tell others what they know, they do not really know it. Believers need to recognize the need to speak about their experience of salvation. They speak to others in testimony and to God in thanksgiving and praise.

NOTES

Mark 7:31 *district of Tyre*: an ancient town on Phoenician coast. Tyre is located about 40km south of Sidon. Before the time of Alexander the Great, Tyre was an island but only 600–750 meters offshore. But since the time of Alexander the Great the island has been linked with the mainland by a causeway, which has broadened over the centuries so that now the location is a peninsula. [ABD, 686] *Decapolis*: a group of Hellenistic cities located east of the Jordan and Lake Tiberias.

Mark 7:32 *speech impediment*: Greek *mogilalos* literally meaning "difficult speaking"

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