

A prophetic ministry of relationship

Jesus in conversation with three women in the Gospels

by [Ian McFarland](#) in the [September 25, 2019](#) issue



Christ and the Woman of Samaria (Schr. 2215), ca. 1460–70; Master with the Cologne Arms, German

The creedal affirmation that Christ's suffering happened "under Pontius Pilate" rightly situates the incarnation in the midst of secular history. But the focus on Jesus' passivity has arguably served to eclipse attention to the concrete—and often politically subversive—features of his ministry. As womanist and feminist theologians in particular have pointed out, one result has been to encourage passivity among his followers, especially among those who subsist at the margins of church and society.

If Jesus' prophetic ministry is reduced to his suffering, it seems to follow that the good disciple is one who endures suffering, with little attention to the fact that the defining practices of Jesus' ministry, his healing the sick and associating with outcasts, reflect a commitment to alleviating suffering. To be sure, Jesus warns his followers that such commitment will itself entail suffering. But it is a suffering that comes from challenging the present order rather than passively acquiescing to its demands.

However infelicitous the theological deployment of "suffered under Pontius Pilate" has been, the phrase can bear a more expansive interpretation. Because Pilate was prefect of Judea through the whole course of Jesus' ministry, it is not necessary to limit Jesus' suffering under him to his last days in Jerusalem. This is especially the case if suffering is not equated with physical or psychological pain but rather is interpreted as meaning (from the Latin *suffere*) to bear, endure, or undergo.

In this sense, saying that he "suffered under Pontius Pilate" affirms Jesus' concrete, historical humanity. It focuses on the fact that the whole of his earthly ministry was defined by relationships with other human beings with whom he undertakes the practices of healing, teaching, reproof, and feasting that define him as "a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people" (Luke 24:19).

In the Old Testament, the ministry of the prophet is one of "suffering." It is a radically contingent ministry, continually shaped by social context. If it is a defining feature of the divine nature to be unconditioned, it is an index of the humanity of the incarnate Word that he is known only as his life is conditioned, constrained, and defined by interaction with people and circumstances. In just this way, Jesus fulfills the office of prophet.

The creedal phrase "suffered under Pontius Pilate" can be extended to encompass the whole of Jesus' ministry.

This broader understanding of his suffering provides a basis for reclaiming the language of *kenoticism*, or the Word's self-emptying. It is a mistake to suppose that the mere fact of taking flesh entailed a diminishment of Jesus' divinity. His self-emptying consists rather in what follows upon his "being found in human form," namely, the fact that, as a human being, "he humbled himself" (Phil. 2:7-8). That is certainly how Jesus interprets the shape of his ministry:

The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. (Luke 22:25-27; cf. John 13:1-16)

In short, the kenosis of the Word describes the mode by which the eternal Word lives out his human life as Jesus of Nazareth. It is by emptying himself of any claim to earthly distinction that Jesus exemplifies the life of a prophet.

A sense of how that life is to be understood theologically emerges from three episodes recorded in the Gospels dealing, respectively, with three significant features of Jesus' prophetic ministry: his role as teacher, as healer, and as friend of sinners. I have chosen these episodes also because they are compelling accounts of how Jesus' ministry was shaped by responsive attention to the circumstances of those he teaches, heals, and befriends.

The Samaritan woman (John 4:1-42): Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman is described as a one-on-one encounter from which even his closest disciples are absent. The setting is not especially suggestive of teaching. Jesus is evidently unknown to his interlocutor (so that, unlike other Gospel characters, she does not approach him as a well-known teacher), and they meet at a well—not a place where one would normally expect religious instruction. The fact that the principals are a Jewish man and a Samaritan woman renders the encounter profoundly irregular, as the woman herself notes.

Yet it is precisely the irregularity and sheer contingency of this encounter that brings out important features of Jesus' character. Jesus is not here communicating already formulated teachings that could as easily be given from a mountaintop, on the plain, or in the temple precincts. Rather, the encounter is profoundly dialogical. Its content takes shape through the back-and-forth of conversation.

The woman recognizes that Jesus is no ordinary traveler ("Sir, I see that you are a prophet," v. 19) and on that basis seeks to explore with him specifically theological matters ("Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem," v. 20). Yet what Jesus teaches is specific to her situation. Thus, when she returns to town to report what has

happened, she does not refer to “living water” (the ostensible subject of Jesus’ teaching in vv. 7–15), the nature of true worship (vv. 21–24), or even the fact that Jesus claims to be the Messiah (v. 26). Instead, she says simply, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! Is this not the Christ?” (v. 29 alt.)

At first glance, the reader might be inclined to associate the woman’s words with Jesus’ comments about her marital relations (vv. 16–18). But given that Jesus’ display of such knowledge comes in the middle of his discourse rather than as a climactic revelation at the end, and remembering that in the balance of the conversation the woman demonstrates considerable theological literacy, culminating with a discussion of the role of the Messiah, it seems odd to suppose that the one matter that stuck in her mind would be Jesus’ reference to her marital status.

Nevertheless, there is something to be said for the idea that the story highlights Jesus’ knowledge of the situations of those he encounters. In the face of more abstract debates over the extent of Jesus’ human knowledge (of the “Could he speak Mandarin?” variety), the story is a helpful reminder of the way the evangelists depict him as knowing others in such a way that they become known to themselves. It is presumably this experience, rather than Jesus’ factual knowledge of her biography, that has impressed the woman. It is also in this way that Jesus’ human knowledge is properly equated with the knowledge of God: not by virtue of its extent, but as a knowledge that corresponds perfectly to the situation of the one who is known.

The Canaanite woman (Matt. 15:21–28): Of course, being known fully is not necessarily a pleasant experience. The examples of the rich young man (Matt. 19:16–22) and, more catastrophically, Judas (John 13:21–30), show that Jesus’ teaching, with its ability to bring people’s inner thoughts to light, can work to the detriment as well as to the benefit of his auditors. If the knowledge that people receive from their encounters with Jesus is to function as good news—the work of a Lord who is also Savior—then it has to be accompanied by the conviction that Jesus is also a source of blessing to us in our vulnerability and weakness. That Jesus’ ministry has just this character is illustrated by the story of his encounter with the Canaanite woman.

To first-century Jewish ears, the designation “Canaanite” would have had uniformly negative connotations. The Canaanites were those whom Israel had dispossessed in taking up residence in the promised land. They are hated by God, and Israel is charged with their destruction (Deut. 20:17; cf. Num. 21:1–3; Josh. 17:18; Judg.

1:1–4). All interaction with them is forbidden, lest close association with them tempt Israel to abandon their covenant with the Lord (Exod. 23:32–33, 34:11–16; Deut. 7:2b–4; Ezra 9:1; cf. Judg. 2:1–3). From this perspective, the fact that Jesus, when followed by a Canaanite woman shouting for him to heal her daughter, “did not answer her at all” (Matt. 15:23) demonstrates exactly the sort of behavior one would expect from a pious Jew.

That the disciples urge him to speak to her, if only to send her away, shows their willingness to sacrifice principle for practicality. But Jesus does not yield to their entreaties, insisting, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (v. 24).

Yet because Jesus evidently does not send her away, the woman persists; and since following after Jesus has done no good, she falls prostrate before him to renew her plea for aid. At this point, Jesus at last speaks to her directly: “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs” (v. 26). In so speaking, Jesus has exposed this woman’s situation in the most cutting way possible: she is not merely a gentile (and therefore not part of the covenant), but a gentile of the lowest order—one of those whose wickedness was the occasion for God driving them from the land (Deut. 9:4).

Seen from this perspective, to criticize Jesus’ language as evidence of ethnic prejudice unworthy of the Messiah is to fail to take seriously the meaning of Israel’s election. Election is not merely a matter of historical accident, as though God might have chosen another people since God loves all peoples equally.

To be sure, God rules and provides for all nations (see Amos 9:7). But Israel alone—in spite of its own objective unworthiness and legacy of faithlessness—is and remains the unique object of God’s love (Deut. 7:7–8; cf. Num. 23:8–9; Amos 3:2). Those of us who are gentiles may wish it were otherwise, that God’s commitment to Israel were finally not something to be taken all that seriously. But even if the witness of the Old Testament were not sufficient, Jesus’ words here render any such supposition utterly untenable. Gentiles are not part of the covenant people and, as such, have no claim on the grace and mercy of Israel’s God.

It is to the credit of the woman that she does not contest Jesus’ judgment: “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” She accepts that gentiles can have no expectation of—let alone any right to—the blessings that God has promised to Israel. She concedes that God’s blessings are

given exclusively to Israel, but she argues that these blessings are so abundant that they naturally spread beyond the limits of the chosen people in such a way as to benefit the gentiles as well. So it is that all nations—even the hated Canaanites—will be blessed through Abraham’s progeny: not because Jesus brings blessing to gentiles alongside (let alone instead of) Jews, but because although God’s blessings come to Israel alone, their infinite richness causes them naturally to spill over to benefit all nations.

At this point in the story, the Canaanite gains her blessing: “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish” (v. 28). It would be a mistake, however, to suppose that she gains it by way of exchange, as though her daughter’s health were restored as a reward for her great faith. Rather, her faith is precisely that God’s blessing is already there, bestowed so fully that its benefits have overflowed Israel’s table and are there for the taking. Jesus’ words to her are simply an affirmation of what she has already claimed: the ability as an outsider to recognize and draw on the abundance of what has been granted to Israel in the person of Jesus.

The sinful woman (Luke 7:36-50): Although the story of the woman with the alabaster jar of ointment is found in all four Gospels, Luke’s account is twice the length of any of the other three. Luke completely decouples the story from Jesus’ passion—it appears just a little less than a third of the way into his Gospel. Moreover, he shifts the setting from the environs of Jerusalem to Galilee and describes the host as a Pharisee rather than a leper.

The most significant feature of Luke’s account, however, is that the woman (who, as in the other Synoptics, is unnamed) is explicitly introduced as “a sinner” (v. 37), and it is on this point that his telling of the story turns. While Luke, like the other evangelists, records that the anointing gives rise to complaint (in this case by the host himself), in Luke alone the complaining is not directed at the woman for wasting the ointment but at Jesus for allowing himself to be touched by a known sinner.

Indeed, if in the story of the Samaritan woman, Jesus’ knowledge of other people establishes his identity as a prophet, in Luke’s story of the sinful woman, Jesus’ apparent lack of knowledge is used to call that identity into question: “If this man were a prophet, *he would have known* who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner” (Luke 7:39).

To be sure, the subsequent narrative makes it quite clear that Jesus knows the woman's character (v. 47). But the issue of his knowledge remains important for what Luke communicates here about Jesus' ministry. The Samaritan woman seems to have received Jesus' knowledge of her past as good news—a likely sign of his messianic status (John 4:29). For the Canaanite woman, this status serves as the basis for her trust that his blessing will come even to someone who is not a member of the chosen people. But the case of the anonymous woman in the Pharisee's house is different.

Unlike the Samaritan and the Canaanite, this woman is evidently a Jew, but one who, as a sinner, has proved faithless to God's covenant and thus dismissive of God's blessing; and yet she is forgiven. The fact that we are not told the content of the woman's sins (only that they were, in Jesus' words, "many") is just as well, for it allows us to imagine the worst—and thereby to understand that no sin is beyond the reach of divine forgiveness.

It is important also to note how Luke describes the forgiveness of the woman. A cursory reading might seem to suggest a logic of exchange, according to which forgiveness is granted as recompense for the woman's love, as demonstrated by her care for Jesus. That such an interpretation is incorrect is shown by the parable Jesus tells to illustrate the woman's situation:

"A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly." (Luke 7:41-43)

Jesus makes it clear that the creditor's act of forgiveness is motivated by nothing whatsoever in the situation of the debtors other than their dire need (namely, the fact that neither could pay). Correspondingly, the debtors' love is a response to, not a cause of, their debts being forgiven.

If the woman's case is to be interpreted in these terms, then the love she shows Jesus in anointing his feet (vv. 38, 44-46) must be related to her being forgiven as consequence rather than cause. And any lingering suspicion that the woman has somehow earned forgiveness by her love is refuted by the chapter's concluding verse, where Jesus says to her, "Your *faith* has saved you; go in peace."

These three episodes certainly do not provide anything like a summary of Jesus' prophetic office, let alone other dimensions of his earthly ministry. They do, however, illustrate something of the texture of his prophetic ministry, which, like that of the prophets of the Old Testament, takes shape in and through particular interactions. It is a ministry of "suffering" in the broad sense of exhibiting Jesus not as imposing his will on the world around him but as responding to the contingencies of time and place.

Like a prophet, Jesus is responding to contingencies of time and place.

In and through these contingencies, Jesus shows himself to be sovereign: to know the situations of those he encounters and to speak words of truth, healing, and forgiveness. He shows himself to be Lord and Savior—but as one who rules and saves by emptying himself of pretension and exercising authority in response to those in need, rather than by demanding submission and service from others.

In this way, his ministry exemplifies power exercised *with* and *for* others rather than *over* them. Exercising power in this way does not entail any diminishment of Jesus' sovereignty—it is precisely as one who teaches with authority that Jesus proclaims, "I am among you as one who serves"—but it does clarify the character of this power: Jesus proves to be Lord precisely insofar as he is revealed as Savior.

This article is adapted from Ian McFarland's book The Word Made Flesh: A Theology of the Incarnation, just published by Westminster John Knox and used by permission. A version of it appears in the print edition under the title "A relational prophet."