Jesus, the Syrophoenician Woman, and Other First Century Bodies

Jennifer A. Glancy
Le Moyne College, Syracuse, NY

Abstract

Social identity is embodied identity. Therefore, in order to come to terms with cultural complexity, we must come to terms with the implications of embodiment. Attention to corporal performance of social identity is critical to the project of intersectional theory. In any given encounter, an individual is unlikely to keep intersecting facets of her identity “in mind,” but without conscious analysis she will perform her complex identity “in body.” The body is where cultural complexity takes place. I focus on the dynamics of cultural complexity in the exchanges of Jesus of Nazareth with those he encountered; or, more humbly, in representations of those dynamics—representations which are already informed by the culturally complex worlds of their creators. As a case study, I focus on the story of the Syrophoenician woman from the Gospel of Mark. I argue that explicit attention to the embodiment of cultural complexity helps us better appreciate what is at stake in Mark’s representation of Jesus’ exchange with his stubborn interlocutor.

Keywords

embodiment, cultural complexity, Syrophoenician woman, Gospel of Mark

How did cultural complexity play out in the first-century Mediterranean world, not on a grand scale, but in daily life?1 How did anyone manage

1) I thank Halvor Moxnes and Marianne Kartzow for their invitation to participate in an October 2008 symposium that was part of their larger project on Jesus in Cultural Complexity at the University of Oslo. Comments from Halvor, Marianne, and Denise Buell have been helpful to me as I revised the article. With its reliance on intersectional methodology, this article is specifically shaped as a contribution to the Jesus in Cultural Complexity project, but it incorporates substantial material from my recently...
to negotiate the variegated dimensions of social location in interactions with individuals and groups who were at once like and unlike the self? A cosmopolitan traveler from Rome might find himself surprisingly at home in faraway Corinth. Would a traveler from Nazareth have felt equally at home in nearby Tyre?

I am interested in the dynamics of cultural complexity in the exchanges of Jesus of Nazareth with those he encountered; or, more humbly, in representations of those dynamics—representations which are already informed by the culturally complex worlds of their creators. Social identity, I argue, is always embodied identity, and so I argue that in order to come to terms with cultural complexity we must come to terms with the implications of embodiment. In any given encounter, an individual is unlikely to keep intersecting facets of her identity “in mind,” but without conscious analysis she will perform her complex identity “in body.” The body is where cultural complexity takes place.

As a case study I will focus on the story of the Syrophoenician woman from the Gospel of Mark, arguing that explicit attention to the embodiment of cultural complexity helps us better appreciate what is at stake in Mark’s representation of Jesus’ exchange with his stubborn interlocutor. I hope the broader implications and potential of the theoretical approach I propose will be clear.

Bodies and Intersectional Identity

We may describe an individual as a man—a Galilean—a speaker of Aramaic—authoritative—powerful. This verbal description is sequential, with attributes listed as though they are independent of one another. However, in body, those attributes—and myriad others—are simultaneously expressed. Feminist social scientists use the term “intersectionality” to capture the interplay of identity categories, especially marginalized or stigmatized identities. Although one or another