

Miracles, Apocalypse, Globalization

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My purpose is to consider how the story of the hemorrhaging woman in Mark 5: 25-34 can provide ways for social justice activists in North America to think about a growing sense of helplessness in the face of the oppressions wrought by transnational capitalism. I want to question the apocalyptic elements of this story as congruent with dominant imperialist discourse and to think about what it might be like to read against those elements. I will critique the framework of the story as both apocalyptic and masculinist, but suggest that the woman's faith, touch, and speech can be read as a useful corrective to that framework.

I write as an activist and biblical scholar living in the United States. I write as more and more atrocities in Iraq become public. The visual images are vile and shocking reminders of what transnational capitalism looks like. They attest to the fact that war crimes are integral to imperialist globalization. I am not surprised, though I am deeply disturbed. I know torture has been taking place in Guantanamo Bay.¹ I know it takes place in federal and state prisons.² I know that in some way I am an unwilling accomplice, by the very fact of living in the U.S. But I am sickened and feel utterly helpless. Along with many others – and probably less often than others – I have written letters, I have occupied offices, I have done civil disobedience, I have marched. But it is to little effect. A million people on the streets are considered insignificant; they are dismissed as a focus group.³ Such is my context.

Justice is sick; bleeding to death. The analogy is imperfect,⁴ but I read the hemorrhaging woman as the possibility for justice, performed in and by the U.S. With so much blood on our hands, death is certain. Only a miracle could change things now. But the closest thing on the horizon to a miracle – the possible election of someone other than George W. Bush – is only a mirage. Blood will

¹ For an exposition and analysis of current American torture tactics in light of the connection between truth and flesh in the gospel of John, see Glancy 2004.

² For a description of Special Housing Units in American supermax prisons, in which prisoners are locked down twenty-three hours a day, see Weinstein 2001.

³ Bush's well known answer to a question about the sizeable anti-war demonstrations in England – he was clearly also referring to the huge anti-war protest in the U.S. three days prior – was: "First of all, you know, size of protest, it's like deciding, well, I'm going to decide policy based upon a focus group" (2003).

⁴ My reading begins with the problematic bias that the woman's menstrual blood is somehow ugly and polluting.

continue to spill, perhaps in greater volume, under alternate leadership. Politicians are in the pockets of corporations, and the flow of transnational capital voraciously demands the flow of blood. A miracle seems unlikely.

Apocalyptic Miracles

But perhaps it is precisely the expectation of a miracle that lends popular support for the war in Iraq. Here I am thinking of the hope for the rapture. As commentators have pointed out, during the build up and implementation of both U.S. attacks on Iraq, sales of apocalyptic literature skyrocketed, the first time with bestsellers like Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Boyer 1992, 329), and the second time with bestsellers like Timothy LaHaye's *Left Behind* series (Munday 2003).

In perusing contemporary apocalyptic material, it becomes clear that those who await the rapture feel increasingly embattled. According to popular texts, the rapture will come at a point when life on earth is no longer bearable. Internet sites interpreting contemporary news events as signs of the proximity of rapture attest to a group of Christians who feel increasingly threatened by the world.⁵ Likewise, Christian films – such as, *Apocalypse: Caught in the Eye of the Storm*, produced by Christian filmmakers Peter and Paul Lalonde – portray the rapture interrupting a moment of intense warfare and preventing nuclear destruction. The point of such productions is to persuade non-Christians to convert, and to encourage Christians to persist in their faith. At the same time, they seem to revel in escalated militarism.

It is not insignificant that fundamentalist groups with premillennial eschatological leanings support President Bush.⁶ According to a premillennial reading of Revelation, Iraq is understood to be the geographical and spiritual equivalent of Babylon, which is to be destroyed before the rapture (Revelation 18). Saddam is the antichrist (Boyer 1992, 330; Munday 2003). The war in Iraq is also understood to be tied up with the restoration of Israel. According to premillennialist eschatology, Israel must be restored prior to the rapture;

⁵ For instance, the “Rapture Ready” site contains a rapture index rating current events on the level of their probable signification of the end. See <http://www.raptureready.com/rap2.html>. (I was made aware of this site's existence by Elizabeth Castelli and Loris Mirella).

⁶ Rick Perlstein (2004) reports on the relationship between the premillennialist Apostolic Congress (affiliated with the United Pentecostal Church) and the White House.

thus much of the Christian Right's support and lobbying focuses on U.S. foreign policy in Israel (Boyer 2003; Munday 2003; Perlstein 2004). As Paul Boyer points out, some have argued that God's original gift of land to Israel – to which the Jews must be restored – encompassed the Arabian Peninsula and oil-rich gulf states (1992, 195). Whichever prophecy is mapped onto Iraq, it may be in the interests of those who await the rapture to hasten its approach through support for the war.

Nor is it insignificant that Bush's own language carries many apocalyptic resonances. Indeed, in some ways, Bush positions the U.S. as the miracle working hope of the world. As I have also outlined elsewhere, the position taken by the Bush administration with respect to the rest of the world clearly falls within the tradition of covenantal, messianic chosenness by God, which is both a covenantal and apocalyptic discourse (Runions 2004a). Roughly speaking, freedom represents the covenantal relationship with God; terror is its apocalyptic nemesis. Covenant promises land and blessing for keeping the law (whatever the U.S. version of it may be) and apocalypse polices the keeping of the law by predicting catastrophic destruction at the hands of those who transgress the law. Covenant implies a divine, even messianic, calling, while apocalypse motivates a great and final struggle between the chosen one and evil.

Throughout the Bush administration's rhetoric, the covenantal relationship between God and the U.S. is proclaimed through assertions of the nation's calling to use its military strength in the role of ensuring freedom and defeating the evil that threatens to besiege all humanity.⁷ It is evident that what Bush means by “freedom” is actually globalization on U.S. terms: that is, U.S. access to markets and other nations' conformity with U.S. morals and demands (Runions 2004b).⁸

⁷ There are many examples of Bush's rhetoric of the need for America to stand firm under siege. To give just one example here, before beginning the war on Iraq, Bush said the following: “Some ask how urgent this danger is to America and the world. The danger is already significant and it only grows worse with time. . . . Failure to act would embolden other tyrants, allow terrorists access to new weapon resources, and make blackmail a permanent feature of world events. The United States would betray the purpose of its founding. . . . the United States would resign itself to a future of fear. . . . America believes that all people are entitled to hope and human rights. . . . People everywhere prefer. . . self-government to the rule of terror and torture” (2002c). Two years later, in face of the prolonged American occupation of Iraq and torture of prisoners, the ironies of these statements speak rather loudly.

⁸ See Bush's “Compassionate Conservatism” speech, in which he states that nations receiving monetary aid are expected to “end corruption, to *open their markets*, to respect human rights, and to adhere to the rule of law” (2002a, emphasis mine). The monetary aid that will bring freedom from poverty is only given in exchange for conformity to American demands, including the demand to buy American products, and the demand to follow an American standard of law.

As in its military policy, in globalization, the Bush administration advocates unilateralism. Despite the obviousness of the goal, it is veiled in language of sacred mission. The messianic chosenness of the U.S. has become so aggrandized in this administration's rhetoric that in his speech on the first anniversary of 9/11 Bush was able to make the same claim about the U.S. that the writer of John's gospel makes about Christ: "America is the hope of all mankind. . . . That hope lights our way. And the light shines in the darkness. And the darkness will not overcome it" (Bush 2002b).⁹ Paradoxically, the U.S. is positioned as both the persecuted and the savior.

One might think that those who oppose globalization (in its transnational capitalist form) would not be likely to use the same kind of apocalyptic language. Yet, in my experience, anti-globalization activists exhibit a tendency to use language that is homologous to mainstream apocalyptic language, in their hope for a miraculous triumph over evil imperialism (through direct action, of course). Many activists express a sense of embattlement, and convey their feelings about the happenings in the world in apocalyptic terms of good and evil. For instance, in activist literature, globalization is often apocalyptically termed "the beast" and the U.S. or Wall Street "the belly of the beast."¹⁰ However, the hope for some kind of decisive intervention in the face of great evil merely mirrors the logic that supports, motivates, and generates a militarized exportation of American values and products, with its high exchange rate in human life. New metaphors are needed, along with new ways of thinking about the (righteous) self and the (unrighteous) other. I will return to this point presently.

The Apocalyptic Framework in Mark

The sense of embattlement, the end-times eschatology, and the conviction to persist in faith are consistent with the sensibilities expressed in the gospel of Mark and in the story of the hemorrhaging woman. The miraculous cure of the woman has been read by scholars as exemplifying the overarching themes of the book. It is a story that offers both a model for discipleship and hope for the coming kingdom of God. Given the current uses of apocalyptic thinking, in order for this story to be helpful

in any way, it may need to be wrested from its apocalyptic context.

Without entering into the debates about the historical context or genre of the gospel of Mark, I will simply outline several points that have been made by scholars about the apocalyptic context of the gospel, and then about the story itself. First, there is general agreement by scholars that Mark was written during a time in which Christians were under stress of persecution and hardship, most likely during the time of the Jewish War (Marcus 2000, 33–37; Meyers 1988, 64–67; Kee 1977, 100). Support for such a supposition is taken from the references to suffering in the text. As Joel Marcus points out, "a preoccupation with persecution . . . seems to be reflected in the very structure of the book" (2000, 28). The central part of the gospel is framed by predictions of persecution for the disciples (4:16–17 and 13:9–13), while the middle part of the gospel contains predictions of Jesus' death, also linked to the hardships the disciples will face (8: 31–38; 9: 30–31; 10: 17–39) (2000, 28–29). The gospel seems to reflect the Markan community's struggle in a hostile environment.

Second, the genre and literary style of Mark has often been likened to that of Jewish apocalyptic literature (Vines 2002; Horsley 2002; Marcus 2000; Collins 1992; Kee 1977; Donahue and Harrington 2002). The most obvious connection to apocalypse comes in Mark 13, with its future predictions, but scholars have found the overall themes of apocalypse to be present in Mark as well. Howard Kee defines the theological goals of apocalypse as: assertion of the rule of God and defeat of hostile powers, redefinition of the community, a demonstration of certainty, and an encouragement to stand firm (1977, 70). These themes can all be found in Mark. There is a clear emphasis on the coming kingdom of God in Mark, as is made clear in the first chapter (1: 14–15), and continued throughout the book (e.g. 4: 11, 26–32; 9: 1; 10: 13–31; 14: 24–25). Jesus' statement that "there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power" (9: 1) indicates that the Markan community expected the kingdom imminently (Kee 1977, 107–8; Donahue and Harrington 2002, 37; Marcus 2000, 71).¹¹ Also consistent with apocalyptic thinking, the coming of the kingdom is preceded by conflict with hostile powers in Mark (Marcus 2000, 72–73). Jesus confronts demons, illness, the sea (chaos), and death, all of which he conquers in the group of miracles in 4:35–5:43 (Donahue and Harrington 2002,

⁹ For further analysis of the logic of this citation, see Castelli 2003.

¹⁰ A quick internet search on "globalization" and "belly of the beast" renders about 1700 hits.

¹¹ Marcus argues that "Mark holds this note of imminent expectation in tension with a sense of present fulfillment" (2000, 71).

37-38). There is a certainty that Jesus' work will prevail, as the resurrection demonstrates, and as the call for the disciples to follow Jesus' example in teaching and driving out demons suggests (16: 15-18). Jesus also redefines the community, drawing his followers into a new family and a new understanding of Judaism, by challenging the Jewish elite (e.g. 8: 14-15) and re-reading the Torah (e.g. 2: 23-27) (Kee 1977, 109-110; Meyers 1988, 73-80; Selvidge 1990, 36, 47-63). And finally, as a new, but persecuted, community, the implied readers of Mark are called to stand firm in their faith. Discipleship appears to be a difficult but central task in the gospel (Donahue and Harrington 2002, 30-34).¹² As Ched Meyers reads it, in the gospel of Mark, "discipleship is the only form in which faith in Jesus can exist" (1988, 11). This call to faith is implicated in the preoccupation with persecution, generating what Meyers calls the "conviction that the suffering of the just is somehow in itself efficacious in bringing down the old order and creating the new" (1988, 103).

A number of these apocalyptic themes are also present in the story of the woman who has bled for twelve years and who gathers up her courage to touch Jesus, in order to be healed. First, the story demonstrates Jesus' victory over hostile powers. As mentioned, the pericope comes as part of a series of miracles in 4: 38-5: 43 that reveal Jesus' power over evil forces, here illness and suffering. The woman's touch – and confident expectation of healing – shows a certainty that Jesus is able to prevail over these hostile forces. Her healing is also a sign that the coming kingdom of God is also already present. The story likewise exemplifies a redefinition of community. In healing a ritually impure woman, Jesus works toward establishing a new community by challenging the religious status quo and by including her in a new family, with the appellation "Daughter" (Donahue and Harrington 2002, 176; Marcus 2000, 360). Most importantly though, the story motivates discipleship, and models what it means to stand firm. The woman is presented as one who persists in her faith against all odds and in the face of great suffering (Beavis 1988, 8; Swartley 1997, 19).¹³ In spite of her fear, when she is

called upon, she tells the whole truth, and as such serves as a model for the community (Selvidge 1990, 100-101).¹⁴ The woman's faith in the face of hardship is set as a model and metaphor for discipleship, over and against the twelve male disciples' unreliable discipleship (Selvidge 1990, 98-99; Beavis 1988, 7-8). Marcus goes so far as to read the story as an apocalyptic metaphor for the Markan community:

Mark's readers may well have been reminded of the time when their own faith 'saved' them from the world of death and set them on the path toward eschatological [peace]... The story of the woman with the menstrual disorder, then, is their story... Jesus has turned to them and confirmed that, through their faith in him, they now stand within the sphere of the new age; when persecution, apostasy, and death threaten to engulf them, their faith will save them (2000, 369).

Whether or not intended to be read metaphorically, the story is deeply embedded in the apocalyptic framework of the book.

Re-reading

What difference does it make in reading this story that an apocalyptic framework, similar to that of the gospel of Mark, is partly responsible for the imperialist program of the United States? Bush has managed to portray the U.S., without straying too far from the language of civil religion (Barnes 2003), in apocalyptic terms of an embattled messianic figure, struggling against hostile forces; yet certain of God's help in meeting success. What difference does it make that in this messianic role, the U.S. makes much of "saving" other nations, and their women? (Runions, 2004a). What difference does it make that the rhetoric of sacrifice and suffering for freedom has become so ubiquitous in Bush's encouragement to the population to stand firm in its resolve for war?¹⁵ To my mind, the apocalyptic strain in dominant discourse makes all the difference in reading this story. The

¹² The disciples are shown both in positive terms (being given authority, e.g. 16: 15-18) and in negative terms (being clueless, e.g. 8: 14-21).

¹³ Beavis also makes the interesting observation that as a pronouncement story, the story of the bleeding woman challenges traditional Greco-Roman gender roles. She argues that the passage is similar in form to the Greco-Roman literary form of the *chreia*, stories that tell something useful for living. But where Greco-Roman *chreia* about women would typically expound on female virtues, the *chreia* about women in Mark "do not provide models of specifically female virtue, but of faith and discipleship in general" (1988, 8).

¹⁴ Jesus' answer to her confession, "your faith has saved you," has been read by scholars as an indication of the importance of faith for salvation, and as a proclamation about faith and discipleship (Sabin 2002, 189).

¹⁵ To give just one example of Bush's rhetoric of sacrifice, in a recent press release, in response to a question about increasing American disillusionment with the war, Bush responded by saying: "I plan on telling the American people that I've got a plan to win the war on terror... They understand the stakes... One of the hardest parts of my job is to console the family members who have lost their life. It is a – it is – it's a chance to hug and weep and to console and to remind the loved ones *that the sacrifice of their loved one was done in the name of security for America and freedom for the world*" (2004, emphasis mine).

apocalyptic themes being mobilized in the present moment have become so closely allied with oppressive power that for the moment, in my context, they are unrecuperable. I would like to think about how this story might be read outside, or at least against, its apocalyptic framework.¹⁶ Can the story provide any new metaphors for thinking about activism in the present moment?

First, let me suggest what might be resisted. Some of the problems with apocalyptic thinking in the present American context stem from the fact that many of those who use it are part of a social context that is opposite to the context in which the New Testament was written. As Meyers points out, Mark's "primary audience were those whose daily lives bore the exploitative weight of colonialism, whereas [the North American audience] are those who are in a position to enjoy the privileges of the colonizer" (1988, 5–6). A facile identification of those in power with the persecuted makes it too easy to use that power against others. It is one thing for the persecuted to stand firm, quite another for the oppressor to think itself persecuted and therefore called to stand firm.¹⁷ Moreover, power wielded by the "persecuted" is often accompanied by an unreflecting sense of self-righteousness (perhaps developed from a synoptic perspective of the persecuted as righteous) that might efface responsibility for the suffering of others. Activists who adopt apocalyptic metaphors may also tend to do so with a sense of persecution (and perhaps more justifiably so than Bush), and with a sense of self-righteousness. They, therefore, also run the risk of overlooking oppression. Activists necessarily have to (and do) wrestle with their own implication in the power structures; but a sense of embattlement slows down such an engagement.

Secondly, the force that is generated by apocalyptic thinking is necessarily strong, because it counters "evil." As Bush puts it, the stakes are high. Thus, those who oppose the persecuted righteous are called "unrighteous." As I see it, what has become so problematic in the present context is the identification of the forces of evil with a people (or particular leaders), rather than with nature (illness, suffering, storms, etc.). The identification of particular leaders with evil may come, in large part, from the model of apocalyptic thinking given in Revelation. Demonizing

others is precisely what allows for the gross misuses of power we are presently witnessing. Rather than adopting a position based on dualism and separation, it may be more helpful, as postcolonial theorists have suggested, to analyze the overlaps between self and other, between persecuted and persecutor, between colonized and colonizer, between oppressed and oppressor (see Bhabha 1994).

Another apocalyptic element that ought to be resisted, one not elaborated by scholars of Mark but nonetheless alarmingly present in this story, is the heroic male messiah figure who is crucial in mastering the forces of feminine evil. In this story, the messiah figure saves the ostracized woman; all her own attempts come to naught. Moreover, as typical of the treatment of women in apocalyptic literature, the woman is depicted as sexually impure, and somehow suspect or needing to be forgiven in some way. Her bleeding, as well the immodesty of walking out alone and touching a man, as Wendy Cotter suggests, could be interpreted as sexual deviance (2001, 57–59). One commentator goes so far as to suggest that the woman's bleeding might be a challenge to Jesus' authority, since a certain strand of the rabbinic tradition suggests that that "contact with a menstruant . . . might cancel a charismatic individual's miraculous power" (Marcus 2000, 358). In this reading, the woman not only needs the male hero, but she challenges him, and must be overcome by him in some way. The feminist critique of male heroism and of the tradition of misogyny within apocalypse provides an important counterbalance to such a reading (see Pippin 1999; Quinby 1994). In light of such a critique, identification with the hero of the story ought also to be resisted. Identification with the messianic figure is as problematic as identification with the persecuted/suffering group. The need to save the suffering turns them into "others" and creates an inequality between hero and victim. Again an analysis of the overlap between self and other would be a useful corrective.

What remains, then, of the story, from which to try to build new metaphors for doing activism? I will focus on the woman's faith, her touch, and her speech. The woman's touch cannot be read without her faith. As Mary Ann Beavis asserts, "Her faith is not only a trusting attitude, but also an action involving risk" (1988, 6). Her touch shows that initiative, agency and determination are part of her faith (see Dube 2001, 59–60). There is no place here for resignation or cynicism. The woman did not give up, but continued trying new options, perhaps even as they seemed increasingly strange, and socially unacceptable. As noted above, the woman's touch violates norms of gender, of social rank, of acceptable behavior, and

¹⁶ Following Derrida's discussion of the parergon (1979 [1978]), I am aware of the difficulty in trying to separate the work from the frame.

¹⁷ Elizabeth Castelli (2004) has shown the way the theme of the "persecuted church" is central to the devotional life of many Christians and also how it gets taken up in discussions of American foreign policy.

of religious propriety. Violation of social norms is risky; but perhaps it is necessary, the only remaining possibility, if justice is to be prevented from bleeding to death. Perhaps risk is a part of faith.

But if the element of heroism is extrapolated from the story, what appeal to faith can be made? If faith is not placed in a miracle, a quick fix, or a savior, in what can it be placed? Significantly, Jesus tells the woman that it is *her* action, resulting from her faith, which heals, and even saves, her. He does not claim it as his own work. Her initiative and her touch begin an interaction that even the more powerful cannot control. In a sense, the woman's faith *is* her determination; it is oriented toward the very possibility of healing. Again there is no place for hopelessness or cynicism. There is no place for heroism either.

The interaction between the woman and Jesus may be successful because touch is something that both establishes and breaks down boundaries. As Luce Irigaray points out, touch is what allows one to know the limits of one's own body, and the limits of another; but it is also what can transgress those limits (1993 [1984]).¹⁸ The woman's action does both: in touching Jesus, the flow out of her body is stopped, she finds her limits, but his are transgressed, as power goes out of his body. Again the question of self and other comes into focus. The story does not show Jesus to be a clearly defined self, in control of an other; but as a porous self, open to another's touch. He does not overcome her; rather she evokes his power. The woman's touch creates something like Bhabha's "third space," that disorienting and catachrestic¹⁹ overlap between the self and other, between the powerful and the powerless, the dominator and the dominated. The overlap between self and other is a place of non-sense, a place of "threatened 'loss' of meaningfulness in cross cultural interpretation" (1994, 125–26). This troubling overlap shows that "the symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew"

¹⁸ Irigaray writes: "The most subtly necessary guardian of my life is the other's flesh. Approaching and speaking to me with his hands. Bringing me back to life more intimately than any regenerative nourishment, the other's hands, these palms with which he approaches without going through me, give me back the borders of my body and calls me to remembrance of the most profound intimacy. As he caresses me, he bids me neither to disappear nor to forget but rather to remember the place where, for me, the most intimate life is held in reserve" (1993 [1984], 187). Time does not permit a more in depth interrogation of this text alongside Irigaray's difficult engagement with Levinas through the trope of the caress. It would be a task worth pursuing (to be clear, I am not suggesting that the woman's touch is a caress).

¹⁹ Catachresis is a term Bhabha takes (1994, 183) from Gayatri Spivak who describes catachresis as "reversing, displacing and seizing the apparatus of value-coding" (1990, 228, see also 229).

(1994, 37). Perhaps from this place, even apocalypse could be read anew. More immediately, I might ask: How could an exploration of both the limits and the overlaps of the righteous persecuted self and the evil, unrighteous other help to stop the flow of blood? How might activists work toward enabling more popular understandings of the limits and overlaps of self and other?

Finally, there is the woman's speech. She tells the whole truth. Commentators have suggested that this line signifies beyond the simple telling of her troubles. Marcus suggests that the woman's words serve as a model for a community that might be tempted to hide its association with Jesus in the face of persecution (Marcus 2000, 369). Selvidge suggests the word "truth" associates the woman with Jesus, and shows her to be allied with the divine, thus also overturning received ideas about femininity (1990, 100–101). However it is read, the telling of the whole truth is a courageous and difficult act. It is made possible, however, by the interaction between the woman and Jesus, by the overlap between the two. Perhaps it is not possible to speak the whole truth without this overlap. Activists have often heard the call to speak the whole truth (to power); this story suggests that such speaking is only possible with an awareness that there is a place of non-sense, in the "third space" between self and other, a place where the truth cannot fully signify (Bhabha 1994, 124–26). Such awareness can guard against self-righteousness.

At the very least, understanding apocalyptic convergences in disparate discourses – between the framework for Mark, the belief system that smoothes the way for current atrocities, and the language sometimes used by activists – may be a starting point for thinking about each differently. The attempt to read outside of apocalypse may also transgress the bounds of order that apocalypse struggles to establish; it may return the reader to a place of chaos and disorder. Just as envisioning order and conquest of chaos may be imperative for the struggle of the oppressed, perhaps stepping into a space of disorder and disorientation is crucial for enabling the privileged to change. The story of a woman's determination to initiate the exchange and overlap between self and other, between blood and healing power, between boundaries and porousness, can be read as modeling such a disorientation.²⁰

²⁰ Thanks goes to Michael Casey for comments on an earlier draft, extended discussion of many of these ideas, and help with the conclusion.

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