

ARTICLE

## Puppies and Pejoratives: Did Jesus Insult the Syrophoenician Woman (Mark 7.24-30)?

N. Clayton Croy 

School of Theology and Ministry, Southern Nazarene University, Bethany, Oklahoma, US  
Email: [nclaytoncroy@gmail.com](mailto:nclaytoncroy@gmail.com)

### Abstract

Jesus' response to the Syrophoenician woman in Mark 7.27 is sometimes seen as sexist, racist, or abusive. The force of his response depends in part on the diminutive form *κυνάριον*, which is often dismissed as a faded diminutive that lacks true force. But a statistical, semantic, and contextual analysis of the word indicates that it does, in fact, have diminutive force in Mark 7:27. Because of this, the pejorative force found in direct insults employing the word 'dog' is lacking in Jesus' response. In addition to failing to recognise the diminutive force of *κυνάριον*, interpreters sometimes assume a social context in which Jews routinely referred to Gentiles as dogs. Finally, the analogy that Jesus makes is often read allegorically, assuming that 'children' and 'dogs' have direct counterparts in 'Jews' and 'Gentiles'. These assumptions are found to be dubious. The point of Jesus' analogy is about the proper order of events: children eat before the puppies; Jews receive the benefits of his ministry before Gentiles. The Syrophoenician woman outwits Jesus by arguing that the puppies may eat simultaneously with the children. The interpretive upshot is that Jesus' saying is unlikely to be misogynistic or abusive, but simply asserts Jewish priority, a priority that admits of exceptions and change.

**Keywords:** diminutive; dogs; exorcism; Gentiles; misogyny; Syrophoenician

Misogynistic, racist, abusive... These words are not often associated with Jesus.<sup>1</sup> But in Mark 7.24–30, Jesus encounters a Syrophoenician woman whose daughter is beset by an unclean spirit, and her plea is initially denied by Jesus with language that many readers find harsh. He defers her request with a proverb that seems to liken the woman and her daughter to dogs. One interpreter bluntly asserts, 'Jesus' answer is morally offensive'.<sup>2</sup> A Jewish scholar, mindful of the history of anti-Semitism in biblical scholarship, asserts that '[Jesus'] answer was so brusque and chauvinistic that if any other Jewish teacher of the time had said such a thing, Christians would never have forgiven Judaism for it.'<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, Hector Avalos has a chapter entitled 'The Misogynistic Jesus' in *The Bad Jesus: The Ethics of New Testament Ethics* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2015) 228–80; Herman C. Waetjen refers to Jesus' proverb in Mark 7.27 as racist in *A Reordering of Power: A Socio-Political Reading of Mark's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) 135; and Sharon H. Ringe calls the saying of Jesus 'insulting in the extreme'. See 'A Gentile Woman's Story, Revisited: Rereading Mark 7.24–31' in *A Feminist Companion to Mark* (ed. Amy-Jill Levine; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001) 79–100 (89).

<sup>2</sup> Gerd Theissen, *The Gospels in Context: Social and Political History in the Synoptic Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 61.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth: His Life, Times, and Teaching* (Boston: Beacon, 1925) 294.

The precise rhetorical force of Jesus' response depends in part on the term *κυνάρια*, which is translated as 'dogs' in many English versions. The word is clearly a diminutive in form, but it is debated whether it should be understood as a true diminutive.<sup>4</sup> If the diminutive force can be established, it might soften the harshness of Jesus' words and possibly call for a different interpretation of the passage.<sup>5</sup> Diminutives, particularly those that describe living things, sometimes express affection and endearment.

On the other hand, many have pointed out that diminutive forms often lose their force over time.<sup>6</sup> It is said that Koine Greek, in general, and the Gospel of Mark in particular, given its lower literary register, have a fondness for diminutive forms.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, diminutives were relatively rare in Classical Greek, especially the higher style of epic and tragedy, although more common in the colloquial language of comedy.<sup>8</sup> So is *κυνάρια* in Mark 7.27–8 an endearing diminutive, or is it simply a faded form equivalent to the non-diminutive word, *κύων*, from which it derives?

In fact, the possibilities are fourfold.<sup>9</sup> (1) The usage in Mark could be a faded diminutive form with no real diminutive force. (2) It might be a diminutive with reference to size/age, i.e., referring to small or young dogs. (3) It might be a diminutive of affection or endearment, what linguists, both ancient and modern, call a hypocorism.<sup>10</sup> Or (4) it could be a derogatory diminutive that demeans the person or thing.<sup>11</sup>

Recognition of the diminutive force of a word is intuitive to native speakers, but for ancient languages, criteria are needed by which to judge. Relevant considerations include the frequency of the terms, the thing denoted, the distinction between meaning and referent, the usage of the term in a broad array of writers, and, most importantly, the

<sup>4</sup> On the morphology of diminutives, see Herbert Weir Smyth, *Greek Grammar* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1920) 235, §852.3; J.H. Moulton and W.F. Howard, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek. Volume 2: Accidence and Word-Formation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1920) 344–7; F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, (trans. ad rev. Robert W. Funk; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961) 60–1, §111 (3).

<sup>5</sup> The commentaries on Mark are divided. Those favouring true diminutive force for *κυνάρια* include C. E. B. Cranfield (1959), J. Schmid (1963), Vincent Taylor (1966), W. Grundmann (1971), William Lane (1974), Robert H. Gundry (1993) and James R. Edwards (2002). Those opting for a non-diminutive meaning include Robert A. Guelich (1989), Joel Marcus (2000), R.T. France (2002) and Adela Yarbro Collins (2007).

<sup>6</sup> See C.H. Turner, 'Marcan Usage: Notes, Critical and Exegetical, on the Second Gospel', *JTS* 29 (1928) 346–61, esp. 350–2; Donald C. Swanson, 'Diminutives in the Greek New Testament', *JBL* 77 (1958) 134–51; Keith Elliott, 'Nouns with Diminutive Endings in the New Testament', *NovT* 12 (1970) 391–8; and Jonathan Watt, 'Diminutive Suffixes in the Greek New Testament', *Biblical and Ancient Greek Linguistics* 2 (2013) 29–74.

<sup>7</sup> See Turner, 'Marcan Usage', 352; Swanson, 'Diminutives', 143; and Watt, 'Diminutive Suffixes', 45. Christian Orth observes that 'Deminutiva auf -άρια ... vielleicht einem niedrigeren Sprachregister angehören als die Deminutiva in -ίδιον'. See *Fragmenta Comica Alkaios – Apollonophanes: Einleitung, Übersetzung, Kommentar* (Heidelberg: Verlag Antike, 2013) 138.

<sup>8</sup> 'No branch of ancient literature displays a richer selection of diminutives than the comedy.' Leiv Amundsen, 'Some Remarks on Greek Diminutives', *Symbolae Osloenses: Norwegian Journal of Greek and Latin Studies* 40 (1965) 5–16 (5).

<sup>9</sup> For a slightly different categorisation, see Watt, 'Diminutive Suffixes', 43–4.

<sup>10</sup> The ancient grammarians coined the term 'hypocoristic' (*ὑποκοριστικός* from *ὑποκορίζομαι*) to denote words that expressed tenderness and affection. See Moulton and Howard, 2.344, n1.

<sup>11</sup> The possibility of a derogatory usage in Mark 7.27–8 has been suggested. See Amundsen, 'Greek Diminutives', 12; Edwin K. Broadhead, *Teaching with Authority: Miracles and Christology in the Gospel of Mark* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1992) 130 n1; Alan H. Cadwallader, 'When a Woman is a Dog: Ancient and Modern Ethology Meet the Syrophenician Woman', *The Bible and Critical Theory* 1 (2005) 1–17 (3); and Cadwallader, *Beyond the Word of a Woman: Recovering the Bodies of the Syrophenician Women* (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2008) 80–1. But the non-diminutive form *κύνες* would be far better suited for this meaning. The *κυνάρια* in Mark 7.27–8 are indoors, under the dining table, and are to be fed, even though the children have a prior claim. The survey of *κυνάρια* in section 4 below indicates that the diminutive form is more likely to be neutral or hypocoristic rather than derogatory.

cultural and literary contexts of the specific instance in question. Each of these criteria will now be examined.

## 1. Frequency of the Terms

Grammarians and linguists recognise that diminutives that are frequently employed tend to lose their diminutive force.<sup>12</sup> Sometimes the diminutive simply overtakes the non-diminutive word and becomes synonymous with it. A good example in biblical Greek is δαμόνιον, the diminutive of δαίμων. Δαίμων appears only once in the LXX (Isa 65.11) and (Matt 8.31). The diminutive form appears over 80 times in biblical Greek. Δαμόνιον has clearly usurped the semantic field of δαίμων.<sup>13</sup>

At other times, both the diminutive form and the regular form are well represented. In such cases, the distinction between a true diminutive and a faded diminutive becomes difficult and may even vary from one author to the next. In biblical Greek, the words παῖς and παιδίον are both very common (493 vs. 220 times respectively). The non-diminutive form is far more common in the LXX than in the NT (469 vs. 24 times respectively). (The larger size of the LXX does not account for all of this difference.) The diminutive form is about equally distributed between the LXX and the NT when one takes into account the relative sizes of the two corpora (168 LXX vs. 52 NT). This may reflect a movement toward the replacement of παῖς with παιδίον, but in the NT the diminutive form still seems to be preferred when one wishes to denote an infant or a very young child.<sup>14</sup> Philo, drawing upon Hippocrates, says that παιδίον refers to the first stage of a person's life up to seven years of age. The second phase is denoted by παῖς and demarcates the next seven years up to puberty at age 14 (*Opif.* 105). This suggests that there was a distinction between the two terms at one point in time. How long and how consistently this distinction was maintained is unclear. Jairus' daughter, whom Jesus raises from death, is referred to by Mark as a παιδίον but is also described as twelve years of age (Mark 5.39–41). Perhaps it is significant that both Matthew and Luke avoid παιδίον in their versions of the story.<sup>15</sup> Twice Luke substitutes the word παῖς (Luke 8.51, 54). Elsewhere, we see that Luke refers to the 12-year-old Jesus as a παῖς (Luke 2.43). This suggests that Luke (and possibly Matthew) may regard παιδίον as inappropriate for a 12 year old, while Mark seems to be expanding the semantic field of παιδίον at the expense of παῖς.<sup>16</sup>

What relevance does the criterion of frequency have for Mark 7.27–8? The regular form of the word 'dog' (κύων) occurs 46 times in biblical Greek (LXX 41; NT 5). The two occurrences of κυνάρια found in Mark 7.27–8 and their parallels in Matt 15.26–7 are the only four in biblical Greek. In the Philonic corpus, κύων occurs 16 times; the diminutive κυνάριον never appears.<sup>17</sup> In Josephus, κύων occurs 21 times; the diminutive is absent. These facts alone suggest that the diminutive word has not replaced the regular form.

<sup>12</sup> Smyth, 235 §855.

<sup>13</sup> An even more complete replacement occurred with the word ἱμάτιον ('clothing', 283 times in biblical Greek). It derives from εἶμα, a word that never appears in the Greek Bible but was common in the Classical period. If ἱμάτιον originally had diminutive force, it was lost during the Hellenistic period. The same is true of ποτήριον 'cup', 64 times in biblical Greek; 5279 times in the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*, which derives from ποτήρ, a word that never appears in the Greek Bible and is found only 28 times in the *TLG*. By the Hellenistic era ποτήριον seems to have replaced ποτήρ completely.

<sup>14</sup> BDAG, 749, 750.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew (17.18) also substitutes παῖς for Mark's παιδίον (9.24) in the story of the demon-possessed boy.

<sup>16</sup> R. Larry Overstreet, "The Greek Concept of the "Seven Stages of Life" and Its New Testament Significance", *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 19 (2009) 537–63; see esp. 555–8.

<sup>17</sup> A different word for 'puppy, small dog' (κυνίδιον) occurs twice in Philo (*Spec. Laws* 4.91; *Praem.* 1.89). Both are true diminutives. The latter reference is to Maltese dogs.

If that were so, we would expect lopsided statistics like those for δαίμων / δαμόνιον. If κυνάριον were advancing on the semantic territory of κύων, we would at least expect a more even distribution like that of παῖς / παιδίον.<sup>18</sup>

## 2. The Thing Denoted by the Diminutive

Some words, by the very nature of the things that they designate, are more likely to have diminutive forms that retain a diminutive sense. The foremost category here would be living things, both human and animal. Because humans and animals pass through stages of life, diminutives are naturally coined to denote the early stages. A variety of words was needed for animals that were born in households or on farms and grew from newborn to adult size. Hypocoristic words (pet names) are naturally coined for the young of domestic animals. Walter Petersen observes that a diminutive suffix may be an exponent of endearment, expressing affection for the person or pet. ‘The ease with which endearment is associated with small size in the case of a child or pet animal is too familiar in all languages to need illustration.’<sup>19</sup>

In Mark 7.27–8, the diminutive form is associated with domestic dogs. These dogs are inside the house, perhaps in v. 27, but explicitly in v. 28.<sup>20</sup> They are under the table, a fact that suggests small size and/or young age but certainly indicates their permitted presence in the house. These dogs implicitly eat *after* the children (v. 27) or may even simultaneously eat small morsels that the children drop or intentionally feed them (v. 28). So the thing designated by the diminutive form and the figurative setting of the words of the Syrophoenician woman are conducive to a genuine diminutive, either of size/age and/or of endearment.

## 3. The Distinction between Meaning and Referent

Linguists distinguish between meaning, which one finds in a dictionary, and referent, the thing, either in the real world or in the literary world, to which the word points.<sup>21</sup> Two words that have different meanings may still have the same referent. That does not imply that the two words are synonymous. It means that the referent can be designated by more than one lexeme.

<sup>18</sup> Another likely example of a faded diminutive in biblical Greek is βίβλος / βιβλίον. The regular form occurs 40 times (LXX, 30; NT, 10); the diminutive form occurs 220 times (LXX, 186; NT, 34). There is no consistent distinction in size between the terms. Βιβλίον appears to have lost its diminutive sense by the first century CE, perhaps earlier.

<sup>19</sup> Walter Petersen, *Greek Diminutives in -ION: A Study in Semantics* (Weimar: R. Wagner Sohn, 1910) 170–1.

<sup>20</sup> The location of the dogs in Jesus’ remark is implicitly inside. The reference to ‘throwing’ the bread has sometimes been taken to mean that the dogs are outside the home. See Susanna Asikainen, *Jesus and Other Men: Ideal Masculinities in the Synoptic Gospels* (Leiden: Brill, 2018) 112 n25; and Francis Dufton, ‘The Syrophoenician Woman and her Dogs’, *Expository Times* 100 (1989) 417. But βαλεῖν need not mean ‘throw outside’. (Note that Matt 7.6 uses δίδωμι and βάλλω in a parallelism.) Moreover, Jesus’ use of κυνάρια implies household dogs. Ulrich Luz correctly says that ‘Only with the household pet does the contrast between dogs and children make sense.’ See Luz, *Matthew 8–20: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001) 340. Similarly, John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) 634. The suggestion that Jesus refers to outside, scavenging dogs and the woman refers to indoor pets is highly unlikely. Pace Jim Perkinson, ‘A Canaanitic Word in the Logos of Christ; or the Difference the Syro-phoenician Woman Makes to Jesus’, *Semeia* 75 (1996) 61–86, at 75. This would almost certainly require two different words rather than the repetition of κυνάρια. The καί before τὰ κυνάρια in Mark 7.28 is ascensive. It does not introduce a new idea but rather elevates something that was previously mentioned or implied. Cf. καί in Mark 1.27; 2.28; 4.25; 7.37.

<sup>21</sup> J. P. Louw, *Semantics of New Testament Greek* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1982) 50–1. See also Eugene A. Nida and Johannes P. Louw, *Lexical Semantics of the Greek New Testament* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992) 21–34.

This linguistic distinction has relevance to the question of diminutive words. A small person, animal or thing may be referred to by both a regular word and the corresponding diminutive. This may occur even within the same short context. It does not necessarily mean that the diminutive has lost its force and become synonymous with the regular word. It means that the person, animal or thing belongs to a subset within a larger category and can simultaneously be designated by words that highlight either the subset or the category. Words that refer to the subset are called hyponyms.

In Greek, a puppy can be referred to as either a κύων or by the hyponym κυνάριον since puppies are a subset of the larger category of 'dog'. That does not mean that κυνάριον has lost its diminutive force. In simple terms, puppies are still dogs; κυνάρια are still κύνες. One will occasionally find scholars who observe that a word and its diminutive form are used of the same referent in the same paragraph and then suggest this indicates that the diminutive has faded. While this *may* be case, it is not necessarily so.

Mark 7.24–30 contains a good example of this phenomenon of two words (one regular, one diminutive) having the same referent. The Syrophoenician woman has a daughter who is designated by both the standard term θυγάτηρ (vv. 26, 29) and the diminutive form θυγάτριον (v. 25). We learn at the outset that the daughter is little. Thereafter she can be referred to simply as a daughter. This does not indicate that θυγάτριον has lost its diminutive force. The girl is both. She is the female offspring of the woman, and she is the *young* female offspring of the woman.

A similar collocation of these words occurs in Josephus' account of the assassination of the Emperor Gaius Caligula. Josephus refers to Julia Drusilla, the offspring of Caligula and Milonia Caesonia, as their daughter (θυγάτηρ) in *Ant.* 19.195. Just a few paragraphs later, he speaks of Drusilla as their 'little daughter' (θυγάτριον, *Ant.* 19.200). The Emperor, his wife Milonia, and their daughter Drusilla were all killed on the same day. We know from other sources that Drusilla was an infant at the time.<sup>22</sup> The use of the diminutive in the summation of Josephus' account is intentional. As Petersen notes, sometimes a diminutive 'results from pity, from the desire to console'.<sup>23</sup> The age of Drusilla, her innocence and the pathos of the scene all call for the use of the diminutive.

It remains the case that there will be instances in which the precise meaning of diminutive forms will be unclear. A biblical example would be the words for 'boat/small boat' (πλοῖον / πλοιάριον). The regular term occurs 109 times in biblical Greek (LXX, 42; NT, 67). The diminutive form occurs only in the NT and only five times. These statistics initially suggest that the diminutive may be deliberately chosen, but the NT data are perplexing. The context of the diminutive form in Mark 3.9 is virtually identical to that of the regular word in Mark 4.1: Jesus embarks in a boat/small boat in order to address a crowd seated beside the lake. One could argue that a small boat (πλοιάριον) is still a boat (πλοῖον), and so the diminutive is genuine. But in this case, other NT uses muddy the water. A πλοῖον in John 21.3, 6 becomes a πλοιάριον in John 21.8. The Johannine story of Jesus walking on the water and its aftermath similarly fluctuate between the regular word (John 6.17, 19, 21, 22, 23) and the diminutive form (John 6.22, 23, 24). In the case of John 6.23, the manuscripts are divided between the two words. (The same textual variation occurs in Luke 5.2.) It was undoubtedly the case that in the Sea of Galilee, *all* boats were small in comparison to large merchant vessels that plied the Mediterranean.<sup>24</sup> (It may be significant that all five occurrences of πλοιάριον in the NT are found in the Gospels. Πλοῖον is used consistently of Paul's Mediterranean journey

<sup>22</sup> Suetonius, *Cal.* 59, and Dio Cassius 59.29.

<sup>23</sup> Peterson, *Greek Diminutives*, 178.

<sup>24</sup> Watt, 'Diminutive Suffixes', 66.

in Acts 27.) So the case of *πλοῖον* / *πλοιόριον* is hard to decide. One might argue that *πλοιόριον* is a faded diminutive, but the NT evidence is not conclusive.<sup>25</sup>

What relevance does this criterion have to the specific question of dog vs. puppy in Mark 7.27–8, since this passage does not use both *κυνάρια* and *κύνες*? It is relevant in that one cannot appeal to other texts that use both terms to designate the same animals and thereby conclude that the diminutive has faded. In this way, attention to the distinction between meaning and referent may not positively identify true diminutives, but it may prevent us from dismissing a true diminutive based on the occurrence nearby of the corresponding regular word.

#### 4. The Usage of the Diminutive Form in a Range of Authors

An important criterion in determining the meaning of any word is a survey of the word's usage in a variety of contexts. How do authors use *κυνάριον*? Does it seem to have true diminutive force or has it faded? This is not a matter of playing the odds, as if a word in a given context must mean what the word usually means. But usage reveals a word's range of meanings and may provide guidance in discerning its meaning in a given context. The massive database of the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* contains 263 instances of *κυνάριον*.<sup>26</sup> Only a small number of these are pre-Christian. The overwhelming majority of post-first-century examples are found in Christian writers who are commenting on the Gospel texts. Here, I will survey a few examples that antedate or are roughly contemporary with the Gospel of Mark.

4.1 Aesop preserves a fable (#346 'The Blacksmith and the Puppy', *χαλκεὺς καὶ κυνάριον*) that is somewhat similar to the Gospel story.<sup>27</sup> A little dog (*κυνάριον*), clearly an indoor pet, sleeps while his master, the blacksmith, is working, but wakes and expects food when the blacksmith pauses for a meal. There are multiple versions and textual variants for this parable. Sometimes, another diminutive word, *κυνίδιον*, is used instead of *κυνάριον*. The blacksmith throws the dog a bone and chides him as, 'You miserable, sleepy pup!' (*ἜΩ ταλαίπωρον κυνάριον ὑπνώδες*) The banter may be playful but obviously acquires a derogatory tone from the accompanying adjectives.

4.2 In the Platonic dialogue *Euthydemus* (298 D), Euthydemus claims that his father is the father of all living things. Ctesiphon challenges him and asks if Euthydemus is the brother of puppies and piglets (diminutive words in both cases). When Euthydemus responds in the affirmative, Ctesiphon infers, 'Then your father is a boar and a dog (using the words that designate the grown animals).'<sup>28</sup>

4.3. In Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* 8.4.20, Cyrus is advising Chrysantas regarding the kind of woman that would be a suitable wife for him. Cyrus says, 'In the first place, she must be short; for you, yourself are short. And if you marry a tall woman and wish to kiss her when she is standing upright, you will have to jump up for it, as puppies do

<sup>25</sup> The statement in *BDAG* (830) that the use of *πλοιάρια* in Aelius Aristides (50, 35; *Sacred Tale* 4) is 'plainly' a faded diminutive is incorrect. The passage in question speaks of small boats (*πλοιάρια*) in a harbour that were cast up on land or destroyed by a violent storm. But in the very next sentence, Aelius speaks of the large merchant ship (*ἡ ὀλκός*) that carried him and his companions as tossed about but spared destruction. In this case, *πλοιάρια* refers to boats whose small size made them more vulnerable in the storm. See Charles A. Behr, *P. Aelius Aristides: The Complete Works* (Leiden: Brill, 1981) II, 325.

<sup>26</sup> The non-diminutive form (*κύων*) occurs 13,943 times in the *TLG* database, over 53 times the number of the diminutive forms.

<sup>27</sup> E. Chambry, *Aesopi fabulae* (Vol. 2; Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1926) #346.

<sup>28</sup> J. D. M. Derrett rightly recognises this usage of *κυνάριον* in Plato as 'a pure diminutive'. See Derrett, 'Law and the New Testament: The Syro-Phoenician Woman and the Centurion of Capernaum', *NovT* 15 (1973) 161–86 (169 n4).



(κυνάρια).’ The point of Cyrus’ humour obviously depends on the diminutive size of the dogs.

4.4 The *Cyranides* is a compilation of magical texts from the first or second centuries CE. In a discussion of the healing powers of various animals, there is a section (2.20) entitled ‘Concerning a small dog’ (Περὶ κυνὸς μικροῦ). The text begins, ‘That which we call a κυνάριον is a dog (κύων) that is small, newly born, still nursing.’<sup>29</sup> The diminutive sense of the word is clear, as is the fact that a κυνάριον can be referred to as a κύων.

4.5 Plutarch (*Aratus* 7.3) is a text that requires special comment because the standard lexicon cites it as an example of how κυνάριον is ‘used with no diminutive force at all’.<sup>30</sup> When carefully examined in context, this claim is seen to be mistaken.<sup>31</sup> In the larger context (5.3–8.1), Aratus sent a reconnaissance team to determine the vulnerability of an enemy’s fortified post. The report came back that the wall was scalable, but a certain gardener’s dogs (κυνάρια) made it hard to enter the grounds undetected for, although the dogs were small (μικρῶν), they were ‘very aggressive and unmanageable’ (ἐκτόπως... μαχίμων καὶ ἀπαρηγορήτων). Aratus decided to proceed with the attack. A scout failed to secure the dogs (κυνάρια, 7.3) in advance of their arrival, and Aratus had to promise his men that they would retreat if the dogs (κύνες, 7.3) became too troublesome. Presumably, the editors of *BDAG* first read κυνάρια and then κύνες referring to the same animals in two consecutive sentences and concluded that the former had lost its diminutive sense. But the previous description of these dogs as small rules out that possibility. Moreover, in 8.1 Aratus’ men encounter a watchdog at a tower that is described as a ‘large hound’ (κύων μέγας) that was roused to action by the noise of the small dogs (κυνάρια) and thereby supplies an implicit contrast. So, in this case, κυνάρια remains a diminutive of size, though not in an endearing sense. The pack of small dogs can be described as either κυνάρια or κύνες, although the large hound in 8.1 can only be described as a κύων.

4.6 A final example actually gathers up a number of ancient references. Maltese dogs were popular in antiquity and are mentioned frequently in the literature.<sup>32</sup> The adjective ‘Maltese’ (Μελιταιῖος) occurs a few times with κυνάριον (e.g., Athenaeus, *Deipn.* 12.16; Ptolemaeus VIII Euergetes, *Frag.* 8; Theophrastus, *Char.* 21.9) and even more often with another diminutive form, κυνίδιον (e.g., Plutarch, *Tranq. an.* 472C; Lucian, *Symp.* 19; *Philops.* 27; Strabo 6.2.11; Philo, *Praem.* 1.89). Rarely, if ever, does the adjective modify the non-diminutive form κύων. Even if examples of the latter could be adduced, it would not disprove the diminutive force of κυνάριον since Maltese miniature dogs are still dogs.<sup>33</sup>

Before moving on to the final criterion, I must comment on the alternative diminutive form that was mentioned above in 4.1 and 4.6, namely, κυνίδιον. The literature on Mark 7.27–8 sometimes points out that Phrynichus, a second-century grammarian, asserted that κυνίδιον was to be used rather than κυνάριον. He tersely advises, ‘Say κυνίδιον. But Theopompus, the comic poet, somewhere once said κυνάριον.’<sup>34</sup> But this is by no

<sup>29</sup> Demetrios V. Kaimakes, *Die Kyraniden* (Meisenheim am Glan: Hain, 1976).

<sup>30</sup> *BDAG* 575.

<sup>31</sup> I thus agree with the view of A.L. Connolly, who argues that Plutarch, *Arat.* 7.3 illustrates a true, not a faded, diminutive. See Connolly, ‘κυνάριον’, in *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity 4* (ed. G. H. R. Horsley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 157–9; 158.

<sup>32</sup> According to the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, in Greek antiquity ‘the commonest pet was the small white long-coated Maltese dog’. ( *OCD* 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1150). See also Kenneth F. Kitchell, *Animals in the Ancient World from A to Z* (London: Routledge, 2014) 53.

<sup>33</sup> J. Méndez Dosuna notes that ‘Maltese dogs are almost invariably referred to by the diminutives κυνίδια, κυνάρια’. See J. Mendez Dosuna, ‘What’s in a Name? An Epitaph for a Maltese Dog in the *Greek Anthology*’, *Seminari Romani di Cultura Greca* 10 (2007) 267–75 (269).

<sup>34</sup> Phrynichus, *The New Phrynichus* (ed. W. Gunion Rutherford; London: Macmillan, 1881) 268, #157.

means a denial of the diminutive force of κυνόριον. Phrynichus was simply asserting that κυνίδιον was, in his opinion, the more proper *Attic* form.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, Phrynichus' testimony is divided against itself. In another work, he is quoted as saying that both κυνίδιον and κυνόριον are accepted (δόκιμα).<sup>36</sup> Another ancient lexical authority agrees with the latter quote and asserts that 'κυνόριον, not only κυνίδιον [is correct], so Alcaeus, the comic poet'.<sup>37</sup> It is clear that κυνίδιον was understood as a diminutive. This *strengthens* the case for κυνόριον. If Greek distinguished between the regular form 'dog' and a diminutive form, there could easily be more than one diminutive form. Some modern languages also have more than one diminutive: Spanish, *perrillo* and *perrito*, and German, *Hündlein* or *Hündchen*.

The relevance of this brief survey for our consideration of Mark 7.27–8 is clear. The diminutive force of κυνόριον was recognised in the classical era (Plato, Xenophon) and persisted into the Hellenistic age (the *Cyranides*, Plutarch, etc.). The existence of a second diminutive form, κυνίδιον, only confirms the need for such a term. This usage in ancient Greek writers does not prove the diminutive meaning in Mark 7.27–8, but it creates the possibility that the word has this force in Jesus' saying unless contextual clues indicate otherwise.

## 5. The Context(s) of Mark 7.27–8

Before turning to the immediate *literary* context, the broader *cultural* context must be noted. In Jewish literature, dogs were often spoken of disparagingly. 'While in the West the dog has regularly been regarded as a symbol of faithfulness and "man's best friend"... such was not the case in the Old Testament.'<sup>38</sup> Dogs were often regarded as scavengers, eating blood, carrion and corpses (Exod 22.31; 1 Kgs 16.4; 21.19; 21.23; 2 Kgs 9.10; Jer 15.3; Matt 7.6; Luke 16.21). They were usually thought of as wild predators (Ps 22.16; Ps 59.6, 14). 'Dog' became a generalised pejorative for someone who was insignificant or contemptible (1 Sam 17.43; 24.14; 2 Sam 9.8; 16.19; 2 Kgs 8.13; Prov 26.11; Phil 3.2; 2 Peter 2.22; Rev 22.15).<sup>39</sup> There are, however, positive references to dogs in Jewish literature. They are occasionally mentioned as pets or service animals.<sup>40</sup> Ulrich Luz

<sup>35</sup> See Eleanor Dickey, *Ancient Greek Scholarship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) 96–7.

<sup>36</sup> Phrynichus, *Phrynichi Sophistae, Praeparatio Sophistica* (Edited by Ioannes de Borries; Leipzig: Teubner, 1911) 84.

<sup>37</sup> Stefano Valente, *The Antiatticist: Introduction and Critical Edition* (Sammlung griechischer und lateinischer Grammatiker 16; Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2015) 202; #87.

<sup>38</sup> Carey A. Moore, *Tobit: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Bible Commentaries; New York: Doubleday, 1996) 197; see also 261–2. See the negative assessment of dogs in D. Winston Thomas, 'Kelebh, "Dog": Its Origin and Some Uses in the Old Testament', *Vetus Testamentum* 10 (1960) 410–27. Geoffrey David Miller provides a more balanced treatment in 'Attitudes toward Dogs in Ancient Israel: A Reassessment', *JSOT* 32 (2008) 487–500. Joshua Schwartz's study is especially thorough: 'Dogs in Jewish Society in the Second Temple Period and in the Time of the Mishnah and Talmud', *Journal of Jewish Studies* 55 (2004) 246–77. Schwartz (266) concludes that, while it is possible that some Jewish homes had dogs as pets, 'it is improbable that dogs in Jewish society were the objects of the same degree of affection as they received in the Graeco-Roman world or the Persian world'.

<sup>39</sup> Alan H. Cadwallader notes that dogs lack rationality (λόγος) and relates this to the fact that the woman is commended for her λόγος in v. 29. It is questionable, however, whether the word means that in its Markan context. See Cadwallader, 'When a Woman is a Dog: Ancient and Modern Ethology Meet the Syrophenician Woman', *The Bible and Critical Theory* 1 (2005) 1–17 (2); and *BDAG*, 600 1ay.

<sup>40</sup> See Tobit 5.17, 6.1 (S), 11.4 (S). The hunting/herding use of dogs is found in Job 30.1; T. Job 9.3; Josephus, *Ant.* 4.206; and Philo, *Abr.* 1.266. In a remarkable passage, Philo (*Decal.* 1.114) speaks of household dogs that protect their masters to the point of death. He also notes that herding dogs risk their lives for the sheep and the shepherd. Philo uses these examples to enjoin human beings to follow the dogs' example! J. Martin C. Scott's sweeping statement that 'it is impossible to find plausible *affirmative* references to people as either little dogs, puppies, or



sums it up well: ‘House dogs were as widespread and beloved at all social levels in antiquity as at any other time... Nor was there in Judaism a special hostility to dogs, although there was an obvious fear of the numerous stray dogs. ...it was taken for granted that people fed house dogs with table scraps.’<sup>41</sup>

Greco-Roman culture provides a greater number of positive images. From the earliest times, dogs were used for hunting and guarding livestock. More importantly, for our purposes, they were kept as pets, often inside the house, as is well attested by literary sources, vase paintings, and gravestones.<sup>42</sup>

What clues, if any, can be found in the immediate *literary* context to shed light on the force of *κυνάρια*? As I have already noted, these *κυνάρια* are inside the house and under the table. The dogs are either eating after the children (v. 27) or simultaneously with the children (v. 28). Adela Yarbro Collins opines that *κυνάρια* in Mark 7.27 ‘probably refers to the scavenging dogs of the street’.<sup>43</sup> While one might with difficulty infer that from Jesus’ remark in v. 27, it becomes impossible in the woman’s response in v. 28. Moreover, if the Markan Jesus had meant scavenging street dogs in v. 27, it is hard to explain why he would not have used *κύνες*.<sup>44</sup>

The preceding discourse in Mark 7 is also quite telling.<sup>45</sup> Jesus is portrayed as rejecting the notion that eating unclean foods defiles a person. The evangelist, in a parenthetical comment, interprets this as Jesus’ declaration that all foods are clean (v. 19). If eating something unclean does not defile, then *a fortiori*, coming into close proximity to something unclean is not defiling. The juxtaposition of the discourse on foods with the encounter with the Syrophenician woman weighs against the possibility that Jesus is calling the woman an unclean, defiling presence. The diminutive force of *κυνάρια* accords with this interpretation.

The five criteria discussed above offer principles for evaluating the force of diminutive forms. It is not enough to say that Hellenistic writers used diminutives frequently and, therefore, they have lost their diminutive force. The observation is true, but such a sweeping conclusion is not warranted. To say that Mark 7.24–30 contains several diminutive forms and, therefore, they must have faded, is a non-sequitur.<sup>46</sup> Writers are quite capable of discourse that includes numerous diminutive forms, some of which are faded, while others retain their diminutive force. Native speakers of the language easily distinguish between the two.<sup>47</sup>

---

house pets’ requires some qualification. See Scott, ‘Matthew 15:21–28: A Test-case for Jesus’ Manners’, *JSNT* 19 (1997) 21–44 (27) (author’s emphasis).

<sup>41</sup> See Luz, *Matthew 8–20*, 340. See also P. Pokorný, ‘From a Puppy to the Child: Some Problems of Contemporary Biblical Exegesis Demonstrated from Mark 7.24–30/Matt 15.21–8’, *NTS* 41 (1995) 321–37; esp. 325. See the index of references to dogs, both positive and negative, in Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998) 7.115–6.

<sup>42</sup> See J. M. C. Toynbee, *Animals in Roman Life and Art* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973) 102–24; and Kenneth F. Kitchell, *Animals in the Ancient World*, 47–53. Connolly (158) notes there are several gravestones that depict pet dogs of the deceased, including some in which the dogs are near tables or funerary couches.

<sup>43</sup> Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007) 367.

<sup>44</sup> Jonathan Rolands, ‘Difficult texts: “A dog at the table” in Matthew 15.21–28’, *Theology* 122 (2019) 285–8; esp. 286.

<sup>45</sup> See David M. Rhoads’ narrative analysis of the passage, especially Mark 6.30–8.10, in ‘Jesus and the Syrophenician Woman in Mark: A Narrative-Critical Study’, *Currents in Theology and Mission* 47 (2020) 36–48; esp. 38.

<sup>46</sup> The passage contains five separate words with nine occurrences due to repetition (*θυγάτριον*; *δαμόνιον* 3x; *κυνάριον* 2x; *ψυχίον*; and *παιδίον* 2x). Rhoads (‘Jesus and the Syrophenician Woman’, 46) sees the accumulation of diminutives as the narrator’s development of the motif of ‘least-ness’. Derrett (‘Law’, 169 n5) cautions, ‘The number of diminutives in our passage is interesting, but it is not conclusive of a ‘devaluation’ of vocabulary in “popular” Greek.’

<sup>47</sup> This fact is illustrated by the following English example: ‘After the *banquet*, the woman attended a *marionette* show. During an intermission, as she lit up a *cigarette*, she realised that she had left her *bracelet* in the banquet

## 6. Results of This Study: Diminutive Force and Function

The primary result of this study is that *κυνόριον* in Mark 7.27–8 has diminutive *force* and should be translated with a diminutive expression: ‘little dogs’ or ‘puppies’.<sup>48</sup> Although English readers are familiar with the translation ‘dogs’ in standard versions like the NRSV and the NIV, there are, in fact, dozens of translations in modern languages that render the term with a diminutive. A second and more difficult question is the precise *function* of the diminutive. I mentioned above that a true diminutive, i.e., not a faded one, may refer to size or age. It may express affection or derogation. As household pets, the *κυνόρια* of Mark 7.27–8 are small and probably young. Whether the diminutive expresses affection, i.e., is hypocoristic, is difficult to determine. The dogs’ location (in the house under the table) allows for this. The literary context in Mark 7 (purity vs. defilement, ministry in the Decapolis) favours a neutral or positive connotation. The cultural context (Jewish perspectives on dogs) is complex but is by no means as uniformly negative as is often assumed. The use of *κυνόριον* in Aesop (4.1 above) was derogative, but this function derived from the accompanying adjective and was not inherent in the word.<sup>49</sup> There are no such indicators in Mark 7.27–8 that *κυνόριον* should be taken pejoratively.

The more important question is how this contributes to the interpretation of the passage.<sup>50</sup> If *κυνόριον* in Mark 7.27–8 is diminutive in force, it softens the harshness of the metaphor.<sup>51</sup> Some interpreters would argue that there is still an implicit and unfavourable comparison between children and puppies, but it is not a harsh repudiation of the woman as a scavenging street dog.<sup>52</sup> Stefan Schreiber accurately describes the significance of the diminutive: ‘It evokes the image of the dog, but it significantly mitigates the disparagement in that it speaks of small housedogs that are not perceived as foreign and hostile but as members of the household. The element of savageness is eliminated in favour of belonging and familiarity. ...The diminutive possesses semantic force. It denotes, in contrast to the wild street dog or fierce watchdog, a housedog or even a lapdog.’<sup>53</sup>

hall’s *kitchenette*.’ The italicised words are diminutive in form. Native speakers immediately recognise that only the last of these has diminutive force.

<sup>48</sup> Summing up his analysis of the word, Connolly (158) concludes that ‘as for *κυνόριον* the few literary and documentary examples suggest that it was not simply a faded diminutive, but could take on various nuances expressed by the diminutive form’.

<sup>49</sup> Similarly, a pejorative sense for *κυνόριον* in Epictetus 4.1.111 is required by the context.

<sup>50</sup> Mark 7.24–30 has generated a huge amount of scholarly reflection, including specific treatments from different hermeneutical angles. For a helpful survey of interpretations, see Jaime Clark-Soles, *Women in the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2020) 17–42. Amy-Jill Levine offers a creative parable of quarrelling siblings who take starkly different approaches to the interpretation of Matthew’s story. She commends, critiques and mediates between historically oriented and ideologically oriented approaches. See Levine, ‘Matthew’s Advice to a Divided Readership’, in *The Gospel of Matthew in Current Study* (ed. David E. Aune; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) 22–41. Julien C. H. Smith refers to a range of interpretations in ‘The Construction of Identity in Mark 7:24–30: The Syrophenician Woman and the Problem of Ethnicity’, *Biblical Interpretation* 20 (2012) 458–81; see esp. 460–1 nn.4–11. Finally, Dorothy A. Lee discusses missional, paedagogical, paradigmatic, and Christological readings of the Markan story in ‘Clean and Unclean: Multiple Readings of Mark 7:24–30/31’ in *Terror in the Bible: Rhetoric, Gender, and Violence* (ed. Monica Jyotsna Melanchthon and Robyn J. Whitaker; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2021) 67–87.

<sup>51</sup> Kelly Iverson, *Gentiles in the Gospel of Mark: ‘Even the Dogs Under the Table Eat the Children’s Crumbs’* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2007) 48–9. See also Bas M. F. van Iersel, *Mark: A Reader Response Commentary* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998) 250: ‘the use of the diminutive relativizes this [the unfriendly image]. These little dogs are not stray or watch dogs but well cared for pets that share the life of the family’. See also Rebekah Liu, ‘A Dog under the Table at the Messianic Banquet: A Study of Mark 7:24–30’, *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 48 (2010) 251–5; esp. 254.

<sup>52</sup> Pace Rhoads, ‘Jesus and the Syrophenician Woman’, 40, 42.

<sup>53</sup> Stefan Schreiber, ‘Cavete Canes! Zur Wachsenden Ausgrenzungswalenz einer neutestamentlichen Metapher’, *Biblische Zeitschrift* 45 (2001) 170–92 (175 and n18).

Unlike Paul's vituperative language in Phil 3.2, the Markan Jesus does not actually call the woman a dog. He uses an analogy that contains an animal metaphor.<sup>54</sup> Analogies usually imply one point of comparison, but they should not be expanded into allegories with multiple point-for-point correspondences. When Paul says that 'day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night', he is comparing the suddenness and unexpectedness of two events. He is not calling Jesus a burglar. When Paul quotes the injunction of Deut 25.4 about not muzzling the ox while it is treading out the grain, and analogises it to the right of apostles to be compensated, he is not calling apostles oxen.<sup>55</sup> And when Jesus likens the healing of the woman's daughter to the feeding of children and puppies, he does not necessarily imply a correspondence between Gentiles and dogs.

Too often, this saying of Jesus has been read against the backdrop of a supposed Jewish habit of routinely characterising Gentiles as dogs. But the evidence for this often alleged claim is meagre and only found in later rabbinical sources if at all.<sup>56</sup> What the Markan Jesus is doing is deprioritising Gentiles *in terms of the focus of his ministry*. At this point in the Gospel narrative, Gentiles do have a lower priority in Jesus' ministry.<sup>57</sup> But the exchange between Jesus and the Syrophenician woman is a matter of duelling proverbs (a duel which the woman wins), rather than an ethnic slur followed by grovelling self-abasement.<sup>58</sup> The point is the chronological order of two events (the Jewish mission vs. the Gentile mission), not the hierarchical order of two different kinds of mammals (humans vs. dogs).<sup>59</sup>

Some readers will, of course, find the prioritisation of the Jews offensive enough, but it accords with the view held by Jesus and early Christians regarding Israel.<sup>60</sup> That priority is

<sup>54</sup> As Walter E. Bundy observes, 'the dogs here are a part of a word-picture with no odious comparison'. See Bundy, *Jesus and the First Three Gospels: An Introduction to the Synoptic Tradition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955) 280. David D. M. King rightly comments that Jesus' use of the word *κυνόπιον* 'is within the context of metaphorical speech. He does not directly say, "You and your daughter are dogs"'. See King, 'The Problem of Jesus and the Syrophenician Woman: A Reader-Response Analysis of Mark 7:24–31', *Journal of Religion, Identity, and Politics* 3 (2014) 1–21 (4 n1).

<sup>55</sup> If a modern parallel may be permitted, suppose a university is in financial straits and is barely able to make payroll. If someone says that the school's employees are fleeing 'like rats off a sinking ship', the employees are not being called rats. The speaker simply sees a parallel between the employees' action and that of rats on a sinking ship. The statement is not an insult, despite the fact that 'rat' is often used derogatorily.

<sup>56</sup> See the critique of this claim a century ago in Israel Abrahams, *Studies in Pharisaism and the Gospels* (2 vols.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1924) 195–6. More recently in Mark D. Nanos, 'Paul's Reversal of Jews Calling Gentiles "Dogs" (Philippians 3:2): 1600 Years of an Ideological Tale Wagging an Exegetical Dog?' *Biblical Interpretation* 17 (2009) 448–82; and Ryan D. Collman, 'Beware the Dogs! The Phallic Epithet in Phil 3.2', *NTS* 67 (2021) 105–20. On the thrust of Jesus' metaphor, see Collman, 113: 'Jesus uses the term... in the context of a household illustration to explain his present mission to Israel, not to belittle the woman for her ethnic or moral status.'

<sup>57</sup> One could argue, however, that in Mark 7 both the discourse (7.1–23) and the events (7.24–37) signal a re-evaluation of the lower priority of Gentiles.

<sup>58</sup> Feminist interpreters often observe that the Syrophenician woman gets the better of Jesus in the exchange. See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1992) 96; Sharon H. Ringe, 'A Gentile Woman's Story' in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. Letty M. Russell; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985) 65; and Gail R. O'Day, 'Surprised by Faith: Jesus and the Canaanite Woman' in *Feminist Companion to Matthew* (ed. Amy-Jill Levine; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001) 114. O'Day (117) observes, 'In our story... Jesus is not the protagonist; the Canaanite woman is.' Finally, Dorothy Lee ('Clean and Unclean', 82) observes that 'Jesus loses the verbal conquest and accedes to the woman's request. Far from attempting to claw back lost honor, Jesus willingly relinquishes the power of winning the debate.'

<sup>59</sup> Elmer A. McNamara concludes: 'The principal point of Christ's teaching ... does not lie in the comparison of the children to the little dogs, as if this were the relative worth of Jew and Gentile before God. The whole force of the comparison rests rather in the element of precedence and time.' See McNamara, 'The Syro-Phoenician Woman', *The American Ecclesiastical Review* 127 (1952) 360–9 (368).

<sup>60</sup> John Nolland rightly observes (*vis-à-vis* the Matthean parallel) that 'As with all forms of particularism, the affirmation of Jewish privilege here sits uncomfortably with postmodern sensibilities...'. The biblical tradition,

explicit in the Matthean parallel (Matt 15.24; cf. 10.6) and in Paul's letters.<sup>61</sup> But there is a counterpart to the priority of Israel, and that is the fact that a categorical rejection of the Gentile mission is not to be found in the NT.<sup>62</sup> Jesus' response to the Syrophoenician woman is more of an *ad hoc* refusal of her request than a blanket rejection of the Gentile mission. In fact, in Mark's account, it is more of a *deferral* than a refusal. He insists that the children be fed *first*.<sup>63</sup> There is no indication about when the little dogs are to be fed, so the deferral might seem indefinite when Jesus speaks it.<sup>64</sup> But because of the woman's shrewd rejoinder, the deferral of her request was short-lived.

Finally, the suggestion is sometimes found in the literature that Jesus is making a sexist remark, using a pejorative that likens the woman to a female dog. It is true that this is an ancient slur, not one originating in modern times.<sup>65</sup> But to attribute this meaning to Jesus runs aground on several points. First, *κυνάριον* is neuter, suggesting that the gender of the puppies is irrelevant. The language could have explicitly targeted the woman and her gender by using the noun 'dog' marked with a feminine article: οὐ γὰρ ἔστιν καλὸν λαβεῖν τὸν ἄρτον τῶν τέκνων καὶ τῇ κυνὶ (or ταῖς κυσὶν) βαλεῖν. Second, the diminutive force for which I argue also undercuts the sexist interpretation. T. Alec Burkill's comment that 'to call a woman "a little bitch" is no less abusive than to call her a "bitch" without qualification' is sensationalistic.<sup>66</sup> More importantly, it begs the question that Jesus' words are sexist to begin with. Third, the woman does not respond to Jesus' statement as if it were a sexist insult. Her demurral addresses the issue of timing: the puppies can eat *at the same time* as the children by retrieving their crumbs. Finally, Jesus is portrayed elsewhere in Mark as responding to women in need, not insulting them (e.g., Mark 1.29–31; 5.21–43).<sup>67</sup>

The point of Jesus' analogy is one of proper sequence: the children eat first, then the puppies. Likewise, there is a proper sequence in Jesus' mission. But the Syrophoenician woman objects: the puppies may eat simultaneously. This objection portrays the

---

however, while not without sensitivity to such concerns, is committed to a metanarrative that inevitably involves particularity.' See Nolland, *Matthew*, 635.

<sup>61</sup> The priority of Israel is unmistakable in Pauline theology (Rom 1.16; 2.9–10) and in the missionary strategy of Paul (Acts 13.46). On this question, see T.W. Manson, *Only to the House of Israel?* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964); and Michael F. Bird, *Jesus and the Origins of the Gentile Mission* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2006).

<sup>62</sup> Theissen, *The Gospels in Context*, 64. See also Robert A. Guelich, *Mark 1-8:26* (World Biblical Commentary; Dallas: Word Books, 1989) 387.

<sup>63</sup> Matthew's parallel, which removes the word 'first', is more problematic on this point. On the other hand, the Matthean Jesus praises the woman's response effusively (Matt 15.28).

<sup>64</sup> Asikainen, *Jesus and Other Men*, 113. Admittedly, the hint of a later feeding for the puppies provides 'no comfort to the woman in her present anxiety about her daughter'. See Joachim Jeremias, *Jesus' Promise to the Nations* (London: SCM Press, 1958) 29.

<sup>65</sup> See Cristiana Franco, *Shameless: The Canine and the Feminine in Ancient Greece* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2014). See Sirach 26.25 (only in the Syriac and a few Greek manuscripts): γυνὴ ἀδιάρπτος ὡς κύων λογιθῆσεται. 'A headstrong wife will be regarded as a dog.' In contrast to Mark 7.27, note that: (1) the abusive title is directly attributed to the γυνή; (2) κύων is used, not κυνάριον; and (3) the adjective ἀδιάρπτος makes the derogatory nature of the statement unmistakable.

<sup>66</sup> T. Alec Burkill, 'The Historical Development of the Story of the Syrophoenician Woman', *NovT* 9 (1967) 161–77; quote on 173. Burkill's remark has often been repeated in the literature. See, e.g., Ringe, 'A Gentile Woman's Story', 69; Frances Taylor Gench, *Back to the Well: Women's Encounters with Jesus in the Gospels* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004) 9; and Bird, *Jesus and the Origins of the Gentile Mission*, 49.

<sup>67</sup> Deb Beatty Mel comments, 'In contemporary Western culture, where "bitch" is one of the most demeaning epithets for a woman, especially a bold and outspoken one, we are bound to read insult in this statement. However, there is no evidence from any of the other healing miracle stories that Jesus ever treated a supplicant with disrespect.' See 'Jesus and the Canaanite Woman: An Exception for Exceptional Faith', *Priscilla Papers* 23 (2009) 8–12 (10). If one extends the database beyond Mark, both John 4.1–26 (the Samaritan woman) and John 7.53–8.11 (the woman accused of adultery) also portray Jesus as one who interacts respectfully with women.

woman as resourceful and shrewd rather than portraying Jesus as racist or sexist. By winning the battle of wits, she gains healing for her daughter and indirectly advances the cause of all Gentile supplicants.

**Competing interests.** The author declares none.

### Addendum: Diminutive Translations of Mark 7.27

Numerous translations use a diminutive to translate *κυνάρια* in Mark 7.27. Translations do not constitute evidence per se, but they represent the judgement of scholars who weighed the evidence and concluded that the word had diminutive force in the Markan story.

#### Afrikaans Translation of *κυνάρια* in Mark 7.27

1. hondjies – Bible Afrikaans (1953)

#### Catalan Translation of *κυνάρια* in Mark 7.27

2. gossets – Bíblia Catalana, Traducció Interconfessional (1993/2002)

#### Danish Translation of *κυνάρια* in Mark 7.27

3. Små Hunde – Danish New Testament (1997)

#### Dutch Translation of *κυνάρια* in Mark 7.27

4. hondjes – Willibrordvertaling (1995)

#### English Translations of *κυνάρια* in Mark 7.27

5. whelpes – The Tyndale New Testament (1534)
6. little dogges – The Bishops' New Testament (1595)
7. whelps – Geneva Bible (1599)
8. little dogs – Young's Literal Translation (1862)
9. little dogs – Worldwide English New Testament (1969)
10. little dogs – New King James Version (1982)
11. little dogs – New Jerusalem Bible (1985)
12. pet dogs – Complete Jewish Bible (1998)
13. little dogs – The Idiomatic Translation of the New Testament (2006)
14. puppies – International Standard Version (2011)
15. little dogs – Disciples' Literal New Testament (2011)
16. little dogs – The Passion Translation (2017)
17. little dogs – Evangelical Heritage Version (2019)

#### Finnish Translation of *κυνάρια* in Mark 7.27

18. penikoille – Finnish Pyhä Raamattu (1933/1938)

#### French Translations of *κυνάρια* in Mark 7.27

19. petits chiens – French Louis Segond (1910)
20. petits chiens – French Bible de Jerusalem (1973)
21. petits chiens – La Sainte Bible, Nouvelle Version Segond Révisée (1978)
22. petits chiens – Nouvelle Edition Geneve (1979)



23. petits chiens – French Traduction Oecuménique de la Bible (1988)

### **German Translations of κυνάρια in Mark 7.27**

- 24. Hündlein – Unrevidierte Elberfelder (1905)
- 25. Hündlein – German Schlachter Version (1951)
- 26. Hündchen – Münchener NT (1998)

### **Italian Translations of κυνάρια in Mark 7.27**

- 27. cagnolini – La Nuova Diodati (1991)
- 28. cagnolini – La Sacra Bibbia Nuova Riveduta (1994)
- 29. cagnolini – Nuovissima Versione della Bibbia (1995)

### **Latin Translation of κυνάρια in Mark 7.27**

- 30. catellis – Nova Vulgata Editio (1979)

### **Lithuanian Translation of κυνάρια in Mark 7.27**

- 31. šunyčiams – Biblija: Senasis Testamentas, Naujasis Testamentas (1999)

### **Norwegian Translation of κυνάρια in Mark 7.27**

- 32. småhundane – Norsk Bibel Nynorsk (1994)

### **Polish Translation of κυνάρια in Mark 7.27**

- 33. szczeniętom – Polish Warsaw Bible (1975)

### **Portuguese Translation of κυνάρια in Mark 7.27**

- 34. cachorrinhos – Brazilian Portuguese João Ferreira de Almeida 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (1993)

### **Slovak Translation of κυνάρια in Mark 7.27**

- 35. šteňatám – Sväté Písmo (1995)

### **Spanish Translations of κυνάρια in Mark 7.27**

- 36. perrillos – Spanish Reina-Valera Revised (1960)
- 37. perrillos – La Biblia de las Americas (1986)
- 38. perritos – Reina-Valera Actualizada (1989)
- 39. perrillos – Castilian Bible Version (2003)
- 40. perrillos – Nueva Biblia de los Hispanos (2005)

---

**Cite this article:** Croy NC (2024). Puppies and Pejoratives: Did Jesus Insult the Syrophoenician Woman (Mark 7.24-30)? *New Testament Studies* **70**, 407–420. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688524000031>