

Article

The Woman Who Took the Initiative: A Look at Mark 5:25–34 from the Perspective of Power Dynamics

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Abstract: The paper takes a close look at the ‘hemorrhaging woman’ in Mark 5:25–34. The pericope is analyzed from the perspective of power dynamics. Utilizing tools of narratological analysis, both the woman and Jesus come into focus. By also taking concepts of social psychology into consideration, the question of power dynamics in the pericope is seen from a new perspective. Thus, the article differentiates what kind of power the woman and Jesus hold in Mark 5:25–34. The article argues that while Jesus is known by readers to hold both social and personal power, he does not actively exercise it in the pericope under consideration. The *Woman who Took the Initiative* on the other hand holds no social but a great deal of personal power which she not only holds but also applies to make sure she will receive the healing she has come for.

Keywords: healing; dis/ability; hemorrhaging woman; social power; personal power

1. Introduction

The ‘hemorrhaging woman’ who approaches Jesus in Mark 5:27 has without doubt received much attention from exegetes. This is not surprising, as—even though she remains without a name and appears only in this instance in the gospel of Mark—the text devotes several verses to her description and her train of thought. This is something that does not go without saying in the gospel of Mark. Many minor characters remain without backstory or insight into their motivation in the Markan narrative, even though they are woven into the story’s fabric quite expertly.¹

Despite this attention that reaches beyond purely academic scholarship and is also attested by numerous artistic depictions of the scene from early Christian times on (Baert 2010, p. 52), the text has rarely been analyzed from a perspective of power dynamics, and especially not in dialogue with social psychology, which has a lot to say on the question of power.²

This paper wants to address this shortage in recent scholarship of Mark’s gospel and thus address the following question:

Is the ‘hemorrhaging woman’—who will mainly be called the *Woman who Took the Initiative* in this essay from here on—presented as a powerful character in Mark 5:25–34?

To answer this question, I will investigate the presentation of the nameless woman primarily in comparison to Jesus, and I will demonstrate that many interesting discoveries lie hidden in an undervalued pericope that presents a healer who does not heal and a patient without patience.



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2. Methodology

Is the Woman who Took the Initiative presented as a powerful character—especially in comparison to Jesus? The answer to this question depends, of course, upon both the methods applied while analyzing the text and upon the crucial question of what one means while talking about ‘power’.

This essay sees the Markan gospel as a “carefully crafted” (Kotrosits and Taussig 2013, p. 21) narrative with a complex theology. The narrative will be analyzed from a synchronous perspective and with one classical tool of narratological analysis: characterization. The focus of investigation will be the details of the depiction of important characters in this ‘carefully crafted’ narrative, namely of the Woman who Took the Initiative and of Jesus.

Because modes and methods of characterization vary widely, I will explain shortly which aspects of characterization will be under consideration in this paper.

Understanding a character as “a text-[...]based figure in a storyworld” (Jannidis 2009, p. 14) the text of Mark 5:25–34 will be carefully analyzed with close-reading techniques, “restrict[ing] our investigation to what is presented to us in the actual words of the text” (Bal 2017, p. 106). Following first and foremost ‘what is presented in the text’ (instead of sticking strictly to one of the many models of characterization in [biblical] narrative), the following elements of characterization will be under special consideration in this paper:

- Actions;
- Knowledge;
- Motivation;
- Physical condition;
- Backstory.

In particular, the characters’ actions and knowledge are analyzed both with regard to Jesus and to the Woman who Took the Initiative. Motivation, physical condition and backstory relate more to the Woman who Took the Initiative.

In addition to analyzing the two main characters of Mark 5:25–34 from the perspective of narratological analysis, models of social and personal power discussed in social psychology will be brought into dialogue with the Markan text. The aim of this dialogue is not a socio-psychological analysis of the characters in the story, but rather to bring models of explaining and structuring a contemporary readers’ world to the investigation of a biblical text as a heuristic tool. I do this in a similar way as Stefan Alkier has carried out recently when he proposed to read the gospel of Mark as a tragicomedy. Alkier writes the following: “Ich behaupte also nicht: Das Markusevangelium ist eine Tragikomödie [...] Vielmehr nutze ich sie [...] als heuristisches Interpretationsmodell, das mir—und hoffentlich auch anderen—beim Zusammenhang herstellenden Lesen des Markusevangeliums wirksame Hilfe leistet” (Alkier 2020, p. 223). Similarly, reading Mark 5:25–34 with a model of social and personal power will aid us in reading the episode in a useful, coherent and maybe also surprising way.

3. The Devil Is in the Details: The Presentation of the Main Characters

Let us start with the examination of our two main characters’ presentation before we look at them from the perspective of power dynamics. The details are important here, because Matthew and also Luke change quite a few parameters and the Markan version has some interesting and unique features.

3.1. The Woman Who Took the Initiative: A Patient Without Patience

The nameless woman’s affliction undoubtedly serves as a motivator for the scene’s plot. Clearly the woman is moved to act in the way she does by the affliction, which is called *hrysis haimatos* (ῥύσις αἱματος) in Mark 5:25, usually translated as ‘flow of blood’.

This ‘flow of blood’ has been her constant companion for 12 years.³ A second motivator is the woman’s knowledge about Jesus. Readers are not told what exactly it is the woman knows about Jesus but the Markan text states that she (has) heard about him (*akousasa peri tou Iēsou*; ἀκούσασα περὶ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ).

With regard to her background story, the woman is depicted as one who has suffered—albeit not quite in the way readers might expect it from one who is in need of healing. The participle *pathousa* (παθοῦσα) in Mark 5:26 is not used to describe the affliction itself, which is referred to with a rather matter-of-fact *ousa en* (οὖσα ἐν) in Mark 5:25. Instead, Mark uses *pathousa* (παθοῦσα) to characterize the failed attempts of the woman’s physicians to help her (Marcus 2005, p. 358). Mark 5:26 reads: “And she had suffered many things from many physicians, and she had given away all of her things and had not received any benefit, but instead had gotten worse”.⁴ Sticking strictly to the text, the woman suffers *because* of the physicians; there is no direct statement about her suffering because of the ‘flow of blood’, although the affliction is described as a scourge (*mastix*; μάστιξ) later on, in Mark 5:29. This does not exclude the *hrysis haimatos* as reason for the woman’s suffering. But it shifts the focus from the *hrysis haimatos* to the physicians. Also, the second part of Mark 5:26 states that the woman has spent everything she had on the physicians (*dapanēsasa ta par’ autēs panta*; δαπάνησασα τὰ παρ’ αὐτῆς πάντα). Thus, the half-verse is evoking the context of financial loss (Moss 2017, p. 289) and makes readers wonder if the financial threat might not be as bad as (or even worse than) the medical condition itself.

Interestingly, the woman is also not described as being incapacitated by the affliction. She is indeed among a minority of patient-characters in the gospel of Mark who take initiative and do not wait passively to be healed (Lawrence 2013, p. 94). In most healing stories those who are later healed by Jesus are either brought to him by others or remain stationary while Jesus comes to them (see Mark 1:30–31; Mark 1:32; Mark 2:1–12; Mark 3:1–5; Mark 5:35–43; Mark 6:55–56; Mark 7:31–37; Mark 8:22–26 and Mark 9:14–29). Examples for those who are brought to Jesus are the paralyzed man in Mark 2 and the person with a hearing and speaking impairment in Mark 7. Among those patient-characters who remain stationary and are visited by Jesus are Peter’s mother-in-law (Mark 1:30–31) and also, more relevant for our context, Jairus’s daughter who is mentioned in Mark 5:22–24 and 5:35–43. In contrast to Jairus’ daughter, the Woman who Took the Initiative in Mark 5:25–34 is on her own, she moves about on her own accord without the help of anyone, and she is the one to take the initiative to approach Jesus herself.

How are the rest of her outer and inner processes described in the pericope? We learn that the woman hears about Jesus and goes to him. She is within the crowd but does not have any companions visible to readers. She touches Jesus’ clothes and then speaks. Usually, the monologue in Mark 5:28 is interpreted as an inner one (cf. e.g., Schenke 2005, p. 149; Yarbro Collins 2007, p. 281; Struthers Malbon 2009, p. 84). In the (inner) monologue, she expresses her confidence and faith that she will be healed. Immediately afterwards, readers are told that she has indeed been correct (cf. Mark 5:28a) before the woman herself has a realization: She “knows in her body” (*egnō tō sōmati*; ἔγνω τῷ σώματι) that she is healed from her affliction (cf. 5:28b).

The next three verses shift the focus of attention to Jesus and his disciples (who are still far away from realizing what is going on). In Mark 5:33, we return to the woman. She is now described as gripped by fear, shaking and falling down in front of Jesus. This is the direct consequence of having realized what has happened to her. While the woman is sitting, kneeling, or lying on the ground, she tells Jesus “the whole truth” (*pasan tēn alētheian*; πᾶσαν τὴν ἀλήθειαν).

3.2. Jesus: A Healer Who Does Not Heal

But what about Jesus? Even though the length and detail of the background story of the Woman who Took the Initiative is rather impressive for a character in Mark's gospel, readers of Mark's gospel naturally know a lot more about Jesus by the time they reach chapter five than they do about the nameless woman. They have already been told that Jesus is the Messiah (*Christos*; Χριστός), that he is able to see and hear divine communication (cf. Mark 1:10–11a) and that he is indeed the beloved son of God (cf. Mark 1:11b)—and this is only part of the information the reader receives about Jesus in the first eleven verses of the gospel.

In the more immediate context of our episode, Jesus' exorcizing and healing capacities are emphasized. After exorcizing a legion of demons from a man and sending them into a herd of pigs, Jesus goes to the other side of the sea of Galilee (cf. Mark 5:21). He is approached by Jairus, the head of a synagogue, who falls down before Jesus and begs him to come and save his daughter from her imminent death (cf. Mark 5:23). Jesus goes with him and is soon surrounded by a crowd of people pressing in on him. This is when the Woman who Took the Initiative enters the stage.

What does Jesus do in Mark 5:25–34? For two verses we do not hear about him at all. When he comes into focus, we see the scene from the woman's perspective (Guttenberger 2017, p. 128). Jesus is approached, and his clothing is touched. The mention of Jesus' clothing (*himation*; ἱμάτιον) is technically also a characterizing element with regard to Jesus: readers now know that he is clothed. However, unfortunately, the term used is not very specific nor productive for detailing Jesus' physical appearance. It should be noted, however, that Mark only mentions Jesus' clothing, but not the hem (*kraspedon*; κράσπεδον). The latter is found in the Matthean and Lukan parallels (cf. Matt 9:20 and Luke 8:44) and has often been interpreted in scholarship as referring to the *tzitzit* or tassels hanging from the seams of traditional Jewish (men's) clothing as prescribed in Num 15:38–39 and Deut 22:12 (Sidgwick 2014, pp. 359–60).

The next direct statement about Jesus after he is being approached by the nameless woman is made in Mark 5:30. Jesus realizes at once (*euthys*; εὐθὺς) that some kind of power (*dynamis*; δύναμις) has left him. Interestingly, this is described in a similar way as the woman's realization that she had been healed just one verse earlier (Yarbro Collins 2007, p. 282). The woman had realized in (or with) her body (*egnō tō sōmati*; ἔγνω τῷ σώματι); Jesus comes to realize (*epignous*; ἐπιγινούς). He then turns around in the crowd and asks who has touched him. Interestingly, this seems to be a real question for Jesus.⁵ The search for the person responsible for Jesus' power leaving him continues in Mark 5:32 after his disciples have demonstrated once again not understanding anything. They apparently think Jesus might have lost it a little bit as they ask: "You do see that the crowd is pressing in to you and you say: who touched me?" (Mark 5:31). Jesus ignores them (Connolly 2018, p. 129) and looks around searching for the person who has touched him. Then, the woman falls down in front of him and Jesus concludes by speaking to the woman. He calls her 'daughter' and tells her that her faith and trust have saved her. He also tells her to go away in peace and to be healed from her affliction.

4. Hermeneutical Frame: What Is Power?

Is the Woman who Took Initiative portrayed as a powerful character? This question depends, of course, on what one means while talking about power. This essay wants to take into consideration two concepts of power frequently used in social psychology from the 1950s until today. The aim is not to analyze our two main characters in the story psychologically, but to bring the story into dialogue with one way to look at power dynamics in the 21st century.

4.1. John French and Bertram Raven: Power as Social Power

Let us start with social power. It is probably the better known of the two terms and the model that comes closer to an intuitive understanding of ‘power’. Many conceptions of social power and social power dynamics draw upon the Model of Interpersonal Influence developed by Bertram Raven and John French in 1959 (French and Raven 1959). Raven and French see social influence as a “change in the belief, attitude, or behavior of a person” (Raven 2008, p. 1) and social power “as the potential for such influence” (Raven 2008, p. 1). Social power is the ability of a person to create change in belief, attitude or behavior of another person. Powerful are those who can change others.

In French and Raven’s model social power stems from the relationship between the interacting persons (French and Raven 1959, p. 155). Several types of relationships are distinguishable that form the bases of social power (French and Raven 1959, p. 155).

‘Reward power’ means the powerful person has the ability to change others’ beliefs, attitudes or behaviors by giving them a reward. This reward can be connected to monetary gain but does not need to be material at all. A boss could, for example, reward employees with better job hours or a parent could reward children with more television time. Strictly speaking, the reward does not need to be connected to any kind of gain at all. Also, the removal of negative conditions can be considered as reward (French and Raven 1959, p. 156).

‘Coercive Power’ on the other hand follows from the prospect of punishment. A person with a lot of coercive power is thus seen by others as being able to punish (French and Raven 1959, p. 157). Sticking to the examples mentioned above, a boss usually holds coercive power as they have the power to move employees to less desirable positions or to fire them for underperforming. A parent might exert coercive power by restricting access to television or video games.

‘Legitimate Power’ appears in many forms and has many facets. On the most basic level it means the ability to change others because they perceive the powerful person to be in the right to demand change. This perceived right to demand change is based on norms and values, for instance cultural ones (French and Raven 1959, p. 159). An example employed by French and Raven that is valid in many cultural contexts is the legitimate power people of advanced age hold in decision-making (French and Raven 1959, p. 160). It is important to note that legitimate power can, in French and Raven’s view, also be valid where no coercive or reward power is involved (French and Raven 1959, p. 159).

‘Referent Power’ refers to a relationship between two parties where one party changes because it has the wish to be similar to the powerful party. One reason for this need to be similar could, for example, be attraction. French and Raven describe this need to be similar also as “identification, [...] a feeling of oneness [...] or a desire for such an identity” (French and Raven 1959, p. 161). Referent power is not restricted to romantic attraction, but the changes one makes in order to appeal to or to become closer to a person one is romantically attracted to is an obvious example.

‘Expert Power’ is relatively self-explanatory: The powerful person can produce change because they are perceived to be an expert in a certain field in which they have a lot of knowledge and/or experience (French and Raven 1959, p. 163). The expert status can be assigned based on comparison with one’s own knowledge or to a predefined level (French and Raven 1959, p. 163). For example, a professor might hold expert power in the classroom as well as in a conference setting among colleagues, if the professor is seen as being proficient enough in their field.

These five are the first five bases of power suggested by French and Raven which were later complemented by a sixth base: ‘Informational power’ (Raven 2008, p. 3). A person who holds and uses informational power explains why change is sensible or necessary.

Thus, behavior, attitude or belief is changed through access to information. Even though there are processes of social power involved here, too, the changes become independent of the person holding informational power relatively quickly: The person influenced by the other's informational power "understands and accepts the reasons and changes behavior. Informational influence then results in cognitive change and acceptance [...] [The] altered behavior, though initiated by the influencing agent [...] now continues without the target necessarily referring to, or even remembering, the supervisor as being the agent of change" (Raven 2008, p. 2).

To sum up, at the heart of most models of social power, lies the idea of influence over others. One or more agents are influencing one or more others (Lammers and Stoker 2019, p. 270).

4.2. From Social to Personal Power

But there is also another way of looking at power in social psychology that is helpful for analyzing Mark 5:25–34: to conceptualize power not primarily as social but personal power. From this different perspective, the focus shifts to the individual's capability not to influence others but to exert influence over their own behavior, attitudes and beliefs. In this framework, power is seen as the ability "to act with agency" (van Dijke and Poppe 2006, pp. 537–38) and "to control one's own outcomes, [...] to be personally independent. This type of power is often called *personal power*" (Lammers et al. 2009, p. 1549).

Powerful in this sense are those who do not exclusively depend on others, are (or become) free of the influence of others, and are capable of reaching their own goals (Lammers and Stoker 2019, p. 270; Leach et al. 2017, p. 5).

Personal power is often connected in the relevant literature to having a lot of resources at one's disposal. Most often, money and knowledge are mentioned (Lammers et al. 2009, p. 1543), but essentially, the importance of the specific resource for a heightened personal power depends upon the value ascribed to the resource by the individual in question: "In this view, power implies influence, [...] via one's relative control over resources valued by the self" (Leach et al. 2017, p. 5). As an effect of this control of valued resources, those who hold a lot of personal power are not as easily influenced by others or by situational parameters (Leach et al. 2017, p. 5; Galinsky et al. 2008, p. 1451).

The concepts of social power and of personal power are not mutually exclusive, of course (Leach et al. 2017). One could imagine a person being in a great deal of control over their own life but almost completely without the ability to influence others. A good example of this would be a hermit living in a very secluded, but also autonomous way. But there are also constellations in which a person has both a lot of social power and a lot of personal power. A common example would be a position in higher management which might also allow an individual to freely arrange where and at what time of day to work.

5. Synthesis: What Kind of Power Do Jesus and the Women Who Took the Initiative Possess?

How does this excursion into social psychology help us when analyzing the power dynamics in Mark 5:25–34? Coming back to Mark's story and our main question about whether the Woman who Took the Initiative is presented as a powerful character in Mark 5:25–34, a new perspective unfolds.

5.1. The Woman Who Took the Initiative as Powerful Character

From a narrative perspective the Woman who Took the Initiative appears as a clear-cut character, individuated from the surrounding people (Marshall 1989, p. 101; Zwiep 2019, p. 243). But is she depicted as a powerful character? Looking at the models of social and

personal power that we discussed above helps us to formulate the question in a more precise way.

Is the woman depicted as having the ability to create change (social power)? Is she described as a character who “act[s] with agency” (van Dijke and Poppe 2006, p. 538) towards the realization of her own goals (personal power)?

Looking at the woman’s ability to effect change in others (social power), I argue that the text remains relatively vague. We do not receive any information about the woman’s social status from her backstory. An exception is the fact that she must have been able to pay physicians in the past. What this means for her present, however, remains unclear. All her relationships except for that with Jesus are obscured in the text. As noted earlier, the gospel of Mark does not mention any companions, be they female or male.⁶ During the pericope itself the woman is said to be within the crowd (*en tō ochlō*; ἐν τῷ ὄχλῳ) but does not interact with the crowd in any way.

This leaves us with analyzing the relationship between Jesus and the woman. Jesus does indeed change his behavior as a reaction to something the woman does. She touches his garment which results in some kind of power (*dynamis*; δύναμις) coming out from Jesus which in turn causes Jesus to turn around and look for the person that has initiated this. It is important to be careful with the phrasing here, because in my opinion Mark 5:25–34 emphasizes that the woman does not heal herself. She is the one that takes initiative, no doubt. But the element of faith that is commented upon twice in the pericope draws the readers and listeners attention to God’s involvement.

Strictly speaking, Jesus turns around and pauses in his initial quest to go and heal Jairus’s daughter because the *dynamis* has left him, not because he expects reward from the woman or punishment, or because the woman has a social position that gives her authority and also not because he wants to be like her, or regards her as an expert in some way. In my conclusion, the Woman who Took the Initiative is not depicted as having a lot of social power.

However, she is depicted as a character with a lot of personal power. She does act with agency and independently, reaching her goal by her “manipulation of the divine power that works through [Jesus]” (Lawrence 2013, p. 94). There are no helper figures to be seen in the pericope, despite her being in need of healing. This is especially relevant because helper figures are quite common in Markan healing stories; we encounter them, for example, in Mark 2:3–5 and Mark 7:32.

The woman overcomes quite an obstacle on her way to attain healing when she pushes through the crowd (Dube 1999, p. 17; Lawrence 2013, p. 95; D’Angelo 2014, pp. 99–100). From the perspective of personal power, this would make her resistant to external factors on her way to reach her goal.

Additionally, the Woman who Took the Initiative is described as very sure that she will be healed. She also knows how she will be healed before it happens (D’Angelo 2014, p. 99). The woman touches Jesus’ garment. Then, the reader hears her train of thought: “If I only touch his garments, I will be saved” (Mark 5:28). Directly after this, the readers learn about the success of her endeavor and receive confirmation that the woman was right: “And at once the spring of her blood was dried” (Mark 5:29). In the context of personal power, this means that the woman is portrayed as very resourceful. She knows exactly what she must do to be healed (Struthers Malbon 2009, p. 84). Readers learn immediately that she was right. Should this be seen as knowledge on the part of the woman? Or rather as faith? In any case the woman made a prediction, and she was proven right immediately.

Twice more the woman is portrayed as knowledgeable in the pericope: She knows in (or with) her body that she has been healed (cf. Mark 5:29). And again, she not only knows that she has been healed, but also realizes what this means. Her trembling and falling

down before Jesus are explained by the text in the following way: “And the woman was gripped with fear and began to tremble, knowing what had happened to her [...]” (Mark 5:33). Viewed from this perspective, the trembling and falling to the ground do not need to be interpreted as fear of anger or punishment. They can rather be plausibly explained as reaction to the enormity of God’s power which has indeed healed her (Marcus 2005, pp. 259–60).

5.2. Jesus as Healer Who Does Not Heal—But Could

In contrast, Jesus seems almost unaware of what is going on around him. Jesus is not the most unknowing character in the story fragment of Mark 5:25–34; this role falls—once again in the gospel of Mark—to the disciples who do not realize what Jesus talks about in Mark 5:32 at all. But the Jesus that is earlier on described as being able to see into the hearts of people (cf. Mark 2:6–8) does now not know who has touched him. He does perceive that *dynamis* has flown out of him, but he is actively looking for the person responsible for this. That Jesus’ question “who has touched my clothes?” (Mark 5:30b) is not a rhetorical one becomes apparent when he ignores the disciples reply to this question and instead looks around for the person responsible. Even Jesus’ message to the Woman who Took the Initiative might show a lack of knowledge. He says: “Daughter, your faith has saved you. Go away in peace and be healed from your affliction”. (Mark 5:34). It is true that her faith and trust have saved the nameless woman. The readers know as much. Also, nothing can be said against the wish to go and be at peace. But Jesus’ declaration “be healed!” seems quite inconsequential for the woman’s healing. The readers know that the Woman has been cured since Mark 5:29. As Mary D’Angelo puts it: “Jesus’ parting commendation of her faith simply concedes to her what she has already taken from him: the power with which to supply her weakness” (D’Angelo 2014, pp. 100–1; contra Tiwald 2012, p. 94).

Is Jesus therefore depicted as a powerless character in the episode of the Woman who Took the Initiative? Indeed, not a lot of personal power is discernible in Mark 5:25–34 on the side of Jesus. Jesus is stopped on his original quest to heal Jairus’ daughter in Mark 5:30. He is stopped despite the readers’ knowledge that the quest is a very important one; Jairus’s daughter is on the brink of death. Nevertheless, Jesus’ movement towards this goal is stopped. His knowledge appears to be limited throughout the whole pericope. He is primarily reacting to external influences. And he does not seem to control the *dynamis* flowing from him (Moss 2010, p. 516).

However, even if he does not always actively *exercise* it in this pericope, the readers know that Jesus possesses a large amount of social power, because he has exercised it before.

True, Jesus is not always described as having and exercising social power in Mark’s story. Keeping the narrative flow of Mark’s story in mind, one such event is still fresh on the readers’ and listeners’ minds by the time they hear about the Woman who Took the Initiative. For while Jesus demonstrates his capability to exorcize masterfully at the beginning of chapter five, his social power is at the same time called into question. The pericope of the man exorcized at Gerasa (Mark 5:1–20) tells us about people asking Jesus to leave their land, leading the readers and listeners to question if Jesus has achieved what he wanted to. Still stronger is the example of the man healed from *lepra* in Mark 1:40–45. Here, Jesus is very clear in asking the man to keep quiet (see Mark 1:44). The man, however, does the exact opposite and talks about it a lot (*kēryssein polla*; κηρύσσειν πολλά)(see Mark 1:45). This ambiguous trend continues in the gospel of Mark also (and maybe even stronger) after Mark 5 (for examples of this ambiguity see also van Iersel 1993, p. 174). Jesus is portrayed as changing the beliefs, attitudes and behavior of some characters in Mark’s story. But he also fails to explain important things about himself and the kingdom of God to his disciples (see, e.g., Mark 8:32–9:1) and he at least occasionally fails to effect the change he wants to

bring about (see, e.g., the nameless rich man leaving Jesus instead of following him in Mark 10:17–22; König 2024, esp. pp. 257–58).

Nevertheless, readers have been encountering examples of Jesus exercising social power from the very beginning of the narrative: Jesus is exercising enormous social power in Mark 1:16–20 when he calls his disciples and they change their behavior at once, following him. He will also exercise a great deal of social and personal power shortly after our pericope ends, in Mark 5:35–43. This is especially relevant for the characterization of Jesus with regard to his power because of the proximity of both pericopae in the narrative sequence and also because of the close thematic and formal connections between them. Mark 5:25–34 and Mark 5:35–43 complement and balance each other (e.g., Gosbell 2018, p. 230; Nogossek-Raithel 2023, pp. 159–60, 183). Coming back to Mark 5:25–34, Jesus is indirectly depicted as having social power since the woman's actions are motivated by her having heard of Jesus (see Mark 5:27).⁷ If the woman expects to be healed from her affliction through the encounter with Jesus, he holds reward power in this specific social constellation even if he does not take action to exercise this reward power in the scene (e.g., by asking the woman to fall to the ground before him in order to be granted her healing). One could even argue that simply the fact of being known as a healer and thus leading the Woman who Took the Initiative to come to him in the first place (see Mark 5:27) demonstrates Jesus not only holding but exercising social power. French and Raven themselves use the example of “a policeman[...] standing on a corner” whose presence “may be considered an act of an agent for the speeding motorist” (French and Raven 1959, p. 152) while discussing the necessity of conscious action for exercising social power. French and Raven conclude that they “do not want to limit our definition of ‘act’ to [...] conscious behavior” (French and Raven 1959, p. 152) and point out that influence can be exerted with actions taken to exert it varying in strength: “The policeman, for example, may merely stand and watch or act more strongly by blowing his whistle at the motorist”. (French and Raven 1959, p. 152). Regardless of whether Jesus exercises or simply holds social power in being part of the Woman who Took the Initiative's motivation to come and touch Jesus' garment, it is a facet of the story that connects Jesus to the sphere of social power. Having read (or heard) the first four and a half chapters of Mark's gospel, the readers also know, of course, that Jesus could heal the Woman who Took the Initiative, even if he does not do so actively in this pericope.

This brings us to a concluding remark that should be considered when asking if Jesus is presented as powerful in Mark 5:25–34: besides the immensely helpful differentiation between social and personal power, the formulations of both types of power considered in this essay have an additional big strength: they focus on the ability to effect change in others and, respectively, the ability to act with agency towards one's own goals. This does not necessarily mean that personal and social power need to be exercised at any given time.

6. Social Power, Personal Power and the Interpreters' Perspective(s)

To conclude: The story of the Woman who Took the Initiative does present us with two powerful characters. However, they each possess different types of power and they exercise it differently from each other.

Jesus does not actively exercise personal power or social power, but from the narrative context and the motivation for the woman's action detailed in Mark 5:27 (her knowledge about Jesus), it is nevertheless clear that the beloved son of God (Mark 1:11) holds enormous social power. He will demonstrate also personal power shortly after Mark 5:25–34 while healing Jairus' daughter.

The nameless woman on the other hand is not depicted as exercising or having social power at all. From her backstory, we simply do not find enough information to infer

the ability to effect change in others, and in the episode itself, she is neither depicted as having nor exercising social power in the strict sense. But, and especially in contrast to Jesus, the Woman who Took the Initiative holds and exercises personal power. She takes action towards her goal. She is successful in reaching the goal. She is not dependent upon others for it. And she is depicted as being a very resourceful woman, having faith as well as knowledge.

These conclusions have consequences for the picture of Jesus painted in Mark's narrative overall. They also have consequences for the presentation of characters that are in need of healing in the gospel of Mark.

In the case of the presentation of the main character of Mark's gospel, Jesus, the image becomes more ambiguous and complex and maybe even less overtly triumphant when considering Mark 5:25–34 as an example of a main character not powerful in all respects. Readers of Mark's gospel know Jesus to be a healer, holding and exercising social power not least by physically changing those he heals. But this presentation of Jesus is not unambiguous. Already Mark 4:35–41 had hinted at the fact that Jesus' attempt to teach his disciples about the kingdom of God (see Mark 4:34) has at least partially failed and *not* resulted in a strong trust in God (König 2024, p. 134) while at the same time demonstrating Jesus' power over wind and sea. Similarly, the readers were confronted with both a successful exorcism *and* Jesus being asked to leave in Mark 5:1–20. Now, in Mark 5:25–34 a Jesus is presented that is hindered in his attempt to reach Jairus' daughter in time, who does not control the power flowing from him and who does not know who has touched his clothes. This ambiguousness continues in Mark 6 and beyond (see also above Section 5.2). Seen from the perspective of power dynamics (and not, for example, purely within the framework of an ever-mounting opposition to Jesus), it prepares readers for the end of Mark's story and the question they will need to carefully consider then: who holds and exercises power when Jesus is crucified? Is Jesus still influencing others? Is he “act[ing] with agency” (van Dijke and Poppe 2006, pp. 537–38) and does he “control [his]... own outcomes” (Lammers et al. 2009, p. 1549)? And if the answer should be ‘no’: who then holds and/or exercises power while the son of God dies on the cross?

Regarding the characters healed by Jesus, new questions appear independently of the Markan context which will need to be addressed by biblical scholars in the future:

For how many characters can we determine if they have and exercise social and personal power at all?

What does this mean for the narrative roles of the characters in need of healing?

And if we do try to analyze aspects of power, especially aspects of personal power: how strongly are our own preconceptions of agency and of goals worth achieving shaped by exclusively able-bodied perspectives?

Especially interesting in this regard might prove an analysis of the seemingly inconspicuous episode of the two blind people in Matt 9:27–31 who cry loudly for Jesus' help and follow him into his own home to secure a healing. Luke 14:1–6, too, would make for an excellent text to discuss with regard to personal and social power, since it almost (but not quite) obliterates the person in need of healing while discussing Jesus' social power.

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Notes

- ¹ For the role minor characters play in Mark's narrative see, e.g., [Ebner \(2000\)](#).
- ² Among the articles discussing Mark 5:25–34 from the perspective of power dynamics, Candida Moss' article on the subversion of gendered power structures in ancient medicine ([Moss 2010](#)) and Mary D'Angelo's essay on the Markan depiction of a sharing of power are especially recommended to interested readers ([D'Angelo 2014](#)).
- ³ While the flow of blood is almost undisputedly a gynecological problem, the medicinal identification and exact diagnosis of the affliction will not be at the center of this study. For the identification of the affliction as a gynacologically relevant flow of blood cf. (e.g., [Marcus 2005](#), p. 357; [Yarbro Collins 2007](#), p. 280; [Guttenberger 2017](#), p. 133; [Zwiep 2019](#), p. 54; and very recently [Nogossek-Raithel 2023](#), pp. 168–73).
- ⁴ If not otherwise specified, all translations are my own and are based on the 28th edition of the Novum Testamentum Graece and with consulting the German translation given in [Alkier and Paulsen \(2021\)](#). Greek texts are taken from the 28th edition of the Novum Testamentum Graece.
- ⁵ I argue differently here than Ludger Schenke, who interprets Jesus' question as a rhetorical one ([Schenke 2005](#), p. 150). Schenke's main argument seems to be that readers would expect Jesus to be knowledgeable in this pericope. While this seems plausible at first glance, the gospel of Mark does sometimes work against the readers presuppositions as Schenke himself notes, e.g., for Mark 5:43 ([Schenke 2005](#), p. 152). Another argument in favor of Jesus' question being rhetorical seems to be Schenke's overall interpretation of the woman as being very intent on obscuring her actions ([Schenke 2005](#), pp. 145–46). In my opinion, the only part of the text that can (but need not) be interpreted as intent to maintain secrecy is the fact that the woman approaches Jesus from behind (*opisthen*; ὀπισθεν) (see Mark 5:27). After the healing the woman makes no attempt to hide her actions whatsoever. It seems possible to me that the need for secrecy commonly attributed to the Woman who Took the Initiative stems more from the Lukan version of the story than the Markan one. In Luke 8:45 we find an explicit denial of having touched Jesus made by everyone on the scene. After Jesus' insistence that someone must have touched him, Luke 8:47 tells us how the woman realizes she cannot remain hidden (*idoua de hē gynē hoti ouk elathen*; ἰδοῦσα δὲ ἡ γυνὴ ὅτι οὐκ ἔλαθεν). Both emphasizes are absent from Mark's text.
- ⁶ The absence of any companions of the Woman who Took the Initiative is stressed by [Connolly \(2018\)](#), p. 130). If the woman's flow of blood is indeed a menstrual problem it could mean that she does not have a husband or a family. Gudrun Guttenberger suggests that the woman is not married based on the woman's lack of company and her agency ([Guttenberger 2017](#), p. 133).
- ⁷ I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers of this paper who has remarked upon this important point.

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