

## A BORDER CROSSING GOSPEL: THE HEALING OF THE HEMORRHAGING WOMAN (MARK 5:21-34)

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### Abstract

In Mark 5:21-43, readers encounter a woman suffering from a hemorrhage who encounters Jesus in the space of borderland. Like many other female characters in the Gospels, the woman does not have a name. But not only was she nameless, she was also alienated, powerless, and voiceless. Acting as an agent of her own life, she touches the garment of Jesus, and consequently she was remarkably healed. In this case, healing is not just about restoration of health, but also the restoration of social membership. Excluded by her illness due to the purity code of the times, she now was reconnected with the community. This story is unique because it is the healed, not the healer who took the initiative for the healing to take place. In the borderland, the subject and the object are reversed and, in the process, the marginality of the woman is located at the centre. Through her subversive act, the woman moved her life forward and recovered her wholeness.

**Keywords:** Border-Crossings, Healing, Transformation, Women's Spirituality, The Marginal, Borderland

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In our global era, border crossings create a borderland. This is the phenomenon of immigration which often results in the dislocation of people. Border-crossing is a polyvalent and multilayered reality and needs more exploration for its transformative meaning. I suggest a reading of the healing story of the haemorrhaging woman according to Mark 5:21-34 as a way to explore a border crossing spirituality.

## 1. Story as Borderland

The borderland is a space where boundary crossings occur, with different socio-political and cultural forces encountering one another and creating new situations. This essay explores briefly chapter 5 of the Gospel of Mark, as a whole, and focuses on the story of the haemorrhaging woman, in particular, as a story of borderland.

### 1.1. The Setting

The geopolitical setting of chapter 5 of Mark tracks the movement of Jesus as he crosses borders. According to the narrative, Jesus and his disciples cross back and forth across the lake twice, moving between the territory of the Jews and that of non-Jews, indicating that the story is set in a border town. Chapter 5 begins, “they came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes.”<sup>1</sup> Additionally, the narrator uses a variety of vocabulary to emphasize the notion of border or border crossings in this passage. Although the NRSV and various other versions of the English Bible use the phrase “the other side” as the translation of the Greek word *peran* (πέραν), this word’s original meaning is “crossing the border.”<sup>2</sup>

In Mark 5:21-34, the second border crossing occurs when the people of the Gerasenes ask Jesus to “leave their neighbourhood” after he heals the demoniac by sending the pigs into the lake. Here the Greek word for the neighbourhood is *horion* (ὄριον), literally meaning the boundary. Thus, the phrase, “leave their neighbourhood” is understood as Jesus being asked to cross the boundary/border.<sup>3</sup> As such, it implies the hostility of the residents (or at least that they lack hospitality) toward Jesus. This attitude is particularly shown toward strangers, and also toward those who are regarded as causing serious economic disadvantages for the residents. Biblical narratives often ignore the response of Gentiles

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<sup>1</sup>*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*, Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989, Mk 5:1.

<sup>2</sup>Robert L. Thomas, *New American Standard Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek Dictionaries: Updated Edition*, Anaheim: Foundation Publications, Inc., 1998.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas, *New American Standard Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek Dictionaries: Updated Ed.*

who encounter Jesus, as they focus on the response of the Jewish people. However, like any border crossing, the one taken by Jesus causes suspicion, discomfort, and tension, to the Jews as well as to the Gentiles.<sup>4</sup>

Jesus' action of border crossing parallels his healing. It is remarkable that as a border crossing person, he performs miracles both among the Jews and the non-Jews.<sup>5</sup> In chapter 5, Jesus heals the possessed man in Gentile territory and, as a parallel, he heals the haemorrhaging woman and the 12 year-old girl in Jewish territory. The geopolitical effect of crossing over between Jewish and non-Jewish territories, along with the adept use of vocabulary regarding borders and/or border crossings — such as “the other side” and “cross the lake” — emphasize the notion of the borderland.

## 1.2. Composition

As a set, the three healing stories of chapter 5 have a literary structure which includes characteristics of a borderland: organic, chaotic, and disordered. The first story is about the healing of demoniacs (5:1-22) the second is about the healing of a 12 year-old girl (5:23-25 and 35-42); and the third, which is inserted into the second story, is about the healing of a haemorrhaging woman (5:25-34). These three dissonant and different healing stories seem to have been woven into chapter 5, creating a sense of disorderliness.

The comparative length of each story shows an imbalance. The first story takes up half the chapter, making the literary structure seem less systematic and more organic. The literary styles of the stories clearly differ, since the narrative of the raising of Jairus' daughter is written in the present tense with the frequent use of *kai* (καί), meaning ‘and,’ whereas the healing of the woman is written in the aorist and imperfect tenses with many particles.<sup>6</sup> Thus, it is evident that these two stories, presented in the intercalated style, present different literary forms.

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<sup>4</sup>Regarding Jesus as a border crosser, the narrative of Mark's Gospel is much smoother, as compared to other Gospels, especially Matthew's Gospel which shows traces of redaction as a way to dilute the impression of a border crosser. See Pablo Alonso, *The Woman Who Changed Jesus: Crossing Boundaries in MK 7, 24-30*, Leuven: Peeters, 2011, 243-246.

<sup>5</sup>Virgilio Elizondo, *The Future is Mestizo: Life Where Cultures Meet*, Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2000, 68.

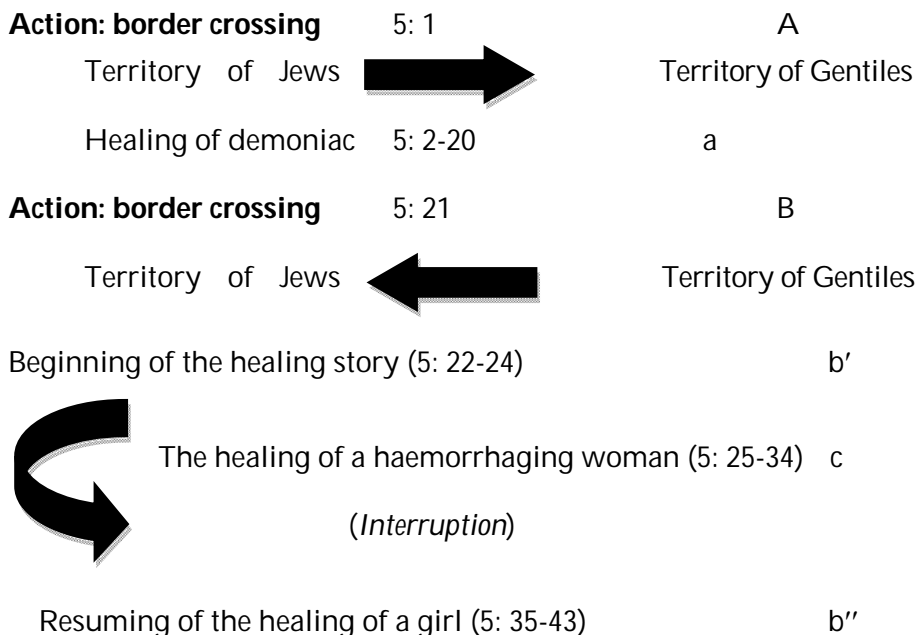
<sup>6</sup>C.D. Marshall, *Faith as a Theme in Mark's Narrative*, SNTSMS, 64, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, 92.

The intercalation style, called the “sandwich style” — wherein a narrative is generally begun, interrupted, and then resumed — gives an accommodating nature to the text, as presented in this pericope as 5:21-24–[25–34]–35-43, in which the story in the bracket is the healing story of the haemorrhaging woman. This technique serves to create suspense by either contrasting one narrative with another, or by interpreting one narrative through another.<sup>7</sup>

Usually, the inserted or misplaced story is considered less authentic. In this pericope, however, the story of the haemorrhaging woman is neither a minor story nor is it subject to the story of the two others. Rather, as a bracketed story, it connects the two healing narratives in chapter 5. It has a central role in the structure of this sandwiched format which clearly shows the characteristic of a borderland.

If we chart this complex literary framework, it becomes clear to us how the story of the haemorrhaging woman — as an inserted story or a story which exists in-between the cracks of the one story — becomes the centre piece of the whole chapter.

It goes as follows:



<sup>7</sup>John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, vol. 2, Sacra Pagina Series, Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2002, 18.

Chapter 5 is composed of two border-crossing actions between Jewish and Gentile territories (A and B), and the healing stories are introduced after the narrator describes Jesus' border crossing actions. Thus, it can be read as A-a (Jesus' border crossing action-healing and B-b (Jesus' other border crossing and healing). However, the structure becomes complicated when story b is interrupted by story c. Literary analysis demonstrates that story c, the story of the haemorrhaging woman, has an important place within the whole narrative in chapter 5. This organic, disproportioned, and intercalated literary structure shows the nature of the borderland with the haemorrhaging woman's story at the centre of this literary set.

## **2. The Healing Story of the Haemorrhaging Woman as a Borderland**

The narrative of the haemorrhaging woman is an inserted story, appearing unexpectedly in the midst of the space of another story. In fact, even the healing itself occurs as an unexpected event. Yet the story has a clear literary structure, plot, and natural flow — all of which help it function as an independent story.

### **2.1. Centrepiece of the Borderland**

The story of the haemorrhaging woman functions as the centrepiece of chapter 5, linking together the other two stories. First, it is related to the story of the possessed man in terms of geographical dislocation and social exclusion as shown in the following descriptions in the text: he lived among the tombs (5:3); on the mountains and among the tombs he was always howling and bruising himself (5:5); and he had often been restrained with shackles and chains (5:4).

The narrative presents the man as almost non-human, using the verb "howling," which indicates the crying sound of a beast. In the Greek text, the verb used is *krazoun* (κράζων), which is the croaking sound of ravens, along with crying or crying out, and the invoking of the name of a Greek god. In the Greek world, *krazou* (κράζω) has a particular religious significance in relation to the demonic. Similarly, this word was also used with reference to magic and to incantations, with the sounds of the haunting voice of the witch, the belling of hounds, the howling of wolves, the hooting of the owl, and the hissing of the snake.<sup>8</sup> According to the NRSV translation, the word "howling" insinuates that the possessed man was not like a normal human being but was more like a beast in a demonic state.

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<sup>8</sup>Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964, 898-899.

Also, through the description in v. 3-5, the narrative reinforces that the man is dislocated and excluded from society. Here Mark's narrative specifically emphasizes a single man's loneliness and alienation (whereas in the narrative of Matthew, the demoniacs were at least a pair). After the healing, Jesus (in v. 19) remarkably commands the man to go back to family and friends, rather than to wander with Jesus as his disciple, for his healing is in his return to his home. Having suffered from exclusion, the man can only be healed by belonging once again to a community.

Like the possessed man the haemorrhaging woman is excluded and dislocated, with her alienated status manifested at the space where her healing happens. Usually, in the Gospel of Mark, the healing of women happens in domestic and private domains. But the haemorrhaging woman's healing story is located at the space in-between the public and private, as the healing occurs on the way to the house of Jairus. Here, the expression "on the way" indicates that it is a process and in the midst of movement. This space is the realm that negates "this" or "that," "public" or "private." To understand the spatial setting of the haemorrhaging woman's healing story, we must understand that it exists in the territory of a borderland.

Like the man who is possessed by demons, the haemorrhaging woman is excluded and alone. Kinship is the way people were connected in ancient societies. Sometimes the whole city gathered at the door (1:33) when the sick were brought to Jesus. Or in the case of the curing of the deaf man (7:32) and that of the blind man (8:12), the sick person was brought by 'they.'<sup>9</sup> However, the haemorrhaging woman, with no social relations, stood alone in the crowd.

The story of the haemorrhaging woman is also related to the story of the daughter of Jairus, who had died or was dying and was restored and healed by Jesus. Their illness isolated them from the community. Although the girl had not been socially excluded for as long a period of time as the haemorrhaging woman, her sickness or near death forcibly separated her from people.

The haemorrhaging woman's suffering parallels the girl's wandering between life and death. Likewise, the woman suffered from a blood related gender-specific illness for 12 years, while the girl is 12 years of age, the time when she experienced menstruation, the

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<sup>9</sup>John J. Pilch, *Healing in the New Testament: Insights from the Medical and Mediterranean Anthropology*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000, 67.

first sign of womanhood.<sup>10</sup> As the text indicates, the haemorrhaging woman sought healing using all the money she had, but she was slowly dying of the long-standing disease. The number of weeks, months, or even years of her suffering indicates the intensity of her illness and the probable imminence of death. When a physician diagnoses a patient as being near death, treatment is abandoned and the patient is already considered somewhat dead.<sup>11</sup> Thus, this woman's situation may not be not as drastic as the girl's, but the two female characters share the demarcating line between the living and the dead.

The girl and the woman are also tied in relation to menstruation or blood in the context of the purity code. According to the codes of Leviticus 15, an abnormal discharge of blood caused ritual impurity which prohibits a woman from entering the temple. Lawrence M. Wills, a biblical scholar, questions if this impurity actually was ritual impurity, as it was an issue in the area of Galilee.<sup>12</sup> The Levitical purity code would only have applied to the woman if she were a Jew, but not if she were a Gentile.

Scholars make assumptions that the haemorrhaging woman was Jewish, offering some socio-political and cultural symptoms<sup>13</sup> in relation to her disease and, as such, emphasizing that Jesus as the saviour liberated Jewish women from the purity code.<sup>14</sup> However, there is nothing to confirm that she was a Jew. Marie-Eloise Resenblatt critically points out that the text only explains that Jesus crossed the border and that there were large crowds. In other words, there is no indication that the crowd was ethnically homogenous.<sup>15</sup> As a matter of fact, the borderland is a land of diversity and

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<sup>10</sup>Susan Miller, *Women in Mark's Gospel*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 259, New York: T & T Clark International, 2004, 57.

<sup>11</sup>Antionette Weissenrieder, *Image of Illness in the Gospel of Luke: Insights of Ancient Medical Texts*, Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003, 253.

<sup>12</sup>Lawrence M. Wills, "Introduction and Annotations on Mark," in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, 70-71.

<sup>13</sup>Antionette Weissenrieder, *Image of Illness in the Gospel of Luke*, 253-5.

<sup>14</sup>See J. Dewey, "The Gospel of Mark," in *Searching the Scriptures, Vol. 2: A Feminist Commentary*, ed. E. Shüssler Fiorenza, New York: Crossroad, 1994, 470-509. Also see Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power*, New York: Crossroad, 1988, 83-4.

<sup>15</sup>Marie-Eloise Rosenblatt, "Gender, Ethnicity, and Legal Considerations in the Hemorrhaging Woman's Story Mark 5:25-34," in *Transformative Encounters Jesus & Women Re-Viewed*, ed. Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger, Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2000, 155.

differences, and the haemorrhaging woman's ethnic identity is meant to remain ambiguous and unknown. That way, her ethnic ambiguity can function as a bridge between two different ethnic cultures in the narrative of chapter 5.

As aforementioned, the possessed man and the haemorrhaging woman share the common situation of being alienated and alone. The man's social status is almost like a beast or non-human being, while that of the haemorrhaging woman is hidden or invisible in a crowd. As well, the daughter of Jairus was alienated from her in-between status of being alive and dead, and the haemorrhaging woman was likely alienated by her status in-between the living and the dead. Seen from the parallels of the situation of the haemorrhaging woman with the other two characters, her story is located at the borderland in terms of exclusion and dislocation, beyond the border between Jewish society and Gentile society, and between the living and the dead. Further, her ambiguous ethnic identity reinforces the meaning of the borderland.

## **2.2. The Healing Process of the Haemorrhaging Woman**

The borderland is the space "in-between" which allows conflicts, violence, and chaos. Chapter 5 of the Gospel of Mark, and specifically the story of the haemorrhaging woman, shows the characteristics of the borderland, the various levels of border crossing, and the healing that can occur. The healer in this case is Jesus, and the healed is the haemorrhaging woman. The afflictions are the continuous discharge of blood, the situation of poverty, and the condition of social alienation, as she was ill, poor, and forsaken. The healing, which happens in the borderland, is disruptive, in the sense that it radically changes a situation which brings a new burst of hope. The following section examines the scope, context, and process of healing, at the border crossing.

The meaning of healing can be described as the attempt to provide personal and social meaning in the crisis created by and embedded in a certain illness.<sup>16</sup> Thus, healing is an hermeneutical process between the healer and the healed in the context of a given culture. All healing should be understood in the context of the values of a given culture. As such, in the world of the Gospel narrative, the concept of healing is situated within the context of the values of honour and shame, societal gender-based division, inclusion and exclusion, and attitudes

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<sup>16</sup>Pilch, *Healing in the New Testament*, 25.



toward sickness in first century Mediterranean culture.<sup>17</sup> Regarding healing practices, there was a demarcating line between public and private domains along gender lines. In most of the healing narratives in the Gospel, the healing of women occurs in the house, while that of men happen in public places such as the synagogue or temple.

In the paradigm of healing, in terms of this first century culture, elements or processes of healing are delineated as the transaction between the healer and the healed through use of symbols and the affirmation of healing. Transaction means that Jesus' healing power affects the sick, and the symbols can be words, gestures, acts, and events. Jesus as a healer sometimes touches, says a word, or speaks with the sick in a dialogue. Each healing story in the Gospel narrative reflects the author's description of Jesus' healing power in its own socio-cultural context.

In the story of the haemorrhaging woman, Jesus says to her, "Daughter, go in peace. Your faith has saved you," which functions as the affirmation of her healing. In Mark's narrative, a daughter not only has a social space, but also has a special meaning as a disciple. Being addressed as daughter, the haemorrhaging woman's status was elevated from the alienated and invisible to one who is a model of faith and discipleship, as well as having regained a sense of belonging.

### **2.3. The Process of Healing as Border Crossing**

Most importantly, this story, in the framework of a healing narrative, includes many border crossings in which the subject and the object of healing are switched. First, the healing action begins with *her touching his* clothes (v. 27; emphasis mine), not through Jesus touching her. In other words, the initiative of this healing is not the healer, but rather the healed. Even in this border-crossing action, the woman's gesture is quite bold. Matthew's version refers to the tassels attached to the corners of the cloak, reminding readers of the passages of Num 15:38 and Deut 22:12, but in this Gospel, the narrative simply mentions Jesus' clothes. It is remarkable that this gospel uses diminutive expressions, such as little and few, but the narrator chooses clothing rather than the tassels. The fact that the same narrative uses the word 'clothing' emphasizes the woman's bold action. While approaching the crowd secretly, because of her ritual impurity or social exclusion, the woman's bold action indicates her strong belief that mere contact with Jesus will affect a cure.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Pilch, *Healing in the New Testament*, 27.

<sup>18</sup>C.S. Mann, *The Anchor Bible Mark*, 285.

Second, there is reversed transaction between the healer and the healed. Unlike an ordinary healing story, the healer, Jesus, is passive and is only cognizant that his power has been extracted. Scholars argue that this story indicates the healing power of Jesus is beyond social codes and the purity code, in particular.<sup>19</sup> In most healing narratives, Jesus is active while the healed are just simple recipients. But this story is exceptional. Through the whole process of healing, the woman functions as the subject of her healing. It is she who attains the healing power while, Jesus, the healer, only recognizes his healing power was transacted to someone. In fact, Jesus appears to have no control over his power. E.S. Malbon observes that the healing narrative is unique in Mark's Gospel because this woman's request is granted without Jesus' direct intention.<sup>20</sup> In other words, she is the one who takes action for her own healing and, as a consequence, she is empowered and transformed.

Third, in this healing story, Jesus takes his auxiliary role to raise her status. Although Jesus solemnly says, "Daughter, your faith has healed you," his real role is to affirm the healing. Thus, the woman actively achieves her new status as a disciple and as a full member of the community, as well as a whole being who is free from sickness.

Most importantly, the woman instantly realizes that she has been healed through her bodily knowledge; she immediately feels she is cured. In fact, her subjective experience of the various stages of the healing is emphasized throughout the story in a way that is unprecedented in the Gospels. We are informed of her initial hearing of the news about Jesus, which corresponds to Jairus' initial seeing of him (5:27); the belief that motivate her approach ("Even if I just touch his clothes..." 5:28); her internal experience of the healing itself ("she knew in her body that she had been healed," 5:29b); and her reaction to the miracle ("fearing and trembling, knowing what had happened to her." 5:33).<sup>21</sup> The narrative clearly shows how she was determined to make herself healed and to act out what she wanted to achieve.

The nameless woman achieves her new status of being a daughter, just as the title was also given to the little girl whose father was the leader of the synagogue. Many explain that the woman is an example of a new discipleship. Indeed, she is a new member of the Christian

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<sup>19</sup>Miller, *Women in Mark's Gospel*, 55.

<sup>20</sup>E.S. Malbon, "Fallible Followers," *Semeia* 28 (1983) 36.

<sup>21</sup>Joel Marcus, *Mark 1-8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 27, Anchor Yale Bible, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008, 368.

community as well as a returned healthy member of the larger community.<sup>22</sup> The title of daughter given by Jesus is reminiscent of his saying that “whomever does the will of God is my brother, sister, and mother” (3:35).

### 3. Border Crossing Spirituality

In this story, the situation is a typical description of a borderland, which is crowded and chaotic. But in that situation, the woman who is not supposed to be in such a public place, initiates action.

This healing story shows how people who struggle with exclusion and powerlessness can overcome social barriers. First, this story shows how a woman’s autonomous action overcomes her marginalized situation in terms of gender and defilement. Here, the woman breaks social norms as imposed by purity codes. Mary Douglas writes that the purity code functioned as a rule to exclude certain members, women in particular.<sup>23</sup> Throughout history, women have experienced certain limits and exclusions, especially as immigrants (both undocumented and documented) or as newcomers in certain cultures. Today immigrants and people who carry two cultures feel doubly marginalized and excluded, from both the home culture and the host culture.

The most startling aspect of the story of the haemorrhaging woman is that she herself initiates the action to break social norms. The Japanese Biblical scholar Hisako Kinukawa points out that the story begins by describing the haemorrhaging woman seven times with participles, which do not show a direct personality of her character. However, the narrative describes her action with the verb, “touched his cloak,” which indicates that through her active motion she assumes a face and identity.<sup>24</sup> Like many other women characters in the Bible, we do not know the woman’s name, and only know her sickness, which is a source of great shame in the Mediterranean cultural standards of the first century. In her determined action, however, the nameless woman regains her person and dignity.

Only the story of the haemorrhaging woman which was inserted in the middle of Mark 5 shows bold action on the part of the character. In this sense, the story of the haemorrhaging woman is a healing

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<sup>22</sup>Miller, *Women in Mark’s Gospel*, 60.

<sup>23</sup>Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966, 7-28.

<sup>24</sup>Hisako Kinukawa, *Women and Jesus in Mark: A Japanese Feminist Perspective*, New York: Orbis, 1994, 33.

story. Additionally, the woman becomes a border crosser like Jesus. Although her haemorrhaging itself does not cross a border physically, the woman performs many other kinds of border crossings. Just as Jesus crosses boundaries — defiling himself by talking to a man living in the impurity of a graveyard and by touching the impure body of a dead girl, the woman also crosses social boundaries — appearing in the male domain of public space and by intentionally touching the cloak of a male. This story reveals a borderland spirituality, which inspires empowerment for the outcast, and agency for the voiceless.

And this story of empowerment and agency happened in the disordered conditions of the borderland, a place that is chaotic and often overly populated. There was a crowd and confusion, when she approached Jesus. In a situation where it was hard to say who was touching whom, the woman's hand grasps the garment of Jesus. In her desperation she tried anything, even breaking rules and crossing boundaries.

The Markan use of word power (*dynamis*: δύναμις) is associated with the language of healing.<sup>25</sup> As aforementioned, in this healing activity, Jesus' power passes on to the woman, and she receives the power. She recognizes that her somatic symptoms are gone and she can stand again in the public. Things have changed and she is whole.

The story of the haemorrhaging woman teaches us the wisdom in the borderland: every moment should be appreciated and seized. The woman takes bold actions which goes beyond cultural norms and boundaries, and she achieves her new status of being whole and being a disciple. Furthermore, her whole healing process is an embodied experience rather than a cognitive process and cerebral knowledge. In this spirituality, being on the margin can be a true moment of grace, where one can achieve healing and transformation.

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<sup>25</sup>Elaine M. Wainwright, *Women Healing/Healing Women: The Genderization of Healing in Early Christianity*, Equinox, London: 2006, 113.