

ST. STEPHENS UNIVERSITY

JESUS AND THE CANAANITE PERICOPE: A REDEMPTIVE READING

SUBMITTED TO DR. BRAD JERSAK  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF  
BIB5120 INTERPRETATION OF SACRED TEXTS

BY  
DAVE MCFADDEN  
DECEMBER 10, 2020

The story of the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:21-28 is an unusual miracle story.<sup>1</sup> There is an apparent harshness and rudeness to Jesus' words which creates an uncomfortable tension for many readers today.<sup>2</sup> Some going as far as believing "Jesus' behaviour typifies an attitude of exclusion."<sup>3</sup> Perhaps for the original Matthean audience of Jewish Christ-followers, the words of Jesus were not interpreted as being quite so harsh or demeaning. Some scholars have tried to soften the rhetoric by interpreting the denigrating reference to Canaanites being "dogs" as a "homely metaphor" with the phrase meaning "little dogs" or "house pets."<sup>4</sup> Others have suggested that the Canaanite woman exposed and corrected Jesus' prejudice against Gentiles.<sup>5</sup> I do not consider any of these to be a fully satisfying interpretation of this text. Given Jesus' practice of treating the marginalized—including Gentiles and women—with respect, compassion and dignity<sup>6</sup>, I am convinced there must be a redemptive reading. Therefore, I propose a reading of this pericope whereby Jesus is verbalizing the prejudices of the disciples, not his own thoughts, to expose and rebuke their thinking. The woman was not insulted because Jesus' words were spoken tongue-in-cheek.

Reading the text in this way suggests the main point Jesus was conveying to the disciples was that the kingdom of heaven was not restricted to the Jewish people but would include even their enemies.<sup>7</sup> With its explicit inclusion of the terms Canaanite and House of Israel, it is possible that this pericope proposes a redemptive re-interpretation of the Canaanite conquest narrative in the Old Testament. Matthew already suggests in 4:24-25 that Jesus' ministry was not restricted to Jewish regions and "great crowds" followed him from the Decapolis and beyond the Jordan. Mark 3:8 also records that "great numbers" came to Jesus from the Gentile areas "beyond the Jordan, and the region around Tyre and Sidon." Jesus demonstrated explicitly in Matthew 8:5-13 that the kingdom of heaven was not restricted to Jews. Here, the author of Matthew records the healing of the Gentile centurion's servant and Jesus saying, "I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the

<sup>1</sup> Dorothy A. Lee, "The Faith of the Canaanite Woman (Mt. 15.21-28): Narrative, Theology, Ministry" *Journal of Anglican Studies* 13 (May 2015), 12.

<sup>2</sup> J. Martin C. Scott, "Matthew 15:21-28: A Test-Case for Jesus' Manners" *JSNT* 63 (Sept 1996), 22.

<sup>3</sup> Melanie S. Baffes, "What Do We Do With This Jesus? A Reading of Matthew 15:21-28 through the Lens of Psychoanalytic Theory" *Journal of Pastoral Psychology* (2014) 63:257.

<sup>4</sup> Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on his Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 314-315.

<sup>5</sup> Judith M. Gundry-Volf and Miroslav Volf, *A Spacious Heart: Essays on Identity and Belonging* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 1997), 23-25.

<sup>6</sup> See for example Matthew 8:5-13; Matthew 9:10-13, 20-22; Matthew 14:34-36

<sup>7</sup> The writer of Matthew chooses to identify the woman as Canaanite, a member of the historic enemy of the Jewish nation, instead of Syrophenician as the writer of Mark does (Mark 7:26).

kingdom of heaven, while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness...” (Mt 8:11-12). There is a clear literary parallel between Matthew 8:11 and 15:26-27, with the image of Gentiles eating at God’s table being used in both.

In the “mission of the twelve” (Mt 10:5-15), textually located before the Canaanite woman, Jesus specifically limits his disciples’ mission at that time to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” This phrase is a literary parallel to Matthew 15:24. However, Jesus anticipates the response from the house of Israel to include rejection (Mt 10:14) and persecution (Mt 10:17, 23). Matthew 11:20-21 further serves to illustrate the rejection of Jesus by Jewish people.<sup>8</sup> Here we see another literary parallel between Matthew 11:21 and 15:21-22, with the Gentile cities of Tyre and Sidon. Jesus predicts that these cities would have received him and repented (11:21): this prediction is then played out in the Canaanite woman pericope. Furthermore, the use of the title “Son of David” in Matthew 11:22 is a deliberate irony, highlighting to the Jewish audience of Matthew that even a Gentile knew how to recognize and receive Jesus in the proper manner. For greater rhetorical effect, not just any Gentile, but a Canaanite, the traditional enemy of Israel.<sup>9</sup>

The story of the Canaanite woman opens with her request for Jesus to heal her daughter and ends with Jesus granting her request. The middle of the story consists of three dialogues with Jesus, the disciples and the woman as the characters.<sup>10</sup> In the very center, Bailey notes Jesus’ use of metaphorical language in a “miniparable about children, crumbs and little dogs,” a rhetorical feature also found in Luke 7:36-50.<sup>11</sup> In addition to referring to Jesus as “Son of David,” the woman is shown to use the traditional language of a beggar, “Have mercy on me.”<sup>12</sup> She is cast as lowly and marginalized, begging for a miracle. For a Canaanite woman to be approaching and shouting at Jesus was obviously received in a negative light by the disciples. Culturally, a self-respecting rabbi did not talk to women.<sup>13</sup> The disciples appear to take Jesus’ lack of response to the woman as normal and urge him to send her away (Mt 15:23).

It is at this point that I suggest Jesus may have winked at the woman or given some other indication to her that his next responses were to be a parody of his disciples’ attitudes. While

---

<sup>8</sup> We also see this anticipation in Luke 4:16-30 where, at the start of his ministry, Jesus highlights historical examples of YHWH choosing Gentiles over Israelites and the Jewish crowd rages in response.

<sup>9</sup> William Loader, *Jesus’ Attitude Towards the Law: A Study of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 218.

<sup>10</sup> Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 217.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 220.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 221.

this is naturally speculation, it would explain why Jesus used the harsh, racially charged language that the author of Matthew records. Jesus was not stating his own beliefs to the woman, but the answers that were in the hearts and attitudes of the disciples. He was “voicing, and thereby exposing, deeply held prejudices in the minds of his disciples.”<sup>14</sup> That Jesus extended his ministry to Gentiles was already established, but perhaps not understood by the disciples. It is useful to note that this pericope follows Jesus teaching a crowd that “what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles” (Matthew 15:18). This was a teaching that the disciples did not grasp and Jesus exclaims to them, “Are you also still without understanding?” (15:16). They did not appear to recognize that they were defiled by their prejudice against the Canaanite woman.

There is a clear progression in the pericope, starting from a racial standoff and concluding in a granting of the woman’s request and a warm commendation of her “great faith” by Jesus.<sup>15</sup> Given Jesus’ apparent satisfaction with the woman’s responses, this suggests that the outcome may have been his intention from the start.<sup>16</sup> As Jesus verbally progresses through the “prejudices in the minds of his disciples,” these attitudes become a stark contrast to the grace shown by God. Reading the text in this manner explains why Jesus used such harsh language to the woman: he was demonstrating how great the disparity was between their attitudes and his. Here was a woman pleading in desperation for her daughter to be healed. Like the story of the Good Samaritan, Jesus describes the right attitude being demonstrated by a Gentile and not by a Jew. This would have been offensive to many Jews, but such rhetoric was unmistakably powerful. Of interest is that in Matthew, only the Canaanite woman is described as having “great faith” (though similarly is the centurion’s faith) while the disciples are described as having “little faith” (Mt 8:26, 14:31, 16:8), ironic rhetoric that would have chided the Jewish audience for being “bested” in faith by Gentiles.

There is a further progression around the motif of eating: the Jews eat first, but the Gentiles eat as well. The bread Jesus speaks of is a symbol of salvation.<sup>17</sup> Matthew 14:13-21 describes the feeding of the five thousand, a Jewish crowd. Twelve baskets of food are left over: numerology would suggest that this indicates there is fullness of food for all the tribes, all the people, of Israel. The pericope of the Canaanite woman is a powerful illustration that the

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>15</sup> R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 591.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Hertig, “The Powerful and Vulnerable Intercultural Encounters of Jesus” *Mission Studies* 32 (2015), 302.

Gentiles will also be fed by God. While Matthew 15:32-39 is interpreted by some as a repeat of the feeding of an Israelite crowd, I suggest it is more likely the feeding of a Gentile crowd. The language of Matthew 15:31, “And they praised the God of Israel” would indicate Gentiles; for a Jewish crowd, there would be no need to add “of Israel.” Secondly, according to Mark 7:31, Jesus was in the Gentile region of Decapolis. Thirdly, after feeding the crowd, Jesus is described as getting into a boat and going to the region of Magadan (Mt 15:39). This is likely to be Magdala on the western shore of Lake Galilee: a boat was used to travel from one side of the lake to the other (Mt 16:5). Finally, the amount of food left over was seven baskets; again, in numerology this would suggest perfection. In this context, it would indicate that the feeding of Gentiles is evidence of the fullness of mission: all nations are fed by God.<sup>18</sup>

A further rhetorical emphasis on the extension of Jesus’ mission to the Gentiles is found in the woman’s final response. This serves as the climax to the pericope, where she affirms that Jesus’ mission is first to the house of Israel then infers that his mission does not stop there (Mt 15:27). Her reply, knowingly or not, captures the “biblical theology of the election of Israel not for their own benefit alone but to be a means of blessing of all nations, a light to the Gentiles (Gen 12:3, Isa 49:6).”<sup>19</sup>

The result of the pericope is that the Canaanite woman found salvation in Jesus: her need, the healing of her daughter, was met. The effect of this was to demonstrate for the disciples that their prejudice against Gentiles was not one shared by Jesus, and by extension Yahweh. Jesus used a number of parables and teachings to demonstrate that those considered outsiders by the house of Israel were actually embraced and included by God in his kingdom. Prejudices cannot be redeemed until they are exposed, and in this pericope, Jesus exposes them in dramatic fashion.<sup>20</sup> It was a clarion call to repentance for the disciples, reinforced by Jesus healing, and then feeding, many Gentiles in the region of Decapolis (Mt 15:29-31).

The writer of Matthew makes use of literary parallels to previous texts, dramatic irony, progression to a climax, rhetorical questions, and an unexpected result to make his point in force to his audience. It is powerful rhetoric contained in a short passage. For the original audience of Jewish Christ-followers, it would have brought to light any prejudicial thinking in the listeners. They, like the disciples, would be strung along by Jesus’ responses to the woman, finding agreement with his words. Until the climactic conclusion where their prejudice is left harshly

---

<sup>18</sup> Scott, “Matthew 15:21-28: A Test-Case for Jesus’ Manners”, 40.

<sup>19</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 595.

<sup>20</sup> Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 226.

exposed. Getting people to own their prejudice before exposing it is more powerful and effective rhetoric than simply preaching to them.

In conclusion, the pericope of Jesus and the Canaanite argues for the Jewish Christ-followers to surrender prejudices against Gentiles and recognize that Jesus' mission, and the kingdom of heaven, includes non-Jews—even those long considered enemies of God and God's people. A careful reading of the text can offer an interpretation of Jesus' harsh words that is consistent with the rest of the gospels: namely, that he was verbalizing wrong thinking that needed to be corrected. The gospels well establish that Jesus knew the hearts of people, so I suggest that the woman did not take offence because Jesus, knowing her trust in him, had already given an indication to her that this was to be a lesson for his disciples. Indeed, Jesus' mission was to proclaim the good news and "prepare his apostles for a world-wide mission of evangelization."<sup>21</sup> This pericope was part of that preparation: until the disciples understood and accepted that God welcomed even those cast as his enemies into his kingdom, they would be unlikely to fulfill the Great Commission (Mt 28:19-20)<sup>22</sup>. As uncomfortable as this lesson may have been for the Jewish Christ-followers to hear, ironically the language used by Jesus also creates a difficult passage for many modern-day Gentile Christ-followers to read, albeit for a different reason.

---

<sup>21</sup> J. W. Shepard, *The Christ of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968), 288.

<sup>22</sup> See Luke 9:52-55 for an example of how Jesus rebuked his disciples for their prejudice towards historic enemies and their belief that God supported their prejudice.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Baffes, Melanie S., "What Do We Do With This Jesus? A Reading of Matthew 15:21-28 through the Lens of Psychoanalytic Theory." *Pastoral Psychology* 63 (2014): 249-263.
- Bailey, Kenneth E. *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels*. Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008.
- France, R. T. *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007.
- Gundry, Robert H. *Matthew: A Commentary on his Literary and Theological Art*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982.
- Gundry-Volf, Judith M., and Miroslav Volf. *A Spacious Heart: Essays on Identity and Belonging*. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 1997.
- Hertig, Paul. "The Powerful and Vulnerable Intercultural Encounters of Jesus." *Mission Studies* 32 (2015), 292-314.
- Lee, Dorothy A. "The Faith of the Canaanite Woman (Mt. 15.21-28): Narrative, Theology, Ministry." *Journal of Anglican Studies* 13 (May 2015): 12-29.
- Loader, William. *Jesus' Attitude Towards the Law: A Study of the Gospels*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002.
- Meier, John P. "Matthew 15:21-28." *Interpretation* 40 (Oct 1986): 397-402.
- Scott, J. Martin C. "Matthew 15:21-28: A Test-Case for Jesus' Manners." *JSNT* 63 (Sept 1996): 21-44.
- Shepard, J. W. *The Christ of the Gospels*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968.