Jesus and the Canaanite Woman: An Exception for Exceptional Faith

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Jesus’ encounter with the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:21–28 can be perplexing to contemporary Christians. Why does Jesus seem to put off, in an apparently callous manner, a woman whose desperate plea for her daughter’s healing touches the heart of any loving parent? Why does he appear to demean her by calling her a “dog”? This article will look at the interaction between the Canaanite woman and Jesus, examining the social and scriptural underpinnings of their encounter.

Wider context

As we seek to make sense of these questions, we should begin by noting that this account is a coherent unit with a clear beginning and end. Verse 21 begins with a change of location—Jesus’ departure from Gennesaret, where some Pharisees had disputed with him about ceremonial uncleanness. It ends with the satisfaction of the woman’s request in verse 28. Verse 29 describes travel to another area—a clear transition to the next pericope.

Where does this passage fit in the flow of Matthew’s larger discourse? It foreshadows the future of Jesus’ ministry. His focus up until this time has been almost exclusively on the Jewish community, with the notable exception of the centurion (8:5–12) and possibly that of two demon-possessed men (8:28–34). Jesus’ increasing conflict with Jewish authorities is a major theme of Matthew’s gospel. Craig Blomberg notes, “The most obvious thrust of the sequences of topics in the Gospel is that Matthew is tracing the events of Jesus’ life in terms of a growing hostility on the part of the Jewish leaders that increasingly leads Jesus himself to turn to the Gentiles and to anticipate a later, widespread ministry on the part of his disciples among them.”

The satisfaction of the Canaanite woman’s request—an exceptional act by Jesus at that point in his ministry to the lost sheep of Israel—“is a ‘signal’ of this coming, unheard-of grace of God,” where Gentiles are a central focus and not just ancillary beneficiaries. The encounter follows one of Jesus’ confrontations with Jerusalem-based scribes and precedes the journey toward Jerusalem for trial and execution. Clearly, the relationship with the Jewish leadership is worsening.

Looking at the immediate context, we notice that the feedings of the five thousand in 14:13–21 and of the four thousand in 15:29–39 bracket the Canaanite woman’s story. The descriptions of the two feedings have strong verbal parallels, and R. T. France postulates that the latter may have been for a Gentile crowd. The word for "baskets" differs between the two accounts: in 14:20 a Jewish word is used, and in 15:37 Matthew chooses a more general term. Other elements of the stories, except for numbers, are virtually identical.

Bearing all this in mind, let us now examine Matthew 15:21–28.

Overview of the narrative

This account is one of fourteen individual healing miracles in Matthew’s gospel. The individual healing stories are structured similarly: (1) setting the scene, (2) appearance of the supplicant, (3) dialogue, and (4) recovery of the sick or disabled person. Sometimes a response by onlookers is also recorded, but that is not the case here. The daughter’s recovery is mentioned only cursorily; the focus is on the scene, the request, and especially the dialogue.

The Canaanite woman’s account closely parallels that of the centurion seeking healing for his servant (Matt. 8:5–13). In both cases, the supplicant is a Gentile advocating for someone under his or her care, the healing takes place from a distance, and the supplicant is commended for great faith. While many translations render Jesus’ response as unhesitant agreement to help the centurion (e.g., the NIV’s “I will go and heal him”), R. T. France sees an unmarked question expressing Jesus’ surprise that a Gentile would make such a request of the Jewish Messiah: “Am I to come and heal him?” The grammatically unnecessary ἐγό (Greek “I”) in verse 7 is used emphatically. The man’s remarkable response of faith and “striking perseverance” ultimately overcome Jesus’ hesitation.

The Greek words of the dialogue between Jesus and the woman form a pattern to show the give-and-take and resolution of their exchange. Each of Jesus’ responses to the woman is marked by “he answered.” His three refusals are introduced by o de (but he) plus a form of apokrinomai (to answer). This then changes to tote apokritheis (then he answered) when a resolution is reached. The back-and-forth of the dialogue is structured using o de (but he) and ἕ de (but she), with the masculine and feminine articles o and ἕ serving as pronouns and de (but) indicating that a different person is speaking.

The scene is set

Matthew begins by making the point that Jewish territory has been left behind and the reader is to focus on a new location: the Gentile region of Tyre and Sidon. The verb for “retreat or withdraw” (ἀναχώρεω) appears more frequently in Matthew than in the other gospels. It usually describes leaving an area to seek refuge and avoid conflict, such as the Magi’s return to their own country and evasion of Herod (Matt. 2:12–13), the flight of Joseph and Mary into Egypt (Matt. 2:14), and Jesus’ departure after healing a man on the Sabbath (Matt. 12:15, Mark 3:7) and after hearing of the death of John the Baptist (Matt. 14:13). The word carries a sense of remoteness, as when used figuratively to describe a secluded place.

Although Tyre originally had been a nation friendly to Israel, supplying materials for the construction of David’s palace (2 Sam. 5:11), Tyre and Sidon later became adversaries of Israel
and targets for prophetic condemnation ( Isa. 23, Ezek. 26–28, Joel 3:4–6, Zech. 9:1–4). Jesus cites them in Matthew 11:21 as negative examples for Chorazin and Bethsaida, Jewish towns that had been unresponsive to his message. By leaving Jewish territory, he may have been seeking a quiet environment to teach his disciples, or simply putting some distance between himself and the Pharisees who had just challenged him on matters of ritual cleanliness in Matthew 15:1–20.

The women approaches

In verse 22, the woman arrives on the scene, her shouts becoming louder and clearer as she draws near. This verse includes the only use of the word “Canaanite” in the New Testament. Upon entering the Promised Land, the Israelites were told to exterminate the Canaanites and other native peoples: “. . . you must destroy them totally. Make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy” (Deut. 7:2 TNIV). This harsh directive intends to prevent the new nation from drifting into idolatry. When the Israelites failed to eliminate these nations, they became “thorns in your sides and their gods [became] a snare to you” (Judg. 2:3 TNIV). Canaan was also the object of the Lord’s anger as voiced by the prophets: “There is a word of the Lord against you, O Canaan, land of the Philistines” (Zeph. 2:5 JPS). On the other hand, Matthew has already reminded us that Canaanites who agree to follow the Lord can be integrated into his people, as were Jesus’ foremothers Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth (Matt. 1:3–5). Matthew’s use of the archaic term “Canaanite,” contrasted with Mark’s description of the woman as “a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia” (Mark 7:26), recalls historical anachronisms and reinforces the fact that significant social barriers existed between Jew and non-Jew.

A series of three verbal forms in a row (exélthousa ekrazen legousa, came out, calling out, said) in verse 22 shows that the woman is taking the initiative. The appellation “Lord” places her in league with Jesus’ followers, who also call him “Lord,” and in contrast to his enemies, who call him “teacher” or “rabbi.”16 It is notable that this Gentile woman calls Jesus “Son of David”—the title of the Jewish Messiah. Ulrich Luz sees this as an indication of her remarkable faith: “Thus she knows that Jesus is sent to Israel; and her faith is seen precisely in the fact that she nevertheless cries out to him.”17 Although Jesus has entered her geographical territory, she approaches him on his cultural and theological grounds.

Jesus’ initial response to her is a lack of response. This could mean refusal or a test of her faith.18 It could also imply hesitation as Jesus wrestles with dissonance between the compassion awakened by the woman’s plea and the knowledge of his primary focus on Israel. John Nolland observes, “We are to understand that it is not at once clear what he ought to do.”19

The woman persists, and the disciples urge Jesus to bring the matter to a resolution. The imperfect form of the verb (érotōun, requested) indicates that their request was attempted but unsuccessful.20 They probably conferred before bringing their request to Jesus.21 The disciples ask him to send her away, using a verb (apolyō) that usually serves as a legal term, such as releasing someone from prison or from a debt, dissolution of a marriage, or releasing someone from a painful condition.22 Most likely, they were not asking that Jesus send the woman away unsatisfied, but rather that he grant her petition in order to keep her quiet: “Do what she asks and get rid of her.”23

When Jesus uses the phrase “lost sheep” in verse 24, the word for “lost” (apolōlota) evokes apolyson (send away), the word the disciples had used. The two words sound similar when used in close proximity, even though they come from different roots. This use of alliteration may awaken within the reader the possibility that “the lost sheep of the house of Israel may include the woman.”24 Jesus’ reference to the lost sheep is almost identical to the instruction he gave his disciples prior to sending them out in 10:6.25 Now, however, the matter of focusing the mission is no longer theoretical. It is immediate, set against the backdrop of the woman’s emotion-filled cries, and the directive of limitation seems harsh.

Why is Jesus reluctant to reach out to people outside of Israel? Primarily, he is focused on fulfilling the promises to the patriarchs and their descendants (Rom. 15:8).26 Indeed, soon, the doors will be thrown wide open to all nations (Matt. 28:19), but, for now, the focus is on the Jews. Mark’s account makes explicit the temporary nature of this restriction: “Let the children be fed first” (7:27 NRSV). W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison note that Jesus’ concern for Israel comes relatively far into the storyline of Matthew’s gospel; even after encountering repeated and mounting opposition from the Jewish leadership, “Jesus remains preoccupied with his people.”27 The root must be planted securely before the mission can branch out.28

Strong words

The woman replies with a desperate plea: “Lord, help me!” J. Martin Scott sees the “same overtones” in her concise “Help me!” as in Peter’s “Lord, save me!” (14:30) during his attempt to walk on water.29 Her desperation would seem to rule out any jocular tone to the exchange that follows, as some have suggested.30 Once again, a series of three verbal forms is used (elthousa prosekynei . . . legousa, came up, bowed down, said), showing that the initiative is hers. Although prosekynei can mean “worship,” there is no reason to believe that the woman perceives Jesus’ divine nature; she is bowing down in a gesture of entreaty. The imperfect tense of the verb shows the continued nature of her supplication.31

In his reply, Jesus chooses a metaphor of bread, which is rich in meaning. Bread can mean not only literal loaves of bread, but also basic food or sustenance.32 “Bread” in the Lord’s Prayer (Matt. 6:11) carries this more general sense, just as the manna represents God’s overall provision for the Israelites while in the wilderness (Exod. 16). Jesus describes himself as the “bread of life” (John 6:48). “Eating bread” is a euphemism for “earning a living” in 2 Thessalonians 3:12 and Amos 7:12.33 Bread is also a common element in accounts of friendship or alliance. Sharing a meal in the Ancient Near East was “an act of friendship and personal communion.”34 Special meals of friendship include those of Abraham and Melchizedek (Gen. 14:18–19), Moses and the Israelite elders in God’s presence (Exod. 24:11), and the Last Supper (Matt. 26:20–
29 and par.) “Friend” and “he who shared my bread” are used synonymously in Psalm 41:9 and in Obadiah 7. Those outside the “house of Israel” may be motivated by the simple “desire to benefit from [Jesus’] miraculous power” — the nourishment of the bread. They may not understand or be prepared to share in the relationship that is implied.

Perhaps the most difficult of Jesus’ words to understand in this passage is “dogs” (kynaríos, a diminutive form of kyón). The negative connotations of this word choice can not be ignored. Dogs were considered unclean scavengers (e.g., 1 Kgs. 14:11). In Luke 16:19, Lazarus’s miserable plight is made even more wretched by the dogs that would lick his sores. The word is used as a pejorative term by Paul (Phil. 3:2) to describe heretics and false teachers, and the Didache (9.5) uses it to describe those unworthy to receive communion.56 Not only are dogs unclean, but also are depicted as capable of causing harm. This nuance is present in the Sermon on the Mount: “Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and mauel you” (Matt. 7:6 NRSV). These precious objects are not merely wasted or unappreciated, but damaged, perverted, and made to cause damage to others.

The use of the diminutive form (the equivalent of “doggies” or “puppies”) softens his statement. Ulrich Luz cites a number of classical references that describe household dogs being fed with table scraps.57 These are not wild dogs. They are “dogs with owners, most likely all working dogs,”58 that may also have been household pets. 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. The gist of this metaphor is that she is not one of the children, is not part of the family fellowship around the table, and is doing something highly irregular by requesting for herself and her daughter the blessings intended for the children.

For the third time, in verse 27, the woman addresses Jesus as “Lord.” Although bold, she is not disrespectful: “She may debate with Jesus, but that does not diminish her recognition of his superiority.”59 She accepts Jesus’ metaphor of the dogs and the children and widens it, bringing in new perspectives. The conjunction gar (for) that she uses here is inferential, giving a “deduction, conclusion, or summary” of what was previously stated. John Nolland notes that gar is normally used to affirm the statement that has just been made, but, combined with kai (and), it takes the matter one step further, serving not only as an affirmation, but also “as an implication drawn out from what has been affirmed.”60 Perhaps the woman’s Greek background has predisposed her to use wordplay in her response, since Greek is a language known for its rhetoric and repartee.

The woman’s Greek culture may also have given her an appreciation of the positive qualities of dogs.61 Francis Dufan postulates that Jesus’ Jewish background gives the word kynaria the sense of “dogs outside,” while the woman’s Hellenistic culture brings an implication of “dogs inside”:

Mindful of her lack of a privileged status, the woman appeals to Jesus’ love and generosity.

The Jews were not pet-lovers. To them dogs were dirty, unpleasant and savage animals. . . . It was an easy step for “dogs” to become a Jewish word of abuse. . . . Everyone knew that the Greeks had a special fondness for dogs. Accordingly the woman would be used to having dogs about the house. . . . Only a Gentile, perhaps only a Greek, could have spoken the memorable words about dogs eating the scraps under the table, for no Jew would have allowed dogs to be there.62

The woman also expands upon the part played by the children in the metaphor. While Jesus emphasizes their status as family members and, therefore, heirs, the woman reminds Jesus that others have set the table for the children, bringing in connotations of “their immaturity and dependence.”63 For her part, she is happy to accept a lesser status in order to be included within the circle of the household, as was the prodigal son of Luke 15.64 Seeking scraps from one’s superiors recalls Lazarus’ “longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table” (Luke 16:21 TNIV). The disciples, who have begun to debate about which one of them is greatest (Matt. 18:1–5, 20:20–28), have a lesson in humility to learn from this woman.

Matthew has recorded this narrative between the two miraculous feeding stories, so talk of “bread” and “crumbs” cannot but bring to mind how the loaves were greatly multiplied and basketfuls of leftovers were collected after everyone had eaten his or her fill. Mindful of her lack of a privileged status, the woman appeals to Jesus’ love and generosity. She “grasps what the disciples . . . have not grasped: that even when the ‘children’ have been fed, there is more than enough left over even in the scraps for the outsiders to be fed.”65

The woman is commended and rewarded

Jesus responds by complimenting the woman’s “great faith” in contrast to the “little faith” he often points out among his disciples. Addressing her as “woman” (gynai) may sound cold in a contemporary Western cultural context, but this is not the case here. Others whom he addressed in this manner include his mother (at Cana, John 2:4; at the cross, John 19:26), Mary Magdalene (at the tomb after the resurrection, John 20:13, 15), a crippled woman who was healed (Luke 13:12), the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:21), and the adulteress saved from stoning (John 8:10). None of these interactions has overtones of coldness. Jesus’ use of the vocative Ô (Oh) in addressing the woman puts to rest any concern about coldness; Ï is generally “used in contexts where deep emotion is to be found.”66 In the Greek text, emphasis is put on “great” (megále) by placing it at the beginning of the sentence. Similarly, in the final clause, “healed” (iathé) is moved to the front to emphasize the accomplishment of her request.

In the latter part of Matthew’s gospel, we will begin to hear parables about workers who receive unexpected generosity in
pay (20:1–16) and a motley crew invited to a wedding banquet after the invited guests fail to respond (22:1–14). All along, Jesus has been welcoming outsiders and disenfranchised people such as tax collectors, prostitutes, and “unclean” people. The Canaanite woman’s reward foreshadows the fact that God’s family is about to expand beyond Israel to include “all nations” (Matt. 28:19).

Some have suggested that Jesus changed his mind about his mission after being bested in his exchange with the Canaanite woman. For example, Daniel Patte sees “a transformation of [Jesus’] understanding of his own mission.”51 If Jesus’ communion with the Father was as intimate as Scripture teaches us (e.g., John 10:30), he could not have been unclear about the reason he was sent. However, he was convinced to make an exception for the woman and her daughter. In that exception, the future breaks in to the present, and we can glimpse what God has in store for those who believe and follow.

Conclusion and applications

The primary idea that we can take from this passage is that, although Israel is still Jesus’ priority at this point in his ministry, he is willing to make exceptions, especially for a demonstration of exceptional faith. He is more concerned with matters of the heart than with ethnic boundaries. Jesus had just engaged the Pharisees in a dispute about handwashing and ritual cleanliness (Matt. 15:1–20), which also made this point. The condition of one’s heart is far more important than rigid adherence to rules. Now, Jesus demonstrates this by making an exception to his own rule that he is to reach out only to the lost sheep of Israel.

Writing for a primarily Jewish readership, Matthew emphasizes Jesus’ faithfulness to Israel. What sounds exclusivist from a contemporary Western perspective was, for the original readers, an affirmation of the Lord’s enduring concern for his chosen people. Matthew is showing that the trajectory of God’s redemptive plan is traced first through Israel, then to all of humankind, where faith is rewarded without regard to ethnicity. Jesus’ response to the Canaanite woman foreshadows God’s wider embrace. In a church that was primarily Jewish, or a mixture of Jews and Gentiles (many of these former God-fearers who attended the synagogue), this story would serve to help the two communities to understand each other’s histories and to embrace each other as part of a new covenant community.

Today, the church is primarily Gentile, and different lessons can be applied. Christians can emulate this woman’s boldness and persistence, qualities that are affirmed in the parables of the friend in need of bread (Luke 11:5–8) and the persistent widow (Luke 18:1–8). We can also observe her humility and note that many of us, too, are Gentiles who certainly should not harbor any sense of entitlement. Paul makes this point to a Gentile audience with the metaphor of natural and grafted branches (Rom. 11:17–24). We can also learn that the categories orlimitations placed on us by society need not affect our relationship with God. Just as the woman did not let her status as a Gentile in a Jewish culture, or as a female in patriarchal ones, keep her from boldly seeking Jesus, so we should not let factors like age (too young, too old), gender, income level, education level, and handicapping conditions prevent us from seeking Christ and offering ourselves to him in service.

Finally, we can take away the knowledge that we serve a God who is both faithful to his promises and full of surprises. Examples of “great faith” sometimes come from unexpected places, and a seed that drops from the sower’s hand unnoticed indeed may find fertile soil and flourish. God may choose to make an exception in our lives or churches. May we respond from the heart to the actions of our creative and surprising Lord.

Notes

1. Although the ethnicity of the two men is not specified, the presence of a herd of pigs indicates that this was a Gentile area. R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2007), 340.


7. My translation of the passage is as follows: Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew into the region of Tyre and Sidon. Then a Canaanite woman from that area came along, calling out [the imperative implies continued or repeated cries], “Have mercy on me, Son of David! My daughter is badly demon-possessed.” He did not answer even one word to her. His disciples approached and requested, “Send her away, for she is crying out after us.” But he answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” She came up to him and bowed down, saying “Lord, help me.” He answered, “It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” But she answered, “Yes, Lord, but the dogs will eat [the verb is singular, indicating that the subject is a collective noun] the crumbs that fall under their masters’ table.” Then Jesus answered her, saying, “My dear woman [lit. “Oh, woman”], your faith is very great. It will be done [lit. “It is done”] for you as you wish”—and her daughter was healed at that moment.


15. Several textual variants for ekrazen (call out, imperfect tense) exist. The aorist ekrazen is well attested, occurring in the manuscript Ν* (Sinaiticus uncorrected at the scriptorium). The verb kraugazo, a
less common synonym, also appears in aorist and imperfect forms. In context, the imperfect makes the most sense given that her cries were continual, to the point of raising concern among the disciples. (Lilly Nortjé-Meyer, “Gentile Female Characters in Matthew,” in Transformative Encounters: Jesus and Women Re-viewed, ed. Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger [Boston, Mass.: Brill, 2000], 69.) Some manuscripts also add “to him” or “after him” following the verb, but these variants were likely clarifying changes which do not greatly affect the meaning.

17. Luz, Matthew 8–20, 339.
18. These are the two choices offered by Davies and Allison, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary, 2:549.
21. The participle proselthontes (approaching) implies that they approached him with the purpose of making the request.
25. The uncial D and the Syriac insert tauta (these), which would break this consistency.
28. Plummer points to a tactical consideration: Jesus’ limited time must be focused on training Jews to be missionaries to Jew and Gentile alike. An Exegetical Commentary, 216.
30. J. Lyle Story describes her response to Jesus’ rebuff as a “lively, high-spirited and no doubt humorous rejoinder” (“The Discipleship of Women—from Jesus’ Birth to the Empty Tomb,” Priscilla Papers 21, no. 1 [Winter 2007], 18). R. T. France says, “Cold print does not allow us to detect a quizzical eyebrow or a tongue in the cheek, and it may be that Jesus’ demeanor already hinted that his discouraging reply was not to be the last word on the subject.” (The Gospel of Matthew, 591).
31. Some manuscripts have the aorist prosekhinen rather than the imperfect.
32. BDAG, TDNT, s.v. It is interesting to note that, in some Asian cultures, “rice” has this connotation.
33. The contemporary American expression “bread and butter” has this same connotation.
35. Meredith Kline sees the humans’ eating of the fruit in Eden as confirmation of an alliance with Satan: “. . . she spurned the table of the Lord and accepted the invitation to eat of the sacramental tree of the prince of demons, so ratifying her pact with him.” Kline, Kingdom Prologue (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 126.
37. There are a few minor textual variants around otk estin kalon (it is not good), none of which has particularly strong support.
38. EDNT, s.v.
42. Wallace, Greek Grammar, 673.
43. Gar is missing in a few manuscripts.
44. Nolland, The Gospel of Matthew, 635.
45. Daniel Patte cites Bailly’s Unabridged Greek Dictionary and concludes that “[i]n Hellenistic literature the connotations of ‘dog’ are predominantly positive (faithfulness, watchful, etc.).” Patte, “The Canaanite Woman and Jesus: Surprising Models of Discipleship,” in Transformative Encounters: Jesus & Women Re-viewed, ed. Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger (Boston, Mass.: Brill, 2000), 44 n. 23.
48. Pokorny, “Puppy,” 337. A friend of mine once joked that she would rather be “a scullery maid in the house of the Lord” than have a position of honor in any other house.
49. Scott, “Jesus’ Manners,” 40.
50. Wallace, Greek Grammar, 68.

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