

Social Action and the Canaanite Woman of Matthew 15

MOLLY TOMASHEK

²¹ Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²² Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” ²³ But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” ²⁴ He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” ²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” ²⁶ He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” ²⁷ She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” ²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed from that moment.

Matthew 15:21–28 NRSVue

Matthew 15:21–28 raises many questions for the modern reader—social questions regarding racism and sexism, theological questions about Jesus’s character and practice, and literary questions concerning imagery and context. Similarly, the worlds behind the text, within the text, and in front of the text reveal ambiguity and tension. Late first-century Syrian Antioch, the likely setting for the community that first encountered Matthew’s Gospel, found Jewish Christians in a liminal space religiously, politically, and culturally.¹ Within the text itself, the “world within the text,” Jesus and the Canaanite woman meet outside of cultural norms and expected physical boundaries, in an enigmatic space.² Many readers of this text find themselves in a similar interstice, as they lose the ability to remain apathetic toward injustice and, thus, move toward engagement in social reform. Interpreting Matt 15:21–28 from a socio-rhetorical approach informs the modern reader’s engagement for social change as seen in the text’s dialogue, characterization, Jewish perspective, and contextual significance.

The World Behind the Text: Historical Context

As mentioned above, the Gospel of Matthew may well have been written within a Jewish Christian community in Syrian Antioch, about 250 miles (400 kilometers) north of Galilee. “Social pressures” experienced by the community included “Gentile persecution from Romans and Syrians . . . hostility from Pharisees . . . and internal pressure to welcome local Jesus-believing Gentiles.”³ Along with these relatively new conflicts, and in light of Jesus’s mandate to “love your enemies,” the Matthean community living in the Diaspora faced the dilemma of reframing relationships with ancient enemies, such as the Canaanites.⁴ The Canaanites were Israel’s long-standing enemies, the people who had stood between the early Israelites and their promised land.⁵ The Canaanites’ “idoltrous religion was a constant threat to the religious purity of the people of

Yahweh.”⁶ Syrian Antioch’s early Christians sought to create a “new and emerging identity,” while engaging in reconciliation with their historic and political enemies.⁷

The World of the Text: Literary and Rhetorical Context

A conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees over religious purity (15:1–20) precedes the narrative in which Jesus and the “unclean” Canaanite woman publicly converse outside of Israel, northwest of Galilee in the land of Tyre and Sidon.⁸ Immediately following, Jesus returns to Galilee where he heals “the lame, the blind, the mute, and many others” (15:29–31) and feeds over 4,000 people (15:32–39). Our text is situated between Jesus’s rebuke of the Pharisees’ tradition that made “void the word of God” (15:6) and Jesus’s public ministry where verbal praise of God (15:31, 36) and care of those in physical need (15:30–31, 37) were experienced together. Jesus’s conversations with the Pharisees and the Canaanite woman, the center of a chiasm,⁹ act as a mirror to the Pharisees’ hypocrisy and the disciples’ apathy. The Canaanite woman’s humility (15:25) juxtaposes with the Pharisees’ hypocrisy (15:7). Her meek willingness to eat crumbs (15:27) magnifies the abundance in the surrounding feedings (14:13–21, 15:32–39), and Jesus’s acknowledgement of her “great faith” (15:28) stands in stark contrast to the disciples’ “little faith” (14:28–33, 16:5–12).¹⁰ Indeed, Matthew presents the Canaanite woman as a model of Christlikeness.

Tension mounts as the story opens in a foreign land and three requests are met by Jesus’s cold responses of silence, denial, and insult.¹¹ Jesus’s rudeness seems more consistent with the Pharisees than with his usual compassion; the Canaanite is the one who displays humility and offers creative repartee that exemplifies the Jesus of Matthew (15:25).¹² The Canaanite woman’s willingness to take on a form lesser than her own (a dog) and humbly counter Jesus’s stated practice leaves the reader in suspense (15:27). Tension releases as Jesus sounds more like

himself, exalting her for her “great faith,” and immediately healing her daughter (15:28).

Analysis: Setting (15:21)

The episode opens with Jesus’s withdrawal into a foreign location, Tyre and Sidon, which already sets the Jewish reader on edge (v. 21).¹³ Jesus leaves the land of Israel (the last places mentioned were Gennesaret [14:34] in Galilee and Jerusalem [15:1] of Judea) and enters the land of the Gentiles (v. 21). Because Tyre and Sidon are “outside Jewish territory,” and earlier in Matthew Jesus tells his disciples to “go nowhere among the Gentiles,” one needs to ask why Jesus is here.¹⁴ If Tyre and Sidon were “paradigms of Israel’s enemies of old,” what could Matthew be showing the reader as Jesus flees his antagonists, the Pharisees, while entering the land of his people’s age-old enemies?¹⁵ I propose this shift in location is setting the stage for a paradigm shift for his disciples and the reader.

Analysis: The First Unit of Request and Response (15:22–23a)

As Jesus enters the region, a Canaanite woman comes out toward him, leaving her home and troubled daughter, shouting, begging him to “have mercy” on her (v. 22). The use of “Canaanite” in the text, versus “Syro-Phoenician” seen in the parallel version in Mark 7:26, polarizes the Jewish reader with the woman creating an “us” and “them” binary system.¹⁶ Her cry for mercy harkens to “the mandate given to Israel to exterminate the Canaanites,” to “show no mercy to them.”¹⁷

Jesus’s silent response is striking, even rude, pulling the reader in with questions about Jesus’s loving nature and integrity (v. 23a). Many scholars have debated the meaning behind Jesus’s silence, suggesting he was “testing her faith” or “playing hard to get,” but Elaine Wainwright’s insight that Jesus’s silence reflects the word made void in 15:6 changes the text completely.¹⁸ Jesus’s reticence echoes the Pharisees’ refusal to acknowledge the needs of suffering people, while the Canaanite woman’s selfless cry looks more like the “justice, mercy, and faith” Jesus esteems (Matt 23:23).

Analysis: The Second Unit of Request and Response (15:23b–24)

The disciples assert themselves into the dead air, urging Jesus to dismiss the woman, which evokes a restatement from Jesus of his mission that would render him exempt from this interaction (vv. 23b–24). The disciples’ use of “us” and Jesus’s declaration that he has been “sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” reinforce Jewish primacy and the otherness of the Canaanite woman.¹⁹ Both Jesus and the disciples still have not addressed the woman directly, but rather patronizingly talk as if she is not there, another example of the disciples’ “insensitivity toward needy people (cf. 14:15; 15:32–33).”²⁰ To continue with Wainwright’s observation that Jesus’s silence (v. 23a) mirrors the word made void (v. 6), Jesus’s restatement of his mission (v. 24) typifies the Pharisees’ traditions that deny care (vv. 4–5).

Analysis: The Third Unit of Request and Response (15:25–26)

As the woman moves into Jesus’s space, affronting his silence and denial with another cry for help, the reader is left with

mounting tension and confusion. Jesus now not only denies but insults her (vv. 25–26). The woman’s bowing and dire “Lord, help me” “[heighten] her desperation” within the text (v. 25).²¹ “The woman’s position of profound humility and lowliness out of the spotlight is an acknowledgment that the world is not structured in a way that typically makes room for her needs and desires.”²² Scholars have attempted to reconcile Jesus’s response in which he refers to the woman as a dog—emphasizing the “diminutive” connotation, comparing it to other “unclean” references, or continuing the commentary on Jesus’s challenge to her faith (v. 26).²³ None of these explanations adequately dismiss Jesus from the accountability such a dehumanizing comment requires.²⁴ Rightly so, according to his own words in the immediately preceding context: “it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles” (15:11 NRSVue). The incompatibility of Jesus’s words evokes a cry for justice within the reader. Yet as the words fall from the lips of the anointed one, Matthew is continuing to expose the unclean hearts of his Jewish readers.²⁵

Analysis: The Fourth Unit of Request and Response (15:27–28)

The Canaanite woman “turns Jesus’ own parable against him.”²⁶ Some scholars claim her retort epitomizes the “theology of the election of Israel” as a first fruit that will bless the nations.²⁷ This popular reading, however, may miss the point by looking at the word “dogs” instead of her bold world-changing use of “their” (“their masters’ table,” v. 27). By declaring the master as her own, she inserts herself into the kingdom of God. Wainwright calls her “the catalyst . . . the ‘foremother’ of all gentile Christians,” which makes her representation of Christ all that more compelling.²⁸ As her retort hangs in the air and the reader waits in suspense for Jesus’s response, suddenly the story turns on its head with Jesus’s accolade: “Woman, great is your faith!” (v. 28).²⁹ In an instant, Jesus—compassionate and responsive—apparently has come to himself and heals her daughter. The nightmare of being ignored, denied, and insulted has ended; the Canaanite woman is seen, blessed, and applauded.

The World in Front of the Text: Application

By following the conversation of Jesus and the Pharisees (15:1–20) with the dialogue in this story, and then leading into Jesus’s healing and feeding the masses, Matthew allows Jesus’s actions to expose the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and to envision a world free from the bounds of tradition and remade by love. Matthew’s Jewish Christian readers would have been emboldened to love their enemies in tangible ways, refusing to succumb to their historic practices that thwarted love. In the same way, this passage is prescriptive for those—including those within communities such as the White evangelical church of America—who have historically ignored, denied, and dehumanized people suffering from systemic injustice. Often this segment of the church has remained complicit, making claims such as, “We do not talk about politics; we are about Jesus,” spurning the social gospel as no gospel at all. In response to this denial of justice, Matthew exalts the most surprising of people, the one the leaders had been trying to keep silent and to demonize. In Matthew’s text, Jesus celebrates

and serves the one who demonstrates perspective, inclusivity, humility, and others-centeredness. Reading about this encounter, the modern reader cannot sit idly by, ignoring the cries of those in need, and expect Jesus to applaud. Jesus turns away from the traditions that stifled love. As Jesus came to himself, so too can all people arise from their slumber and apathy in regard to social justice, embracing it as part of the wholistic mission of Jesus.

Conclusion

By looking at the dialogue, characterization, context, and socio-religious features within the text of Matt 15:21–28, one can move beyond a traditional reading that oversimplifies the ugliness of Jesus's response to critical need. One cannot merely gloss over Jesus's silence, patronization, and dehumanization—but perhaps that is Matthew's point. Injustice should stir us, sicken us even, to the point that we engage with practical acts of mercy. Jesus's example does not give us permission to deny justice to the oppressed; in the story, he is the mirror that exposes what lies within the reader. Early in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says, "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (5:20 NRSVue). By the end of this story in ch. 15, Jesus has done just that: his righteousness exceeds all bounds of tradition and law, moving beyond words into action, loving those his culture taught him to hate. Just as Jesus has stepped outside of Israel to undo the harmful paradigm of the Pharisees, our stepping out of what is familiar will situate us in a space ripe for a new kingdom vision that is not mere words, but social action.

Notes

1. Love L. Sechrest, "Enemies, Romans, Pigs, and Dogs: Loving the Other in the Gospel of Matthew," *ExAud* 31 (2015) 88, 105.
2. "Theologically addressing a Jew in his own terms, a lone woman yet prior resident of the region and of the claimed homeland of the addressee, shouting in the public arena but in the careful words of a Jewish religious devotee, the character of the Canaanite woman breaks the power of binary opposition as dichotomy since she is both A and Not-A and neither." Anita Munro, "Alterity and the Canaanite Woman: A Postmodern Feminist Theological Reflection on Political Action," *Colloq* 26/1 (1994) 41.
3. Sechrest, "Enemies," 105.
4. Matt 5:44. "Because it was written in Greek scholars propose that it was written outside of Judea, possibly an urban environment." Peter H. Davids and Ralph P. Martin, "Matthean Community," *DLNT* 725.
5. In Deut 7:1–6 (NRSV, NRSVue, and various other translations), God commands Israel, upon entering "the land," to "utterly destroy" the Canaanites along with six other nations, in order to keep marriages within Israel pure and to prevent idol worship. "Canaanites are the quintessential enemies of Israel, the ones God had commanded them to exterminate because their sins were so extreme that contact with them, especially through intermarriage, would lead Israel into idolatry and immorality." Grant LeMarquand, "The Canaanite Conquest of Jesus," *ARC: The Journal of the Faculty of Religious Studies, McGill University* 33 (2005) 238.
6. R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Eerdmans, 2007) 423.
7. Miranda Pillay, "Good News for All? A Feminist Perspective on the Gospel of Matthew," *Scriptura* 114/1 (2015) 5; Davids and Martin,

"Matthean Community," 725: "Basing their arguments on the Gentile emphasis (Mt 1:1–17; 2:1–12; 4:12–16; 8:5–13; 15:21–28; 28:16–20), the use of the phrase 'their synagogues' (Mt 4:23) and the heated debate with the Pharisees (e.g., Mt 23), a number of scholars now argue that Matthew's community was already separated from Judaism and is to be understood as the church."

8. The commentary about purity in Matt 15:10–20 "is put into practice with 'unclean Gentiles' in this passage." David L. Turner, *Matthew* (Baker Academic, 2014) 357.

9. Elaine Mary Wainwright, *Towards a Feminist Critical Reading of the Gospel According to Matthew* (de Gruyter, 1991) 100–1; Janice Capel Anderson, "Matthew: Gender and Reading," 25–51 in *A Feminist Companion to Matthew*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marianne Blickenstaff (Sheffield Academic, 2001; Pilgrim, 2004) 37. Wainwright and Anderson label Matt 15:21–28 as the fulcrum in a chiasmic structure emphasizing the feeding of many. Wainwright's combination of Matt 15:1–20 and 15:21–28 as one unit reinforces the idea that this conversation in Tyre and Sidon is in reaction to the conflict that had recently occurred in the land of Israel between Jesus and the Pharisees.

10. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 423, suggests that, in Matt 15:32–38, Jesus puts feet to "sharing 'the children's bread' with 'the dogs,'" and "relaxation of the Jewish 'purity' culture" by feeding a group of Gentiles and Jews.

11. Turner, *Matthew*, 386, suggests a four-set request/response structure to the text: "The drama of repeated requests and responses heightens the reader's anticipation as Jesus places obstacle after obstacle in front of the woman." Gail R. O'Day's structure—the Canaanite woman and Jesus (15:22–23a), the disciples and Jesus (15:23b–24), the Canaanite woman and Jesus (15:25–28)—sets up the woman as protagonist ("initiator-goat-initiator") which reinforces the idea that her actions are the ideal in the text: O'Day, "Surprised by Faith: Jesus and the Canaanite Woman," 114–24 in *A Feminist Companion to Matthew*, 117.

12. The Pharisees deny people: fellowship in Matt 9:11, legitimacy of healing in Matt 9:34, 12:24, food in Matt 12:2, and financial support in Matt 15:5. Jesus displays compassion in Matt 9:36, 14:14. Jesus rebuts false interpretations of Scripture or knowledge of God in Matt 3:15; 4:4, 7, 10; 8:20, 22; 9:3–6, 15–17; 12:3–8, 11–12, 26, 39, 48–50; 13:57; 15:3.

13. The NRSVue uses the phrase "went away," but I prefer "withdrew" found in the NASB, NIV, and NABRE, because "withdrew" more aptly connotes hiding away or seeking refuge, which amplifies the effect of the opposition Jesus faced from the Pharisees in the previous section. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 423, concurs that Jesus is seeking "a retreat to a place where [he] and his disciples could be away from Jewish opposition and Jewish crowds." See also Wainwright, *Towards a Feminist Critical Reading*, 110: "Jesus was presented going into a gentile territory to seek refuge."

14. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 423; cf. Matt 10:5.

15. Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew* (Broadman, 1992) 166. Isa 23; Ezek 26, 28; Amos 1:9–10 refer to Tyre and Sidon as Israel's enemies.

16. Munro, "Alterity," 37. Also Musa W. Dube Shomanah, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Chalice, 2000) 146: "Jerusalem and Canaan are not only place names but also ideologically loaded geographical markers. The former represents Israel's political and cultural center, controlled by the implied author's rival group, and the latter recalls memories of conquering and possessing a foreign land."

17. LeMarquand, "The Canaanite Conquest of Jesus," 242; cf. Deut 7:2.

18. Wainwright, *Towards a Feminist Critical Reading*, 107; Turner, *Matthew*, 387; France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 421, 424.

19. Jesus's words, "sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel," echo Matt 10:6, language that a Jewish reader would interpret as

prioritizing Jews, and harkening texts from the OT: Isa 53:6, Jer 50:6, Ezek 34:15. See Turner, *Matthew*, 387.

20. Turner, *Matthew*, 387. Both Jesus and the disciples remind the reader of what Sechrest, “Enemies,” 81, calls the “trope of the fragile white victim who shifts attention away from the oppression experienced by people of color and unto the lesser problems surrounding white identity.”

21. Dube Shomanah, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation*, 139.

22. Sechrest, “Enemies,” 102.

23. Turner, *Matthew*, 388; France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 425; Sechrest, “Enemies,” 98.

24. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 422: “Jesus appears insensitive and downright rude not only in his refusal to act but also in speaking of Gentiles as ‘dogs’ and implying that they can expect no consideration from him as the Jewish Messiah.” Dube Shomanah, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation*, 153, names this a stroke of imperialism: “Rather, the outsiders must not only be characterized as evil and dangerous, womenlike, and worthless dogs but also be seen as those who beg for salvation from a very reluctant and nationalistic Jesus.”

25. This strategy harkens Nathan’s prophetic story of the sheep that he used to call out David’s abuse of Bathsheba and murder of Uriah (2 Sam 12:1–7). Matthew uses this story of beloved Jesus with the “unclean” Canaanite woman, a preposterous encounter to Jewish ears, to call out

their own lack of engagement with those who are suffering, especially those they have historically demonized.

26. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 425.

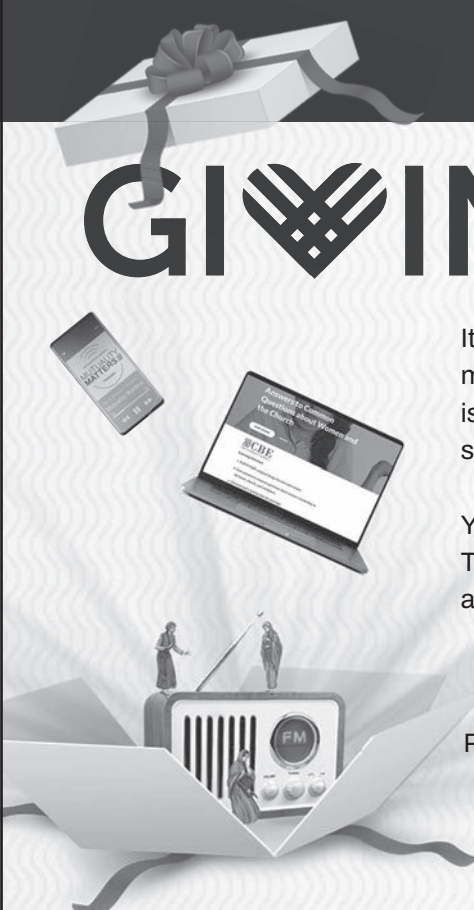
27. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 425. This theology references Gen 12:3 and Isa 49:6.

28. Wainwright, *Towards a Feminist Critical Reading*, 113. Surely her catalytic faith follows Jesus’s lead as the “pioneer” of faith (Heb 12:2).

29. O’Day, “Surprised by Faith,” 125, suggests that Jesus was changed by the woman’s boldness; see also O’Day, “Surprised by Faith,” 117: “In our story, Jesus is not the protagonist; the Canaanite woman is.” This is the only example in Matthew of Jesus labeling someone’s faith as “great” (France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 425).



MOLLY TOMASHEK is worship minister at Pilgrim Congregational Church in Green Bay, Wisconsin, and is nearing completion of an MDiv at Fuller Theological Seminary. She and her husband, Scott, have four wonderful children. Read more from Molly at her blog, LifeInPracticeDotBlog.wordpress.com.



SAVE THE DATE! NOV 29, 2022

GIVING TUESDAY

It is vital that CBE continues to reach people worldwide with the transforming message that women and men were created to share authority equally. That is why we are using CBE’s Giving Tuesday fundraiser to raise funds that will strengthen CBE’s new website resources and expand our reach.

Your gift will support CBE’s podcast, eLearning courses, and radio spots. These projects are strategic in reaching and educating new global audiences and the next generation.

Our goal is to raise \$110,000 by the end of Giving Tuesday.

Please help us establish a strong campaign by giving today at **cbe.today/gt**.

Thank you for partnering with CBE to reach more people with the message that God values women!