

The Canaanite Conquest of Jesus (Mt 15:21-28)

By Grant LeMarquand

Matthew's gospel contains at least two and perhaps three references to Jesus restricting his ministry to Israel (10:5-6; 15:21-28; and perhaps 7:6). On the other hand, numerous references to gentiles hint that the evangelist wants the reader to understand that the time of an exclusive mission to Israel has limits and that gentiles will soon be welcomed into the community of God's people. Most of these 'gentile references' are found in Matthew's infancy narratives, but also in the story of the centurion (8:5-13), and in the programmatic conclusion of gospel, the so-called "Great Commission" (28:16-20).¹

It is not so often noted, however, that Matthew is aware that not all gentiles are the same. This paper will examine a story about a woman who is not merely a "gentile" but a very particular type of gentile, a Canaanite. This essay will contend that Matthew (in contrast to his Markan source) deliberately invokes the story of Israel's conquest of Canaan in his re-telling of the story of the encounter between Jesus and the women from regions of Tyre and Sidon (15:21-28). Several pieces of evidence will be examined which appear to indicate that Matthew's redaction has the result of leading the reader to reevaluate the traditions of the Canaanite genocide.²

And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon." But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, "Send her away, for she is crying out after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." And he answered, "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly. (Mt 15:21-28)

Canaanites in Matthew

The Matthean version of the story differs from its Markan source in calling this woman a "Canaanite" (15:22). Mark, of course, calls her a "Syro-Phoenician" (Mk 7:26). The change is remarkable for several reasons. First of all, the word "Canaanite" is found nowhere else in the New Testament. The King James Version does list two references to another person whom that translation calls a "Canaanite": Simon, one of Jesus' disciples (Mk 3:18; Mt 10:4). Most commentators, however, believe the Authorized Version has stumbled at this point and that the word *kanonaion* used to designate Simon is the Aramaic loan word *qan'an*, meaning a "zealot."³ The woman of Matthew 15, then, is the only person in the New Testament who is explicitly called a "Canaanite." Second, it seems likely that Matthew's use of the term is "a literary term for the stereotype it invokes."⁴ As Musa Dube notes, "Jerusalem and Canaan are not only place names but also ideologically loaded geographical markers."⁵ Clearly, although it views the land of Canaan as good, the Old Testament sees Canaanites themselves as evil.⁶ Matthew's use of the term "Canaanite" to describe the woman highlights the nature of this woman and her daughter as the worst of outsiders. 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 inter-marriage, would lead Israel into idolatry and immorality.⁷ The Canaanite woman is not merely a gentile, therefore, but a representation of those peoples who are God's, as well as Israel's, enemies.⁸

This observation about the use of the word "Canaanite" in Matthew 15 is strengthened when we realize that Matthew seems to have a particular interest in Canaanites. The genealogy which opens the gospel refers to four women. Three are certainly gentiles (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth) and one is either a gentile or at least married to a gentile ("the wife of Uriah" 1:6). It is probable that two of these gentile women are Canaanites: Rahab and Tamar. The narrator of Genesis 38 tells us that Judah's wife was a Canaanite and implies that Judah, while living in Canaan, also arranged the marriage between Tamar and his son Er, leaving the reader with the impression that Tamar was a Canaanite. The case of Rahab is more obvious: she was a resident of Jericho at the beginning of the Israelite conquest. Thus we have the odd situation at the head of Matthew's gospel where we find a genealogy in which foreigners, even Canaanites, the worst of foreigners, are held up as ancestors of the Messiah. No doubt the text is signaling an anticipation of the

mission to the gentiles not made explicit until 28:19. But it seems that it is not just “gentiles” in the abstract, but even gentile *enemies*, Canaanites, who are considered to be within the scope of those who are redeemable.

The Canaanite Woman and the Wilderness Feedings

The more immediate narrative setting places the story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman between the two feedings in the wilderness (Mt 14:13-21 and Mt 15:32-39). This context may be significant since it is often noted that the stories of Jesus’ miraculous feedings carry overtones of the Exodus narrative. Just as God fed the recently emancipated Israelite slaves with manna in the desert, so Jesus feeds the multitudes. Some have seen the story of Jesus walking on the water (Mt 14:22-32) as a parallel to the parting of the Red Sea in the Exodus. The healing of the daughter of the Canaanite woman might also be seen as a part of this New Exodus complex – a parallel to the conquest narrative.

What may be most significant, however, is that the story of the Canaanite woman is followed closely by the feeding of the 4,000 (15:32-39). Many have noted that the first feeding story (14:13-21) ends with the disciples collecting twelve baskets of broken pieces of bread. That the number of baskets “corresponds to the twelve tribes of Israel” seems obvious.⁹ The number of baskets of leftovers from the second feeding, seven (15:37), needs a bit more attention. If it can be conceded that the number twelve is symbolic of Israel in the first feeding story, surely we should also expect the number seven to be symbolic. Lohmeyer argued that the feeding of the four thousand was a gentile “Lord’s Supper” – the twelve baskets representing Israel and the seven baskets representing the seven deacons of Acts 6. Whether the historical Matthew was even aware of the deacons is one problem, but Lohmeyer’s argument really falters on the fact that the seven in Acts 6 were not gentiles but Hellenistic Jews.¹⁰ Although Lohmeyer looked to the wrong text to support his view, he was on the right track. The feeding of the four thousand is probably meant to be seen as a gentile feeding. The location of the second feeding story is Galilee (15:29), and for Matthew Galilee is “Galilee of the gentiles” (4:15).¹¹ But not just the setting, but also the symbolic number seven, as Lohmeyer suspected, points towards the feeding of the four thousand being a gentile feeding which is symbolic of a future gentile mission. In the Hebrew Bible the number seven appears in at least two contexts in which the theme of the “nations” is prominent. First, Genesis 10, the “table of nations” refers to 70 nations. It seems probable that the number seven refers to the completeness of the created world (Gen 1) and that the number 70, a multiple of seven, refers to the whole inhabited world, the totality of the nations.

Even more pertinent to our investigation is a passage which is programmatic in the biblical discussion of the Israelite conquest of Canaan, Deut 7:1-4:

When the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations more numerous and mightier than yourselves, and when the LORD your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them, then you must devote them to complete destruction. You shall make no covenant with them and show no mercy to them. You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the LORD would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly.

Although the Hebrew Bible contains several different lists of nations slated for extermination and subjugation in the conquest,¹² Deut 7:1 is explicit that the number of the nations is “seven.” It seems certain that the number seven is symbolic of completeness in some way, but it is not clear what is “complete” about these condemned nations. Perhaps the mention of seven nations suggests that the “whole” of the promised land is to be given to Israel; perhaps the number indicates the fullness of the sins for which the Canaanites are being punished (see Gen 15:16 which looks to the Israelite occupation of Canaan to coincide with the future “completion” of the iniquity of the Amorites); or it could be that the completeness envisioned is the completeness of the Canaanites’ opposition to Israel and Israel’s God.¹³ In any event the number seven does seem to represent the completeness of the Canaanites in some unspecified way.

The two feeding miracles also mirror the story of the Canaanite woman in their attention to the subject of “bread.” The reader who reaches the story of this woman’s encounter with Jesus is already well aware that Jesus is able to produce ample amounts of bread. Just as God was able to sustain Israel in the wilderness by the miraculous provision of manna (Deut 8:3) and just as God would provide Israel with “wheat...barley...vines...fig trees...pomegranates...olive trees and honey a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing” (Deut 8:8-9) in the promised land, so Jesus provides for the crowds. The woman in our story, however, is not interested in recapturing the lost wealth of her ancestral lands – she wants merely the crumbs of bread that fall from the conqueror’s table (Mt 15:26). The disinherited “Canaanite” sees what is possible at the healing hands of this “son of David” and begs for just a crumb, the healing of her demon-possessed daughter.¹⁴ The feeding of the 4,000, then, has the quality of a promise of better things to come for gentiles, even for gentile enemies like the Canaanites: the same kind of abundance which was available to Israel will soon be available to gentiles. Although the mission of Jesus is at the present confined to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (15:24; cf. 10:5-6) the time is coming when a new mission will send the disciples of Jesus to “make disciples of all the gentiles” (28:19). The commandment of Deut 7:1-4 commissions Israel to exterminate the seven nations of the Canaanites so that Israel may inherit the bread of the land (Deut 8:8-9), but the feeding of the 4,000 promises that a multitude of gentiles will be fed and still there will be seven baskets full of leftovers. In the Matthean story the gentiles are not exterminated, but fed.¹⁵

“Have mercy”

Another suggestive feature of the Matthean version of the story of the Canaanite woman has to do with the wording of her plea. Mark does not record the words with which the Syro-Phoenician woman implored Jesus on behalf of her demon-possessed daughter. Matthew, however, is quite specific: “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon” (Mt 15:22). Again, reference to Deuteronomy 7 proves to be instructive. The mandate given to Israel to exterminate the Canaanites instructs the people to “show no mercy to them” (Deut 7:2). That which Israel was expressly forbidden to extend to the seven nations of Canaan is specifically requested by this Canaanite.

Of course a major difficulty for Christian readers of this text has always been that Jesus appears to be reluctant to extend the mercy asked for. What is more, he appears rather insulting in his response. First he ignores her (15:23). Her persistence bothers the disciples, however, and they attempt to have Jesus relieve them of this bothersome woman. She comes to Jesus a second time begging for help (“she came and knelt before him”; 15:25). Jesus not only refuses again but intimates that she and her people are “dogs” (15:26). This term has, of course, led to a fair bit of exegetical squirming, but neither the suggestion that Jesus’ words are “proverbial”¹⁶ nor the observation that the word used for “dog” here is a diminutive (*kynarion*) lessens the force of Jesus reducing this woman and her people to animals.¹⁷ But the woman is not finished – again she comes back at Jesus, turning his insult back with a self-deprecating humour which acknowledges her status as a member of a conquered race, and yet still begs for crumbs. It is instructive to note once again the contrast with the Markan story. Mark’s account has the woman beg only twice and only in one of these instances are her words recorded. Glenna Jackson has suggested that Matthew’s redaction is based on a Rabbinic tradition concerning another gentile woman, that is, Ruth. Jackson cites the following text: “Turn back, my daughters, go your way [Ruth 1.2]. R. Samuel b. Nahmani said in the name of R. Judah b. Hanina: Three times is it written “turn back,” corresponding to the three times that a would-be proselyte is repulsed; but if he persists after that, he is accepted.”¹⁸ In other words, according to Jackson, the Matthean Jesus’ words are not so much purposely insulting as they are a test: “Matthew purposely poses Jesus, not as being rude, but as ritually testing the Canaanite woman’s desire to become a member of the community of faith by turning her away three times and accepting her after she pursues him a fourth.”¹⁹ As a good Rabbi was to have done, Jesus tests this gentile with a three-fold refusal before he concedes that she is sincere. Whether or not Jackson is correct in her assessment that the purpose of Matthew’s redaction is to instruct the Matthean community in how to test potential converts to the “Jewish in-group,”²⁰ it does seem clear that Matthew is pre-figuring a gentile mission in this story – and it is a rather radical mission, one which seeks to include enemies (Mt 5:44), even those once considered worthy of extermination.

In fact, it may be that it is not just the woman who is converted, as Jackson suggests, but Jesus himself. In the midst of his testing of this woman, Jesus’ attitude appears to shift. She is at first a non-entity; she is

ignored. Next she is addressed, but Jesus' words to her are simply an explanation of her exclusion ("I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel," 15:24). Finally, Jesus hears the faith behind her plea, grants her request, and heals her daughter (15:28). It appears that Jesus has been turned; he has been confronted with and has learned the meaning of his own teaching concerning "mercy" (see, for example, Mt 5:7, 9:13; 12:7; 23:23). The story of the Canaanite woman is a story of Jesus' own "conversion." In this narrative the Israelite is conquered by the Canaanite.

Conclusion

Several redactional features of Matthew 15:21-28 point to the possibility that this text is subversive of the Canaanite genocide tradition found especially in Deut 7:1-4: as opposed to the Markan source, the woman in the story is called a "Canaanite"; Matthew has already hinted (1:3,5) that Canaanites have a positive role in God's story since two of them (Tamar and Rahab) are ancestors of the Messiah; the presence of the story of this woman between the two feeding stories, one symbolic of Israel, one symbolic of gentiles (seven baskets, Mt 15:37, representing the seven Canaanite nations of Deut 7:1); the woman of the story begs for "mercy" although the genocide command included the injunction to "show no mercy to them" (Deut 7:2). Matthew has shaped the story of this woman in such a way that the story of the conquest, the most violent anti-gentile tradition of the Hebrew Bible, has been turned on its head. The story implies that the new Exodus of Jesus is not limited to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Mt 15:24). This Exodus story does not result in the subjugation and extermination of gentiles, but in mission for the purpose of making disciples (Mt 28:19). The conqueror, the Davidic King (Mt 15:22), is himself conquered by the wit and faith of this Canaanite. As a consequence, a member of the peoples who were shown "no mercy" is now shown mercy, and becomes a kind of first fruits of the mission to the gentiles commanded in the so-called "Great Commission" (Mt 28:16-20).

Theologically, the presence of the conquest narratives in the scriptures is perhaps the most difficult of apologetic problems. This article does not solve the "problem" of the Canaanite genocide. I do hope that this reading of the story of the Canaanite woman allows us to see that, at least in this one place, the conquest has been turned on its head.²¹

Footnotes

¹ One of Fred Wisse's enduring interests has been the gentile matrix of early Christianity. In contrast to strong currents within biblical scholarship which have emphasized the Jewish context of the New Testament and other early Christian documents, Fred has consistently attempted to demonstrate that the evidence for a "Jewish Christianity" is not very solid and that the same evidence could be used to make very different points. I remember vividly a discussion in a class on the History of Early Christianity in the mid-1980s in which several of us tried to argue with our professor that surely Matthew was "Jewish." Fred patiently took apart most of our arguments and then suggested that we read a little article by K. W. Clark, "The Gentile Bias of Matthew," *JBL* 66 [1947]: 165-72. Clark concluded that "Matthew" was "a gentile Christian ... [who] was persuaded that the Christian gospel, originally delivered to the Jews, had been rejected by them as a people; that God had now turned his back upon Judaism and chosen a largely gentile Christianity" (172).

² As a Christian reader of the Bible, I have always found the presence of the conquest narratives to be a stumbling block. I have, therefore, apologetic reasons for my attempt to understand Matthew's mention of Canaanites. The reader will need to decide whether my desire to subvert the conquest traditions has led me to a misreading of Matthew. The conquest stories themselves have attracted a fair bit of attention. Of particular interest is Norman Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979). A recent work of evangelical apologetics C. S. Cowles, et al., *Show Them no Mercy: 4 Views on God and the Canaanite Genocide* (ed. Stanley N. Gundry; Counterpoints; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003) is likely to be considered unhelpful in the evangelical world to say nothing of the wider community.

³ See, for example, W. D. Davies and Dale Allison, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (ICC, 3 vols; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991), II: 156.

⁴ Glenna Jackson, *“Have Mercy on Me”: The Story of the Canaanite Woman in Matthew 15:21–28* (JSNT Sup 228; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 61.

⁵ *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000), 146.

⁶ Jackson, *“Have Mercy on Me,”* 80.

⁷ See especially, Ex 23:20-33; Lev 26:3-45; Num 14:39-45; 21:1-3; 31:1-20; Deut 7:1-5, 17-26; 9:1-5; 12:1-3; 13:12-18; 20:10-18, as well as the narratives (especially in the book of Joshua) in which the Canaanite genocide is, to a greater or lesser degree, carried out. In fact, as James Treat notes, if it were not for this story readers of the New Testament might assume that the genocide had been completely “successful”; see “The Canaanite Problem,” *Daughters of Sarah*, Spring 1994, 23; cf. Robert Allen Warrior, “A Native American Perspective: Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians,” in *Voices From the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah; Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), 277–85.

⁸ It is little wonder that some would see Matthew’s choice of the term “Canaanite” as an example of “racist colouring.” See, for example, Nlenanya Onwu, “Jesus and the Canaanite Woman (Matt.15:21–28): Toward a Relevant Hermeneutics in African Context,” *Bible Bhashyam* 11 (1985): 130.

⁹ Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 295.

¹⁰ Gundry, *Matthew*, 321.

¹¹ Some have also argued that the reference to the people praising “the God of Israel” in 15:31 may also point to the crowd being gentile. Rob Cousland shows how doubtful this argument is in his carefully reasoned “The Feeding of the Four Thousand Gentiles in Matthew? Matthew 15:29–39 as a Test Case,” *Novum Testamentum* 42, no. 1 (1999): 1–23. On the other hand, Cousland does not consider the evidence for thinking that the number seven is symbolic of gentiles.

¹² Ex 3:8 and 23:23, for example, list six nations: all those mentioned in Deut 7:1 except the Girgashites.

¹³ The certainty of Eugene Merrill is overstated when he says, “The enemy consists of seven nations, seven no doubt reflecting the fullness of opposition.” [“The Case for Moderate Discontinuity,” in *Show Them No Mercy: 4 Views on God and the Canaanite Genocide* (ed. Stanley Gundry; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 77.]

¹⁴ “Son of David,” a favourite Matthean theme, may refer to the common belief that Solomon, the Son of David was an exorcist. See, for example, Josephus *Antiquities* 8.2, 5.

¹⁵ J. Martin C. Scott puts it well: “Even if the twelve baskets mentioned in 14.20 do not yet include the Gentiles, but represent the availability of food for all of God’s people, the twelve tribes, the second feeding miracle which follows comes under the influence of the woman’s courageous action. For in that second account not twelve, but *seven* baskets are gathered in: the perfect number which the reader may hear as echoing all of God’s creation, Gentiles included!” [“Matthew 15:21–28: A Test-Case for Jesus’ Manners,” *JSNT* 63, no. 1 (1996): 40.] I would add that the number seven might also suggest a subversion of the conquest, a reversal of the genocide command.

¹⁶ See J. D. M. Derrett, “Law in the New Testament: The Syro-Phoenician Woman and the Centurion of Capernaum,” *Novum Testamentum* 15 (1973): 161–86.

¹⁷ Judith Gundry-Volf argues that, “The use of the diminutive *kynarion* may suggest the meaning ‘little dogs, puppies,’ which would make the epithet non-pejorative. Yet the contrast between children and dogs remains. The woman is being told that she has no right to expect Jesus to help her.” Indeed, it is worse than Gundry-Volf believes: the epithet is *still* pejorative, whether the dogs in questions are pets or not. [“Spirit, Mercy, and the Other,” *Theology Today* 51, no. 4 (1995): 517.] In the stark words of T.A. Burkill,

“to call a woman a ‘little bitch’ is no less abusive than to call her a ‘bitch’ without qualification.” [“The Historical Development of the Story of the Syro-Phoenician Woman (Mark VII:24–31),” *Novum Testamentum* 9 (1967): 173.]

¹⁸ The Rabbinic quotation is from *Ruth R. 2.16*; see “*Have Mercy on Me*,” 130.

¹⁹ Jackson, “*Have Mercy on Me*,” 137.

²⁰ Jackson, “*Have Mercy on Me*,” 141.

²¹ I have little doubt that Professor Wisse will consider my case to remain unproven. I do hope that he may acknowledge the possibility that this reading is at least “preachable.”

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The Rev. Dr. Grant LeMarquand is Academic Dean and Associate Professor of Biblical Studies and Mission at Trinity. Dr. LeMarquand has written and edited numerous articles and books, including Why Haven't You Left? Letters from the Sudan and A Comparative Study of the Story of the Bleeding Woman in North Atlantic and African Contexts. He is executive editor of Trinity's new theological journal, the Trinity Journal for Theology & Ministry and international editor of Anglican and Episcopal History.