

Have we Missed the Main Point? The Purpose for Jesus' Encounter with the Canaanite Woman (Matthew 15:21-28)

Doug Lowenberg*

Abstract:

Much ink has been spilled writing articles regarding “the notoriously difficult passage”¹ which recounts Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman from Syro-Phoenician. Many of these studies propose principles such as: 1) those who hold onto their faith when facing God-ordained tests and adversity will see their prayers answered, 2) Jesus' missional ministry prior to the resurrection focused almost exclusively on the people of Israel, and 3) the disciples of Jesus were taught lessons about themselves, Jesus, and His mission through this encounter.

Oscillating between this pericope and Matthew's entire gospel raises questions about the validity of the wide array of lessons generated from the story when one considers the purpose for which the author included as his account of the gospel.² It could be that these preconceived ideas have so affected the interpretations of the text that Matthew's intentionality has been skewed resulting in misunderstandings of why Jesus traveled to the region of Tyre and Sidon and encountered the Canaanite woman. The proposed motives for Jesus' words and actions with her could be quite misleading from what Matthew intended to communicate about the person, mission, and ministry methods of Jesus. A fresh examination of Matthew's account of Jesus' meeting of the Canaanite woman is merited to reconsider what the inspired author may have been saying to his first century audience.³

This study will examine each verse in the pericope commenting on issues that shape the overall meaning of the passage, consider the literary context of the story, discuss the importance of the historical and cultural settings, and reflect on the possible location and composition of Matthew's audience. Attention will be given to Jesus' ministry strategy based on this text and the

* Doug Lowenberg, Ph.D. and his wife, Corrine, have served as missionaries in Africa with the Assemblies of God for over 25 years primarily in Bible school training. Currently they are based in Nairobi, Kenya. Doug holds a PhD in Theology from Regent University and DMin from Bethel Theological Seminary. Doug's passion is doing missional hermeneutics in the African context. The Lowenbergs have two adult daughters, Julia and Ruthie, who serve as career missionaries in Africa.

contribution that this episode makes to Matthew's gospel. Lessons learned by Matthew and his fellow disciples from this experience will be proposed and evaluated.⁴

Verse 21 and the Literary Context

There seems to be a continuity of thought as Matthew moves his narrative forward from the preceding discussion on ritual cleanness (15:1-20) to the story of the Canaanite woman using the conjunction “and” (καὶ).⁵ Matthew is known for arranging his biography⁶ around theological themes.⁷ Another indicator of a continuation of the theme of “cleanness” for these two pericopes is Matthew's reference to geographical locations. The previous discussion took place in Gennesaret (14:34). Now in 15:1, he reports that Jesus departed from there (ἐξελθὼν ἐκεῖθεν) and withdrew to the regions of Tyre and Sidon (τὰ μέρη Τύρου καὶ Σιδῶνος).⁸ Some scholars note that Jesus had a pattern of withdrawing from one location to another more secluded when controversies arose with the Pharisees and teachers of the law (12:15; 14:13). To avoid conflict with the opposition, as well as to find rest for himself and his disciples from the demands of public ministry, and to secure time for private discourse with the twelve, he retreated to remote places.⁹ However, in Matthew's story there is no mention of Jesus' motivation for withdrawing nor explanation for his going an extreme distance to a foreign location. Extending the same theme, it appears that Jesus intentionally traveled to a ritually unclean region inhabited by impure, “pagan” people.¹⁰

Several observations from the preceding pericope help inform one's understanding of Matthew's intention for the inclusion of the Canaanite woman's story. In the preceding account, the Pharisees criticized Jesus for condoning His disciples' neglect of observing traditional, ritual washings before eating, thus disqualifying them from approaching God for worship and intercession and excluding them from table fellowship with those determined to be “clean.”¹¹ Jesus responded to the Pharisees' challenge by criticizing their misleading emphasis on “the traditions of the elders” to the neglect of the “command of God” and “the word of God” (15:2-6 NIV).

Jesus, calling the crowd, drew attention to their hypocrisy (15:20) and explained what it was that brought about moral and spiritual defilement, which was far more important to God than ritual, external impurity.¹² The former brought God's disapproval and disqualified people from receiving his blessings and answers to prayer. Jesus stated, “What comes *out of the mouth*, that is

what makes him ‘unclean’” (15:11). He repeated this same phrase a few moments later: “The things that come *out of the mouth* come from the heart, and these make a man ‘unclean’” (15:18). While explaining that the heart was the source for many spiritually contaminating thoughts and actions, he twice mentioned the close association between the heart and what flowed out of the mouth referring to one’s words. In his list of sins that originate in the heart, he specifically itemized two aspects of speech: false testimony and slander (15:29). Jesus’ instruction about the matters that defile one in the presence of God called attention not only to inner motivations, but also to the outer expressions of the heart measured by one’s conduct as well as one’s words. One’s speech was a clear indicator of the state of the heart.

What seems to be overlooked by interpreters is the disciples’ reaction to Jesus’ criticism of the Pharisees’ teaching. Upon Jesus’ exposing the hypocrisy of the Pharisees in the way they honored human tradition to the nullifying of God’s law, and erroneously emphasized external cleansing while ignoring the state of the heart, the Twelve responded: “Do you not know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?” (15:12). While it was Jesus’ disciples who triggered the critical judgment of the Pharisees, it was these same Twelve who sided with the Pharisees in their theology and practice in terms of ritual cleansing.¹³ They criticized Jesus for His negative assessment of their religious leaders and defended the position of the Pharisees against Jesus’ revelatory perspective. At this juncture in their spiritual development as future apostles of Jesus, they were more conformed to and in agreement with the beliefs and practices of the Pharisees than those of Jesus.

With a one sentence parable, Jesus asserted that what the Pharisees taught, which these teachings did not originate from His heavenly Father, would one day be destroyed (15:13). This parable could refer to his earlier, more extended one about the enemy who planted weeds among the wheat (13:24-30, 36-43). The final judgment in both stories was the same.

Based on the discussion between Jesus and His disciples, it appears that the Twelve were deeply influenced by Pharisaic teachings and had adopted their worldview.¹⁴ To correct His followers’ perspective, which included the Pharisees’ views on ritual cleanness, qualifications for table fellowship, the identity and purpose of the Messiah, and requirements for entrance into God’s kingdom, along with other beliefs, Jesus commanded His disciples, “Leave them” (ἄφετε αὐτούς) (15:14). Mirror reading would indicate that His disciples had not yet abandoned the beliefs and practices of this religious sect. Jesus continued His warning: “They are blind guides;

and if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a ditch” (Matt. 15:14 KJV). In the immediate historical context of this statement, Jesus indicated that not only were the Pharisees blind, but also His own disciples were blind failing to grasp the truth about His kingdom. And if they continued following these religious leaders, they too would stumble and fall in their pursuit of God’s will and kingdom. They struggled to grasp the new perspective that Jesus was introducing. Their confusion is emphasized in Jesus’ address to Peter who expressed his bewilderment over the parable. Jesus said, “Are you still so dull?” (15:16).

Later in Matthew’s travel narrative, as Jesus was attempting to reshape the faith, values, and practices of His followers, the topic of the Pharisees arose again. He said, “Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (16:6). Slowly the disciples were recognizing the deeply rooted influence that the Pharisees had on their thinking. Matthew comments, “Then they understood that he was...telling them to guard against...the teachings of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (16:12).

If one considers the audience to whom Matthew wrote, this passage could serve as a strong warning to the New Testament Church in the latter half of the first century to be on guard and distance themselves from the persistent, misleading influence of Pharisaism, whether it came from Pharisaic Jews or Pharisaic Christians (see Acts 15:5). The conflicting worldview propagated by a Pharisaic perspective promoted adherence to the Mosaic law, circumcision, Sabbath Day observances, ritual cleansing, and a restrictive diet—practices that impeded the inclusion of Gentiles into God’s kingdom, destroyed the unity of the church, and subverted salvation through faith in Jesus alone.

Returning to the issue of geographic location, Matthew reported that Jesus went to the region of Tyre and Sidon. No details are given as to the precise location that he visited, but it is noteworthy to recognize the distance from Gennesaret to Tyre and Sidon and to identify the people living in that region. Gennesaret was located on the northwest shore of Lake Galilee, approximately 4 kilometers west of Capernaum. To travel from there to Tyre, the route required one to journey east approximately 8 kilometers to the Jordan River Valley, north 15 kilometers to Lake Huleh, then follow a circuitous northwestwardly route 50 to 55 kilometers through the North Galilee highlands to Tyre. The trip would have covered almost 80 kilometers. Based on Mark’s account of this same incident, after Jesus’ encounter with the Canaanite woman, Jesus went further north to Sidon, an additional 40 kilometers (Mark 7:31). The overall expedition

would have covered over 120 kilometers one way. Did Jesus travel this extreme distance simply to avoid the Pharisees and the crowds? Journeying to this region, Jesus left behind the province of Galilee and entered a foreign land dominated by Gentiles. Could it be that this journey was intended to introduce His disciples to the global mission of God being fulfilled in His Son, the Messiah?¹⁵

Verse 22

To emphasize the non-Jewish nature of the vicinity, Matthew recorded his surprise when Jesus was approached by a Canaanite woman (literally, “and behold a woman, a Canaanite”; καὶ ἰδοὺ γυνὴ Χανααία). While Mark refers to her as “a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia” (Mark 7:26 NIV), Matthew described her with an old, anachronistic term that had fallen out of use in the first century— “Canaanite.”¹⁶ The Canaanites were an ancient, resistant enemy of Israel opposed to Israelite occupancy of the land. They led the people of God into idolatrous and immoral behavior which brought God’s judgment on Israel. This woman came seeking help from Jesus for her demon-possessed daughter. According to traditional Jewish and Pharisaic sensibilities, this woman represented the epitome of uncleanness and defilement: a woman, a Canaanite, the mother of a daughter as opposed to a son and having a child who was demonized (the demonization could have resulted from the idolatrous practices of the family and tribe).

From one perspective, she is the one who instigated the encounter; she approached Jesus. This is the view taken by those who hold the opinion that Jesus did not actively engage Gentiles during His earthly ministry.¹⁷ And only on rare occasions did He accept the advance of a Gentile. Keener comments, “The Gentile mission was at most peripheral to Jesus’ earthly ministry: he did not actively seek out Gentiles for ministry, and both occasions on which he heals Gentiles he does so from a distance (8:13; 15:28).”¹⁸ On the other hand, Jesus approached her; He traveled over 80 kilometers to place Himself in her proximity. And unlike Mark, Matthew made no reference to Jesus seeking anonymity by entering a house (Mark 7:24).¹⁹ Jesus seemed to be moving into a public space where He was accessible.

Her appeal is surprising and yet filled with familiar words: “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession” (κύριε υἱὸς Δαυίδ· ἡ θυγάτηρ μου κακῶς δαιμονίζεται). What would she have known of Jesus that would cause her to employ such honorific titles? What did she believe about Jesus that emboldened her to approach

him for help? From Jesus' earliest days of public ministry, news about Him had spread throughout the provinces of Israel and beyond, as far as Syria, the region north of Syrophenicia (Matt. 4:24-25). Crowds with every type of sickness and spiritual condition came to Him and were healed. As Jesus and His companions traveled north from Gennesaret, the report of their movements would have been noticed and circulated. She heard of His coming, believed, and came to Him with her request.

The NIV places this woman's honorific titles before her request. However, the Greek text begins with her request for mercy, followed by the titles, and concludes with the explanation of her need (Ἐλέησόν με, κύριε υἱὸς Δαβὶδ· ἡ θυγάτηρ μου κακῶς δαμονίζεται).²⁰ Following this order, the woman would have first expressed her lowly, dependent status as she approached Jesus. She came to Jesus asking for help that she did not deserve. Then she declared His exalted state: Lord and Son of David. The term "Lord" (κύριε) could be understood as a statement of respect equivalent to "sir." But coupled with the next epithet, "Son of David," a messianic title, the first expression should more aptly be interpreted as an expression of lordship and worship. Following her declaration of His identity, she appealed for mercy on herself (Ἐλέησόν με). The explanation for her need was the description of her daughter's condition. The needs of her daughter had become her own.

In a pagan culture, the normal response of the local people to demonization would have been to consult sorcerers to determine the cause and solution for the demonic assault then pay the price exacted by the spiritual practitioner hoping for some degree of relief. One might assume this mother had exhausted her resources attempting to find a cure but experienced no deliverance. Having heard the reports of people who "brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed, and he healed them" (Matt. 4:24), her knowledge that he had journeyed all the way to her region, her faith in Jesus' power,²¹ and her confidence in his compassion inspired her to come out from her home and ignore the cultural norms to request his intervention. "Matthew views compassion as a primary motivation in Jesus' acts of healing."²² "Clearly the woman has prior knowledge of Jesus and of his compassion for all, be they Jews or Gentiles, male or female."²³

The terms she used are found on the lips of others approaching Jesus for help. "Lord" was the title used by the leper seeking healing (Matt. 8:2) and the Gentile centurion interceding

for his servant (Matt. 8:6). A father with a demonized son cried, “Lord, have mercy on my son” (Matt 17:15). Two blind men desiring healing called out to Jesus, “Have mercy on us, Son of David” (Matt. 9:27). Two other blind men requesting healing from Jesus used the same, exact expression, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!” (Matt. 20:31). In all these cases, Jesus was moved with compassion and was willing to heal. This Canaanite came to Jesus with expectations of supernatural intervention. While some scholars report that she was being manipulative, there is no indication in the text of any attitude other than desperation, humility, and hope. Thus, Jesus’ response to her seems shocking and inconsistent with His usual response to those coming to Him with desperate needs and with words of honor and faith.

Verse 23

“But He [Jesus] did not answer her a word” (ὁ δὲ οὐκ ἀπεκρίθη αὐτῇ λόγον). Why the silence? At this juncture in the narrative, scholars provide a host of explanations for Jesus’ silence including: He was indifferent or reluctant to help her because she was a Gentile;²⁴ helping her ran contrary to His mission to the Jews; He was aghast at her sinful uncleanness; He was shocked by the aggressive attitude of a despised Canaanite; He was perplexed and did not know what to do; and He was testing her to see her level of faith and determination.²⁵ Matthew, however, reports that out of the deafening silence, the first voices heard were those of the disciples. It is not until this moment in the narrative that Matthew mentions the presence of the disciples. They persistently urged Jesus to send her away. The reason for their dismissal, “She is crying out after us” (καὶ προσελθόντες οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ ἠρώτουν αὐτὸν λέγοντες· Απόλυσον αὐτήν, ὅτι κράζει ὀπισθεν ἡμῶν). Jesus’ “indifference...was no doubt seen by the disciples as acting in an entirely appropriate manner.”²⁶ Is it possible that Matthew was providing a concrete example of Jesus’ instructions in the previous pericope: “The things that come *out of the mouth* come from the heart, and these make a man ‘unclean’” (15:18)? When touring a foreign region and facing an unclean Canaanite woman with a demonized daughter, did their request reveal the state of their hearts, their assessment of such people, and their readiness, or lack thereof, to minister to her need?²⁷

“Send her away” (Ἀπόλυσον αὐτήν). Scholars provide two different interpretations of the disciples’ request. Some view this request as one of utter rejection showing the contempt of Jewish men towards a Gentile woman.²⁸ Possibly they felt cultural discomfort because a foreign,

pagan woman had publicly approached them which in their culture was completely inappropriate. This Gentile woman was obviously unclean; any contact with her would defile them and their esteemed rabbi.²⁹ Others propose that the disciples were asking Jesus to honor her request, heal her child, so she would leave them alone.³⁰ This second perspective is dubious in light of the disciples' previous request for Jesus to send the crowds away (ἀπόλυσον τοὺς ὄχλους) when faced with the impossible situation of providing food in a remote area for such a vast multitude (Matt. 14:15). In the pericope immediately following the encounter with the Canaanite, which quite likely took place among Gentiles in the Decapolis (Matt. 15:29-39; Mark 7:31), to preempt the disciples once again requesting Jesus to send the crowds away for similar reasons, Jesus said, "I have compassion for these people...I do not want to send them away hungry (Σπλαγχνίζομαι ἐπὶ τὸν ὄχλον...ἀπολύσαι αὐτοὺς νήστεις οὐ θέλω), or they may collapse on the way" (Matt. 15:32). When faced with impossible situations or "unclean" people, it seems the tendency of the disciples was to dismiss the needy without a solution for their physical or spiritual predicament. Concerning the Canaanite woman, it is more probable that they simply wanted Jesus to dismiss her.

Their request also revealed something about their self-centered perspective. While her pleas for help were aimed solely at Jesus, they reported she was crying after "us" (ὄπισθεν ἡμῶν). When did the woman mention the disciples? Their self-centered outlook and words collectively were an attempt to preempt Jesus from responding to the woman and showed their callousness towards her dire predicament.

Verse 24

Since it was the disciples who proposed the request to send her away, it seems that Jesus' response was to their petition: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Οὐκ ἀπεστάλην εἰ μὴ εἰς τὰ πρόβατα τὰ ἀπολωλότα οἴκου Ἰσραήλ). Most scholars view this assertion as Jesus' affirmation of His earthly mission—to the lost sheep of the house of Israel—only and exclusively.³¹ They reinforce this statement with Jesus' previous restriction given to the Twelve: "Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Εἰς ὁδὸν ἐθνῶν μὴ ἀπέλθητε καὶ εἰς πόλιν Σαμαριτῶν μὴ εἰσέλθητε· πορεύεσθε δὲ μᾶλλον πρὸς τὰ πρόβατα τὰ ἀπολωλότα οἴκου Ἰσραήλ, Matt. 10:5-6).³² Was Jesus declaring the rationale for which the woman should be sent away—he had not come for Gentiles,

at least not at this time in His earthly ministry? Given the context, one might assume the disciples were in hardy agreement with this statement. Bailey rightly notes, “Jesus here gives concrete expression to the theology of his narrow-minded disciples.”³³

With this assertion, what did Matthew intend to convey about Jesus, His ministry focus, and His attitude towards this marginalized woman with her desperate need?³⁴ By these words was Jesus delineating His ministry priority which then dictated how He should respond to the woman’s request? Or was He verbalizing the views that the disciples had for His messianic ministry, much like Peter would do later when he told Jesus that the way of the cross was not acceptable (Matt. 16:22)? Do these words accurately represent Jesus’ primary ministry, or did they encapsulate the perspective formulated in the hearts of the Twelve for the ministry of the Messiah: He came to save the people of Israel and their nation? Bailey’s insights are instructive: Jesus was “irritated by the disciples’ attitude regarding women and Gentiles...He decide[d] to use the occasion to help her and challenge the deeply rooted prejudices in the hearts of his disciples...Jesus’ approach to the education of his disciples [was] subtle and powerful.”³⁵

One should consider the consistency of this statement in comparison with the entire gospel of Matthew. Does his gospel confirm an exclusive focus of Jesus’ messianic, compassionate, and saving ministry for the people of Israel?³⁶ Matthew began his gospel portraying Jesus, the Messiah, as the son of David and the son of Abraham (Matt. 1:1). The reference to David reminded His readers of the promise God made to David, and later the prophets, that He would establish the house and kingdom of one of David’s offspring forever and this kingdom would extend to the ends of the earth (2 Sam. 7:13-16, 29; Psalms 2:8; Isaiah 9:6-8; 42:1-6; 49:6). As the son of Abraham, Jesus the Christ came to fulfill God’s promise to Abraham that one of his seed would bring blessings to Abraham’s descendants and bless all the peoples of the earth (Gen. 12:1-3; 26:4; 28:14).

Unlike Luke’s gospel and unique from most Jewish authors who recorded genealogies to legitimize one’s lineage and legal authority, Matthew included four women—this step alone is a unique characteristic for a genealogical listing. In addition, the common characteristic of these four women is that they are non-Jews, or they were married to a Gentile (Matt. 1:3-6); Tamar, a Canaanite (Gen. 38:18); Rahab, a Canaanite from Jericho (Josh. 2:1); Ruth, a Moabitess (Ruth 1:3); and an unnamed woman who was the wife of Uriah, a Hittite (2 Sam. 11:3). It is possible that Matthew wanted to demonstrate that Jesus the Messiah was the legal heir of David, despite

His mixed lineage, whose throne would be established forever, and that Christ fulfilled God's promises to Abraham as the one who came to bless all humankind, including all nations and both genders.

Matthew recorded the coming of the Magi from the East as a group of foreigners who recognized the One born to be the "King of the Jews" (Matt. 2:1-11). Not only did they recognize His kingly sovereignty over the Jews, but they also identified a divine aspect to His nature and worshipped Him.³⁷ While King Herod, the priests, and the teachers of the law heard their testimony and identified the location where the child was to be born, only the Magi sought to find and worship Him.

When the rulers of His own people tried to murder Jesus, God provided a haven in the foreign country of Egypt for the infant Jesus and His parents (Matt. 2:13). After returning to the land of Israel, His parents chose to relocate from Nazareth (Matt. 2:22) to Capernaum to fulfill Isaiah's prophecy: "Galilee of the Gentiles—the people living in darkness have seen a great light" (Matt. 4:15-16). The good news of Jesus' words and deeds circulated far beyond Israel's borders (Matt. 4:24). The crowds that came to hear His message and receive healing included both Jews and Gentiles (Matt. 4:25).

At the conclusion of the first of the five teaching blocks recorded by Matthew (the Sermon on the Mount, Matt. 5-7), Jesus demonstrated His compassion and healing power for a diverse group of people—healing a Jewish leper,³⁸ a Gentile centurion, a Jewish mother,³⁹ those demonized, and the sick (Matt. 8:1-16). Some scholars propose that the healing interaction with the Gentile centurion was one of the few exceptions of when Jesus ministered to a non-Jew.⁴⁰ Further, they suggest that Jesus was willing to heal the man's servant because of his extraordinary faith; however, other scholars state that Jesus was not willing to go with the man and enter his defiled, Gentile residence. Other interpreters have turned Jesus' response into a question. The text reads, "Jesus said, 'I will go and heal him'" (Ἐγὼ ἐλθὼν θεραπεύσω αὐτόν (Matt. 8:7)). The assertion becomes a question: Should I go and heal him?⁴¹ This transposition seems to be motivated by the preunderstanding that Jesus came only to reveal Himself and minister to the Jewish people. The Greek text could be read as an emphatic phrase: "I, having gone, will heal him," or "Having gone, I myself will heal him." Rather than Jesus questioning whether He should go or instead send someone else to bring the healing, Jesus wanted His audience to know that He was willing to go to the centurion's house and heal the household

servant.⁴² The implications of Jesus' response to the centurion run countercultural to common Jewish and more extreme Pharisaic sensibilities, which were also held by his own disciples. Peter stated to a Gentile centurion: "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him" (Acts 10:28).

Matthew recorded Jesus' reaction to the centurion's faith: "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith" (Matt. 8:10). He followed this commendation by describing the future messianic banquet when people from the East and the West would feast with the patriarchs while the "subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside" (Matt. 8:11-12).⁴³ This Matthean passage reveals that Jesus' messianic banquet in the eschaton would include people from every part of the Earth while some of those descended from the Jewish patriarchs would be excluded. The depiction of those excluded from the banquet resonates with John the Baptist's earlier warning to Jews who assumed their descendancy as guaranteed salvation: "Do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham" (Matt. 3:9). Race and nationality were no guarantee of entrance into God's kingdom.⁴⁴

The deliverance of the two demoniacs in the region of Gadarene, which resulted in the drowning of a herd of pigs, was a record of the spiritual liberation possible for two Gentiles (Matt. 8:28-34). During Jesus' teaching and travel narratives, Matthew quoted from the Suffering Servant passages of Isaiah to describe the character and ministry focus of Jesus, God's Messiah, which testified how: "He will proclaim justice to the nations (Gentiles, κρίσιν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν ἀπαγγελεῖ) ...In his name the nations (Gentiles, ἔθνη) will put their hope" (Matt. 12:18-21; Isaiah 42:1-4).⁴⁵

The Gentiles of Nineveh and Ethiopia set an example for the Jews based on faith, repentance, and worship, but the people of Israel refused to accept this time of divine visitation (Matt. 12:38-45). In explaining the parable of the weeds sown in the field by an enemy, Jesus explained that the sower of the wheat was the "Son of man;" the field was the world (*kosmos*; Matt. 13:37-38). Jesus' parable of the unfaithful tenants concluded with Jesus' eschatological announcement: "The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit" (Matt. 21:23, 43). Before the eschaton would arrive, the gospel had to be preached in all parts of the inhabited world as a witness to every nation (ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ οἰκουμένῃ εἰς μαρτύριον πᾶσιν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν; Matt. 24:14). The Roman centurion supervising the crucifixion of

Jesus, at the moment of His death, declared, “Surely He was the Son of God!” (Matt. 27:54). The conclusion of Matthew’s gospel, which recorded the Great Commission without referencing Christ’s ascension, was intended to leave Jesus’ command to disciple all the nations (μαθητεύσατε πάντα τὰ ἔθνη) reverberating in the ears of His followers as well as those hearing Matthew’s gospel being read (Matt. 28:18-20).

Rather than an exclusive focus on the lost sheep of the house of Israel, Matthew described an intentional inclusiveness in Jesus’ ministry and His offer of the Good News to the Gentiles as the prophetic fulfillment demonstrating that Jesus was the one prophesied to bring blessings to the descendants of Abraham and to all nations.⁴⁶ Surveying Matthew’s introduction (1:1) and conclusion (28:19-20), one could identify a grand *inclusio* emphasizing the missional thrust of Jesus’ Earthly ministry. Matthew’s gospel biography narrates the story of the promised King and Savior who came to provide salvation for all people and inaugurated His kingdom accessible to any who would repent and believe. While the disciples initially held the position that Jesus came only for the lost sheep of the house of Israel, they gradually learned from Jesus’ teaching and example⁴⁷ that He offered salvation to the world.

Verse 25

The Canaanite woman had already identified Jesus as the Son of David, the promised Messiah who came to rule over an eternal kingdom that extended beyond the cultural and geographical borders of Israel to the ends of the earth. At Jesus’ assertion about the purpose of His ministry, she seemed to grasp the irony of the statement. Following his words, the Canaanite thus drew nearer and worshipped Him (ἡ δὲ ἐλθοῦσα προσεκύνει αὐτῷ). She repeated the title “Lord” with an abbreviated plea: “Lord, help me!” (Κύριε, βοήθει μοι). The verb, προσκυνέω, appears 12 times in Matthew. On eight of these occasions, the word clearly means “worship.” While the word can be translated “kneel down,” it seems that worship best fits in this setting.⁴⁸ She acknowledged Jesus as both Lord and the Son of David. She was filled with faith in him. There was no hesitation on her part in approaching him for help. And there is no inference from the text that Jesus ignored or resisted her or was obstinate with her to test her faith.

Verse 26

Jesus' statement found in this verse, even if it was a well-known proverb, seems to be extremely inconsistent with the way He is presented throughout Matthew's Gospel. Where He is repeatedly moved with compassion, accessible to anyone who comes to Him, reaches out and touches the unclean, and eats with tax gatherers and sinners, His words here seem insulting and racist: "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs." Jeremias comments, "The term 'dog' is the supreme insult."⁴⁹ Dogs were viewed as unclean and dangerous scavengers who roamed the streets and alleys.⁵⁰ If employed as a guard dog, they brought fear with the possibility of a violent attack on a stranger. They did not move about one's home as pets. Making this comparison to a person would be humiliating and insulting. While some scholars suggest that the term dogs (κυνάρτιος) is the diminutive of dogs and best translates "little dogs," making the slur less abrasive, it still was an extremely derogatory comparison to make with a human being.

Some explain that this disdainful speech was Jesus' way of testing the commitment, persistence, and resilience of the woman in terms of her faith in Christ.⁵¹ But one must ask if there is any other example of Jesus testing and insulting sincere seekers who humbly came to him for help? He tested the unbelieving disciples and resistant Pharisees, but there is no evidence of such a methodology towards the sincere and desperate. Some propose that Jesus was using the terms "children" and "dogs" to refer to the Jews and Gentiles with the purpose that this Canaanite woman needed to acknowledge the historic distinction between the two groups and acknowledge that she was a "Gentile 'dog,'" unworthy of "Israel's covenanted mercies" and "divine election."⁵²

Could there be another explanation for this language and clarification of what Matthew intended to convey to his readers? If one recalls the previous pericope and the stress on words that flowed out of one's mouth which revealed the state of the heart, and if the assertion of Jesus about His mission was actually intended to objectify the thoughts of the disciples, it would be consistent to view this statement as another step where Jesus exposed the prejudiced and racist attitudes of His Jewish disciples towards other people groups whom they viewed as unclean and unworthy of the Messiah's intervention.⁵³ Jesus' proverb was consistent with the general view of Jews, and especially Pharisees, towards Gentiles. Was Jesus articulating the inner thoughts of

His disciples towards this woman and themselves? In terms of those who deserved of the food, they likely saw themselves as the children, descendants of the privileged family, destined to receive Christ's provisions.

For those who view this statement as Jesus' way of challenging the woman's faith, to belittle and insult her seems cruel and inconsistent with the character of the divine Son of God. And if His comment accurately reflects the perspective He had towards her and all Gentiles during His earthly ministry, it would seem extremely difficult to suddenly pivot concerning a mission focused exclusively on the house of Israel to include all nations.⁵⁴ Not only would Jesus have to significantly change the content of His teaching about the kingdom during the 40 days between resurrection and ascension, it would be extremely difficult to present a new message which challenged the narrow, racist opinions of His disciples which He had condoned during the previous 3 ½ years of discipleship. When Jesus was born as a Jewish boy and grew up in a Jewish cultural milieu, was He so culturally and racially shaped by His society that He was no different than the Jewish people around Him? If He was inculcated by a traditional Jewish, male worldview, how could He prophetically speak throughout His lifetime against their prejudices and misunderstandings regarding religious traditions, the mission of the Messiah, God's love for all people, and the way of salvation?⁵⁵ One must remember, concerning the identity of Jesus, that He was not simply a Jewish boy shaped by Jewish culture and Jewish worldview. He is "Emmanuel, God with us"—the Lord of all creation and all people who came to dwell among humankind (Matt. 1:23).

Verse 27

The woman agreed with Jesus' proverb ("Yes, Lord"; Ναί, κύριε). One should not take bread given to children and toss it to dogs. Her answer is filled with wisdom, wit, and faith. She adds, "And even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table" (καὶ γὰρ τὰ κυνάρια ἐσθίει ἀπὸ τῶν ψιχίων τῶν πιπτόντων ἀπὸ τῆς τραπέζης τῶν κυρίων αὐτῶν).⁵⁶ Even despised and filthy dogs benefited from crumbs that involuntarily fell from the table where their masters were feasting. The implication was that there was an abundance of food on the table. Those at the table had plenty to eat. The generous portions resulted in crumbs involuntarily falling to the ground where they were consumed by the hungry dogs. Both the people at table and the dogs under the table were fed. The master of the table provided enough so that all were fed.

The woman replaced Jesus' word "children" with "masters." Whether she was honoring the disciples by referring to them as masters, perhaps Jewish masters, or using sarcasm to refer indirectly to their harsh, superior attitudes towards her, one can only speculate. But noting her consistent humility in coming to Jesus and agreeing with Jesus' proverb, it seems she was graciously giving the disciples honor as members of Jesus' discipleship team. She did not imply that they were the ones giving food to the dogs. She did not condone their condescending attitudes towards her and her people. Crumbs were falling to the ground involuntarily and being consumed by the dogs. While the masters—the disciples—enjoyed the bread, the dogs were nurtured as well because there was such an abundance. Both parties were supplied what they needed by the one supplying the bread, the master of the disciples.⁵⁷

Her answer did not demand of Jesus an either/or mentality which would require Jesus to either minister to the disciples or to her, to the Jews or to the Gentiles. Her faith in Christ's abundant provision and mission to all enabled her to have a both/and mindset. She grasped that Jesus came for all, and there were no limits to His bounteous provisions. Jesus provided for both the children and those denied this privilege because of prejudice, racism, and gender bias. The Lord, the Son of David, had come to bless all and was true to His inclusive mission.

Some scholars hold to a different interpretation of the woman's response to Jesus' proverb. Their perspective is that Jesus demanded that she acknowledge that the disciples, and with them the people of Israel, deserved to be offered the gospel and blessings provided by the Messiah prior to any spiritual provisions coming to the Gentiles. Only after the woman accepted the "divinely ordained division between God's people and Gentiles" and the preferential ministry of Jesus to the people of Israel did He grant her request.⁵⁸ This view seems to be based on a literal understanding of Jesus' words as a truth assertion in verse 24, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

As has been shown in the discussion above, there does not seem to be evidence provided by Matthew himself that Jesus exclusively ministered to Israel. And one cannot find support in Matthew's Gospel for the view that Jesus expected non-Jewish believers to confess to their own racial-spiritual inferiority when compared to the Jews before they could receive help from the Messiah. It is possible that Matthew was arguing the very opposite for his readers who consisted of both Jews and Gentiles, and he was undermining the claim that either group had racial superiority.⁵⁹ Neither group had the right to assert spiritual or racial authority over the other;⁶⁰

through the grace of Jesus, all people were saved by faith in Jesus alone (Acts 15:11). Both groups needed to recognize their spiritual defilement, repent, and come by faith to the Only One Messiah who could make them true sons of Abraham. He alone provided entrance into His Kingdom that included descendants of the patriarchs and those coming from the East and West.

Verse 28

Where Jesus had not addressed the woman when she first approached Him, He now spoke directly to her with an exclamation: “Oh woman, great is your faith! May it be to you as you desire”⁶¹ (ὦ γύναι, μεγάλη σου ἡ πίστις· γενηθήτω σοι ὡς θέλεις).⁶²

Even without a word of deliverance, the Canaanite’s demonized daughter was set free and made whole. Charette notes, “His exorcisms, effected as they are through the power of the Spirit of God, signify that the kingdom of God has come.”⁶³ Christ’s Kingdom had come to Gentiles in Syro-Phoenicia (Matt. 12:28; 4:16).

She demonstrated great faith in Him as a loving, powerful Messiah for all people. She approached Jesus with confidence that He would do something to help her tormented daughter. She was not distracted by the attitudes of Jesus’ disciples. Throughout Jesus’ indirect instructions aimed at His prejudiced disciples, she continued to focus on and worship Him.⁶⁴

Jesus’ words to her sound extremely different from His statement to His disciples about their faith. To them He said, “Oh you of little faith” (Matt. 14:31; 17:20). The Lord commended her before their onlooking eyes, “You have great faith.” As with the centurion, Jesus’ assessment of her faith must have shocked His Jewish audience (Matt. 8:10; 15:28). Matthew did not indicate how the disciples reacted to Jesus’ words: “Your request is granted.” They were ready to send her away. Jesus transformed her life and situation while using her presence and undistracted faith to expose the calloused, prejudiced hearts of His disciples. His acceptance of her and the healing of her daughter were steps in preparing them to eventually fulfill their roles as apostles delivering the salvation message to all nations.

The fact that “her daughter was healed from that very hour” (καὶ ἰάθη ἡ θυγάτηρ αὐτῆς ἀπὸ τῆς ὥρας ἐκείνης) must have been verified by ensuing reports that came to Jesus and the Twelve as they moved onward in their journey. Or perhaps, Otherwise, Jesus and the disciples would have then gone to the woman’s home and testified of the girl’s deliverance and healing. One might suspect that this entire experience had a profound impact on the disciples. While

harboring prejudice, exclusiveness, and a self-centered perspective, their Master exposed His disciples' collective heart condition by taking them to places home to people they had previously despised and avoided. He modelled love, acceptance, and inclusiveness and displayed His transforming power to change both the woman and them.

Matthew's Audience

It is possible that Matthew penned his Gospel for the believers in Antioch, a church consisting of Jews and Gentiles, neither exclusively Jewish nor Gentile (Acts 11:19-21; 15:1).⁶⁵ There was racial and religious tension among these Christians, which divided them and obscured their grasping of the true message of the gospel intended also for outsiders. The Syrian church was struggling with the ongoing influence of Pharisaism.⁶⁶ The apostle wrote to expose the struggle he and the other disciples had undergone to recognize their skewed understanding of Jesus and His mission and what was the true mission instead. It was not easy to transform their worldview and admit that that they should label no one unclean or defiled and that table fellowship must include all people groups. Their views of others had to be healed so they could fellowship at table together,⁶⁷ so that they could from now on demonstrate the acceptance and unity required for the body of Christ and moving forward continue to advance the discipling of the nations. With what Matthew had learned about being a true disciple of Jesus, the New Testament church he served now had to learn the same lessons.

Conclusion

If Jesus came not only for the lost sheep of the house of Israel but to offer salvation and healing to individuals from every tribe and nation, why did He limit His original commissioning of the disciples to the house of Israel (Matt. 10:5-6)? Jesus knew their racial and religious prejudices. If His emissaries brought the good news to Gentiles and Samaritans without love and compassion, let alone without the parameters of making relationships, the message of the gospel would be tainted in its delivery (see Luke 9:54-55; Acts 10:28; 11:2-3).⁶⁸ As a concession to their present, prejudiced state, His starting point for their evangelistic efforts was to order them not to go to the Gentile nations. He knew their attitudes would have to be significantly transformed before they could effectively make disciples among the nations. Jesus did not

condone their prejudices, but He recognized with time and with them learning through His own example, His disciples would arrive at the place where He would commission them to go and disciple every nation under Heaven. The uncleanness of the hearts and mouths expressed through prejudice, racial slurs, religious pride, and intolerance for others required forgiveness, as well as their own spiritual deliverance, training, and transformation provided by Christ alone.

To demonstrate the unilateral faithfulness of God to His covenant with Israel, Jesus came as a Jew to extend the offer of salvation to the people of Israel and the associated privilege of them knowing God as Savior and Lord. With this special relationship then came the responsibility of serving God as a kingdom of priests, a holy nation (Exodus 19:6), to mediate His grace to the nations of the world. While most members of the house of Israel struggled to accept their Messiah, particularly because He did not fulfill their expectations in the way He provided salvation and for whom He offered this gift, Jesus Christ continued with His saving plan of providing forgiveness, transformation, and a personal relationship for those who accepted Him. In word and deed throughout His life of ministry on earth, Jesus modeled the content and methodology of an all-inclusive nature of His gospel for the benefit of His disciples and His church.⁶⁹ The Canaanite woman provides an outstanding example of this truth, which needed to be understood by the disciples of Christ and by His New Testament church.

In a day of divisiveness, anger, and intolerance, followers of Christ then and still need to allow the Holy Spirit to examine their hearts and words when it comes to their thoughts and deeds towards others from different racial, ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Acceptance, understanding, love, and unity must begin with His church and flow into one's immediate social context and beyond to the entire world, bringing healing, hope, and deliverance through the love, power, and holiness of the gospel.

Bibliography

Augsburger, Myron S. Matthew. *The Communicator's Commentary*. Waco, TX: Word, 1982.

Bailey, Kenneth E. *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008.

Bertram, Georg. "ἔθνος, ἔθνικός." Pages 364-369 in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Vol. 2. Edited by Gerhard Kittel. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964.

- Blomberg, Craig L. "Matthew." Pages 541-567 in *Holman Bible Handbook*. Edited by David S. Dockery. Nashville, TN: Holman, 1992.
- Brown, Jeannine K. *Scripture as Communication: Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021.
- Brown, Jeannine K., and Kyle Roberts. *Matthew. The Two Horizons NT Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018.
- Carson, D. A. *Matthew: Chapters 1 Through 12. The Expositor's Bible Commentary*. Grand Rapids: MI: Zondervan, 1995.
- . *Matthew: Chapters 13 Through 28. The Expositor's Bible Commentary*. Grand Rapids: MI: Zondervan, 1995.
- Charette, Blaine. *Restoring Presence: The Spirit in Matthew's Gospel*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000.
- Davies, W. D., and Dale C. Allison Jr. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew. Vol. 2. International Critical Commentary*. London: T&T Clark International, 2004.
- Dobbs, Elizabeth A. "The Canaanite Woman, the Second Nun, and St. Cecilia." *Christianity and Literature* 62 (2013): 203-222.
- France, R. T. *The Gospel of Matthew, The New International Commentary on the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007.
- Guthrie, Donald. *New Testament Introduction*. Rev. edition. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990.
- Hagner, Donald A. *Matthew 14–28. Vol. 33B. Word Biblical Commentary*. Dallas: Word, 1995.
- Harlow, Daniel C., "Jewish Context of the NT." Pages 373-380 in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*. Edited by Kevin J. Vanhoozer. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005.
- Hill, David. *The Gospel of Matthew. The New Century Bible Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981.
- Jeremias, Joachim. *Jesus' Promise to the Nations*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982.
- Jusu, John., ed. *Africa Study Bible*. Chicago, IL: Oasis International, 2016.
- Kapolyo, Joe. "Matthew." Pages 1105-1170 in *Africa Bible Commentary*. Edited by Tokunboh Adeyemo. Nairobi: WordAlive, 2006.

- Keener, Craig S. *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999.
- . *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009.
- . *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*. 2nd ed. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014.
- . *Matthew*. The IVP New Testament Commentary Series. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997.
- Krentz, Edgar. “Missionary Matthew: Matthew 28:16-20 as Summary of the Gospel.” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 31 (2004): 24-31.
- Manson, T. W. *Jesus and the Non-Jews*. London: Athlone Press, 1955.
- Martin, Ralph P. *The Four Gospels*. Rev. ed.; Vol. 1 of *New Testament Foundations: A Guide for Christian Students*; Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1999.
- McKnight, Scot. *A Light Among the Gentiles: Jewish Missionary Activity in the Second Temple Period*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1991.
- Moore, George Foot. *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era*, Vol. 1-2. New York: Schocken Books, 1971.
- Morris, Leon. *The Gospel according to Matthew*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992.
- Nolland, John. *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. *New International Greek Testament Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; Paternoster, 2005.
- Rowlands, Jonathan. “Difficult texts: ‘A Dog at the Table’ in Matthew 15:21-28.” *Theology* 122 (2019): 285-288.
- Sanders, E. P. *Jesus and Judaism*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985.
- Schmidt, Karl L. “ἔθνος in the NT.” Pages 369-372 in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Vol. 2. Edited by Gerhard Kittel. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964.
- Schreiner, Patrick. *Matthew, Disciple and Scribe: The First Gospel and Its Portrait of Jesus*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019.
- Scott, Jr., J. Julius. *Jewish Backgrounds of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995.
- Smillie, Gene R. “‘Even the Dogs’: Gentiles in the Gospel of Matthew.” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45 (2002): 73-97.

- Stein, Robert H. *Jesus the Messiah: A Survey of the Life of Christ*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996.
- Van Elderen, Bastiaan. "Sidon." Pages 427-428 in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*. Edited by Merrill C. Tenney. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976.
- Wallace, Daniel B. *Greek Grammar: Beyond the Basics*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996.
- Wells, C. Richard. "New Testament Interpretation and Preaching." Pages 562-585 in *New Testament Criticism & Interpretation*. Edited by David A. Black and David S. Dockery; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991.
- White, Benjamin L. "The Eschatological Conversion of 'All the Nations' in Matthew 28:19-20: (Mis)reading Matthew through Paul." *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 36 (2014): 353-382.
- Wiseman, D. J. "Sidon" and "Tyre." Pages 1099-1100 and 1215-1216 in *New Bible Dictionary*. 3rd ed. Edited by D. R. W. Wood. Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity. 1996.
- Wright, Christopher J. H. *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 200

¹ C. Richard Wells, "New Testament Interpretation and Preaching," in *New Testament Criticism & Interpretation* (ed. David A. Black and David S. Dockery; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991), 575.

² Jeannine K. Brown advises, "During much of the exegetical process, the most important literary unit to attend to when reading a specific text is the entire book of the Bible in which it is found. For exegesis to stay true to what an author has communicated, the whole book must remain in view." Jeannine K. Brown, *Scripture as Communication* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), 14.

³ David Hill sums up the traditional perspective on Matthew's overall intentions: "Matthew's Gospel is written from a Jewish Christian standpoint in order to defend Christianity, to make acceptable to Jewish-Christian readers, and to prove that Jesus is the Messiah of the Jews." David Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew* (NCBC; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), 40.

⁴ Bailey observes, "The training of the disciples is a prominent feature in all four Gospels" and this certainly is the case with this story. He adds, "Jesus is not simply dealing with the woman, he is also interacting on a profound level with the disciples." Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 217, 219.

⁵ Hill states, "The question of clean and unclean (verses 1-20) is closely related to the matter of Jewish attitudes towards Gentiles...It is therefore likely that this pericope was employed for the guidance of the Matthean church in its relations with Gentiles." Hill, *Gospel of Matthew*, 253.

⁶ Keener identifies the Gospels as ancient biographies. For discussion, see Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (2nd ed.; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 37-38.

⁷ Wright says that this story happens “in the wake of the dispute between Jesus and the Pharisees, and teachers of the law regarding clean and unclean food.” He observes, “The clean-unclean distinction in Israel was fundamentally symbolic of the distinction between Israel and the nations. Accordingly, if Jesus abolished the distinction in relation to food (the symbol) then he simultaneously abolished the distinction in relation to Jews and Gentiles (the reality that the symbol pointed to). This point makes it all the more significant that both Matthew and Mark follow the dispute with two miracles for Gentiles (the woman of Tyre and the man in Decapolis) and probably a third (if the feeding of the four thousand took place on the Decapolis side of the lake).” Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 508-509. Also see Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 38, 155.

⁸ Rather than considering Tyre and Sidon as remote villages, and while the people were followers of the fertility god, Eshmun, Sidon was renowned as a center of philosophical learning and both cities continued to have maritime and economic influence. See Bastiaan Van Elderen, “Sidon” (in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, vol. 5; ed. Merrill C. Tenney; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976), 428; D. J. Wiseman, “Sidon” and “Tyre” (in *New Bible Dictionary*; 3rd ed; ed. D.R.W. Wood; Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity, 1996), 1099-1100, 1215-1216.

⁹ Craig S. Keener comments that Jesus “needed a short vacation to rest with and teach his disciples.” Craig S. Keener, *Matthew* (IVPNTCS; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 263. Myron S. Augsburger sees no reference to a respite but claims that Jesus traveled to the region of Tyre and Sidon “to provide opportunity for persons to hear and respond.” Myron S. Augsburger, *Matthew* (CC; Waco, TX: Word, 1982), 195.

¹⁰ D.A. Carson, *Matthew: Chapters 13 Through 28* (EBC; Grand Rapids: MI: Zondervan, 1995), 354. Jeremias holds the view that even in this distant region, Jesus moved among “the Jewish population.” Joachim Jeremias, *Jesus’ Promise to the Nations* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 35-36. Craig L. Blomberg believes that Jesus turned from those who rejected His message and ministry to those more receptive. “Jesus revealed himself as the Bread of life for Jews and Gentiles alike.” Craig L. Blomberg, “Matthew” in *Holman Bible Handbook* (ed. David S. Dockery; Nashville, TN: Holman, 1992), 554.

¹¹ Moore explains that the Pharisees were committed to separation from anything, any person, situation, food, or conduct that compromised their separation unto God, His law, and His holiness. Their efforts were not to earn salvation but to keep them in the place where God’s approval and blessings rested. George Foot Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era* (vol. 1; New York: Schocken, 1971), 59-62. Ablutions were intended to remove ceremonial defilement caused by contact with anything considered unclean. See Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 251.

¹² For further discussion on the significance of Jesus’ comments related to ritual versus moral defilement, see Carson, *Matthew 13-28*, 352.

¹³ Carson observes that their response shows that the disciples held the Pharisees in high regard. Carson, *Matthew 13-28*, 350.

¹⁴ Regarding the Pharisees, Harlow purports that “a key element of their social program was to extend the priestly regulations of ritual purity mandated in Leviticus to all Jews in all spheres of life.” Daniel C. Harlow, “Jewish Context of the NT” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 375.

¹⁵ Keener reports that Matthew believed that “a call to missions work demands that disciples first abandon ethnic and cultural prejudice.” Yet Keener believes that this stage of Jesus’ ministry “was for Israel alone.” Keener, *Matthew*, 172, 263. Jeremias points out that Judaism considered itself a missional religion. But the premise of conversion of the Gentiles to faith in the one God, YHWH, was not dependent on the sending out of emissaries, but the presence of the Jewish Diaspora. Conversion required that Gentiles become religious and cultural Jews through the confession of one God, circumcision, observing the food laws, and keeping the Sabbath. Jeremias, *Jesus’ Promise to the Nations*, 12-17. In agreement with Jeremias’ understanding of the missionary nature of Judaism, McKnight writes, “Jews were essentially uninvolved in such a thing as ‘evangelism.’” Scot McKnight, *A Light*

among the Gentiles: Jewish Missionary Activity in the Second Temple Period (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1991), 107. Also see J. Julius Scott, Jr., *Jewish Backgrounds of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995), 343.

¹⁶ Blomberg states that this label was intended to “conjure up horrors of Israel’s enemies of old.” Blomberg, “Matthew,” 555.

¹⁷ Jeremias reports, “The initiative is not taken by Jesus” who “limited his activity to Israel.” Jeremias, *Jesus’ Promise to the Nations*, 31.

¹⁸ Keener, *Matthew*, 171.

¹⁹ Jeremias says that Jesus wished to remain in concealment. Jeremias, *Jesus’ Promise to the Nations*, 32.

²⁰ Ἐλέησον is a second person singular aorist imperative indicating that her request for mercy was to Jesus alone.

²¹ Much like the leper who boldly approached Jesus for healing assured that Jesus was able to heal his disease, his only question was if Jesus was willing (Matt. 8:2-3). The Canaanite woman seemed confident of both Christ’s power and His willingness. She overstepped all normal cultural prohibitions to approach Him publicly driven by her faith in His ability and compassion.

²² Keener, *Matthew*, 170.

²³ Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 220. Bailey further notes, “Thus far in his ministry Jesus’ compassion for all was constantly on display and the disciples could not have missed it” (223).

²⁴ Jeremias says that Jesus’ attitude towards her was “one of definite refusal”; He replied, “extremely harshly”; His response was a “last revulsion.” Jeremias, *Jesus’ Promise to the Nations*, 26, 29, 32. France comments, “Jesus’ initial reluctance to respond is overcome by the faith of the suppliant which refuses to be put off and which ... draws Jesus’ admiring comment.” R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 309. Keener indicates that “Jesus simply snubs her. ... It is possible that he is testing her ... but he is certainly reluctant to grant her request and is providing an obstacle for her faith.” Keener, *Matthew*, 263. Jusu comments that “for some unexplained reason, Jesus did not respond to her request immediately.” John Jusu, *Africa Study Bible* (ed.; Chicago, IL: Oasis International, 2016), 1404.

²⁵ Bailey asserts, “Jesus chooses to give her a critical test.” Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 220. Keener, referring to the centurion, the Canaanite woman, and the rich young ruler (chapters 8, 15, 19), claims that initial rejection like this was a common ploy for demanding greater commitment. Keener, *Matthew*, 173.

²⁶ Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 221.

²⁷ While Bailey does not note any connection between this pericope and the previous one, he does observe, “Jesus was voicing, and thereby exposing, deeply held prejudices buried in the minds of his disciples.” Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 222.

²⁸ Hill asserts that this statement made by the quarrelsome, fault-finding disciples represents the Jewish Christian church who were opposed to the entry of Gentiles into the NT church. Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 254.

²⁹ As with the account of the leper, a Jewish teacher with a proper concern to maintain ritual purity would be expected to refuse to have anything to do with him. The same was assumed by the disciples for Jesus. See France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 307.

³⁰ For discussion on the nuances of the disciples’ request, see Carson, *Matthew 13-28*, 354.

³¹ Stein observes that Matthew recorded Jesus' journey outside the confines of Israel as he reached predominantly Gentile territories to demonstrate to His Gentile readers, so proving that "even during his lifetime Jesus was concerned for them. He came to bring the good news not just to the children of Abraham but to Gentiles as well." Robert H. Stein, *Jesus the Messiah: A Survey of the Life of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity 1996), 156. Wright reports, "The Gospels record that Jesus deliberately limited his itinerant ministry and that of his disciples for the most part to 'the lost sheep of Israel.' But they also show some significant engagements with Gentiles ... it is simply false to say that Jesus had no interest in the world beyond his own Jewish people." Wright, *The Mission of God*, 507. Carson states that Jesus "recognized that his own mission was to Israel" and that His target audience was all Israel who were "regarded as lost sheep." Carson, *Matthew 13-28*, 355. Hill comments, "Jesus insisted that his call was to the children of Israel." Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 253. Also see Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (rev. ed.; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 29.

³² In Luke's parallel account, Luke 9:1-6, there is no record of this restriction on the evangelistic commissioning of the Twelve. The absence of the prohibition in Luke serves to highlight the unique agenda of Matthew as he includes these limits on the early ministry of the disciples. And Matthew does note in these same instructions that there would be a time when the disciples would stand before the Gentiles to proclaim the gospel (Matt. 10:18). However, scholars like Jeremias interpret this statement meaning that "Jesus forbade his disciples during his lifetime to preach to non-Jews." Jeremias, *Jesus' Promise to the Nations*, 19-25.

³³ Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 223.

³⁴ Mark's gospel account of this encounter does not include this saying (Mark 7:24-30). The reader must assume Matthew had a specific intent, distinct from the other gospel writers, for recording Jesus' response to the disciples' request.

³⁵ Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 222.

³⁶ Guthrie notes the universalistic, missional emphasis of Matthew's gospel, "unbounded by the restricted environment out of which it emerged." See Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 30.

³⁷ Jusu comments that Matthew "shows clearly this King came not only for Jews but for everyone." Jusu, *Africa Study Bible*, 1375.

³⁸ France observes, "By recounting Jesus' response to the most feared and ostracized medical condition of his day, Matthew has thus laid an impressive foundation for this collection of stories which demonstrate both Jesus' unique healing power and his willingness to challenge the taboos of society in the interests of human compassion" France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 306. Hill states, "To touch a leper was considered a violation of the ceremonial law of uncleanness (Lev. 5:3)." Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 156.

³⁹ Hill reports that Jesus' touching of the woman was an action banned by Jewish legalism. Hill, *Gospel of Matthew*, 160.

⁴⁰ Keener maintains this view. Yet he comments, "This narrative challenges prejudice in a number of ways...Jesus is not satisfied by our treating an enemy respectfully; he demands that we actually love that enemy." And Keener also asserts that this incident endorsed the Gentile mission in advance. Keener, *Matthew*, 172, 174.

⁴¹ This perspective is held by Keener, *Matthew*, 173; Hill, *Gospel of Matthew*, 158; and France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 313. While France notes that the I (*egō*) makes Jesus' statement emphatic so that it could read, I myself will come and heal him, he interprets the statement as a question of surprise: QUOTED MATERIALS SEEM TO BE MISSING THE QUOTATIONS IN WHAT IS HIGHLIGHTED IN YELLOW. THE AUTHOR SHOULD BE CONTACTED FOR FIXING THIS PORTION OF THE SENTENCE. "You want *me* to come and heal him?" (Italics his).

⁴² Wright comments that “a Gentile believed that the compassion and healing of Jesus could reach across the divide between Jew and Gentile.” Wright, *The Mission of God*, 507. Taking a different tact, Keener explains that the centurion, in offering for Jesus to not come under his roof but rather heal his servant from afar, was the Gentile’s concession to Jesus’ mission to Israel. He recognized that for Jesus to come under his roof would contradict the Messiah’s primary purpose for His Earthly ministry. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 65.

⁴³ Keener suggests that the reference to the West would be alluding to the great power of Rome; whereas the East was the region from which the Magi had come. These “pagans” would join the Messianic banquet with “the patriarchs—the messianic banquet Israel expected for itself.” Keener, *Matthew*, 175.

⁴⁴ Keener indicates that there were Jewish people who expected salvation based on their descent from Abraham. Keener, *Matthew*, 174.

⁴⁵ See Georg Bertram, “ἔθνος, ἔθνικός” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (vol. 2; ed. by Gerhard Kittel; trans. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 364-369.

⁴⁶ Jeremias interprets the Great Commission as “the eschatological hour [that] has arrived. God no longer limits his saving grace to Israel, but turns in mercy to the whole Gentile world ... the closing passage of the Matthaean gospel indirectly establish[es] the fact that the earthly ministry of Jesus has not yet embraced the Gentiles.” Jeremias, *Jesus’ Promise to the Nations*, 39.

⁴⁷ Keener notes that the Early Church “naturally looked to accounts of Jesus’ life for examples of ministry to the Gentiles,” yet he holds the opinion that Jesus did not intentionally pursue ministry to Gentiles during His Earthly ministry. Keener’s perspective seems to be contradictory when he claims that Jesus’ ministry avoided Gentiles except on rare occasions, yet he believes that Jesus provided an example for Gentile ministry for the NT church. Keener, *Matthew*, 171.

⁴⁸ The verb form is imperfect emphasizing the continuous action of her adoration.

⁴⁹ Jeremias, *Jesus’ Promise to the Nations*, 29. Kapolyo proposes that this term of abuse was somehow conveyed to the women from Jesus with humor. Joe Kapolyo, “Matthew,” in the *Africa Bible Commentary* (ed. Tokunboh Adeyemo; Nairobi, WordAlive, 2006), 1142.

⁵⁰ Bailey reports that “dogs in the Middle Eastern traditional culture, Jewish and non-Jewish, are almost as despised as pigs.... Dogs are never pets.” Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 224.

⁵¹ Bailey claims that Jesus used this insulting term to test the woman’s grace towards haughty Jews and to discover if her resolve to see her daughter healed and her faith in Jesus’ compassion and power would enable her to “absorb the insult and press on.” Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 224. This perspective that Jesus intentionally insulted her yet expected her to show grace towards his humiliating utterance and maintain confidence in His love, compassion, and power seems contradictory to the caring nature of Jesus and thus runs counter to the attitudes within the disciples that He was attempting to transform.

⁵² Carson, *Matthew 13-28*, 355. Jeremias explains, “Jesus does not grant her request until she has recognized the divinely ordained division between God’s people and the Gentiles.” Jeremias, *Jesus’ Promise to the Nations*, 30.

⁵³ Hill reports that “dogs” was a Jewish way of referring to Gentiles. Hill, *Gospel of Matthew*, 254.

⁵⁴ Keener comments that “it is unlikely that Christians would lightly attribute to Jesus a view they no longer held” to defend his view that Jesus was resisting her request because of her Gentile ethnicity. However, if one recognizes the lesson Matthew is teaching about Jesus’ inclusiveness in the face of the disciples’ racial narrowness and

exclusiveness, Keener's comment could reflect the transformed perspective needed in the Early Church. Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 415.

⁵⁵ As E. P. Sanders notes, "The idea of a universal God of love is completely opposed to the views of Jesus' contemporaries." E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 213.

⁵⁶ For the argument that καὶ γὰρ should be translated as "and even" rather than with the adversative, "but even," (which is used in the NIV), see Carson, *Matthew 13-28*, 356 n 27.

⁵⁷ The idea of Jesus miraculously providing an abundance of food for all those present while encircled by incredulous disciples is found on both sides of this pericope: Jesus' feeding of the 5,000 men plus their families (Matt. 14:19-21); Jesus' feeding of the 4,000 (Matt. 15:36).

⁵⁸ This view is advocated by Hill, *Gospel of Matthew*, 254; and Jeremias, *Jesus' Promise to the Nations*, 29-30. Keener adds, "He is surely summoning her to recognize Israel's priority in the divine plan." Keener, *Matthew*, 264.

⁵⁹ Manson advanced the idea that Jesus came to create a new community of faith rather than promulgate the religious ideals of Jews, a group of believers "set free from chauvinistic nationalism, from the ambition to impose Israelite ideals of faith and conduct on the rest of the world...men and women who learned in apprenticeship to Jesus how to accept the rule of God." T. W. Manson, *Jesus and the Non-Jews* (London: Athlone Press, 1955), 18. Similar concerns are found in Paul's epistle to the Roman church. Paul addresses Jewish arrogance in Romans 2:17-24 and Gentile superiority in Romans 11:18-20, 25-26; 12:3, 16. However, for a perspective that Matthew is certainly unPauline, see Benjamin L. White, "The Eschatological Conversion of 'All the Nations' in Matthew 28:19-20: (Mis)reading Matthew through Paul" *JSNT* 36 (2014): 353-382.

⁶⁰ While Paul affirms that God established His covenant with Abraham and the people of Israel, and that Jesus came to Israel as a Jewish person to be their Messiah and fulfill God's promises to the patriarchs and prophets—the promise that He would bless them with His unchanging love, His persistent offer of salvation, and His continuous plan to use them as instruments to bring salvation to all humankind—Christ came to be the Savior of all. There is no favoritism when it comes to His blessings and judgment (Romans 2:9, 11). Throughout Christ's life, He fulfilled his mission to be the Savior of the world (John 4:4, 42; consider the implications of Jesus' first public message; Luke 4:24-30). Matthew showed how difficult it was for Jesus' Jewish disciples and Jewish Christians in the Early Church to grasp the fact that their descendancy provided no guarantee of salvation. Anyone who came to Christ with faith in His Lordship and saving purposes, whether it was during His earthly ministry, after the resurrection, or following the Day of Pentecost, experienced His welcome into His Kingdom.

⁶¹ My translation.

⁶² Daniel B. Wallace comments, "Here the presence of the particle ὃ is used in contexts where deep emotion is to be found." Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar: Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 68.

⁶³ Blaine Charette, *Restoring Presence: The Spirit in Matthew's Gospel* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 67.

⁶⁴ Each of the three times that she addresses Jesus, it is as "Lord" (κύριε, the vocative of κύριος).

⁶⁵ Regarding the original recipients of Matthew's Gospel and the makeup of the church, Keener proposes, "The best (though far from certain) and most common case for provenance fits some urban center in Syro-Palestine (often thought to be Antioch) where Greek was spoken, which included a sizable Jewish community residentially segregated from Gentiles—Jews who perhaps remained bitter about the recent massacres of 66-70 and remained in contact with theological issues in Judea." Keener, *Matthew*, 33. Also see Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 42-44. Guthrie views the original audience as a "mixed group" most likely in Antioch. Guthrie, *New Testament*

Introduction, 38-39. France expresses doubts about the original audience being Antioch. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 15.

⁶⁶ Keener believes that Matthew was “engaged in polemic against Jewish authorities...the successors of Pharisaism, probably the founders of what became the rabbinic movement at Jamnia and those Jewish leaders throughout Syro-Palestine who may have been aligned with them.” Keener, *Matthew*, 34. Guthrie notes a “strongly anti-Pharisaic tone to the gospel.” Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 33. Harlow claims that in the decades after 70 CE, the Pharisees attained true predominance in their influence over the Jewish society. Daniel C. Harlow, “Jewish Context of the NT,” 375.

⁶⁷ Wright comments that for the early Christians, “The importance of eating together as a sign of unity in Christ was highly visible and very significant. Such table fellowship within the [E]arly [C]hurch cut right across both the Jew-Gentile and also the social divide of economic status.” Wright, *The Mission of God*, 510.

⁶⁸ According to France, the social interaction of conservative, orthodox Jewish Christians with Gentiles of any faith persuasion, as demonstrated in Acts 10–11, shows “the repugnance felt by even a relatively open-minded Jew to such ‘defilement’; for a Jewish teacher in the public eye, it would be an even more defiant breach of taboo than even Jesus’ controversial mixing with ‘tax-collectors and sinners’ (Matt. 9:10–11).” France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 313. Yet Jesus set the example of breaking these restrictive taboos to bring the gospel to all people.

⁶⁹ Stein states, “They would learn both from him and of him. They were uniquely chosen to witness his actions and deeds and to master his teachings. Only by remaining with him would they be able to observe who Jesus was and master the gospel teachings Jesus would entrust to them.” Stein, *Jesus the Messiah*, 119