

A Feminist Companion to

Matthew

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SURPRISED BY FAITH:
JESUS AND THE CANAANITE WOMAN*

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Introduction

On first reading, Mt. 15.21-28 is a text that may gall us because of the portrait of Jesus it presents: Jesus is petitioned for help by a nameless Gentile woman and turns his back on her and her need. It is a text that challenges our preconceptions about Jesus because he does not want to help the woman. His disciples even actively seek the woman's dismissal. The Jesus in this story seems greatly removed from our conventional images of him as the gracious, all-giving healer. Moreover, in the story the Gentile woman gets the better of Jesus in an argument and he changes his mind: he heals where he had at first refused healing. This portrait of Jesus' intransigence and the impingement of the Gentile woman has been a stumbling block to many interpreters. There is a hesitancy to recognize either the mutability of Jesus or the powerful presence of the woman.¹ Both, however, are central to the text.

The story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman is a richly layered and densely textured text. This text cannot simply be read for what it seems to be saying because its substance cannot be plotted on a single line. The text must also be read to see how it is constructed as well as how it communicates. What this story says is inseparable from how it says it.² In this essay I will demonstrate the theological and pastoral benefits that can be gained from a close reading of this text. We may

find ourselves surprised by Mt. 15.21-28, just as Jesus was surprised by the Canaanite woman.

Matthew 15.21-28 is preceded by two pericopes that focus on keeping the law, and in particular, the purity laws. In Mt. 15.1-9, Jesus, the Pharisees, and the scribes debate the nature of defilement, and in Mt. 15.10-20 Jesus provides his disciples with additional teachings on the same subject. Both the debate and the teachings center on the relation between word and deed, pure and impure, and internal and external sources of defilement. Immediately after these discussions, Jesus turns away from the emissaries from Jerusalem, leaves Judea, and withdraws to Tyre and Sidon (15.21).

The geography of this sequence is more than happenstance. Jesus' rebuke of the Pharisees and scribes is intensified by his movements since he leaves the land and the people who are 'clean', to enter a land that is 'unclean'. The question of what is the source of defilement is thus put to the test by Jesus' very actions. Jesus' move from Jewish to Gentile territory seems to have been part of the tradition, since it also occurs in the Markan parallel (Mk 7.24-30). In Mark, however, Jesus journeys to Tyre (v. 24) and Sidon (v. 31) separately,³ whereas in Matthew's version, the geographical move into unclean territory is highlighted by the joint reference to Tyre and Sidon. In the prophetic literature of the Old Testament, Tyre and Sidon are more than place names; they were Israel's dangerous and threatening enemies (e.g. Isa. 23; Ezek. 26-28; Joel 3.4).⁴ The significance of the names Tyre and Sidon would not be lost on either Matthew or his readers.

Just as Matthew identifies Jesus' destination in Old Testament terms, so, too, does he identify in Old Testament terms the woman who comes out to meet him (15.22). In Mark, the woman is identified as Syro-Phoenician, a designation reflective of the nations of Jesus' own day. In Matthew, however, the woman is identified as Canaanite, the traditional biblical identification of Israel's enemy.⁵ The word 'Canaanite' occurs only here in the New Testament, and the only other uses of 'Canaan' in the New Testament occur in retrospectives of Israel's

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1. Robert Gundry (*Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982]) is an excellent example of this. In his treatment of Mt. 15.21-28 (pp. 309-17), Gundry is at great pains to emphasize Jesus' dominion, no matter how his reading distorts the details of the text.

2. For a discussion of the relationship between the 'how' and 'what' of the text, see Gail R. O'Day, *Revelation in the Fourth Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), pp. 33-48.

3. There is a minority reading of Mk 7.24 in later manuscripts that includes both Tyre and Sidon.

4. For a discussion of the symbolic value of Tyre in the Old Testament prophets, see Carol Newsom, 'A Maker of Metaphors—Ezekiel's Oracle Against Tyre', *Int* 38 (1984), pp. 151-64.

5. On the Israelite treatment of the Canaanites, see Jon Levenson, 'Is There a Counterpart in the Hebrew Bible to New Testament Antisemitism?', *JES* 22 (1985), pp. 243-60.

history (Acts 7.11, 13.19). We may thus safely judge Matthew's anachronistic use of 'Canaanie' to be an intentional narrative strategy to accentuate the distinctions between Jesus and the woman who approaches him. She is the enemy, not of his kind.

The juxtaposition of the geographic details in the opening verses of our text with the preceding narratives about defilement raises many questions about what is to follow. Will Jesus' actions in 15.21-28 match his words in 15.1-19? How will questions of clean and unclean be resolved when Tyre, Sidon, and Canaan clamor for attention? Will the Canaanite woman be welcomed as an occasion for Gentile mission (cf. Mt. 8.5-13), or rebuffed as an outsider, an enemy? The narrative context and introductory details move us forward into the text itself.

2. Identifying the Form

The form of Mt. 15.21-28 has proved problematic for form critics. At first glance, Mt. 15.21-28 seems to be a story about a healing: it opens with a request for healing and ends with the granting of the request. Yet this pericope is almost uniformly rejected by form critics as a miracle story proper.⁶ There is almost no narrative material in this pericope, as the bulk of the text is dialogue, and neither the daughter's illness nor her healing are depicted for the reader. Instead of being the focus of the story, the illness/healing seems to function only as a narrative foil to precipitate the dialogue between Jesus and the Canaanite woman. It is a story in which a healing is reported, but it is not a miracle story *per se* because the miracle is subordinated to other interests.

The story is therefore most frequently classified as a 'saying of Jesus',⁷ but Mt. 15.21-28 refuses to be contained by this form-critical category as well. In a 'saying of Jesus' story, or 'apophthegm', the focus is 'entirely confined to the saying of Jesus', and the material is not tied up to a particular place or time, or at most only accidentally so.⁸ According to both of these criteria, therefore, Mt. 15.21-28 falls outside

the conventions of form-critically identified genres. First, the focus is not confined to the saying of Jesus. A final, climactic teaching of Jesus is not the point of this story because the 'point' of the story rests in the change undergone by Jesus. The focus is not as much on what Jesus says as on what is said to him. Second, as already noted, the geography of this story is more than accidental.⁹ It is essential to what transpires that the story is set in Gentile territory, and that Jesus' interlocutor is a Canaanite woman. This text, then, refuses classification as either a miracle story or a saying of Jesus.

That this story defies conventional genre categorizations is, like its geography, more than happenstance. Traditional form critical categories work from the assumption that Jesus is the protagonist of each story being studied, and seeks to establish a taxonomy of Jesus' various functions. In our story, however, Jesus is not the protagonist; the Canaanite woman is. Traditional form critical investigation will therefore always come up empty, because it asks inappropriate questions of this text. Matthew 15.21-28 is neither miracle story nor apophthegm by design. It tells an unconventional story with an unconventional protagonist. The story, like the Canaanite woman herself, will not be pigeonholed.

The structure of Mt. 15.21-28 illuminates the relative positions of Jesus and the woman in this story. The pericope breaks down into three units:

- vv. 22-23a The Canaanite woman and Jesus
- vv. 23b-24 The disciples and Jesus
- vv. 25-28 The Canaanite woman and Jesus

In the first unit (vv. 22-23a), the Canaanite woman approaches Jesus and speaks directly to him, but he does 'not answer a word to her' (v. 23a). She has attempted conversation but her attempt is thwarted. In the second unit (vv. 23b-24), the disciples speak directly to Jesus about the woman, asking that she be sent away. This time Jesus responds, but he addresses himself to the disciples, not the woman. In the third unit (vv. 25-28), the woman approaches Jesus again and this time succeeds in engaging him in conversation.

As the outline makes clear, the story's development hinges on the Canaanite woman. In the first and third units, she initiates contact and 'conversation' with Jesus; in the middle unit she is the goad that prompts the disciples to speak to Jesus. She is indeed the protagonist.

9. Bultmann, *History*, p. 64, considers precise indications of place to be secondary additions to the tradition.

6. So Rudolf Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition* (trans. J. Marsh; New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 209, and Heinz Joachim Held, 'The Retelling of Miracle Stories by Matthew', in G. Bornkamm, G. Barth and H.J. Held (eds.), *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), pp. 165-211 (197).

7. Bultmann, *History*, p. 209; Martin Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965), p. 261.

8. Bultmann, *History*, pp. 62-64.

The opening words of each unit of the text also focus attention on the woman. Each unit begins with an imperative: have mercy on me, send her away, help me. The Canaanite woman's petitions are ostensibly for herself ('have mercy on me', 'help me'), although her real goal is the restoration of her daughter's health. The ostensible object of the disciples' petition is also the woman ('send her away'), although their real aim is their own relief. The disciples are the woman's unwitting allies, because their words about her dismissal actually function to keep her in view. The woman impinges on Jesus from all sides and does not hesitate to make her presence felt and demand known.

Jesus, by contrast, initiates nothing in this story. In fact, in the first and second units, his role is strictly that of refusal. Of the three petitions made of Jesus, the first two are not sanctioned by him.¹⁰ To the first petition, Jesus turns a deaf ear. To the second petition, Jesus responds with a rebuttal concerning his mission's purpose, but does not grant the disciples' request. It is only the third petition, the woman's restatement of her need, that is finally sanctioned. After an involved dialogue in which the woman continues to press her case, the woman's imperative of petition is matched by an imperative of response, 'let it be done to you as you wish' (v. 28). Jesus concedes and grants the woman's wish.

Matthew 15.21-28 is from beginning to end the story of the Canaanite woman. She initiates the movement of the story with her first petition, refuses to be silenced or ignored, and in the end goes away victorious, having been answered and heard by Jesus. She is insistent, demanding, and unafraid to state her claims. She is the lifeblood of this story. Any attempt to classify this text by placing Jesus at its center will ultimately be inadequate. We must instead look to the Canaanite woman's daring insistence as the key to the distinctive shape and form of this text.

3. *Matthew 15.21-28 and the Lament Psalm*

When we listen carefully to the woman's daring words, we hear echoes of words that have been spoken from the beginning of Israel's life of

10. The notion of 'sanctioning' a need is a key element of the narrative schema formulated by Greimas (A.) Greimas and J. Cortes, *Semantics and Language* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982]. Hendrikus Boers (Neither on *This Mountain nor in Jerusalem* [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988]) analyzes the story of the Samaritan woman in Jn 4 from the perspective of the semiotic schema of sanctioning. A thorough semiotic analysis of Mt. 15.21-28 according to the sanctioning of needs would contribute to our understanding of this text.

faith. Commentators on Mt. 15.21-28 frequently note the resemblance between the woman's words of petition and the cries for salvation and deliverance in Israel's lament psalms.¹¹ In the woman's cry for pity (mercy) (v. 22) one can hear echoes of Ps. 86.16, 'Turn to me and take pity on me'. In her cry for help (v. 25), one can hear echoes of Ps. 109.26, 'Help me, O Lord my God'. The connection between Mt. 15.21-28 and Israel's lament psalms goes deeper than verbal echoes in the woman's petitions, however, and has not been adequately probed by interpreters. The very boldness of the woman's stance before Jesus has its roots in Israel's bold stance before God in the laments. The form which helps readers understand Mt. 15.21-28 is neither miracle story nor apophthegm, but the psalm of lament. Matthew 15.21-28 is a *narrative embodiment of a lament psalm*. To demonstrate this thesis, I will first review the characteristics of the lament psalm and then assess the Matthean text in the light of those characteristics.

The majority of the prayers and songs in the Psalter are laments—individual and communal prayers of desperate longing, heart wrenching brokenness, pained injustice.¹² The laments confront God with startling candor, placing full-bodied pleas and petitions for help and deliverance boldly before God. Israel was not afraid to make its needs known to God and to assert that those needs and injustices, those complaints and fears, were God's business. These candid psalms of lament had a regular home in Israel's liturgy.¹³ Israel knew that its worship, as with all its life with God, had to allow for the honest articulation of pain, fear, and need; these human experiences had to be handed over to God in disciplined, liberated speech in order for transformation to become a reality.

The lament psalms are characterized by a clearly recognizable form. They contain two major sections: an opening section of *plea* that gives

11. E.g. Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Matthew* (trans. D.E. Green, Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1975), p. 330, and Gundry, *Matthew*, p. 314.

12. For studies of lament psalms that address both their form and theology, see Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), and Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984).

13. The candid laments of Israel found their place in the liturgy because of Israel's powerful memory of God's salvation and deliverance. See Rainer Albertz, *Persönliche Frömmigkeit und offizielle Religion: religionsinterner Pluralismus in Israel u. Babylon* (CTM, 9, Stuttgart: Calver Verlag, 1978), Gerhard Gerstenberger, *Der bittere Mensch* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1980), and W. Brueggemann, *Israel's Praise: Doxology Against Idolatry and Ideology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988).

way to words of *praise*.¹⁴ The lament psalms thus not only contain words of lament, petition, and complaint, but also words that reflect change and transformation.

Within the first section of the lament, the words of *plea*, the following constituent elements may be found:¹⁵

- (1) Address
- (2) Complaint
- (3) Petition
- (4) Motivations
- (5) Imprecations

The petitioner addresses God directly. The complaint is not spoken at random, but to a particular, named addressee. In the complaint the petitioner tells God how bad and desperate the situation has become. The petitioner then asks that God act decisively to rectify the situation of complaint. The address, complaint, and petition form the heart of the plea. To strengthen the petitioner's claim, he or she may add motivations and/or imprecations. In the motivations, the petitioner provides God with reasons why God should act. In the imprecations, the petitioner expresses the rage and hostility (in the form of curses) the desperate situation has provoked.

Words of *praise* follow the words of plea. Scholars have long noted the 'abrupt change in mood' in the lament psalms.¹⁶ The constituent elements of the praise section include:

- (1) Assurance of being heard
- (2) Payment of vows
- (3) Doxology and praise

Psalms 13 is a succinct example of the basic lament form.¹⁷ In vv. 1 and 2 we have the address ('O Lord') and complaint ('How long...?'). In v. 3 we have the petition ('Consider and answer me'), and in v. 4 we have a double motivation ('lest...lest...'). The psalmist knows himself to be in constant pain and sorrow, threatened by enemies, absented from God's presence, standing on the verge of death. At v. 5, however, the mood of the psalm changes, and the petitioner now

14. Westermann's study of this movement from plea to praise (*Praise and Lament*) has had decisive influence on the study of psalms of lament.

15. Hermann Gunkel (*Einteilung in die Psalmen* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1933]), and Westermann (*Praise and Lament*) have done the determinative studies of the lament form.

16. This phrase comes from Gunkel, *Einteilung*, p. 243.

17. Bruggemann, *Message of the Psalms*, pp. 58-60, provides an analysis of Ps. 13.

speaks words of praise. Verses 5 and 6 contain the assurance that God has heard and responded ('God has dealt bountifully with me'), and the words of doxology ('I will sing').

By the end of Ps. 13, God's bountiful, gracious acts are as real to the psalmist as God's silence and seeming abandonment were at its beginning. What can account for the move to praise? The most widely accepted hypothesis for this move is that within the context of Israel's liturgy, the answer to the petitioner's plea has been given.¹⁸ At the moment in the liturgy when the complaint and the plea have been placed before God, the priest, the leader of the liturgy, addresses the petitioner with words of assurance. This 'salvation oracle', as the words of assurance are called, tells the petitioner that his or her plea has been heard by God, and that God's presence and help are sure. In the midst of the pain, fear, and need of the petitioner, a word of God enters to transform brokenness and to open the petitioner to new, courageous possibilities for life.

What is most astonishing about Israel's lament psalms is that the candid speaking of pain in the liturgy actually worked: the transformation of pain and the meeting of need did indeed take place. Reality does seem to change for the petitioner from the beginning of the psalm to the end. Israel boldly, often brazenly, placed its claims before God, and God listened and responded.

4. *The Lament Psalm as an Act of Faith*

We are now ready to look at Mt. 15:21-28, and in particular the Canaanite woman's words, against the backdrop of Israel's psalms of lament. The woman's words can be isolated from the larger narrative and written as follows:

Have mercy on me,
O Lord, Son of David,
My daughter is severely possessed by a demon (v. 22)
Lord, help me (v. 25)
Yes, Lord,
For even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their
masters' table (v. 27)

18. The hypothesis of the place of the answering salvation oracle in the liturgy of the psalms was most fully developed by Joachim Begrich, 'Das priesterliche Heilswort', *ZAW* 52 (1934), pp. 81-92. This study is now reprinted in Walter Zimmerli (ed.), *Gesammelte Studien zum Alten Testament* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1964), pp. 217-31. There have been some who have contested Begrich's hypothesis, most notably Edgar Conrad ('Second Isaiah and the Priestly Oracle of

It is now possible to outline the Canaanite woman's words according to the basic constitutive elements of the lament form:

Petition:	Have mercy on me
Address:	O Lord, Son of David
Complaint:	My daughter is severely possessed...
Address:	Lord
Petition:	Help me! ¹⁹
Motivation:	For even the dogs eat the crumbs...

What we discover is that the woman's words are, in essence, a short lament psalm. Matthew has shaped her words to reflect the traditional, candid speech of Jews before their God.

The woman's words of address, petition, and complaint need no additional commentary. Verse 27, which I have labeled the motivation, deserves special attention, however. After the woman renews her address and petition in v. 25, Jesus finally turns to answer her. His answer, however, is not to grant her request, but to provide a rationale for not granting it. In v. 23, he had told his disciples that his mission was only to Israel, and in v. 26 he reasserts that notion, this time in a more colloquial, proverbial idiom. Jews commonly used 'dogs' as an epithet for Gentiles, and Jesus may be quoting a maxim here.²⁰ Whatever the origin of Jesus' words, his intent is clear: he will not grant the woman's request because she is not of his people.

The Canaanite woman, however, will not be silenced by this rebuff. Her answer to Jesus is rich with irony.²¹ With a masterful use of overstatement (*vai*, i.e., yes),²² she begins by granting the truth of Jesus' maxim, but goes on to show that its truth is nonetheless irrelevant to her claim and request. Even the outsider deserves minimal attention. The motivation element of the lament psalm aids our interpretation of the Canaanite woman's words here. In the motivation, the petitioner

Salvation [Reply to J. Begrich], *ZAW* 93 [1981], pp. 234-46, and *Fear Not Warrior: A Study of 'al tira' Pericopes in the Hebrew Scriptures* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985).

19. The repetition of individual elements (as with the repetition of the petition and address here) is standard in lament psalms. See, for example, the repetition of complaint (vv. 1-2, 6-8, 12-18), motivation (vv. 3-5, 9-10), and petition (vv. 11, 19-21) in Ps. 22.

20. On this verse as a maxim, see J.D.M. Derrett, 'Law in the New Testament: The Syrophenician Woman and the Centurion of Capernaum', *NovT* 15 (1973), pp. 162-73.

21. For a discussion of irony and biblical narrative, see O'Day, *Revelation in the Fourth Gospel*.

22. The Greek particle *vai* is used for emphatic repetition (BDP §441). The emphatic is a possible signal to ironic overstatement.

attempts to provide God with reasons to act. The motivations given may range from threat of the petitioner's death to an appeal to God's own power and reputation. The motivation is in many respects a form of bargaining, or even intimidating, as the petitioner works to force God's hand (e.g. Ps. 88.11).²³ That is precisely the function of the Canaanite woman's words in v. 27. The woman contends that even if Jesus' words in v. 26 are true, acts of dignity and charity are still by no means excluded. Even dogs eat crumbs from the table, so who are you to deny me?, she asserts. Is Jesus not gracious enough to provide crumbs? She provides Jesus with a motivation to act that appeals to his sense of vocation.

The woman's motivation holds sway, as the motivation also does in the lament psalms, and Jesus responds. Jesus' words in v. 28 function as a salvation oracle, and complete the embodiment of the lament psalm in this story. Verse 28 contains the words that turn the situation from despair to hope, from plea to praise. In response to the woman's unrelenting insistence, Jesus says, 'O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire'. Jesus' words give voice to what the woman's words have already demonstrated: her faith. Israel's placing of needs and hurts before God was an act of faith in God's presence and ability to respond. The Canaanite woman's act of placing her need before Jesus was also an act of faith. Even when circumstances seemed to indicate the opposite, when Jesus and his disciples seemed resolutely determined not to listen, the woman persevered in her faith that she would be heard.

In Mt. 15.21-28, then, we see the narrative enactment of a lament psalm. The woman's words provide the words of plea, Jesus' final response provides the move from plea to praise, and in the aftermath of the story, the daughter's healing, we find the occasion for praise itself. This text is neither miracle story nor a saying of Jesus, but a story about robust faith that will not die, despite all odds against it. The vehicle Matthew uses to tell this story of faith is Israel's lament psalm, the quintessential form of robust faith found in Scripture.

5. *Surprised by Faith*

In Israel's lament psalms, Israel demands that God should be as God has promised to be. God has made promises of life, not death; hope, not despair; wholeness, not brokenness. Israel will not let God forget

23. For a discussion of the function of motivations in the lament psalms, see Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms*, p. 55.

these promises. When the circumstances of life seem to void them, Israel does not run away from God, defeated, but instead confronts God directly. Israel will not let go of God's promises, or let God 'off the hook', because its insistent faith in God's promises is the key to new life. The experience of life may seem to indicate the end of the promises, but Israel will not settle for that. Rather, Israel will remind God in bold petitions about a fresh and hopeful future.

The Canaanite woman in Mt. 15.21-28 is infused with this same spirit of defiant resistance to despair, and bold faith in God's promises. The odds are incontrovertibly against her: she is an outsider, her daughter is demon-possessed; no one will listen to her. Yet she perseveres, holding Jesus to whom he is, and to what he has promised: God's saving presence.

What a rich irony this text presents, then, in this woman whom Matthew has identified as a Canaanite! This woman, who shows herself to be full heir of Israel's tradition of lament, is not Jewish at all, but Canaanite. She is not of the chosen people, yet she clings resolutely to their promise. This Canaanite woman is more faithful, indeed, more authentically Jewish, than many of the Jews whom Jesus encounters. She is a fuller embodiment of Jewish traditions than Jesus' own disciples, who want to dismiss her because she is a foreigner and an irritant. The Canaanite woman stands fully in the tradition of Abraham and Moses who were not afraid to bargain with God (Gen. 18.22-33; Num. 11.11-15); she is profoundly linked with all the broken and needy petitioners who sang Israel's songs of lament, with all those in Israel who cling to the faithfulness of the promise. She is not a Jew; she is, nevertheless, fully Jewish.

Matthew's use of the form of the lament psalm to shape this text ensures that the pointedness of the irony of the Canaanite woman's story will not be missed by his readers. Her expression of faith places her within the promise. Matthew holds up as model of faith not simply a woman and Gentile, but a despised Canaanite. And the faith she embodies is not a faith of submission,²⁴ but of robust boldness and

24. There seems to be a resistance in scholarship on this text to credit the Canaanite woman with much more than submission to Jesus. For example, Held, 'The Retelling of Miracle Stories', p. 200, quotes admiringly A. Schlatter's description of the woman's 'complete submission' to Jesus. Similarly, Gundry, *Matthew*, emphasizes the woman's acquiescence to what Jesus says. Such a view of the Canaanite woman, however, is more determined by preconceptions about the relative positions of Jesus and the woman than by the details of the text itself. This woman does not quietly submit to Jesus, but takes him on directly. Her faith moves beyond stereotypes of female passivity.

vigor. As a model of faith, Matthew has chosen someone from the margin: a Canaanite woman who lives at the boundaries (ἀπὸ τοῦ ὁρίου, v. 22). It is the marginal one, the one who would be reckoned 'unclean', who pushes Jesus to new possibilities. The disciples, scions of Israel, do not want to open up to new possibilities, but rather foreclose them. Dismissal of the Canaanite woman would keep things the way they have always been. The woman from the margin, however, will not settle for this. She lives a faith filled with new possibilities and hope for a vibrant future.

Jesus was changed by this woman's boldness. Just as God is impinged upon by Israel's pleas, so is Jesus impinged upon here. The Canaanite woman knows who Jesus is and holds him to it; she will not settle for a diminishment of the promise. She insists that Jesus be Jesus, and through her insistence she frees him to be fully who he is. Two dominant themes of Mt. 15.21-28 are healing (vv. 22, 27) and feeding (vv. 26-27). Jesus resists doing either. Immediately after his exchange with the Canaanite woman, however, Jesus moves on to heal (vv. 29-31) and feed (vv. 32-39) multitudes. Once again, we may regard this configuration of texts as more than happenstance. The woman's faith in Jesus reminds him of the fullness and vitality of the promise, and he moves forward to fulfill that promise.

Matthew 15.21-28 is a powerful story about the surprise of the gospel. Using the idiom of Israel's lament, Matthew narrates a story that shows the power and possibility inherent in boldly insisting that God be faithful to God's promises. In the voice of this marginal woman who would not be silenced even when no one seemed to listen, we hear the resilience of faith. The Canaanite woman's faith insisted on the fulfillment of the gospel promise, and Matthew asks that we, like Jesus himself, listen to her and be transformed through a faith like hers: persistent, vigorous, and confident in God's faithfulness to God's promises.