

Queer Studies and Religion

Welcoming the “Whelps”:
A Queer-Allied Reading of Matthew 15:21-28

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Abstract: This paper discusses a queer-allied reading of Matthew 15:21-28, the story of the Canaanite woman. It will take seriously reader subjectivity and experience, interpreting the pericope through the lens of a religious ally to queer persons. First, I review and translate the story itself. Second, I explain my social location and personal interest in the pericope. Third, I give an explanation of queer theory, as well as a proposed definition for “queer-allied” theology. Fourth, I summarize traditional and ideological/standpoint interpretations of the passage. In conclusion, I offer a careful reading of the passage as a queer-ally.

Keywords: Matthew 15:21-28, Jesus and the Canaanite woman, queer theology, welcoming, ally

Introduction

Matthew 15:21-28 and its corollary text Mark 7:24-30 take place within a historical context of great turmoil and tragedy for the Jewish people.¹ During Jesus’s time, Pax Romana was in effect, wherein the Roman Empire suppressed any speech or deed that could disrupt that peace, in particular calls for greater autonomy or independence from the empire. At the time that the author of Matthew would have been writing his Gospel, the Pax Romana would have become increasingly violent toward those in the Palestinian region because of the Jewish-Roman War in the late 60’s C.E. that ended in the destruction of the Jewish Temple. Early readers of

¹ Though this pericope appears in both Matthew’s and Mark’s Gospel, this paper will focus on the version presented by the author of Matthew.

Matthew's Gospel would have been well-aware of both their own and Jesus's cultural contexts.²

This pericope in Matthew 15 begins with Jesus and his disciples traveling into the region of Tyre and Sidon, a borderland between the Jewish people of Palestine and non-Jews to the north.³ Jesus had just left an argument with other Jewish leaders regarding purity laws and “what defiles” a person (Matt. 15:1-20). While out in public, Jesus and his disciples are approached by a Canaanite woman begging for their assistance. She breaks cultural rules of feminine propriety and submissiveness by approaching their group of (presumably) all men by herself.⁴ Presented here are the Nestle-Aland Greek text and my own translation of Matthew 15:21-28:⁵

21 Καὶ ἐξελθὼν ἐκεῖθεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἀνεχώρησεν εἰς τὰ μέρη Τύρου καὶ Σιδῶνος. 22 καὶ ἰδοὺ γυνὴ Χαναναία ἀπὸ τῶν ὀρίων ἐκείνων ἐξελθοῦσα ἔκραζεν λέγουσα, Ἐλέησόν με, κύριε, υἱὸς Δαυὶδ: ἡ θυγάτηρ μου κακῶς δαιμονίζεται. 23 ὁ δὲ οὐκ ἀπεκρίθη αὐτῇ λόγον. καὶ προσελθόντες οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ ἠρώτουν αὐτὸν λέγοντες, Ἀπόλυσον αὐτήν, ὅτι κράζει ὀπισθεν ἡμῶν. 24 ὁ δὲ ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν, Οὐκ ἀπεστάλην εἰ μὴ εἰς τὰ πρόβατα τὰ ἀπολωλότα οἴκου Ἰσραὴλ. 25 ἡ δὲ ἐλθοῦσα προσεκύνει αὐτῷ λέγουσα, Κύριε, βοήθει μοι. 26 ὁ δὲ ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν, Οὐκ ἔστιν καλὸν λαβεῖν τὸν ἄρτον τῶν τέκνων καὶ βαλεῖν τοῖς κυναρίοις. 27 ἡ δὲ εἶπεν, Ναί, κύριε, καὶ γὰρ τὰ κυνάρια ἐσθίει ἀπὸ τῶν ψιχίων τῶν πιπτόντων ἀπὸ τῆς τραπέζης τῶν κυρίων αὐτῶν. 28 τότε ἀποκριθεὶς ὁ Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν αὐτῇ, ὦ γύναι, μεγάλη σου ἡ πίστις: γεννηθήτω σοι ὡς θέλεις. καὶ ἰάθη ἡ θυγάτηρ αὐτῆς ἀπὸ τῆς ὥρας ἐκείνης.

² Thomas Bohache, “Matthew,” in *The Queer Bible Commentary*, ed. Deryn Guest et al. (London: SCM Press, 2006), 489-492

³ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8-20: A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch, ed. Helmut Koester (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 338-339

⁴ Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *But She Said* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 103

⁵ The Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graece lists minor textual variants in these verses, but none are particularly significant neither in regard to their sources nor in how they effect an English translation. All biblical quotations from Matthew 15:21-28 are from my translation; other biblical quotations come from the New International Version (2011).

21 And leaving from there, Jesus withdrew into the parts of Tyre and Sidon. 22 And behold a Canaanite woman from that border was coming and crying out loud, saying, "Have mercy on me, Lord, son of David. My daughter is badly possessed by a demon." 23 But he did not answer her a word. And coming near, his disciples were asking him, saying, "Dismiss her, for she cries out loud after us." 24 And the one answering said, "I was only sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." 25 But the one coming prostrated herself before him saying, "Lord, help me." 26 And the one answering said, "It is not good to take the children's bread and to throw [it] to the whelps." 27 But she said, "True, Lord, for even the whelps eat from the falling crumbs from the table of their lords." 28 Then answering, Jesus said to her, "O woman, your faith is great. Let it happen to you as you will." And her daughter was healed from that time.

In some ways, this pericope follows the basic formula of miraculous healing stories: Jesus is out in public, someone "impure" but faithful comes to him for assistance, and he heals that person or the person's loved one.⁶ If Jesus had simply granted the Canaanite woman's initial request, this passage would not be so remarkable. The extraordinary amount of scriptural interpretation of this text comes from Jesus's unusually harsh reaction to the Canaanite woman. Jesus's response is especially strange in the context of Pax Romana, wherein both Jesus's Jewish region and the woman's Canaanite region were colonized and suppressed by the Roman Empire. As Thomas Bohache writes, "This struggle takes on the character of what sociologists call 'horizontal violence,' when, under the control of an oppressive power, marginalized groups turn on each other."⁷ This passage is also unique in the Canaanite woman's retort to Jesus's pitiless response. Unlike the Matthaen formula for controversy stories, Jesus does not best this person he argues with. Instead, the Canaanite woman has "the last word," beating Jesus with the same

⁶ "Healing," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 299-306

⁷ Bohache, "Matthew," 490

sort of wit he himself often used successfully in debates against the scribes and Pharisees.⁸

Jesus's cruelty and the Canaanite woman's perseverance make this a popular text in both traditional biblical scholarship as well as post-modern, ideological hermeneutics. Post-colonial and feminist scholars have used this text to discuss the oppression that colonized persons and women face from the church and society at large. The story of the Canaanite woman is also studied in the newer field of queer New Testament scholarship. I explore Matthew 15:21-28 from a slightly different lens, which I have deemed "queer-allied." In the next section of this article, I describe my own social location and interest in this pericope, following the practice of other ideological/standpoint scholars. Then, I define "queer," "queer theory," and the proposed "queer-allied" theological stance. Next, I summarize traditional and ideological/standpoint interpretations of the passage, as both have influenced queer scholarship on Matthew 15:21-28. Lastly, I give a line-by-line interpretation of the passage as a queer-allied reader.

Author's Social Location

I am a Euro-American Unitarian Universalist candidate for ministry in the United States. I have worked for many years as a heterosexual ally to the queer rights movement. Until my entrance into seminary, my involvement in the queer rights movement was ostensibly secular. Now that I am pursuing a call to ordination, I am reframing my motivation to work for equality for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and queer (GLBTQ) persons in theological terms.

⁸ Schussler Fiorenza, *But She Said*, 11-12

As a queer ally, I am interested in Matthew 15:21-28 because in Jesus's and his disciples' treatment of the Canaanite woman, I recognize "the Church's" treatment of queer persons. Some faith communities are more overt than others in their rejection of queer persons. Some queer persons are thrown out of churches because the congregation's leadership and membership tell them that they are "sinners" and not children of God. Other queer persons are told that their faith community "isn't ready" to change its prejudicial theology and open its doors to non-heterosexual people. Still more queer persons are turned away because their needs are ignored and unrecognized due to the heteronormative (and heterosexist) American culture that has seeped through the church's walls.⁹ As Bohache writes:

Just as Matthew's audience would have received the words of the Gospel amid the memory of slavery, occupation, exile, oppressive taxation and government-approved murder, so too today's queer reader comes to this Gospel mindful of the queer history of church- and government-sponsored burnings, false imprisonment, executions, fag-bashing and lesbian-baiting; as well as prejudice and exclusion at all levels of society, unequal treatment under the law despite equal taxation, and daily mental colonial occupation at the hands of a heterosexist society.¹⁰

I am angry at Jesus and his disciples for their mistreatment of the Canaanite woman in need—regardless of the fact that, in the end, her request is fulfilled. Their initial abusive words and actions toward the disadvantaged woman are inexcusable. In the context of queer theology, this pericope shows Jesus and his disciples perpetuating bigotry.

⁹ Such treatment of queer believers by heterosexual/heterosexist churches is also described in: Justin Tanis, "Eating the Crumbs That Fall from the Table: Trusting the Abundance of God" in *Take Back The Word: a queer reading of the Bible*, ed. Robert E. Goss and Mona West (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2000), 43-56.

¹⁰ Bohache, "Matthew," 490

When I read Matthew 15:21-28, I want to see myself as the Canaanite woman who argues on behalf of her daughter—perhaps a young lesbian woman—who battles the demons of oppression and rejection from the surrounding homophobic culture. I want to be the one who begs Jesus for mercy despite the societal expectations to keep silent and not “rock the boat.”

However, I cannot assume the position of the Canaanite woman. Because I am myself heterosexual and am considered a leader in my church community, I cannot identify with the Canaanite woman’s “outsider” status. In evaluating this passage, I realize with sadness that if I am anyone in this passage, I am Jesus and his disciples. I am in the “in-group” of heterosexuals and accepted church members. Throughout his essay for a collection of feminist New Testament scholarship, Euro-American male Daniel Patte acknowledges his place of privilege and how he recognizes himself and his errors in Jesus and disciples of Matthew 15:21-28.¹¹ Taking my cue from Patte, I explore this Matthaen pericope through the lens of a queer-allied person hoping to learn from (and thus not repeat) the mistakes of Jesus and his disciples.

Queer, Queer Theory, and Queer-Allied Theology

In recent years, the term “queer” has become an umbrella term for all non-heterosexual sexual orientations. Queer persons express their gender and/or their sexuality in ways that do not fit into the rigid categories created by sexual

¹¹ Daniel Patte, “The Canaanite Woman and Jesus: Surprising Models of Discipleship (Matt. 15:21-28),” in *Transformative Encounters: Jesus and Women Re-viewed*, ed. Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger, Biblical Interpretation Series 43 (Boston: Brill, 1999), 33-53

heteronormativity and by assumptions that biological sex denotes gender.¹² Being queer, as much as being heterosexual, is defined by physical actions, emotional connections, and self-identification. Lilly Nortje-Meyer writes that “true” queerness “refers not only to the sexual act, but also to a way of thinking, feeling and behaviour as an expression of love.”¹³ Some definitions also include queer allies as “queer,” because queer allies also fight against the “hegemony of the heterosexual majority .”¹⁴

Queer theory is an ideological position that speaks from and for queer persons living in the global heteronormative society. Just as being queer means one does not fit into rigid sexual and gendered categories, queer theory seeks to liberate silenced voices from pervasive oppressive systems of heterosexism.¹⁵ For theological interpretation, queer theology borrows from feminist theology in employing a “hermeneutics of suspicion” when reading biblical texts and commentaries. Queer theology assumes that traditional biblical scholarship, tainted by its homophobic and androcentric interpreters, has ignored the expressions and traces of oppressed voices.¹⁶ As Paula Gooder writes, “traditional” biblical scholarship has an ideology/standpoint of its own: Western/white, masculine, heterosexual, and powerful. Post-modern biblical scholarship, including feminist and post-colonial, seeks to disrupt these biblical interpretations and expand them to

¹² Annamarie Jagose. *Queer Theory* (Victoria, Australia: Melbourne University Press, 1996) 3, 93

¹³ Lilly Nortje-Meyer, “The Homosexual Body Without Apology: A Positive Link Between the Canaanite Woman in Matthew 15:21-28 and Homosexual Interpretation of Biblical Texts,” *Religion & Theology* 9.1&2 (2002): 118

¹⁴ Bohache, “Matthew,” 492

¹⁵ Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 40-41

¹⁶ Bohache, “Matthew,” 488

include the voices of disempowered persons.¹⁷ Queer theology in particular “seeks to reverse the damage that other [biblical] interpretations have done to GLBT people” and open the Bible and Christianity to queer people in a healthy and life-giving way.¹⁸

In this paper, I attempt a new mode of biblical interpretation, which I call queer-allied theology. A queer ally is a person who is within the heterosexual majority, and thus cannot claim to have same standpoint in biblical interpretation as queer persons do. Though actively aligned with queer persons’ fight for equality and liberation, a queer ally is still privileged in the global heteronormative society. Queer-allied theology understands that the loving God who is exhibited in the teachings of Jesus hates the homophobia and intolerance of contemporary society. Therefore, instead of a queer theological reading of the Canaanite woman’s story, I will present a queer-allied reading of the pericope. I seek to acknowledge elements in the pericope that are heteronormative and androcentric, and open myself to learning how, as a queer ally, I can reform or break heterosexist structures in modern society that are reflected in the interaction between Jesus and the Canaanite woman.

History of Interpretation of the Text

¹⁷ Paula Gooder, “Introduction: From Text to Reader,” in *Searching for Meaning: An introduction to interpreting the New Testament*, ed. Paula Gooder (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2008), 108. And, Lilly Nortje-Meyer, “Gentile Female Characters in Matthew’s Story: An Illustration of Righteousness,” in *Transformative Encounters: Jesus and Women Re-viewed*, ed. Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger, Biblical Interpretation Series 43 (Boston: Brill, 1999), 73.

¹⁸ Teresa J. Hornsby, “Queer criticism,” in *Searching for Meaning: An introduction to interpreting the New Testament*, ed. Paula Gooder (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2008), 146. Tanis in “Eating the Crumbs” also writes, “What I long for is for the church to recognize my difference without trying to change me into a neat category of male or female, gay or lesbian, queer or straight. At the same time I do not want to be a token, recognized only for my difference. I want to be encountered as a human being, a child of God” (51).

Two major strands of interpretation on the story of the Canaanite woman have survived from the earliest days of the Christian church to contemporary times. The salvation-history interpretation states that, allegorically, the Canaanite woman shows that the Gentiles would supersede the Jews as the children of God after Jesus's death and resurrection. There was a dominant trend within the church fathers that the Canaanite woman represented the redefined people of God. To those early Christian authors, the Canaanite woman was the "mother of believing Gentiles" because of her humility and submissiveness. Augustine wrote that the Canaanite woman exemplified humility through responding, "Yes Lord," to his refusal, and John Chrysostom favorably compared her "meek" reply to the "puffed up character of the Jews."

The second interpretative model, the parenetic-existential interpretation, states that the story shows the importance of faith as a virtue, especially as defined by humility, submission, and perseverance. During the Reformation, Martin Luther and John Calvin changed what was most virtuous about the Canaanite woman from humility to faith alone. Both of these traditional models of interpretation emphasized God's love for people of faith, regardless of their ethnic background. Ulrich Luz acknowledges that though both of these models of interpretation were used to show God's overabundant love, interpretations in both the salvation-history and parenetic-existential models were also anti-Semitic.¹⁹

¹⁹ The preceding two paragraphs come from: Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 337-338, 341. And, Schussler Fiorenza, *But She Said*, 161. And, Louise J. Lawrence, "Crumb Trails and Puppy-Dog Tales': Reading Afterlives of a Canaanite Woman," in *From the Margins 2: Women of the New Testament and their Afterlives*, ed. Christine E. Joynes and Christopher C. Rowland (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009), 263-266. And, Elaine Mary Wainwright, *Towards a Feminist Critical Reading of the Gospel according to Matthew* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1991), 118.

The Canaanite woman's ethnicity attracted a great deal of attention partly because she was considered the "mother of Gentiles," but also because of the history of the Israelites and Canaanites. The Hebrew Bible explains that the Israelites had been led out of slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land, where they would have to annihilate the native Canaanites and their culture in order to make a home of their own (e.g., Exod. 23:1-18). Jews were forbidden to have any contact whatsoever with any remaining Canaanites.²⁰ When reading that the woman in Matthew 15:21-28 is a Canaanite, many interpreters recall another Canaanite woman in Matthew's Gospel: Rahab, who is listed in Jesus's genealogy in Matthew 1:5.²¹ In the book of Joshua, the Israelites took Rahab's offer of assistance in conquering Jericho, despite the religious purity laws against Canaanites and "sexually immoral" persons. Rahab and her family were spared after the fall of Jericho, and they were incorporated into the Israelite tribe (Josh. 2:1-7; 6:17-25). Like the Israelites and Rahab, Jesus pardons the Canaanite woman's ethnicity (and thus Judaism's exclusionary ethnic claims) and accepts her into his tribe.

Another important aspect of traditional interpretation is that Jesus's cruel behavior toward the Canaanite woman, especially his calling her a "dog" or "whelp," is consistently mitigated. Traditional commentary on this pericope has attempted to "diminish the prejudicial character of the saying on the lips of Jesus" as not actually insulting or as a teachable moment for the woman and the disciples.²² From a

²⁰ Musa W. Dube Shomanah, "Divining Texts for International Relations: Matt. 15:21-28," in *Transformative Encounters: Jesus and Women Re-viewed*, ed. Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger. Biblical Interpretation Series 43 (Boston: Brill, 1999), 324. And, J. Martin C. Scott, "Matthew 15.21-28: A Test-Case for Jesus' Manners," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 63 (1996): 36.

²¹ Wainwright, *Towards a Feminist Critical Reading*, 105

²² Schussler Fiorenza, *But She Said*, 161. And, Tanis, "Eating the Crumbs," 46

supersessionist lens, some commentators have said that the Canaanite woman acknowledges that Gentiles are indeed “dirty dogs” and must renounce her cultural heritage to receive Jesus’s healing ministry.²³ Some have written that the Canaanite woman needed to be taught that she was indeed a dog, utterly dependent on Jesus and worthless because she was a mere human. Jesus’s “insult” was successful in revealing that a true believer submits herself to God’s will, as a dog submits to its master’s will.²⁴ Others have written that Jesus’s use of the diminutive form of “dog” in verse 26 was meant to soften what ordinarily was used as an ethnic slur.²⁵ There are even some who have written that Jesus was actually complimenting the woman because dogs are “most faithful of animals,” and that the comparison between dogs and children only makes sense if the dogs are beloved household pets.²⁶

However, there are many ideological/standpoint criticisms of these traditional interpretations of the Canaanite woman’s story. Feminist and post-colonial readers have deemed as “dangerous” the belief that the Canaanite woman’s “great faith” is her submission to Jesus. Such a reading of the text further marginalizes those who are already near the bottom of socio-religious hierarchies.²⁷ Qualifying the Canaanite woman as a household dog, separate but equal to the children, is just as dangerous in a globalized world of innumerable ethnicities and cultures. Feminist readers have also recognized that the insulting words and actions hurled at the Canaanite woman are not only because of her “outsider” ethnicity,

²³ Patte, “The Canaanite Woman and Jesus,” 48

²⁴ Eg., Antoine E. Nachef, STD, *Women in the Eyes of Jesus: Yesterday, Today and Forever* (Staten Island, NY: Society of St. Paul, 2004), 27. And, Patte, “The Canaanite Woman and Jesus,” 48

²⁵ Nortje-Meyer, “Gentile Female Characters in Matthew’s Story,” 70

²⁶ Nachef, *Women in the Eyes of Jesus*, 26. And, Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 340. And, Heidi Husted, “When the gospel goes to the dogs (Mark 7:24-30),” *The Christian Century* (Aug. 2000): 829

²⁷ Patte, “The Canaanite Woman and Jesus,” 52

but also because of her “outsider” sex.²⁸ They criticize traditional interpretations for overlaying patriarchal assumptions, such as feminine meekness and humility, on the Canaanite woman’s bold words. They ask, is the Canaanite woman supposed to accept her subordinate place as the “household pet” of the men? As Louise J. Lawrence writes, “They urge her, bewildered and weak though she may be, to get on her feet, first to whisper but eventually to bark back, not only at the Christ that calls her ‘dog’, but also the myriad disciples, missionaries and interpreters that stand in his wake.”²⁹

Post-colonial and feminist readers have emphasized previously ignored elements of this pericope in their interpretations. They do not excuse Jesus’s or the disciples’ deplorable behavior, and instead move the focus of the story from the men’s actions to the Canaanite woman’s actions.³⁰ They recognize that, like some of the women listed in Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus, the Canaanite woman is an outsider to Judaism who has an aggressive, not “humble,” demand to be one of the faithful.³¹ They applaud her for standing up for herself and her daughter, despite Jesus’s rude words and higher socio-religious status as a Jewish male.³² They are impressed with her success in changing Jesus’s mind and mission from one of exclusion to inclusion.³³ These scholars hope to save this pericope from patriarchy and Eurocentrism, and bring the story’s force into contemporary times.

²⁸ Lawrence, “Crumb Trails and Puppy-Dog Tales,” 270

²⁹ Lawrence, “Crumb Trails and Puppy-Dog Tales,” 275

³⁰ Wainwright, *Towards a Feminist Critical Reading*, 117. And, Tanis, “Eating the Crumbs,” 46.

³¹ I.e., Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. Wainwright, *Towards a Feminist Critical Reading*, 114. And, Nortje-Meyer, “Gentile Female Characters in Matthew’s Story,” 62

³² Schussler Fiorenza, *But She Said*, 11-12. And, Wainwright, *Towards a Feminist Critical Reading*, 241. And, Nortje-Meyer, “The Homosexual Body Without Apology,” 131

³³ Wainwright, *Towards a Feminist Critical Reading*, 116

This interpretative strategy means that Jesus was, in fact, very insulting to the Canaanite woman. For many Christians, the idea of Jesus making mistakes, especially the gross errors of racism and sexism, is theologically inconceivable. In post-modern biblical scholarship, there appear to be two ways to address this issue.³⁴ One method is to declare the especially offending line in Matthew 15:26 as inauthentic.³⁵ Another method is to recognize the humanity of Jesus coming through in his interaction with the Canaanite woman. J. Martin C. Scott asks, “Do we need rather to readjust our understanding of Jesus to accommodate the fact that, on occasions, he could be as rude and chauvinistic as any of his male counterparts?”³⁶ Through the Christian mystery of the incarnation, Jesus was both fully human and fully God.³⁷ Instead of considering Jesus as unchangeable perfection throughout his ministry, readers of the Bible can view him as transformed throughout his life, up

³⁴ One contemporary interpreter has another unique way to explain Jesus’s behavior that avoids both the flawed “traditional” interpretations and the feminist and post-colonial claim that Jesus made a mistake. Glenna S. Jackson’s *‘Have Mercy on Me’: The Story of the Canaanite Woman in Matthew 15.21-28* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002) theorizes that Jesus was following a Jewish conversion model for proselytes: a Gentile hoping to convert to Judaism had to be rejected three times before admittance, to prove his or her sincerity. Jackson’s theory helps explain Jesus’s behavior, but does not advance an allied read of the pericope for subaltern peoples for a couple of reasons. First, denying a person entrance into a religious community three times is also not practiced in most Christian churches, though it is still practiced in some branches of Judaism. Second, Jackson’s theory requires the Canaanite woman to revoke her “different” heritage and follow the laws and customs of Judaism; it would follow that queer persons seeking admittance into the church would have to “follow the laws and customs” of Christianity, e.g., becoming heterosexual. There is an argument to be made that heterosexuality is not a “law” of Christianity, but that is outside the purview of this article.

³⁵ Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 337-338. He is not in agreement with this method, though he acknowledges it in his commentary: “Humble submission is no longer regarded as a virtue. The saying about the children and the dogs is regarded as an ‘atrocious saying’ and the ‘worst kind of chauvinism,’ and it is inconceivable for many that Jesus could have demanded such submissiveness. Fortunately, however, the historical-critical exegesis has often relieved him of responsibility for it by declaring the logion to be inauthentic!”

³⁶ Scott, “Matthew 15.21-28,” 25.

³⁷ Peter S. Hawkins, “Dogging Jesus: Matthew 15:21-28,” *The Christian Century* (Aug. 2005): 18

until the day of his resurrection when he does, finally, achieve divine glory.³⁸ A Jesus with recognizable human faults is a better example for human readers than a Jesus with unachievable divine perfection. From Jesus in this pericope, readers learn that they too can and should learn from their errors in pursuit of divine perfection.³⁹ And, readers learn that they, like the Canaanite woman, can and should speak up for justice, even if they must rebut someone who is purportedly an agent of God.⁴⁰

For my queer-allied reading of the text, I draw insights from traditional, post-colonial, and feminist interpretations. In my interpretation, I do not excuse Jesus's and his disciples' mistreatment of the Canaanite woman, just as I cannot excuse my own culturally-imbued heteronormative outlook. This means that I also accept that Matthew 15:21-28 shows Jesus's humanity, which comes with making mistakes and having the ability to grow and learn. I take the Canaanite woman's "great faith" as her wit and perseverance for the sake of her daughter. I do not agree with traditionalists that her response "True, Lord," is a sign of submission, nor that "submissiveness" or "humility" in the face of oppression and cruelty is a marker of "great faith." Lastly, I will assume that God has overabundant love, more than enough to offer life-giving bread to all the people of the earth.

Queer-Allied Interpretation of the Text

*21 Καὶ ἐξελθὼν ἐκεῖθεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἀνεχώρησεν εἰς τὰ μέρη Τύρου καὶ Σιδῶνος.
And leaving from there, Jesus withdrew into the parts of Tyre and Sidon.*

As previously explained, at the start of this pericope, Jesus is traveling into a borderland area in northern Palestine between Jewish-inhabited and Gentile-

³⁸ Patte, "The Canaanite Woman and Jesus," 43

³⁹ Tanis, "Eating the Crumbs," 50

⁴⁰ Scott, "Matthew 15.21-28," 43

inhabited regions. The verb ἀνεχώρησεν means “withdrew,” as in from a battle, expressing how Jesus has just left a verbal battle with Pharisees and teachers of the law in the previous pericope (Matt. 15:1-20). The author of Matthew often uses this word to imply the growing hostilities between Jesus and other Jewish leaders.⁴¹ In this way, even before we meet the Canaanite woman, we see an oppressed person: Jesus himself, subject to Roman rule and an unwelcoming Jewish religious authority. In this pericope, I visualize a worn-out Jesus. Since learning of the execution of his second cousin John the Baptist, Jesus had not had an opportunity to rest from healing and teaching.⁴² As a Unitarian Universalist minister in training, I identify myself with Jesus’s and his disciples’ exhaustion from leading a small sect attempting to redefine common religious understanding.

22 καὶ ἰδοὺ γυνὴ Χαναanaία ἀπὸ τῶν ὀρίων ἐκείνων ἐξεληθοῦσα ἔκραζεν λέγουσα, Ἐλέησόν με, κύριε, υἱὸς Δαυὶδ: ἡ θυγάτηρ μου κακῶς δαιμονίζεται.

And behold a Canaanite woman from that border was coming and crying out loud, saying, “Have mercy on me, Lord, son of David. My daughter is badly possessed by a demon.”

A new marginalized person enters the scene, crying out for Jesus’s help. At first glance, Jesus and the disciples would have noticed certain “undesirable characteristics” of the crier: she was a woman, a Canaanite, and the mother of a demoniac.⁴³ The author of Matthew even highlights that she is a “γυνὴ Χαναanaία” by inserting “ἰδοὺ” before introducing her. At that time, women were not supposed to be out in public by themselves, much less allowed to speak to a man.⁴⁴ This is the

⁴¹ Wainwright, *Towards a Feminist Critical Reading*, 223

⁴² Scott, “Matthew 15:21-28,” 41. And, Luke 1: 5-25, 36.

⁴³ John P. Meier, “Matthew 15:21-28. Expository Article,” *Interpretation* 40 (Oct. 1986): 398

⁴⁴ Nortje-Meyer, “The Homosexual Body Without Apology,” 127

first time in Matthew's Gospel that a woman has directly addressed Jesus, and it may have surprised him.⁴⁵ The Canaanite woman's method of crying would be considered especially inappropriate, as the word implies a loud, croaking sound.

The word "Canaanite" has its own negative connotations, and is an important change from Mark's version of the pericope, wherein the woman is described as Syro-Phoenician (7:26). First, Canaanites were non-Jews, and were considered "unclean" from birth.⁴⁶ Second, as previously discussed, the Canaanites were the people dispossessed of their land (Palestine) and culture by the invading Israelites. Matthew's change from Mark's "Syro-Phoenician" to "Canaanite" in this pericope increases how despised this woman would be to the Jewish population. She cries to Jesus in desperation using the terminology of his Jewish culture ("son of David"), knowing that he may be the only one who can help her daughter, but also knowing that his people have oppressed her people.⁴⁷

From a queer-allied lens, I notice that the Canaanite woman is alone and seeking help for another woman. I notice that her difficult, but unchangeable, characteristics are highlighted in the narrative. For the purpose of this exegesis, I imagine that the Canaanite woman is a mother—alone because of an intolerant or absent partner—seeking help for her queer daughter. Queer women experience

⁴⁵ Wainwright, *Towards a Feminist Critical Reading*, 226

⁴⁶ Gentile women were considered "menstruants from birth" and contaminated anyone who came in contact with them. Wainwright, *Towards a Feminist Critical Reading*, 225. And, Nachev, *Women in the Eyes of Jesus*, 26.

⁴⁷ Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 339. And, Wainwright, *Towards a Feminist Critical Reading*, 237. Also, "in Graeco-Roman world, the verb [κράζω] was used to refer to cries directed to the gods, but that these were generally felt to be unworthy of the gods," further emphasizing her desperation (Wainwright, *Towards a Feminist Critical Reading*, 108).

intersecting oppressions from sexism and heterosexism.⁴⁸ I imagine the Canaanite woman's daughter is indeed "badly demon-possessed" by these intersecting oppressions as well as the racism of Roman and Israelite colonization. Identifying myself with the disciples, I see this woman coming into a church to speak to me and my fellow ministers, begging for mercy and a safe haven for her daughter. Will we welcome the Canaanite woman's wounded daughter and the changes her needs might bring to our community, or will we turn away these weak and desperate people from our doors?

23 ὁ δὲ οὐκ ἀπεκρίθη αὐτῇ λόγον. καὶ προσελθόντες οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ ἠρώτουν αὐτὸν λέγοντες, Ἀπόλυσον αὐτήν, ὅτι κράζει ὄπισθεν ἡμῶν.

But he did not answer her a word. And coming near, his disciples were asking him, saying, "Dismiss her, for she cries out loud after us."

Jesus and the disciples choose to turn away the Canaanite woman. From a queer-allied perspective, their reaction is unacceptable but not surprising. As Justin Tanis writes, "It never occurred to me [as a transgendered male] that God would not accept me, but I was very afraid that God's representatives within the church might reject me."⁴⁹ Queer people and their allies risk rejection of all kinds when they try to join a faith community. In this verse, the Canaanite woman is ignored by Jesus and perhaps overhears that the disciples want her "dismissed." There is no implication in the Greek text that Jesus simply didn't hear her; it seems he is ignoring her. I can imagine the Canaanite woman in a congregation's foyer, hands outspread as the physical embodiment of her plea, watching as the lead minister (Jesus) avoids eye contact and the assistant ministers (the disciples) whisper amongst themselves.

⁴⁸ Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 48

⁴⁹ Tanis, "Eating the Crumbs," 44

Perhaps Jesus and the disciples are, as suggested by verse 21, simply fatigued from helping so many needy people. Perhaps Jesus was waiting to see how the disciples would react to her request.⁵⁰ Or, perhaps Jesus and the disciples are in fact expressing the cultural racism and sexism of their time, making a grave error in their ministry. Whatever the reason, this verse is the beginning of many disappointing moments for a queer-allied reader. By this point in the pericope, I am already dismayed and angry at Jesus's and the disciples' reaction to the Canaanite woman's request for healing.

However, I recognize myself and other church leaders in their words and deeds. As Daniel Patte writes, "How typical of [the privileged] behavior is Jesus' contemptuous refusal to answer the Canaanite woman's plea! How typical to try to justify this silence by adding insult to injury when he awkwardly explains that 'he was sent' by God for a specific mission which excludes her!"⁵¹ As a queer-allied reader, I acknowledge that I and other queer-allies have sometimes failed through inaction in our attempts to bring equality and peace to the lives of queer persons. I find myself hoping that in the next verses, Jesus will show me a better way.

24 ὁ δὲ ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν, Οὐκ ἀπεστάλην εἰ μὴ εἰς τὰ πρόβατα τὰ ἀπολωλότα οἴκου Ἰσραήλ.

And the one answering said, "I was only sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

The exclusionary theme is continued in verse 24. An optimistic reader might hope that Jesus was answering the disciples when he said this phrase, perhaps out of earshot of the woman. Perhaps, that reader would hope, he is reviewing with

⁵⁰ Even if this were the case, Jesus would still be complicit with and responsible for allowing the woman to be dismissed, ignored, and abused.

⁵¹ Patte, "The Canaanite Woman and Jesus," 35

them disciples the boundaries of their mission, looking for a way out so that he can help the woman. But, the flow of the pericope says otherwise. If Jesus is speaking to the disciples, he is only answering their request in the affirmative: “I was only sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, so, yes, I should send her away.” Or, that optimistic reader might hope that “ὁ ἀποκριθεὶς” is not Jesus, but perhaps an anonymous disciple. However, this is unlikely when one reads verse 25 wherein the Canaanite woman prostrates herself before “him” who had answered her.

A further disappointing note in verse 24 is Jesus’s use of the word “ἀπολωλότα,” from “ἀπόλλυμι” to describe the “lost” sheep of Israel. Lilly Nortje-Meyer connects this to the disciples’ use of the verb “ἀπολύω” to ask to “dismiss” the Canaanite woman in the previous verse.⁵² There is a cruel irony in this pericope that though Jesus knows he “was sent to the lost sheep,” he colludes with the disciples’ proposal to tell the Canaanite woman to “get lost.”

If we assume that the Canaanite woman could hear Jesus’s words, she would know what he implied. She and Matthew’s readers are left with the fact that at that moment, Jesus is excluding the Canaanite woman from his healing ministry. As Justin Tanis writes:

Jesus answers, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.” He was saying, in effect, “I’m sorry, you’re not covered in our mission statement,” or “We don’t serve your kind here.” Maybe Jesus was just exercising appropriate boundaries and doing effective self-care, realizing, “Hey, we can’t help everyone”... We have heard these words spoken out of good intentions and bad, but all to the same effect: “Go away.”⁵³

⁵² Nortje-Meyer, “Gentile Female Characters in Matthew’s Story,” 69

⁵³ Tanis, “Eating the Crumbs,” 46

The fact that Jesus tells the Canaanite woman to “go away” is only worsened by the fact that he is explicitly doing so because of her family’s ethnicity and perhaps implicitly because of her gender. For my queer-allied reading, he may also implicitly be excluding her daughter because she is queer.

25 ἡ δὲ ἐλθοῦσα προσεκύνει αὐτῷ λέγουσα, Κύριε, βοήθει μοι.

But the one coming prostrated herself before him saying, “Lord, help me.”

As feminist biblical scholars have noted, the Canaanite woman does not turn and run from the discrimination and prejudice of Jesus and his disciples. It appears that whatever the cost to her dignity, she will convince Jesus, perhaps the only healer who can save her daughter from demon-possession, to do as she asks.⁵⁴ Some scholars have noted that the Canaanite woman’s cries, prostrations, and words are reminiscent of the psalmists who throw themselves on God’s mercy in times of great trial.⁵⁵ In the Hebrew Bible, there is a precedent from such great believers as Abraham and Moses that God’s mind can be changed. The Canaanite woman, recognizing Jesus’s special connection to the divine, hopes that Jesus’s mind can be changed too.⁵⁶

As a queer-allied reader, I imagine that the congregation the Canaanite woman has entered may be the most progressive in town. Perhaps the church ordains women and has relatively positive interfaith relationships, but does not yet explicitly welcome queer persons. I imagine the modern Canaanite woman visiting various religious communities in her area and choosing the one that she believes

⁵⁴ Scott, “Matthew 15.21-28,” 38

⁵⁵ Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 339. And, Meier, “Matthew 15:21–28,” 398

⁵⁶ Jackson, *Have Mercy on Me*, 111

has the most potential to transform into a space that would welcome young queer women like her daughter. She implores the lead minister for help, as the assistant ministers allow themselves to fade into the background, just as the disciples' voices stay silent as Jesus takes the lead in condemning the Canaanite woman.

26 ὁ δὲ ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν, Οὐκ ἔστιν καλὸν λαβεῖν τὸν ἄρτον τῶν τέκνων καὶ βαλεῖν τοῖς κυναρίοις.

And the one answering said, "It is not good to take the children's bread and to throw [it] to the whelps."

Lilly Nortje-Meyer accurately calls this "discrimination at its worst."⁵⁷ In traditional and post-modern scholarship, this verse commands a great deal of attention. It is here where traditional interpreters have attempted to explain away "κυναρίοις," a difficult word to translate, which is typically rendered as "dogs" though may be better rendered as "whelps" or "puppies." The reader is reminded of Jesus's words in Matthew 7:6, "Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs." Some commentators have tried to prove that calling someone a "dog" in Jesus's time did not carry the same connotations as it does in our time, but most scholars acknowledge that "dogs" was an ethnic slur used by Jewish people against their "unclean" Gentile neighbors.⁵⁸ In my reading of this passage, "κυναρίοις" emphasizes the smallness and helplessness of the daughter who Jesus refuses to heal. In contrast to the "whelps," the "children" are a clear reference to those who are in "the house of Israel," the blessed descendants of the Hebrew Bible patriarch

⁵⁷ Nortje-Meyer, "Gentile Female Characters in Matthew's Story," 67

⁵⁸ Nacheff (*Women in the Eyes of Jesus*, 26) claims Jesus is not being racist using the former logic. Aruna Gnanadason, "Jesus and the Asian woman: A post-colonial look at the Syro-Phoenician woman/Canaanite woman from an Indian Perspective," *Studies in World Christianity* 7.2 (2001): 163. And, Meier, "Matthew 15:21-28," 399. And, Patte, "The Canaanite Woman and Jesus," 42. And, Jackson, *Have Mercy on Me*, 57.

Jacob. Jesus tells the Canaanite woman not only that he won't help her daughter, but also that she is a mere animal in comparison to those to whom he will extend his mercy. For a person who has just said that "the things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart, and these defile them"—as Jesus did in Matthew 15:18—these words are not only degrading, but hypocritical.⁵⁹

The bread that Jesus claims he cannot toss the dogs is an equally damning part of this cruel phrase. In this verse, Jesus is using "bread" as a metaphor as much as "children" and "whelps" are metaphors. Jesus's bread is his good news and healing ministry. Does he really not have enough to "feed" the Canaanite woman and her ill daughter? In Matthew 14:13-21, Jesus multiplies five loaves of bread to feed a crowd of five thousand. Yet here, only a chapter later, Jesus says he cannot multiply his mercy and healing for one more person.⁶⁰ Further, in comparison to the parallel story in Mark 7, the author of Matthew has removed a crucial compassionate word. In Mark 7:27, Jesus says, "First let the children eat all they want... for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs." Matthew's version does not have "first." While in Mark's version, the Canaanite woman may have some hope for leftover mercy; in Matthew's version she does not even have that.⁶¹

Jesus's racial epithet against the Canaanite woman and her daughter is a heartless response in my queer-allied reading. Again, when I read this text, I am thinking of a mother who begs the church to become a safe space for her oppressed queer daughter. She hopes that the church, which can be a persuasive voice of social

⁵⁹ Scott, "Matthew 15.21-28," 30

⁶⁰ Wainwright, *Towards a Feminist Critical Reading*, 112. And, Scott, "Matthew 15.21-28," 40

⁶¹ Scott, "Matthew 15.21-28," 38-39

change, will stand with the oppressed and fight discrimination.⁶² When Jesus refuses to extend his mercy to the “whelps,” I see the lead minister using homophobic language in his or her harsh refusal to amend the congregation’s heterosexism. I see a minister who has become an oppressor.

27 ἡ δὲ εἶπεν, Ναί, κύριε, καὶ γὰρ τὰ κυνάρια ἐσθίει ἀπὸ τῶν ψιγίων τῶν πιπτόντων ἀπὸ τῆς τραπέζης τῶν κυρίων αὐτῶν.

But she said, “True, Lord, for even the whelps eat from the falling crumbs from the table of their lords.”

Jesus is not often bested in argument, and the Canaanite woman’s words may have taken him by surprise. Many traditional interpreters, believing that the Son of God surely could not lose an argument, read verse 27 and only see “Ναί, κύριε.” These commentators believe that the Canaanite woman has agreed with Jesus’s implication that she is worthless compared to the children of Israel and compared to him, and that she accepts a second-class citizenship even in the kingdom of God.⁶³

However, such a reading only makes sense in the context of the first two words of the woman’s response. In a full reading of verse 27, the reader sees that Canaanite woman shows Jesus superficial respect. She is willing to keep her wits and swallow the epithet of “whelps” to have her daughter healed. Even though the expected response might be for her to hurdle hateful epithets back at him, she does not allow herself to be “baited” by Jesus’s slur.⁶⁴ The Canaanite woman shows her intelligence by “humoring the great religious man to get what she wants.”⁶⁵

⁶² Nortje-Meyer, “The Homosexual Body Without Apology,” 125

⁶³ Schussler Fiorenza, *But She Said*, 162

⁶⁴ Tanis, “Eating the Crumbs,” 47

⁶⁵ Schussler Fiorenza, *But She Said*, 162

But, she only keeps her façade of humility and submission at the start of her reply. The Canaanite woman indeed keeps her wits, boldly turning Jesus's own words against him, as he often turned the Pharisees words against them.⁶⁶ Though Jesus believes there is not enough bread to feed both the people he calls children and the ones he calls whelps, the Canaanite woman knows that he is wrong. She believes that God does not discriminate, and that she can teach Jesus how God's overabundant love is greater than even he understands.⁶⁷ The Canaanite woman's superbly clever reply shows Jesus that he is being unreasonable and unmerciful, and that an agent of God ought not have such characteristics.⁶⁸

As a queer ally, I rejoice at the courage of the Canaanite woman. I imagine Jesus and his disciples thought their argument was over, and were shocked at her reply. I pray that they will recover from the embarrassment and realize that they were in the wrong for the entire dialogue. I pray that for myself and other church leaders when we are shown by brave parishioners and visitors how we have been discriminatory.

28 τότε ἀποκριθεὶς ὁ Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν αὐτῇ, ὦ γύναι, μεγάλη σου ἡ πίστις· γενηθήτω σοι ὡς θέλεις. καὶ ἴαθη ἡ θυγάτηρ αὐτῆς ἀπὸ τῆς ὥρας ἐκείνης.

Then answering, Jesus said to her, "O woman, your faith is great. Let it happen to you as you will." And her daughter was healed from that time.

Finally, Jesus behaves in the manner befitting his stature.⁶⁹ He recognizes the need and worthiness of the Canaanite woman's request, and gives her a blessing that her desire will become a reality. We breathe a collective sigh of relief after

⁶⁶ Meier, "Matthew 15:21-28," 399

⁶⁷ Tanis, "Eating the Crumbs," 47, 53

⁶⁸ Scott, "Matthew 15.21-28," 39-40

⁶⁹ Hawkins, "Dogging Jesus," 18. And, Scott, "Matthew 15.21-28," 42

getting through the prior tense verses. “Was Jesus rewarding her for her persistence, her refusal to back down? Was he simply in touch with what God had done, as she exercised her own faith by pestering him? Was he touched by the way in which she endured his abuse and then turned it around, perhaps hoping to humble him with her willingness to bear any abuse for her daughter’s sake?”⁷⁰ Jesus does not explain his change of heart. However, it is obvious that his heart was changed.

The extent of his changed heart is shown in the Greek text. He addresses the Canaanite woman in the vocative with “ὦ,” the only time in Matthew’s Gospel that Jesus shows this respect for a woman. It is also the only time that Matthew’s Jesus declares a person’s faith “great.”⁷¹ Jesus recognizes that the Canaanite woman has not only saved her daughter, but has also given him a better understanding of his own mission and ministry.⁷²

As a queer-allied reader, Jesus’s words and actions in this verse of the pericope are the most important. Queer allies see a Jesus who realizes when he is mistaken and can be transformed by those who he is supposedly wiser than. He adapts his mission and vision according to his broadening perspectives.⁷³ I imagine the modern Canaanite woman, with relief and pleasure, watching as the church’s ministers realize that her daughter is a child of God and offer to accept her into their community.

⁷⁰ Nancy Wilson. *Our Tribe: Queer Folks, God, Jesus, and the Bible* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 160

⁷¹ Wainwright, *Towards a Feminist Critical Reading*, 241-242

⁷² Scott, “Matthew 15.21-28,” 42

⁷³ Tanis, “Eating the Crumbs,” 50. And, Scott, “Matthew 15.21-28,” 41

Conclusions

This pericope has traditionally been used to show that “great faith” is resignation to Jesus’s words and will, regardless of whether his words and will are insulting and demeaning. However, feminist and post-colonial scholarship has disrupted these interpretations by emphasizing that the Canaanite woman does not accept Jesus’s refusal. Instead, she gives Jesus a clever rebuttal, reframing his derogatory statement as a reason for him to give her what she seeks.

Following in the footsteps of feminist and post-colonial interpreters, I have read this pericope through the lens of a queer ally, a heterosexual person who supports and works for socio-religious acceptance and equality of queer persons. I have acknowledged that as a queer ally and a religious leader, the people I have the most to learn from in Matthew 15:21-28 are Jesus and his disciples. A queer-allied reading of this pericope reveals that those in the privileged majority must keep themselves open to challenge and change through interaction with those outside their identity group. Daniel Patte calls the Canaanite woman “a model of discipleship, not because of her meekness or because she is transformed by Jesus, but rather because she relentlessly struggles for justice.”⁷⁴ Queer allies in religious settings have the responsibility to struggle for justice alongside queer persons, until whether any community of faith will welcome queer persons is no longer a question.

⁷⁴ Patte, “The Canaanite Woman and Jesus,” 53

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