
Do Not Disturb: Behold a Woman Whose Enemy is Her Remedy

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The gospel of Matthew begins with a genealogy that declares Jesus to be the Messiah and situates him within the Jewish tradition, as the son of David and the son of Abraham. Place is a significant consideration in this gospel. Repeated for the third time at the beginning of the second chapter, Jesus was born in Bethlehem, Judea, during the time of King Herod. By placing Jesus in a particular location at a specific time, the reader is not simply traversing through the times and places of the past but is also located specifically in Roman provincial cities and towns within the imperial world of first-century Judea. The writer consistently emphasizes place and space throughout the gospel. From Egypt to Bethlehem and from Nazareth to Capernaum to Jerusalem, the story of Jesus is a journey. Though it is easy to allow these places to fade into the background, they are significant for informing the reader about the breadth and scope of Jesus' ministry and for the faith formation of those who followed him. Faith is not built in one spot, at the base of the cross or the mouth of an empty tomb; it is also formed at the seaside of Galilee, in Bethsaida, in Caesarea Philippi, and in the districts of Tyre and Sidon.

Like location, the imperial context of the gospel is similarly important. We are introduced to Herod early and quickly find that he is portrayed as a conniving, murderous, and jealous leader. The killing of all children under the age of two is an extreme and callous action to take to eliminate one child. Furthermore, why would he even be threatened by a newborn child who is called the King of the Jews? The slaughter of the innocent and the fleeing of Jesus and his family to Egypt provide a glimpse into the implications of living under Roman imperial rule. The quaint scene of a baby born in a manger surrounded by farm animals has deceptively portrayed the birth of Jesus as serene. However, the gospel of Matthew makes clear that leaders were volatile and those subject to their power were victims of cruelty and lived with the fear of losing their very lives. An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, instructing him to flee with Mary and Jesus to Egypt. And it would take an angel to assure Joseph that it was safe to return to Judea (2:13-14; 2:19). Not only is Jesus born into this traumatic environment, but his family also flees their country, their homeland, to protect their child from a murderous king. This sociopolitical context alerts the reader to cruelties, both great and small, that are found throughout the text.

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This essay will examine one such cruelty characteristic of imperial power and its systems of oppression. Power is ubiquitous and can be wielded by anyone who has an advantage over another. As a result, power dynamics should be examined in multiple directions, not solely in terms of a king and his subjects, but also in the relationships between religious leaders and their followers, teachers and students, and parents and children. The confrontation between Jesus and the Canaanite Woman in Matthew 15:21-28 is a place where cruelty is on full display, and an interrogation of these power dynamics allows us to witness how cruelty can be confronted and challenged with truth, and as a result, perhaps transformed into mercy. This text is also a resource that offers lessons for justice-seeking and the work of liberation in the ancient world and in our contemporary context.

What does it mean to be human?

What it means to be human is more than a philosophical query, and its full exploration extends beyond the confines of this essay. This question has been examined for centuries, in efforts to determine what makes humans unique from other creatures. As Descartes posited: "I think, therefore, I am." The rapid advancement of technology has escalated this consideration to an urgent one. Intelligence alone does not distinguish humans from nonhumans, given the advancements in machine learning and artificial

intelligence that have surpassed human ability. If intellect is not what makes us uniquely human, what is? In our contemporary context this question continues to be debated.

Clear distinctions between humans and animals existed in antiquity. Aristotle's "Ladder of Nature" ranks beings based on their ability to move and reason. For instance, humans were closer to angels and thus closer to God. The great chain of being, rooted in this ancient philosophical tradition and created in medieval times, would overlay theological concepts to describe a hierarchy of life that was no longer simply natural, but divinely ordered. At the core of this ideology is not only what makes humans distinctive, but what makes humans better. These distinctions were not limited to species of beings but were extended between humans. A quick examination of personhood in the United States of America makes this clear. A nation that declared that all men are created equal, while enslaving men, women, and children, could only justify such actions by determining that African Americans were not fully human. Enslaved Americans were considered 3/5 of a person, according to Article One, Section Two of the Constitution. While it is argued that this had less to do with humanity and more to do with representation and taxation, surely one cannot distinguish between a person, their humanity, and how they are perceived legally.

Overshadowing the claim to historical presence, however, is the anthropological factor—the Negro qua human. This always lay at the heart of the fight concerning significations of the Negro or blackness: whether the Negro was human or some other type of creature.¹

The caste system in India similarly categorized people based on a social hierarchical system that put Brahmins at the top and Dalits at the bottom. Based on this system, marriage, occupation, and one's social status would be determined at birth. Though the modern Indian government had declared such a system illegal, the long-lasting effects of discrimination persist. These examples of the historical use of dehumanization shed new light on the question of what it means to be human and call into question the relationship between this query and what it means to be a free and full participant in one's society.

The struggle for the recognition of one's full humanity has persisted alongside the need to categorize humans. One way differences have been created and asserted among humans is by classifying groups of humans as subhuman or inferior. Therefore, it is not surprising that in many cultures, being called a dog is a scathing insult. It is an insult that intends to demean and dehumanize the person. Dehumanization is a key component of the imperial project. Those who are considered less than human can be treated poorly, ignored, and in some extreme cases, they become disposable, and attempts are made to eliminate them entirely. Dehumanization is a slippery slope that becomes the justifica-

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tion for cruelty, and thus any form of dehumanization must be outrightly rejected. Jesus calling the Canaanite Woman a dog, a bitch even, serves as a clarion call that even those who are working to dismantle the imperial project may find themselves entangled in it, culpable and capable of perpetuating the very ideologies one seeks to destroy. The poet Alexander Pope infamously wrote: "To err is human, to forgive is divine." If this is true, this text portrays Jesus as fully human and fully divine.

The cost of great faith

Matthew 15 begins with the Pharisees and the scribes from Jerusalem questioning Jesus about tradition. They want to know why his disciples do not wash their hands before they eat. Jesus responds that "for the sake of tradition, you make void the word of God" (15:6). Jesus responds, quoting Isaiah: "The people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines" (15:8-9). Jesus then turns to the crowd to teach them that a person is defiled by what goes out of the mouth, not what is put in it. He further explains to Peter: "But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles" (15:18). The exchange begins between Jesus and the religious rulers then shifts to a teaching between Jesus and the crowd that is following him and ends with a personal teaching between Jesus and his disciple Peter who seeks to understand what Jesus is teaching. To be sure, one should wash one's hands before eating. And yet, the moral of the teaching is that unwashed hands are far less critical than an unclean heart.

A close reading of Matthew 15:21-28 reveals power dynamics operating on multiple levels simultaneously. The story begins by placing Jesus and his disciples in the region of Tyre and Sidon. Jesus was in transition, moving from one place to another. However, it is important to note Jesus is in the Woman's territory (not the other way around). Because place is important throughout the text, we should note here that this Woman is described as crossing boundaries. She is a woman from the borders, existing here on the margins.

This Gentile Woman is geographically on the margins of Israel (Jesus' focus, 15:24) and is, as a Gentile, marginal in Israel's worldview. As a Canaanite, a member of a

1. Sylvester A. Johnson. *The Myth of Ham in Nineteenth-Century American Christianity*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 8.

cursed people destined to be subjugated as slaves (Gen 9:25), she belongs to a people dispossessed by Israel's occupation and possession of the land... Yet, though submissive, she challenges this excluding ideology.²

The Woman's ethnicity puts her at odds with Jesus' tradition. In the Hebrew Bible, the Israelites seized the land of the Canaanites, calling it their Promised Land. The Canaanites were their enemies. The animosity between these groups of people is the undercurrent of this passage.

In addition to this background, the passage contains the command "behold." Behold is used as a form of narrative attention; it tells us to notice what is about to occur. It is found over twenty times in this gospel. For example: "Behold the angel of the Lord appeared to him; Behold, a virgin shall be with child; Behold angels came and ministered to him; Behold the fowls of the air" (Matt. 1:20, 1:23, 4:11, 6:26). Here in Matthew 15:22, the writer shines a light on the Canaanite Woman alerting the readers to look at her and pay attention, signifying that that something important is about to occur: "And Behold a Canaanite woman" (*kai idou gyn Xavavaia*). She came from the borders, came out crying: "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me. My daughter is severely demon-possessed." The Woman who exists on the margins petitions Jesus for help.

Jesus' response is to ignore her. He does not respond to her cries. It seems that he does not want to be disturbed. She has addressed him honorifically, calling him Lord and Son of David. She recognizes who he is when others have not. And yet, he does not respond to her. His lack of response does not deter her. She follows Jesus and his disciples because the disciples implore Jesus to "Send her away, for she keeps crying after us" (15:23). When Jesus finally responds to her, he does so to tell her: "I was only sent to the lost sheep of Israel." Jesus' response was meant to silence the Woman and exclude her and her daughter from the benefits of his ministry, the healing that he had provided others. But this does not deter the Woman. She kneels before Jesus, again, addressing him with respect. "Lord, help me!" (15:25). The exchange between Jesus and the Canaanite Woman takes an uncharacteristic turn. Her earnest request does not result in the healing of her daughter. Instead, he replies: "It is not fair to take the children's food and toss it to the dogs." Jesus refers to this Woman as a dog. She and, by extension, her daughter do not have a right to the "food," the sustenance, the healing he has so freely offered to others. Despite being insulted, the Woman responds, seemingly unscathed: "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table" (15:27). The disciples had just learned that what comes out of the mouth reveals the condition of our hearts, so what does this exchange say about Jesus' heart? Based on all they have witnessed, why do the disciples not come to her aid? Perhaps it is her very humanity that confronts and challenges Jesus' prejudices.

She is clearly a woman on a mission; she wants her daughter

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to be healed. Ignoring and insulting her does not hinder her from diligently seeking her daughter's healing. Her response does not reveal her desperation as much as it suggests that Jesus does not want to help her. Jesus' certainty of purpose is matched by her determination for her daughter's healing. If Jesus views her as an enemy, her desire for her daughter's healing supersedes her conceding defeat. She chooses to view Jesus as her daughter's remedy.

The Canaanite Woman is willing to disturb the peace if it would result in changing her daughter's circumstances. There is something in her response to Jesus that disturbs his peace, that interrupts tradition, that changes insults into intention and transmutes cruelty into mercy. Her willingness to accept the bare minimum if that would result in her daughter's healing has resulted in her being remembered as resilient, a representative of Jesus' mission being extended to the Gentiles. However, the Gospel has already demonstrated this expansion of Jesus' ministry in 8:10 when the centurion's servant is healed from a distance. The centurion's faith is also described as great faith. Jesus says, "In no one in Israel have I found such great faith." Similarly, this story ends with Jesus declaring: "'Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.' And her daughter was healed from that very hour." Contrary to these Gentiles, Peter and the disciples are described as having little faith (14:31), and later they are taught that a little faith, the faith of a mustard seed, would allow them to say to the mountain, move and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for them (17:20). What is Jesus demonstrating for his disciples when he refuses to acknowledge this Woman? Sometimes the lessons that teachers provide for their students are what they should not do. What does her great faith cost her? What has she endured to ensure her daughter's healing? Though the costs may not be easily discerned, her story affirms that great faith can transcend boundaries.

Concluding observations: What will we do for love?

Jesus' response to the Canaanite Woman demonstrates how one can be implicated in interlocking systems of oppression. When reading this passage, we cannot simply dismiss the cruelty and vio-

2. Warren Carter. *Matthew and the Margins: A Socio-Political and Religious Reading* (New York: T&T Clark, 2000), 321.

lence witnessed; to do so is an indication of or reflection of our entanglement with systems of power. The necessity for interrogating power becomes clear. Just as Herod wielded power over the people of Israel, Jesus has power over the centurion and the Canaanite Woman. His ability to heal, initially withheld from her daughter, places him in a position of privilege. Religious, economic, political, and ethnic barriers can seem insurmountable, distances too far, and differences too vast. However, the Canaanite Woman is not seeking her own healing. She comes to Jesus on behalf of her daughter. It is her agency that results in her daughter's healing. Mothering is to seek the well-being of another, even if you have to endure insult or injury to do so. Mothering is a willingness to put oneself in harm's way for the benefit of another, to allow love to compel us to act courageously.

Desperate for her child, this mother does not relent in the face of power. Her daughter's healing is the result of her agency. Her courageous confrontation serves as an example of how we, too, must persist in the face of injustice. This mother did not walk away when she was ignored; she took action. She crossed borders in order to see a change in her child. She demanded justice and did not settle for anything less. Michael Joseph Brown highlights: "This scene highlights another theme we have encountered in the gospel: survival. This Woman acts on behalf of her daughter, both outsiders, and places her own life on the line to secure her family's survival."³ Survival often requires fearlessness. When the story ends, it is not clear that the Woman perceived as an outsider is now included. We are not told that she follows Jesus. All that we know for certain is that her faith was great, and this faith led to the healing of her daughter. It is not solely her humility that is laudable, but her courageous demand for justice and mercy is noteworthy.

The Canaanite Woman's actions are bold because she displays an unwavering sense of self. Despite being repeatedly told, in both spoken and unspoken ways, that she is an outsider, she respectfully rejects this status. She sees Jesus as Lord and the Son of David, even when he views her as an enemy. She did not let his distorted perception of her alter her mission. She is a human being, a mother, and a child of God. She knows who she is and views her daughter as worthy of the same healing that others had received. She did not see herself or her child as outside of God's

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In a world that is divided and divisive, it is important to acknowledge moments when hearts are softened and changed, when power is challenged and acquiesces, and when justice prevails. This story is an example. Throughout this gospel, the Matthean community is being asked to have faith. Then this community is given examples of great faith. We, too, can learn from the Canaanite Woman. We have seen when anger turns into hatred and hatred leads to dehumanization, and dehumanization results in cruelties that no one should have to endure. We must challenge all systems of oppression, perhaps most especially when we hold places of privilege. When given the *power* to create change, how will we promote or withhold political, religious, or social changes? How can our agency change the lives of others? The very survival of others may be connected to our willingness to participate in the struggle for liberation, to steadfastly demand a more just society. In a world overwhelmed by those who want to call us enemies and whom we may likewise want to call enemies; we must question power dynamics on every possible level. One way for a so-called enemy to become a remedy is to have the self-assurance of God's protection and provision and to be courageous and resolute in our ability to love others enough to demand mercy and justice.

3. Michael Joseph Brown, "Matthew," in *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary*, Second edition. Brian K. Blount, Gay L. Byron, and Emerson B. Powery, eds. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2024), 118.