



Mother Pleads for Her Daughter

ELAINE WAINWRIGHT interprets the story of the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:21-28.

Matthew 15: 21 Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. 22 Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting: “Have mercy on me, *Kyrios*, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” 23 But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying: “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” 24 He answered: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” 25 But she came and knelt before him, saying: “*Kyrios*, help me.” 26 He answered: “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” 27 She said: “Yes, *Kyrios*, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” 28 Then Jesus answered her: “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

There are some biblical stories that capture our imagination as well as our hearts. The story of the Canaanite woman – who challenges Jesus in seeking healing for her daughter – is one such story for me. And I was particularly struck when I discovered the early Christian tradition named this woman *Justa*, or *Just One*. I was challenged, too, as to how such a seemingly human-centred Gospel might be read ecologically.

The first words of Matthew 15:21-28 draw the reader into the story’s groundedness in time and place. The references are vague: Jesus left “that place” (Mt 15:21). We find in the preceding chapter “that place” was *Gennesareth* (Mt 14:34) where Jesus carried out his ministry of healing (Mt 14:35-36). However, the text quickly draws us towards a new destination, the region of Tyre and Sidon (Mt 15:21) where Jesus initially refuses to heal.

The reference to the “region” of these two major cities, Tyre and Sidon, along the western seaboard from Galilee, evokes not only materiality but also the tense socio-economic and political interrelationships between the regions.

For instance, one of Tyre’s staple and wealth-producing industries was producing precious purple dye. But as an island city it needed its own hinterland as well as that of its most immediate neighbour, Galilee, to supply its inhabitants with food and bread. In Acts 12:20 we find evidence of Tyre’s dependence on Galilee and the conflict it generated.

The Canaanite Woman

Readers are called to attention by the beginning words of the next verse, *kai idou*/look, pay attention (Mt 15:22). They refer to a woman, designated as

Canaanite, who was coming out of this region, rife with its ethnic and politico-economic tensions.

The name “Canaanite” has puzzled scholars as it seems more symbolic than descriptive, especially when in the Markan Gospel she is called “Greek, Syro-Phoenician by birth” (Mk 7:26). Her “Canaanite” title in Matthew evokes the ancient inhabitants of the Promised Land who were stripped of access by the Hebrews coming in from the desert. It constructs this woman similarly as being denied access to Israel’s and Galilee’s resources – as will be seen as the story unfolds.

Plea for Healing

The woman seeks healing for her daughter whose body has been possessed by a force or power that she names as demonic (Mt 15:22). We are not told how this possession manifests in the daughter’s body.

The woman's “Canaanite” title in Matthew evokes the ancient inhabitants of the Promised Land who were stripped of access by the Hebrews coming in from the desert.

However, the demon-possessed body of the daughter remains close to the surface of the text. As ecological readers we notice the corporeality embedded in the woman’s desire and her supplication for healing.

In Mt 15:24 we encounter the materiality of the other-than-human in the text when Jesus claims that he was sent only to the “lost sheep of the house of Israel”. This phrase occurs only twice in other parts of Scripture, in Psalm 119:176 and Jeremiah 50:6. It speaks of sheep, the most common other-than-human creatures in the agricultural life of the Jewish nation. It is the materiality, the corporeality of the straying sheep that Jesus calls upon to contrast his mission to the lost with the dynastic implications of the title “son of David” given him by the Canaanite woman.

The reference to the lost sheep could be seen or read simply as a literary cipher, but Donna Haraway provides insights into ways in which “the biological and literary or artistic come together with all of the force of lived reality”. This is an area that invites further exploration by the ecological reader of biblical texts.

Embodying Her Plea

Justa continues her agency (Mt 15:25), again appealing to Jesus for help. This time she uses her body to strengthen her appeal by kneeling before Jesus, as did the leper and the ruler’s daughter earlier in the Gospel (Mt 8:2; 9:18). She is embodying pleas for healing. Justa uses the language of her body to speak her desperate need.

Jesus’s response – “It is not *kalon* (good or right) to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs” – continues to intertwine the metaphorical and the material.

Sharing Reversed and Extended

Jesus draws “the dogs” into the text to evoke those who ought not share the bread. Justa, however, reverses the function of the metaphor and does even more. Justa in this first-century text evokes the lived reality of dogs finding a place under the tables. Archaeologists have discovered this depicted in stone. The metaphoric and the material can function together to create ecological meaning.

Justa’s reversal of Jesus’s metaphoric use of bread and dogs functions in the text to reverse his response to her desperate plea for her daughter. First, Jesus affirms the faith that enabled Justa to see the possibility of reversal and to bring it to speech: “Even the dogs can eat the crumbs.” And what she desires for her daughter is also brought about – her daughter is healed instantly and her body is restored.

Jesus uses the materiality of a specific image to justify his refusal of Justa: “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” But through her persistence, and her willingness to engage Jesus on his own terms – “Even the dogs can eat the crumbs” – Justa succeeds in having Jesus heal her daughter. There is something radical in this: by rejecting the Galilean healer’s rejection of her, Justa enables healing to happen. 🐕

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“I see the Church as a field hospital after battle.”

POPE FRANCIS

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