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# Women in the Bible

INTERPRETATION *Resources for the Use of  
Scripture in the Church*

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## SERIES FOREWORD

This series of volumes supplements *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. The commentary series offers an exposition of the books of the Bible written for those who teach, preach, and study the Bible in the community of faith. This new series is addressed to the same audience and serves a similar purpose, providing additional resources for the interpretation of Scripture, but now dealing with features, themes, and issues significant for the whole rather than with individual books.

The Bible is composed of separate books. Its composition naturally has led its interpreters to address particular books. But there are other ways to approach the interpretation of the Bible that respond to other characteristics and features of the Scriptures. These other entries to the task of interpretation provide contexts, overviews, and perspectives that complement the book-by-book approach and discern dimensions of the Scriptures that the commentary design may not adequately explore.

The Bible as used in the Christian community is not only a collection of books but also itself a book that has a unity and coherence important to its meaning. Some volumes in this new series will deal with this canonical wholeness and seek to provide a wider context for the interpretation of individual books as well as a comprehensive theological perspective that reading single books does not provide.

Other volumes in the series will examine particular texts, like the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, and the Sermon on the Mount, texts that have played such an important role in the faith and life of the Christian community that they constitute orienting foci for the understanding and use of Scripture.

A further concern of the series will be to consider important and often difficult topics, addressed at many different places in the books of the canon, that are of recurrent interest and concern to the church in its dependence on Scripture for faith and life. So the series will include volumes dealing with such topics as eschatology, women, wealth, and violence.

The books of the Bible are constituted from a variety of kinds of literature such as narrative, laws, hymns and prayers, letters, parables, and miracle stories. To recognize and discern the contribution and importance of all these different kinds of material enriches and enlightens the use of Scripture. Volumes in the series will provide help in the interpretation of Scripture's literary forms and genres.

The liturgy and practices of the gathered church are anchored in Scripture, as with the sacraments observed and the creeds recited. So another entry to the task of discerning the meaning and significance of biblical texts explored in this series is the relation between the liturgy of the church and the Scriptures.

Finally, there is certain ancient literature, such as the Apocrypha and the noncanonical gospels, that constitutes an important context to the interpretation of Scripture itself. Consequently, this series will provide volumes that offer guidance in understanding such writings and explore their significance for the interpretation of the Protestant canon.

The volumes in this second series of Interpretation deal with these important entries into the interpretation of the Bible. Together with the commentaries, they compose a library of resources for those who interpret Scripture as members of the community of faith. Each of them can be used independently for its own significant addition to the resources for the study of Scripture. But all of them intersect the commentaries in various ways and provide an important context for their use. The authors of these volumes are biblical scholars and theologians who are committed to the service of interpreting the Scriptures in and for the church. The editors and authors hope that the addition of this series to the commentaries will provide a major contribution to the vitality and richness of biblical interpretation in the church.

The Editors

# Introduction

We begin this journey on a celebratory note for two reasons. First, today women are exercising leadership in churches across a number of denominations. Second, much scholarship has been published in the area of women in the Bible over the past two decades so that our knowledge has grown and the subject has become mainstream rather than ancillary. For example, we now have the *CEB Women's Bible*, a one-volume study Bible that combines excellent scholarship with attention to the complexity of contemporary lived reality. In addition, the new Wisdom Commentary series, an ongoing project that will cover the entire Bible in fifty-eight volumes through the lens of feminist scholarship, testifies to our explosion in knowledge, the refinement of interpretive approaches, and the exciting potential for individual, communal, and global transformation to which the gospel surely calls us.

Challenges remain, of course. First, many traditions still do not ordain women and continue to reinforce gender roles in ways that perpetuate inequality. In many Christian traditions today, women are not permitted to preach and teach the gospel in any formal capacity. Part of the “argument” against women in leadership comes from passages of the Bible, especially 1 Timothy 2, 1 Corinthians 14:33–36, and the household codes of Ephesians. Such authors drew upon their predecessors from both Jewish and non-Jewish sources. From Aristotle and Hippocrates, to the biblical texts, to Josephus, the church

fathers, Luther, Calvin, and so on down to today, one can adduce an endless collection of choice quotations to prove that women have been considered inferior to men. A few examples will suffice:

<i>Quote</i>	<i>Source</i>
“Males are warm, dry, and firm, and this is the norm. Females are cold, moist and spongy, these being defects.”	Hippocrates, 5th–4th c. BCE (Dean-Jones 1991, 115–16)
“Females are weaker and colder in their nature, and we should look upon the female state as being as it were a deformity.”	Aristotle, 4th c. BCE (Allen 1985, 98)
“The law says that the woman is in all things inferior to the man. Let her accordingly be submissive . . . for the authority has been given by God to the man.”	Josephus, 1st c. CE (deSilva 2000, 183)
“The female sex is irrational and akin to bestial passions, fear, sorrow, pleasure and desire.”	Philo of Alexandria, 1st c. CE (Allen 1985, 191)
“Praised be God that he has not created me a gentile; praised be God that he has not created me a woman; praised be God that he has not created me an ignorant man.”	Tosefta Berakhoth 7, 8 (Swidler 1979, 155)
“It is not proper for a woman to speak in church, however admirable or holy what she says may be, merely because it comes from female lips.”	Origen, 185–254 CE (Tavard 1973, 342)
“The rule remains with the husband, and the wife is compelled to obey him by God’s command. He rules the home and the state. . . . The woman on the other hand is like a nail driven into the wall. She sits at home. . . . Just as the snail carries its house with it, so the wife should stay at home and look after the household.”	Martin Luther, 16th c. CE (Tavard 1973, 174)
“[The woman] had indeed been subject to her husband [in Paradise], though this was an honest, and by no means harsh subjection, but now [after “the fall”] she is placed as it were in slavery.”	John Calvin, 16th c. CE (Tavard 1973, 176)

Far from picking on any one tradition, my point here is to demonstrate the ubiquity of such attitudes toward women by movers and shakers across the board whose effects are felt to this day.

Second, there are many more women in the Bible than you may realize, but chances are that you have not heard of many of them because they are not mentioned in our teaching and preaching.

Third, when you do hear of a woman in the Bible, the woman is often presented as a sinner and is often associated with some kind of sexual immorality. Even Jesus's mother!

Fourth, rarely do we hear of women who lead and are moral or faith exemplars. Those we do encounter often have been so egregiously misinterpreted that it would be better if they had stayed ignored (e.g., Mary Magdalene and the Samaritan woman).

These patterns in the Bible raise some questions for us Christians and our witness. First, there is the issue of how God is described and portrayed: Does God believe that women are not equal to men and that most women are sexpots and seductresses? Second, based on the answer to the first question, do followers of God have license to constrain women on the basis of gender? Third, how do we entertain the issue of the unity and authority of the Bible? Not all texts agree; some are liberating for women and some appear to condone or engender oppression. How do we address this?

## Goals of the Book

The Bible has been a resource in the struggle for gender equality and, by extension, people equality. The rising of women means the rising of the whole human family. When Christians talk about anything, including women, we are talking about the nature of the kingdom (or kin-dom, or dream) of God. Where does the Bible exemplify good news of abundant life for women and point the way to how life would look if things were "on earth as it is in heaven"? Since the Bible is Scripture for us, it has special authority. But how does that authority work, given the distance between the time and cultures in which it was composed and now? It is important to know how women were viewed in ancient society so that we can inquire about which aspects of that view inhere in the present and which aspects might be cast off. Paul asked women to veil in 1 Corinthians 11, but most

American women do not do that today. What was at stake then, and why do most of us not do it now? So, the Bible is authoritative, the Bible teaches us about the nature of God's kin(g)dom, and history can help us think about how we relate to the Bible today.

This book spotlights overlooked women and takes a fresh look at some of the most commonly referenced women. I address women who are astute theologians. I feature women who are active agents, those who are victims of forces beyond themselves, and those who are both. I try to be honest about what the texts do and do not say, whether we like it or not and whether we decide to agree or disagree with the author on any given point.

I also point out different types of family structures in the Bible. After all, neither Jesus nor Paul ever married or had children, and Paul patently calls Christians *not* to marry if they can at all resist it. Unmarried people in the Bible are whole people on their own. On the other hand, Peter is married. Some women are mothers, and some are not. Some are leaders in their communities—judges, warriors, prophets, apostles, ministers, leaders of prayer circles and churches. Others are “ordinary” people like the rest of us, trying to live faithful lives amidst sometimes difficult circumstances, celebrating and praising God for the joys that attend our lives (such as finding a coin or seeing a brother raised to new life).

The stated goals of this book are as follows:

1. Address well-known biblical women. Where necessary, reintroduce such figures from fresh perspectives using a variety of interpretive methods.
2. Lift up stories of women that have been ignored.
3. Reinstate biblical women who have been erased (rather than merely ignored) due to political moves in textual transmission (such as Junia) or through politically motivated translation moves of which the English reader may not even be aware (e.g., Phoebe).
4. Consider symbolic feminized figures such as Woman Wisdom in Proverbs, daughter Zion, and the “great whore” in Revelation.
5. Explore the ways the Bible employs feminine imagery and the ways it moves across or beyond gender. For example, God, Jesus, Paul, and the male disciples are depicted using feminine language. “When feminists speak of reclaiming the feminine aspects of salvation history, the common reaction is that one is somehow changing either scripture or tradition. In fact many feminists are merely asking that the fullness of the scriptures and tradition be



recognized within the public prayer of the church” (Fox, “Women in the Bible,” 352).

6. Draw upon recent scholarship that addresses the status of women in ancient Israelite society, in Roman Palestine (and the empire more broadly), and in the early church.

7. Present insights from new perspectives that have emerged in the interpretive conversation through the growing attention to women in the Bible and the increasingly active participation of women in different social locations in the current global context.

8. Point the reader to excellent resources for further study.

Ideally, the book will cause readers to know more, incorporate the material into their faith life, and help others to do the same.

## Texture of the Book

While the stated goals of the book have been enumerated above, the reader might fairly ask about some of the overarching commitments that undergird the project. First, I am a New Testament scholar, and the book is weighted more heavily in the New Testament direction as a result. Indeed, the longest, most detailed chapter is devoted to women in Jesus’s ministry.

Second, of all the things I could have addressed, I have tried to choose what is most useful and urgent for those called to lead groups of people in engaging Scripture. How might engaging these texts deepen our discipleship and allow us to encounter God? How might we encounter the texts in different settings in the life of the church?

Third, I assume a stance of reading toward wholeness and liberation for everyone and everything in God’s creation. This entails being honest about potential obstacles to said liberation. Patriarchy constitutes one such entrenched obstacle both in antiquity and in our contemporary society. Patriarchy, literally “rule by the father,” is a system in which men rule by virtue of being male. The a priori assumption in this book is that patriarchy always disadvantages women and is inherently unjust insofar as political and economic power is not distributed evenly. Patriarchy is, by definition, sexist, and sexism is unjust. Thus, when I use the language of “equality” (or lack of) in this book, I refer to having agency and equal access to the power to shape societal structures that affect one’s ability to survive and flourish.

It is the nature of scholarship itself for scholars to debate ideas and evidence in order to advance human knowledge. This book, however, is written not merely as a disinterested historical analysis or a summary of scholarly debate on women in the Bible; rather, as stated above, it is written for the sake of communities for whom these biblical texts are currently authoritative in some way, shaping the moral, intellectual, and emotional lives of contemporary people. Thus, I will spend very little time rehearsing arguments from every scholarly angle. Two specific examples may help.

Dr. Carol Meyers, a Hebrew Bible scholar whose work informs my own, suggests that we should use the word “heterarchy” rather than “patriarchy” in order to draw attention to the fact that women had a more active role and more agency in society during the Old Testament period than we generally imagine. Likewise, Dr. Susan Hysten, my esteemed New Testament colleague (and editor of this volume), tends to argue for a more optimistic view of women’s power and agency in the biblical period than we generally imagine (while still noting that women were considered inferior and that the society was patriarchal). I respect, rely upon, and recommend the work of both scholars as they seek to nuance our historical knowledge.

Yet I remain concerned not to soften gender disparities in our own era, inherited from thousands of years of reading these very biblical texts. It may be that not all scholars are using the word *power* in the same way. On the one hand, I understand the argument that women have power when they influence their husband’s choice about whom their daughter should marry or donate money to a civic organization. When I use the word “power,” however, I mean the power of a woman to make and enforce laws that affect her and her children; self-determination with respect to her body and who has access to it and what kind of access; the same standards for morality that apply to men rather than a double standard; the same consequences (or lack of) for particular actions; and so on. One even reads arguments (not from Meyers or Hysten) trying to soften the inherently oppressive nature of patriarchy by appealing to “benevolent patriarchy” or something similar. I consider “benevolent patriarchy” an oxymoron in any century in any locale, and that assumption underlies the book. We have inherited patriarchy along with its concomitant dangers. To be sure, there have been moments of light, but then as now, trying to point out “bright spots” or to dull

the razor-sharp edges of patriarchy, far from making it safer, lulls us into obscuring the deadly force it has always been for women.

Given our subject, then, I address the potential promises and pitfalls of the biblical texts under consideration with respect to ancient audiences and later interpreters, including us. I ask: in what ways does the text have liberative potential, and in what ways does it present potential obstacles for those seeking abundant life (John 10:10)?

## Challenges of the Book

Undertaking such a project requires addressing numerous complexities. Here are some of the issues that arose in conceptualizing and producing it.

### 1. *Gender Constructs*

One could argue that it is outdated to speak of “women in the Bible”; rather, it is now more common to speak of “gender in the Bible.” To pull out “women in the Bible” draws attention to the fact that, even now, “male” is the normal, unmarked, unremarkable category. The norm. “Gender in the Bible” helps us to avoid reinforcing the masculine as normative and the feminine as some of kind of noteworthy exception to the norm. I want to avoid gender “essentialism,” the idea that each gender is marked by inherent and distinctive traits or characteristics.

I find it curious that many books (including excellent ones that I adduce in this work) try to categorize ancient women: *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes* or *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves*, for example. There appears to be no urge to categorize men in this way. Such categorizing risks presenting females (in the literary texts and historical record) as flat, stereotyped characters without individuality.

Gender is a social construct. As Hylan explains: “What it means to be male or female is not a biologically given category that endures through time but is constructed by culture, often with political, social, and religious ramifications. In every culture, people make sense of their experiences and the world around them, and in doing so they construct understandings of what it means to be male or female” (*Women in the New Testament World*, 7). That

fact raises a question about where the category “women” fits into the LGBTQIA+ conversations about gender identity and performance, biological sex, and so on. (If such terms are new to you, consult the glossary in *A Brief Guide to Ministry with LGBTQIA Youth* by Cody J. Sanders.) For instance, we will find that God, Jesus, Paul, and the male disciples are depicted in categories that cross traditional gender notions; that is not to say, however, that the ancients did not have binary notions of male and female identity. In this book, we will understand the texts from the perspectives of the ancient authors and culture as well as raise questions related to our own contemporary appropriation of these texts.

To speak of “women” is to speak of gender and sexuality and personhood. It is to speak of procreation and family structures and social structures and embodiment and incarnation and choices and power (and lack thereof) and economics and race and ethnicity and anything else that pertains to the human condition. That’s a tall order.

## 2. *What about “Women in the Bible”?*

The next issue is one of scope and focus. On the one hand, there are many women in the Bible—usually where we expect them, sometimes where we might not. There are hundreds of named and unnamed women in the Bible, and it would be impossible to treat them all. The indexes of named and unnamed women in the excellent *CEB Women’s Bible* list 344 women (178 named, 166 unnamed). In choosing what to present, I must also choose what not to present, necessarily excluding other fascinating material.

On the other hand, women are missing, and the missing women should matter as much as the present women. None of the twelve named disciples is female. No females are depicted at the transfiguration, the Last Supper, or the Garden of Gethsemane. The story of the prodigal son names no females—was there no mother, were there no sisters? The special 144,000 in Revelation are all virgin males (“these who have not defiled themselves with women,” 14:4). And Matthew tells us that the women and children at the feeding of the “five thousand” did not count, literally: “And the ones who ate were about five thousand men [*anēr*], not including [*chōris*] women and children” (14:21, my trans.). I am somewhat tempted to call this book *Women in the Bible . . . and Not*.

In addition to so much material to address in the biblical texts themselves, there are also now many good, useful books on women in the Bible. I direct the reader to a number of them. Given the availability of these resources, I have chosen to shape this volume according to the specific goals I provide in this chapter without trying to accomplish what has already been achieved elsewhere.

### 3. *Nature of the Evidence*

The type of evidence available presents challenges for those desiring a full picture of women's lives in biblical times. First, most of the evidence tells us only what elite men thought or imagined about women's lives, if they thought about them at all. It assumes certain notions of what constitutes an "ideal" woman for a given social context. When we do find the rare piece of evidence from a woman herself, it usually comes from a woman of the elite echelons of society. We have almost no direct evidence from the lives of ordinary women and only scant from elite women. Thus there is no easy answer to the common question "What was it like to be a woman in the biblical period?" It depended, in part, on a woman's social location—was she a wife, a widow, a slave, a queen, a judge, or an "ordinary woman"? We will consider women in those different categories.

Second, scholars do not all agree in their construal of the evidence. Third, we are working across a number of centuries, especially with respect to the Old Testament period, which covers about fifteen hundred years. Social conditions and norms can change over time, potentially altering some aspects of women's lives.

### 4. *Audience*

The danger of writing a book called *Women in the Bible* is that potential readers may think that the book is primarily for women. While it is primarily *about* women, the book is *for* everyone. I do not want this only to be a book by a woman, for women, about women; rather, I want people of all genders to use it. Material related to women or the feminine, like material related to other genders, should be considered a resource for addressing the "human" condition. Surely men are to imitate the behavior of faithful women, like the widow with her mite, the Canaanite woman, and the Samaritan

woman. As Ruth Fox avers: “Just as men are held up as spiritual models for women (how many sermons have we heard on the faith of Peter?), so, too, men’s spirituality is enriched and aided with feminine patterns of holiness” (1999, 366).

Women have been using their “analogical imaginations” for centuries now. That is, they take material specifically addressed to men and translate it into their own lives. For instance, the Gospel of Matthew praises those who are “eunuchs for the kingdom” (19:12, my trans.). Eunuchs are castrated males. But women have worked by analogy to read this as a call to celibacy, which they have answered over the centuries. Are male readers also willing to use their analogical imaginations?

## Structure of the Book

I begin the book by using Matthew 15 to display a variety of hermeneutical methods and considerations relevant to this project as a whole. It’s an invitation into a world of rich conversations and a chance to turn the text around and around as if it were a diamond in the light in order to see the various facets. Then I move to God, consideration and experience of whom undergirds the whole interpretive process. I especially focus upon the ways God moves across gender in our Scriptures. Next I address a perennial issue for Scripture readers and people living in every age—women and violence. It was not an easy chapter to write, and I imagine it won’t be the easiest to read. I kindly ask the reader, however, to stay with me through the “Women and Violence” chapter; I promise you will be rewarded and refreshed by the “Women Creating” chapter that immediately follows. Next, I address the book of Ruth as an example of one of books of the Bible named after a female. The complexities and beauty of life and relationships present themselves, with special attention to the relationships about women therein. Next I turn to the women who appear in Jesus’s life and ministry, along with consideration of the ways that Jesus himself (and sometimes his disciples) moves across gender at certain places in our Scriptures. Likewise, I write about the women in Paul’s life and ministry and the ways that he, too, is presented as one whose capacities defy ancient gender concepts. Finally, I explore the deutero-Pauline texts as they relate to the topic of women in the Bible.

In the spirit of Ralph Waldo Emerson's declaration that "a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds," I have not sought to subject the book or individual chapters to a contrived consistency. Rather, I have presented the content that I think is most useful laid out in an order that I think is most useful. Ideally, the reader would read the book in order from start to finish; however, I've tried to write the book in a way that would enable a person preaching or teaching in a specific area to use a relevant chapter on its own.

## Assumptions about My Readers

You are people who are well-read and love learning. If you are clergy, you have probably gone to seminary. If you are a lay leader, you are that person who always goes deeper into the complexity of a subject. All of you care about the gospel of Jesus Christ and pray that God's will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. That is a big ask. But you have been called to work toward that vision and equipped to do so by God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Scripture is no small part of that equation. How might attention to women in the Bible help us to discern and enact God's will on earth, as it is in heaven?

You have been taught to consider both what the text *meant* in its original sociohistorical context, by its original author, for the original audience, and also what the text *means* today for the church in the world. You live in a time in which you and your community have unprecedented access to an overwhelming amount of information. It used to be that you could simply rely on the standard commentaries, written by a single author, from a single perspective, usually employing the historical-critical method undergirded by modernist assumptions. Notice that most commentaries in a library reference room are by males. Now you work in a postmodern context in which a plethora of methodologies have yielded new questions and approaches and insights, and voices from across the globe have entered the conversation.

You are tasked with helping others navigate a complex world where politics, religion, gender, sexuality, economics, race, technology, and global forces factor into everyday lives. The moral issues you address are weighty: sex trafficking, reproductive rights, end-of-life decisions, proper use of technology, pluralism, war, care for the least of these, the alien and sojourner in your land.

You do not have the luxury of burying your head in the sand and pretending that we live in “a simpler time” (if we ever did) and a small world where everyone thinks like “we” do. Your guidance and preaching and teaching are needed more than ever as unprecedented numbers of people have no knowledge of or connection to the life-giving power and genius that the Bible holds—wisdom from the ages, both pain and promise, breathtaking failures and astonishing moments of mystery and redemption.

## The Lectionary

When we Christians gather for worship, how often do we hear biblical texts related to women? If one comes from a tradition that does not use a lectionary, the pastor chooses which texts are heard when the church gathers and can, therefore, choose whether to exclude or include women. It is my hope that pastors who use this book will review how often, in what ways, and to what ends the women of the Bible appear in the church’s life with Scripture and will expand the exposure the congregations get to the wide variety of women who appear in our canon.

On the other hand, if one does follow a lectionary, one may encounter some women, but there are real obstacles to presenting the full picture of women in the canon.

### *The Challenge of the Lectionary*

In the biblical text, women are rarely central in the stories, compared to men. The problem is exacerbated by the lectionary tradition. In this book I refer to both the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) used by Protestants and the Roman Lectionary (RL) used by Catholics. The lectionaries differ.

J. Frank Henderson’s *Remembering the Women: Women’s Stories from Scripture for Sundays and Festivals* is a great starting point for an in-depth review of problems with the lectionary. It provides some history of the lectionary (both the RL and the RCL), especially as it pertains to the presence and absence of women’s stories therein. Women’s stories are more absent than present, to the detriment of both women and men whose faith lives are shaped by the liturgy of the church. This absence of women includes the following:



1. Including only a limited selection of the “women’s books,” especially in Sunday readings
2. Omitting many stories of the Bible that feature women
3. Omitting verses featuring women from passages used as lectionary readings
4. Listing some passages that feature women only as “optional” or “alternative” readings

Other problems with the presentation of women in the lectionary relate to how women are portrayed in biblical passages and whether their inclusion or exclusion from the lectionary is helpful or dangerous. When negative stories about women are included and positive stories omitted, surely this inhibits the celebration of women in ministry doing the work of God and reinforces negative stereotypes about women. On the other hand, if some of the Bible’s challenging passages about women are omitted from the lectionaries—and especially Sunday readings—when will the corporate body of believers ever deal with these difficult passages, speaking honestly about the harm they have done and can do? Will believers simply have to decide how to interpret such texts on their own?

### *Solutions for the Problems with the Lectionary*

To help solve the problem of women’s absence from the lectionaries, Henderson’s book is arranged according to the logic of the lectionaries (which is explained in detail in the introduction). Women’s stories that already are part of the lectionary are capitalized upon and expanded. Those that have been omitted are now included, according to a set of four principles:

1. Stories taken from the same biblical book or closely related material from other books
2. Theological relationships with the festival or season
3. Passages that employ feminine images of God
4. Passages that refer to holy Wisdom

The book provides an appendix with excerpts from some psalms that use feminine images of God. Another appendix is an index of Scripture readings in three columns. Column 1 lists the Scripture readings in canonical order. Column 2 names the Sunday

or festival on which *Remembering the Women* suggests use of the passage. Column 3 shows the relationship with the RL and RCL (and, on occasion, other lectionaries). A third appendix includes three essential essays related to women in the lectionary by Jean Campbell, OSH; Ruth Fox, OSB; and Eileen Schuller, OSU. In their essays, Fox and Schuller suggest the following ways to include more women in Christian engagement of the Bible (1–4 below are in Fox, “Women in the Bible,” 366):

1. Choose to read the long versions of the Gospel.
2. Preach on the full text, including omitted texts.
3. Use texts including women on other occasions. For example, if anointing the sick, read from the story of the woman anointing Jesus. When commissioning music ministers, use the example of Miriam or Judith leading singing.
4. Open and close meetings with Esther or Judith’s prayers or portions of the Magnificat.
5. Expand opportunities for Bible study. “The Sunday readings at Mass can never be the only context in which we experience the Bible. There is a real need for small group Bible study, catechetical and adult-learning programs to provide an arena for people to explore the full scope of what the Bible says about women; here we can bring our own experiences to interact with the text in ways which are not possible with the parameters of the Sunday eucharist” (Schuller, “Women in the Lectionary,” 373).

In addition to reading the essays in *Remembering the Women*, I recommend that the reader who wants to counter the problems with the lectionary learn what is excluded or relegated to a basically unheard status. Make use of resources that mind the gap for you, such as *WomenPsalms* and *In Her Own Rite*. In preaching and teaching, engage difficult texts about women creatively and by pairing them with positive texts. Speak boldly about what is excluded—whether those texts have positive or negative images—to reinforce life-giving perspectives about women in the Bible and beyond.

In this volume, I direct readers to material related to women in the Bible so that they can choose to present those passages in sermons and liturgical events. That is, I highlight material already in the lectionary. In addition, I present some of the important women or aspects of womanhood in the Bible that are excluded from the lectionary. This two-way method should, God willing, make it easier

for those who lead worship or education to find ways to include more of the material related to women in the Bible in the life of the church and in their own personal study.

## Conclusion: Truth, with Hope

Of all the women in the Bible, Pollyanna is not one of them. So in the pages that follow, I aim to have an honest conversation with you about what kinds of things the Bible says and does not say about women; who is present and who is absent; what the text actually says and what interpreters have said it says. I want to provide information and point you to some excellent resources for further study. In many ways, I want to stoke your imagination and inspire you to come at the subject from a variety of angles, each yielding different fruit for different seasons. It will have to be done in a representative, not exhaustive, fashion, of course.

If I am successful, you may learn something new about particular women or groups of women in the Bible; more importantly, I hope that you will be equipped to imaginatively consider these women from more angles than you might have before and, as a result, that the scriptural text will spark your imaginations about how we might live better, more just (or righteous) lives today. I suppose I consider myself the scribe of whom Jesus speaks in Matthew 13:52: “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.” Something old, something new—may you find some of each in the pages that follow.

## Recommended Resources

- Ahlers, Julia, Rosemary Broughton, and Carl Koch, compilers. 1992. *WomenPsalms*. Winona, MN: St. Mary's Press.
- Baughman, Rachel, Christine Chakoian, Jaime Clark-Soles, Judy Fentress-Williams, and Ginger Gaines-Cirelli, eds. 2016. *The CEB Women's Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press.
- Henderson, J. Frank, compiler. 1998. *Remembering the Women: Women's Stories from Scripture for Sundays and Festivals*. 2nd ed. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications.

- Huyen, Susan. 2019. *Women in the New Testament World*. Essentials of Biblical Studies. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Procter-Smith, Marjorie. 2000. *In Her Own Rite: Constructing Feminist Liturgical Tradition*. 2nd ed. Cape May, NJ: OSL Publications.
- Reid, Barbara E., ed. 2015-. Wisdom Commentary series. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press.
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# Of Canaanites and Canines

## *Matthew 15*

So many passages in the Bible are relevant to our topic that it is impossible to cover each one or even all possible interpretations of a single passage. However, I want readers to have a sense of the variety of approaches that are available to a contemporary interpreter. There isn't a single "right" answer for a given passage, so the task isn't to make one correct interpretation. Rather, we readers can learn to make various interpretive decisions, understanding that we might revisit and revise those conclusions at a later reading.

The story of the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:21–28 admits of polyvalent interpretation to a stunning degree. One-fourth of the essays in *The Feminist Companion to Matthew* are devoted to it. In what follows we

- review the story, offering some comments along the way,
- note varieties of interpretations,
- draw conclusions about the significance of the variety of interpretations, and
- tie the chapter into the stated goals of the book.

### The Story

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Immediately preceding this story, Jesus is in Gennesaret (northwest corner of the Sea of Galilee; Matt. 14:34), where he addresses the

issue of defilement. It's not what goes into the mouth that defiles but rather what comes out, Jesus says, because "what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart" (15:18)—the heart is the gold standard for judging. Notice that the offenses he names, including slander, involve mistreating others. This is something to keep in mind when Jesus calls the woman a dog later in Matthew 15. In the two passages that follow ours, Jesus heals and feeds. His experience with the woman is catalytic.

Jesus leaves Gennesaret and proceeds to the area of Tyre and Sidon, which is significant because that is predominantly Gentile territory. Not only is the woman who approaches Jesus a Gentile, then, but Matthew further labels her a Canaanite, an extremely loaded, if anachronistic, term. The Canaanites were among the most hated enemies of ancient Israel, although there were no longer any "Canaanites" per se in the first century. The term is a slanderous one, a point made more starkly if one compares Matthew's version to its source, Mark, which simply calls her "Syro-phenician." First, as Gail O'Day suggests, Matthew lumps Tyre and Sidon together as a region (Mark mentions them separately in 7:24 and 7:31) to evoke the Old Testament vitriol against Israel's old enemies: "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)" (O'Day 2001, 115). Second, Matthew employs the Canaanite slur (though Tyre and Sidon were real Gentile places in the first century, unlike Canaan). So, Matthew is maximizing the "unclean Gentile" theme here. The woman is not simply "other"; she is intensely "other."

And she's a loud mother "other." She shouts a command to Jesus using some of Matthew's favorite words: "Have mercy on me, Lord" (*eleēson me, kyrie*; Matt. 15:22). Eight of the fifteen occurrences of "mercy" in the Gospels occur in Matthew (four in Luke; three in Mark; zero in John). And "Lord" is a christological confessional title in Matthew. In fact, often where Mark has someone call Jesus "Teacher," Matthew changes it to "Lord."

Next, the woman calls Jesus "Son of David." Why is this important? Matthew alludes to David and his relationship to Jesus far more than any other Gospel; "Son of David" is one of the most important christological titles in Matthew. So this woman "gets it" with her doubly correct christological confession.

The title “Son of David” links this Canaanite woman to the understanding of Jesus expressed back in Matthew’s genealogy, which ties Jesus directly to David, through an ancient *Canaanite woman*—Rahab. That is, Rahab and Salmon begat Boaz; Ruth and Boaz begat Obed; Obed begat Jesse with an unnamed woman; Jesse begat David with an unnamed woman. A lot of begetting, which takes two of course, even though the genealogy focuses on men. That’s all the more reason to take note of the exceptional spots where women are named, including the Canaanite Rahab, the foremother of Jesus himself and also, in some ways, the Canaanite woman in the story, given that only Matthew insists that the woman who engages Jesus is a Canaanite. In fact, the genealogy is one of the most important and rich texts in the New Testament for appraising the topic of women in the Bible. (For more on Matthew’s genealogy, consult chap. 7, “Women in Jesus’s Life and Ministry.”) I particularly appreciate Stuart Love’s treatment of the ways the genealogy connects to our passage (as well as the ways our passage is inextricably tied to the hemorrhaging woman in Matt. 9). He argues, “The Canaanite woman’s story remains a significant memory for the Matthean community. Old external/internal boundaries have been crossed or are being challenged.” Further, he asks, “But what can be said about marginal, non-Israelite women in this contentious, polemical, fluid and uncertain period? Does the Canaanite woman’s story provide a social transparency of a gender issue being faced by Matthew’s community?” (Love 2009, 158). After rehearsing some of the history of scholarly interpretation of the genealogy, Love suggests that the four women in the genealogy have more in common with the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15 than they have in common with Mary. He also asserts:

We believe the inclusion of these women in the genealogy anticipates the “surprise and scandal” of the Canaanite woman’s story. But as in the time of Jesus who as an Israelite healer had difficulty negotiating his own defined boundary limits (only to Israel), so now, the Matthean community must pass through its own boundary taboos by accepting outcast non-Israelite women. Following the model, her example upsets the “order of the social system.” (160)

In this view, then, the Canaanite woman represents women who are “out of bounds” in some way and the conversation taking place

in Matthew's own late-first-century community about where such women fit into the new community.

After she calls Jesus "Son of David," the NRSV has the Canaanite woman telling Jesus that her daughter is "tormented by a demon" (15:22). That translation does not convey the full force of the language here. "Evilly demonized" would be better. This is deeply harrowing, excruciating language. The adverb (*kakōs*) comes from the adjective that means evil or wicked. The verb (*daimonizomai*) shows that the daughter is a victim who is acted upon; the Greek present tense emphasizes the ongoing nature of the situation such that we could justifiably add the word "constantly." Notice that the woman asks for mercy on herself, not her daughter. Anyone who has watched someone who is their very heart suffer will understand her choice of words. Is there a more heart-wrenching scene in the Bible?

How does Jesus react to the mother's cry for mercy? The text says: "But he did not answer her a word" (15:23, my trans.). Period. While we may want to fill in felt "gaps" here, to do so is to add to the text, and that move should be overtly acknowledged. Jesus remains silent.

How do the disciples react to the mother's cry for mercy? They do not talk *to* her at all; rather, they talk *about* her, presumably right *in front of* her. They, unlike the woman, approach Jesus with no honorific title, just a command of their own: "Send her away." Why? "Because she is [repeatedly] crying out after us" (my trans.). That is the sole reason given. They find her an annoying bother.

Finally, she gets a response from someone: Jesus. He delivers the unfortunate (for her as a Gentile) news: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (15:24). When you picture the exchange, is Jesus saying this to the woman, to himself, to the disciples, to some or all of the above? The text does not specify. At any rate, the statement is entirely in keeping with Matthew's understanding of both Jesus's and his disciples' mission, as the reader recalls from Jesus's command to his disciples in 10:5–6: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Indeed, Matthew's genealogy squarely ties Jesus to Judaism, from King David all the way back to father Abraham. Only Matthew specifies that the child is to be named Jesus because "he will save *his people* from their sins" (1:21; emphasis added). Jesus is a Jewish Messiah for Jewish people.



After Jesus's pronouncement, he stops speaking to the woman or about the woman. Nevertheless, she persists. She approaches Jesus, prostrates herself before him (*proskyneō* has a number of meanings, including "worship"), calls him by an honorific title (Lord) again, and issues another imperative from beneath him: "Help me!" (15:25).

The text then says that Jesus answers. Again, it does not specify to whom Jesus is speaking. Is he speaking to her directly or to someone else (the disciples; himself)? Pay attention to what he says: "It is not good to take the children's bread [*artos*] and cast it to the little dogs" (15:26, my trans.). The children are those belonging to the house of Israel. The dogs are non-Jews.

She takes the comment as directed to her and responds, for the third time calling him "Lord." She absorbs the slander of being called a dog and rolls with Jesus's logic in order to defeat his argument: "Yes, Lord [*kyrie*], but even the little dogs eat the scraps of the things that fall from the table of their lords [*kyriōn*]" (15:27, my trans.). Note that the children sit at the table; the proper place for a dog is on the ground, where she is as she says this.

For the first time since the story began, the text notes that Jesus answers her directly. In 15:28 he calls her "Woman" (the only place in Matthew where he does this) and extols her: "Great is your faith!" He then issues a command: "Let it be done for you as you wish." The story ends thus: "And from that hour her daughter was healed [*iaomai*]" (my trans.).

In the chapter before ours, Jesus feeds bread (*artos*) to a multitude and heals many people in his own Jewish territory. Immediately following, the reverse happens— Jesus heads back to his own Jewish territory and heals (*therapeuō*) innumerable people who are at his feet. He also gives them bread (*artos*). Jesus heals many people and then feeds a multitude. This pattern, called chiasm, puts the attention on the center element, C, highlighting it as crucial:

- A. Feeding bread to thousands in Galilee
- B. Healing many in Galilee
- C. Canaanite woman and her daughter in Tyre and Sidon: Who should receive bread and healing?
- B1. Healing many in Galilee
- A1. Feeding bread to thousands in Galilee

The story is a watershed moment in the narrative where we learn that, in fact, the ministry of Jesus (and the church) extends across boundaries of many sorts.

## Traditional Interpretations

Traditional interpretations of this passage fall into the following categories.

### *1. This Is a Test. It Is Only a Test.*

The first line of interpretation sees the episode as Jesus testing the woman's faith and often attempts to downplay Jesus's harshness. According to this approach, Jesus intended all along to respond to her; furthermore, the point is made that Jesus calls her a "little dog," more like a "puppy," such that it is a term of affection. A variation of this approach claims that Jesus is testing the disciples in the episode.

### *2. Faith as a Prerequisite for Healing*

The second approach focuses upon the importance of faith for healing to occur. Jesus praises the woman's faith and grants healing on the basis of her faith. (We return to this line of reasoning in the section on disability below.) Often, her faith is seen as a foil for the lack of faith of the scribes and Pharisees, with whom Jesus is wrangling in this part of the narrative.

### *3. Jesus Includes Gentiles*

In the third approach, "the point" (because many interpretations assume that there can be only one point) is that the woman is a Gentile, and Jesus, unlike the scribes and Pharisees, accepts her as part of the people of God. The eventual inclusion of Gentiles is foreshadowed at certain places in the Gospel, including, perhaps, the genealogy; the arrival of the magi (Zoroastrian priests; Matt. 2); the healing of the centurion's servant (Matt. 8); and the encounter with this woman. The earthly Jesus primarily came to the Jews as the promised Messiah; in this way it can be said that God kept God's covenant with God's elect people. The resurrected Jesus (and his disciples, in his name) have all nations as their scope. This would help Matthew's own church understand and explain why the church has both Jews and Gentiles in it.

Whenever contemporary Christians take up the issue of how Gentiles fit into God's plan of salvation history, it becomes

important to notice the potential for the interpretation to go off the rails in a variety of ways, including promoting anti-Semitism. Thus, a brief word is in order. Matthew's own historical context made for a variety of tensions between his church and the surrounding world. Usually thought to be in Syrian Antioch where there was a substantial Jewish community, Matthew's own church contained both Jews and Gentiles near the end of the first century. Presumably, it was *at least* bilingual and bicultural. The first tension exhibited in Matthew, then, is that while Jesus is the fulfillment of the promises to Israel, his chief opponents are from that group. Perhaps Matthew's most vitriolic moment in this regard occurs at 27:25: "Then the people *as a whole* answered, 'His blood be on us and on our children!'" (emphasis added). I imagine that Matthew, himself most likely a Jew speaking to a largely Jewish audience about a Jewish Messiah, would be horrified to discover that his love of hyperbole has resulted in a terrible history of anti-Semitism on the part of Christians over the centuries. Words matter and sometimes have unintended consequences.

How might this play out in some interpretations of Matthew 15:21–28? Let me overstate the case for illustrative purposes. One might argue: "Jews were ethnocentric and did not have dealings with Gentiles, especially Canaanites, the worst of Jewish enemies." Jesus, though a Jew, overcame his "natural" Jewish proclivities toward ethnocentrism and was more expansive and inclusive; he overcame (and dissociated from) his "narrow" Judaism and left it behind to become something totally different—a Gentile-accepting Christian. For a further analysis, I would point the reader to A.-J. Levine's comment:

Rather than view the narrative as hopelessly colonial or employ it to advance a supersessionist agenda, we might see the woman as another Rahab or Ruth: she recognizes her salvation is with Israel's representative, yet she retains her Canaanite identification; she proves more faithful than insiders (the spies in Jericho; the disciples); and she does what she must to save her family. (2012, 474)

#### *4. The Importance of Humility*

In this interpretation the woman's humility, expressed by prostrating herself and allowing the canine slur, gives all Christians a model to live by.

At the granular level within each of these categories, one could include more detail or shades of nuance within these interpretive trajectories. These four, however, provide enough background for our purposes at present. We now turn our attention to newer interpretations.

## Newer Interpretations

In most traditional interpretations, Jesus is the protagonist and hero of the story. Where the woman is highlighted, she is often painted as one who is acted upon by Jesus, rather than the one acting upon Jesus. Citing numerous commentaries, Gail O'Day notes: "There seems to be a resistance in scholarship on this text to credit the Canaanite woman with much more than submission to Jesus. . . . 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" (2001, 124 n. 24).

Innumerable articles on this passage take a newer interpretive approach, especially since 2000. In what follows, I acquaint the reader with some of the current interpretive trajectories. (If you are looking for a single book that brings you relatively up-to-date on the recent productive lenses through which to view biblical texts, I recommend *Mark & Method: New Approaches to Biblical Studies*, edited by Janice Capel Anderson and Stephen D. Moore, second edition.)

### *Sample of Feminist Interpretations*

Feminist biblical interpretation has led interpreters to investigate the Canaanite woman from new angles. For instance, many would argue that the woman, not Jesus, is the protagonist and hero of the story. She helps Jesus imagine a wider scope for his ministry and thus helps to shape his understanding of his vocation. Countless feminist interpretations have been conducted on this passage; in what follows I sample only a few. Each one is an act of recovering the voice and significance of the woman, who is seen as strong,

savvy, and even subversive. These interpretations do not feel a need to “rescue” Jesus from his humanity, and they do not sugarcoat his harsh treatment of the woman.

As if stories involving gender were not complicated enough, ethnicity is a primary factor in the story as well. In fact, if one surveys feminist essays on this passage, one notices stages of interpretation. First are moves of recovery and reinterpretation. Then interpreters notice that the issue is far more complex than gender alone and includes considerations of class, of ethnicity, and, more recently through postcolonial contributions, of empire. Make no mistake—empire is at least as alive and well in our century as it was in Jesus’s and Matthew’s.

Another move that feminists make in their recovery effort is to take note of who and what information is *not* in the story. Is there a father? How old is the daughter? Is she there? Feminists pay close attention to children (or lack thereof) in the narratives because in antiquity, as now, there was a tight connection between the fate of women and the fate of children. In fact, in two different places just before and just after our passage (the feedings of the five thousand and the four thousand), Matthew overtly states that the women and children, unlike the men, are not even important enough to count:

And those who ate were about five thousand men, not counting (*chōris*) women and children. (Matt. 14:21, my trans.)

Those who had eaten were four thousand men, not counting (*chōris*) women and children. (Matt. 15:38, my trans.)

One act of recovery, then, would be to start *counting* and *naming* women in the Bible.

Megan McKenna writes about this issue in her book *Not Counting Women and Children: Neglected Stories from the Bible*:

“Not counting women and children.” People react to that phrase in different ways—some with laughter, others with anger, sadness, or disgust. Especially when read aloud, that phrase hangs suspended in the air, like bait on a hook for a fish. One person responds, “I feel excluded.” Another complains, “Women and children are put in the same category.” Such responses are countered, “But we are all the children of God” (theological reaction to emotion). Or, “But they all were fed and everyone was satisfied, full.”

. . . It is amazing that in a culture where we characterize men as the dominant group—and men are still dominant in the church in many ways—that that line is even in the text. . . . Furthermore, sociologists say that when you gather a crowd of men, women, and children, the ratio of women and children to men can be as high as five or six to one. *So, the story is really the feeding of the thirty-five thousand!* (1994, 7–8; italics added)

Thus if we are going to count honestly, let's start calling this feeding story "The Feeding of the Thirty-Five Thousand." In all of these stories about handing out divine bread—Matthew 15 and the feeding miracles—the women and children stand on the margins.

### The Woman as a Paradigm of Faith

New interpretations of the Bible also note that, in addition to being charged with the care of children (usually without pay), women have historically been tasked with caring for the ill as well (usually without pay). Matthew 15, then, features a woman suffering a double burden—caring for a child who is ill. If there is no male provider, she is further disadvantaged. In this story, she attempts to get help from some powerful males, and that becomes, in large part, a harrowing experience of humiliation.

Like the woman with the flow of blood in Matthew 9, the Canaanite woman is unnamed and not explicitly tied to a male. Her social standing is not given. Is she what we would call a single mother? Martina Gnadt sees the woman as a proselyte or God-fearer, because she knows and subscribes to the traditions of the Jews (Son of David, etc.). She is said to have great (*me gas*) faith. Conversely, the disciples are designated as having "little" faith (*oligopistos*).

The woman sees more than Jesus does. . . . In contrast to Jesus, the woman has an inclusive vision of the wholeness God offers, and she holds it fast in the face of persistent attempts to get rid of her—and in the end she is proven right. Jesus makes a fundamental change in his attitude. He has been shown the better way. . . . What is so striking about this story is that here Jesus is espousing a position that in the course of the discussion is shown to be "short on faith" and is overcome. That confers authority on the woman's point of view. It cannot be set aside without further

ado. On the contrary, it has such an inner weight that it must be wrestled with. (Gnadt 2012, 622)

In this interpretation, the woman is a paradigm of faith to be emulated whose persistence and courage benefit many, including at least her daughter, Jesus, the disciples, the early church, and us, the contemporary readers.

## A Jewish Lament

O'Day's treatment of Matthew 15:21–28 focuses upon three aspects of the story: (a) the irony of the Canaanite woman as the quintessential Jew in the narrative; (b) the way the woman shapes Jesus; and (c) how the reader might be shaped by the narrative. Irony is subversive in its own way.

O'Day seeks to show that our passage “is a *narrative embodiment of a lament psalm*” (2001, 119). In the lament psalms (such as Ps. 13), Israel boldly approaches God in the midst of her pain, need, and despair and implores God to rise to the occasion of assisting her, to remain actively faithful to the promises made long ago. O'Day analyzes the eight moves made in a traditional lament psalm, starting with address and concluding with praise. She then maps the story of the Canaanite woman onto this model and argues that, ironically, it's the Canaanite woman who plays the role of Israel in her bold entreaty and her faithful conviction that she deserves to be helped and that she will be helped by the Lord. “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's own disciples who want to dismiss her because she is a foreigner and an irritant. . . . She is not a Jew; she is, nevertheless, fully Jewish” (124).

O'Day stresses not only that the woman is a Gentile female, but, again, even a Canaanite. Furthermore, her faith is anything but submissive. On the contrary, “Jesus was changed by this woman's boldness. . . . She insists that Jesus be Jesus, and through her insistence she frees him to be fully who he is.” O'Day concludes by calling us readers to, “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” (2001, 125; for

a similar interpretation of this passage in Mark's Gospel, consult Pablo Alonso, *The Woman Who Changed Jesus*, esp. 287–343).

## Introducing Justa

Elaine Wainwright's passion for this passage shows in the fact that she has reconsidered it from various angles over her career. (Consult, for example: *Shall We Look for Another?*; "The Gospel of Matthew"; and "Not Without My Daughter.") She reminds us of the importance of naming, reclaiming, and remembering. For her, Matthew evinces numerous tensions. First, Matthew presents Jesus as being in tension with his own tradition. Jesus is the fulfillment of promises made to Israel, but he is opposed by the leaders of Israel who seek to kill him. As seen earlier, at one point "all" of Jerusalem cries out, "His blood be on us and our children" (Matt. 27:25).

Second, there is ethnic tension in the Gospel of Matthew. On the one hand, Jesus came to make disciples of all nations (*ethnē*; Matt. 28:19). On the other hand, he says he came only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. This tension inheres not only in the Gospel of Matthew as a whole, but also in our passage.

Third, there is gender tension:

The tension is also visible, on the other hand, in relation to gender, which is the significant concern in this commentary. Indications have already been given of the inclusion of women within the *basileia* vision and praxis of Jesus. Yet the Matthean Gospel constructs a symbolic universe that is androcentric and encodes the patriarchal constructs present in its sociohistorical location. The text creates a world in which the male norm is coterminous with the human, and this presupposition finds expression in the grammatical and narrative strategies of the text resulting in the marginalization of women. (Wainwright 1997, 637)

The use of masculine language and examples (sons, fathers, men, brothers) obscures women and makes the male the norm for discipleship. Only four women appear in Matthew's genealogy; that is, they are "exceptions." Jerome calls them sinners, and Luther calls them outsiders. So, not only Matthew, but also later interpreters obscure the place of women in Jesus's ministry.

In her essay "Not Without My Daughter: Gender and Demon Possession in Matthew 15.21–28," Wainwright highlights the



importance of naming. She insists that we should refer to the Canaanite woman as Justa, the name given her in the afterlife of the story:

The *Pseudo-Clementine Epistles* give the name “Justa” to the Canaanite woman. I have chosen to use this name throughout this paper in order that in the reclamation of this story, the naming of the woman may lead to her story being remembered in contemporary Christian telling of the story. Unnamed characters tend to be forgotten more easily than those who have been given names, and female characters in the gospel story, especially; named female characters are fewer than named male characters. The naming of women characters, especially when that naming belongs within the Christian tradition, can assist in bringing them to the center of the Christian re-membering. (Wainwright 2001, 126 n. 2)

Wainwright turns to an analysis of the daughter by attending to the interconnection of gender and ethnicity. She determines that demon-possession, which is more prevalent in Greco-Roman sources than Jewish, does not tend to be gendered. While the healer/exorcist is usually male, the afflicted person can be either gender. What stands out in Matthew is that those who have a demon exorcised from them and are then declared as healed using the Greek word *iaomai* (as in our case) are Gentiles. That is, this is the same word used for the centurion’s servant in Matthew 8. Thus the focus on the *ethnicity* of Justa and her daughter stands out.

## Woman Wisdom

Stuart Love connects the Canaanite woman to Israel’s wisdom tradition through the ideal woman of Proverbs 31 as well as Ruth. He treats each figure in turn. He argues in reference to the Canaanite woman:

She, too, should be given “an everlasting name” as a foreigner who honors the God of Israel even if her status is that of a liminal person. She, like the women of the genealogy, wise women in their life settings, courageously speaks and behaves as a capable, worthy woman whose strength is manifest in her persistence with Jesus. Wisdom is seen in her behavior. . . . Wisdom is revealed in her language. There is no other such example in Matthew. . . .

She is a capable, worthy, and wise person who teaches Jesus.  
(Love 2009, 161–62)

Given that Matthew depicts Jesus himself in terms of Woman Wisdom in Matthew 11:28–30 (consult chap. 8, “Jesus across Gender”), interpreting the Canaanite woman within that trajectory elevates her and her powerful witness to the gospel in the Gospel.

### Critique from Jewish Feminists

Jewish feminists take issue with some Christian feminist interpretations of the passage as anti-Jewish on a number of counts. They argue that it is wrong (a) to present Judaism as particularly biased against women, Gentiles, and the sick (as impure) and (b) then to depict Jesus as uniquely “overcoming” the biases of his native Judaism. It leaves the impression that Judaism and Christianity were both in existence at the time of Jesus (they were not) and that Jesus was more a Christian than a Jew. That is, it inappropriately suggests that all the “bad” behaviors or motivations ascribed in Matthew to characters such as the scribes and Pharisees (for example) are representative of Judaism, while Jesus goes against his native Judaism when he interacts graciously with women, Gentiles, and ill people (for more on this topic, consult Gnadt 2012, 621).

Amy-Jill Levine raises some questions along these lines:

Some readers understand the woman as the (postcolonial) Christian who must subjugate herself and her culture to obtain the West’s benefits. For others, the story shows Jesus moving beyond the ideology of chosenness, to embrace (Christian) universalism. However, chosenness need not be an oppressive ideology: it is precisely that ideology that helps groups persevere despite persecution, and it is how the church saw itself. . . . Also, Jesus does not insist that the woman become Jewish to receive the healing. This is an ironic difference from the so-called universalism of those claiming salvation only through Jesus. Rather than view the narrative as hopelessly colonial or employ it to advance a supersessionist agenda, we might see the woman as another Rahab or Ruth: she recognizes her salvation is with Israel’s representative, yet she retains her Canaanite identification; she proves more faithful than insiders (the spies in Jericho; the disciples); and she does what she must to save her family. (2012, 474)

## *LGBTQIA+ Readings*

Women are not the only minoritized group who find hope in this passage. For LGBTQIA+ interpreters, the story inspires in at least two ways. First, those who are currently marginalized as “outsiders” are encouraged to fight for inclusion: “A queer interpretation of this story remembers that often the Christian Church, like Jesus in the story, is reluctant to give queer folk our just deserts; frequently queer activists must resort to extraordinary means to get a hearing” (Bohache 2006, 513).

Second, the Canaanite woman models Acting Up. (Here I allude to the ACT UP movement, AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, an advocacy group that operated in legal, medical, and social realms.) The woman’s assertive faith leads to inclusive justice for all of God’s children. Thus, in addition to calling for bold activism on behalf of the marginalized, the story shows that Jesus himself ordains inclusivity beyond our (and originally his) wildest imaginations. “A queering of Matthew sees hope in this radical inclusivity that pushes the justice of God beyond human conventions and comfort levels and will thus even overcome the predisposition of many toward intolerance and homophobia” (Bohache 2006, 513).

We could multiply examples of minoritized readings, but at this point the reader can see the interpretive strategies involved, which include pressing the Christian community in all times and places to widen the net of inclusion.

## *Postcolonial Readings*

Postcolonial critics have much to work with in this passage. (Warren Carter has done much good work on postcolonial criticism as it illuminates the New Testament, especially the Gospels. Consult his *Matthew and Empire*. For a general primer, consult Carter’s *The Roman Empire and the New Testament*.) In both Jesus’s and Matthew’s time, Palestine was occupied by Rome. Rome crucified Jesus (and many other Jews as well). After Jesus died but before the Gospel of Matthew appeared, Rome burnt the Jewish Second Temple to the ground and expelled the Jews from Jerusalem. In addition to operating under Gentile Roman rule (no matter where the Gospel of Matthew was composed), Matthew’s community had to address ethnic tensions in its midst between Jews and Gentiles. How is a

Christian community supposed to relate to the government at any given moment? How is a Christian community supposed to define its boundaries and establish its identity, especially when it is at odds with both its parent tradition (Judaism) and the ruling government? How does one live in and for God's empire while Caesar and his systems are alive and well?

How is Matthew's community a subversive community with a counternarrative? Caesar Augustus claimed to be a divine savior who brought healing, salvation, and peace (*Pax Romana*); the whole system, of course, was built on power, violence, injustice, and oppression. Christians told a counternarrative about a Messiah who brought *true* healing, salvation, and peace. Part of that involved healing stories. Thomas Bohache notes: "A postcolonial reading of Matthew sees his exorcisms as a way of overcoming the evils of imperialism and colonialism that seem incurable" (2006, 512). For most of the history of scholarship, interpretation has been done by Western males. With the rise of feminism, female Western voices were added. Finally, we are hearing from global voices, many of whom have lived under imperial rule. They have shed new light on the ways the Gospels resist and undermine empire and the ways they inadvertently collude with and propagate the values of Caesar.

I have preached on Matthew 15:21–28 a number of times from various angles and find it endlessly fascinating. I also used it as a test case for an exercise in "the politics of biblical interpretation" in *Engaging the Word*. In that chapter I touch on various interpretive lenses and wrote this concerning aspects of postcolonial interpretation:

The passage is rich with potential for postcolonial analysis as it is rife with political, economic, racial, and ethnic boundary issues. Clearly Israel is privileged in this story, and the unnamed woman is painted as the "undeserving other," a foreigner (even though Jesus is outside of his own country), someone who is "lesser than." She brings nothing to the table; Jesus deigns to provide a handout from his abundance. It's not enough, apparently, for Matthew to call her a Gentile; rather, he designates her a "Canaanite." This is, of course, a historical anachronism since the Canaanites lived many centuries ago and were driven out (killed, assimilated) by the imperializing conquerors, in this case the Israelites. Hence, to call the woman a Canaanite is to further degrade and marginalize her. Furthermore, Jesus tells her flat out that his power and

product is to be used to benefit *only* those of his own nation. This should not surprise the reader since he has already told the disciples in the Missionary Discourse of chapter 10 to “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (10:6).

Not only is this woman not a member of the “house of Israel,” she also is male-less, which in her culture (and perhaps in most cultures today) leaves her exceedingly vulnerable. Without a male, there’s no money; without money, there’s little access to health care. Without a male of her own, a woman is often left no choice but to get on her knees and throw herself upon the mercy of another male. How terrifying, then, when Jesus, the foreign male she is desperately and shamefully begging from (and not even for her own sake but for the sake of one even more vulnerable than she, a female child), first rebuffs her with silence. What does his silence mean? Will he harm her, kick her as she’s down in the dirt debasing herself, groveling, making herself as small as possible so that he is bigger and taller and can look down upon her as she piles up honorific titles fit for an emperor or a king (note the reference to David)? Will he simply ignore her and thereby destroy her last hope?

As if that weren’t threatening enough, now a whole pack of males (Jesus’ disciples) turn against her, and Jesus makes the comment about his patriotism to Israel. Still, she presses on, having nothing left to lose. Jesus then makes another racial slur that literally dehumanizes her. Israelites are children; her kind are mere curs. Sometimes interpreters try to soften Jesus’ words by noting that the diminutive form of the word dog is used here. But as one scholar said, there’s not a lot of difference between “bitch” and “little bitch” (Levine 2001, 32). The context in which Jesus makes the comment is polemical, not warm and cuddly. Another commentator notes: “[D]og’ was an insult in the earliest extant pagan tradition, as was its female derivative form. . . . Dogs were known for their attachment to dung and sniffing other dogs’ rear ends . . . ; more commonly they were linked with birds as scavengers that devoured unburied corpses” (Keener 2009, 416–17).

For the sake of her daughter, she absorbs the slur and even adopts it so as to protect herself and her daughter. She has no power and is in an extremely compromising situation—now is not the time to fight back.

But as a matter of fact, she is fighting back by “using the master’s tools to dismantle his house.” Hers is a subversive approach, and women worldwide as well as groups like African Americans

who were enslaved in America have been relying on such techniques for centuries. And sometimes it works. By the end of this story, this woman has taught Jesus a lesson about his own identity and mission that even he himself didn't know (let alone his ill-mannered disciples), that his mission was broader than he had realized. Jesus, it turns out, is not a flat literary character; he develops, with her help. Her grit and wit literally saved her and her daughter. She is the only hero in the story. You might say she is a protofeminist. (Clark-Soles 2010, 145–46, revised slightly)

### *Disability Studies*

Disability studies has taught us to ask other good questions as we interpret biblical texts and seek to learn how they might inform our current lived reality. Continuing from the section in *Engaging the Word* that began above, I wrote:

Women and children have always been disproportionately represented among the poor. Women still do the majority of the world's labor and own hardly any of the world's goods. In this story, gender, race, ethnicity, culture, politics, and disability intertwine. The woman has a sick child and seems to have no one to rely on. Women tend to be assigned the care of those who are sick, thus further inhibiting their ability to sustain a profitable job that could lead to independence and agency. In this story, the daughter is said to be "tormented by a demon." Disability theorists would have us unpack this. What did it mean in its own context? Certainly ancient medical models have little in common with current ones. Does she have a sickness, an illness, a disease (these are not synonyms)? Is this a physical ailment? A mental illness? Is it a short-term or chronic condition? Does it incapacitate the daughter such that she cannot easily be integrated into society, be a "productive" citizen, hold a job, or have a family? How old is this daughter? Can she worship with her community, or must she remain sequestered according to her society's mores?

Just as the language of illness is debated, so is the language of health. What does it mean to be healed or cured? How is that different from being saved, if at all? When the woman with the issue of blood was made well in Matthew 9:22, Matthew uses the Greek word *sōzō*, typically translated as "save." Indeed, Jesus was to be named "Jesus" because he was to "save [*sōzō*] his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). Why, then, do we hear in 15:28 that

the woman's daughter was "cured" (Greek: *iaomai*)? Was there something different about the result of the miracle in chapter 9 versus chapter 15? Furthermore, can one be saved without being cured? Can one be both "whole" and disabled? Is the language literal, metaphorical, both? How did her being healed affect her life on the ground—her relationships with friends, enemies, family; her sense of self; her identity; her relationship with God; her place in her religious community; her place in her society and its economy? And, importantly, what does her story teach us to ask about our own context with respect to persons with disabilities? (Clark-Soles 2010, 146–47)

While Elaine Wainwright began to explore exorcism and healing in terms of health care, the full force of that line of questioning was not to come until postcolonialism and disability studies further developed, which they have enormously since Wainwright wrote and even since I wrote the above in 2010. We now have the excellent *The Bible and Disability: A Commentary* (Melcher, Parsons, and Yong 2017). Disability studies teaches us to ask a number of new questions. (For those who regularly preach, I recommend Kathy Black, *A Healing Homiletic*. In addition, I highly recommend taking advantage of the resources provided by the Institute on Theology and Disability; consult the Collaborative on Faith and Disabilities, <https://faithanddisability.org>.)

As part of the good news that the kingdom of God has come near in Jesus, the Gospels narrate numerous stories of miraculous cures. While healing is a worthy goal of Christian practice, to be celebrated whenever and wherever it occurs, the cure stories are not necessarily unmitigated good news for faithful people who live with chronic disabilities. As Kerry Wynn notes: "The two most common assumptions in popular theology that marginalize people with disabilities are (1) disability is caused by sin, and (2) if one has enough faith, one will be healed" (2007, 61). In our passage Jesus says: "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." We are then told, "And her daughter was healed instantly" (Matt. 15:28). Did the healing of the daughter depend upon the faith of the mother? What about those who are not healed—do they or their advocates simply not have enough faith? Does the burden of healing rest upon the afflicted individual and their family, or is the situation more complex than that?

### *Matthew 15 as a Model of Allyship*

In her essay “Enemies, Romans, Pigs, and Dogs: Loving the Other in the Gospel of Matthew,” Love Sechrest writes as a “female African American NT [New Testament] scholar who is well read on the dynamics of race and gender in American society” (2015, 71). Through her work, she aims to “construct a Christian ethic of allyship” (73). Though the language of “allies” arose in the context of LGBT activism, it applies to other instances in which a person from the majority group works to end the oppression of minority populations. In terms of race in America, allyship entails whites, who constitute the powerful majority, working to interrupt racism and eradicate oppression of people of color.

How does Matthew help us? Sechrest first addresses Matthew’s ambiguous attitude toward Gentiles. She assumes that Matthew writes from a Jewish perspective that reflects the tensions found in the Old Testament “with respect to ancient Israelite ethnocentrism on the one hand and a welcome of outsiders through conversion on the other hand” (83). Sechrest also assumes that the author of Matthew was “ethnically Jewish” (83 n. 58). Matthew evinces positive examples of Gentiles, including the magi (2:1–12); the Roman centurion (8:5–13); the Canaanite woman (15:21–28); and the Roman soldiers who confess at the cross (27:54). On the other hand, there are passages that derogate Gentiles. Having presented concerns from Jewish feminists above, it is appropriate to include these words of Sechrest here: “Jesus’s encounter with the Canaanite woman . . . triggers a firestorm of protest about sexism and hierarchy and ethnic discourse. Interpreters recoil at the evangelist’s portrait of a woman who seems to participate in her own denigration, while other readers resent the subtle anti-Semitism that emerges when critics label Jesus’s behavior as racist and then suggest that it was typical of Jewish thought of the time” (86).

Sechrest depicts Matthew’s sociohistorical milieu as a community pressured from all sides: Gentile persecution in Syrian Antioch; conflict with Pharisees in the wake of the Jewish War; and pressure to accept local Gentile converts into a Torah-observant mission. Thus, Sechrest operates from the assumption that Matthew is a Torah-observant Jew who is faced with the challenge of inviting into his community those who had traditionally opposed him and his community, including neighboring Gentiles as well as



the Gentile occupying government of Rome. Thus Matthew's willingness to depict a Roman centurion and a Canaanite woman, both traditional enemies of Israel, as persons who model faithful Christian discipleship is astonishing.

These are the only two Gentiles in the Gospel who converse with Jesus. In a poignant statement, Sechrest notes that the Canaanite woman represents the "old" enemy and the centurion the "new" enemy—enemies all the same: "the Canaanite and the centurion are both enemies who reach out to Jesus for grace across the lines of profound enmity" (2015, 97).

The Roman represents the oppressive military force that has within living memory of the community receiving this Gospel devastated the Jewish people, temple, and capital city, inflicting horrific losses that threatened to crush the very heart of the people. The Canaanite represents a different kind of enemy but one no less potent, embodying deep-rooted, longstanding, and entrenched hostility that is intertwined with a peculiar kind of intimacy that is anchored in shared life, shared land, and even shared ancestry. (95–96)

Both gender and race come into play here. Regarding gender, certainly the woman is treated more harshly than the male. Regarding race, there are numerous points to be made. For instance, since Sechrest's article focuses upon race, it is important to highlight that "race," of course, is patently a construct of modernity. As part of that factual conversation, it is important to include this comment from Sechrest:

Further, we should reflect on the fact that Jesus's Canaanite ancestry [recall that Rahab the Canaanite appears in his genealogy] problematizes the racial purity aspect of the ethnocentric message in Matt. 10:5–6. Just like the findings of modern genetics that renders the idea of pure races dubious, Matthew's genealogy suggests that the icon of Judaism, the Davidic Messiah-King Jesus, is himself "mixed race" (96 n. 93).

Matthew, following Old Testament precedent, presents dogs as negative—ferocious and antagonistic: "Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you" (Matt. 7:6). Thus, when he refers to the woman and her daughter as dogs, it raises the

specter of racialized stereotypes. The woman, however, deals with the affront astutely:

Yet rather than trying to resist the categorization, the woman accepts the image and channels it in a way that advances her plea. If it is possible to characterize this acceptance as something akin to internalized racism, a more generous understanding is that she recognizes that the label is a part of the cost of seeking a relationship with a long-time enemy. She understands that she lives in a world that she did not construct and which does not facilitate entering into the relationship she seeks. Her only way forward is to trust that Jesus's love can transform the terms of this encounter. (Sechrest 2015, 98)

Powerful words.

The way that Sechrest brings together the ancient text with modern analogies of allyship is creative and thought provoking. Jesus, representing Judaism to some degree, is aligned with modern oppressed groups, while the woman, as an outsider and historic enemy, is depicted in the role of an ally who shows humility and deference to the oppressed minority that Jesus represents. One analogy is that white Christians should recognize “that communities of color are endowed by their Creator with all the resources of agency and co-regency in creation when it comes to leading work that participates with Christ in bringing justice and healing to earth as it is in heaven” (Sechrest 2015, 100–101). Another is to recognize that the Canaanite woman represents the white ally who understands that we do not live in isolation from one another. Everyone gets hurt and becomes less than God intended them to be when we participate in racism. White allies will recognize that, though they individually may not subscribe to racism, they “must squarely face the lack of trust and conflict bequeathed on them by history” while simultaneously boldly daring to dream of and work toward “the new creation that Jesus represents” (103). “They listen and learn, and like the Canaanite, they engage deeply with what the oppressed say, even when it hurts. ‘When criticized or called out, allies listen, apologize, act accountably, and act differently going forward.’ In solidarity with those who have no respite from racism and prejudice, allies are endlessly persistent and refuse to back down, take breaks, or retreat back into privilege” (103).

In Sechrest's proposal, then, Jesus represents African Americans and the Canaanite woman represents the model white ally. Hear her call:

The goal of allyship is not for people in privileged groups to be shamed, punished, or retaliated against but to eliminate the conditions that dehumanize us all, to restrain evil in our midst, and to seek our common good. Each and every one of us needs to be able to see what and who have been previously invisible as we cautiously move towards inhabiting the kinds of relationships that give honor to the gospel, risking pain but persisting in our desire to build the beloved community. (Sechrest 2015, 105)

## The Lectionary

The story of the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15 appears in the Roman Lectionary (RL) on the 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time in Year A, and it is also a weekday reading for Wednesday of Week 18 of Ordinary Time. According to the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL), the passage is to be read in Year A on Proper 15 (20), in the season after Pentecost. The parallel in Mark 7:24–30 is designated by the RCL to be read in Year B on Proper 18 (23), in the season after Pentecost. According to the RL, it is a weekday reading for Thursday of Week 5 of Ordinary Time.

The inclusion of the story in the lectionary readings provides congregations the opportunity to share (even emphasize) some of the newer interpretations now available, to recover and lift up women and any who are marginalized, to seek ways that we can become allies to those in need of healing or liberation.

## Conclusion

In keeping with the goals of the book presented in the introduction, a major purpose of this chapter has been to provide readers with a sense of the variety of approaches that are available to a contemporary interpreter. We have heard from interpreters who occupy diverse social locations. We have drawn upon scholarship that illuminates the ancient sociohistorical context within which the

narrative is set. We have provided further resources for study. For those who previously were unfamiliar with this woman, or who had in mind only Mark's version, I hope you have added a new sister to your great cloud of witnesses who sustain you.

We have allowed this fascinating woman—Justa, if you will—to take her rightful place at center stage with the spotlight shining upon her. As a result, we have had the opportunity to engage her more fully, spot details that had previously escaped our notice, and ask questions that may have never occurred to us before. We have marveled at her courage, tenacity, wit, and willingness to fight boldly for her daughter in an oppressive system or systems (since both the religious system as well as the political system of Rome were deeply patriarchal). We have interrogated the text.

In the end, however, the real force of the story may reside in its power to interrogate us. Who are we in this story? Are we the woman, the daughter, Jesus, the disciples, or someone else? Do we long for healing and inclusion? Do we offer it? Do we obstruct it? And if so, do we obstruct it because of our individual attitudes and practices or because we are part of a larger system that inhibits healing and inclusion? As Christians, do we understand or care to understand the culture we live in enough to assess honestly where we need to work within a given system and where we need to promote change in the system? If this text were to have its way with us, what would happen? Would we more closely represent the kin-dom of God as God envisions it, “on earth as it is in heaven”? If we did, that would be good news, the gospel, indeed!

## Recommended Resources

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