

A REMARKABLE WOMAN – THE CANAANITE WOMAN IN MATTHEW

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Abstract

This article focuses upon the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15. Matthew's story is interpreted socio-historically to understand the obstacles faced by this woman in her conversation with Jesus. It turns out that not only did she come to the conversation with obstacles, but the disciples and Jesus created more obstacles for her during the dialogue. In spite of all these obstacles this woman turned out to be remarkable. She proved a deep faith and was willing to be humiliated. Her determination cannot be ignored. It is suggested to let the Canaanite woman retell her own story to let her voice be heard. This woman's story is then retold in a way to give some focus to her remarkable character and to give some insight into her fears, pain, ideas, opinions, experiences and questions.

Key words: *Canaanite woman, conversion, faith, obstacles, miracle, Matthew 15:21-28.*

1. Introduction

Through history, many women struggled for righteous treatment (read Barber, 1995). As well as fighting for themselves, women have tried to change the world for their families, for others too. Elizabeth Fry (1780-1845) helped people in prisons, Florence Nightingale (1820-1910) improved the way hospitals were run, Clara Barton (1821-1912) helped wounded soldiers and the victims of disasters, Eglantyne Jebb (1876-1928) believed in the need to look after children, Mother Theresa of Calcutta (born 1910) dedicated her life to help the poor and sick, Sue Ryder (born 1923) spent her life helping people who are disabled, sick or suffering. These and many other women proved themselves to be courageous women. Some were born into slavery, and most of them grew up in societies where women were not expected to be educated. Nevertheless, they caused positive changes in their societies.

The Bible does not offer lengthy narratives about ancient women. It was written by male authors and their aim was not to spread stories about ancient women. Nevertheless, we do find limited glimpses of courageous women during the life of Jesus Christ. Matthew 15:21-28 and Mark 7:24-30 offer us enough information about the Canaanite woman to realize that this woman was remarkable in her own way.

The Canaanite woman in Matthew and Mark is presented to be a determined woman who finally got healing for her daughter. Not only does she have the guts to approach Jesus, but she is also willing to be answered harshly and still beg for healing. As the caregiver of her family, she is the one approaching Jesus.’

In both stories about her in the New Testament, this woman does not have a name. Matthew calls her by a derogatory term, religious in nature “a Canaanite”. Mark is more neutral when his description is more political “a Syro-Phoenician” (read Sim, 1998:223; Levine, 1988:138-139). In the story where she was involved, where Jesus regarded her good enough to heal her daughter, she is not important enough to be mentioned by her name.

Theissen (1983:52) indicates that in miracle stories there are often obstacles in the way of the suppliant, either constituted by the crowd or the disciples. The Canaanite woman must have faced many obstacles in her dialogue with Jesus. What were these obstacles? Because of the differences between the versions of Matthew and Mark, this article limits itself only to Matthew’s version of the story of the Canaanite woman.

2. Obstacles faced by the Matthean Canaanite woman

The Canaanite woman did not only face obstacles presented by the crowd or the disciples. She came with obstacles to the dialogue, baggage from her past, her culture, her religion. And then she encountered obstacles in the environment of her dialogue with Jesus. Matthew’s story in Matthew 15 starts with an introduction stating the obstacles: “...a Canaanite woman from that region (Tyre and Sidon) came out...”. She came from the regions of two gentile cities known to have worshiped many gods, as a Canaanite, a Gentile, and a woman.

2.1 Obstacles presented by society

Matthew 15 only mentions the facts that the Canaanite woman who came to Jesus for help, came from the regions of “Tyre and Sidon” and that she was a “woman” (Matthew 15:22). In one single sentence, this woman is identified. Her name is not necessary for Matthew’s story about this healing by Jesus. The bottom line of his story is simple: Jesus is willing to heal the daughter of a “woman” among the “Gentiles” from “Tyre and Sidon”. Socio-historically, these attributes are obstacles given by the society this woman lived in. This woman’s identity thus created an obstacle in itself. Her gender, race and descent were negative for her plea before Jesus.

Being a *woman* in the ancient Greek society, was already an obstacle to those women. Their sphere was the home and they were supreme in the household (Ferguson, 1987:58). However, the woman was restricted in public appearance. As the management of the family was the woman’s duty, it seems logic that the Canaanite woman did her best to help her sick child. However, for her to have gone out into public and speak to a Jewish man, must have taken some guts from her side. Add to

that her public presence among Jews while she was a Gentile – a Gentile woman in the midst of a Jewish circle of mostly men. She could not expect a positive response to her actions.

Another difficulty stems from the particular society this woman came from. Matthew 15:21-22 states that she came from the regions of “Tyre and Sidon”. Although the Old Testament indicates that the inhabitants of Tyre and Sidon were intelligent, skilled people who gave generously and were used by God to offer help in time of need, they are also described as enemies of Israel, primarily because of their foreign gods (Jackson, 2002:35). This woman was a descendant from the sinful *Canaanites*. Jackson (2002:99) says the “Canaanites” in the Old Testament are identified as stereotypically bad. According to Lemche (1991:165-166) the term “Canaanite” was a synonym for the “opponent” and therefore the Canaanites were allowed no entry to the Jewish community nor permitted to intermarry with them. Jackson (2002:84) writes that it is a metaphor for any foreigner to Judaism, whether by race, religion or trade. Her social background was against her. She came from the regions of cities with a low reputation. Sim (1998) says that the Matthean text strengthens the view that the Jewish community of Matthew had suffered persecution at the hands of the Gentiles, and was now keeping itself at a safe distance from the Gentile world (read Hare, 1967:123; Meier, 1983:48-49).

Coming thus from a suspicious background to the Jews’ sphere to ask for help, was not favourable for the Canaanite woman at all.

2.2 Obstacles presented by religion

Being a *gentile* in the midst of Jews meant nothing positive for the Canaanite woman. In the socio-historical world within and behind the Matthean text, the Israelites believed themselves to be the chosen people, and the Jews held a strong conviction of the necessity of being as member of the chosen race by pure descent in order to share the future blessings. A great deal of attention was given to racial purity (Ferguson, 1987:427). Israel was God’s possession out of all nations of the earth. What were the attitudes of pagans toward Christians? Because of religion, the Jews became the enemies of all other nations (read Ferguson, 1987:473). Sim (1998:251) writes that Matthew’s text spells out that the mission of Jesus was solely to save his people, the Jews, from their sins. Gentiles had no part of this salvation unless they became proselytes. Matthew’s story makes it clear that this Gentile woman can only get assent to the mission, on condition that Israel’s religious primacy be recognized (Harrisville, 1966:274).

In his answer, Jesus compares this Gentile to a *κυνάριον*- a house dog eating from its owner’s table. Although some scholars interpret the “dogs” in Matthew 15:26 as “hard-hearted people” in general (see Gundry, 1994:122-23 and Overman, 1990:100), it seems more likely to consider “dogs” to be a harsh reference to the Gentiles in general (see Sim, 1998:239; Davies and Allison, 1991:676,677; Levine, 1988:147-150; Hagner, 1995:171-172). Why would Jesus motivate his initial choice not to help her by saying that “hard-hearted people” are not to be helped? I assume this would mean that Jesus considered this woman right from the beginning as one of those hard-hearted people? This seems unlikely. It makes more sense to interpret his words as a reference to her identity as a Gentile.

Coming to Jesus, thus, as a Gentile was already an obstacle to the Canaanite woman. This gentile woman is asking help from a Jewish Messianic figure, when she calls him “Son of David” (see Lee & Viljoen, 2009:80). Lee & Viljoen (2009:80) say that Jesus’ reaction to her request is exactly what contemporary Jews expected from a rabbi as the Gentiles were not worthy getting divine mercy. Gundry (1982:312-313) writes that she faced an obstacle of *Jewish restriction* on Jesus’ ministry rejection

2.3 Obstacles presented by Jesus in the text

Theissen (1983:272) writes that Jesus appeared as a miracle-worker at a time when miracle-workers of various types were unusually active in Palestine. Miracle-working rabbis also emphasised their teachings by miracles. Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa for an example, performed healings and proved himself to be immune to snake-bite. The Canaanite woman thus, must have heard many miracle stories. In the time of her daughter’s illness, a miracle worker must have been her last resort of hope.

However, this man she expected a miracle from, was not going to make it easy for her. She was up for rejection. Jesus ignored her at first. Matthew 15:23a says it simple: “... he did not answer her at all”. Gundry (1982:312) writes that this woman’s faith had to overcome the *silence* of Jesus. This silence was the first obstacle created by Jesus, for the Canaanite woman to overcome. When one reads the story, it is almost shocking to see Jesus responding in the same way one would expect ancient society to do. It is shocking because the New Testament gives one the idea that Jesus came to the world to show that in spite of the ancient patriarchal society, women and men were equal. In his sojourn on earth Jesus treated women with respect. Jesus is not pictured elsewhere to order women around, to ignore them in public, to treat women as the weaker ones. We are told that Jesus healed both men and women (Matthew 8:14-15, Matthew 9:18-26, Mark 1:30-31, Mark 5:21-43, Luke 4:38-39, Luke 8:40-56, Luke 13:10-17). Through Jesus there was thus no distinction between man and woman (Luke 1:41-45, Acts 2:1-4, Acts 9:36-42, Acts 17:4 and 12). In the Samaritan woman’s story made a deliberate choice to cross ethnic and religious and gender boundaries (read Cornelius, 2008).

Yet, the Canaanite woman approaches Jesus and requests him to heal her sick daughter and he does not answer her at all. A second time he ignores her, but “answer” her by speaking to the disciples (Matthew 15:24). He does not make eye contact with her, does not even bother to speak to her. His answer to the disciples is meant as an answer to her, with the non-verbal message that she is not worth speaking to.

The Canaanite woman is persistent (Matthew 15:25) and the third time Jesus answers her, but in a harsh way, comparing her to a dog: “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs” (Matthew 15:26). Lee & Viljoen (2009:81) indicate that Gentiles were generally regarded as dogs. It was made clear that this Gentile woman was not worthy of the divine mercy and Jesus’ ministry, of help, healing, grace, forgiveness and membership of the community. Jesus’ initial attitude creates a background not encouraging for the woman’s plea. The reference to “dogs” indicates that this woman was considered by Jesus to be an outcast. Jackson (2002:57) proves from various texts that the term “dog” distinguishes persons outside the Jewish faith or established in-group. The Canaanite woman faced an obstacle of not being part of Jesus’ circle.

2.4 Obstacles presented by Jesus' disciples

In Matthew's story, the disciples ask Jesus (Matthew 15:23) to dismiss the Canaanite woman because she was "crying after them". She became a nuisance and bothered them. These men were not willing or ready to become the witnesses for her conversion. However, they did not get rid of her themselves. They wanted Jesus to get rid of her without granting her request (read Gundry, 1994:312-313 and Theissen, 1983:53). Their whole attitude following this woman's plead, tells one that they felt antagonistic. They are on their way with their master and here a Gentile woman lays claim to the healing of her daughter. In the persons of the disciples, this woman faced an obstacle of *antagonism* (see Gundry, 1982:312; Lee & Viljoen, 2009:81).

2.5 Conclusive

Theissen (1983:52) writes: "what a torment it is to have the source of potential healing before one's eyes but not to be able to reach it". What a torment it must have been for the Canaanite woman to see Jesus as the potential healer of her daughter before her, but not to be able to persuade him to help her. She even fell on her knees, an act to attract the attention and to show her confidence in Jesus (read Theissen, 1983:53). Jesus ignored her at first, he would not listen or heal before she really showed her determination and distress, being humiliated and rejected. This created the perfect environment for teaching and healing from Jesus. Bamberger (1968:40) called it the "request and rejection" pattern, a formula for proselytism into the Hebrew faith in the rabbinic tradition. The woman made unusual efforts to persuade Jesus to help her. Once she proved that she overcame all the obstacles, Jesus acknowledged that as "faith" (see Theissen, 1983:53) – a remarkable faith.

3. The Canaanite woman is remarkable

The Canaanite woman takes the initiative to approach Jesus and she comes out of her region. Jackson (2002:105) made me realize that she was in the process of leaving her own people behind to convert to the religion of the Jews. Quite remarkable to begin with!

In spite of all the obstacles she faced, the Canaanite woman did not give up (Lee & Viljoen, 2009:82). She turned out to be remarkable. She proved a *deep faith in Jesus' miraculous powers* and it was applauded by Jesus. As a matter of fact, it was Jesus who acknowledged her being remarkable when he said in verse 28: "O Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." Hanna (1983:34) writes that the response of Jesus is filled with emotion. The unusual position of the word *μεγάλη* lends feeling and emphasis to his appreciation of the woman's attitude: "your faith is great indeed". This, Hanna proceeds, is further underlined by the occurrence of *ὦ* in the vocative exclamation: "O woman!". This woman's ability to overcome all the obstacles she faced, proved a faith deep enough to let Jesus bless her with grace and the healing of her daughter. To use Theissen's (1983:53) words: Jesus acknowledged her faith, made up of insistence and humility. Jackson (2002:1) says this woman desired to become a member of the community. It is, however, a question whether the "faith" of this woman was a case of her conversion and regeneration. It can rather be seen as a true faith in Jesus' healing powers – an unusual strong faith in Jesus as

Healer. There is always a possibility that she became converted as a result of the miracle. She proved herself willing to completely surrender herself to God's reign. She was willing to become a member of the Jewish community if only her daughter could be healed. If we use Taylor's (129) categories of conversion, one could argue that the Canaanite woman was acknowledging Jesus' divinity and was willing to worship him. Whether conformity in the practice of the Law and socialization and integration into the community had already been part of her faith, is disputable. For Jesus, however, she must have proved enough signs of true discipleship (read Jackson, 2002:47).

This woman must have heard enough about Jesus to really *trust* him. In Mark 3:7-8 we are told that Jesus had a following from the area of Tyre and Sidon. It is said in verse 8 that "hearing all that he was doing, they came to him in great numbers from...the region around Tyre and Sidon:.. People from there must have heard about him and this particular woman was no exception. When she says "Lord" and "Son of David", it means she must have heard a report concerning Jesus as a "pious man who gladly helps everyone" or "an envoy of God able to work wonders" (Harrisville, 1966:281). When one reads the stories about the Canaanite woman in the New Testament, it is striking that in Mark's story the emphasis is upon the miracle of healing (Harrisville, 1966:276). Jesus becomes the Great Healer. In Matthew's story, however, it is more about faith. The Canaanite woman becomes a remarkable example of true faith. Harrisville (1966:285) discussed how this story proved that faith is not a quality which takes its support from what can be perceived. This woman trusted Jesus despite the evidence of her eye and ear. She had no support. One could have expected her to have abandoned her plea and declared Jesus as a fraud, says Harrisville. Her faith consisted only in assurance of things she hoped for. She unquestioningly insisted in petitioning Him until her daughter could share in His miraculous powers.

This woman had the *determination, perseverance* and *willingness* to be humiliated as long as her daughter could be healed. As a woman and a Gentile she could not expect a fair treatment. However, she was willing to face society's anger and resentment in order to help her child. She was even willing to be put in the dog-class (see Harrisville, 1966:284). When she was humiliated by Jesus' reference to her as a dog, she must have realised where she was coming from. She came from the idolatry of Tyre and Sidon (see Harrisville, 1966:278). However, she also knew where she was heading – to the "sweet smell of the myrrh of the Saviour (Harrisville, 1966:278).

In Matthew's story, however, the Canaanite woman's heart, desires, pain, fears and thoughts are not obvious and can hardly be seen or felt. We only find glimpses of her in Matthew's text (read Skinner, 1987:3). Franzmann (2000) suggested a method to hear women's voices in text by *inter alia* to move them to centre stage to tell her own story. To conclude this article, it might be interesting to hear the same story from the pen of the Canaanite woman herself. It gives a fresh approach and provides new insights in the remarkable woman's story, and gives us some insight into her internal drama.

4. A retelling of her history

My daughter was sick – being tormented by a demon I believe. Nobody could help her and I was scared to loose her. I have heard many miracle-stories. Just then I heard about Jesus, a Jewish rabbi, who healed many sick people. He

came to our district of Tyre and Sidon. I was willing to trust the Jews' God if this man could heal my child. I went out where he was among his people. There were so many people, I had to shout: "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me, my daughter is tormented by a demon". Jesus simply ignored me and walked on. My child needed help so urgently, I kept on crying out for help. Jesus' disciples seemed to be frustrated by my presence as they urged him to get rid of me: "Send her away – she keeps shouting after us". They must have realised I was a Canaanite. Something in me wanted to give up. How can I expect a Jew to help me after all the pain us Gentiles caused them? But I remembered the pain and confusion on my daughter's face. Luckily Jesus stopped and said: "I was only sent to the lost sheep of Israel". I knew he was a Jew and that the Jews regarded him as their property. But I was willing to follow their God and I believed this Jesus could help me and my daughter. I was willing to beg him. I knelt before him and begged once more: "Lord, please help me". He looked at me and answered: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs". The Israelites were regarded as his children and in their midst I was the "dog" – a Gentile. I knew where I was coming from, but I also knew where I wanted to go. So I begged him again: "Even dogs eat crumbs that fall from their master's table". I needed his mercy and passion and healing. He looked at me with a smile: "Woman, great is your faith!". And he promised me to heal my daughter! This changed my whole life! The humiliation I felt in this short time, was nothing compared to the peace I then felt! The God of the Jews was also available for Gentiles! A new life was ahead of me and my family.

5. Conclusion

When interpreting the socio-historical background of Matthew's story of the Canaanite woman, it becomes possible to retell her story. The above retelling of the story of the Canaanite woman creates a different understanding, opens up the internal drama of this woman. It brings out the remarkable characteristics of the Canaanite woman. In exploring the socio-historic background of Matthew's story, it became clear that this woman faced tremendous obstacles that make her faith and perseverance even more remarkable. Not only did she come to the conversation with obstacles, but the disciples and Jesus created more obstacles for her during the dialogue (as presented by Matthew). In spite of all these obstacles this woman turned out to be remarkable. She proved a deep faith and was willing to be humiliated. Her determination cannot be ignored.

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