



Research Article

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Geography as Revelation: Gentile Faith in the Syrophoenician/Canaanite Woman Narratives

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Received Date: July 13, 2026**Published Date:** July 21, 2026

Abstract

The narratives of the Syrophoenician woman in the Gospel of Mark 7:24-30 and the Canaanite woman in the Gospel of Matthew 15:21-28 have often been interpreted through the lenses of Gentile inclusion, ritual purity, ethnicity, gender, or the apparent harshness of Jesus's response. While such approaches remain important, they frequently overlook the theological significance of geography and narrative movement within the pericope itself. This study argues that Jesus's journey from Jewish Galilee into the Gentile territories of Tyre and Sidon functions as a decisive theological act that reframes the encounter. Although Jesus verbally declares that he was sent "only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt 15:24), his physical movement into pagan territory already anticipates the universal scope of salvation.

Further developing Matthew's broader salvation-historical movement from a mission focused on Israel toward a universal mission, this paper contends that the woman's faith emerges not merely from belief in Jesus as miracle worker for her daughter's benefit or from hope for eventual Gentile inclusion, but from recognition that Jesus himself has crossed ethnic, territorial, and theological boundaries to enter her world.

The narrative therefore becomes not simply a story about a Gentile woman approaching Israel's Messiah, but about Israel's Messiah approaching a Gentile woman in anticipation of the universal mission culminating in Matthew 28:19-20 and the apostolic proclamation to all nations.

Keywords: Narrative geography; Gentile mission; salvation history; Matthew's universalism; Syrophoenician woman; Canaanite woman.

Introduction

Among the most discussed episodes in the Synoptic tradition is the encounter between Jesus and the Syrophoenician woman in Mark 7:24-30 and its Matthean parallel concerning the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:21-28. Modern scholarship has increasingly emphasised the complexity of the passage. Furthermore, it has variously approached the text through feminist criticism, postcolonial

analysis, salvation-history, redaction criticism, narrative criticism, and interreligious dialogue [1]. Feminist and postcolonial readings explore the woman's rhetorical agency and resistance. Dorothy Lee interprets the woman as embodying faithful persistence amid divine silence and ecclesial exclusion [2]. Postcolonial interpreters emphasise the crossing of ethnic boundaries and the destabilisation of insider-outsider categories [3].

¹ Lawrence D. Hart, "The Canaanite Woman: Meeting Jesus as Sage and Lord (Matthew 15:21-28 and Mark 7:24-30)," *The Expository Times* 122, no. 1 (2010): 20-25;

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0014524610377043> [accessed 21 May 2026]. See also, Petr Pokorný, "From a Puppy to the Child: Some Problems of Contemporary Biblical Exegesis Demonstrated from Mark 7.24-30/Matt 15.21-28," *New Testament Studies* 41, no. 3 (1995): 321-337;

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688500021512> [accessed 21 May 2026]; Poling Sun, "Naming the Dog: Another Asian Reading of Mark 7:24-30," *Review & Expositor* 107, no. 3 (2010): 381-394; <https://doi.org/10.1177/003463731010700310> [accessed 21 May 2026]; Guy Sayles, "Jesus and the Challenging Gift of the Other: An Expository Article on Mark 7:24-30," *Review & Expositor* 114, no. 1 (2017): 51-6; <https://doi.org/10.1177/0034637316688036> [accessed 20 May 2026].

² Dorothy A. Lee, "The Faith of the Canaanite Woman (Mt. 15.21-28): Narrative, Theology, Ministry," *Journal of Anglican Studies* 13, no. 1 (2015): 12-29;

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740355314000187> [accessed 20 May 2026]; for different methodological interpretations, see David D.M. King, "The Problem of Jesus and the Syrophoenician Woman. A Reader-Response Analysis of Mark 7:24-31," *Journal of Religion, Identity, and Politics* 3, no. 1 (2014): 1-21; https://udenver.academia.edu/DavidKing?utm_source=chatgpt.com [accessed 22 May 2026].

³ YongHan Chung, "The Canaanite Women in Korean Context: A Postcolonial Feminist Reading of Matthew 15:21-28," *HTS Theologies Studies / Theological Studies* 81, no. 1 (2025): 1-8; <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v81i1.10529> [accessed 20 May 2026].

The narrative has generated substantial scholarly discussion also because of Jesus's initially resistant response [4], his reference to Israel as τέκνα, tékna, "children" and Gentiles as κυνάρια, kynária, (literally, "little") "dogs," and the woman's striking persistence. Recent scholarly debate has focused on whether Jesus's language concerning "dogs" constitutes insult, pedagogical testing, or rhetorical provocation [5]. N. Clayton Croy argues that the diminutive form may soften but does not entirely eliminate the force of exclusion. In a similar vein, Robert G. Bratcher and Eugene A. Nida opine that "Though the word dogs, in its regular form would be the common term used by Jews in speaking disrespectfully of the Gentiles, Jesus may have softened the term ... by using the diminutive ending." [6] Nevertheless, the woman transforms the metaphor into a theology of participation through abundance.

Importantly, contemporary readers frequently recognise the radical inclusivity implied by the narrative. Theological discussions repeatedly interpret the episode as demonstrating that divine mercy extends beyond ethnic and covenantal boundaries. Yet one feature of the narrative has not received sufficient theological attention: Jesus's journey itself. Both Mark and Matthew deliberately narrate Jesus leaving Jewish territory and entering the Gentile

region of Tyre and Sidon immediately before the encounter. Mark writes: "From there he arose and went away to the region of Tyre (τὰ ὄρια Τύρου, tà ória Týrou)" (Mark 7:24) [7]. Matthew similarly records: "And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon (τὰ μέρη Τύρου καὶ Σιδῶνος, tà méré Týrou kai Sidónos)" (Matt 15:21) [8].

The movement appears not to be incidental. Rather, the geographical transition may be understood as forming part of the theological logic of the narrative. Jesus does not encounter the woman accidentally while she intrudes into Jewish territory. In a literary-textual perspective, Jesus is narrated as entering Gentile or pagan territory. This movement creates an interpretive tension: verbally Jesus insists that his mission concerns Israel, yet physically he has already crossed Israel's borders into Gentile land [9]. This paper argues that the theological force of the episode lies precisely within that tension. The geographical movement of Jesus's journey appears to foreshadow the later universal scope of salvation before it is verbally articulated. The woman's faith is therefore grounded not merely in confidence in Jesus's miraculous power, but also in the revelatory significance of the geography where that power manifests itself.

⁴Brendan Byrne, "Matthew," in *The Paulist Biblical Commentary*, eds. José Enrique Aguilar Chiu, *et al.* (New York / Mahwah, NJ, 2018), 940.

⁵See Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark*, ed. Harold W. Attridge (Hermeneia; Fortress – Augsburg, Minneapolis, MN, 2007), 366-367.

⁶N. Clayton Croy, "Puppies and Pejoratives: Did Jesus Insult the Syrophoenician Woman (Mark 7:24–30)?," *New Testament Studies* 70, no. 3 (2024): 407-420;

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688524000031> [accessed 20 May 2026]. See also, Robert G. Bratcher and Eugene A. Nida, *A Handbook on the Gospel of Mark* (UBS Handbook Series; New York: United Bible Societies, 1961), 238; José Enrique Aguilar Chiu, "Mark," in *The Paulist Biblical Commentary*, eds. José Enrique Aguilar Chiu, *et al.* (New York / Mahwah, NJ, 2018), 995.

⁷Unless otherwise indicated, biblical citations are from the *New Revised Standard Version* (Oxford: Oxford University Press - National Council of the Churches of Christ, 1990).

⁸For a discussion about the redactional character of Tyre (and Sidon), see Yarbro Collins, *Mark*, 364-365. For more information about Sidon, see, Philip C. Schmitz, "Sidon," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols, edited by David N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:17-18; for Tyre, see, H. Jacob Katzenstein and Douglas R. Edwards, "Tyre," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols, edited by David N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:686-692; Robert I. Bradshaw, "The City of Tyre in History and Prophecy," in *Biblical Studies.org.uk* (1999);

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/article_tyre.html [accessed 22 May 2026].

⁹Michael Flowers, "Jesus' "Journey" in Mark 7:31. Interpretation and Historical Implications for Markan Authorship and both the Scope and Impact of Jesus' Ministry," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 14 (2016): 158-185; <https://doi.org/10.1163/17455197-01402005> [accessed 22 May 2026].

Literary Context in Mark and Matthew

The Markan Context

In Mark, the episode follows directly after disputes concerning ritual purity (Mark 7:1-23). Jesus confronts Pharisaic traditions regarding handwashing and external defilement, culminating in the declaration: “There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him (τὰ κοινούντα τὸν ἄνθρωπον, τὰ κοινούντα τὸν ἄνθρωπον)” (Mark 7:15). Mark adds the editorial comment: “Thus he declared all foods clean” (Mark 7:19) [10]. Immediately afterward comes the geographical transition: “And from there he arose and went away to the region of Tyre” (Mark 7:24). The juxtaposition by Mark appears deliberate. Questions of purity and exclusion are immediately followed by Jesus’s Gentile territorial boundary crossing. The dismantling of ritual barriers may be embodied geographically in Jesus’s movement into Gentile territory. Scholars frequently recognise this literary sequencing as significant [11]. The narrative movement implies that the dismantling of ritual boundaries prepares for the crossing of ethnic and territorial boundaries.

Jerome H. Neyrey’s socio-symbolic analysis of purity systems provides an important framework for understanding the theological significance of such boundary crossing. Drawing upon the anthropological work of Mary Douglas [12], Neyrey argues that purity regulations in Second Temple Judaism functioned not merely as ritual prescriptions but as symbolic mechanisms for maintaining social, ethnic, and theological order. Boundaries between clean and unclean, Jew and Gentile, and holy and profane were expressed spa-

tially through geography, table fellowship, bodily interaction, and territorial separation [13]. Within this framework, Jesus’ movement into the region of Tyre and Sidon may be interpreted not simply as geographical relocation but as symbolic transgression of established purity boundaries. Yet in the Gospel narratives, holiness is not contaminated through contact with impurity; rather, holiness radiates outward from Jesus and transforms spaces of exclusion into places of encounter and restoration. Geography therefore functions not merely as narrative setting but as a medium through which theological meaning is disclosed.

The Matthean Context

Matthew preserves the same basic structure. Jesus disputes with Pharisees concerning purity (Matt 15:1-20) before travelling into the district of Tyre and Sidon (Matt 15:21). However, Matthew intensifies the ethnic tension by changing Mark’s Ἑλληνίς, Συροφονίκισσα τῷ γένει, Hellênís Syrophoiníkissa tō génei, “Syrophenician woman” (Mark 7:26) [14] into a γυνὴ Χαναanaíta, gynḗ Chananaíta, “Canaanite woman” (5:22) [15]. This is a striking archaism. By the first century, “Canaanite” was no longer a normal ethnic designation. The Matthean terminology appears intentionally to evoke Israel’s ancient enemies [16]. The Matthean wording may therefore intensify the scandalous character of the encounter. Jesus does not merely enter Gentile territory; he encounters a representative of the ancient nations displaced during Israel’s conquest traditions [17].

¹⁰These elements may be compared with the pericope describing the baptism of the centurion Cornelius and his household in Acts 10:14-15. There, Peter refuses to eat “anything common” (κοινὸν, koinòn), a stance subsequently overturned by the divine injunction, “σὺ μὴ κοίνου” (“[What God has made clean,] you must not call common”). Significantly, the rebuke is not principally concerned with dietary regulations themselves, but anticipates a more profound theological point: the dissolution of ethnic and cultic boundaries between Jews and Gentiles. In this context, God redefines the parameters of holiness and covenantal community. Luke T. Johnson observes that the vision reorients Peter’s symbolic universe (The Acts of the Apostles, Sacra Pagina 5 [Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier–Liturgical Press, 1992], 190; 194). Likewise, Ben Witherington III maintains that, “Peter has now concluded that his vision was not just about food but also or perhaps primarily about persons. No person should be called common or unclean” (The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998], 353). The symbolic association between food laws and human communities is deeply rooted within the Jewish tradition itself (Lev 20:24–26). See also, Aguilar Chiu, “Mark,” 995.

¹¹Hart, “The Canaanite Woman,” 20-25; Sayles, “Jesus and the Challenging Gift of the Other,” 51-63; Sun, “Naming the Dog: Another Asian Reading of Mark 7:24-30,” 381-394.

¹²See, Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966); 7-28; 114-139.

¹³See Jerome H. Neyrey, “The Idea of Purity in Mark’s Gospel,” *Semeia* 35 (1986): 91-128; *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 1-35; Neyrey, ed. *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 97-124.

Theological Geography

Tyre and Sidon in Biblical Memory

Tyre and Sidon were historically Phoenician cities north of Galilee. Within Israel's Scriptures, these cities often symbolised all that induces impurity. The cities occupy a complex and frequently negative role within Israel's prophetic imagination. In Isaiah 23, Tyre is portrayed as the wealthy maritime trading centre whose international commerce and pride provoke divine judgment: 'îr rōvlîm "the merchant city" whose traders were kin'ânêha nikbaddê~ârez, "the honoured of the earth" (Isa 23:8). Ezekiel 26–28 develops this imagery even further, lamenting Tyre's extraordinary wealth, naval dominance, and self-deification; the king of Tyre is condemned because his heart became proud and claimed divine status amid immense prosperity (Ezek 28:2). Joel 3:4-8 presents Tyre and Sidon as hostile nations that exploited Judah and trafficked Israelites into slavery, thus becoming objects of eschatological judgment. Similarly, Amos 1:9-10 condemns Tyre for violating covenantal brotherhood and delivering entire communities into slavery. Collectively, these prophetic traditions establish Tyre and Sidon not merely as neighbouring Gentile cities but as theological symbols of the nations in rebellion against God and his covenant. They were associated with economic excess, pagan identity, oppression, and resistance to Israel's covenantal vocation. Against this Old Testament background, Jesus's journey into the region of Tyre and Sidon in Matthew 15

and Mark 7 may therefore carry profound theological significance. The narrative presents the Messiah Jesus as entering territory traditionally associated with estrangement from Israel and opposition to God's people, thereby transforming a symbolic geography of hostility into a place of divine encounter and unexpected faith.

Sidon was also associated with Jezebel, daughter of the king of Sidon (1 Kgs 16:31), who became emblematic of idolatrous corruption. Thus, Jesus's movement into this region carries symbolic weight. He enters territory historically associated with opposition to Israel's covenantal identity [18].

The Elijah Typology

The journey into Phoenician territory also evokes the story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath in Sidon (1 Kgs 17:8-24). During famine, Elijah is sent by God not to Israelites but to a Gentile widow in Phoenician territory. Jesus himself later references this narrative in Luke 4:25-26: "There were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah... and Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon." The parallel is profound: Elijah crosses into Gentile territory; divine mercy is extended outside Israel; a foreign woman demonstrates receptivity; miraculous deliverance occurs for her household. The Syrophoenician narrative in Matthew and Mark therefore participates in a broader biblical motif: God's movement toward outsiders through prophetic visitation [19].

¹⁴Moody, Brent A., *The Syrophoenician Woman: Mark's Narrative Purpose* (Term paper; Course 5350 - Seminar in the Synoptics; Memphis, TN: Harding School of Theology), 1-25;

https://www.academia.edu/4914806/the_syrophoenician_woman_marks_narrative_purpose [accessed 22 May 2026].

¹⁵See, Kara J. Lyons-Pardue, "A Syrophoenician Becomes a Canaanite: Jesus Exegetes the Canaanite Woman in Matthew," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 13, no. 2 (2019): 235-250; <https://doi.org/10.5325/jtheointe.13.2.0235> [accessed 22 May 2026].

¹⁶Glenna S. Jackson, "Enemies of Israel: Ruth and the Canaanite Woman," *HTS Theologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 59, no. 3 (2003): 779-792; <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v59i3.673> [accessed 20 May 2026]; Cedric Vine, "Repatriating the Canaanite Woman in the Gospel of Matthew," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 58, no. 1 (2020): 7-32;

<https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/auss/vol58/iss1/3> [accessed 21 May 2026].

¹⁷See Tarak Dridi, "Meta: Research in Hermeneutics, Phenomenology, and Practical Philosophy," 16, no. 1 (2024): 182-205; https://www.metajournal.org/articles_pdf/182-205-dridi-meta-techno.pdf [accessed 22 May 2026].

¹⁸Gerard, Mussies, "Jesus and 'Sidon' in Matthew 15/Mark 7," *Bijdragen* 58, no. 3 (1997): 264-278; <https://doi.org/10.1080/00062278.1997.10739676> [accessed 21 May 2026].

¹⁹See, Aquilar Chiu, "Mark," 995.

'Geography as revelation' or 'spatial theology' functions simultaneously as a literary-narrative strategy and as a theological claim. Literarily, Mark and Matthew employ spatial movement and territorial boundary-crossing to structure narrative tension, irony, and meaning, particularly through Jesus's deliberate movement into Gentile regions. Theologically, this same movement embodies and anticipates the universal scope of salvation, revealing the outward trajectory of divine grace beyond Israel. Spatial theology therefore operates not merely as symbolic decoration or historical backdrop, but as a narrative-theological mode of disclosure through which the evangelists communicate Christological and missional revelation. In this sense, the concept is literary in method, theological in significance, narrative in mediation, and ultimately Christological in meaning.

"Only to the Lost Sheep of Israel"

Salvation-Historical Priority in Matthew

The Gospel according to Matthew develops this universal horizon through a gradual narrative movement. Jesus's statement in Matthew 15:24: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" must be understood within the salvation-historical framework of Matthew's Gospel [20]. Matthew initially emphasises the priority of Israel within Jesus's earthly ministry. In Matthew 10:5-6, the disciples are instructed to: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles... to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

Yet the Gospel simultaneously anticipates Gentile inclusion from its opening chapters onward. Gentile Magi from the East worship the infant Jesus (Matt 2:1-12), and the Roman centurion in Matthew 8:5-13 serves as examples of extraordinary faith. Jesus then declares: "Many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 8:11).

Thus, Matthew appears to present a carefully structured salvation-historical progression. Matthew's geographical sequencing appears deliberate and may be interpreted as anticipating the later universal mission. The episode therefore suggests that spatial movement functions theologically within the Gospel narrative. Ulrich Luz argues that Matthew intentionally constructs a theological movement from an Israel-centred mission toward universal mission [21]. Israel retains chronological priority within salvation history, but not exclusive possession of salvation. This movement culminates after the resurrection in the Great Commission: "Go

therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Matt 28:19). Thus Israel possesses chronological priority, not exclusive privilege.

Paul expresses the same pattern: "To the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Rom 1:16). The phrase "first" (πρῶτος, *prōtos*) implies sequence rather than limitation [22]. The New Testament presents a progressive trajectory of universalisation of salvation that begins within Israel yet ultimately transcends ethnic, social, and cultural distinctions. In Luke 24:47, the risen Christ commissions that "repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed ... beginning from Jerusalem," thereby affirming Israel's priority within salvation history. Similarly, Paul declares that the gospel is directed "to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Rom 1:16), preserving the historical precedence of Israel while simultaneously extending salvation to the Gentiles. This movement toward universality reaches its theological culmination in Galatians 3:28, where Paul affirms that "there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus," thus articulating a new communal identity in which traditional ethnic, social, and gender distinctions are transcended in Christ.

The encounter with the Canaanite woman may be understood as occupying a theological turning point between Israel's priority and the gathering of the nations. The narrative is neither a denial of Israel nor an abandonment of covenantal history. Rather, it reveals that the Messiah sent first to Israel is already moving outward toward the Gentile world. Within this framework, Jesus's journey into Tyre and Sidon becomes extraordinarily significant. Jesus's geographical movement anticipates the later universal mission.

The Tension Between Speech and Movement

The crucial observation is this: while Jesus verbally restricts his mission to Israel, his bodily movement contradicts a narrow territorial exclusivism. He has already crossed into Gentile land. Narratively, Jesus's feet have gone farther than his words. The episode may therefore be read as creating tension between verbal restriction and enacted movement.

This generates a profound theological irony: although the woman hears Jesus articulate a seemingly restrictive understanding of his mission, his very presence within her territory already intimates the wilful extension of divine grace beyond Israel. His geographical movement may function as a hermeneutical disclosure of the universal scope of salvation. Indeed, the incarnation itself may be understood as a decisive movement toward the outsider.

²⁰Matthew formulates this saying by drawing on Jesus's self-understanding as one sent by God, employing Old Testament terminology associated with Israel, and reflecting the historical limitation of Jesus's mission to Israel. The association with Israel involves the Aramaism in οὐκ ... ἐν μὴ (Mt 15:24), a reflection of "not ... except," i.e., "only": see Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew. A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church Under Persecution*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 313.

²¹Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8–20: A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 339–347.

²²See Robert H. Gundry, *Mark. A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 373. It is to be noted, however, that the statement of Jesus that the "children" must be fed "first" πρῶτος, *prōtos* makes more sense in a Galilean context. The implication in the source was probably that Jesus's mission to the people of Israel precedes that of the disciples of Jesus to the Gentiles after the resurrection: see, Yarbrow Collins, *Mark*, 365.

The Faith of the Woman

Faith as Recognition

The woman's faith is often interpreted as persistence despite rejection (Mark 7:26-28; Matt 15:22-27) [23]. While correct, this interpretation remains incomplete. The narrative suggests that her faith arises partly from recognising that Jesus has come into her world. She does not travel to Jerusalem. She does not intrude into synagogue space. Jesus comes to Tyre and Sidon. This reverses expected movement patterns. In ancient Jewish thought, Gentiles typically approached Israel's God through pilgrimage toward Israel. Here, however, Israel's Messiah journeys outward toward pagan territory. The woman may be portrayed as perceiving this movement as revelatory.

Nor should one overlook Mark's continued emphasis upon secrecy: "He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it" (Mark 7:24). Yet the evangelist immediately qualifies this assertion with the striking observation that "he could not be hidden." The irony is profoundly theological in character. Mark's narrative may suggest that the presence of the Messiah resists confinement and concealment; divine grace, by its very nature, overflows the boundaries of secrecy and manifests itself in revelation.

"Even the Dogs Eat the Crumbs," and Healing Occurs Through Touching Hems

The woman responds: "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table" (Matt 15:27). Her answer accepts Israel's historical priority while simultaneously discerning abundance within Jesus's mission. If Israel receives bread, even crumbs from the Messiah possess saving power. The woman's appeal for "crumbs" participates in a broader Synoptic theology of abundance in which even partial participation in Jesus's presence mediates fullness of grace.

A striking theological parallel may be drawn between the faith of the Syrophoenician/Canaanite woman and that of the haemorrhaging woman in the Synoptic tradition (Mark 5:25-34; Matt 9:20-22; Luke 8:43-48). Both women approach Jesus from positions of exclusion: one because of ritual impurity and chronic illness, the other because of Gentile identity and pagan geography. Yet both express faith through what may be termed the theology of 'sufficiency in contact.' The haemorrhaging woman believes that "if I only [ἐάν μόνον, eàn mónon] touch his cloak, I will be made well" (Matt 9:21), while the Syrophoenician woman insists that "even [καὶ γὰρ, kai gàr] the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table" (Matt 15:27). In both narratives, seemingly minimal participation

in Jesus's presence is understood as fully efficacious because the power of salvation resides wholly in his person.

Scholars such as Joel Marcus observe that Mark consistently portrays faith as recognising the superabundant and boundary-breaking power of Jesus that overflows conventional limits of purity and exclusion [24]. Similarly, Richard T. France notes that the "crumbs" image in Matthew 15 does not signify insignificance of grace but rather abundance overflowing beyond Israel [25]. The haemorrhaging woman's touch of the fringe (κράσπεδον, kráspe-don) of Jesus's garment parallels the Syrophoenician woman's appeal for crumbs: both women believe that even the slightest contact with the Messiah mediates transformative power. Ulrich Luz further argues that the Canaanite woman perceives that divine mercy cannot be contained within ethnic boundaries [26]. In this sense, the two narratives mutually illuminate one another. The haemorrhaging woman believes healing can flow even from the hem of his prayer garment (κράσπεδον τοῦ ἱματίου αὐτοῦ, kráspe-don tou himatíou autou [Matt 9:20]); the Syrophoenician woman believes salvation can flow even from crumbs beneath the table of the banquet prepared for all, Jews and Gentiles. Both women may therefore be interpreted as embodying radical faith in the inexhaustible abundance of Christ, whose holiness and mercy overflow all social, ritual, and ethnic barriers. Regardless of interpretive approach, the woman perceives possibility within Jesus's presence itself. She interprets his arrival in Gentile territory as opening access.

Narrative Irony and Missional Anticipation

The Messiah Beyond Borders

The narrative significance of Jesus's movement extends beyond the immediate episode and anticipates the broader expansion of the Gospel in early Christianity. The geography anticipates the later Gentile mission in Acts of the Apostles. In Acts the Gospel moves from Jerusalem to Judea, then Samaria, then "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The Syrophoenician woman episode foreshadows this outward movement in miniature. Before the Church officially reaches the nations, Jesus himself crosses borders.

The Woman as Prototype Disciple

Matthew praises only two individuals for "great faith": the centurion (Matt 8:10), and the Canaanite woman (Matt 15:28). Both are Gentiles. This is not accidental. Matthew contrasts Israel's unbelief with outsider recognition. The woman may function as a paradigmatic figure insofar as she perceives the universal trajectory already implicit in Jesus's movement, and transforms geography into embodied revelation.

²³See, Yarbro Collins, Mark, 367-368.

²⁴Joel Marcus, Mark 1-8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary (Anchor Yale Bible 27; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 466-473.

²⁵Richard T. France, The Gospel of Matthew (New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 592-595.

²⁶Luz, Matthew 8-20, 339-347.

²⁷Marcus, Mark 1-8, 466-473.

The Woman as the Paradigm of Boundary-Crossing Faith

The climax of the narrative is not merely the granting of the miracle, but Jesus's explicit commendation of the woman's faith. In Matthew 15:28 Jesus declares: "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." This statement is extraordinarily significant within Matthew's narrative theology. Matthew rarely uses the expression "great faith" (πίστις μεγάλη, *pístis megálê*), and when he does, it is applied not to Israel's religious elite nor even to the disciples, but to Gentiles. The Roman centurion (παρ' οὐδενὶ τοσαύτην πίστιν ἐν τῷ Ἰσραὴλ εὗρον, Matt 8:10) and the Canaanite woman (Matt 15:28) become the exemplary figures of faith within the Gospel. By contrast, the disciples are repeatedly rebuked for possessing "little faith" (oligopistía, ὀλιγόπιστοι) (Matt 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8). The juxtaposition is deliberate and theological.

The woman's faith should therefore not be reduced merely to persistence, humility, or confidence in Jesus's miraculous power. Rather, her faith consists in perceiving the meaning of Jesus's movement towards her. She appears to perceive that the Messiah of Israel's coming into Gentile territory itself reveals divine intentionality. Even before the universal mission is formally proclaimed, she understands that the presence of Jesus in Tyre and Sidon signifies that the mercy of Israel's God is already overflowing ethnic and territorial boundaries. In this sense, the woman becomes the first character in Matthew to grasp existentially what the Gospel will only later proclaim universally in the Great Commission. She sees that Jesus has not remained confined within Israel's borders but has crossed into pagan territory. Her faith is grounded precisely in this startling reality: although Jesus "desired that no one should know" (οὐδένα ἤθελεν γινῶναι; Mark 7:24), she nevertheless encountered him, for he "could not remain hidden" (οὐκ ἠδυνήθη λαθεῖν)—at least not from her. From the perspective of the narrative, his presence in that region may be understood as providentially oriented toward her encounter with divine mercy.

Thus, Jesus's praise functions not only as approval of her persistence but as confirmation of her theological insight. Matthew appears to portray her as correctly discerning the deeper significance of his journey. While Jesus verbally affirms the historical priority of Israel, the woman perceives that his very presence among the Gentiles already anticipates the inclusion of the nations. Her faith therefore becomes paradigmatic Christian faith: the recognition that in Jesus Christ God crosses boundaries to seek those who are far off. This interpretation also illuminates the Christological depth of the narrative. The geographical dynamics of the episode ultimately point beyond narrative space toward a broader Christological pattern and significance. The Gospel narratives may be interpreted as portraying divine movement toward the outsider. Just as the incarnation itself represents God crossing the infinite boundary between divine holiness and fallen humanity, so too Jesus's movement into Tyre and Sidon embodies the outward trajectory of grace. The narrative may suggest that the woman perceives Jesus not merely as a miracle worker who can heal her daughter, but as one who has already crossed boundaries toward her. In this respect, the Canaan-

ite/Syrophoenician woman stands as one of the profoundest models of faith in the New Testament: she understands that salvation begins not with humanity's search for God, but with God's journey toward humanity.

Theological Implications

Christological Movement

Theologically, the episode may be interpreted as reflecting the logic of incarnation itself. The Gospel is fundamentally about divine movement toward humanity: God comes toward sinners; holiness moves toward impurity; Israel's Messiah enters pagan space. Mark consistently portrays Jesus as transgressing boundaries that separate clean from unclean, Jew from Gentile, and insider from outsider [27]. The Syrophoenician narrative thus becomes a climactic enactment of Mark's theology of overflowing holiness. Rather than impurity contaminating Jesus, holiness radiates outward from him. The woman's faith rests upon this movement.

Mission as Going Toward the Other

The Church's later Gentile mission emerges organically from Jesus's own pattern. Before commanding disciples to go to the nations, Jesus already journeys toward them. The narrative may suggest that mission begins not with conquest but with presence.

Grace Before Explicit Inclusion

Importantly, the narrative suggests that grace often precedes theological explanation. Jesus's movement into Tyre and Sidon anticipates what later becomes explicit after the resurrection. In this narrative, geography functions sacramentally insofar as spatial movement becomes a visible mediation of theological meaning. Jesus's crossing into Gentile territory does not merely symbolise the future universal mission but performs and anticipates it narratively. Geography therefore operates as enacted theology, embodied revelation: territorial movement discloses the outward movement of divine grace beyond Israel. In this sense, spatial transition becomes revelatory and performative, communicating Christological and missional meaning through embodied narrative action.

Conclusion

When read within their literary, geographical, and salvation-historical contexts, these narratives reveal a coherent theological pattern. The Syrophoenician/Canaanite woman narratives are not merely stories of a Gentile woman successfully petitioning a reluctant Jewish Messiah. Rather, they are narratives of divine approach. At their theological core, they disclose the outward movement of God in Christ. While Jesus verbally affirms the historical priority of Israel ("I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" [Matt 15:24]), his deliberate journey into the pagan territories of Tyre and Sidon simultaneously enacts a wider salvific horizon. Before the universal mission is proclaimed in Matthew 28:19, Jesus physically embodies it by crossing ethnic and territorial boundaries. The tension between his stated mission and his enacted movement is the theological heart of the passage.

The woman's faith therefore emerges not simply from belief in Jesus's miraculous power, nor merely from hope that Gentiles might eventually participate in salvation. Rather, she perceives that Jesus himself has crossed boundaries to enter her world. Her faith recognises something more profound: Jesus has come from Israel into her pagan space. The episode suggests that Jesus's movement into Gentile territory is not accidental but theologically meaningful; it creates the conditions for this revelatory encounter with the woman. He went there for her. The journey itself may thus function as revelation within the narrative.

This explains why Jesus publicly praises her faith as μεγάλη, megálê, "great" (Matt 15:28). She understands before the disciples do that the Messiah's presence in Gentile territory is itself a theological declaration. In entering Tyre and Sidon—regions long associated with paganism and estrangement from Israel—Jesus transforms a geography of exclusion into a place of divine encounter. Thus, the episode is not merely about a Gentile woman receiving a miracle for her daughter. It is about the outward movement of the Messiah toward the outsider. Before Acts, before Pauline universalism, and before the Great Commission, the Gospel already reveals its universal trajectory in the footsteps of Jesus himself. The Syrophoenician woman understands this before anyone else in the narrative does [1-32].

Acknowledgements

None

Conflict of Interest

No Conflict of Interest.

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