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### “Who’s in Charge Here? How Traditional and Feminist Scholars Explain the Story of Jesus and the Canaanite/Syrophoenician Woman.”

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#### ABSTRACT

In New Testament times, a woman’s sphere of influence was restricted to her home and family. In accordance with the status quo, stories involving Jesus healing a woman typically cast the female in a silent and passive role. However, the story of the Canaanite/Syrophoenician woman disrupts this pattern of submission and silence. Rather than waiting for Jesus to heal her daughter or asking politely, she demands Jesus to take action. Her initiative has led to a number of interpretations of the passage in the Gospels, which have differed greatly in traditional and feminist scholarship. Through reviewing the literature on these interpretations, I argue that the differences in interpretations are due to traditional scholars focusing on Jesus’s actions and messianic identity, while feminist scholars fixate on the women’s bold actions and motivations.

**Keywords:** Feminist Criticism, Traditional Criticism, Canaanite Woman, Syrophoenician Woman, Women in the Bible, Gospel Criticism and Interpretation.

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# “Who’s in Charge Here? How Traditional and Feminist Scholars Explain the Story of Jesus and the Canaanite/Syrophoenician Woman.”

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### INTRODUCTION

When the Bible was written, a woman’s sphere of influence was restricted to her home and family.<sup>2</sup> To go even further, Susan Asikainen explains, “[i]t was shameful for a person to be out of place: a woman who had too public a role was unsuitably masculine.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, to emphasize their femininity, women were expected to be modest, shy, and quiet.<sup>4</sup> Tertullian (1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> c. CE) wrote that “a female would rather see than be seen,” illustrating the submissive role women were expected to take.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Jose ben Johanan of Jerusalem, who lived around 150 BCE, stated, “[h]e that talks much with womankind brings evil upon himself and neglects the study of the law.”<sup>6</sup> Philo of Alexandria (1<sup>st</sup> c. CE) viewed women as inferior and subordinate because their minds were passive, while men's minds were active.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the idea that women should be seen and not heard was prevalent before and during Jesus’s ministry.

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<sup>2</sup> Ben Witherington, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 2.

<sup>3</sup> Susanna Asikainen, “Women Out of Place: The Women Who Challenged Jesus,” *Neotestamentica* 52, no. 1 (2018): 181.

<sup>4</sup> Wendy Cotter, “Mark’s Hero of the Twelfth-Year Miracles: The Healing of the Woman with the Hemorrhage and the Raising of Jairus’s Daughter (Mark 5.21-43),” in *A Feminist Companion to Mark*, ed Amy-Jill Levine and Marianne Blickenstaff (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2004), 58.

<sup>5</sup> Cotter, 58-59.

<sup>6</sup> Evelyn Stagg and Frank Stagg, *Woman in the World of Jesus*, 1st ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978), 52.

<sup>7</sup> Stagg and Stagg, 41.

Stories involving Jesus healing women typically cast the females in silent and passive roles because this was the status quo. However, the Canaanite/Syrophoenician woman in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew disrupts these patterns of submission and silence. Not only is she one of the only women in the Gospels who addresses Jesus, she also takes initiative and insists that Jesus heal her daughter.<sup>8</sup> Antoinette Wire calls stories like this in the Bible "demand stories" because someone other than Jesus takes initiative while Jesus takes a more passive role.<sup>9</sup> The story of the Canaanite/Syrophoenician woman is a demand story, thus the interpretations of her passage in the Gospels have differed greatly in traditional and feminist scholarship. I argue that this is because traditional scholarship focuses on Jesus's actions and Messianic identity, while feminist scholarship fixates on the woman's bold actions and motivations.

In the story, the Canaanite/Syrophoenician woman comes to Jesus and begs him to cast a demon out of her daughter, but he refuses and insults her.<sup>10</sup> However, she uses his insult to convince him to heal her daughter—which he does.<sup>11</sup> This story is strange for many reasons; it is the only record of Jesus healing a female Gentile pagan,<sup>12</sup> being bested in an argument,<sup>13</sup> not physically confronting a demon,<sup>14</sup> and refusing to heal someone.<sup>15</sup> John Meier notes, "[n]owhere else in the Gospel tradition does Jesus address a sincere petitioner with such harsh insulting language."<sup>16</sup> The Canaanite/Syrophoenician woman story shows the reader a side of Jesus that

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<sup>8</sup> Frances Taylor Gench, *Back to the Well: Women's Encounters with Jesus in the Gospels*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 45.

<sup>9</sup> Gench, 50.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 15:22-26, Mark 7:25-27.

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 15:27-28, Mark 7:28-30.

<sup>12</sup> Dorothy A. Lee, "The Faith of the Canaanite Woman (Mt. 15.21-28): Narrative, Theology, Ministry 1," *Journal of Anglican Studies* 13, no. 1 (2015): 23.

<sup>13</sup> Stagg and Stagg, *Woman in the World of Jesus*, 114.

<sup>14</sup> Sharon H. Ringe, "A Gentile Woman's Story, Revisited: Rereading Mark 7.24-31a," in *A Feminist Companion to Mark*, ed Amy-Jill Levine and Marianne Blickenstaff (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2004), 87.

<sup>15</sup> Ringe, 88.

<sup>16</sup> Gench, *Back to the Well*, 9.

does not necessarily fit with his other portrayals, which has prompted many scholars to explain this abnormal behavior in different ways.

Before discussing the story and interpretations of Jesus and the Canaanite/Syrophenician woman, it is important to examine the terms used to describe her. In the Gospel of Mark, she is depicted as Greek and born in Syrian Phoenicia.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the descriptor "Syrophenician" is appropriate; it explains the woman's hometown and lack of Jewish heritage. In contrast, Matthew describes the woman as Canaanite,<sup>18</sup> indicating a dramatic shift in mood. Here, characterization of the woman accentuates her differences from the Israelites on a racial and spiritual basis.<sup>19</sup> In the Old Testament, the Canaanites are "worthy of extermination."<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, the term "Canaanite" was so archaic that this is the only instance in the New Testament where it is used.<sup>21</sup> Some scholars have argued the term acts as a means to evoke memories of other Canaanite unconventionally successful women, like Rahab, Herodias, and Tamar.<sup>22</sup> Each of these women act courageously and boldly to achieve their goals.<sup>23</sup> In particular, Rahab's story appears similar to the account of the Canaanite woman.<sup>24</sup> Rahab, a prostitute at the walls of the city of Jericho, hides spies from Israel and asks for their help in escaping when they destroy the city.<sup>25</sup> She trusts the spies' promise to come back for her and declares that Israel's

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<sup>17</sup> Mark 7:26.

<sup>18</sup> Matthew 15:22.

<sup>19</sup> Lee, "The Faith of the Canaanite Woman," 15.

<sup>20</sup> Stephenson Humphries-Brooks, "The Canaanite Women in Matthew," in *A Feminist Companion to Matthew*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2001), 142.

<sup>21</sup> O'Day, "Surprised by Faith: Jesus and the Canaanite Woman," in *A Feminist Companion to Matthew*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2001), 115.

<sup>22</sup> Humphries-Brooks, "The Canaanite Women in Matthew," 155, and Richard Bauckham, "The Gentile Foremothers of the Messiah: The Canaanite Women" in *Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002), 43.

<sup>23</sup> Bauckham, "The Gentile Foremothers of the Messiah," 43.

<sup>24</sup> Humphries-Brooks, "The Canaanite Women in Matthew," 155.

<sup>25</sup> Bauckham, "The Gentile Foremothers of the Messiah," 45.

God is the true God, which points to her exceptional faith as well.<sup>26</sup> Although the connection is tentative, it alludes to a possible reason for Matthew's use of such the unusual term.

This is the only example of Jesus refusing to heal someone in the gospels, so it is important to look at how and why he denies her daughter healing. In Matthew, Jesus denies the woman three times through silence, theology, and a mix of theology and insult.<sup>27</sup> After the woman encounters Jesus and calls for help, he ignores her.<sup>28</sup> Even his disciples want Jesus to send the woman away, but he answers them that he was sent only to Israel.<sup>29</sup> In saying this, he actively ignores the woman, but also does not force her to leave.<sup>30</sup> After this refusal, the woman still pleads with Jesus to help her.<sup>31</sup> Jesus challenges her by replying, "[i]t is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."<sup>32</sup> By calling her a dog, he labels her with the term used to describe people who were hostile to God's people and laws.<sup>33</sup> It was a very harsh term that compared people to dogs who were "contemptible scavengers who lick human blood."<sup>34</sup> However, the woman identifies with this term<sup>35</sup> and seemingly changes Jesus's mind.<sup>36</sup> Feminist scholars are more willing to hold that Jesus's mind is changed because they focus on his behavior throughout this story, while traditional scholars are more hesitant to express this change because they believe that Jesus's deity would imply that he is omniscient and therefore cannot change his mind.<sup>37</sup> Immediately after her final plea, Jesus's demeanor changes: he addresses her

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<sup>26</sup> Humphries-Brooks, "The Canaanite Women in Matthew," 144.

<sup>27</sup> Gench, *Back to the Well*, 4.

<sup>28</sup> Matthew 15:23.

<sup>29</sup> Matthew 15:23-24.

<sup>30</sup> Stuart L. Love, "Jesus, Healer of the Canaanite Woman's Daughter in Matthew's Gospel: A Social-Scientific Inquiry." *Biblical Theology Bulletin: Journal of Bible and Culture* 32, no. 1 (2002): 16.

<sup>31</sup> Matthew 15:25.

<sup>32</sup> Matthew 15:26.

<sup>33</sup> Gench, *Back to the Well*, 9.

<sup>34</sup> Ringe, "A Gentile Woman's Story, Revisited," 89.

<sup>35</sup> Ringe, 91.

<sup>36</sup> Richard Bauckham, "The Gentile Foremothers of the Messiah," 43.

<sup>37</sup> Gench, *Back to the Well*, 21. Gench offers an explanation about how Jesus was able to change his mind due to his humanity.

directly to commend her faith<sup>38</sup> and uses the vocative "O Woman,"<sup>39</sup> indicating that he is deeply moved by her faith.<sup>40</sup> Frances Taylor Gench writes, "Jesus thus honors the woman and her faith, her unshakeable confidence in him, and her insight into the inclusive power, presence, and mercy of God,"<sup>41</sup> Jesus's change in countenance at the woman's persistence and boldness is unique to the story of the Canaanite/Syrophoenician woman.

The Canaanite/Syrophoenician woman's persistence and faith despite social constraints are so extraordinary that Jesus seemingly changes his mind after refusing her three times. Joanna Dewey explains the woman's outlandish actions well: "[t]his is the only instance in the extant tradition of Jesus being taught by someone, and that someone is a woman who should not properly be speaking to him at all."<sup>42</sup> It was extremely inappropriate for a woman to speak in public, especially with a man who was not her husband.<sup>43</sup> Her daughter needs his help. As a result, she breaks gender norms by pursuing Jesus and screaming at him in public.<sup>44</sup> Gail O'Day summarizes her unseemly behavior by writing that, "[t]he woman impinges on Jesus from all sides and does not hesitate to make her presence felt and demand known."<sup>45</sup> Her refusal to leave after three denials also speaks to her faith that Jesus can and will heal her daughter if she persists.<sup>46</sup> Although her behavior is entirely inappropriate, it is ultimately rewarded.

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<sup>38</sup> Gench, *Back to the Well*, 10.

<sup>39</sup> Matthew 15:28.

<sup>40</sup> Lee, "The Faith of the Canaanite Woman," 18.

<sup>41</sup> Gench, *Back to the Well*, 10.

<sup>42</sup> Gench, 10.

<sup>43</sup> Ranjini Wickramaratne Rebera, "The Syrophoenician Woman: A South Asian Feminist Perspective," in *A Feminist Companion to Mark*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marianne Blickenstaff (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2004), 104.

<sup>44</sup> Gench, 6.

<sup>45</sup> Gail O'Day, "Surprised by Faith: Jesus and the Canaanite Woman," in *A Feminist Companion to Matthew*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2001), 118.

<sup>46</sup> Gench, 8.

Her quick reply to Jesus prompts him to praise her faith<sup>47</sup> and word<sup>48</sup> has also produced conflicting interpretations about whether it was done in humility or because of her intelligence. Stuart Love argues that the woman's response was not a smart retort, but a plea for mercy.<sup>49</sup> In her response the woman acknowledges that she is not who Jesus came for, but she shows that the dogs (Gentiles) can be fed with the by-product from the Lord's table.<sup>50</sup> His point illustrates how traditional scholarship seeks to emphasize Jesus's mercy and the woman's submissiveness. On the other side, Sharon Ringe argues, "[h]er retort wins the day. Her point of view prevails in the story and is eventually adopted by Jesus (7:29). Hers is the defining wisdom of the story."<sup>51</sup> The irony and logic she used to recast Jesus's insult shows the woman's brilliant grasp of theology.<sup>52</sup> Even in Ringe's quote she highlights the initiative in the woman's actions. Each sentence of her argument starts with the woman's actions; Jesus is merely the passive receiver of her actions. The contrast between these two scholars shows the tension and shift in focus of this story within Biblical scholarship. One view highlights the woman's boldness in taking initiative and demanding healing, while the other casts her in a position of submissiveness and desperation.

The most prevalent theory explains that Jesus was testing the woman's faith and his disciples' character via his silent behavior and theological responses.<sup>53</sup> This theory finds its basis in focusing on what Jesus does not do, rather than what he does. Throughout Matthew and Mark, Jesus never directly sends the woman away. In Matthew, he remains silent to her cries until the disciples tell him to send her away.<sup>54</sup> He has the power to dismiss her, but Jesus instead allows

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<sup>47</sup> Matthew 15:27-28.

<sup>48</sup> Mark 7:28-29.

<sup>49</sup> Love, "Jesus, Healer of the Canaanite Woman's Daughter in Matthew's Gospel," 17.

<sup>50</sup> Witherington, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus*, 65.

<sup>51</sup> Ringe, "A Gentile Woman's Story, Revisited," 90.

<sup>52</sup> Gench, *Back to the Well*, 9.

<sup>53</sup> Witherington, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus*, 64.

<sup>54</sup> Matthew 15:23.

the woman to remain in his presence to question him. Her persistence also further glorifies Jesus by accentuating his all-knowing power and kindness towards children later in the Gospels.<sup>55</sup>

Dorothy Lee argues that Jesus's actions strengthen the woman's faith rather than discouraging it, which may explain why she is the only person in Matthew who is described as having great faith.<sup>56</sup> Additionally, Gench argues that the woman's great faith is contrasted with the disciples' lack of faith because of the location of the story in Matthew.<sup>57</sup> In the preceding chapter, Jesus remarks on Peter's "little faith" because he sank after walking on water.<sup>58</sup> In the chapter following the story of the Canaanite/Syrophoenician woman, Jesus is frustrated by the disciples' "little faith" because they do not understand his teaching.<sup>59</sup> This interpretation is rooted in tradition because it explains Jesus's harsh language as the Son of God. Jesus is seen as omniscient because he tests the woman's faith to teach the disciples. Therefore, it could be argued that she is little more than a prop in the overall story.

Another prominent interpretation of Jesus's actions is explained in the "ethnic exclusivism" theory.<sup>60</sup> This theory focuses on Jesus's response that "[he] was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."<sup>61</sup> Love observes that, "Jesus's behavior and words including his healing activity and that of the twelve belong primarily to the public, political, Israelite, social domain."<sup>62</sup> Jewish nationalism was prevalent in this area because God had given them this

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<sup>55</sup> Matthew 19:13-15, Mark 10:13-16, Luke 18:15-17.

<sup>56</sup> Lee, "The Faith of the Canaanite Woman," 18.

<sup>57</sup> Gench, *Back to the Well*, 10. Although Gench is not necessarily in agreement with the theory about the testing of the woman's faith, she does allude to the theme of faith in the chapters surrounding the woman's story in the Gospels. The following two examples are taken from Gench's chapter.

<sup>58</sup> Matthew 14:29-31. See further, Gench 10.

<sup>59</sup> Matthew 16:5-8. See further Gench, 10.

<sup>60</sup> Gench, *Back to the Well*, 7.

<sup>61</sup> Matthew 15:24.

<sup>62</sup> Love, "Jesus, Healer of the Canaanite Woman's Daughter in Matthew's Gospel," 13.



land, but the Gentiles occupied it.<sup>63</sup> There are two explanations of why Jesus took this mindset. One argues that Jesus was taking the typical Jewish mindset toward Gentiles in order to show its unfairness to his disciples.<sup>64</sup> However, other scholars argue that this story conveys Jesus's humanity and realization that his former mindset was wrong.<sup>65</sup> This branch considers that Jesus possibly faced deep inner turmoil over his identity as the Messiah because he was expected to overthrow and wipe out the Gentiles, but he was torn in this instance over the woman's plea.<sup>66</sup> Because the woman uses what Lee calls "covenant language" and acknowledges that Israel is Jesus's first concern, Jesus heals her daughter and extends his mission.<sup>67</sup> Ringe views her reshaping of Jesus's insult as a gift to Jesus because she opened his eyes and ministry to the Gentiles.<sup>68</sup> This theory is prominent among feminist scholars because it elevates the woman's role in Jesus's ministry. She is viewed as the enlightened protagonist in this story who teaches the teacher. Rather than Jesus using her to prove a point, she uses him to gain healing for her daughter. Her bold, demanding demeanor is seen as a gift rather than inappropriate because the focus is on how the woman changes Jesus's mind.

In contrast with how the "ethnic exclusivism"<sup>69</sup> theory casts the Canaanite/Syrophenician woman as the protagonist, the socioeconomic theory portrays her as the villain. This theory rationalizes Jesus's behavior by proposing that the woman was, as Gench phrases it, "an oppressor rather than one of the oppressed."<sup>70</sup> In other words, the woman was

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<sup>63</sup> Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz. *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 177.

<sup>64</sup> Stagg and Stagg, *Woman in the World of Jesus*, 114.

<sup>65</sup> Gench, *Back to the Well*, 21.

<sup>66</sup> Stagg and Stagg, *Woman in the World of Jesus*, 115.

<sup>67</sup> Lee, "The Faith of the Canaanite Woman," 20.

<sup>68</sup> Gench, *Back to the Well*, 23.

<sup>69</sup> Gench, *Back to the Well*, 7.

<sup>70</sup> Gench, *Back to the Well*, 20.

wealthy and belonged to a high social class that did not look out for the poor, so Jesus was challenging her privilege rather than attacking her race.<sup>71</sup>

The theory is grounded in geographical locations referenced in both Mark and Matthew: Tyre and Sidon.<sup>72</sup> Residents of Tyre consisted of Jews and Gentiles, but there were economic, ethnic, religious, and cultural tensions between the two groups.<sup>73</sup> In addition, Gentile residents of Tyre and Sidon were considered the most dangerous enemies of the Jews.<sup>74</sup> The land they occupied was something that God had given the Jews, and the Gentiles continuously threatened to take it again.<sup>75</sup> The Gentiles of Tyre were rich landowners who would exploit the Jews as well; they would rightly be called dogs.<sup>76</sup> Especially when food was scarce, the landowners would abuse the Jewish workers who depended on them.<sup>77</sup> Theissen summarizes it well: "[t]he economically stronger Tyrians probably often took bread out of the mouths of the Jewish rural population, when they used their superior financial means to buy up the grain supply in the countryside."<sup>78</sup> Besides the evidence of the Canaanite/Syrophoenician woman living in this area, Mark notes that the woman's child was healed in her bed.<sup>79</sup> "Bed" in this context could also be translated as "couch"<sup>80</sup>; signifying the woman could hold an upper class position. Thus, her geographical location and furniture allude to a particular social class.

Considering the socioeconomic tensions between the Tyrians and the Jews, it is possible that this story is about physical bread rather than spiritual bread.<sup>81</sup> This woman's lifestyle may

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<sup>71</sup> Gench, 20.

<sup>72</sup> Matthew 15:21, Mark 7:24.

<sup>73</sup> Ringe, "A Gentile Woman's Story, Revisited," 84.

<sup>74</sup> O'Day, "Surprised by Faith," 115.

<sup>75</sup> Theissen and Merz, *The Historical Jesus*, 177.

<sup>76</sup> Ringe, "A Gentile Woman's Story, Revisited," 89.

<sup>77</sup> Theissen and Merz, *The Historical Jesus*, 172.

<sup>78</sup> Gench, *Back to the Well*, 19.

<sup>79</sup> Mark 7:30.

<sup>80</sup> Gench, *Back to the Well*, 19.

<sup>81</sup> Gench, 19.

have been a source of suffering and starvation for her poor Jewish neighbors.<sup>82</sup> Theissen again writes about the economically poor Jewish residents of Tyre, “[c]ertainly the message ‘Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.’ found ready ears—those of people who were indeed poor and longed for a revolution in their situation.”<sup>83</sup> In other words, the Canaanite/Syrophoenician woman may have been a target for Jesus’s preaching about the blessedness of the poor.<sup>84</sup> Thus, the woman’s request for bread/healing may have been entirely inappropriate considering that she may not have shared when others asked for her bread.<sup>85</sup> However, she is faithful that Jesus is, as Gench phrases it, “rich in mercy, [and] supplies bread aplenty for all.”<sup>86</sup> She understands the plight of the poor and throws herself upon Jesus’s mercy, which prompts Jesus to finally heal her daughter. Resultantly, the language in the story shifts from frugality to abundance.<sup>87</sup>

Finally, one must consider the possibility that her story could be a parallel about enjoying one’s wealth on earth like the interaction between the rich man and Lazarus—which only Luke includes, possibly in place of the story of the Canaanite/Syrophoenician woman.<sup>88</sup> In this interpretation, the focus shifts from Jesus’s rude behavior to the woman’s tainted past. She is not the hero; she is the repentant villain. This story supports the traditional portrayal of Jesus’s grace and mercy because it exemplifies the woman’s progression from a villain to a child of God. However, her persistence is still portrayed in a positive light because it shows her true repentance from her past behavior.

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<sup>82</sup> Ringe, “A Gentile Woman’s Story, Revisited,” 86.

<sup>83</sup> Theissen and Merz, *The Historical Jesus*, 173.

<sup>84</sup> Ringe, “A Gentile Woman’s Story, Revisited,” 86.

<sup>85</sup> Ringe, 90.

<sup>86</sup> Gench, *Back to the Well*, 10.

<sup>87</sup> Gench, *Back to the Well*, 9.

<sup>88</sup> Luke 16:19-31.

Although it has little support, some scholars have proposed that the Canaanite/Syrophoenician woman was a prostitute, which may have been why Jesus refused to heal her daughter.<sup>89</sup> Ringe points to the lack of a husband mentioned in the woman's story as potential support for her being a prostitute because a male relative would have been responsible for coming to another man to ask for healing.<sup>90</sup> Therefore, the woman may have been disowned by her family in a desperate state.<sup>91</sup> Although this theory is possible, it does not fully explain Jesus's treatment of the woman. In Luke 7:36-50, Jesus encounters a sinful woman who anoints his feet, but he does not shame her or deny her gift. Although some early manuscripts do not include John 8:1-11, in this passage Jesus refuses to shame or condemn a woman caught in adultery and instead uses the instance to teach a crowd about condemnation. Because Jesus did not normally treat sinners rudely, it is improbable that he was rude to the woman—no matter her possible prostitution. However, this theory attempts to synthesize traditional scholarship with an emphasis on the woman's background. Though it fails on many different accounts, it was a start to scholarship focused on the background of a woman in the Gospels.

A unifying interpretation proposes that the woman was speaking in the form of a lament psalm. This understanding is promising because it combines a feminist approach to the story while also emphasizing Jesus's Messianic identity.<sup>92</sup> O'Day explains that "[i]n Israel's lament psalms, Israel demands that God should be as God has promised to be. God made promises of life, not death; hope, not despair; wholeness, not brokenness."<sup>93</sup> In other words, lament psalms

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<sup>89</sup> Love, "Jesus, Healer of the Canaanite Woman's Daughter in Matthew's Gospel," 17. Sharon Ringe once supported this theory in "A Gentile Woman's Story" found in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* edited by Letty M Russell. However, Ringe later apologizes for this interpretation and notes that she longer supports it in "A Gentile Woman's Story, Revised: Rereading Mark 7.24-31a" in *A Feminist Companion to Mark* edited by Amy-Jill Levine and Marianne Blickenstaff.

<sup>90</sup> Ringe, "A Gentile Woman's Story," 70.

<sup>91</sup> Love, "Jesus, Healer of the Canaanite Woman's Daughter in Matthew's Gospel," 17.

<sup>92</sup> O'Day, "Surprised by Faith," 119.

<sup>93</sup> O'Day, 123.

provided a way for the Israelites to demand that God heal them, which resulted in healing and praise.<sup>94</sup> According to O'Day, the woman's words parallel the model of this type of psalm.<sup>95</sup> In particular, the woman's plea for mercy and use of Jesus's title are of similar form.<sup>96</sup> Gench remarks, "[t]he Biblical presentation of this tradition of prayer suggests that God welcomes this dialogue, and that to argue with God in this manner is in fact an act of faith."<sup>97</sup> Although she is not an Israelite, the woman acknowledges Jesus's Messianic identity, which prompts him to heal her daughter and laud her faith. She trusts that Jesus will heal her daughter, so she perseveres and reminds him of his power. This understanding provides a synthesis between traditional and feminist scholars because it acknowledges Jesus's deity and praises the woman.

These theories have different rationale for Jesus and the woman's actions, but they all agree that this story is distinctive; it is the only instance where Jesus refuses to heal someone and praises a person for their great faith. Given her gender, the woman's actions are even more remarkable. She risks public shame and a tarnished reputation in her efforts. However, Jesus in the end shows his respect for her faith and persistence. Depending one's interpretation, the woman's actions are either covered up or praised. Traditional scholars typically focus on Jesus's behavior since he is the protagonist of the gospels; whereas feminist scholars center on the woman for her perseverance and great faith serve as an example to everyone. Regardless of whom scholars focus on, the story represents a turning point in Jesus's ministry. After his interaction with the Canaanite/Syrophenician woman, Jesus began preaching, healing, and feeding Gentiles.<sup>98</sup> Though scholars do not know exactly what caused Jesus's uncharacteristic

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<sup>94</sup> O'Day, 120.

<sup>95</sup> O'Day, 119.

<sup>96</sup> Gench, *Back to the Well*, 6. O'Day further breaks the woman's speech down on page 122 of her chapter in *A Feminist Companion to Matthew*. O'Day indicates further parallels in Psalm 86:16 and 109:26.

<sup>97</sup> Gench, *Back to the Well*, 24

<sup>98</sup> Gench, 12.

actions or the woman's great faith, the positive results of this interaction have had a profound impact on modern Christianity.

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