

THE CANAANITE PROBLEM

by James Treat



"Canaanite Woman and Her Daughter," by Meinrad Craighead.

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Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession."

Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us."

He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."

The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said.

He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs."

"Yes, Lord," she said, "but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from

their masters' table."

Then Jesus answered, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed from that very hour.

—Matthew 15:21–28

This story from the New Testament describing Jesus' encounter with a Canaanite woman reminds us that the biblical record is not always what we would like it to be. Of course, we can make the same observation about American history. The Columbus Quincentenary of 1992 afforded us the opportunity to reflect on the contradictions of our collective past, and to plan for a different kind of future. The Quincentenary forced us to acknowledge that the story often told about the last

five hundred years in this land has been incomplete, sometimes even untruthful. It's time for us to acknowledge the whole story, as painful as that may be, so that the healing process of repentance, restitution, and reconciliation can move forward. We need to imagine a new story about ourselves, and to find new ways of telling our stories together.

One important theme in the conventional story of the Americas has been what some people have called the "Indian Problem." From the perspective of the European immigrant society, the "Indian Problem" refers to the moral dilemma created by the very existence of Native Americans, a dilemma which has social, political, ethical, and theological dimensions. Life might have been simpler for America's immigrants if this continent had been a vast and empty wilderness waiting to be settled, as popular myths suggest, or if Native Americans had finally succumbed to centuries of warfare, land dispossession, and epidemic disease.

Yet Native Americans *were* living here long before 1492 and have survived down to the present day. This marginalized but undeniable reality creates quite a problem for those who would like to celebrate Christopher Columbus as the patron saint of the New World. Interestingly enough, it was Columbus himself who suggested the

the gracious people who welcomed him to their island "ought to make good and skilled servants." Five hundred years later, the Columbus Quincentenary marked an important point in the history of the Americas. In 1992, many Americans learned to reject the Eurocentric perspective and to develop a more inclusive, a more compassionate, a more honest understanding of our world, one that respects the multicultural reality of American history and society.

I believe that Christians can learn something about how to do this by realizing that Jesus, in his own place and time, had a Canaanite Problem. As a Jew living in Palestine two thousand years ago, he viewed Canaanites in much the same way that non-Indians today view Native Americans.

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Before we examine the story in the book of Matthew, we need to consider some events that took place long before Jesus was born. The five books of the Pentateuch tell the story of the "Exodus," the liberation of the people of Israel; and the book of Joshua provides an account of the conquest of Canaan, the "Promised Land." The first chapter of Judges gives us an update on where things stand in the new nation of Israel; it's a kind of "state of the union" report.

Of course, we can read the Old Testament from a variety of perspectives. If we want to, we can accept Israel's version of history and view the land of Canaan through the lens of covenant, exodus, and conquest. But what we're learning to do in these times is to reread the text from new perspectives, to look at the Bible through new eyes. What we find when we read the Old Testament from the underside of history is that words like invasion, dispossession, and slavery might be more accurate in describing what happened to the Canaanites who were already living in Palestine. Try to imagine yourself as a Canaanite, as you

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first official solution to the Indian Problem, and he did so on the very day that he and his crew were discovered on a Caribbean beach. On October 12, 1492, Columbus wrote in his log that

read this passage from the book of Judges, listen to the story with Canaanite ears:

Now the house of Joseph attacked Bethel, and the Lord was with them. When they sent men to spy out Bethel (formerly called Luz), the spies saw a man coming out of the city and they said to him, "Show us how to get into the city and we will see that you are treated well." So he showed them, and they put the city to the sword but spared the man and his whole family. He then went to the land of the Hittites, where he built a city and called it Luz, which is its name to this day.

But Manasseh did not drive out the people of Beth Shan or Taanach or Dor or Ibleam or Megiddo and their surrounding settlements, for the Canaanites were determined to live in that land. When Israel became strong, they pressed the Canaanites into forced labor but never drove them out completely. Nor did Ephraim drive out the Canaanites living in Gezer, but the Canaanites continued to live there among them. Neither did Zebulun drive out the Canaanites living in Kitron or Nahalol, who remained among them; but they did subject them to forced labor. Nor did Asher drive out those living in Acco or Sidon or Ahlab or Aczib or Heibah or Aphek or Rehob, and because of this the people of Asher lived among the Canaanite inhabitants of the land.

—Judges 1:22–32

When we look at Matthew 14 and 15, we find that it's been a remarkable period in Jesus' life. To say that Jesus had a rough week is putting it mildly. First he learns that John the Baptist, the person who baptized him, has been beheaded. When Jesus tries to find some privacy, five thousand people follow him and he ends up having to make supper for all of them. Still looking for some peace and quiet, he resorts to walking, not around, but across the sea of Galilee. When he gets

to the other side, some scribes and Pharisees are waiting there in order to challenge his lifestyle. Finally, he and his disciples leave for the Mediterranean coast, in the region of Tyre and Sidon.

When Jesus arrives he is confronted by a Canaanite woman from that area, who asks Jesus to perform an act of spiritual healing for her demon-possessed daughter. Three times she pleads with him for mercy; three times Jesus rejects her request. What are we to make of this situation, where our lord and savior acts more like . . . one of us? If you look in the various Bible commentaries, you will find different rationalizations for Jesus' seemingly callous behavior. I suppose there are several possible explanations. Maybe Jesus was tired, and he was just having an off day. Or maybe he was preoccupied with something else, had some more important issue on his mind. But maybe he really was unconcerned about this woman, and had no interest in her problems. Maybe he saw her as an insignificant person who didn't deserve his attention. Maybe he thought of himself as a God-fearing Jew, and wanted nothing to do with some filthy Canaanite pagan. Maybe Jesus was just a plain racist.

Maybe Jesus really was unconcerned about this woman and had no interest in her problems.

It would be foolish to form an opinion about Jesus' character on the basis of one story. But it does seem clear to me that in this story we find Jesus struggling with the Canaanite Problem.

I suggest that this passage in Matthew is a foundational text for understanding how to make the next five hun-

dred years better than the last five hundred have been. This is the only place in the New Testament where the Canaanites are mentioned. If it were not for this story, we might very well believe, at least on the basis of the biblical record, that they had disappeared by the time of Jesus. But that is not the case, and now we, like Jesus, must grapple with their presence, just as non-Indians today must acknowledge the Canaanites of North America. This story is also foundational for anyone who is struggling to understand what it means to be both Native American and Christian, because in it Jesus ultimately affirms three very important things about Canaanites and their Native American counterparts: their survival, their humanity, and their faith.

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One of the twelve tribes of Israel was the tribe of Asher. In Joshua 19 we read that the people of Asher received an allotment of land on the Mediterranean coast, what is today southern Lebanon. The cities of Tyre and Sidon are in this region, and it's also where Jesus encountered the Canaanite woman.

In Judges 1 we read that Asher, like the other tribes of Israel, invaded the Canaanite homeland, murdered many of the Canaanite people, and then enslaved the Canaanites who survived this reign of terror. Fifteen hundred years later, the appearance of a Canaanite person in the Gospel of Matthew demonstrates that, in spite of these threats to their very existence, God chose to spare some of the Canaanites, and they survived down to Jesus' time. And so this story affirms Canaanite survival simply by the very mention of the Canaanite woman. The New Testament is silent about first-century Canaanites but for this passage.

But there is silence on another level that we have to deal with, and there is another way in which this text is unique in the New Testament. I have yet to find

any other gospel passage where Jesus' initial response to someone who approaches him is silence. Many people ask Jesus for the kind of help the Canaanite woman wants when she cries out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me!" But this is the only instance where it can be said that "Jesus did not answer a word." Jesus finds himself face to face with the Canaanite Problem, and he has no response. He will not even acknowledge her existence.

His disciples know how to handle it, though, and they rally to his defense. I can almost hear them whining: "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us." Jesus hears his disciples' complaint and provides them with a theological rationale for ignoring her request. "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel," he says. Yes, I can see that the Canaanite woman exists, but she's excluded from my ministry. There's not room for her in my view of things.

This is all the encouragement the Canaanite woman needs, though, to press her case further. She kneels before Jesus and says, "Lord, help me!" His next response is one of the cruelest things we have ever heard Jesus say: "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs." In other words, yes, you exist, perhaps you're not excluded, but you most certainly are inferior to God's children, God's favorites, God's chosen people.

The Canaanite woman's persistence in this situation makes us realize that she is not satisfied with mere existence, and so this story goes beyond affirming Canaanite survival. The Canaanite woman must also defend her humanity and her dignity as a human being. And as we look at Jesus' three responses to her persistent request, we see him develop an appreciation for the Canaanite presence. In his eyes, the Canaanite woman moves from a situation of non-existence, through a state of exclusion, to a position of inferiority. Fortunately, she isn't finished

with Jesus yet. "Yes, Lord," she says, "but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

Jesus' final response indicates that he has finally seen the light. "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." By addressing her as "Woman," Jesus acknowledges that she deserves that respect afforded to every other human being. And her persistence forces Jesus to go beyond acknowledging her survival and her humanity. She leads him to consider the reality of Canaanite faith.

Now what does it mean to say that this woman has "great faith"? First of all, we need to avoid a Christian reading of this particular story. Keep in mind that the New Testament tells us nothing about the Canaanite woman either before or after her encounter with Jesus. She might have been a devoted follower of Jesus for some time but she might not have heard about him until he arrived in her community. Maybe she liked Jesus' teachings but was skeptical about his ability to heal, and she wanted to test him. Perhaps she was just the desperate mother of a disturbed child, an opportunist who had no interest in Jesus or in the Hebrews' god, but who did have a daughter in need and who was willing to take a shot, any shot, that might bring healing. So we don't know where this woman stood, from devotion to desperation, and we don't know where she went after this encounter.

But we do know this: the Canaanite woman believed that her daughter had a problem that was spiritual in nature, she believed that spiritual healing is possible, and she believed that Jesus might be a spiritual person, a healing person, a *medicine* person who could speak words of power in a critical situation. And what I find most striking about this story is that Jesus acknowledged her faith on its own terms. He didn't ask the Canaanite woman to recite a prayer, to change her lifestyle, to join a church, to make a contribution, or even to follow

him. He acknowledged her great faith, he granted her request, and Matthew tells us that "her daughter was healed from that very hour."

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The Canaanite woman was one of the most important individuals Jesus encountered during his life, and her story helps us understand how we should respond to the issues facing us in the wake of the Columbus Quincentenary. Her very presence forced Jesus to acknowledge the survival of the Canaanites despite his own ancestors' claims of divine sanction for their genocide. The Canaanite woman asserted her dignity as a human being, and challenged Jesus to move beyond an ethnocentric view of his world. And she prompted Jesus to recognize the validity and authenticity of her unique faith experience, even though at first it seemed strange, inferior, or even non-existent.

The Canaanite woman asked for many things from Jesus; today, Native American women and men are asking for many of the same things from the followers of Jesus. Will you stand with us? We are living in a perplexing and dangerous time; it may take a miracle to heal the wounds that divide us. I invite you to follow the example of the Canaanite woman, and of countless Native Americans, in believing that miraculous healing is indeed possible.

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