

The Canaanite Woman: Was Jesus Prejudiced?

By Nicholas LaBanca
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If you were fortunate enough to attend daily Mass during Ordinary Time in February, then you were able to get a pretty nice look at St. Mark's Gospel. One particular reading, the meeting between Jesus and the Canaanite woman, and its parallel account in St. Matthew's Gospel have been the subject of a little bit of controversy.

Recent Eisegesis

In recent years, priests and theologians have made attempts to read these selections in a new light. Apparently, these Gospel selections are subjected to explicit [eisegesis](#) (that is, pouring one's private ideas in instead of taking the author's intended meaning out); even the clergy have not been immune to this. Most notably, the Maryknoll Missioners and even popular Catholic social media figures have pushed this new reading of the Canaanite woman's story.

So what is this ridiculous heterodox interpretation being bandied about? [According to one variation](#), "Jesus was part of his culture: prejudiced against Canaanites. But he allowed a foreign woman to expand his views. Do we?" [Another one](#), focusing on St. Matthew's Gospel, says, "Jesus is challenged by the Canaanite woman to see that his ministry extends to all. He changes his mind, learning from a wise woman." And when focusing on the account as it is told in St. Mark's Gospel, "She challenges him to see that his ministry extends beyond the Jews. Even Jesus is open to seeing things in a new way."

Could God the Son really have been prejudiced? Did He need someone to change His mind? If we answer "yes" to these questions, we run into some major difficulties regarding doctrine on Jesus' humanity and divinity. Let's unpack things a bit.

Why is This Interpretation Problematic?

We first have to realize that, if these interpretations are right, we are effectively denying that Jesus was the all-perfect God. Think about what is being said here: Do we really think that Jesus Christ, true God and true man, did not know that His ministry extended to the Canaanites? That the Wisdom of God needed to learn this and needed to be challenged? How can we ascribe a prejudicial attitude to our Lord? This is what this novel interpretation of these two passages leads us to.

To be prejudice against someone because they are foreign is an imperfection in us as humans. But since Jesus didn't have only a human nature, but a divine nature as well, He did not possess this imperfection, as He was like us in all things but sin (cf. [Hebrews 4:15](#)). Like the Father, as both are one in being (cf. [John 10:30,38](#)), Jesus Christ is perfect (cf. [Matthew 5:48](#)).

The new interpretation denies the august majesty of Jesus as well as His foreknowledge. It is interpretation is just as bad as the ridiculous interpretation of the Feeding of the Five Thousand ([John 6:1-13](#); cf. [Matthew 14:13-21](#), [Mark 6:32-44](#), [Luke 9:10-17](#)), which says that Jesus performed no miracle; everyone just shared.

Proper Interpretation

So then, what exactly is the right interpretation of this verse? Luckily, we have the Church Fathers and the rest of the saints to turn to, as well as many orthodox priests and pastors alive today.

When preaching on this topic, the pastor of my parish alludes to the “moral therapeutic deism” approach to religion; such folks would contend that Christ's response to the Canaanite woman would be “un-Christian”. What Jesus teaches us through the Canaanite woman is to become stronger in two virtues: humility and persistence. We must pray unceasingly, even if we feel that God is not listening to us, just as Jesus at first ignored the Canaanite woman. God gave this woman the grace to be superabundant in these two virtues, and she serves as a good example for us.

My pastor also reminded the congregation that, while it may be hard, we have to realize that we are less than a speck of dust when compared to Almighty God. When we realize this, we start to possess that “fear of the Lord”, which is a gift of the Holy Spirit. We have to step back and see what Jesus was trying to accomplish in saying such divisive things because at first glance it does seem like Jesus is mean. But that's not the case at all. We have a wonderful example of how to address our Lord in the Canaanite woman. Because of her example, we learn how to be persistent in prayer, and how to live with humility.

“The Golden-Mouthed” on the Canaanite Woman

Now when I first heard this heterodox interpretation of the Canaanite woman enlightening Jesus on His mission, I immediately thought, “What did the Church Fathers say?” It turns out they said quite a lot. In fact, St. John Chrysostom, a Doctor of

the Church, preached [an entire homily](#) on it. While the entire homily itself is worth reading, the real meat that reveals the traditional view of this Gospel is quoted below:

What then says Christ? ... "It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."

What then says the woman? Out of His own very words she frames her plea. "Why, though I be a dog," said she, "I am not an alien." Justly did Christ say, "For judgment I came into this world" [[John 9:39](#)]. The woman practises high self-command, and shows forth all endurance and faith, and [does] this [even while] receiving insult; but [the Pharisees of [John 9](#)], courted and honored, requite it with the contrary.

For, "that food is necessary for the children," says she, "I also know; yet neither am I forbidden, being a dog ... nay, rather on this ground am I most surely a partaker, if I am a dog." ...

With this intent did Christ put her off, for He knew she would say this; for this did He deny the grant, that He might exhibit her high self-command. For if He had not meant to give, neither would He have given afterwards, nor would He have stopped her mouth again. But as He does in the case of the centurion, saying, "I will come and heal him" [[Matthew 8:7](#)], that we might learn the godly fear of that man, and might hear him say, "I am not worthy that You should come under my roof" [[Matthew 8:8](#)]; ... and as in the case of the Samaritan woman, that He might show how not even upon reproof she desists [cf. [John 4:18](#)]: so also here, He would not that so great virtue in the woman to be hidden. Not in insult then were His words spoken, but calling her forth, He revealed the treasure laid up in her.

Do you see the woman's wisdom, how she did not venture so much as to say a word against it, nor was stung by other men's praises, nor was indignant at the reproach? Do you see her constancy? ... He used the name of a dog, but she added also the dog's act. Do you see this woman's humility?

*Yea, therefore did He put her off, that He might proclaim aloud this saying, that He might crown the woman. "Be it unto you even as you will." Now what He says is like this: "Your faith indeed is able to effect even greater things than these; nevertheless, Be it unto you even as you will." This was akin to that voice that said, "Let the Heavens be, and it was" [[Genesis 1:3](#)]. (*Homilies on Matthew 52:3*; most italics omitted)*

It's high time that some people start reading more from St. John Chrysostom and the other Church Fathers. If someone wants orthodoxy, they won't be getting it from people who buy into the "prejudiced Jesus" interpretation. Let's instead trust in the tradition of the Church, understanding that there are people much wiser than us. Then there will no longer be a reason for forcing strange interpretations onto the text of the Gospel.