

## **Crossing boundaries: Social-scientific reading of the faith of a Canaanite woman (Mt 15:21–28)**

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### **Abstract**

Social-scientific criticism refers to an interpretation of the biblical text that takes into cognizance the social system that produced that text. This article presents a social scientific reading of the faith of a Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:21–28. The article outlines models of social systems in Matthew 15:21–28 like landscape and spatiality, gender and sexuality, ethnicity, purity, and social status in order to achieve a social scientific reading. The purpose of this article is to firstly demonstrate that the models of social system in Matthew 15:21–28 served as boundaries to the faith of a Canaanite woman. Secondly, it is to demonstrate that the Canaanite woman crossed such boundaries in Matthew 15:21–28 for her daughter to receive healing. Lastly, the Canaanite woman serves as a model for South African women today who have to cross boundaries like landscape and spatiality, gender and sexuality, ethnicity, purity, and social status.

### **Key words**

*Social scientific criticism, Canaanite woman, Gospel of Matthew, boundaries, faith, South African women*

## **1. Introduction**

Traditionally, the interpretation of the story of the Canaanite woman depicts feminist perspectives of women's status, faith, and marginalisation within the Jewish system (Shin 2014:6). History of interpretation in the last two decades of the faith of a Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:21–28 shows an extensive work on social-scientific reading of the text. What is unique in this article is that the faith of a Canaanite woman is presented as the faith that crosses boundaries. The faith of a Canaanite woman serves as a model for South African women who need to cross boundaries such as the ones

crossed by the Canaanite woman. This article reads and interprets the faith of a Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:21–28 by using a social-scientific criticism. The article considers Matthew 15:21–28 as part of social systems that produced the text.

## **2. Why Matthew 15:21–28?**

The gospel of Matthew in general represents sets of groups who represent marginality (Love 2015:10). The specific text touches onto many social systems like gender and sexuality, landscape and spatiality, ethnicity, purity and social class. These social systems make it possible for a social scientific reading of the faith of a Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:21–28. The social systems in this text stood as social boundaries to the faith of a Canaanite woman. Thus, the article affords us an opportunity to explore on the ways in which the woman crossed these boundaries. In addition, according to Chennattu (2010:48) Matthew gives a special significance to the woman and her interventions. By the specific reference to the place as Tyre and Sidon (Gentile territories) and the designation of the woman as Canaanite (indigenous people of Canaan and ancient enemies of Israel), Matthew presents the woman as a political enemy of, and religious outsider for, the Jews. She encounters Jesus in public place – the domain of men.

## **3. History of interpretation on Matthew 15:21–28**

Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman in Matthew's Gospel according to Davila:

“Presents the modern reader with a troubling account, for in it Jesus acts in a way disparate from the way he is usually presented in the Gospel of Matthew. When the Canaanite woman first calls out to him, begging for a healing for her daughter and recognizing him as Lord, he simply ignores her; when she persists, the disciples approach Jesus about her, and he responds that he “was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” seemingly a blatant rejection of the Gentiles (Mt 15:24). Yet she continues, and thus Jesus is brought to pronounce what seem offensive, even bigoted remarks: “It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs” (Mt 15:26). Then, departing from the model, when she again persists

in begging for the healing, Jesus acclaims her faith and grants her wish” (2012:21).

The story according to Novakovic (2009:576) offers an example that challenges the conventional distribution of power. A non-Jewish woman, a Canaanite, approaches Jesus asking for help for her sick daughter. Van Aarde (2007:5) adds that the story is an ample indication that Matthew made a meticulous distinction between the character roles of the Israelite “crowd” (referred to as the “lost sheep of Israel”) and the Gentiles (referred to as “Canaanite woman”). Scholars like Rukundwa and Van Aarde (2005), Saga (2009) and Klancher (2012) have discussed the social systems of the faith of a Canaanite woman in Matthew. These scholars agree that the context of the Canaanite mother fits the contemporary issues of discrimination based on race, region, tribe, ethnicity, class and gender. Furthermore, they state that in analysing the interpretations of this text, there is a need for a tool which will enable the scholars to focus on how these social systems are dealt with, constructed and interrelated (Rukundwa & Van Aarde 2005:942 cf saga 2009:14, Klancher 2012:45).

#### **4. Social scientific interpretation**

A social-scientific study of the New Testament presupposes a relationship between the text and the socio-historical environment from which it originated (van Standen 1991:22). A social-scientific criticism<sup>1</sup> argues that no text can responsibly be interpreted if the social system<sup>2</sup> that produced

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- 1 Social-scientific criticism is the stage in the exegetical process that brings scrutiny to bear on the religious, geographical, historical, economic, social codes, and cultural values operative within the world of early Christianity. It does so by utilizing the perspectives, theories, and models generated by the social sciences. Broadly defined, social-scientific criticism approaches the texts of the New Testament from the viewpoint that meaning in language is embedded in a social system that is shared and understood by speakers, hearers, and readers in the communication process. It investigates the social features of the form and content of the texts along with the factors that gave shape to them. It seeks to discover the intended consequences of the communication process. It looks for complementary relationships between the texts linguistic, literary, ideological, and social dimensions – each of which contributes to a proper analysis and understanding of the texts of the New Testament (Elliot 2011:2).
  - 2 Models of social phenomena such as kinship and family, honour and shame, patronage and clientage, collectivism, social status, limited good, evil eye, purity and pollution, ritual, gender and sexuality, landscape and spatiality, ancient economies, healing and

the text is not taken seriously (van Eck 2013:238). The purpose of Social-scientific study is primarily to understand the New Testament by placing it more nearly in the social world out of which it came (Rohrbaugh 1996:10). Social scientific criticism does not only study the social systems of the form and content of texts but also the conditioning factors and intended consequences of the communication process. The correlation of the text's linguistic, literary, theological (ideological), and social dimensions. The manner in which this textual communication was both a reflection of and response to a specific social and cultural context, that is, how it was designed to serve as an effective vehicle of social interaction and an instrument of social as well as literary and theological consequence (Elliott 1993:7).

## 5. Social scientific reading of Matthew 15:21–28

### 5.1 Matthew 15:21–28<sup>3</sup>

Then Jesus went thence, and departed into the coasts of Tyre<sup>4</sup> and Sidon<sup>5</sup> (Mt 15:21). And, behold, a woman<sup>6</sup> of Canaan<sup>7</sup> woman of Canaan came out of the same coasts, and cried unto him, saying, Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a devil (Mt 15:22). But he answered her not a word. And his disciples came and besought him, saying, Send her away; for she cries after us (Mt 15:23). But he answered and said, I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Mt 15:24). Then came she and worshipped him, saying, Lord, help me (Mt 15:25). But he answered and said, It is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast

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health, and social memory permit the careful examination of these issues in biblical texts in socially significant ways.

- 3 The text has been taken from the King James Version.
- 4 Τύρον it is a noun, genitive, singular and feminine. It means a celebrated and wealthy commercial city of Phoenician on the Mediterranean, very ancient, large, splendid, flourishing in commerce, and powerful by land and sea (Mounce & Mounce 2008:1182)
- 5 Σιδῶνος it is a noun, genitive, singular and feminine. It means ancient and wealthy city of Phoenicia, on the east coast of the Mediterranean Sea, less than 20 miles (30 km) north of Tyre (Mounce & Mounce 2008:1161)
- 6 γυνή it is a noun, genitive, singular and feminine and refers, a woman of any age, whether a virgin, or married, or a widow (Mounce & Mounce 2008:1037)
- 7 Χανααί, is an adjective, normative, singular and feminine. It means Canaanite, the name of the ancient inhabitants of Palestine before its conquest by the Israelites (Mounce & Mounce 2008:1193)

it to dogs<sup>8</sup> (Mt 15:26). And she said, Truth, Lord: yet (τὰ κυνάρια) the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table (Mt 15:27). Then Jesus answered and said unto her, O woman, great is thy faith<sup>9</sup>: be it unto thee even as thou wilt. And her daughter was made whole from that very hour (Mt 15:28).

## 5.2 Social scientific reading

### 5.2.1 Gender and sexuality

In Matthew, women<sup>10</sup> fulfilled a supporting, rather than an initiating role. In Matthew,<sup>11</sup> women are only followers, clearly distinguished from the twelve disciples or apostles. Along with all the other marginalised categories of people who did not have access to the temple, women are the receivers of Jesus' love and therefore have free access to God. They *receive* that love. However, they are not the agents who transmit that love to others. They do not take the initiative (Dreyer 2011:2). 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. However, the woman was restricted in public appearance (Cornelius 2011:35).

The Canaanite woman according to Baffes (2014:9) represents the marginalized in the world of the story and, at the outset of the exchange; she appears to act out of compliance to societal norms. She is a woman, a

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8 Κυνάρσιος noun, dative, plural and neuter. It means little and worthless dogs (Mounce & Mounce 2008:1103).

9 Πίστις noun, nominative, singular feminine. It means a conviction of the truth of anything, belief; in the NT of a conviction or belief respecting man's relationship to God and divine things, generally with the included idea of trust and holy fervour born of faith and joined with it (Mounce & Mounce 2008:1141).

10 For more information on Matthew's descriptions of the women's stories see Shin (2014:5). According to Shin women in Matthew are not only Christological and human issues; they also include women's marginalisation and "female problems" in the Jewish world of the first century Palestine. However, the women's stories have compositional elements which are anti-Judaic, miraculous, and Christ-centred.

11 In the Matthean narrative world, women are "flat" characters. With regard to gender roles, the cultural characteristic of the social bodies of women, nothing remarkable are reported by the narrator. Women are mostly silent, and spoken to. When they do speak, they ask basic questions, illustrative of the narrator's concerns. Some are shown in a positive light (as faithful "daughters" of Israel), many are spoken about in neutral terms, and some women act foolishly. In Matthew women typically are mothers, they serve (Jesus and other men), they worship and they carry messages (Botha 2003:517).

Gentile, a foreigner, and she behaves in ways she is expected to; she may be complying with societal expectations or she may have internalized an identity ascribed to her. Saga (2009:34) adds, “she as an anonymous woman had to approach a distinguished man with her problem. She didn’t even have a son to pray for, just a daughter.” What if the woman was a widow? Or she was a slave? From what we know about how families or households were constructed along gender and power imbued lines in the Greek-roman world of 1st century Palestine, there could be many factors, which would make the woman and her daughter extremely marginal.

The Canaanite woman is portrayed as a round character, whose nuances are developed as the narrative progresses. On one hand, she has the distinction of being the first of only two women who address Jesus directly in Matthew’s story (Mt 15:22; cf. also 20:21). On the other hand, she is depicted as marginalised, in triple fashion: as a woman, a Gentile, and the mother of a possessed person (Meier 1986:398). In rabbinic writings women are seldom presented positively and rarely illustrate faith or theological acumen. Jesus used her as an illustration of His previous teaching about defilement (Mt 15:10–20; Mk 7:14–23). Jesus’ disciples considered this Gentile woman unclean (cf. Acts 10:28). Jesus tested her spiritual tenacity, enlarged her understanding of spiritual truth, and then granted her request, complimenting her for her faith (Borland 1991:107).

### *5.2.2 Landscape and spatiality*

The geographical location of the meeting between Jesus and the Canaanite woman was in between region, the area around the frontiers of Judea and the region of Tyre and Sidon (Mt 15:21 cf Rukundwa & van Aarde 2005:943). Tyre<sup>12</sup> and Sidon<sup>13</sup> are theologically significant places; these places were not significant just because they were Gentile territory, but also because the

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12 According to Douglass and Tinney (2011:1491) Tyre was a famous city in Phoenicia, some 25 miles (40km) south from the sister port of Sidon and 15 miles (24 km) north of the modern Lebanese border with Israel. It is a natural geographical frontier. Phoenicia itself is a coastal strip backed by mountains, and Tyre was further defended by rocky promontories which effectively hampered invasion.

13 The first biblical occurrence of this name is in reference to the firstborn son of Canaan (Gen 10:15), but elsewhere it designates an important coastal city-state of Phoenicia. As a geographical term, it first occurs in Genesis 10:19 in a description of the territory of the Canaanites, which is said to have extended from Sidon to the south as far as Gaza (Douglass & Tinney (2011:1359).

people of Tyre and Sidon were enemies<sup>14</sup> of Israel primarily because of their foreign gods and serve as the victims of God’s wrath on many occasions (Is 23; Ezek 26–28; Jl 3:4). According to the Jewish perspective, Tyre and Sidon were impure places. Jesus entered these places – this was a movement from the clean people and land to an unclean land (Shin 2014:5). In his account of the Canaanite woman’s faith in the district of Tyre and Sidon, Matthew records Jesus calling to Israel – “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” – but this understanding of a purely local calling is challenged immediately and successfully by the foreign woman’s importunity (Presler 2010:201). “Jesus went away from there and withdrew (*ἀνεχώρησεν*) to the district of Tyre and Sidon.” In this passage, Jesus’ withdrawal is intentional once more. This time it is not to Galilee but beyond the borders of Israel (Good 1990:4).

### 5.2.3 Ethnicity

The woman is ethnically<sup>15</sup> categorized as the Canaanite<sup>16</sup>; a term<sup>17</sup> that ethnically and religiously disqualifies her as a candidate for justice and righteousness in a Judean context. During the first century, the Canaanite

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- 14 Take note that the inhabitants of Tyre and Sidon were not only enemies of Israel but intelligent, skilled people who gave generously and were used by God to offer help in time of need. (Cornelius 2011:36 cf Jackson 2003:784).
- 15 Ethnicity is something one has by kinship or place of origin, and indexed by custom – including possibly language or religion. Ethnicity is one form of group self-definition that may appeal to ties of kinship or place but whose boundaries and meaning are malleable—individuals participate to construct and maintain or alter ethnic identities over time (Buell 2014:35).
- 16 First of all, the word “Canaanite” is found nowhere else in the New Testament. The King James Version does list two references to another person whom that translation calls a “Canaanite”: Simon, one of Jesus’ disciples (Mk 3:18; Mt 10:4). Most commentators, however, believe the Authorized Version has stumbled at this point and that the word *kananaion* used to designate Simon is the Aramaic loan word *qan’an*, meaning a “zealot.” The woman of Matthew 15, then, is the only person in the New Testament who is explicitly called a “Canaanite.” Second, it seems likely that Matthew’s use of the term is “a literary term for the stereotype it invokes (Jackson 2002:61).
- 17 Canaanite was probably “a part of traditional biblical vocabulary for the most persistent and insidious of Israel’s enemies in the OT period, those whom God had driven out before his people Israel, and whose idolatrous religion was a constant threat to the religious purity of the people of Yahweh” (Deut 20:16-18; Ezra 9:1). In other words, “Canaanite” was a term that summed up all that was opposed to God, and therefore to detestable in His sight. In the Old Testament, “Canaanite” became a synonym for “trader” or “merchant”, and usually referred to the practice of cheating with false balances – a practice which was an “abomination to the Lord (Prov 11:1; 20:10, 23).

community as a people or a tribe no longer existed but the term was used to denote a disgraceful people (Rukundwa & van Aarde 2005:942). The Canaanite woman was Israel's enemy, according to the traditional biblical identification. Thus, Matthew has intentionally labelled the woman a Canaanite in the narrative to show that she was an enemy of Israel and a gentile (Shin 2014:5).

Carter (2000:321–322) shows that Canaanites were enemies to the Judeans. Ethnic and religious clashes between them often occurred in the 60s CE. There were also various economic and political interests which united and divided them from time to time. The social and political relationship between Galilee and Tyre-Sidon was decidedly lukewarm, based on the interests of that moment. Freyne (1980:118–121) adds that the Canaanite woman was caught in the middle of these lukewarm political and diplomatic relations. In most cases innocent people who live in border regions frequently fall victims to such inconsistent diplomatic ties. This woman was a descendant from the sinful *Canaanites*. The “Canaanites” in the Old Testament are identified as stereotypically bad. 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. It is a metaphor for any foreigner to Judaism, whether by race, religion or trade (Cornelius 2011:36).

Matthew characterizes her identity as different not only ethnically and nationally but also by the term “Canaanite,” which in Israelite history evoked religious abhorrence and national enmity (Mt 15:21–28) (Presler 2010:201). Matthew has apparently changed her ethnicity to Canaanite from Syro-Phoenician in Mark's account, thus emphasizing that the conflict is Israel centred. She might be appealing to a Judean manifest destiny in order to challenge Northern Israelite aspirations that confront her where she lives. Canaanites are in the land that Israel claims for herself (here as represented by the Jesus-believing author of the Gospel), perhaps in the context of a rivalry within the land of Northern Israel over who has the right to the blessings of the awaited Davidic king's rule (Nanos 2007:20).

‘Canaanite’ is not merely a matter of Matthew ‘archaising’ in order to evoke images of Israel's enemies. More likely, Matthew could be said to be changing the woman's identity to reveal concern for the status of non-Israelite subjects within the restored kingdom of Israel (Willitts 2009:5).By



referring to her as “a Canaanite woman” (Mt 15:22), this “implies that she is unclean and pagan [and] evokes an adversarial relationship, dating from the divinely-sanctioned conquest of the Canaanites’ land by the Israelites.”

#### 5.2.4 Purity

In discussions about purity, Van Staden (1991:187) is of the opinion that it has become clear that the ideological differences can for the most part be related to the question of boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, of acceptability or unacceptability, of wholeness and holiness in terms of some gradation system. Purity codes in the words of DeSilva (2004:243) are a way of talking about what is proper for a certain place and a certain time. Purity according to Pilch and Malina (1993:151) can be discussed in four ways: from outside, inside, at the margins or boundaries, and from inconsistencies or internal contradictions. Purity<sup>18</sup> is specifically about the general cultural map of social time and space, about arrangements within the space thus defined, and especially about the boundaries separating the inside from the outside. The unclean or impure is something that does not fit the space in which it is found, that belongs elsewhere, that causes confusion in the arrangements of the generally accepted social map because it overruns boundaries and the like (Malina 1993:35).

Being a *gentile* in the midst of Jews<sup>19</sup> 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,

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18 Fundamental to the purity rules was that things that are not alike are not to be mixed. These rules covered areas such as gender (woman shall not wear anything that pertains to a man, nor shall a man put on a woman’s garment; Dt 22:5), agriculture (you shall not sow your vineyard with two kinds of seed; Dt 22:9), husbandry (you shall not plow with an ox and an ass together; Dt 22:10) and clothing (you shall not wear mingled stuff, wool and linen together (Dt 22:11) (van Eck 2013:240). Neils Peter Lemche (1998:11), suggests that the term “Canaanite” never did refer to an historical people; that is, the term is a literary device created in order to make a distinction between the heroes of the narrative, the biblical Israelites, and the villains, the Canaanites. They came to symbolize the non-Israelite population living in Palestine at any moment of Israel’s history, whether understood to be the history of biblical Israel or of postexilic Judaism. In this way “Canaanite” might in fact simply mean the non-Jewish population of the land of Israel, irrespective of the time and circumstances in which the term appears.

19 According to the Jewish system, the Canaanite woman and her demon-possessed daughter were outsiders of the Jewish society; no one listened to her. Probably some Jewish leaders reached out to the Canaanite woman hoping to make her a proselyte and to keep her in the Jewish system (Shin 2015:6).

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 (Cornelius 2011:36).

In fact, the Jewish leaders did not want go to gentile territory because it was unclean. However, Jesus went to an unclean place for the demon-possessed girl. Matthew's Jesus tried to include the unclean woman who had a demon-possessed daughter in the Kingdom of God. Matthew emphasised that Jesus' religious movement accepted the unclean marginalised woman and her daughter; this intention implies aspects of anti-Judaism. The Matthean Jesus ignored the Jewish purity system. It shows that the Matthean expression of the Christological function in the Canaanite woman's story implies aspects of anti-Judaism. Moreover, the 'juxtaposition of Jesus and the Canaanite woman with the dialogue between Jesus and the Pharisees and its explanation suggests a thematic continuity, an antithetical continuity' (Patte 1987:221). Purity also bears weight on gender prescriptions, not only religion. It is here a Canaanite woman, specifically, that the Jewish and male Jesus here relates to.

#### *5.2.5 Social status*

The economy in Canaan was based on agriculture. All land was owned by the state, the temples, and private landowners, although tenant farmers possessed small areas. Since society was basically feudal, much of the land was held as a grant from the king specified services and taxation in return for their lands. There was a severe difference in living standards between the upper class patricians and the wide range of lower class people such as half-free serfs, slaves, etc. Some evidence of class distinction comes from excavations that reveal some fine houses and many inferior houses. The population was distributed in the larger towns and their numerous associated villages or suburbs (Douglass & Tinney 2011:244). The ancient Roman Empire, like most traditional aristocratic empires in largely agrarian societies, concentrated more than half of the total wealth of all its subjects in the top 1 or 2 percent of its populace. This included the emperor and his court, other key political and military leaders, the landed aristocracy, and at times the most influential religious leaders.

The bureaucracy necessary to serve these people, nationally and locally, swelled the ranks of the rich to perhaps 5 to 7 percent. A small middle class – people who earned enough to have modest savings and not live a merely day-to-day existence – comprised at most another 15 percent. It included many priests and Pharisees, in addition to the more fortunate merchants and traders, artisans and craftsmen, bankers and toll collectors (Blomberg 2009:65).

In ancient world, the term “dog”<sup>20</sup> was generally a term of contempt (1 Sam 17:43; 24:15; 2 Sam 9:8; 16:9; Ps 22:20; Prov 26:11; Is 56:10–11; Phil 3:2; Rev 22:15; Eph 7:1). Judaism referred to other peoples as “swine” or “dogs”, not to disparage them, but because they were the enemies of Israel. In fact, in the Old Testament, the reference to “dog” is an expression of humility (1 Sam 24:14; 2 Sam 9:8; 2 Kings 8:13), or unworthiness (2 Sam 16:9; Is 56:10). To infer that Gentiles were “unworthy” simply reflected conventional Jewish thought. Moreover, Jesus’ command, “Do not give dogs<sup>21</sup> what is holy” in Matthew 7:6a shows that Matthew understands it as a negative term – the very opposite of what is sacred. Although there is no evidence that the term ‘dog’ functioned as a standard reference to Gentiles, the association between dogs and Gentiles is presumed in the Matthean dialogue between Jesus and the Canaanite woman (Novakovic 2009:576).

Women were regarded as second-class citizens. Even the Old Testament presents situations where women were depersonalized (Borland 1991:105). The term “dog” was used as a metaphor to refer to the abuse of persons of the lower classes, according to Israelite social standards (Rukundwa & van Aarde 2005:944). However, the woman acknowledges that she does not belong – she and her daughter are “‘out of place’ because they are not ‘of

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20 The statement about Jesus’ exclusive mission to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, which Matthew inserts before the saying about the children’s bread and the dogs, makes it perfectly clear that the “dogs” are those who do not belong to the house of Israel, meaning Gentiles. (see van Aarde & Dreyer 2010:4)

21 Dogs are considered unholy because they return to their vomit. Their readiness to bark at people or animals is alluded to in Ex 11:7, though here God declares that among the Israelites no dog will bark at any man or animal. In NT times dogs, often strays, were regarded as nuisances. One licked the sores of the beggar named Lazarus (Lk 16:21). However Job’s reference to his sheep dogs (Job 30:1) suggests that good training could make even the despised animals useful. The Canaanite woman’s plea was met when she reminded Jesus that even the dogs can eat the crumbs at their master’s table (Douglass & Tinney 2011:75).

the house of Israel,' not 'children' around the table but 'dogs' whose place is outside the kingdom of God (Baffes 2014:14). As the dog she is willing to wait for a crumb from the masters' table, the kingdom and its benefit must be offered first to Israel. She is willing to cross the boundaries like gender and sexuality, landscape and spatiality, ethnicity, purity and social status. The next section discusses how the Canaanite woman crosses such social boundaries.

## **6. Faith that crosses boundaries**

First, the woman crossed the gender and sexuality boundary. She used her courage, the urgency of her need, and her wisdom to transform barriers of race and gender into inclusiveness. As a Canaanite, unaccepted by the Jews, and as a woman in a male-oriented society, she extends Jesus' ministry to a wider population. The woman teaches about the universality of God's grace; that God's unconditional love is available to all, no exceptions.

According to Chennattu (2010:48) the woman is presented as a social critic who transcends the traditional norms and conventions concerning the role of women in public, which appreciated the surrender and submissiveness of this woman pleading for the "fallen crumbs". The true image that emerges from the text is that of a bold and courageous woman who takes the initiative to come out on her own, and makes her request to Jesus by shouting: have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David. Cornelius (2011:36) adds that the woman had courage to go out into public and speak to a Jewish man. She was not afraid about her public presence among Jews while she was a Gentile. Moreover, she became a Gentile woman in the midst of a Jewish circle of mostly men.

Second, she crossed the landscape and spatiality. The Canaanite woman presented Jesus as a regional saviour, in contrast to the "Judean messiah" concept that was introduced earlier in the Gospel (Mt 1:23). The Canaanite woman joins the wise men from the east to de-ethnicise the new-born king (Mt 2:1–2); a saviour to whom aliens and outcasts could also have access to worship. In turn, he would proclaim justice and righteousness to all humanity, regardless of the religious, racial and socio-economic status of the needy (Rukundwa & van Aarde 2005:946).

Third, Canaanite woman crossed an ethnicity boundary. She was persistent and demonstrated great faith. She convinces Jesus to minister outside Jewish parameters prior to the establishment of the Gentile mission at his resurrection (Mt 28:19). The woman's exceptional faith provides the model for Matthew's readers, who have witnessed the lack of faith in Jewish leaders (Mt 12:24; cf 15:12) and Jesus' hometown (13:58) and the "little faith" of the disciples (14:31) (Burge & Hill 2012:982). Therefore, the Gentile woman's laments and faith in Jesus are indicative of the Canaanite woman's taking the previously Jewish position of priority as the chosen people. This means that "the Jews had priority over the Canaanites in the past, but now it was reversed through the Canaanite woman's faith". In Jesus' ministry, the Canaanite woman's faith had more privileges than the Jewish leaders (Shin 2014:6).

The Canaanite woman's reclamation of the wholeness of her daughter demonstrates not only her resistance against injustice done to women and foreigners, but also the risk of a misappropriation of God's healing power. The woman's plea liberated Jesus from a "Judean cultural ghetto" and helped him to discover a desire to help and support others. Jesus was urged to behave like a Saviour, a Messiah beyond cultural and religious barriers. The mother introduces a very disturbing factor for the Matthean Jesus, namely the realisation that the community was going through a social mutation – that it eventually had to become hybrid into a more accommodating community, a community of brotherhood and sisterhood (see Levine 2001:26).

The Canaanite woman likely provided confirmation to a Jewish reader of Jesus' Messianic identity. The Canaanite woman was portrayed as submitting to Jesus' authority as the Davidic Son in an area where the rule of David once reached. While the leadership of Israel rejected Jesus' identity and authority, the Canaanite woman acknowledged and appealed to it. The woman exhibited "an exemplary Jewish faith" in that she recognised "the saving intervention of the God of Israel through his messiah". Indeed, based on this faith, Jesus granted her request (Mt 15:28). In other words, the Gentile woman "stands near" the Jewish eschatological outlook of Matthew's Jesus; the woman shared the same perspective and saw her salvation as tied up with Jesus' successful completion of his vocation to shepherd Israel (Willits 2009:5).

Fourth, she crossed a purity boundary. The Canaanite woman takes the initiative to approach Jesus and she comes out of her region. In spite of all the obstacles she faced, the Canaanite woman did not give up. She turned out to be remarkable. She proved a *deep faith in Jesus' miraculous powers* and Jesus applauded it. In fact, it was Jesus who acknowledged her being remarkable when he said: "O Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." (Mt 15:28) 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. This woman desired to become a member of the community (Cornelius 2011:38).

Fifth, she crossed a social status boundary. The knowledge of the Canaanite woman about the master and the dog that eat from the same food (Mt 15:27), is important. As Levine (2001:40) puts it, the woman "provides a major means by which social hierarchies can, finally be broken down. In addition, the Canaanite woman seemed to be familiar with a known Judean liturgy. The way in which she engaged Jesus in dialogue, is certainly a prayerful manner with a particular wording, suggesting as one who has been in contact with Jesus' milieu" (Mt 15:22, 23, 27).

She agreed with Jesus' assessment without defensiveness while continuing her plea. "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table" (15:27). She fully accepted the reality of their situation. She was not in covenant with God as part of his chosen people. Earlier she identified Jesus as the "Son of David," (15:24) thereby expressing her faith in Jesus as the Jewish Messiah. Therefore, she and her daughter are aptly called little dogs in relationship to the creator of heaven and earth. She will gladly accept a role for herself and her daughter as house pets in the palace of the King of Kings. She will be delighted and grateful if they can eat the crumbs from his table. Nonetheless, it is important to note Jesus' compassion as what granted the healing to take place.

## **7. Implications for South African women**

The social scientific reading of this narrative has some implications for South African women today. The South African women can be successful regardless of their gender and sexuality. Being female should not be a disadvantage and other people should not take an advantage of women.

Equally so, women should not allow men to use them as objects. Women need not to allow the pop culture to degrade them in music videos. Such videos need not to sell because they have nude images of women. The question is why men are not posing naked on such videos but using women. It is high time that women say no to such degradations.

The South African women do not have to allow where they come from determine their future. This message is directed to the rural women in South Africa. If the likes of Prof Phakeng can become the vice chancellor of the University of Cape Town, this kind of success is possible for other women coming from the rural areas. On the other side of the same coin, successful women such as Phakeng and others should lift up other women who still need to cross many boundaries in their lives. Women who are enduring economic hardships in their lives. Successful women should not use their success to undermine others. They do not have to pay for their own lobola as Busiswa's new song *Banomoya* suggests to successful women.

Women can be successful regardless of their ethnicity. Whether a woman is Zulu, Tsonga, Xhosa or Pedi should not be a disadvantage. Women do not have to be English to be successful. I remember my visit to the University of London to present a paper at an academic conference. During my presentation, I tried to adjust to a British accent and one of the organiser approached me and said the South African accent is one of the best accents. The organiser was saying to me that to present a good paper does not need me to change my accent but what I need is the command of the language. In other words, women can be successful by simply acquiring language, which does not need a change of their identity.

The South African women need not to allow purity laws to hinder them to enter positions of power. Women too can become managers in organisations. Women too can become great preachers of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Women can become Vice Chancellors in institutions of higher learning. Lastly, South African women can prosper regardless of their social status. The Canaanite woman said to Jesus that even the dogs do eat from the crumbs that falls from their masters table. The important message is that a woman does not have to come from a well-known family to be successful. Thus, like the Canaanite woman, South African women can cross the landscape, sexuality, ethnicity, purity and social status boundaries.

## 8. Conclusion

This article read and interpreted the faith of a Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:21–28 by using a social-scientific criticism. The article considered Matthew 15:21–28 as part of social system that produced the text. This article outlined the models of social system in Matthew 15:21–28 like landscape and spatiality, gender and sexuality, ethnicity, purity and social status in order to achieve a social scientific reading. The article demonstrated that the models of social system in Matthew 15:21–28 served as boundaries to the faith of a Canaanite woman. The article also demonstrated that the Canaanite woman crossed such boundaries in Matthew 15:21–28 for her daughter to receive healing. Consequently, her faith serves as a model for South African women who need to cross boundaries in their lives.

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