


The Canaanite women in Korean context: A postcolonial feminist reading of Matthew 15:21–28

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This study explores Matthew 15:21–28 through a postcolonial feminist criticism, comparing the Canaanite woman in the Roman Empire with the North Korean women in South Korea to expose the dynamics of imperialism, androcentrism and patriarchal power. By challenging androcentric and Christ-centric interpretations that often overshadow the woman's agency and voice, the analysis highlights the woman's act of crossing boundaries, building a new identity and claiming participation in the table as acts of resistance. Parallels are drawn between the Canaanite woman and North Korean women, who similarly navigate boundaries and confront marginalisation within androcentric and imperial frameworks. North Korean women's crossings highlight their struggle for survival amid poverty and human rights violations, as well as their efforts to construct a new identity within South Korea's discriminatory context and to claim participation in the table amid neo-imperial context of two Koreas. The study advocates for a redefinition of communal inclusion, challenging dominant ideologies that perpetuate inequality. By amplifying the voices of marginalised women, it calls for a more equitable understanding of identity that transcends political, gender and cultural boundaries, emphasising the necessity of breaking down barriers of exclusion across biblical and contemporary contexts.

Contribution: The study contributes significantly to both biblical studies and contemporary social discourse by applying a postcolonial feminist critique to Matthew 15:21–28. The study challenges traditional androcentric and Christ-centric readings of the text that often minimise the Canaanite woman's voice and agency. By drawing a parallel between the Canaanite woman and North Korean women in South Korea, the study underscores how imperialistic and androcentric systems marginalise women across both biblical and modern contexts.

Keywords: Gospel of Matthew; postcolonialism; feminism; Canaanite woman; North Korean women.

Introduction

Matthew 15:21–28 warrants scholarly attention because of the complex interaction between Jesus and the Canaanite woman, which raises critical questions regarding Jesus' stance on Gentile mission, framed within the tension between particularism and universalism as seen in Matthew 10:4–10 and 28:18–20. Academic discourse on this passage has predominantly centred on the intentions of Matthew or Jesus, often neglecting the perspective and agency of the Canaanite woman.

Within Korean churches, there is an interpretive tradition that views Jesus' actions as a deliberate test of the woman's faith, rooted in the assumption that Jesus possesses omniscient control over every situation. This perspective posits that the Canaanite woman must endure and succeed in this test to demonstrate her faith. Such interpretations have been traditionally supported by historical and literary-critical approaches, which aim to reconstruct the historical context and literary intent of Jesus and Matthew.

Although the Canaanite woman articulates her voice, many interpreters have insufficiently engaged with her agency, often constraining their analyses within Christocentric and androcentric frameworks. These interpretations, predominantly rooted in methodologies that emphasise 'the world behind the text' or 'the world within the text', fail to fully address broader questions relevant to contemporary audiences. This limitation underscores the need for a methodological shift towards examining 'the world in front of the text' (Schneiders 1999:97–179). By critically engaging with these three hermeneutical dimensions, a postcolonial feminist reading offers a lens through which to interrogate the text's meaning within its historical context while simultaneously recontextualising its significance in contemporary lived realities.

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A methodological approach

Scholars such as Davies and Allison (1994) and Luz (2001) have employed author- and text-centred methodologies, emphasising the historical milieu and literary distinctions between the Gospels of Mark and Matthew. Concurrently, reader-centred critics like Wainwright (1991) and Levine and Blickenstaff (2004) have redirected focus towards the Canaanite woman herself, utilising historical-literary criticism to foreground her role, status and social relationship. Their feminist interpretations have illuminated alternative facets of the text, enabling a critique of androcentric readings pervasive throughout church history.

Before situating the text within contemporary contexts, this study also employs historical-literary criticism as its methodological framework, engaging in dialectical analysis of both the world within the text and the world behind the text to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the narrative. More specifically, this study explores the boundaries transgressed by the Canaanite woman through her new identity and faith in Jesus. Framed by the cultural, ethnic, religious and socio-political divisions of the ancient Mediterranean world, the analysis highlights how she subverted group-defining markers – social mechanisms that reinforced distinctions between insiders and outsiders in collectivist societies (Malina & Rohrbaugh 2003:72).

In colonial contexts, women have endured multifaceted oppressions, often overlooked by traditional feminist critiques until the advent of postcolonial theoretical frameworks. This intersectionality necessitates the concurrent application of feminist and postcolonial lenses to biblical exegesis, facilitating a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of texts such as Matthew 15:21–28. This study distinguishes itself from existing feminist and postcolonial scholarship by demonstrating how a woman's absolute faith in Jesus not only transformed her own life but also interrogates its significance within contemporary Korean society – a society still grappling with androcentrism and neo-imperialist influences. To recognise the presence of modern 'Canaanite women' in our midst, fosters a deeper and practical understanding of the Canaanite woman.

The Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:21–28

Crossing boundaries in verses 21–22

In contrast to Mark 7:24–26, Matthew's account places greater emphasis on the Canaanite woman and the act of crossing boundaries (Wainwright 1991:246–247). In Mark's narrative, Jesus is described as deliberately entering a house in the region of Tyre, seeking to remain unnoticed. Matthew, however, omits any explanation for Jesus' withdrawal from Gennesaret (14:34) and simply states that he retreated to the district of Tyre and Sidon. While Matthew largely follows the narrative structure of Mark, the ambiguity in his account leaves unresolved the fact whether Jesus actually entered Gentile territory, unlike Mark, who explicitly indicates Jesus' intentional movement into the Gentile region.

Matthew modifies the phrase 'the region of Tyre' in Mark 7:24 to 'the district of Tyre and Sidon' in Matthew 15:21. According to Joshua 19:24–31, Tyre and Sidon were allotted to the tribe of Asher during Israel's settlement in the promised land. However, Joshua's failure to fully conquer these cities resulted in their inhabitants perpetually leading the Israelites into idolatry (Jdg 10:6; 1 Ki 16:31). This failure is consistently addressed by the prophets, who proclaim divine judgement against Tyre and Sidon (Is 23; Jr 25, 27, 47; Ezk 26–28; Jl 3; Am 1:9–10; Zch 9:1–4).

The first mention of Tyre and Sidon in Matthew occurs in 11:21–22, where Jesus, drawing upon Old Testament tradition, uses these cities to illustrate the spiritual obstinacy of Chorazin and Bethsaida. In Jewish thought, including that of Jesus and his contemporaries, Tyre and Sidon symbolised moral corruption and spiritual hardness, irrespective of whether their inhabitants accepted this characterisation. By invoking 'Tyre and Sidon' in Matthew 15:21, the text appeals to the Jewish audience's preconceptions of these locations as emblematic of divine judgement. This rhetorical framing underscores the historical, religious and ethnic boundaries that distinguished the Jewish people from the inhabitants of Tyre and Sidon, further intensifying the narrative tension.

A significant divergence between Mark and Matthew lies in the characterisation of the woman's identity. While Mark introduces her as 'Syrophoenician' (Mk 7:26), Matthew identifies her explicitly as a 'Canaanite' from the outset (15:22). This terminological shift would have immediately evoked among Matthew's audience deeply entrenched historical animosities towards the Canaanites, a group historically associated with the peoples of Syria and Palestine descended from Canaan (Gn 10:15–19). The inhabitants of Tyre and Sidon were similarly regarded as Canaanites and were historically designated as an ethnic group destined for extermination under the conquest mandates (Dt 20:17).

By labelling the woman a 'Canaanite', Matthew intensifies the perception of her as a symbolic adversary to Israel (Shin 2014:5). This editorial decision underscores and reaffirms the boundaries that demarcated Jews from Gentiles. It further reflects the pervasive prejudices embedded within the socio-cultural and theological frameworks of Matthew's Jewish audience, as well as those of Jesus and his disciples, thus heightening the narrative's tension and its subsequent theological resolution.

Matthew further highlights the juxtaposition of Jesus' proximity to the region of Tyre and Sidon with the woman's act of coming out to meet him. While Mark explicitly situates Jesus within Gentile territory, Matthew maintains ambiguity about whether Jesus himself crosses a border, instead underscoring the woman's initiative in seeking him. This subtle distinction frames the narrative to emphasise her crossing boundaries, rather than Jesus' journey into Gentile lands.

In the androcentric context of the time, such an approach by the woman was extraordinary (Jeremias 1969:357–369). Whether she was a widow or not, cultural norms dictated that she should have been accompanied by a male representative. Her public plea to Jesus – a Jewish male – amid a group of Jews, who were likely her potential adversaries, defied the prevailing patriarchal expectations. This act of crossing multiple boundaries reinforces her determination and the significant tension within the narrative.

Building a new identity in verses 23–24

A notable distinction between Mark and Matthew lies in Matthew's inclusion of the disciples' involvement and Jesus' response to them, interposed between verses 21–22 and 25–28, a narrative element entirely absent in Mark. The disciples are portrayed as intermediaries standing between Jesus and the Canaanite woman, actively attempting to obstruct her approach. Their plea to Jesus, requesting that he dismiss her, elicits his response in v. 24, which directly follows their intervention. This narrative sequence strongly suggests that Jesus' reply is directed to the disciples rather than to the woman, irrespective of whether she overhears it. From the outset, in v. 22, Jesus is aware of her petition as she cries out to him; however, he refrains from offering either consolation or encouragement. Instead, he articulates the rationale behind his apparent reluctance, declaring, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (v. 24). This statement, reminiscent of the mission directive in Matthew 10:6, reintroduces the question concerning the identity of 'the lost sheep of the house of Israel'. It is reasonable to infer from his answer that the Canaanite woman is excluded.

If 'the lost sheep of the house of Israel' refers solely to ethnic Israel, it raises critical questions about Jesus' presence near Gentile regions and Matthew's inclusion of Gentile characters. Notably, Matthew's genealogy (1:1–16) incorporates four Gentile women, and the narrative of Jesus' infancy highlights the Magi from the East (2:1–12). Furthermore, Matthew's Jesus extends his healing ministry to a Roman centurion's servant (8:5–13), the Gadarene demoniacs (8:28–34) and the multitude in the feeding of the 4000 (15:32–39). Davies and Allison (1994:82) argue that Jesus' ministry in the northern regions (Mt 4:12–19:1) symbolises the restoration of the northern tribes, understood as the remnant of the former Northern Kingdom of Israel. This interpretation presents Jesus' activity in these areas as theologically emblematic of the eschatological restoration of the promised land. Similarly, Willitts (2007:379), employing a historical-narrative approach, identifies 'the lost sheep' as the oppressed and marginalised remnant of the Northern Kingdom. However, such interpretations do not sufficiently address the apparent hostility expressed by Jesus and his disciples towards the Canaanite woman.

Matthew does not explicitly explain why Jesus and his followers ventured into the region of Tyre and Sidon. Nevertheless, Jesus' statement regarding his mission to the

'lost sheep of the house of Israel' hints at a purpose that remains unspecified within the Matthean narrative. Regardless of their reasons for entering this territory, Jesus and his disciples did not transgress the socio-cultural boundaries that the Canaanite woman boldly crossed. Instead, they maintained a clear demarcation between themselves and the woman, rooted in distinctions of gender, ethnicity and religious identity. While such boundaries reflected the prevailing societal norms of the time, there exists an underlying shared identity among all the characters in this scene – an identity that transcends these divisions. They are all, inescapably, subjects of the Roman Empire, sharing the common condition of life under colonial domination. The Roman Empire exercised imperial control over Syria by appointing provincial governors, while maintaining military dominance that extended to Judea and other eastern territories. As Josephus recounts, this administrative and military presence enabled direct intervention when necessary to secure Roman hegemony in the region (*Jewish War*, Book 2, 3, 7; *Antiquities*, Book 17–20).

Much like the history of Israel, Tyre and Sidon experienced successive losses of independence under the dominion of major empires. Following the annexation of Syria as a province of the Roman Republic in 64 BCE, these two cities emerged as pivotal commercial hubs, contributing significantly to the economic prosperity of the Roman Empire (Jidejian 2018:19–37). Herod, the king of Judea, further enhanced the cities through extensive building projects (Rogers 2021:22). Under Augustus, Judea and Samaria were incorporated into the province of Syria, where Roman governors exercised administrative control until the outbreak of the First Jewish War in 66 CE (Perdue & Carter 2015:225). The economic interdependence between the colonisers and the colonised is notably illustrated in Acts 12:20, where Herod Agrippa I expresses anger toward the people of Tyre and Sidon because of their reliance on his territory for sustenance: 'their country depended on the king's country for food'. Furthermore, Paul's journey through Sidon en route from Caesarea to Rome (Ac 27:3) underscores the integration of Tyre, Sidon and Israel within the Roman Empire's broader transportation and trade networks.

The shared experience of Roman colonisation forged a common condition of exploitation and oppression for the inhabitants of Tyre, Sidon and Judea. Regardless of their geographic location, these populations endured the systemic economic and political subjugation characteristic of imperial domination. The Canaanites undoubtedly endured the harsh realities of economic exploitation and systemic victimisation under imperial rule. Similarly, the inhabitants of Galilee, including Jesus and his followers, lived with the persistent anxiety of food scarcity, a condition exacerbated by the socio-economic pressures of Roman domination (Freyne 1980:181). Matthew situates Matthew 15:21–28 within the geographic context between Gennesaret and Tyre and Sidon, regions deeply affected by the pervasive reach of Roman authority. The Roman system in Tyre and Sidon failed to address the medical and psychological needs of the

colonised, as exemplified by the plight of the Canaanite woman's daughter (Carter 2001:5). This lack of adequate care underscores the systemic neglect and marginalisation experienced by those living on the fringes of imperial society.

While historical, religious and ethnic differences are often cited as the root causes of hostility between Jews and non-Jews in Matthew's narrative (Kingsbury 1988:28), it is equally critical to recognise the role of Roman imperial manipulation in fomenting such animosities. Scholars have often interpreted the woman and her crossing as a manifestation of the tension between Matthew's community and the Gentiles, without addressing the deeper, underlying causes of such conflicts (Stanton 1993:281). The oppressive conditions of colonial life not only perpetuated divisions but also obscured the colonisers' responsibility for instigating these conflicts.

The Roman Empire strategically fostered discord and divisions among the colonised as a deliberate tactic to sustain the Pax Romana. From the Roman perspective, such internal strife served to stabilise imperial control by diverting attention away from the colonisers themselves, whose presence and influence often remained obscured behind the conflicts they orchestrated (Overman 1990:154). This dynamic allowed imperial powers to manipulate the colonised into competing and clashing with one another in their struggle for survival (Barclay 1996:249–258).

Ironically, the harsh realities of life under Roman rule appear to have liberated the Canaanite woman from the constraints of such imposed hostilities. The boundaries and identities constructed by both the Romans and the Jews hold no significance. Her actions reflect a refusal to accept the divisions and social hierarchies engineered for the benefit of imperial domination, demonstrating a remarkable resistance to the tactics of colonisation.

Although no one welcomed the Canaanite woman or inquired about the reason for her approach to Jesus, her own voice made her purpose unmistakably clear: her daughter was grievously afflicted by a demon. Notably, whereas Mark 7:25 employs the term 'unclean spirit' [πνεῦμα ἀκάθαρτον], Matthew uses the verb 'δαμονίζεται' to describe her daughter's condition. This choice of language aligns with Matthew's broader theological framework, wherein the devil is depicted in the third temptation of Jesus (4:8) as claiming authority over all the kingdoms of the world and demanding worship from Jesus. Following his rejection of the devil and subsequent proclamation of the kingdom of heaven (4:17), Jesus embarks on a mission to liberate individuals from the demonic forces that permeate the Roman imperial system. Exorcism becomes a significant means by which Jesus manifests the inbreaking of God's kingdom, freeing people from the oppressive spiritual and socio-political powers of empire (8:16, 28–34; 9:32–34; 17:18) (Carter 2008:125).

The Canaanite woman, unable to find relief for her daughter within the confines of Syria – a territory subjugated to Roman

rule – transcends these boundaries in her desperate search for healing. Regardless of how the Romans or the Jews perceive or treat her, she redefines her identity through her actions. She becomes one who calls Jesus 'Lord' and places her trust in the 'Son of David', rejecting reliance on the Roman system and its emperor. Her crossing of boundaries signifies not only a physical journey but also a profound shift in allegiance, as she identifies with the kingdom of heaven rather than the kingdom of Rome.

It is deeply ironic that a colonised Gentile woman is distinguished and marginalised by other colonised individuals – Jewish men. Bound by the boundaries imposed by their male-centred, honour-driven society, the Jewish disciples fail to perceive the new identity the Canaanite woman is striving to construct for herself. Her emerging anti-imperial identity starkly contrasts with the disciples' apparent accommodation to the Roman system. Even Jesus, at this point, identifies himself as being sent solely to 'the lost sheep of the house of Israel', further highlighting the tension between her evolving identity and the established perceptions of his mission. Regardless of whether the sheep are in proximity to Jesus, the disciples remain unaware that the house of Israel itself has been profoundly disoriented and subjugated by the Roman Empire. The Canaanite woman alone dares to claim the identity of the 'lost sheep' within the context of Roman rule. Her faith transcends the boundaries that separate her from the disciples.

Participating in the Table in verses 25–28

While both Mark 7:27–30 and Matthew present this narrative with distinct theological emphases, both accounts unequivocally highlight the remarkable strength of her faith, which proves persuasive even to Jesus. Her conviction rests on the belief that Jesus is Lord not only to Israel but also to her, thereby affirming her rightful place at the table of the Lord.

Most of all, the woman approaches Jesus with the firm belief that he is the 'Son of David', capable of healing her daughter, as expressed in v. 22. Her confidence in Jesus as the Lord to both herself and her daughter renders her indifferent to how she might be treated by the Jews. In her initial petition, she addresses Jesus as 'Lord', and she repeats this title in v. 25. Although she invokes the title 'κύριε' three times, this does not necessarily suggest a direct acknowledgement of Jesus' divine nature. Nevertheless, the title, spoken in the context of Tyre and Sidon, invites the readers to hear more than the woman might have intended. The title implicitly poses a question concerning the true nature of lordship: Who is the authentic Lord with the authority to address her affliction – Jesus or the Roman emperor?

The preceding verses (vv. 23–24) reveal Jesus' apparent indifference to the woman's petition, as reflected in his response. Nevertheless, she boldly approaches Jesus and kneels before him [ἐλθοῦσα προσεκύνη] in v. 25. This contrasts with the Markan account in Mark 7:25, where the woman has no difficulty approaching and kneeling [ἐλθοῦσα προσέπεσεν]. Matthew's inclusion of vv. 23–24, therefore, emphasises the

greater difficulty the Canaanite woman faces in approaching Jesus. Her actions signify a deliberate defiance of the social and theological barriers erected against her.

Jesus' response in a brief parable in verse 26 clarifies his self-understanding regarding the scope of his mission, as expressed in v. 24. The parable suggests that Jesus was sent to the children, not to the dogs, with the children symbolising the Jews and the dogs representing the Gentiles. The parable implicitly designates the children as the lost sheep of the house of Israel. This parable carries a pejorative connotation, suggesting that the woman does not deserve a place at the Lord's table. This statement may be interpreted as an insult, regardless of whether it is intended as a form of instruction (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:137). However, she regards this insult as a metaphor rather than takes offence.

The Canaanite woman acknowledges the fact that the children must be fed first, as is customary, but insists that no one should be excluded from the master's table. Her argument reframes the relationship between the 'children' and the 'dogs', suggesting that such distinctions are secondary as long as both remain recipients of the master's provision. This groundbreaking interpretation stems from her conviction that both the Jewish children and the Gentile dogs can find sustenance from the table of their true master – Jesus, rather than the Roman emperor. Although it may be an overstatement to claim that the woman unveils a new dimension of Jesus' mission to the Gentiles, it is plausible to contend that she prompts him to reaffirm the inclusive nature of divine grace – extending to both Jews and Gentiles as equal participants in the kingdom of God.

Rather than succumbing to discouragement, the Canaanite woman persists in persuading Jesus to have compassion for her afflicted daughter. Her tenacity and faith elicit amazement from Jesus, who ultimately grants her request and heals her demon-possessed daughter. Exorcism, a central aspect of Jesus' ministry, is depicted in Matthew as a means of liberating individuals from oppressive forces (8:16, 28–34; 9:32–34). Scholars often interpret these demonic forces in Matthew as symbolic of political oppression and colonial domination (Carter 2008:117–136). Within the context of the Roman Empire, the woman seeks an alternative reality capable of overcoming such powers. She compels both Jesus and his disciples to recognise that all the colonised – whether Jews or Gentiles – are ultimately under the table of the Lord. This realisation requires them to transcend their tendencies to distinguish themselves from Gentiles and women. The affirmation in v. 28 allows us to conclude that Jesus acknowledges her as one of the lost sheep of the house of Israel. By doing so, she not only challenges the disciples but also confronts the readers across history, urging a redefinition of the identity of the lost sheep within the house of Israel.

In conclusion, her challenge ultimately calls into question Christ-centric interpretations that have historically sought to preserve the divine authority of Jesus as one who possesses omniscient control and the prerogative to test individuals at

will. The Canaanite woman has often been portrayed as a passive figure, subjected to interrogation and testing by men who project their own interpretive intentions onto her. Such perspectives reduce her to a mere instrument for unveiling Jesus' salvific plan and divine purpose. However, this reading helps to redirect our focus to the woman's agency – her bold crossing of boundaries, anti-imperial construction of a new identity and resolute confidence in claiming her place at the table of the Lord.

The Canaanite women in Korean context

It has been observed that women like the Canaanite woman often find themselves in a paradoxical position, 'having both two places and no place on which to stand' (Segovia 1995:62). Such women are not only present in the ancient text but are also readily identifiable in our contemporary society. Despite differing historical context, both the Canaanite woman and North Korean female defectors share a critical commonality. They boldly transgressed boundaries within male-dominated, (neo-) imperial structures. This transgression was made possible by their shared conviction that they could claim a new identity and rightfully participate at the table of belonging.

Crossing boundaries

North Korea is a highly militarised and male-dominated communist state governed by the Kim dynasty under the neo-imperial influence of China and Russia. North Korea functions as a buffer state for China in mitigating tensions with the United States, while simultaneously deepening its economic and military ties with Russia, particularly through its reported involvement in the war in Ukraine. North Korea's dependence on China and Russia illustrates how it operates under the neo-imperial influence of both powers.

As a vestige of the Cold War era, North Korea has required men to serve in the military for over 10 years, which has generated numerous social problems, while forcing women to shoulder greater economic burdens within households. This militarised social atmosphere hinders the communist project from fully overcoming the traditional Confucian values it initially sought to dismantle. North Korean society creates hierarchical structure and systemic barriers that shape North Korean women's identities and their boundaries (Choi 2018:21). Economic hardships, particularly during the 1990s famine, led many women to become primary earners through participation in informal markets known as 'jangmadang'. While this shift has challenged some gender norms, it has not substantially altered the overarching patriarchal framework. Women in these markets often face exploitation and lack legal protections, underscoring the persistent gender inequalities. The totalitarian regime in North Korea has subjected its citizens to severe restrictions on political, civil and religious freedoms. The economic crisis and widespread human rights violations are often identified as the two primary catalysts prompting North Koreans to cross boundaries (Yoon 2022:174–175).

In particular, North Korean women have faced existential threats, with many losing their lives under such oppressive conditions. The women traverse boundaries in their quest to find refuge in various parts of Asia, most notably China and South Korea. Within the familial structure of North Korean society, women – whether as mothers, wives or daughters – are often perceived to bear a heavier obligation to support their families compared to their male counterparts, such as fathers, husbands or sons. The food shortages exacerbated this dynamic, intensifying the daily struggle for women to provide sustenance for their households.

When North Korean women decide to cross the Chinese border without a valid visa, their presence is classified as illegal. The Chinese government does not recognise them as refugees but rather enforces policies that mandate their repatriation to North Korea (Han 2011:446). Denied the right to seek asylum, many North Korean women resort to marrying men with legal citizenship in China as a means of survival. According to statistics from South Korea's Ministry of Unification, women constituted 83.7% of North Korean defectors arriving in South Korea in 2023. Alarmingly, between 70% and 90% of these women are reported to have experienced human trafficking during their journey (Yoon 2022:176). North Korean women have crossed multiple boundaries in an effort to overcome the male-dominated structures and neo-imperial conditions of their society for the sake of themselves and their families. In doing so, they have often faced heightened levels of exploitation, oppression and violence; nevertheless, they persist in their boundary-crossing journeys, sustained by a strong sense of emerging identity.

Focusing solely on the issues of poverty and human rights violations faced by North Korean women risks mirroring the perspective of the Jews surrounding the Canaanite woman in the Gospel. Her act of crossing boundaries involved not only religious and cultural tensions between a Gentile woman and the Jewish community, but also broader imperial dynamics affecting all those living under Roman rule. Although Jesus' disciples may not have questioned the Canaanite woman, it is imperative that we engage contemporary 'Canaanite' women in critical reflection – not only on the national borders they traverse, but also on the various boundaries they confront, as well as the motivations that compel their crossing.

Building a new identity

The migration of North Korean women has often been interpreted through the lens of the ongoing conflict between North and South Korea. However, the root cause of their plight can be traced to the neo-imperial colonisation that has shaped the Korean Peninsula since its division. In a context where Koreans are unable to recognise each other under their original, unified identity as 'Koreans', the crossing of North Korean women compels us to confront the real situation and engage in a deeper reflection on our collective identity as 'Korean'. These women contest dominant discourses that construct North and South Korea as inherently distinct

entities and disrupt prevailing assumptions that render the prospect of reunification as unattainable or unrealistic.

The Korean Peninsula has a long history of invasions and resistance against foreign occupation. Over the centuries, Korea was occupied or attacked by one invader after another. Even after the independence from Japanese imperialism in 1945, Korea has never been liberated from the neo-imperial power since the US and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) divided Korea into two parts for their own political interest. The formation of two distinct Korean identities emerged in the aftermath of the conflict between North and South Korea, resulting in identities that have existed for less than 80 years. The evolution of Korean identity has been continuously marked by the ideological struggle between capitalism and socialism, a tension rooted in the Cold War and the global economic system reshaped by the influences of the US, China and Russia. Over the decades, North and South Koreans have experienced a variety of military and political conflicts, and this tension persists to the present day.

South Korea remains one of the most heavily garrisoned nations by the US forces worldwide and uniquely retains the status of being the only country where wartime operational control (OPCON) is still held by the US. The Trump administration has renewed pressure on the South Korean government to increase its share of defence cost-sharing for the US forces stationed in Korea. Given the current military and economic dynamics, South Korea faces significant constraints in refusing this request. These dynamics reflect South Korea's continued subjection to the neo-imperial influence of the US (Chun 2000:84–85). Such a situation has further complicated the formation of a unified Korean identity, forcing Koreans to identify primarily as either South or North Koreans, rather than simply as Koreans (Lee 2020:100–122). Moreover, this has resulted in South Koreans' tendency to look down upon North Koreans, given their ideological and economic superiority.

Just as the presence of the Canaanite woman compelled her audience to confront the pervasive realities of Roman imperialism, North Korean women similarly challenge both North and South Koreans to acknowledge the enduring, though often invisible, influence of global hegemonic powers. Despite living under male-dominated and neo-imperial conditions, these women cross boundaries by asserting their identity as Koreans. Their journey embodies a dynamic process of identity reconstruction – transforming from marginalised North Koreans to self-identified, liberated Koreans. Their lived experience constitutes a profound invitation to all Koreans to reckon with the painful realities of national division and to engage critically with the contested nature of Korean identity.

In this sense, North Korean women function analogously to the Canaanite woman, prompting us to reflect on the identity of the 'lost sheep of the house of Israel' within the broader global context. Their resistance and quest for self-definition

challenge prevailing structures and invite a reconsideration of what it means to belong to the people of God, particularly in a world shaped by imperial forces.

Participating in the table

Much like the Canaanite woman who asserted her right to partake at the table of the Lord, North Korean women affirm their rightful place within the Korean collective identity. However, upon their arrival in South Korea, many encounter a stark dissonance between their aspirations and the reality they face, often resulting in profound disappointment and dissatisfaction (Rice 2018:133–142). South Koreans tend to perceive North Korea as a territory in dire need of cleansing, requiring liberation from the problems associated with communism. Hostile rhetoric and the alienation between the two Koreas are often regarded as natural and even inevitable, particularly by younger generations who lack a strong desire for reunification.

North Koreans in South Korea are frequently viewed as outsiders, unfamiliar with the Americanised democratic system and the free-market economy that shape South Korean society. North Korean women grapple with challenges in adapting to South Korea's societal systems and values, stemming from entrenched social disparities, cultural divergences and linguistic barriers shaped by over eight decades of division. Exacerbating these struggles is the persistent undercurrent of discrimination within South Korean society, which continues to hinder their full integration and acceptance (Lee & Howe 2021:65–90).

The significance of the Lord's table, as experienced by the Canaanite woman, lay in its recognition of a shared identity as the 'lost sheep' – an identity reclaimed by those willing to come forward. If both South and North Korea continue to remain estranged from one another while having lost a sense of their authentic identity under neo-imperial conditions, they will be unable to partake in the transformative experience of the Lord's table. When North Korean women cross boundaries and arrive in the South with a belief in their shared identity as 'Koreans', South Korean society must also acknowledge this forgotten identity and extend a genuine welcome to the table.

In particular, interactions between South Korean women and North Korean women may serve as critical moments of reflection, enabling South Korean women to recognise the socio-cultural and institutional boundaries that constrain their own lives within South Korean society. These intersubjective encounters hold the potential to foster a heightened awareness of shared gendered experiences and may inspire the agency and courage required to challenge and transcend entrenched normative structures. South Korean women continue to confront systemic barriers in the labour market, including persistent gender wage disparities, pervasive glass ceilings and entrenched societal expectations regarding traditional familial roles. According to the 2023 Global Gender Gap Report published by the World Economic

Forum (WEF), South Korea achieved a score of 0.68 on the Gender Gap Index (GGI), ranking 105th among 146 nations. This score underscores the profound and multidimensional nature of gender inequality in South Korea (Kim 2024:20–22). Despite high rates of female education enrolment and the historic election of the nation's first female president in 2013, traditional Confucian values continue to shape perceptions of women's identity and roles in South Korea.

South Koreans must confront the critical status of both Koreas, rather than placing the burden of adjustment on North Korean women who struggle to integrate into South Korean society (Cho 2018:27–50). Both South and North Koreans need to engage in a process of redefining the meaning of the 'table' at which they can all partake. It should not be defined solely by economic systems or political ideologies but should be rooted in a broader, shared understanding of identity and unity.

North Korean women demonstrate profound humility in the face of various forms of discrimination in South Korea. They appear to grasp the relationship between the children, dogs and crumbs within the societal table of South Korea. Just as the Canaanite woman's response both affirmed and transcended Jesus' words, North Korean women are increasingly emboldened to assert that all Koreans, regardless of their background, deserve to partake in the table as independent individuals, free from androcentric and neo-imperial oppression and violence. Nevertheless, while the Canaanite woman was allowed to participate at the Lord's table, North Korean defectors have reached the table but still linger around it. It is commendable that the South Korean government has accepted their requests, granted them entry into the country and strived to support their settlement. However, we must critically address the issue that their current situation cannot be regarded as true inclusion at the table.

Conclusion

Both the Canaanite woman and North Korean female defectors traversed multiple boundaries through their acts of crossing. Their journeys, driven by the pursuit of a reconstituted identity, destabilised these constructed boundaries. Their new identity challenges conventional boundaries of belonging, compelling us to reconsider who constitutes the lost sheep of the house of Israel and who is granted participation in the Lord's table.

Jesus' disciples including Matthew, the interpreters of Matthew 15:21–28 and South Koreans have not realised the broken boundaries and the reconstituted identity because the prevailing androcentric-imperial hegemony continues to naturalise exclusionary paradigms of belonging. The Canaanite woman's act of crossing and the reconstitution of her identity parallel the complex and often painful experiences of North Korean women, while simultaneously embodying resistance against suffering and oppression.

In alignment with this claim, both Koreas must collaborate in the effort to liberate individuals from any form of

exclusion and violence, ensuring that no one is excluded from partaking in the table of shared humanity and dignity. A critical reading of the Canaanite woman narrative should serve as an admonition to Christians against becoming desensitised to the suffering of the North Korean women 'around' the table of the Lord.

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Author's contribution

Y.C. declares that they are the sole author of this research article.

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