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Social identity, dogs and table fellowship in Matthew 15:21–28

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In Matthew 15:21–28, a Canaanite woman asks Jesus to cast a demon out of her daughter. After initially saying that he only came for the 'lost sheep of Israel', he eventually grants her request after her persistence. Social Identity Theory can be used to understand the inter-ethnic relationships in this text. Reference will be made to how Jewish and Gentile identities functioned as groups in such a way as to exclude members who were not part of their group. Social Identity Complexity Theory will be used to understand how a new social identity, that includes both Jesus and his disciples and the Canaanite woman, is created in the interaction. Justin David Strong has argued that dogs were not universally seen as unclean in antiquity. Following Strong's analysis, a nuanced understanding of dogs will be used to understand how the Canaanite woman uses the image of the dog to create a new common identity with Jesus and his disciples.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This article contends that, while there is no intention to erase ethnic identities and distinctions, there is nevertheless an attempt to decrease the significance of these identities in a way that can allow for reconciliation and intergroup fellowship between Jews and Gentiles.

Keywords: Gospel of Matthew; social identity; dogs; table fellowship; Canaanite; Israel; Jewish.

Introduction

In Matthew 15:21–28, Jesus has an encounter with a Canaanite woman. She comes to Jesus to ask him to cast a demon out of her daughter. Jesus initially responds by denying her request, saying that the children's bread should not be given to the dogs. She counters by saying that even dogs get to eat the crumbs that fall off their master's table. Then Jesus, impressed by her faith, grants her request. This article uses 'Matthew' to refer to the author of the Gospel of Matthew, but Matthean authorship is not assumed.

Social Identity Theory (SIT) can serve as a helpful framework for understanding the relationship between Jews and Gentiles as it is presented in this passage. Social Identity Theory can assist in understanding how social groups are constructed, with reference to who is in the ingroup and who is placed into an outgroup, as well as Matthew's critique of these constructions of groups. Social Identity Complexity Theory (SICT) can help to understand the characters in terms of the multiple social identities that they hold. Social Identity Complexity Theory prevents SIT analyses from analysing intergroup interactions in terms of flat ingroup-outgroup distinctions. Social Identity Theory and SICT will be applied to Jewish and Gentile identities as they are presented in Matthew 15:21–28. Occasional reference will be made to spatiality and the idea of assigned spaces, but the bulk of the analysis will deal with SIT.

The article makes a contribution by applying a social identity framework to the text and by using Strong's (2018:183–188) nuanced understanding of how dogs were perceived during the time of Jesus and the Gospel writers. This nuanced understanding of dogs contributes to understanding the meaning of the passage and the way in which the Canaanite woman creates a common identity between herself and Jesus and the disciples.

This article is interested in examining the passage as it stands in Matthew 15:21–28. While there may be occasional reference to redactions from Mark's version (Mk 7:24–30), the focus will be on the passage as it stands in Matthew's Gospel. The article is more interested in Matthew's presentation of the events than whether the events are historical. Historical background will be used to help understand Matthew's presentation of the characters described in the passage, especially with regard to the social relationships between Jews and Gentiles. But the question of

whether the event described in Matthew 15:21–28 occurred in the life of Jesus is outside the scope of this article.

Introduction to Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory dates back to the experimentation of Henri Tajfel. While conducting experiments, Tajfel et al. (1971:172) found that people can easily be led to form groups with other people on seemingly arbitrary grounds. The experimenters placed the test subjects into two groups to understand how they would interact with members of their own group and members of other groups during the experiment.

A result of the experiment was that members of each group acted in ways that were heavily biased in favour of members of their own group, and they were less concerned about members of the other group. Specifically, they found that people would award more points to members of their own group than to members of other groups. This phenomenon has come to be known as ingroup bias ('ingroup' refers to one's own group and 'outgroup' refers to other groups). There was also a perceived sense of entitlement, as members of the group felt that they were entitled to more resources as a result of being in the 'right' group.

While this is true of the group in the experimental situation, there tend to be other factors involved when groups are formed outside experimental situations. Many of these factors that lead to the formation of groups are factors that are based on what the members of the group perceive to be significant. Some of these factors are emotional factors (Greene 2004:137). When the members perceive that they share these important characteristics, they form an ingroup based on these characteristics.

Social identity complexity

While Tajfel et al.'s ideas appear to have generally stood the test of time, more recent researchers have built on and refined their ideas based on new discoveries.

A significant development is SICT. It has been observed that members of a group tend to have multiple group identities, and the way in which they navigate these multiple identities has implications for how they interact with members of other groups (Roccas & Brewer 2002:88). Roccas and Brewer (2002:89–91) describe four ways in which people navigate social identity complexity: intersection, dominance, compartmentalisation and merger.

Intersection involves seeing the ingroup as the combination of all groups of which one is a member. Another person must share all of a person's identities in order to be seen as a member of the ingroup. For example, a person who is an architect and a South African would only see others as part of the ingroup if they were both South African and architects.

Dominance involves making one identity more important than the other identities that a person holds. The identity that is seen as more important is seen as the ingroup identity. For example, a South African architect would give primacy to either architects or South Africans, viewing only one of these as the ingroup. If they see 'South African' as their dominant identity, only other South Africans will be seen as members of the ingroup, while 'architect' without 'South African' will not be seen as a member of the ingroup.

Compartmentalisation involves using the identity that is most pertinent to a particular situation. The dominant identity is the one that is more relevant or beneficial for a particular situation. A South African architect would use 'architect' when with other architects or 'South African' when with other South Africans.

Merger involves seeing all members of all a person's identities as part of the ingroup. According to the merger model, if another person shares just one of the identities, they will be seen as a member of the ingroup. For example, a South African architect will see 'South African' and 'architect' as ingroup identities. A person has to hold only one of these identities to be seen as an ingroup member.

The example of a South African architect serves as a simplified example of how SICT works. Most people have more than two identities, and SICT helps us to navigate the way in which people perceive their plurality of identities.

Individuals can be said to have a 'high' or 'low' identity complexity. Individuals with a high identity complexity are more aware of the many identities they hold, while individuals with a low identity complexity are less aware of their many identities (Roccas & Brewer 2002:93). Individuals with a high identity complexity are often more tolerant of people of other groups than individuals with a low identity complexity. Individuals with a high identity complexity are often able to perceive common identities with members of other groups, while individuals with a low identity complexity show little awareness of commonality with members of outgroups.

Jewish social identity

In Matthew's time, the Jewish people believed that they were descended from Abraham (Gn 12:3) (Domoney-Lyttle 2019:15). The God of Israel promised Abraham that he would bear many children, and these descendants would live in the land that he promised to Abraham and his descendants.

Dunn (1991:24–31) identifies four pillars of first-century Judaism: monotheism, covenant based on Torah, election and land based on the temple. Monotheism refers to the fact that first-century Jews worshipped the God of Israel instead of the gods of other nations. They believed in the existence of heavenly beings, but none of these was as powerful as God, and none of them attracted worship from the Jews the way that God did (Hurtado 2017:118–120). They were therefore

separated from other nations by their exclusive devotion to the God of Israel.

'Land based around the temple' refers to the belief that the land of Israel was to serve the Jerusalem temple. This was the land promised to Abraham, in which his descendants would live (Domoney-Lyttle 2019:15). Another important aspect of the land was that it was to be used to supply the temple. For instance, the space would be used to grow the wood used for the temple and to raise the animals used for sacrifices.

'Election' refers to the belief that they were the elect people of God. The God of Israel promised Abraham that he would have many descendants, and the Jewish people were these descendants. Either the nation of Israel or a faithful remnant of this nation was seen as the elect people of God (Thornhill 2015:10–13).

'Covenant based on Torah' refers to the idea that the Jewish people are the descendants of Abraham. This pillar specifically deals with the idea that God will save his covenant people from their enemies. In the first century, Rome was the enemy from whom they hoped for deliverance.

Spatiality

The bulk of the analysis is based on SIT, so the introduction to spatiality will be less detailed than the introduction to SIT. Lefebvre (1991:38–39) refers to an idea of 'spatial practice'. This refers to space as it is practised on the ground. Societally, it refers to ways in which society practises life within its spaces. 'Representations of space' refers to conceptualisations of space. It refers to space as it is planned by people such as urban planners, including studying how space is zoned. It can also refer to specific spaces being zoned for certain purposes or for certain people.

As this article is primarily interested in SIT, it will suffice to note that Matthew 15 describes Tyre and Sidon, a non-Jewish space. Jesus and his disciples have left the Jewish space within Palestine and entered the Gentile space of Tyre and Sidon. From 'representations of space', the spaces were perceived as spaces for the Jewish people and spaces for a Gentile people, the people of Tyre and Sidon. The space of Tyre and Sidon is seen as a space of a people who are not the people to which Jesus and his disciples belong. They are therefore in outsiders' territory.

Social identity and table fellowship between Jews and Gentiles

In antiquity, table fellowship served to confirm the friendship of the people sitting together at the table (Friedenreich 2011:523). It also came with the expectation that the people sitting at the table held to a common social status. Table fellowship came with the connotation that the people sitting at the table together held a common identity (Moxon 2017:7). In the early Jesus-following movement, we see that table fellowship represented a common identity among the early believers (Schweibert 2008:161–163). For instance, in the Eucharistic meal, the shared table fellowship represented that all the Jesus-followers, despite being many people, were one (1 Cor 10:16–17). Conversely, there were instances in which believers distanced themselves from other believers by a refusal to engage in table fellowship. In Galatians 2:7–14, for example, Peter dishonours Gentile believers by refusing to associate with them at the table when more conservative Jewish believers arrive. In 1 Corinthians 11:23–34, the Corinthian congregation dishonours poor members of the congregation by enjoying table fellowship while the poorer members are not present. Table fellowship is used to represent a common identity, and a lack of table fellowship can dishonour other members of the community.

For Jewish-Gentile relationships, many Jews refused table fellowship with Gentiles. There was a concern that table fellowship with Gentiles might signify a common identity between Jews and Gentiles, and even that the Jewish partakers of table fellowship with Gentiles similarly engaged in Gentile idolatry (Moxon 2017:7). This refusal to engage in table fellowship with Gentiles could hinder the great commission (Mt 28:18–20), as preaching the gospel to all nations would involve Jews and Gentiles interacting. Luke provides a quick solution to this problem with the vision shown to Peter in Acts 10:9–16, but Matthew does not provide an easy answer to this question.

To bring the discussion back to Matthew 15:21–28, Jesus appears to be excluding someone from table fellowship based on ethnicity. From our above discussion, it appears that the disciples and Jesus attempt to avoid encouraging table fellowship with Gentiles. In this case, it appears quite shocking, as the Canaanite woman asks Jesus to cast a demon out of her daughter, and Jesus responds by saying that he was sent only to 'the lost sheep of the house of Israel', and he even appears to refer to her as a κυνάριον, 'dog' (Mt 15:24–26 NRSV). Moreover, Jesus appears to be denying a request to cast a demon out of the woman's daughter, an action by which Jesus appears to be allowing Satan to continue his direct activity in the woman's life on the basis of her not being Jewish. Given a tendency to include both Jews and Gentiles in the early Jesus-following movement, it therefore becomes difficult to explain this text.

The dogs

It has become something of a commonplace to suggest that the dogs were seen as unclean animals in antiquity, especially in ancient Palestine. Regarding the dog imagery in Matthew 15:21–28, Lee and Viljoen (2009:80–82) state that the Matthean Jesus is rejecting Gentiles by comparing them to unclean scavenger dogs. According to Lee and Viljoen, there was a universal rejection of dogs in first-century Palestine. Recently, however, this understanding has come into question. Adewale (2006:34–36), in seeking to present an African interpretation of the parable, suggests that a common belief among Africans and first-century Jews is that dogs are seen as healers, having healing power in their saliva.

Strong (2018:185–188) appeals to a diverse range of literature from antiquity to show that dogs were not universally considered unclean.

For instance, Strong (2018:187) refers to Argos, Odysseus's dog in Homer's (1919) *Odyssey* 17.290–335. Argos, who is barely alive, manages to wag his tail when he perceives that his master Odysseus is coming. Odysseus is pretending to be someone else, as many suitors stronger than him are hoping to court his wife Penelope. Argos sees through this pretence and recognises his master, but the other characters are unaware. Odysseus notes Argos's beauty and asks the shepherd Eumaeus if Argos is a table dog meant for show or a dog that is skilled. Eumaeus remarks that Argos was a very skilled dog who often accompanied young men on hunts but lost much of his vigour when his master, Odysseus, left for Troy. Martial, a contemporary of Matthew, presents Publius praising his dog Issa. Publius describes Issa as 'more loving than any maiden' and 'dearer than Indian gems' (Martial 2008, *Epigrams* 1.109). She sleeps in the bed with her master, and she never wets the bed. Such companionship suggests that dogs were not seen as universally unclean in antiquity. This suggests that dogs could be seen as companions in Greco-Roman circles.

However, given that Matthew's Gospel is not a Greco-Roman document but a Jewish document, it is important to analyse how dogs were perceived according to a Jewish worldview. Keener (2014:85) refers to 'the Gentile custom of using dogs as pets', which suggests that domestication of dogs was a Gentile practice foreign to Judaism. But the picture is not so simple. As Strong (2018:186) notes, Isaiah 56:10–11 alludes to guard dogs. The people who are supposed to watch over Israel are compared to dogs that cannot bark, which renders them unable to carry out the task of warning Israel when danger is coming. The imagery here suggests familiarity with the concept of domesticated dogs in Judaism. In Tobit 6:2 and 11:4, a dog joins Tobias on his journeys. In both instances, the dog is presented alongside the angel Raphael, suggesting that he is a co-companion with Raphael and Tobias.

Furthermore, the Mishnah has legal guidelines that assume domestic ownership of dogs. For instance, a Mishnaic law states that if an ox-owner brings his ox into another person's courtyard and the ox is bitten by their dog, the owner of the dog is not responsible for the harm caused to the ox (B. Qam. 5.3). This law assumes domestic dog ownership.

When Judith offers to lead Holofernes to Jerusalem, she tells him that 'no dog will so much as growl at you' (Jud 11:19 NRSV). The imagery suggests a guard dog, suggesting domestication of dogs in Jerusalem.

It must be admitted, however, that the picture of dogs within the Hebrew Bible is not uniform. The above references indicate familiarity with the idea of domesticating dogs. But there are also sections of the Hebrew Bible that describe dogs in ways that suggest a scavenger's role. In 1 Kings 21:19–23, Elijah prophesies the death of Ahab, using imagery of a dog licking the blood of Naboth and Ahab, and eating Jezebel and anyone who associates with Ahab. In Exodus 22:31, the author instructs the readers that if a domesticated animal is killed by a wild animal, the domesticated animal is to be thrown to the dogs. These images suggest that dogs could also be seen as scavengers.

Strong's argumentation is largely convincing. The strength is that it incorporates a diverse range of both Greco-Roman and Jewish sources. To my mind, he appears to overlook the passages mentioned above from 1 Kings and Exodus that do show dogs to be scavengers, suggesting that it was a view of dogs held prior to Jesus's time (Strong 2018:185–186). These texts do appear to suggest that dogs could be seen as unclean scavengers. Nevertheless, Strong has shown convincingly that ancient views of dogs were more nuanced than a perception of universal uncleanness and that the image of a domesticated dog would not have been entirely foreign in a Greco-Roman or Jewish milieu.

The image presented by the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:21–28 appears to be an image of domesticated dogs. She presents an image of table fellowship among members of a family, where the family members eat, and the dogs also share the food from the table. Since the image is one of table fellowship, it is unlikely that scavenger dogs are in the picture. It is unlikely that members of a household would allow scavenger dogs to sit by the table while the family ate. Therefore, the image presented is one of domesticated dogs.

Social identities in Matthew 15:21–28

Jesus and his disciples hold to Jewish social identities. They see themselves as descendants of Abraham and therefore as the elect people of God. They also worship the God of Israel, unlike other nations, whom they see as partaking in idolatry. As the people of God, based on a covenantal relationship, they believed that a Messiah would come to save their people. They were the ingroup who would receive deliverance by the hand of their Messiah.

Jesus and his disciples also held the identity of 'male'. This was a privileged identity in first-century Palestine. Men are seen as the authoritative ones, as well as the ones who are allowed to move around freely.

The Canaanite woman holds to the identity of 'Canaanite'. 'Canaanite' is a Gentile identity by virtue of not being a Jewish identity. According to first-century Jewish thinking, this placed her among the nations. According to conventional thinking, she was part of the outgroup, as by being a Gentile, she is not part of the elect people of God. This in itself made her part of an outgroup. This is taken even further in that she has a Canaanite identity. Moral reprehensibility was attributed to this Gentile identity by first-century Jews (Keener 2014:84–85). According to the Hebrew Bible, the Canaanites were a nation that had previously been conquered

by Israel, and after the conquest they moved northwards (see for instance Nm 34:2; Dt 1:8) (Keener 2014:84–85; Van Aarde 2020:291). This makes it surprising that Jesus grants her request. Jesus is presented as the Messiah, Son of David, so the expectation would be that she remains in the outgroup, especially as one of the 'morally reprehensible' Canaanites.

She also holds an identity as a woman. As such, she was viewed as one with less authority. Within their households, women lived within a male-dominated environment, with the father or husband being the head of the household (Meyers 2013:109–113). She would have been expected to tend to household chores rather than seek out a travelling Rabbi (Cornelius 2011:35–36).

We see that the characters in the narrative hold multiple identities that affect how they navigate their social world. Jesus and his disciples hold to identities as 'Jewish' and 'male', along with the privileges that come with each of these identities. The Canaanite woman holds to the identities of 'Canaanite' and 'woman', along with the expectations that come with each of these identities. For Jesus and his disciples, their identities contributed to a higher status within the hierarchy of Jewish society, while for the Canaanite woman, her identities contributed to her occupying a lower position on the social hierarchy.

But there is a degree of complexity: Jesus and his disciples have entered Gentile territory. Within Jewish society, they are part of the privileged ethnic group, but within a Gentile society, their Jewish identity is no longer a privileged identity. Yet they retain their male identity, which nevertheless gives them a degree of privilege over the Canaanite woman, as she holds to an identity of a woman.

Children of Abraham, Jews and Canaanites

A significant concern for Matthew is to differentiate between those who are legitimately children of Abraham and those who are not. This theme is seen clearly in Matthew 3:8–9, where John the Baptist preaches his sermon. He tells his audience that they are not to presume upon an identity as 'children of Abraham', as God is able to create children for Abraham from the stones. His hearers hear this as a warning that they may not be legitimate children of Abraham.

A significant point in relation to Matthew is that Matthew attempts to show that Jesus is the Messiah of Israel (Menninger 1994:63–93). In Matthew's genealogy (Mt 1:1–17), the lineage of Jesus is traced back to Abraham. This is in contrast to the genealogy presented in Luke's Gospel, where the ancestry of Jesus is traced back to Adam and then to God (Hays 2005:168; Menninger 1994:76–77). Luke presents Jesus as a Messiah of all nationalities, as he begins with Adam, the father of the human race, whereas Matthew starts with Abraham, the Jewish patriarch. Matthew's genealogy therefore functions to show that Jesus has come to fulfil what has been prophesied in the distant past to the Jewish patriarchs (Hays 2005:167). Similarly, Matthew refers to Hosea 11:1, where he says that he called his son out of Egypt. As a Jewish writer, it is likely that Matthew knew the original sense of the idea of being called out of Egypt, so this allusion to Hosea recalls the Exodus deliverance from Egypt (Hays 2005:174–175). The subsequent allusion to Jeremiah 31:15–20 alludes to the lamentation of a coming exile. Jeremiah 31:17 also alludes to a redemption of the people of Israel by the hand of God. By these allusions, Matthew tells his readers that the Jewish people, as the people with whom God made a covenant based on Torah, are once again to experience a deliverance.

There is some debate over whether Matthew intends to suggest a deliverance limited to Jews or a deliverance that is open to Gentiles as well. Hays (2005:171–173) suggests that the inclusion of Gentiles in Matthew's genealogy suggests that deliverance will be open to Gentiles as well as Jews. Matthew 15:21–28 would then be an example of a Gentile receiving deliverance, consistent with a portrait of Jesus that includes Gentiles in Israel's deliverance. Gullotta (2014:330–332), on the other hand, suggests that Gentile recipients of the benefits of Israel are exceptions to the rule. Gullotta sees the Gentile women in Matthew's introduction as exceptions, with the norm being that Matthew intends to show Jewish superiority over Gentiles. Noting the Canaanite Rahab specifically, she is only spared because of her confession that the God of Israel is superior to other gods (Jos 2:11–13). The Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:21–28, then, functions as another example of a Gentile who receives deliverance only after submitting to Jewish superiority.

Gullotta (2014:329) suggests that Matthew refers to the woman as a 'Canaanite' rather than 'Syro-Phoenician' to further the theme of Jewish superiority, and thus to emphasise the lower status of the Gentile woman. The fact that she is referred to as a 'Canaanite' serves to emphasise the fact that the Canaanite woman is not Jewish, and that she is part of an outgroup that will not receive the deliverance that the Jewish people will receive.

Van Aarde (2020:291) sees this story as representative of a general pattern of the Gentiles coming to Israel. Matthew presents the ministry of Jesus in terms of Jesus seeking out the lost sheep of Israel (Mt 10:6; 15:24). In the case of the Canaanite woman, she sees Jesus and comes to him to seek out healing for her son. The general picture is that the Gentiles need to go to Israel; they need to make the first move. There is no suggestion that Gentiles are to be excluded; to the contrary, they should be included. But they should be included once they have made the first move and approached Israel. This is displayed here, as the Canaanite woman makes the first move to come to Jesus and receive a blessing. According to Van Aarde, even Gentiles are counted among the 'lost sheep of Israel', as evidenced by Jesus's interaction with the centurion, saying that he had greater faith than any in Israel, and the Canaanite woman (Mt 8:5–13; 15:21–28). It initially looks like the Canaanite woman is being excluded, especially with the remark that the children's bread should not be given to the dogs, but she ultimately eats at the same table as the Jews.

Here, the idea of spatiality, with spaces being zoned for particular people, can be of use to help resolve the question. Jesus withdraws from a region within the space of the Jewish people into the space of Tyre and Sidon, a space of a Gentile people. Hays and Van Aarde suggest that the passage represents Gentiles needing to come to Israel, but this suggestion does not take into account the spatial transition of Jesus and his disciples. In both Mark's and Matthew's accounts, Jesus and his disciples go into the region of Tyre and Sidon, which suggests that the God of Israel, instead of including Gentiles only when they approach Israel, is starting a mission to Gentiles.

Gullotta (2014:330) engages with Jesus's movement from Jewish territory into Gentile territory. He suggests that the use of the verb ἀναχωρέω (withdraw) entails a lack of intentionality on Jesus's part to go into the territory of Tyre and Sidon. He further emphasises that the Canaanite woman came from Tyre and Sidon, which only necessitates that the woman approached Jesus from this region, not that Jesus crossed into Tyre and Sidon. According to Gullotta, this means that it is more likely that Matthew presents the Canaanite woman as crossing into Jewish territory without Jesus and his disciples moving into Gentile territory.

However, Matthew does suggest that Jesus crosses into the region of Tyre and Sidon, as he states εἰς τὰ μέρη Τύρου καὶ Σιδῶνος ('into the region of Tyre and Sidon'; Mt 15:21), which does suggest that Jesus went into the region. For this reason, Gullotta's argument fails to convince, as the sentence written in Matthew's gospel presents Jesus as going into the region of Tyre and Sidon. Since Jesus crossed into the region of Tyre and Sidon, it is likely that Matthew is presenting an instance of Jesus crossing into Gentile territory and affirming a Gentile mission. It would be going beyond the text in question, however, to suggest that the text is explicitly affirming Gentiles as children of Abraham, but a Gentile woman does receive a share of the deliverance promised to the children of Abraham.

The dogs and the children

Based on the nuanced understanding of dogs presented by Strong, it appears that the image presented is one of table fellowship among members of a household. The adults, the children, and the dogs are sitting around the table, each eating their allotted share of the meal. Since the dogs in the image are sitting around the table, it is unlikely that Matthew is presenting the dogs in the parable as unclean scavenger dogs. It is unlikely that a family, be they Jewish or Gentile, would allow scavenger dogs into their homes.

Therefore, the image presented by the Canaanite woman represents a family dining at the table, with their domestic dogs sitting around the table. The Canaanite woman takes the image of Gentiles being dogs and makes it into a positive image. Within the household, every member receives their share of the food. The dog is no exception. So the image suggests that Gentiles are part of the household of the God of Israel. They receive their metaphorical share of the food (in this case, deliverance from demonic activity) after the Jews receive theirs, but they are nevertheless included in the household.

The social identities of 'Jew' and 'Gentile' are no longer separate identities. The image of the table suggests that both Jews and Gentiles are accepted at the table. The blessing went to the Jews first and then to the Gentiles, but the Gentiles are affirmed as legitimate recipients of the blessings. Despite the seemingly harsh tones of the word 'dog', there is nevertheless an affirmation of the inclusion of Gentiles.

Identity complexity

Chung (2025:3–5) sees an identity of persons subjugated under Roman rule as a common identity between the disciples and the Canaanite woman. While there is a difference between their identities, as the Canaanite woman is a Canaanite and Jesus and his disciples are Jewish, the Canaanite woman creates a common identity between Jesus and herself by emphasising their similarity as subjects under Roman occupation. They all experienced the negative economic effects of living as subjugated peoples under the Roman Empire. According to Chung, the Roman Empire failed to tend to the medical and psychological needs of either the Jewish people or the Canaanite people, so this gives them a common identity as Roman subjects.

There is a differentiation between the Jewish identities of Jesus and his disciples and the Canaanite identity of the Canaanite woman, and there is also a differentiation between their gendered identities, but these identities lose their salience in light of their shared identity as Roman subjects. Jesus and his disciples may be the masters at the table, because of their Jewish and male identities, but their table remains under the control of Rome, which lowers their position on the social hierarchy.

The Canaanite woman, therefore, shows a high identity complexity, as she is able to recognise a common identity with the Jewish males that they do not initially recognise. The Jewish male disciples are aware of their Jewish male identities and show awareness of this as their identity without showing awareness of other identities, whereas the Canaanite woman is able to recognise a common identity with them. As a result of this recognition of a common identity, the separate identities of 'Jew' and 'Canaanite' lose their salience in favour of a mutual identity as Roman subjects. The Canaanite woman, therefore, constructs an image of table fellowship between her and the Jewish males she is addressing. She has a common identity with them, so she gets a place at the table. Even if she has the position of a dog, she still has a

right to her place at the table, and she claims her place at the table by insisting that she receive her 'crumbs'.

Conclusion

Using SIT and SICT as a framework, this article has analysed the social dynamics presented in Matthew 15:1–28. The characters presented in the passage start off with separate identities, as Jesus and his disciples are Jewish and the Canaanite woman is a Gentile. They are also separated by gendered identities, as the Canaanite woman was not expected to have approached Jesus and his disciples because of their differences in gender.

However, the Canaanite woman shows a high identity complexity by emphasising a similar identity to Jesus and his disciples, that of groups subjugated under Roman rule. Using the image of familial table fellowship, she is able to use the image of a dog to emphasise her right to belong at the table with the Jewish males. Even if she is seen as a dog, she will exercise her right to receive the 'crumbs' that are rightfully hers.

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CRediT authorship contribution

David R. van Groeningen: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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