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Ethnicity and The People of God

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Introduction

There is one element of our biblical understanding and Christian speech that must be revised at least within popular circles of Christianity, which includes, by the way, the majority of Christians around the world: the identity of the people of God regarding race and ethnicity. The issues of ethnicity, culture, national identity and nationality are rather complex, and I do not claim to be an expert on this, but there is at least a minimum that can be said.

Using a biblical example, ethnocentrism is what made Naaman, the Aramean general, reject Elisha's treatment (2 Kgs. 5).[1] Initially, Naaman gets angry because Elisha did not receive him as the general he was, but sent a servant with instructions for his healing. He also rejects the instructions themselves: to bathe seven times in the puny Jordan River when in Damascus they had such rivers as the Abana and Pharpar. His identity had been deeply offended on two unacceptable counts.

Ethnicity will be used in this article in the sense of boundary markers that separate one group of people from another. It 'refers to the social ideology of human division sorted according to common culture'.[2] Ethnocentrism is therefore produced by one's culture. In that sense, ethnocentrism is natural.[3]

Negatively, though, ethnocentrism could be defined as a 'sociopsychological syndrome'[4], characterized by a 'tendency to discriminate against the stranger, the alien, the physically different'; it 'is a virtually universal phe-

1 Other authors also think ethnocentrism plays an important role here. See Efraín Silva and Roberto Fricke, '1 Reyes', in *1 y 2 Reyes, 1 y 2 Crónicas, Comentario Bíblico Mundo Hispano* (El Paso, Texas: Editorial Mundo Hispano, 2000), 211.

2 J. A. Manickam, 'Race, Racism and Ethnicity', in *Global Dictionary of Theology*, ed. William Dyrness and Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen (Downers Grove, Illinois, USA: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 718.

3 David Matsumoto and Linda Juang, *Culture and Psychology* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2001), 61-91.

4 Daniel Druckman, 'Ethnocentrism in the Inter-Nation Simulation', *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 12, no. 1 (1968).

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nomenon in group contacts'[5], obviously including Christians.[6] Since phenotypical differences are included in some definitions of ethnocentrism, we could then subsume racism under ethnocentrism, understanding that each term is a field of study in and of itself.

Ethnocentrism, in its most common expression, is this general attitude by which we determine who is below us, who deserves to be treated completely as an equal human being and who doesn't. This is so much a part of us that we do not notice it. Through these invisible lenses we classify large groups of people and large sections of the world's geography.[7]

The purpose of this article is to explore ethnicity and ethnocentrism in relation to the identity of the people of God and its mission in the world. What I share here is a testimony of some personal challenges that I have faced living in a very ethnocentric region of my own country where I am considered a foreigner just because of my accent (and the whole culture behind it). What I have discovered is that I am no less ethnocentric! In the words of D. Smith, 'I came to realise how deeply my faith was conditioned by culture and how little I really understood the strange world of the Bible.'[8] Ethnocentrism can be one of the greatest obstacles to Christian mission, even in situations where the classic concept of tribe or 'urban tribes' do not apply. Smith suggests that 'if the church is to obey Christ in relevant and faithful witness' in today's context, we need mental, structural and theological changes.[9] This article is an attempt to address some of those mental and theological issues.

Ethnocentrism, when mixed with pride, is one of the most difficult sins to overcome. But just the awareness of its presence in us gives us a new perspective on what it means to be the people of God and what we are here for:

> … mission involves the discovery that our faith and theology have been conditioned by culture to a far greater extent than we had ever realised. Cultural conditioning is not something that happens only to other people, we too carry cultural

5 George Fredrickson, 'Social Origins of American Racism', in *Racism*, ed. Martin Bulmer and John Solomos (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 75.

6 Some studies from the first half of the twentieth century claim that Christians in some parts of the world tend to be more ethnocentric than atheists! See, for example, Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, 'Atheists: A Psychological Profile', in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, ed. Michael Martin (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 303-04.

7 Edward Said has shown the important role that ethnocentrism has played in the East-West international relationships. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York, USA: Vintage Books, 1979). But we should not forget that there is also 'Occidentalism'. See also Kaushik Bagchi, 'Ethnocentrism', in *Berkshire Encyclopedia of World History*, ed. William H. McNeill (Great Barrington, Massachusetts, U.S.A.: Berkshire Publishing Group, 2005).

8 See David Smith, *Mission after Christendom* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 2003), xii. For the sake of simplicity, we will use 'culture' and 'ethnicity' as synonyms in this article. It could be said that ethnocentrism is the elevation of one's ethnic and cultural identity above that of others. For more detailed definitions, see Manickam, 'Race, Racism and Ethnicity'.

9 Smith, *Mission after Christendom*, 11.

> baggage which needs to be declared 'excess' and left behind when we seek to share Christ with others.[10]

This article is divided into two sections. In the first part we will deal with stories from the Old Testament where we see how the promise given to Abraham comes true: people are both saved and judged by faith, not by ethnicity. The second part has two examples from the New Testament where ethnicity is clearly relativized.

I The People of God in the Old Testament

Many times we assume that the promise given to Abram begins to be fulfilled only when Jesus came and when Paul said that there is neither Jew nor Gentile (Gal. 3:28). But there is a long tradition in the Old Testament where the promise is fulfilled. This tradition helps us see the grace of God in the Old Testament and it is essential for our reading of the Bible as a whole.

1.1 The Exodus

We begin with the constitutive event of Israel as a people: the exodus. The biblical author finds no problem in telling us that there was a significant number of non-Hebrews who left Egypt along with the Hebrews, 'A mixed crowd also went up with them' (Ex. 12:38). Why is this bit of information there? The way this is expressed in Exodus is theologically suggestive. The Hebrew word used here is defined as 'mixed people or race'. So from the very beginning of Israel's history as a nation, salvation was possible not just for Israel, but for all sorts of people. So if there ever was a 'peasant revolt' it happened in Egypt and it was very inclusive.

The problem of 'mingling with the nations' is neither in the mingling nor in the nations *per se*, but in 'doing as they do' (Ps. 106:35). The same Hebrew root used in Exodus 12:38 is also used in this Psalm and in Ezra 9:2. The doing is clear in the Psalm, but not as much in Ezra.

It may be that in Ezra we see the beginning of a distorted idea of purity. Or maybe something else. We should not forget that one of the big problems after the return of the exiles was Jews oppressing Jews (Neh.5).[11] This shows that it is possible to do as the nations do without mingling with them; which brings us back to the spirit of the law. What gives identity and permanence to the people of God is faith and obedience to the word of God (*cf.* 1 Sam. 12:24).

1.2 Rahab and Achan

The book of Joshua is not an easy one to read these days. The way out of this is not to fix the text or the theology of those who wrote it. We do need to consider, however, that the book is neither as nationalistic as some critics have thought nor as triumphalistic as some Christians think it is.[12]

10 Ibid., 75.

11 Another bad example in the Bible is king Solomon, who is blamed for marrying foreign women; not because they were many or were foreign, but because he inclined his heart to follow their gods (1 Kgs. 11:1-13).

12 For a fresh reading of Joshua, see K. Lawson Younger, Jr., *Ancient Conquest Accounts* (Sheffield: Sheffield, 1990).

Two personal and elaborate stories in this book deal with the issue of inclusion and exclusion. Rahab is the Canaanite prostitute who becomes part of Israel, along with her relatives, because she understood what God was doing at that point in history with Israel. She became Israel (Josh 2; 6:22-27). Achan, on the contrary, was an Israelite who did not understand what God was doing with Israel, by taking from Jericho souvenirs he was not supposed to take (Josh. 7). He was punished. The Canaanite woman enters the hall of faith while Achan joins the hall of shame. In both cases the only criterion is a combination of what they believed and what they did. Another example in Joshua is the Gibeonites, where a whole people group becomes part of Israel, tricks and all (Jos. 9).

In Acts we find parallels to the stories of Rahab and Achan. Ananias and Saphira (Acts 5) are the Achans, while Cornelius (Acts 10) and many others are the Rahabs of the New Testament. The latter are those who manifest right speech about God and right action in God's name, as Vanhoozer defines theology.[13] In all these cases we find 'insiders' caught up in greed and 'outsiders' as models of piety.

1.3 Do you have an accent?

It is hard to imagine that accent played any role in Israel's history as a way of differentiating between tribes. Such is the cruel case in Judges 12: the pronunciation of one Hebrew consonant became at one point a matter of life and death. When the Israelites seemed to have lost track of who they were as a people,[14] the way to establish identity was, as it sadly is today, accent. Due to some confusing circumstances, the Gileadites went to war against the Ephraimites. Many Ephraimites died at the hands of the Gileadites. Apparently they were not able to distinguish one another by their height, colour or clothing but only by their accent. Ephraimites pronounced the word for ear of grain as 'Sibolet', while the Gileadites said 'Shibolet', apparently the 'right way'.[15]

The reason for including this story here is that it is a bad example. Even the people of God can forget what it is that makes them a people and reduce their identity to the most insignificant of all elements, accent, as if there were people without one.

1.4 Ruth

Ruth was from Moab. Moab was one of Israel's enemies for most of Israel's Old Testament history. Feelings of hatred were mutual. Moab oppressed Israel for some time at the hands of Eglon (Judg. 3). Mesa was the Moabite king who refused to keep paying tribute to Israel; Israel attacked with a

13 Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 165.

14 Some have argued that they did not know who they were just yet.

15 S. Niditch holds that besides showing differences in accent or dialects within Israel at this time, this case testifies to 'Israelite awareness concerning the "mixed multitude" that constituted the people'. See Susan Niditch, *Judges* (Louisville, Kentucky, USA: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 138.

coalition of two more kings (Judah and Edom) but were not able to subdue him (2 Kings 3). Later Mesa celebrates his liberation from Israel by his god Chemosh.

The history of these bad relationships is found in Numbers, chapters 22-25 and 31. Here Moab does two things that seem to justify Israel's hard feelings towards them: Balak hires a seer (Balaam) to curse Israel; later on some Moabite women lead the Israelites to idolatry, an issue where Balaam seems to have been involved. So Moab is a different ethnic group and it is also Israel's enemy.

But this is the Moab Ruth came from! Not only did she become Israel, but also king David's grandmother. Why? Simply because this woman showed her mother-in-law a godly and 'biblical' love and adopted her mother-in-law's faith and fate (Ruth 1:16-18). Her ethnicity was a non-issue.[16]

1.5 Naaman and Gehazi

Naaman is the Aramean general (2 Kings 5) remembered by Jesus (Lk. 4:27) as the leper healed by Elisha at a time when there were many lepers in Israel (2 Kings 7). This enemy of Israel, by the way, won many battles against Israel because Yahweh, the God of Israel, gave them victory over Israel. Very shocking indeed, but that is what the Bible says. Naaman initially feels offended by Elisha's lack of deference and by the prescription to be healed of his leprosy, but in the end, thanks to his aides, Naaman bathes himself in the Jordan River and is healed of his leprosy. Then he wants to compensate Elisha for the miracle, but the prophet rejects the gifts.

In the same story, Gehazi, Elisha's helper, is the delinquent. The story is parallel to that of Rahab and Achan. In this case, leprosy being the problem, 'Naaman the outsider is delivered from it; Gehazi the insider is delivered to it'.[17] There is another ironic contrast in the story. Gehazi states, 'As Yahweh lives, I will run after him and I will take something from him' (v.20). Moore has said it eloquently, 'There is tragic irony in this oath statement, for Gehazi will get Naaman's leprosy! It is as if Gehazi has unwittingly cursed himself. Thus the ultimate fate of Gehazi is anticipated unwittingly by an opening speech, just as was the fate of Naaman in the previous sequence.'[18]

Gehazi is presented here as a pragmatic man. He cannot accept Elisha's decision to reject Naaman's gift and runs after the Aramean general before it is too late.[19] Gehazi makes up a story and is able to extract three pairs of things from Naaman, who, quite willingly, gives them to him: two talents of silver, two sets of clothes, and two servants to carry them (v. 23). Once every-

16 There is no suggestion in the book of Ruth that Elimelek and his family are blamed for going to Moab to look for food.

17 Terence Fretheim, *First and Second Kings* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 152.

18 Rick Dale Moore, *God Saves: Lessons from the Elisha Stories* (Sheffield: Sheffield, 1990), 81.

19 Gehazi's greeting to Naaman, and the Shunammite's greeting to Gehazi reflect how the word 'shalom' was used in conversation as a mere greeting without further meaning.

thing is hidden and Naaman's servants dismissed, Gehazi goes back to Elisha.

In comparison with Naaman who takes a couple of detours to get to the knowledge of Yahweh, Gehazi's actions show how quickly and directly a person deviates from the path of righteousness. Here we find another contrast that Cohn has observed, 'A subliminal contrast: "For while Naaman would support his lord with his 'hand' in the 'house' of Rimmon, Gehazi has taken from others' hands and uses his house to betray his lord."'[20]

Scholars debate what kind of wrong Gehazi has done. For T. Fretheim his sin is more than greed or deception:[21] 'Gehazi's sin is, finally, a *theological* sin, for it endangers the very nature of faith and obscures the gracious work of God. The effect of the judgment is that Gehazi is returned to the pre-healing situation of Naaman, and he now stands in need of a Naaman-like journey…. The insider has experienced God's judgment; the outsider has received salvation. The outsider has become an insider and the insider an outsider. The boundary lines of the community of faith are less clear than the insiders often suggest.'[22]

In brief, Naaman's journey of faith is evident in the form of the text. Alonso Schökel has observed that the story uses the Hebrew root for leper/leprosy seven times. It is used by the narrator, the Israelite girl, the Aramean king, the Israelite king, Naaman, Elisha, and the narrator (2 Kgs. 5:1, 3, 6, 7, 11, 27 [2x]). As Alonso Schökel has put it, Naaman, a magnate, has to go down from the king to the prophet, to a servant, and later to the Jordan River.'[23] As a character, Naaman 'develops from arrogance to humility'. This 'circle' is accomplished with the 'little girl' of verse 2 and the 'little child' of verse 14 and with the leprosy of verse 1 and the other leprosy of verse 27.[24]

This is a story that exemplifies narrative art as form that is put at the service of meaning. The story is theologically powerful because of its artistry. Cohn points out what the story teaches because of its form, 'The power of Israelite prophets (v. 8); the universal reign of Yahweh (v. 15); the denigration of magic (v. 11); the condemnation of theft (vv. 11, 20). At the same time, the narrative explicitly approves of the "conversion" of Gentiles (v. 19) and implicitly assumes the holiness of the land of Israel' (v. 17).[25] The only thing missing in Cohn's list of lessons is the role of the little girl and of Naaman's servants as the ones who make the story possible.[26] But Ngan has picked it

20 Robert L. Cohn, 'Convention and Creativity in the Book of Kings: The Case of the Dying Monarch', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 47 (1985): 182.

21 This has been argued by many. See, for example, Luis Alonso Schökel, Iglesias González, Manuel, *Reyes*, Los Libros Sagrados (Madrid: Cristiandad, 1973), 188.

22 Fretheim, *First and Second Kings*, 155.

23 Alonso Schökel, *Reyes*, 184.

24 Richard D. Nelson, *First and Second Kings* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1987), 181.

25 Cohn, 'Convention and Creativity in the Book of Kings: The Case of the Dying Monarch', 183-84.

26 Nelson argues that the theme of 'universalism' is introduced in v. 1 with Yahweh as the one who gives victory to Naaman and is later confirmed with his conversion. Nelson, *First and Second Kings*, 177. I. W. Provan adds

up: 'If power is the ability to effect change, whether for good or for evil, the servants in this story demonstrate through their effectiveness that they too have power.'[27]

Conclusion

All these stories are the chosen samples in the history of Israel that communicate how the promise given to Abraham came true long before Christ came. With Christ, of course, the promise is democratized. What all these examples tell us is that Gentiles do not become part of the people of God for the first time when Christ comes. Gentiles have been part of the people of God all along on the same grounds that Abraham was justified, by faith.

Ethnicity does count in the Old Testament. As Goldingay has said, the faith of Israel in the Old Testament is ethnic. Ethnicity, however, does not make Israel better or worse. God chose a family, the Hebrews who later became the nation of Israel. There are valid reasons for it. Choosing a family brings stability to the relationship: 'If God's election depended on human response of faith, people could escape or resign from that election. But through the choosing of a certain people, God's name is bound to the world in a way that cannot easily be dissolved.'[28]

But this is, as Goldingay says, an open family, a family that welcomed Jethro the Midianite, the 'mixed crowd', Rahab, Naaman, Ruth, Uriah the Hittite. Some of these stories show that when a choice has to be made between ethnicity and faith in Yahweh, faith wins the day. Even ethnic Israelites must 'confess that Yahweh is God, as Christians will later confess that Jesus is Lord' (Gen. 12:1; 17,14; Deut. 26:16-19; Josh. 24; Rom. 4:16; Gal. 3:7-14).[29] The fact that some prominent cases have been chosen to be part of Israel's history may be an indication that there were many more.

What we see in these stories is that Old Testament authors at some key points in Israel's history included episodes that trivialize economic, geographic and ethnic boundaries as the way by which the great promise of God for humanity comes true. There is a sense in which from an Old Testament perspective, knowledge of Yahweh is available to all peoples.

II The People of God in the New Testament

I, of course, cannot compete here (or anywhere!) with N. T. Wright's book on this issue.[30] My intention in this section is simply to single out some stories in

that 2 Kgs. 5 is 'yet another narrative that picks up themes from the Elijah story; the LORD is seen to be God, not only of Israelites, but also of foreigners (1 Kgs. 17:17-24) and is acknowledged as the only real God (1 Kgs. 18:20-40).' Paul R. House, *1, 2 Kings*, vol. 8, The New American Comentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995; reprint, 1999, 2001), 191.

27 Lai Ling Elizabeth Ngan, '2 Kings 5', *Review and Expositor* 94 (1997): 591.

28 John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology: Israel's Faith* (Downers Grove, Illinois, EEUUA: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 176-77.

29 Ibid., 177.

30 N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God V.1 (London: SPCK, 1992).

the New Testament that help us see this struggle of inclusion-exclusion within the people of God that Christians today need to pay attention to.

What we see in the Old Testament should not come as a surprise in the New Testament since this is the time when the promise given to Abraham to bless all nations comes true in a more general fashion. But several stories in the New Testament show that the promise has many obstacles to its fulfillment. One of them is again ethnocentrism. It could be argued that the stories selected in both Testaments are there for the same reason: ethnocentrism. We will look at two examples from the New Testament: Jesus' genealogy and the story of the Syrophoenician woman. The second story we will develop in more detail.

2.1 A theological genealogy

We have a tendency to pride ourselves on our ethnic and cultural backgrounds. This is something that has value in and of itself and it helps us measure ourselves against other people. But it is really shocking to see the people Matthew selected for Jesus' genealogy. It is rather appalling. Those who speak of Jesus as a 'full-breed Jew' when he talks to the Samaritan woman (supposedly a 'half-breed') should read their Bibles again.

This genealogy is especially disturbing because here Matthew is establishing Jesus' legitimacy as the Messiah, someone from the lineage of David and Abraham.[31] But in order to do that, the first Evangelist includes people that some would consider not so 'legitimate.'[32] There are five women in Jesus' genealogy in Matthew 1: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba and Mary.[33] All of these women had some kind of 'marital irregularity',[34] and the first four were not of Israelite origin. Nevertheless, all of them were worthy of a place in the genealogy of the Messiah. So Jesus counted Moabites, Hittites, and Canaanites among his ancestors.

One author says that the emphasis of this genealogy is not in the women themselves but in the stories that they embody.[35] Maybe so, but these women are their story. No women, no story. These women, their story and the biblical theology that comes out of it tell us that the inclusion of non-Israelites within the people of God is not a novelty in the New Testament. Ethnicity, like one's past, is not a problem for God or an impediment for anyone to have a worthy place within the history of God's salvation. If God's Messiah can come from such a genealogy, he can also be the redeemer of all sorts of people, even if their past is 'questionable'.[36]

31 Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey* (Nashville, Tenn., Estados Unidos: Brodman and Holman, 1997), 199.

32 A detailed explanation of this genealogy can be found in Christopher J. H. Wright, *Conociendo a Jesús a Través Del Antiguo Testamento*, trans. Daniel Menezo (Barcelona: Publicaciones Andamio, 1996).

33 There were other more 'worthy' matriarchs in Jesus' genealogy, but Matthew excluded them.

34 R. T. France, *Matthew* (Leicester, Reino Unido: InterVarsity, 1985), 74.

35 John C. Hutchison, 'Women, Gentiles, and the Messianic Mission in Matthew's Genealogy', *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158 (2001): 152.

36 See Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels*, 199.

This seems to be an important element in the theological agenda of the Evangelists. The reason is that ethnocentrism is very hard to overcome. We need to be reminded time and again that the foundation on which the identity of the people of God rests is not ethnic or geographic or linguistic, but theological. This is how Matthew does theology with a genealogy.

2.2 A theology of dogs and crumbs

The following is a true story of border crossing. This is a story where we see the problem of ethnocentrism very clearly. The reason we're looking at this, let's not forget, is that it is a serious human problem that jeopardizes both our theology and God's mission in the world.

Jesus throws his disciples into a very uncomfortable situation in order to bring them out of their rigid religious and cultural mould in which they have lived all of their lives. He does this because he wants to free them from this thick ethnocentric shell common to all human beings. It is important to note here, as in other Gospel stories, and contrary to what one would expect, that quite frequently Jesus' disciples are for the message of the gospel, the worst example.

In one of his few international trips, Jesus went to the region known as Syrophoenicia, west of Galilee (Mt. 15:21-28). In this trip, Jesus crossed several frontiers. As they arrive, a Canaanite woman comes out shouting, 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.' She has gone against some cultural rules, has used all the appropriate language, but Jesus says nothing.

Perhaps thinking that the woman was annoying Jesus, his disciples asked him to send her away because of her shouting.[37] We do not know what they thought, but they want to dismiss her. There is a similar story in the Old Testament. As Hannah prayed earnestly to God for her situation, Eli, the priest thought she was drunk (1 Sam. 1:14-16). Evidently, sensitivity and discernment are not always the virtues that accompany God's representatives.

Finally, Jesus says something. But what Jesus does with his words is even more confusing than his silence, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' Now, that is theological ethnocentrism at its best! In his response, Jesus seems to side with his disciples and approve of their attitude. 'Jesus is a typical Jew of his time', one might say.[38]

This woman is perhaps the opposite of the rich young man, for whom one difficult answer was enough to turn away from Jesus (Mt. 19:16-30). She does not give up and does not leave. Not only that, she comes closer to Jesus and says the most simple and powerful words, 'Lord, help me.' But, when we expect a 'typical Jesus

37 See R. V. G. Tasker, *Matthew* (Leicester, Reino Unido: InterVarsity, 1961), 150-51.

38 Two examples of authors who hold that Jesus behaves like a typical Jew of his time are: Judith Gundry-Volf and Miroslav Volf, *A Spacious Heart: Essays on Identity and Belonging* (Harrisburg, EEUUA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 21, Theodore W. Jennings and Tat-Siong Benny Liew, 'Mistaken Identities but Model Faith: Rereading the Centurion, the Chap, and the Christ in Matthew 8:5-13', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 123, no. 3 (2004): 478.

response' we get 'a typical first-century-Jew response': 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.'

To be called a 'dog' is not very nice, even if it is a 'little dog'. In most cases in the Bible dogs are associated with feelings of rejection.[39] In fact, in the biblical world, dogs are not pets as they are today. It is a dirty animal, a scavenger that marauds cities around garbage dumpsters; dogs are a symbol of impurity. If Jews considered Gentiles as dogs it was because they did not live according to the Torah and its laws of purity; a gentile is therefore ritually unclean.[40] Not very kind, especially coming from Jesus.

But again, the woman has an answer for that: 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.' She seems to accept that Jesus was sent to the Jews, that is 'the children', but 'dogs', that is, Gentiles, also eat from the crumbs that fall from the table. She uses the same metaphor and states that Gentiles also have a part in the food, which is the kingdom of God. Israel's priority with respect to Gentiles is historical, not social or psychological. And what Gentiles participate of is not just crumbs. What will Jesus do now?

At last Jesus gives the persistent woman a favourable answer. And it is not only favourable; he praises her as he never praised any of his own disciples. In matters of faith, the disciples earned more reprimands than anything else: 'men of little faith'.[41] To this Canaanite, Gentile, Greek woman Jesus says: 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.' And her daughter was healed instantly.

The way the story is told shows that for Matthew the miracle itself is secondary. His main interest is in the dialogue and what happens there. There is no question that the woman's faith and persistence are praise-worthy, but one has to ask why the conversation has gone to such a humiliating extreme for this woman.

First of all, the woman has no name. She is identified by geography and culture. In some cases namelessness in literature is a form of oppression and discrimination; in this case it could be the result of a male-dominated culture.[42] This argument is very appealing today, but does not work for at least three reasons: (1) the men in the story, except for Jesus, do not have names either; (2) the woman in the story is the good example; and (3) in the New Tes-

39 There have been found cemeteries exclusive for dogs in the Ancient Near East, but there is no certainty as to why they were buried in a specific place. *Cp.* Edwin Firmage, 'Zoology (Fauna),' in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

40 1 Kgs. 14:11; 16:4; 21:19, 23; Psalm 59:6; Prov. 26:11; 2 Peter 2:22; Rev. 22:15. See Leland Ryken, and Wilhoit, James, ed., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 29.

41 It is a favourite theme of Matthew. Out of the six cases of 'little faith', five are in Matthew and one in Luke (Mt. 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; 17:20; Lk. 12:28); not counting those where their lack of faith is not mentioned but evident.

42 See, for example, Janis Jaynes Granowski, 'Polemics and Praise: The Deuteronomistic Use of the Female Characters of the Elijah-Elisha Stories' (Ph.D. diss., Baylor University, 1996).

tament there are stories of men without names (Lk. 7:9; Mt. 8:10; 9:18-26; 19:16-30), as well as stories of women with names (Mt. 28:1-10). So the argument of the narrative about the Syrophoenician woman, who is never called 'disciple', is that she is more of a disciple than the disciples themselves.[43]

Perhaps a better explanation for the woman's namelessness in this case is that the biblical author does not want to turn the woman into an inaccessible hero. As it is, it is easy for the reader to identify himself or herself with the character[44] and feel that he or she can be that character. This should work both with the woman's good example and with the disciples' bad example.

Secondly, there still remains the question of why Jesus did not heal the woman's daughter immediately at her first request. We might say that he wanted to test the woman's faith, as he did in other situations with the disciples. But still we need to ask why the whole exchange was so humiliating for the woman. This is a complex issue for which there is no easy answer. Let us explore some possibilities.

Some authors have suggested that Jesus needed the woman's insistence in order to change his opinion about gentiles. This implies that Jesus up until this day was a typical first-century Jew and thought just like his disciples did.[45] In other words, this was the moment in his earthly ministry when Jesus realized that Gentiles also had access to God's salvation. But, what sense could this make in a Gospel where Jesus is God who has become man? He has already crossed so many other borders, he talks to prostitutes, Publicans, Samaritans and all kinds of people. And he even sets these people as examples of faith.

There may be a better alternative to this rather uncomfortable dialogue. It is more likely that Jesus crossed the Galilean border[46] to teach his disciples a fundamental lesson: the mission of God does not see geographic or ethnic borders like we do just as his justice does not 'see faces' nor 'fear certain faces' (Dt. 1:17). Jesus brings his disciples out of their comfort zone in order to give them a theological tour:[47] (1) the

43 There are other positions on this issue. See W. R. Telford, *The Theology of the Gospel of Mark* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 230-34. It must also be pointed out that even though the region is specified, there is no information about the exact location. See also P. Bonnard, *Mateo* (Madrid: Cristiandad, 1976), 348.

44 For a complete feminist version on this, see Patricia Daniel, 'Feminism', in *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Graham Ward, *Blackwell Companions to Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 438.

45 This separation is also evident in Qumran. *Cf.* Bonnard, *Mateo*, 350. There is, however, the possibility of God's favor for those Gentiles who are friends of Israel (*Cf.* Christopher Rowland, *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity* (Londres: SPCK, 1982), 174.). But it seems like official Judaism of the first century did not allow Gentiles to enter any of the thirteen gates leading to the temple. See Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *The Holy Land*, 5a ed., Oxford Archaeology Guides (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 88-89.

46 Perhaps the boundaries between the disciples and this woman is not economic but only ethnic.

47 This may have been a trip that took several weeks. See Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids, Michiga, EEUUA: Eerdmans), 404-05.

previous episode in Matthew had to do with the issue of uncleanliness; Jesus tells them how wrong they are in believing that ceremonial rites are what make a person clean; (2) the gospel of Matthew begins with a genealogy that includes four women who would be among the 'dogs'; and (3) this gospel ends with the great commission to all the peoples of the earth.[48] So with this encounter with the Syrophoenician woman, Jesus challenges his disciples' prejudices and shows what it means and what it takes to make disciples of all nations: ethnical boundaries are harder to cross than geographical ones.

But still, what do we make of Jesus' harsh words to the woman? There is no way to prove this, but some authors have suggested that Jesus' words are accompanied by a wink in his eye and a certain tone of voice. This obviously cannot be seen in writing, but it can be assumed. In other words, Jesus talks to her just as she would expect any Jew would do. But his purpose, just as in the parables, is to surprise them with an unexpected theological twist. The effect should be felt both by the disciples that day and by readers today. What he does then is to make them and us believe for a moment that he thinks like they do and like we do. As he transcends cultures and nationalities, Jesus invites his disciples to do the same,[49] 'True cross-cultural mission thus widens our perspectives and involves the renunciation of all forms of ethnocentrism.'[50] Here, as in many other examples in the New Testament, the marginal (the Syrophoenician woman) becomes central and the central marginal (the Jewish disciples). And as the examples multiply, we see that Christianity is polycentric.

Conclusion

What we say about the Jews here is not an accusation that renders them worse people than anybody else. Ethnocentrism is a human thing. What Stott says about culture could easily be applied to the issue of ethnicity and all that it entails, 'Being part of our upbringing and environment, it [culture] is also part of ourselves, and we find it very difficult to stand outside it and evaluate it Christianly. Yet this we must learn to do. For if Jesus Christ is to be Lord of all, our cultural heritage cannot be excluded from his lordship. And this applies to churches as well as individuals.'[51] God has no favourite culture (Rev. 21:26-27). Jesus, by the way, had a recognizable Galilean accent (Mt. 26:74).

There have been periods, long periods in the history of the people of God when their behaviour does not clearly communicate what their identity and

48 *Cf.* Theresa Okure, 'The Global Jesus', in *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus*, ed. Markus Bockmuehl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

49 Bonnard, *Mateo*, 351.; France, *Matthew*, 247. Morris also holds that Jesus' words alone sound harsh, but perhaps he said them with a smile (just for the woman to see?). Cf. Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 404-05.

50 Smith, *Mission after Christendom*, 57.

51 John Stott, *Making Christ Known: Historic Mission Documents from the Lausanne Movement, 1974-1989* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, EEUUA: Eerdmans, 1996), 40-41. The point is not to abandon one's culture or to lose appreciation of its good things.

their mission is. This may happen when the people of God are assimilated to the surrounding culture or when the people of God shelter themselves from the world around. There might even be a point when the people of God look more like a curse to the world than like a blessing.[52]

Ethnocentrism is a consequence of our human finitude: 'We cannot stand utterly free from our culture and our place in history.'[53] But it is also a result of our sinfulness. It is one thing to interpret things from our cultural and historical point of view and it is quite another to conclude that others are inferior or worthless. So, since ethnocentrism is so difficult to remove completely and since we do believe in the 'first principles' of revelation, the Bible helps us with stories where we see at least three things: that the promise given to Abraham is indeed for all peoples from the outset, that Jesus has a plural ethnic background, and that field trips can be very useful in developing a more relativistic view of our own culture and appreciation for that of others. Our goal is not to stop being who we are ethnically and culturally, but to understand what it means to be in Christ, to understand how our ecclesiology and soteriology are impacted by our anthropology (Gal. 3:28).

Therefore, we are called to believe in word and in deed that the kingdom of God is multiethnic and multicultural. As we cross human borders we evidence the presence of Christ in us. If culture is the podium on which we stand to judge and despise others, Christ invites us to get down, to be like him. Let us all get out of our circle, find our Syrophoenician and live out the gospel. The inclusion of all people in our hearts, in our theology and in our praxis is an essential element of the gospel throughout the Bible. In terms of our mission today, we need to cross borders towards those who speak another language and towards those who speak with a 'theological' accent. The first step might be just to talk.

52 Stott, *Cristianismo básico*, p.114.

53 Kai Nielsen, 'Richard Rorty', in *A Companion to Pragmatism*, ed. John R. Shook and Joseph Margolis (Malden, Massachusets, USA: Blackwell, 2006), 133.