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WANTOK JISAS: READING MATTHEW'S STORY OF THE CANAANITE WOMAN (15:21-28) IN A MELANESIAN CONTEXT[1]

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is an attempt at a narrative-critical and socio-cultural reading of Matthew's story of the Canaanite woman, from a Melanesian perspective. It analyses the story's setting, plot, and characterisation, drawing attention to elements, which may have particular interest for a Melanesian reader. The story's border-line setting, the depiction of the disciples, and the exchange between Jesus and the Gentile woman – in particular, His "silence" – highlight's Jesus' *wantok* framework as "Shepherd of Israel". Finally, the portrayal of this Canaanite mother's quest for her daughter's cure, resonates with the Melanesian experience of the spirit-world, exalts Jesus' status, and, ultimately, provides "hope for the Gentiles".

During a Bible-sharing session with young people, just recently, a young man commented on Jesus' forbiddance of His disciples to proclaim Him (cf. Luke 9:21) in this way: "*Planti taim mi mekim 'boast' long gutpela wok na nem bilong mi. Tasol, dispela em nogat pasin bilong Jisas. Em itambuim*

[1] An early draft of this paper was presented at the biennial conference and meeting of the Melanesian Association of Theological Schools at the Kefamo Conference Centre (Goroka PNG, June 25-28, 2013). The author acknowledges the insightful comments of Dr Scott Charlesworth and Dr William Longgar, who have helped to improve this paper.

ol disaipel bilong em yet long telimautim em." (Often, I boast of my good deeds and name. However, this is not the attitude of Jesus, who forbids His very disciples to proclaim Him.) While that youth must be commended for applying the passage to himself in a spiritual way, his interpretation may not stand scholarly scrutiny, since Jesus, in reality, prevented His disciples from proclaiming Him, because they failed to get Him right. Still his effort – as a Melanesian – was an honest attempt at making sense of the Good News.[2] Besides, Bible sharing is an optimal way to actualise enculturation.[3]

This paper is an attempt at a narrative-critical and socio-cultural reading of a biblical passage in a Melanesian context. It is an effort to make a biblical text resonate with Melanesian readers, by citing common ground, or distinguishing differences between the biblical event and Melanesian culture. It will develop nuances, which may be more strongly felt by Melanesian readers, thus underlining meaning, which may easily escape Western interpretation.[4] It will approach this reading, respecting the primary meaning of the text, and not violating this vital meaning. Hopefully, this

[2] Another interesting example of local, devotional interpretation can be found in Br Silas, SSF, "Solving the Problem of the Pigs: a Case Study in Local Theology", in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 8-1 (1992), p. 61.

[3] Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Enculturation*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1988, p. 269; Philip Gibbs, "The Gospel of Christ in Enga", in P. Gesch, ed., *Gospel Transformations*, Madang PNG: Divine Word Institute, 1993, p. 33, as found in William Kuman, "Who is Jesus Christ for the Kuman People of Simbu Today (AD 2000) and Beyond in the Light of the Scriptural and Cultural Faith Experience?", unpublished project paper, mod. Fr Philip Gibbs. Bomana PNG: Catholic Theological Institute, 1999, p. 6.

[4] Ennio Mantovani believes Melanesian culture, like other cultures, has the obligation to contribute to a deeper understanding of God's revelation; see Ennio Mantovani, "I. God's Word and the Ancestor's Response", in Ennio Mantovani, and Mary MacDonald, eds, *Christ the Life of Papua New Guinea*, Occasional Papers of the Melanesian Institute 1, Goroka PNG: Melanesian Institute, 1983, p. 9. The exegetical approach undertaken in this study is akin to what Stephen Bevans calls the "anthropological model" in contextualising theology. This model is centred "on the goodness of the *anthropos* (ἄνθρωπος), the human person", and makes use of the "insights of the social science of anthropology", with its main emphasis on culture; see Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1992, pp. 47-48. A comparable approach is employed by Ma'afu, "Reading the Old Testament as Gentiles Living in the Pacific", in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 29-1 (2013), pp. 84-103.

exercise can serve as a template for further investigation towards a reading of the biblical books in a Melanesian context.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This work must be read in the light of its two most-obvious limitations. First, enculturation can be done only by indigenous readers themselves, in this case, Melanesians.[5] I am a Filipino-American, trained in Western-style exegesis. That said, I hope my residence in Papua New Guinea of more than a decade, teaching in its schools and seminaries, engaging in village missions, and researching local cultures, allow me some insight to engage the biblical text, from a Melanesian perspective, however limited. Secondly, any Melanesian approach is, by necessity, a generalisation.[6] What exists on the ground are local, indigenous cultures – over 700 of them in Papua New Guinea alone! Still, there is much commonality, and this allows general observations.

A BORDER-LINE SETTING

What initially strikes the reader is the spatial setting of the narrative. Jesus leaves Gennesaret (cf. Matt 14:34), and withdraws to the regions up north. He moves there, not to engage in mission, but to separate Himself from growing opposition. In fact, earlier, He had just limited His disciples to engage only "the lost sheep of the House of Israel" (10:6). Ever since the start of His public ministry, Jesus had gone only to Jewish towns and villages (4:23; 9:35). His fame may have spread beyond Israel's borders (4:24), and immense crowds – even Gentiles – may have followed him (v. 25), but He limited His physical presence within Israel's territory. During His public ministry, Jesus addressed and ministered *only* to Israel and its inhabitants. He did not make any effort to reach beyond its borders, but He did not prevent Gentiles from approaching Him (8:5ff). The only exception, when He reached Gentile shores, was in a bid for withdrawal and reclusion (v. 28; cf. v. 18), not for mission activity. Similarly, by going to

[5] William R. Burrows, "Theologising in the Melanesian Context Today", in James Knight, ed., *Christ in Melanesia: Exploring Theological Issues, Point* (1&2/1977), p. 243.
[6] Mantovani, "I. God's Word", p. 11.

the Phoenician border, Jesus removes Himself farthest away from Herod's clutches (14:13).

The Melanesian reader can identify with Jesus' *wantok* outlook. In the *wantok* system, the priority given to one's compatriot, especially one's village mate, or fellow clan/tribe member, did not only strengthen relationships, but created an effective social security system.[7] This provided a safety net for lean times. The dependable helping hand, and material exchange of goods between *wantoks*, forged village unity. In turn, the village was strengthened, and the tribe assured of defence in time of conflict.[8]

In the case of Jesus, the priority He accorded Israel was not narrow-minded parochialism. It was the expression of His vocational identity to be the "Shepherd of Israel" (2:6), especially by alleviating – and vicariously taking Himself – the people's infirmities and diseases (8:17; cf. Is 53:4). By limiting Himself to Israel's boundaries, He fulfilled "all righteousness" (Matt 3:15) by accomplishing the angel's word to "save His people from their sins" (1:21). Jesus' calling was for Israel; in His lifetime, He showed Himself to be the Messiah (16:16) of Israel (27:29). In fact, when He was killed, the inscription read the charge: "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews" (v. 37). Ultimately, by fulfilling His mandate – and limiting it – to His *wantoks*, Jesus proved God faithful to His promises (1:21; cf. Is 66:18ff).

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[7] Of course, the *wantok* system (literally "one talk") transcends simple kinship – whether biologically, linguistically, culturally and regionally. It is "a social institution, whereby interpersonal and interethnic ties, or relationships, are established through language, trade, domestic exchanges, and other means"; see Kasek M. Kautil, "*Wantok*-system on Karkar Island", in *Catalyst* 16-1 (1986), p. 29. *Wantoks* are given preferential treatment in day-to-day transactions, especially when decisions and choices are made. In traditional Melanesian societies, this reaching out "to meet the needs, wants, and desires of individuals and groups, who are related", strengthened clan membership, through reciprocity; see Paliama Aiyery Tanda, "An Analytical Evaluation of the Effects of the *Wantok* System in the South Sea Evangelical church of Papua New Guinea", in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 27-1 (2011), pp. 7-12.

[8] Ako Arua, and Daniel John Eka, "*Wantok* System", in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 18-1 (2002), p. 11.

THE CANAANITE WOMAN

The Canaanite mother is portrayed as a round character, whose nuances are developed as the narrative progresses.[9] On one hand, she has the distinction of being the first of only two women who address Jesus directly in Matthew's story (Matt 15:22; cf. also 20:21).[10] On the other hand, she is depicted as marginalised, in triple fashion: as a woman, a Gentile, and the mother of a possessed person.[11] In fact, her initial portrait is not too kind. She is obviously contrasted to Jesus – he goes out (ἐξελθὼν (*exelthōn*) in 15:21) and she as well (ἐξελθοῦσα (*exelthousa*) in v. 22). However, she does not accord Him the usual deference (προσκυνέω (*proskuneō*): magi in 2:2, 8, 11; leper in 8:2; synagogue leader in 9:18; disciples in 14:33; mother of Zebedee brothers in 20:20). Instead she cries out incessantly – and in public, of all places!

Here, the Melanesian reader can identify in two ways. By accosting Jesus in public – and afterwards engaging Him in dialogue – the woman had touched a raw nerve. The depiction of Jesus' ministry attests to the practice of gender separation in public, for instance, during the feeding of the 5,000 (although Matthew uses ὄχλους (*ochlous*) in 14:19; cf. ἀνθρώπους (*anthrōpous*) and ὁι ἄνδρες (*hoi andres*) in John 6:10). The woman's action was an affront to Jesus, and Him dishonour. This resonates with the Melanesian, in whose traditional societies, gender separation is common practice.[12] In many Melanesian cultures, the woman may be seen, but not

[9] A round character is one portrayed realistically with positive character traits, as well as weaknesses and flaws. Instead, a flat character is one dimensional.

[10] Glenna Sue Jackson lists seven occasions of direct address, attributed to women in Matthew (9:21; 14:8; 15:22, 25, 27; 20:21; 25:8, 9, 11; 26:69, 71; 27:19). However, it is only in two incidents that women actually address Jesus (15:22, 25, 27; 20:21); Glenna Sue Jackson, *"Have Mercy on Me": The Story of the Canaanite Woman in Matthew 15:21-28*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 228, London UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002, p. 150.

[11] John P. Meier, "Matthew 15:21-28: Expository Article", in *Interpretation* 40 (1986), p. 398.

[12] R. H. Codrington, *The Melanesians: Studies in their Anthropology and Folklore*, Oxford UK: The Clarendon Press, 1891, pp. 42-45.

heard.[13] While it may be surmised that this mother's intense love for her daughter may have brought about this desperate stance, it still was an affront to Jesus, as rabbi, as it would be to any Melanesian *bikman*.[14] It is in this context that one must read the disciples' exasperation, "send her away!" (15:23), and even Jesus' unsettling choice of imagery (κυναρίοις (*kynariois* = dogs) in v. 26).

As if this were not enough, the Canaanite woman appropriates for herself the prerogatives of Israel. She addresses Jesus directly as "Son of David" (15:22). Hitherto, this address has been found only on Israelite lips: the two blind men (9:27); the Jewish crowds (12:23); the blind men of Jericho (20:30, 31). It is as a "son of David", and fellow Bethlehemite, that Jesus is portrayed as Shepherd of Israel. And it is as Israel's Shepherd that Jesus made the rounds of Galilean villages and cured the sick (4:23; 9:35). That she understands her address of "Son of David" as a demand for healing, is reinforced by her plea for mercy: ἐλέησόν με (*eleēson me*) in 15:22. Again, previously in Matthew's story, Jesus heeded the cry of mercy only of the inhabitants of Israel (9:27; the father of an epileptic son in 17:15; 20:30, 31; also 18:33). On her own volition, she shatters the racial barrier dividing Jew

[13] Harvey Whitehouse, *Inside the Cult: Religious Innovation and Transmission in Papua New Guinea*, Oxford UK: Clarendon Press, 1995, p. 52; Louise Aitsi, "Gender Equality: Dignity of Women", in Philip Gibbs, ed., *Alive in Christ: The Synod for Oceania and The Catholic Church in Papua New Guinea 1998–2005, Point* 30 (2006), p. 266. Ennio Mantovani comments: "the man is the talker, who belongs in the community's 'square', while the woman is the producer, who belongs in the garden, but the talking and doing are both necessary and complementary aspects of traditional life"; see Ennio Mantovani, *Male-female Relationship in Melanesia: a Pastoral Reflection, with Particular Reference to Domestic Violence*, Occasional Papers of the Melanesian Institute 8, Goroka PNG: Melanesian Institute, 1993, p. 10. Theoretically, Mantovani defends the Melanesian women's dignity, in recognition of her "specialist role" in village horticulture; see Ibid., pp. 7-8. Unfortunately, that is not a sentiment shared by a majority of Melanesian women, who see themselves as being in a subordinate position, in the village context; see Hilde Thurnwald, "Women's Status in Buin Society", in *Oceania* 5-2 (1934), p. 169.

[14] In Melanesian culture, this woman's incompatible behavior is categorised as a "*rong*", which is revealed by "*sem*". *Sem* means being found out, and being talked about in public. A Melanesian, reading this story, would categorise the situation, when the disciples complain about "*sem*", and their complaint as "*kamapim tok*", or public accusation; see Gernot Fugmann, "Salvation Expressed in a Melanesian Context", in James Knight, ed., *Christ in Melanesia: Exploring Theological Issues, Point* (1&2/1977), pp. 129-130.

and Gentile. She, a Canaanite, makes herself a ***wantok*** of Jesus, and disembowels YHWH's economy of salvation – which gives priority of place to Israel.

To a Melanesian, the supposition of what this Canaanite woman is doing is unsurprising. Melanesian life is based on an endless chain of obligations and exchanges. Considering Jesus as her ***wantok***, she now imposes herself on Him and obligates Him to give in to her request. Moreover, the Canaanite woman believes she has hit upon the "secret formula" – "have mercy, Son of David!" – and is expected to receive its accompanying ***kago***,[15] in this case, the healing of her daughter. That this does not happen is perplexing, and perks the Melanesian reader to investigate the failure: was the formula lacking? Was some part of the ritual left unfulfilled?[16]

THE "SILENCE" OF JESUS

In contrast to the woman, who continuously addresses Jesus directly as **κύριε** (***kurie***) (15:22, 25, 27), Jesus responds to her specifically only twice (**αὐτῇ** (***autēi***) in vv. 23, 28). In two other instances (vv. 24, 26), His response is directed broadly – even indiscriminately – eventually reaching Matthew's implied reader. In each case, Jesus presents His statement in metaphors. Remarkably, at the first moment Jesus actually addresses the woman, He grants her only His silence.

The reticence of Jesus builds tension in the story, and contrasts sharply with the clamour, both of the woman, and the disciples. However, it is not primarily the result of gender bias, or racial prejudice. In two other instances, when Matthew describes "silence", he uses the appropriate verb

[15] The Pidgin term "***kago***", derived from the English "cargo", alludes to the abundance of material goods, associated by Melanesian natives with the coming of the "white men". However, here, the term is used denote the Melanesian concept of salvation or "all the aspects of this longed-for abundant life"; see Ewan Stilwell, "Towards a Melanesian Theology of Conversion", in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 9-1 (1993), p. 31.

[16] For a tragic example of ***kago***-mentality resulting in human sacrifice, see Adolph, Noser, "In Quest of the Golden Age", unpublished paper, Alexishafen PNG, 1978, pp. 1-2, in Bayani Valenzuela, "Cargo Cult: Anthropological Interpretations and Theological-Pastoral Evaluation", unpublished manuscript for a Degree of Licentiate in Missiology, Rome: Pontificia Universitas Gregoriana, 1982, pp. 89-90.

σιωπάω (*siōpaō*) (20:31; 26:63). However, here the silence is not simply the lack of aural noise, it is because Jesus does not give *to her* (His) word (λόγον (*logon*) in 15:23). He deprives her of His *word*. It is this which causes the failure of her quest.

At first, a Melanesian will be at a loss to understand this strategy of Jesus, for traditional leaders are expected to speak out.[17] Their big-men are primarily "men of talk", whose speeches in public meetings displayed their personal power and esoteric knowledge.[18] This failure on Jesus' part to speak out challenges the Melanesian reader to investigate more closely His motivation.

In Melanesia, silence can be pregnant with meaning, especially if this comes from the elder. It is tantamount to great disrespect to interrupt an elder, or, worse still, to disagree with him in public. The actions of the Canaanite woman – her verbal sparring with Jesus – would have been met with grave disapproval.

However, Jesus shows no disquiet. Instead, in measured metaphors, He gradually leads the desperate mother to His own point of view.

THE LOST SHEEP OF THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL

Jesus' beneficence to the woman begins with His denial of His disciples' request: "send her away!" (ἀπόλυσον αὐτήν (*apoluson autēn*) in 15:23). Had He done so, would not have surprised the reader, since, previously, Jesus had already dismissed the crowds (ἀπολύσας (*apolusas*) in 14:22, 23). Dismissing people is slowly becoming the disciples' trait (14:15), in contrast to Jesus, who refuses to do so (15:32). When He eventually sends away the crowds, it is only after they had been satisfied (14:22; 15:39). Jesus is moved by compassion (15:32; cf. also 9:36) as the shepherd of the flock. This is the context to understand the "shout-out" of Jesus: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

[17] James Yugari, "A Biblical Critique of Helahuli Church Leadership", in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 20-1 (2004), p. 13.

[18] Karen J. Brison, *Just Talk: Gossip, Meetings, and Power in a Papua New Guinea Village*, Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1992, p. xiii.

This imagery is the same used to set limits to the disciples' mission (10:6). However, there is a significant difference between the two instances. Here, it is Jesus, who is sent (15:24), and He understands Himself as sent by God, as indicated by the divine passive ἀπεστάλην (*apestalēn*). The phrase "house of Israel" is based on Old Testament prophetic texts, where it designates the chosen people as a whole, especially in view of their regathering after the exile (Is 11:12; Jer 31:31, 33; 33:14, 17; Ezek 34:30; 36:37).[19] The metaphor **τὰ πρόβατα τὰ ἀπολωλότα οἴκου Ἰσραήλ** (*ta probata ta apolōlota oikou Israēl* = the lost sheep of the house of Israel) underscores Jesus' ministry as restricted to Israel, and signals its messianic, eschatological fulfilment.[20]

Instead, the Canaanite mother, by appropriating for herself Israel's prerogative, disregards Israel's priority in the order of salvation. By doing so, she inadvertently belittles God's plan. Now, Jesus gradually brings her to adopt His – and the divinely-ordained – position. It begins by *not* sending her away.

BREAD FOR THE CHILDREN AND CRUMBS FOR THE DOGS

The story of this Canaanite woman is located in the greater narrative block of Matt 11:2-16:20, which discloses a revelation plot. The question that John the Baptist delegates to his disciples – "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" (11:3) – brings about tension in the narrative, as various characters, or character groups, voice their contrasting perception of Jesus (11:19; 12:24; 13:55; 14:33; 15:22). Finally, Simon Peter gives closure to the Baptist's question as he confesses: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (16:16). Two related metaphors – wisdom (11:19; 12:42; 13:54), and bread (12:4; 14:17, 19 [2x]; 15:2, 26, 33ff [3x]; 16:5ff [7x]) – dominate this narrative section, and divide it (11:2-

[19] Massimo Grilli, Comunità e Missione: le direttive di Matteo: Indagine esegetica su Mt 9,3-11,1, Frankfurt am Main Ger: P. Lang, 1992, pp. 106-107 and 232-233.

[20] Guido Tisera, *Universalism according to the Gospel of Matthew*, Frankfurt am Main Ger: P. Lang, 1993, p. 200; S. Brown, "The Two-fold Representation of the Mission in Matthew's Gospel", in *Studia Theologica: Nordic Journal of Theology* 31-1 (1977), p. 28.

14:12; 14:13-16:20).[21] This is the context in understanding the often-misunderstood statement of Jesus in 15:26: "It is not fair to take the children's food (τὸν ἄρτον (*ton arton*)) and throw it to the dogs."

This difficult pronouncement is preceded by a subtle, yet undeniable, transformation already happening in the woman (15:25). In fact, the repetition of ἐλθοῦσα (*elthousa* = came) recalls her earlier approach ἐξελθοῦσα (*exelthousa* = came out) in v. 22, giving the impression of a restart in her dealings with Jesus. Unlike before, she now kneels before Him (προσεκύνει αὐτῷ (*prosekunei autoi* = worshipped Him)), cf. v. 22, and calls out to Him as a Gentile would: "help me" (βοήθει μοι (*boēthei moi*)). Significantly, she no longer approaches Him as "Son of David", but instead, uses κύριε (*kurie* = Lord), thus acknowledging her proper place as a Gentile.

Given her changing stance, Jesus' remark does not need to be interpreted harshly, but was a regular τόπος (*topos* = place) in ancient literature. Judaism referred to other peoples as "swine" or "dogs", not to disparage them, but because they were the enemies of Israel.[22] In fact, in the Old Testament, the reference to "dog" is an expression of humility (1 Sam 24:14; 2 Sam 9:8; 2 Kings 8:13), or unworthiness (2 Sam 16:9; Is 56:10). To infer that Gentiles were "unworthy" simply reflected conventional Jewish thought.[23]

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[21] John Aranda Cabrido, *A Portrayal of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew: a Narrative-Critical and Theological Study*, New York NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2012, pp. 173-174.

[22] The reference to "dog" is an expression of humility (1 Sam 24:14; 2 Sam 9:8; 2 Kings 8:13) or unworthiness (2 Sam 16:9; Is 56:10). Amy-Jill Levine concludes that there is "no evidence that rabbis employed either term (= dogs or swine) as a common metaphor for Gentiles". Instead, if there was such a tendency in Judaism it was because these nations were enemies of Israel; see Amy-Jill Levine, "The Social and Ethnic Dimensions of Matthean Salvation History", in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 109-4 (Winter 1990), pp. 723-725.

[23] Jesus' remark was a regular τόπος (*topos* = place) in ancient literature; see Ulrich Luz, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus*, vols I-IV, Zürich Ger: 1985-2002; English *Matthew 8-20: a Commentary*, Wilhelm C. Linss, tran., Minneapolis Augsburg Publishing, 1989, pp. 340-341; also Joachim Jeremias, *Jesu Verheissung für die Völker*, Stuttgart Ger: 1956, English *Jesus' Promise to the Nations*, Samuel H. Hooke, tran., London UK: SCM Press 1958, p. 29; Leopold Sabourin, *The Gospel According to St Matthew*, vols I-II, Bombay India: 1982,

The narrative, itself, reduces the sting of the words of Jesus in several ways. The pronouncement is not addressed specifically to the woman, but is meant to be explanatory, that the reader may understand Jesus' motive for refusal. The images used in the exchange are diminutives: little dogs (κυναρίοις (*kunariois*) in 15:26, 27),[24] and crumbs (ψυχίων (*psuchiōn*) in v. 27). Significantly, when the woman responds, she clothes her terms in the plural: κυνάρια (*kunaria* = dogs), and κυρίων (*kuriōn* = masters) (v. 27), thus deflecting application of the imagery *only* to herself and Jesus. She, herself, understands it as a τόπος (*topos* = place) of conventional wisdom.

This usage of metaphors and veiled language is an approach, with which Melanesians can associate. In fact, expertise in it is a mark of a true leader. Often times, vague speech is used, in order not to hurt sensibilities.[25] At other times, indirect language is a strategy to get across a message, often a correction, while avoiding confrontation.

The dog is an ambivalent figure in Melanesian cultures.[26] While dogs are much appreciated, especially as hunting companions, it is also recognised that they can be treacherous. The dog's unruly, and sometimes vicious, nature is well known. Because of canine cunning and thieving, young men

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p. II:659. To infer that Gentiles were "unworthy", simply reflected conventional Jewish thought; see Cabrido, *A Portrayal of Jesus*, pp. 192f.

[24] The imagery of the house dog is to contrast it with the scavenging packs, more common in ancient Israel. The household image – and the contrast between children and dogs – is the only one which makes sense, and the reality is children are fed first (cf. Ps 17:14); see Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, p. 340; J. D. M. Derrett, "Law in the New Testament: The Syro-Phoenician Woman and the Centurion of Capernaum", in *Novum Testamentum* 15-3 (July 1973), pp. 167-169. However, for a Melanesian, this distinction is artificial and irrelevant. Pet dogs were such *because* they were hunting companions. Instead, Jesus' metaphor underlines the historical privilege of Israel; see Otto Michel, "κυνάριον (kunarion)" *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1965, p. III:1104.

[25] Veiled speech forms allow the audience to hear what they will "between the lines". It allows them to reach their own conclusions, while avoiding "the problems of 'hard' words, by softening the impact of embarrassing truths and bad feelings"; see Brison, *Just Talk*, p. 17.

[26] John Nilles, "Natives of the Bismarck Mountains, New Guinea", in *Oceania* 15 (1945), p. 2.

are often referred to as "dogs" by the village elders, particularly when they leave off their garden work. But, on the whole, the dog – especially as hunting dogs – are instrumental in a young man's social life, as he goes about hunting, and making the rounds of neighbouring villages, thus creating his social identity.[27]

MULTIPLE TRANSFORMATIONS

Instead of being discouraged by Jesus' statement, this Gentile woman – equipped with a new perspective – finds space for herself and her daughter in Jesus' cramped metaphor (15:27). In order to achieve her quest of healing for her daughter, she reforms her point of view from an entitled – though mistaken – *wantok* to an unworthy petitioner. Her immense trust, coupled by extraordinary wit, brings the episode to a *climax*, and convinces Jesus Himself.

Change also occurs in Jesus. The climax is signalled by the adverb **τότε** (*tote* = then) (15:28). For the very first time in the entire episode, He addresses her directly (**αὐτῇ** (*autēi*), with the vocative **ὠ γύναι** (*hō gunai* = O woman), in v. 28) with His word – and what a powerful word it is! The word order is unexpected and extraordinary: **μεγάλη σου ἡ πίστις** (*megalē sou hē pistis* = great is your faith). One would have expected **ἡ πίστισ σου** (*hē pistis sou* = your faith), cf. 9:22. Instead, by putting **μεγάλη** (*megalē* = great), in the primary position, Jesus stresses the enormity of her faith. Furthermore, transferring **σου** (*sou* = your), immediately after **μεγάλη** (*megalē*) alludes to the greatness, not only of the faith, but of the woman herself! Remarkably, references to faith in miracle stories never applies to disciples, but to non-disciples (9:2, 22, 29) with citations of extraordinary faith accorded only to Gentiles (8:10; 15:28). Ultimately, Jesus recognises in the woman's desire the will of God and fulfils it (cf. 7:21; 26:39, 42).

Lastly, transformation happens also to the daughter. Throughout the episode, she is portrayed as an object of concern. Unlike her mother, she is voiceless, and is further marginalised, because of her youth. Like other

[27] Thomas Maschio, *To Remember the Faces of the Dead: the Plenitude of Memory in Southwestern New Britain*, Madison WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994, pp. 98-99.

young ones in Matthew's story, she benefits from her parent's intercession and Jesus' action (8:5-6ff; 9:18ff; 17:14-15ff). Her instantaneous cure is a testimony to Jesus' powerful word (15:28), and her mother's great faith.

A WORD ON DEMONS

Matthew's story states the demonic possession of the daughter as something matter-of-fact: κακῶς δαιμονίζεται (*kakōs daimonizetai* = is badly demon-possessed) (15:22). By describing it with a verb, the Canaanite mother focuses on the event rather than on the agent. This would be perplexing for a Melanesian, who is greatly sensitive to the presence of spirits in everyday life, and who subscribes to a great variety of them.[28] Health and sickness are not just physiological states, they are brought about by corresponding good or evil spirits.[29] A Melanesian would not be surprised by the demonic. However, one would be compelled to identify exactly which evil spirit caused it.

Correspondingly, the Melanesian reader would sense a lacuna in Matthew's storytelling. Since the Canaanite woman and her daughter were *from that region* (απὸ τῶν ὁρίων εκείνων (*apo tōn horiōn ekeinōn*)) in v. 22) one would surmise that the malevolent agent is a local nature spirit, perhaps a *masalai*.[30] If this were so, then our understanding of Jesus' power is greatly enhanced. Unlike native shamans and village sorcerers, He does not need to perform elaborate ritual. His word alone suffices, and its effect is instantaneous. Furthermore, Jesus does not need to travel to the specific

[28] In the Melanesian worldview, these are "sky spirits", "spirits of the land", and the souls of the deceased; see Theodor Aerts, "Man and His World: Biblical and Melanesian Views", in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 5-1 (1989), pp. 38-39; also Ennio Mantovani, *Divine Revelation and the Religions of PNG: a Missiological Manual*, Melanesian Mission Studies 1, Goroka, PNG: Melanesian Institute, 2000, pp. 45-46.

[29] John Kadiba, "Sickness, Healing, and Wholeness," in Cliff Wright, and Leslie Fugui, eds, *Christ in South Pacific Cultures: Articles by South Pacific Islanders about the Relationship of Traditional Culture to Christian Faith*, Suva Fiji: Lotu Pasifika, 1985, p. 57.

[30] The *masalai* are powerful nature spirits in PNG, which reside in specific locations, such as, caves, rivers, etc. They can be benevolent, malevolent, or ambiguous; see Ennio Mantovani, *Divine Revelation*, p. 46.

locale of this nature spirit to cure this *sik ples*.[31] Jesus cures the daughter from a distance. This attests to His universal power – not just spatially, but over *all* spirits.

WANTOK BILONG HUSAT?[32]

Despite granting the Canaanite mother's request, and curing her daughter, Jesus continues to hold on to His *wantok* framework. In praxis, Jesus continues to minister primarily to Israel (compare Matt 15:29ff to Mark 7:31ff), and His cure of the centurion's son (Matt 8:13), and this woman's daughter remain exceptions His ministry. It is interesting to note that the above two cures differ markedly from other miracles of Jesus. In both instances – and only in these two – the action of Jesus is described by the verb ἰάομαι (*iaomai* = to heal, cure by freeing from disease, make whole) (8:8, 13; 15:28), and the cures are brought about from a distance. Instead, in all other instances of healing, Matthew uses the verb θεραπεύω (*therapeuō* = to heal, cure, restore to health) (4:23, 24; 8:7, 16; 9:35; 10:1, 8; 12:10, 15, 22; 14:14; 15:30; 17:16, 18; 19:2; 21:14). Lastly, in both occasions, the actions of are softened by the use of γίνομαι (*ginomai* = to come into existence, to come to pass): ὡς ἐπίστευσας γενηθήτω σοι (*hōs episteusas genēthētō soi* = "let it be done to you according to your faith") in 8:13, and γενηθήτω σοι ὡς θέλεις (*genēthētō soi hōs theleis* = "let it be done for you as you wish") in 15:28. The impression given is that the miracles are wrought through the mediation of the believing agents. Purposely, Jesus is portrayed as distancing Himself from the very miracles themselves.

By initially withdrawing Himself from action at the Canaanite mother's demand, until she had adopted His own point of view, Jesus has done two things. From a Melanesian perspective, He has wrestled Himself free of the obligation to act, just because He has been called upon, with an appropriate formula. More importantly, by curing her daughter, Jesus has bestowed

[31] In PNG, traditional recovery rituals were performed by a recognised healer (shaman) in the particular locale of the angry spirit or ghost; see William Amo, "The Use of Traditional Healing Practices in Christian Pastoral Care", in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 13-1 (1997), p. 41.

[32] This means "whose *wantoks*?".

upon the woman – a Gentile – a huge gift, and, therefore, an obligation. He has initiated a relationship with her and her kind.[33] While the reality of exchange – and the relationship it forges – may have to wait until after the resurrection, the fact that it has been triggered give this Canaanite woman – and all Gentiles – a reason to hope (Matt 12:18). Ultimately, Jesus did not only heal a sick daughter. He began the healing of relationships, which – for a Melanesian – is the mark of wholeness and salvation.[34]

By this narrative strategy, Matthew's story safeguards Jesus' identity as the Shepherd of Israel during His public ministry. A universal mission is the mandate of the post-resurrection Jesus, who commands His disciples to "make disciples of all nations" (28:19). But, for now, the recipients of the ministry of Jesus are His *wantoks* – the men and women of Israel. In time, with His resurrection, the *wantok bilong Jisas* will include "whoever does the will of (My) Father in heaven" (12:49) and the "least", lowly ones (25:40, 45). But, then, that is another story.

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[33] Local thinker and advocate of "the Melanesian Way", Bernard Narokobi, states: "Melanesian life is centred around obligations." It is a relationship of interdependency, where a clan member not only fulfils obligations, but also, by repayment and bestowal of favours, places others under obligation; see Bernard Narokobi, "Family Law in Melanesia: with special reference to the Arapesh", in *Catalyst* 18-1 (1988), p. 34; also Dan Seeland, "Obligation in the Melanesian Clan Context and its Effect upon the Understanding of the Gospel of Grace", in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 20-2 (2004), pp. 94-96; "Christ my Brother: Shifting Primary Identity in Melanesia from Clan to Christ", in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 22-2 (2006), p. 61; "Stressing Servant Leadership in a Land of Big Men and Great Men", in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 23-1 (2007), p. 14.

[34] Cf. Symeon Schwhyiam Yovang, "Traditional Sickness Healing among the Kalam", in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 8-1 (1992), pp. 56-57.

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