

The Canaanite Woman and the Lost Sheep of Israel

Matthew 15:24 poses a challenging interpretive problem. What did Jesus mean in His response to the Canaanite woman's plea to help her daughter? Virtually all commentators do not explain what Jesus' use of the negative "not" meant, and some translators (NASB, NIV) omit it completely.

But He answered and said, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." (NASB)

But He answered and said, "I was not (Greek: οὐ) sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." (NKJV)

The Greek particle of speech "οὐ" is used to mean "no" to a question expecting an affirmative response; it is the answer "no" in the absolute sense. What is Matthew's intent in recording this periscope?

The best method to approach this issue is by careful observation of the biblical passage.

Then Jesus went out from there and departed to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a woman of Canaan came from that region and cried out to Him, saying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David! My daughter is severely demon-possessed." (Matt 15:21-22, NKJV)

Observations:

- Tyre and Sidon were originally ancient Phoenician coastal cities and, under Roman rule, were important ports of trade. Long recognized as a Gentile and pagan region, Jesus once used these two cities as a contrast to the Jews' obstinate disbelief in rebuke of the Jews (Matt 11:20-22).
- Matthew makes a point to mention the ethnicity of the woman. Despised as a historical enemy, Canaanite can be seen as a racist term much like but lower in esteem than a Nazarene (John 1:46).
- "Canaanite" places a focus on why this "pagan" woman addresses Jesus with the title "Lord, Son of David." There are two possibilities:
 1. She knew the Old Testament, and sought mercy from Jesus the Messiah, or
 2. Like His followers who saw Jesus as the political redeemer of Israel (Luke 24:15-21), she sought mercy from the human Son of David.

But He answered her not a word. And His disciples came and urged Him, saying, "Send her away, for she cries out after us." But He answered and said, "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." (Matt 15:23-24, NKJV)

Observations:

- Jesus does not immediately answer the woman whether He will have mercy on her or not.
- Instead He addresses the unspoken option that the disciples assume. Juxtaposed to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel," "I was not sent" is an absolute denial that He was sent as a political redeemer for the nation of Israel. Jesus was sent to be a shepherd to the Old Testament Believer, because the nation lacked a faithful king, or a prophet of God, or a legitimate High Priest: the Kingdom of God was near and the New Covenant was soon to be inaugurated.

Then she came and worshiped Him, saying, "Lord, help me!" But He answered and said, "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs." (Matt 15:25-26 NKJV)

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Observations:

- The Canaanite repeats her request for mercy. She worshiped Jesus and used the title “Lord,” which indicated her belief that He was the Messiah.
- Jesus portrays Himself figuratively as “children’s bread,” and the imagery of this figure of speech is more developed in John 6:35.
- Jews called Gentiles dogs as a derogatory term of their ethnic and pagan status. Did Jesus respond intentionally in this manner to expose the disciples’ prejudice of Gentiles fully aware of the Canaanite woman’s genuine faith in Him?
- Matthew’s gospel would be the only account of this periscope involving the faith of the Canaanite woman, and he wrote specifically to the Jewish reader.

And she said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table.” Then Jesus answered and said to her, “O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire.” And her daughter was healed from that very hour. (Matt 15:27-28, NKJV)

Observations:

- The Canaanite woman acknowledges the use of the contemptuous term “dog” that would be said of her race and perhaps of her social position; however, more importantly, she is unwavering in her recognition that Jesus the Messiah is the source of life.
- If there was any question of whether the Canaanite woman was a genuine Old Testament Believer, Jesus’ commendation of her “great faith” was decisive and resulted in the immediate healing of her daughter.

This short passage about the faith of the Canaanite woman illustrates the importance of recognizing the shortcomings of relying wholly on one translation when reading the Bible. In this example, the interpretation of the passage is altered when a simple Greek participle (ού) is not translated. By omitting Jesus’ negative reply, “I was not sent,” to the Canaanite woman, one misses the two misconceptions that His disciples had which Jesus was attempting to correct:

1. He did not come to free the Jews of Roman rule.
2. Old Testament Believers were not exclusively of Jewish ethnicity.

References:

1. Brand C, Draper C, England A, *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, (2003).
2. Keener CS, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary, New Testament*, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press (1993).