

ON A NOT RACIST JESUS  
(THE CURIOUS CASE OF A REPENTING SAVIOR)  
A RESPONSE TO THE PROGRESSIVE READING OF MATTHEW 15:21-28

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**Introduction**

Upon reading Matthew 15:26, we are confronted by a very unexpected word coming from the mouth of Jesus. The larger pericope of Matt 15:21-28 is that of a Canaanite woman coming to Jesus to seek the healing of her daughter who is oppressed by a demon. After being pressed by his disciples to send her away, he tells her, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.”<sup>1</sup> Jesus here is referring to this woman as a dog (κυνάριον).

This text has sparked a plethora of debate. Recently, a novel and progressive interpretation has gained much attention. This view, which we will refer to as *the progressive view*, holds that Jesus, in using the term ‘dog’ with respect to the Canaanite woman, is displaying his racial bias toward Gentiles by using a racial slur.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, this view holds that the woman, in continuing to press Jesus on the matter, effectively changes Jesus’ mind on the recipients of the Gospel message from being strictly for the Jews to now a more inclusive message of salvation for those of any background.<sup>3</sup> It is with this view that we will be interacting. In doing so, we will display that this novel understanding of the text wrongly asserts Jesus as a racist and soteriologically prejudiced savior. Rather, we will argue that this pericope shows Jesus displaying compassion toward a covenant outsider. We will do this with 1) a brief systematic theological analysis of Jesus’ holiness with respect to divine simplicity and 2) an exegetical analysis of Matt 15:21-28 in its proper context.

**A Preliminary Matter of Theological Method**

As previously stated, in this paper I will be interacting with the progressive view of this text by systematic-theological and exegetical means. This is due to the fact that the most effective and faithful way of understanding a scriptural text is to perform such actions wherein

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations are from the ESV translation unless noted otherwise

<sup>2</sup> Heck, Peter. “Gay Minister Says Strong Woman ‘Spoke Truth’ to Jesus’ Racism, Caused Him to Repent.” *Disrn*, March 2021. <https://disrn.com/news/gay-minister-says-strong-woman-spoke-truth-to-jesus-racism-caused-him-to-repent>.

<sup>3</sup> De La Torre, Miguel. “Was Jesus a Racist?” *Dr Miguel De La Torre*, February 2009. <http://drmigueldelatorre.com/2009/was-jesus-a-racist/>.

the text itself is guiding the thought process of the reader.<sup>4</sup> This is as opposed to the reader presenting criteria that presides over the text and guides the understanding of it. Adherents of the progressive view demonstrate this latter method and not the former.

Progressive view adherent, Leticia A. Guardiola-Saenz makes the usage of this method evident to her readers in her work, *Borderless Women and Borderless Texts: A Cultural Reading of Matthew 15:21-28*. She writes, “In this article I shall present my *socially and culturally conditioned* interpretation of the Canaanite woman, as a *liberating reading strategy*, to bring about another fragment of the story that needs to be given voice.” Guardiola-Saenz makes it plain to the reader that her own social and cultural categories will guide her understanding of Matt 15:21-28.<sup>5</sup> This is the common method amongst adherents of the progressive view though they may not always speak so plainly of it as Guardiola-Saenz.

### **The Progressive View of Matthew 15:21-28**

The progressive view, as previously mentioned, hinges on the understanding of κυνάριον as a racial slur, there are two primary components of this conclusion: 1) A concept of Jesus as being both born into and a product of a racist culture and 2) the persistence of the Canaanite woman in responding to Jesus. The two are intertwined to formulate the overall conclusion of Jesus’ racism.

Miguel De La Torre, perhaps the current leading champion of this view, expounded on Matt 15:21-28 in a sermon entitled, *Was Jesus a Racist?*. In this sermon he displays that a proper understanding of Jesus calling this woman a dog is informed chiefly by recognizing Jesus as one who had to overcome the racial biases his culture had taught him. To De La Torre, this is simply part of Jesus’ humanity. In this way, it would be understood that Jesus is acting in a racist way because he was born into racism that touched his very human nature. To De La Torre, just as we might say, “One is not a sinner because they sin. One sins because they are a sinner.”, we can understand in this pericope that Jesus is not a racist because he acted in a racist manner. He acted

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<sup>4</sup>“The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics.” International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, 1982. [https://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/25/25-4/25-4-pp397-401\\_JETS.pdf](https://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/25/25-4/25-4-pp397-401_JETS.pdf). See articles VII-VIII. ; Enns, Paul I., and John MacArthur. *The Moody Handbook of Theology: Revised and Expanded*. Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Guardiola-Saenz, Leticia A. “Borderless Women and Borderless Texts: A Cultural Reading of Matthew 15:21-28.” *Semeia* 78 (1997). 70 (emphasis added)

in a racist manner because he is a (recovering) racist.<sup>6</sup> It is partially on the basis of this understanding of Jesus as a product of his racist culture that the claim of *κυνάριον* as a racial slur is made. Some within this perspective are willing to take this framework even further and portray Jesus as not *merely* a recovering racist, but an active oppressor against the Canaanite woman.<sup>7</sup>

The natural reaction to the statement that Jesus is a recovering racist would be to wonder what implications this would bring to the holiness of Christ. In holding that Jesus is a recovering racist, must De La Torre necessarily conclude that Jesus was sinful? De La Torre rejects that conundrum and during an interview conducted by Brandan Robertson he spoke at length concerning this. He says that in this case of Jesus as a recovering racist, it is not right to say that Jesus had some flaw but that, in speaking of the sin of racism, it is a matter of an individual being complicit in a structure. De La Torre refers to this as “corporate sin”.<sup>8</sup> And yet, such argumentation does not explain Jesus the recovering racist as not being sinful, but rather being *actively complicit* in a structure of sin, as demonstrated by his usage of *κυνάριον*, which itself is sinful as per De La Torre. De La Torre has not explained away a sinful Jesus within his view but rather has painted a portrait of Jesus as, at the very least, sinful in a way we may not expect.

Progressive View scholars are largely in agreement with this portrait of Jesus as delivered by De La Torre and see the usage of *κυνάριον* as the crux of the argument though there are varying views on how the woman’s response fits into the narrative. Love L. Sechrest holds that a proper understanding of *κυνάριον* in this instance comes chiefly from how the woman receives the term. She notes that her response to being called a dog being ‘Ναί, κύριε’ (Yes Lord) is not indicative of Jesus truly being in the right but rather it exemplifies the woman’s internalized racism. As Sechrest describes,

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<sup>6</sup> De La Torre, Miguel. “Was Jesus a Racist?” *Jesus the Christ in the 21st Century*. Sermon, October 15, 2017. “Jesus learned how to look at Canaanites through the eyes of his culture and his society... [Jesus] was a recovering racist just like you all are recovering racists... the society and the culture is racist for you.”

<sup>7</sup> Guardiola-Saenz, *Borderless Women and Borderless Texts* 73,76. Guardiola-Saenz seeks a redactional criticism understanding of the text wherein the reader must strip away even Matthew’s own bias as he understands the concept of kingdom through a lens of imperialism against the Gentiles.

<sup>8</sup> Robertson, Brandan. “Was Jesus Racist? A Conversation Between Rev. Brandan Robertson and Dr. Miguel De La Torre.” *YouTube*, March 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s3DHktBCt1E>. In explaining this concept of sin, De La Torre demonstrates that it similar to the fact that he himself is a sexist. He describes that although he may march and fight for women’s rights, he will remain a sexist because he is complicit with a sinful culture of sexism.

We can see this by recognizing that *responses to prejudice and racism* can take many forms in the aftermath of any forced and painful disruption to a controlling narrative such as the one Matthew's community experienced after the Jewish War. Internalized racism is an unfortunate *response to racism* that further damages people oppressed by racism, as the marginalized begin to accept *widely shared and durable negative stereotypes* that take their toll on the community's self-esteem.

For Sechrest, the Canaanite woman saying, 'Yes, Lord' is nothing but the woman internalizing a denigrating racist term that she has likely heard again and again. She has accepted it as her due that perhaps she truly is nothing but a dog.<sup>9</sup>

Jesus using this term at all would be consistent with De La Torre's argumentation that Jesus was displaying that he truly was a product of the racist culture he grew up in. Sechrest takes that and applies it to understand the woman's own response. The trouble comes when it is seen what is implied that the Canaanite woman, in agreeing to being called a dog, is showcasing an internalized racism. This woman can only showcase internalized racism if the term used truly is an example of racism itself and thus, by implication, the one saying it is acting in a racist manner. In this way, Sechrest and Guardiola-Saenz (whom Sechrest cites in making her point) are joining to argue that the most faithful way to understand Jesus' usage of *κυνάριον* is that of an imperialistic oppressor over the Canaanite woman.<sup>10</sup> However, Guardiola-Saenz does not see the woman exemplifying areas of internalized racism but rather speaking up against Jesus and challenging his understanding of her and her place in the kingdom. She writes, "Reading from my place, I see the dispossessed Canaanite woman demanding the right to be treated as a human being and not as a dog."<sup>11</sup>

Other progressive view scholars share this sentiment of the Canaanite woman standing up to Jesus' oppressive words. This comes from the progressive view's understanding of the relationship between the woman's response, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.", and Jesus' reply, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for

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<sup>9</sup> Sechrest, Love L., Ramirez-Johnson Johnny, and Amos Yong. "Humbled Among the Nations': Matthew 15:21-28 in Antiracist Womanist Missiological Engagement." Essay. Pages 276–99 in *Can "White" People Be Saved?: Triangulating Race, Theology, and Mission*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, An imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2018. (Emphasis added)

<sup>10</sup> Guardiola-Saenz, *Borderless Women and Borderless Texts* 76

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 73, 76

you as you desire.” More succinctly, this sentiment within progressive view adherents is to answer the question of why Jesus goes from hurling racial slurs in verse 26 to commending the woman’s faith in verse 28. What caused so great a shift in the perspective of Jesus?

Progressive view adherent, Paul Nathan Alexander displayed this argumentation in his 2013 presidential address to Palmer Theological Seminary. In this address, Alexander argues that Jesus experienced a three-staged transformation because of the persistence of the Canaanite woman, 1) Jesus does not answer the cries of the woman for help amidst suffering 2) Others complicit in whiteness become angry with the woman and her demands and 3) Jesus is humiliated and healed of his whiteness by the Canaanite woman.<sup>12</sup> The operative idea that pierces Alexander’s argument is the concept of whiteness which he defines as, “A system in which people with lighter-toned epidermis use power... for wealth, social status, and control.” Though his definition of whiteness particularly includes lighter-toned skin, his employing of the concept in understanding the narrative moreso reflects the definition operating in Astri Dankertsen and Tone Gunn Stene Kristiansen’s work, *Whiteness Isn’t About Skin Color*, where they present a definition of whiteness that describes the whiteness of an individual as stemming from who they are in their cultural world and whether they have hegemony over others.<sup>13</sup>

This definition is also congruent with De La Torre’s argument of Jesus’ racism being him as a product of his racist culture and, also similar to De La Torre’s argument, it presents an active problem that Jesus must overcome. Here, Alexander sees the Canaanite woman as the necessary component for Jesus overcoming his racism at all.<sup>14</sup> The central focus of his argument is his understanding of Ἐλέησον (“Have mercy”). Alexander rightly acknowledges the verb as being in the aorist imperative which often carries a request with a sense of urgency and immediacy yet he candidly refuses to accept that as being the correct understanding of Ἐλέησον on the basis of wishing to give more rhetorical power to the woman who deserves to command the Messiah.<sup>15</sup> Thus, his reading of Ἐλέησον reflects the cohortative use of the imperative such as in ἐξέλθε in

<sup>12</sup> Alexander, Paul Nathan. “Raced, Gendered, Faithed, and Sexed.” *Pneuma* 35, no. 3 (2013): 319–44.

<sup>13</sup> Dankertsen, Astri, and Tone Gunn Kristiansen. “‘Whiteness Isn’t About Skin Color.’ Challenges to Analyzing Racial Practices in a Norwegian Context.” *Societies* 11, no. 2 (2021): 46.

<sup>14</sup> Alexander, Paul Nathan. “Raced, Gendered, Faithed, and Sexed.” 332ff

<sup>15</sup> Ibid 331

Mark 9:25 where Jesus commands an unclean spirit to come out. Yet, Alexander does not provide any syntactical argumentation for this reading but rather appeals that this woman ought to have commanding power and so it should therefore be understood in that light.

This reading of Ἐλέησόν guides Alexander's thought process to where all of the Canaanite woman's words can be understood as having a commanding nature against Jesus, her hegemonic oppressor. This can be seen in two places: 1) Alexander's reading of 'Ναί, κύριε' would be the Canaanite woman mockingly embracing the term κυνάριον (itself a racial slur in this framework) just so that she could challenge Jesus and 2) Alexander's reading of the second half of verse 27 ("yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.") would be the Canaanite woman commanding inclusion from Jesus by reframing the entire dog/bread metaphor which is the third of his three stages of transformation and healing.<sup>16</sup> As Martina S. Gnadl summarizes, "the Canaanite woman overcomes Jesus' resistance through her 'great faith'.<sup>17</sup> Alexander demonstrates thinking that neatly summarizes the progressive view as he reasons a Jesus who is hopelessly racist and in need of a savior from the oppressed to show him the way to healing.

### **A Response to the Progressive View**

In being honest about one's reactions to this pericope, one will admit that Jesus referring to the Canaanite woman as a dog seems strange and cold. In so doing, one can honestly feel the tension that progressive view adherents are acknowledging if only on a visceral basis. Out of this tension, adherents of the progressive view make the twofold case of Jesus as a product of his racist culture and the woman's proud response to conclude that κυνάριον indeed should be understood as a racial slur. As has been demonstrated, though there are slightly varying understandings of the dynamic at play between Jesus and the Canaanite woman, a unified

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid 332. Alexander shows his bias quite clearly as he says he'd prefer the woman to have said, "I am not a dog. I am a person made in the image of God. Stop ignoring me, excluding me, and insulting me and my daughter. Give me justice!" This, as flowing from his case for the imperative of command in Ἐλέησόν, is a notable point of departure from Love L. Sechrest's internalized racism but the overall commitment to the slur nature of κυνάριον is consistent with both. ; Humphries-Brooks, Stephenson. *A Feminist Companion to Matthew*. Edited by Amy-Jill Levine. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2004. 143, "This woman... proves to be a better theologian than Jesus himself"

<sup>17</sup> Gnadl, Martina S. Essay. *Feminist Biblical Interpretation: A Compendium of Critical Commentary on the Books of the Bible and Related Literature*. Edited by Luise Schottroff, Marie-Theres Wacker, and Martin Rumscheidt. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2012. 623

conclusion on κováριov is reached. In presenting my view on Matt 15:21-28, I will display how this twofold case is inconsistent with both a systematic-theological argument for Jesus as not racist in the consideration of his holiness as well as a proper exegetical understanding of the text.

#### A Preliminary Matter of Presuppositions

In analyzing this pericope, it is imperative that my theological presuppositions are acknowledged. This is not to demonstrate that they are improper or erroneous but rather that they formulate my conclusions in a proper manner. I will not labor to make a case for the validity of these presuppositions as it is outside the purview of this paper and therefore will briefly acknowledge them and their significance to the matter.

In a point of departure with adherents to the progressive view, I affirm that Matt 15:21-28, along with the entirety of the canon, is the inerrant word of God. Progressive view adherents do not hold this view by-in-large as they demonstrate various strains of redaction criticism.<sup>18</sup> Such bibliological efforts are contrary to a position of biblical inerrancy.<sup>19</sup> I will be engaging with Matt 15:21-28 on the basis of it being inspired and inerrant.

#### A Systematic Case for a Not Racist Jesus

Integral to the argumentation of De La Torre and others is the concept that Jesus was a product of his racist culture. As demonstrated, De La Torre posits that is this a simple conclusion in appealing to Christ's humanity. Though he does not provide reasoning for this claim, it is evident that De La Torre anachronistically applies a modern understanding of ontological racial prejudice onto Jesus. Such a philosophy of prejudicial ontology cannot accurately be traced prior to the 1970s and 80s with influential racial justice figures such as Kimberlé Crenshaw who herself candidly acknowledges that this thinking is quite novel.<sup>20</sup> This anachronism can be seen in De La Torre's statement that Jesus is a recovering racist chiefly because his society is racist for him and thus Jesus is simply living into that racist identity as he uses the word κováριov toward the Canaanite woman. Though De La Torre sees no conflict between this and the sinlessness of

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<sup>18</sup> Guardiola-Saenz, *Borderless Women and Borderless Texts* 73 f2

<sup>19</sup> See articles VII and IX of "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy." International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, 1978. [https://www.etsjets.org/files/documents/Chicago\\_Statement.pdf](https://www.etsjets.org/files/documents/Chicago_Statement.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "#2019ASA Presidential Session: Intersectionality and ..." *YouTube*. American Studies Association Official, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=elalUgX-zZE>. See 45:20.



Jesus because any conflict, he argues, would be a result of a narrow view of sin as merely personal. Therefore, in understanding Jesus' racism as complicity with respect to sinful structures, De La Torre argues that Jesus can be both racist and sinless.<sup>21</sup> However, I will argue that such an understanding of Jesus as a product of his racist culture necessarily relinquishes a proper notion of the holiness of Jesus and, therefore, the divine nature of Jesus in the consideration of divine simplicity.

Undoubtedly, De La Torre's argumentation of appeal to Jesus's humanity is speaking in categories of fallenness. As he posits a Jesus who is complicit with sinful structures and engaging in *corporate sin*, he is uniting Jesus' humanity with a fallen nature.<sup>22</sup> Thus to De La Torre, true humanity is necessarily understood as being fallen and so Jesus can assume this fallen nature, from which his ontological racism can be traced, and still be without guilt of sin. However, if Jesus truly were to assume a fallen nature, and simultaneously assume ontological racism, this would allow for the overall potentiality of actualized sin (WCF VI:iv).<sup>23</sup> What must be understood here about the progressive view is that Jesus' racism, in being ontological, is logically prior to his usage of *κυναρῖον* in the encounter with the Canaanite woman.<sup>24</sup> Thus, where Jesus has no say in the matter of his ontological racism, he does have the opportunity to either act on it or not.<sup>25</sup> This would understand Jesus' opportunity to act in a racist manner as a temptation that arises from within. However such a concept of temptation does not exist within

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<sup>21</sup> Robertson, Brandan. "Was Jesus Racist? A Conversation Between Rev. Brandan Robertson and Dr. Miguel De La Torre". See 3:38-8:15. As has been previously noted, De La Torre's argumentation does not succeed in maintaining sinless Jesus but rather a Jesus who is sinful in a way we may not expect. In arguing for Jesus as not individually sinful but corporately sinful, Jesus is still sinful.

<sup>22</sup> Torrance, Thomas F. *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008. 61. The uniting of Jesus' humanity with a fallen nature has seen the support of many orthodox theologians. Most notably, T.F. Torrance writes extensively in support of this idea in *Incarnation*. He writes, "There can be no doubt that the New Testament speaks of the flesh of Jesus as the concrete form of our human nature marked by Adam's fall". I will not interact with the extensive arguments of Torrance as it is outside the purview of this paper. However, it should be noted that, though his conclusion is similar to that of De La Torre's, this is not in and of itself unorthodox.

<sup>23</sup> *The Westminster Confession: The Confession of Faith, the Larger and Shorter Catechism, the Directory for the Public Worship of God, with Associated Historical Documents*. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2018. 35

<sup>24</sup> Heck, Peter. "Gay Minister Says Strong Woman 'Spoke Truth' to Jesus' Racism, Caused Him to Repent." Jesus' usage of *κυναρῖον* is understood by Robertson to be an action for which repentance was needed. Though he does not assert the term 'sin' to this action, he treats it as though it were. Nevertheless, even if we were to grant Robertson and others that a racist act is not *necessarily* a sinful act, the argumentation of Jesus' actualized sin potentiality would still follow.

<sup>25</sup> To use De La Torre's terms, we have the opportunity to live into it or not.

proper Christology since this temptation from within, as it arises from a fallen nature, cannot be fulfilled without sin. As Geerhardus Vos describes, "Will or intellect or emotion in the human nature could not have sinned unless the underlying person had fallen from a state of moral rectitude. There can naturally be no thought of the latter for the Mediator, considering the deity of His person."<sup>26</sup>

The issue then arises that if Jesus could potentially sin, then his holiness could potentially be compromised. Consequently, if the holiness of Jesus could even be potentially compromised, it has been, by the necessity of the divine attributes in the proposition of the existence of God, effectively compromised.<sup>27</sup> This then grounds the conversation to much more basic level. Is Jesus God? I would affirm this as would many proponents of the progressive view, albeit, with fatal inconsistency. For, in order for Jesus to be true God of true God,<sup>28</sup> he must himself be without parts or passions (II:i).<sup>29</sup> Therefore, in light of the necessity of the attributes, Jesus could not have been born a product of a sinfully racist culture. This proves to be a troublesome find for the progressive view as we have mentioned that this understanding of Jesus holds a great deal of rhetorical weight for progressive view adherents.

#### An Exegetical Case for a Not Racist Jesus

Our text begins by informing that Jesus had withdrawn to the region of Tyre and Sidon with his disciples. This comes after they had spent time in the area of Gennesaret by the sea of Galilee. Matthew tells us at the end of chapter 14 that immediately after his arrival in Gennesaret, people were coming to Jesus for healing. And yet it was also there that Jesus was being goaded by the Pharisees who seem to have been spying on him all the way as Matt 15:1 reports that they had traveled all the way from Jerusalem to Gennesaret seemingly to continue in

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<sup>26</sup> Vos, Geerhardus. *Reformed Dogmatics*. Vol. 3. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012. 29

<sup>27</sup> Strong, A. H. *Systematic Theology*. Philadelphia, PA: Judson Press, 1946. 244. A historical-theological understanding of divine attributes includes the notion of the attributes as being one with God's very substance. ; Turretin, Francis. *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*. Vol. 1. Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publ., 1994. 187-189 ; Hart, Trevor A. *In Him Was Life: The Person and Work of Christ*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019. Hart offers a rich explanation on the significance of a *non posse peccare* Jesus.

<sup>28</sup> Council of Nicaea, *The Nicene Creed*.

<sup>29</sup> *The Westminster Confession*. 11:i ; 1 John 4:16 displays this with respect to God as love. Though love is overwhelmingly categorized as an attribute of God, nevertheless here it is seen as essential to the very substance of God. In a likewise manner, I reason that God's holiness is essential to his very substance and were God to not be holy, he would not be God.

their quest of accusing Jesus whether by his actions or his teachings.

Their charge was that Jesus' disciples were breaking the tradition of the elders by not washing their hands before a meal. In presenting this charge to Jesus, they were not laboring to appeal to the law of God in any respect. Rather, their argument rested solely on the tradition that had been instituted by the elders; tradition that was not informed by the law of God. Interestingly, Jesus does not deny that they were indeed breaking the tradition because nothing is at stake in breaking such a tradition. Instead, Jesus replies by accusing them of breaking not the mere tradition of the elders but the law of God in the fifth commandment concerning honoring father and mother. It is on this basis that Jesus declares them hypocrites and indicts them by Isa 29:13.

Furthermore, Jesus, seeing a definitive teaching moment has arisen, calls a crowd of people to him along with the Pharisees. He says in 15:1-20 that it is not what enters someone's mouth that defiles them but rather that it is what comes out of someone's mouth that defiles them because it is what leaves the mouth that exposes the heart.<sup>30</sup> In Mark's account of the pericope, he notes parenthetically that by this Jesus effectively made all foods clean.<sup>31</sup> It is after this reaction that Jesus, seemingly quite annoyed by the hard hearts surrounding him, leaves to Tyre and Sidon.

The area itself of Tyre and Sidon is not new to readers of Matthew, Jesus in fact mentions these cities earlier in 11:20-22 as an example to the unrepentant Galileans that judgement will be better for these Gentile peoples than for them. This indictment comes shortly after Jesus instructs his very disciples not to enter such Gentiles cities in 10:5-7.<sup>32</sup> The contrast that Jesus makes between the city of Chorazin and the cities of Tyre and Sidon is bolstered by perhaps an even more emphatic contrast of Capernaum and Sodom. It is this very region previously used as an example of the emphatically lost that Jesus enters. For Matthew's Jewish readers, 1 Kings

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<sup>30</sup> Wilkins, Michael J. *Matthew*. Edited by Michael J. Wilkins and Clinton E. Arnold. NIV Application Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017. 536

<sup>31</sup> Wilson, Andrew. "No, Jesus Was Never a Racist." *Christianity Today*, July 2021. Wilson describes this teaching from Jesus as one of many within the Matt 13-16 section where Jesus uses symbols of food to explore the boundaries of God's people.

<sup>32</sup> Smillie, Gene R. "Even the Dogs: Gentiles in the Gospel of Matthew." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45, no. 1 (2002): 73-97.

17:8-16 is certainly on the mind as we see another desperate woman in this very region (here specified as Zarephath) trusting in the God of Elijah by giving him bread when she had little to nothing for herself and her son.

Matthew records that Jesus not only *went to* the region of Tyre and Sidon but that he *withdrew from* the region of Galilee.<sup>33</sup> This rampant unbelief that led Jesus to pronounce the condemnation of 11:20-24 is the cause for his withdraw. One might think that in the midst of such saturated unbelief, Jesus' disciples would be a light in the darkness and exemplify for us true faith. And yet, this sadly is not so for even the disciples themselves exhibited moments of unbelief. The account of Jesus walking on water in Mark 6:51-52 makes this point abundantly clear as it reads, "And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened." Even amongst Jesus' own disciples, faith was not abundant and unbelief was rampant. Jesus was hard-pressed to encounter someone of great faith and so he goes to the region of Tyre and Sidon.

To the reader, however, Jesus withdrawing to the region of Tyre and Sidon seems counterintuitive. If what Jesus desires is a true faith, then traveling to the region which Jesus used in a comparison of emphasis in 11:20-22 would likely yield even less faith than that of the Galileans and the disciples. Yet, no sooner than Matthew records Jesus' withdraw in 15:21 does he interject<sup>34</sup> the entrance of the Canaanite woman.<sup>35</sup> 15:22 reads, "καὶ ἰδοὺ γυνὴ Χανααῖα<sup>36</sup> ἀπὸ τῶν ὀρίων ἐκείνων ἐξεληθοῦσα ἔκραζεν λέγουσα· Ἐλέησόν με, κύριε υἱὸς Δαβὶδ· ἡ θυγάτηρ μου κακῶς δαιμονίζεται." Here we see the Canaanite woman approaching Jesus crying out for

<sup>33</sup> Wilkins, Michael J. *Matthew*. 538 Wilkins notes that Matthew's usage of "withdrew" in verse 21 is indicative of the closing of Jesus' ministry to the Galileans. This closing period began in 14:13 and has now officially come to a close after this encounter with the Pharisees concerning ritual washing.

<sup>34</sup> Matthew's account of the Canaanite woman utilizes the interjection "ἰδοὺ" seemingly to illustrate the sheer shock of the unfolding pericope.

<sup>35</sup> It would likely not have been lost on Matthew's contemporaries that Jesus withdraws from the presence of the Pharisees who were insistent upon ceremonial washings and interacts with a Gentile woman whom the Pharisees would have sought to wash themselves after being in close proximity to her.

<sup>36</sup> Ridderbos, Herman N. *Matthew*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987. 288. Ridderbos acknowledges the rhetorical significance of Matthew referring to this woman as a Canaanite to illustrate historical and religious distance between the Jews and the Gentiles. ; Morris, Leon. *The Gospel According to Matthew*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2013. 401 f48. Some progressive view adherents will take Matthew's Χανααῖα to be evidence of his own racial bias when compared to Mark's Συροφοινίκισσα. However, Φοινίκων is found in the LXX's rendering of "of Canaan" in Joshua 5:12 so it is evident that they were considered interchangeable.

his aid. In this plea, Ἐλέησόν is in the aorist active imperative as Paul Nathan Alexander acknowledged.<sup>37</sup> However, where Alexander neglected to provide a syntactical case for the cohortative use of the imperative which delineates a command, I will make the case that Ἐλέησόν is properly understood as being a request imperative which delineates a plea.<sup>38</sup> Where Alexander argues that it is on the basis of a cohortative reading of Ἐλέησόν that one can properly understand the Canaanite woman's referring to Jesus as 'κύριε υἱὸς Δαυίδ' as a comment aimed to ironically flatter Jesus<sup>39</sup>, the construction must be understood as a whole. In so doing, we discern Ἐλέησόν με, κύριε υἱὸς Δαυίδ as a plea.

Similar constructions to the one found here are seen throughout the synoptic Gospels. A notable instance of this takes place in Mark 10:47-48 with Jesus healing Bartimaeus. In this encounter, Bartimaeus cries<sup>40</sup> out to Jesus and when many rebuke him, he cries yet again. The two constructions respectfully read, “Υἱὲ Δαυίδ Ἰησοῦ, ἐλέησόν με.” and “Υἱὲ Δαυίδ, ἐλέησόν με.” The two cries are nearly identical with the only difference being the absence of Ἰησοῦ in the second. This text also identifies Bartimaeus as being himself a προσαίτης (beggar). Thus, in consistency with who he is, Bartimaeus *begs* Jesus for healing with the crying plea of ἐλέησόν με. We additionally see a similar construction in Matt 14:30 with Peter crying to Jesus to save him from drowning. 14:30 reads, “Κύριε, σῶσόν με”. It would be odd to read a cohortative imperative here so as to imply that drowning Peter commanded Jesus out of some authority. In reality, Peter *begs* Jesus to save him. Syntactically there is no reason for us to glean a different understanding of the construction as seen in Matthew's account of the Canaanite woman than the ones we naturally get in Matthew's account of Peter sinking and Mark's account of the blind

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<sup>37</sup> Alexander, Paul Nathan. “Raced, Gendered, Faithed, and Sexed.” 331

<sup>38</sup> Wallace, Daniel B. *The Basics of New Testament Syntax: An Intermediate Greek Grammar*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000. 211

<sup>39</sup> Alexander, Paul Nathan. “Raced, Gendered, Faithed, and Sexed.” 331ff. Alexander heavily references Guardiola-Saenz's reading of the Canaanite woman's words.

<sup>40</sup> Both Bartimaeus and the Canaanite woman are described as crying out to Jesus by the presence of a form of κράζω.

beggar.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, integral to reasoning a request imperative in Matt 15:22 is an acknowledgement of κύριε being in the vocative case. This carries a more emotive sense behind the woman's acknowledgement of Jesus as being Lord.<sup>42</sup> This more accurate reading portrays the Canaanite woman in a light ignored by the progressive view in which she knows this Jesus is her only hope for the healing of her beloved daughter.

The Canaanite woman uses κύριε in the striking construction, κύριε υἱὸς Δαβὶδ. Though some adherents of the progressive view will focus on the Canaanite woman's initial Ἐλέησόν με and, concluding a cohortative reading, reason something sarcastic or sly about κύριε υἱὸς Δαβὶδ, very few labor to see the significance of this latter phrase within the greater context surrounding Matt 15:21-28.

This title is plentiful in Matthew's Gospel as this title for Jesus can be found nine times in the book.<sup>43</sup> It is even included in Jesus' threefold title in Matt 1:1. And yet, it strikes the reader quite poignantly that this Canaanite woman would use such a term of high reverence for Jesus considering what has recently transpired in Jesus' ministry. As we have seen, Jesus has withdrawn to the region of Tyre and Sidon, a region known for hostility toward Jews,<sup>44</sup> after the abundance of hard hearts he found with those in the region of Galilee, the Pharisees of Jerusalem, and his own disciples. Though they had all been blessed by the presence of Jesus in their midst, still they lacked repentance and true acknowledgement of who Jesus is. Enter the Canaanite woman who not only pleads Ἐλέησόν με but pairs that plea with full acknowledgement of who she is speaking to; the son of David himself. Epiphanius comments quite poetically that, "What [the Jews] had lost, she had found".<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Additionally notable about this construction, is that though her plea concerns her possessed daughter, she uses the first person pronoun. This is significant considering other similar pleas where someone is asking on behalf of another, the pronoun typically refers to the one who is in need of healing and not to the one who is speaking such as in Matt 17:15, "ἐλέησόν μου τὸν υἱόν". Though the healing is for her daughter, she pleads for mercy for herself.

<sup>42</sup> Wallace, Daniel B. *The Basics of New Testament Syntax: An Intermediate Greek Grammar*. 39. The ESV renders κύριε as "O Lord". This rendering, generally speaking, comes from the presence of a preceding ὃ which would clearly indicate the vocative of emphatic address. In this construction, however, we find not ὃ κύριε but simply κύριε. Still, the ESV renders it as the vocative of emphatic address which finds support in conjunction with the emotive plea of Ἐλέησόν με.

<sup>43</sup> Kruger, Michael J. "Matthew." *Gospels*. Lecture, 2021.

<sup>44</sup> Ridderbos, Herman N. *Matthew*. 287ff.

<sup>45</sup> Simonetti, Manlio. *Matthew 14-28*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001. 27

In the midst of this cry of the Canaanite woman, the disciples present Jesus with their own imperative plea to send her away.<sup>46</sup> This is integral to a proper understanding of Jesus' forthcoming κυνάριον. Though Jesus has not yet even responded to the woman's cry at this point, it is evident that the disciples need to witness this encounter. Consequently, Jesus is interacting with them arguably just as much as he is with this woman; they are not *mere* bystanders in this encounter.<sup>47</sup> Ligon Duncan, in a sermon on the corresponding text in Mark, comments to this very effect, "Jesus is deliberately going to this Gentile region and this Gentile woman in order to teach his disciples, and you and me, about his mission."<sup>48</sup>

This orientation is established before Jesus even utters his first response to the Canaanite woman. And when Jesus does chime in, it is not in address to the Canaanite woman but to the disciples and their plea to send her away. He replies, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Jesus states quite plainly to his disciples that his mission is to the lost sheep of the house of Israel and that, by deduction, this Canaanite woman does not fit that category. This statement from Jesus greatly reflects that of his charge to the disciples as he sends them out in 10:6. De La Torre takes this as evidence for Jesus' shifted perspective after this encounter where we will see more overt examples of Jesus proclaiming Gentile inclusion such as in the great commission.<sup>49</sup> Though, such an argument would be without acknowledgement that Jesus still had the Gentiles in mind soteriologically even then as made evident in 10:17-18.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Though it is not overtly stated whether this plea from the disciples to send the woman away was to communicate that he merely send her away or that he heal her daughter and send her away, I would argue the latter considering Jesus' response of refusal seems to assume that he is refusing to act according to this woman's request.

<sup>47</sup> Bailey, Kenneth E. *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008. 219-224. Bailey argues that this scenario was just as much a teaching moment for the disciples as it was an interaction with this woman. He describes Jesus' intent as, "I know you think Gentiles are dogs... but pay attention".

<sup>48</sup> Duncan, Ligon. "A Pagan Woman Who Understands Grace." *The Gospel Coalition*, April 3, 2019. [https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/conference\\_media/pagan-woman-understands-grace/](https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/conference_media/pagan-woman-understands-grace/).

<sup>49</sup> De La Torre, Miguel. "Was Jesus a Racist?" "[The Canaanite woman] challenged Jesus with the good news that healing was not the exclusive property of one ethnic group. Instead, healing should be available to all who come... Jesus learned something about his mission from this woman of color."

<sup>50</sup> Carson, D. A., Walter W. Wessel, and Walter L. Liefeld. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary with the New International Version of the Holy Bible*. Edited by Frank E. Gaebelin. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1984. 355-356 "As does Paul in Romans 9–11, the woman preserves Israel's historical privilege over against all radical idealization or spiritualization of Christ's work, yet perceives that grace is freely given to the Gentiles."

Nevertheless, Jesus' statement of "only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel"<sup>51</sup> must be properly acknowledged. Should we find company with De La Torre that Jesus is espousing a gentile-less salvation and needs to be corrected or could there be something more to be gleaned? To this end, we find assistance from an earlier interaction with Jesus and a Gentile in 8:5-13. Here a gentile centurion comes to Jesus asking for the healing of his servant. In a similar fashion to the Canaanite woman, he acknowledges Jesus as Lord. When Jesus agrees to come and heal the servant, the centurion replies that he is not worthy to have Jesus in his home but rather believes that if Jesus merely wills it, his servant will be healed. Jesus commends his faith as of a quality that he has not seen even in Israel and declares, "I tell you, many will come *from east and west* and recline at table *with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob* in the kingdom of heaven."<sup>52</sup> Thus Jesus already envisions a people of God who are from all over the world. Yet, if this truly is the case, why does he say this at all? R.T. France acknowledges that Jesus' words are meant describe what is implied by his initial silence that Gentiles "have no right to the Jewish messiah".<sup>53</sup> And yet, such a restriction should be seen as only temporary considering the temporal nature of Jesus' charge to the disciples in 10:5-6 as well as his interaction with the centurion in 8:12-13. Effectively, Jesus is testing to see if this Canaanite woman grasps the nature of her appeal.<sup>54</sup>

Matthew vividly describes the woman's next action as she shows herself to be a worshipper. She kneels<sup>55</sup> before Jesus crying similarly to the last, "Κύριε, βοήθει μοι.". Her faith that this Jesus, who she repeats to call Lord, was truly her only hope has not faltered<sup>56</sup> and her cry is exceedingly personal as at this point she makes no mention of her daughter in her plea. With all of her hope placed on Jesus, she hears his reply, "Οὐκ ἔστιν καλὸν λαβεῖν τὸν ἄρτον τῶν

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 354. Mark's account does not include this statement from Jesus. This is congruent with the overall Jewishness of Matthew.

<sup>52</sup> Emphasis added.

<sup>53</sup> France, Richard T. *The Gospel of Matthew*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010. 310

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. 310ff

<sup>55</sup> Carson, D. A., Walter W. Wessel, and Walter L. Liefeld. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary with the New International Version of the Holy Bible*. 355. The imperfect προσεκύνει is used perhaps to make the action more vivid and draw attention to it. This would be quite an interesting turn for Matthew's Jewish readers to encounter as the Canaanite woman vividly bows in worship.

<sup>56</sup> Sproul, R. C. *Matthew: St. Andrew's Expository Commentary*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013. 480



τέκνων καὶ βαλεῖν τοῖς κυναρίοις.”<sup>57</sup> (“It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the little dogs.”)<sup>58</sup>

It is at this point that adherents of the progressive view are quick to mention that because Jesus uses this term κυναρίοις with respect to a Gentile, that he was acting in solidarity with the Jews who used this term against Gentiles in a racist manner. However, while ‘dog’ is often employed in Scripture as an undesirable name to be called, hardly can one glean racial categories from such a word. Rather, the biblical witness of this term employed pejoratively will display an insult without respect to racial categories such as in Proverbs 26:11<sup>59</sup> and 2 Sam 9:8<sup>60</sup>. Both of these examples are harsher uses of the term as neither are in the diminutive form. Though, perhaps the best example of ‘dog’ employed without racial categories is found in Phil 3:2. The text reads, “Look out for the dogs (κύνας), look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh.” Here, Paul is utilizing the term ‘dog’ to refer to judaizers (themselves not Gentiles) who were attempting to require circumcision.<sup>61</sup> Thus, as these texts demonstrate, the term ‘dog’ is employed apart from distinct racial categories.

Many expositors make note that κυναρίοις (“little dogs”) is in the diminutive form<sup>62</sup> and should indeed be rendered “little dogs” as opposed to just “dogs”.<sup>63</sup> This could further imply a house dog as opposed to a stray dog considering there is family table imagery in the language of ἄρτον and τέκνων as well as the woman’s forthcoming response including the word “table”.

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<sup>57</sup> It is at this point that adherents of the progressive view are quick to mention that because Jesus uses this term κυναρίοις with respect to a Gentile, that he was acting in solidarity with the Jews who used this term against Gentiles in a racist manner. However, while ‘dog’ is consistently implied in Scripture as an undesirable name to be called, hardly can one glean racial categories from such a word. Rather, the biblical witness of this term employed pejoratively will display an insult without respect to racial categories such as in Proverbs 26:11 (κύων both in the LXX rendering of Proverbs 26:11 as well as its citation in 2 Pet 2:22) and 2 Sam 9:8 (κύνα in the LXX). Both of these examples are harsher uses of the term as neither are in the diminutive form.

<sup>58</sup> Translation mine.

<sup>59</sup> κύων both in the LXX rendering of Proverbs 26:11 as well as its citation in 2 Pet 2:22.

<sup>60</sup> κύνα in the LXX.

<sup>61</sup> It is likely that Paul would have utilized this term as a means of describing how Judaizers should be seen with respect to who is inside or outside the covenant community since that is how the term was seemingly treated and understood by Jews. This understanding is informed by Paul contrasting the Jew and Gentile in Gal 2:14.

<sup>62</sup> The diminutive form of κύων is found only in Matthew and Mark’s account of this pericope.

<sup>63</sup> Williams, Joel F. *Mark*. Edited by Köstenberger Andreas J. and Robert W. Yarbrough. Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2020. 127

However, as R.C. Sproul points out, “no matter how we cut it, Jesus called this woman a dog”.<sup>64</sup> While I agree with Sproul’s honest sentiment, he and many other commentators neglect to wonder for what reason Jesus would have used this diminutive term as opposed to κύνας. Many will rightly understand that, “little dog” is the proper rendering, though rarely is there exegetical interaction with this point beyond speculation. I would put forth that Jesus’ usage of the diminutive, and the family table imagery surrounding it, offers the Canaanite woman, a stranger to the covenant,<sup>65</sup> an opportunity to see herself around the covenant table even if not, at this point in time, seated at it. Will she take this opportunity?

She responds, “Ναί, κύριε, καὶ γὰρ τὰ κυνάρια ἐσθίει ἀπὸ τῶν ψιγίων τῶν πιπτόντων ἀπὸ τῆς τραπέζης τῶν κυρίων αὐτῶν” (“Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat from the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table”)<sup>66</sup> Shocking to those still perplexed by Jesus’ usage of κυναρίοις, the woman begins her response by agreeing with Jesus. Popular progressive view adherent Brandan Robertson opts to avoid such a response by rendering verse 27 as, “Well you can think that about me but even dogs deserve crumbs from the table.”<sup>67</sup> This illustrates yet another point of departure for us as he evidently neglects to interact with this woman’s shocking Ναί, κύριε (“Yes, Lord”).<sup>68</sup> The Canaanite woman does not disagree with Jesus’ statement. She sees κυναρίοις not as a door being closed on her that she has to push open, but rather a door being opened to her if she truly believes who she says Jesus is.<sup>69</sup> And so she declares, by her usage of

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<sup>64</sup> Sproul, R. C. *Matthew: St. Andrew's Expository Commentary*. 481

<sup>65</sup> *Geneva Bible: Notes*. Geneva: Rovland Hall, 1560. Vol. 2, p. 21 This concept of Jesus’ usage of κυναρίοις being a reference to the Canaanite woman as a “covenant stranger” is not new. The Geneva Bible notes for the corresponding text in Mark read, in agreement with Kenneth Bailey’s observation on the role of the disciples on this pericope, that, “The Jewes take strangers no better then dogs, & therefore Christ speaketh according to their opinion.”

<sup>66</sup> Translation mine.

<sup>67</sup> Heck, Peter. “Gay Minister Says Strong Woman ‘Spoke Truth’ to Jesus’ Racism, Caused Him to Repent.”

<sup>68</sup> In addition to this blunder, Robertson would have to be understanding ἐσθίει as “deserve”. Though, such a rendering cannot be reasonably demonstrated.

<sup>69</sup> This would coincide with France’s comment, “He appears like a wise teacher who allows, and indeed incites, his pupil to mount a victorious argument against the foil of his own reluctance. He functions as what in a different context might be called a ‘devil’s advocate’, and is not ‘disappointed’ to be defeated in argument.” in France, Richard T. *The Gospel of Matthew*. 296.

Ναί, κύριε and her proper reverence for the mission of Jesus,<sup>70</sup> that she does indeed have faith placed in the Lord Jesus, the Son of David. It is this beautiful response that leads Jesus to commend her for great faith, a commendation not once used for a Jew. The faith that Jesus was hard-pressed to find in Galilee, and even his own disciples, he finds in this unlikely Gentile woman.

### **Conclusion**

Honest readers of Matthew will acknowledge with F.F. Bruce that Jesus' usage of κυναρίοις is a "hard saying".<sup>71</sup> It is for this reason that one should certainly sympathize with the tension De La Torre and others are sensing. And yet, as we have demonstrated, their application of racial biases to this tension is unwarranted and anachronistic.

Moreso, Matthew 15:21-28 offers a message of hope that the progressive view cannot reason for. Where our opponents have portrayed a Jesus who, at best, was hopelessly lost in the mess of his ontological racism and, at worst, was an active oppressor of those he viewed as racially inferior, the text gives us a different story. Matthew 15:21-28 presents a Jesus who saw a Gentile woman not as a racial other to be despised, but as an outsider coming in and an example, both to his disciples and now to us of what true faith rested on the knowledge of who Jesus is looks like. She knew that only Jesus could meet her need.<sup>72</sup> Therefore, this story is for us today as well that we may know that no matter who we are, the perfect fulfillment of our need rests in Jesus Christ alone. And we can be sure that the one who earnestly cries "Ἐλέησόν με, κύριε υἱὸς Δαυὶδ" will be heard.

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<sup>70</sup> Donaldson, Terence L. *Jesus on the Mountain: A Study in Matthean Theology*. Sheffield, UK: JSOT Press, 1985. 133

<sup>71</sup> Bruce, F. F. *The Hard Sayings of Jesus*. London, UK: Hodder & Stoughton, 1998. 110ff.

<sup>72</sup> Sproul, R. C. *Matthew: St. Andrew's Expository Commentary*. 480

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