

The Many Faces of the Gentile Woman: a Postcolonial Feminist Hermeneutics of Mark 7:24-30

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Abstract

This research is about reading a Syrophoenician woman's story in Mark 7:24-30 from a postcolonial feminist perspective. This research looks at earlier hermeneutics including classical missiological model and earlier feminist hermeneutics. Then, this introduces postcolonial feminist hermeneutics. A postcolonial reading of this Gentile woman tells that a postcolonial interpretation must expose and investigate the intersection of sexism, cultural and religious imperialism in the history of the text's interpretation. By introducing postcolonial interpretation, the Gentile woman's story becomes much richer and multi-dimensional. The main emphasis and contribution of this research is to pro-

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vide multi-faceted interpretations on Gentile woman's story. By inviting more hermeneutics and perspectives, the story of the Syrophoenician woman may offer special insights to various people in the multifaceted society. I propose that current readers may expose themselves to the Gentile woman depending on their contexts. We encounter the text as individuals who interact with our situation and via this existential interaction, the text can be truly alive and understood. Whatever the readers find in this story, the "good news" in the story can be reaching even contemporary Korean readers living in extremely competitive society. From the practical theological perspective, genuine dialogue with an empathy can be a big relief of emotional distress. I see Jesus's words to the woman can be a greater comfort to people in Korea as well. Exploring many faces of gentile woman may lead one to the next step, from seeking one's healing to cooperation with others living in the margin for justice and peace.

- Keywords

The Syrophoenician woman, Postcolonial feminist hermeneutics, Postcolonialism, Gentile woman. Mark 7:24-30.

I. Introduction

A reader reads a text out of her/his particular context. The meaning of the narrative is something other than the narrative shape itself because one's socio-cultural and historical contexts provide the resources and hermeneutical tools for the interpretation.¹ Assuming one's hermeneutics coming from her/his particular context, my hermeneutics also reflect my own context and perspective—a postcolonial feminist hermeneutics. This postcolonial feminist reading would enable me to read the Gentile woman in the story on my own terms and from my own situation.

The term 'post-colonial' is a complex one and further complicated by different forms and histories of colonialism. The prefix 'post' or hyphen itself—"post-colonial"—has been debated and doubted among scholars for its use. For many scholars, post-colonialism is no longer perceived as a linear progression from colonialism referring as "after-colonialism" or "post-independence" since they still doubt if we have really entered the "post"-colonial age and since colonialism is not over and has been replaced by neocolonialism.

Rather, the term, postcolonial encompasses all culture affected by the imperial process from the very first moment of colonial contact to the present day² and postcolonialism deals with the effects of colonization on cultures and societies.³ Postcolonial critics tend to intro-

1 Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteen and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 318.

2 Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, eds. *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 117.

2 The term post-colonialism had a chronological meaning when it was used by historian as denoting the post-independence period. However, from the late 1970s the term has been used by

duce the definition of post-colonial denoting not a temporal period but a reading strategy and discursive practice that seek to unmask colonial epistemological frameworks, unravel Eurocentric logics, and interrogate stereotypical cultural representations.⁴

Colonialism in conjunction with Christianity is often described as naming a sword in one hand and the Bible in the other hand,⁵ which means, the Bible became a crucial symbol of European expansion. Musa W. Dube, a postcolonial feminist, assesses the essential aspect of modern imperialism as the attempt of Anglo-European nations to order the world culturally, economically, and politically from a Euro-centric world view and thought that their view was good for everyone.⁶ Christianization and Westernization became a deeply intertwined process. For example, the Christian missionaries wanted conversion of the spirituality and mentality of individuals and encouraged indigenous people to desire the dominant Western people's "superior" values.

literary critics to discuss the various cultural effects of colonization; Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 186.

- 4 Kwok, Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 2005), 2..
- 5 R. S Sugirtharajah analyzes three similar patterns of the growth of Protestant churches in the colonies: 1) the denunciation of the natives' idolatrous practices; 2) preaching and disseminating the Bible as the answer to their miserable state; 3) the founding of educational and medical institutions: R.S. Sugirtharajah, *Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial, and Postcolonial encounters* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 52.
- 6 Musa W. Dube, "Postcoloniality, Feminist Spaces, and Religion," in *Postcolonialism, Feminism, and Religious Discourse*, ed. Laura E. Donaldson and Pui-lan Kwok (New York: Routledge, 2002), 100; For example, the British missiologist, M.A.C. Warren acknowledged imperialism as a vehicle of great good to a subject people and as a diffusion of good life. He even proclaimed: 'It can, I think, be fairly argued that successive imperialisms have made a significant contribution to the realization of the vision of the time when the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of God as the water covers the sea.

Christian imperialism degraded indigenous cultures as ‘savage’ and ‘primitive’, and not yet ready for civilization. Through colonial educational training, the colonized can progress, develop, become modernized.⁷

In this regard, postcolonial reading is a way of reading and rereading texts to draw deliberate attention to the profound and inescapable effects of colonization on literary production.⁸ What postcolonial reading does is to enable us to question the totalizing tendencies of European reading practices and to interpret the texts on our own terms and read them from our specific locations.⁹

Postcolonial hermeneutics is used as an interventionist instrument, which refuses to take the dominant reading as an uncomplicated representation of the past and introduces an alternative reading. It allows silenced and often marginalized people to find their own voices.

R.S. Sugirtharajah offers the following definition of postcolonial hermeneutics of the Bible as scrutinizing and exposing colonial domination and power as these are embodied in biblical texts and interpretations, and as searching for alternative hermeneutics while overturning and dismantling colonial perspective.¹⁰ Sugirtharajah argues that the greatest aim of postcolonial biblical criticism is to situate colonialism at the center of the Bible and biblical interpretation by say-

7 Dube, “Postcoloniality, Feminist Spaces, and Religion,” 101.

8 Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*, 192.

9 Kwok, Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 16 ; Post-colonialism is a continuing process of resistance and reconstruction. However, this does not imply that post-colonial practices are homogeneous and seamless but indicates the impossibility of dealing with any part of the colonial process without considering its antecedents and consequences: Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, eds., *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, 2.

10 Sugirtharajah, “Biblical Studies after the Empire,” 16.

ing what postcolonial biblical criticism does is to focus on the whole issue of expansion, domination, and imperialism as central forces in defining both the biblical narratives and biblical interpretation.¹¹

In addition, my hermeneutical method of the Syrophoenician woman's story comes from postcolonial feminism. What unites feminism and postcolonialism is their mutual resistance to any form of oppression such as patriarchy or colonialism because women and men do not experience colonialism in the same way. Postcolonial feminist criticism looks at the Bible from the vantage point of women multiply oppressed because of race, class, conquest, and colonialism.¹² Musa Dube describes postcolonial feminism as seeking to understand how gender relations are constructed in postcolonial spaces in order to identify decolonizing feminist strategies of liberation among Two-Third World women.¹³ The imposition of Eurocentric feminist categories of analysis on different cultures reinforces Western cultural imperialism and the superiority of Western women over and against the rest of women was maintained. Dube points out that the Western superiority still portrays the other negatively or stereotypically. The Third World is often described as a world of material poverty and social oppression. Even in White feminism, Two-Third World women were characterized as people who needed to be saved from their own terrible situation.

Postcolonial feminist practices recognize the interaction of two or more patriarchal structures on colonized women: 1) the imposed pa-

11 R.S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 25.

12 Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 65.

13 Dube, "Postcoloniality, Feminist Spaces, and Religion," 103.

triarchal structures of the colonizer and 2) the indigenous one.

Some feminist biblical scholars may use the single-axis framework of gender in their interpretation, without paying attention simultaneously to other power dynamics at work in the text. With this regard, Kwok Pui-lan gives us some definition about postcolonial feminist hermeneutics as following:

A postcolonial feminist reading pays attention not only to violence against women but also to the political conflicts between different peoples. In addition, postcolonial feminist criticism examines how marginalized women in the Bible are rendered invisible, consigned to signify the Other. Postcolonial reading also illuminates how the Bible was selectively cited to legitimate imperial authority through the claim that Christianity was superior to other religious traditions because of its treatment of women.¹⁴

Postcolonial feminist reading does not aim at the opposite of hegemonic power, but it means that the Bible should reflect all of the different voices, which have been muted for a long time. Thus, this Bible enables people from different contexts to interpret and discuss the text together.

My purpose in this research is shedding light on the many versions of the story of Gentile woman so she can have various voices and faces given different contexts. To add more colors on the interpretations of Syrophoenician woman, I look at the story of Mark and then explore numerous-sometimes conflicting- interpretations of the story.

¹⁴ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 65-66.

II. Various interpretations of the Gentile woman's story

1. The Gentile woman and Mark 7:24-30

From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

-Mark 7:24-30

The General outline for Mark 7:24-30 is as follow:¹⁵

- Jesus's arrival near Tyre and effort to escape notice (24)
- The woman approaches (25) (note on the woman's ethnicity)
- The woman's petition (26)
- Jesus' response (27)
- The woman's retort (28)
- Jesus' second response (29a)
- The woman's petition is granted (29b)
- The woman's returns home and finds her daughter healed (30)

15 Taken from Sharon Ringe. "A Gentile Woman's Story Revisited: Re-reading Mark 7:24-31," in *A Feminist Companion to Mark*, eds. Amy-Jill Levine with Marianne Blickenstaff (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 82.

In Mark, the anonymous Gentile woman is depicted as interrupting Jesus' rest when he wanted some time alone. In addition, the background information on the woman has offered. She is Greek (which identifies her religion as a non-Jew) and a Syrophoenician woman. Also, she is a woman living in the first century. She seeks for help of healing her demonically possessed daughter. This follows the typical pattern of healing stories of Jesus. Surprisingly, Jesus' response seems rather harsh. Jesus claims that he came to 'the children need to be fed first'; 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs'(27). It is not the response that would be anticipated by this woman or any reader. Sharon H. Ringe expresses, "The longer I spent with this story, the more perplexed I became." Ringe tells her feeling of being offended at the picture of Jesus that the story presents.¹⁶

Many scholars may have attempted to minimize the impact of Jesus' response to her, stating Jesus was just testing this woman's faith. Some scholars may have read this as coming from a maxim, a proverb of Jews. Some may have claimed that dogs in the text meaning 'house dogs' or 'puppy' while other scholars criticize that "To call a woman 'a little bitch' is no less abusive than to call a woman 'a bitch' without qualification."¹⁷

Metaphor or not, proverb of not, there seems no way to soften the harshness of Jesus' response. Elizabeth Schssler Fiorenza calls this text 'theologically difficult,'¹⁸ Ringe calls Jesus' attitude 'insulting to the extreme.'¹⁹ If any woman in a contemporary world were to hear such a

¹⁶ Ibid., 71.

¹⁷ See Hisako Kinukawa, *Women and Jesus in Mark: A Japanese Feminist Perspective* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994), 57.

¹⁸ Elizabeth Schssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 160.

response, she may become angry and leave, if she is brave and strong enough, expressing deep disappointment at Jesus.

However, another twisted turn follows when this Gentile woman is using Jesus' own degrading metaphor. The dialogue between Jesus and woman goes on. As a result, Jesus grants her ill daughter healing and he set out from the region around Tyre. This is a simple summary of this story.

Various interpretations on the meaning of the dialogue between Jesus and this woman-including the lesson from this story. Now, readers stand before this text with curiosity. How do people read this passage? How can the interpretation be different for people from different contexts? In this research, I want to emphasize that the portrait of Syro-phenician woman may keep changing depending on who looks at this woman from what point of view and purpose. A Gentile woman's story is told in Matthew 15:21-28 and Mark 7:24-30. Although only the story of the Gentile woman in Mark has been reviewed, since the purpose of this research is offering multi-dimensional interpretations on her, another face of the Gentile woman in Matthew-Canaanite women in this scene-can be interpreted together for comparison as needed. To begin with, various interpretations on Gentile women will be presented as follow.

2. The Gentile woman and classic missiological interpretation

Most interpreters of this story follow the salvation history model. The Gentile woman's story is included in the gospels in order to provide legitimation for admitting Gentiles into the Christian community. The encounter of this Gentile woman with Jesus has been interpreted

19 Sharon Ringe. "A Gentile Woman's Story Revisited: Re-reading Mark 7:24-31," 89.

by the Church as a basis for the missionary movement to the Gentiles. Kwok argues that classical interpretation is understood as such: "Although reluctant at first, Jesus heals the Gentile woman's daughter, showing that Gentiles could participate in the salvation promised by God. Thus, the story of the Gentile woman serves as a myth of the origin of the mission to the Gentiles."²⁰ Musa Dube also evaluates that most white Western male readers tend to interpret the story as divine claims such as salvation history, servant king, universal mission, and absolute claims of power.²¹ To summarize, this story has been regarded as an important beginning story about the spread of evangelism from the Jewish Christianity to Gentile Christianity.

3. The Gentile woman and feminist interpretation

The story of the Gentile woman has enjoyed popularity among feminist readers. Some feminist scholars read the texts as women, on behalf of women, and against all forms of oppression. Hisako Kinukawa, a Japanese feminist biblical scholar, describes this Gentile woman as "creating an opportunity for Jesus to cross the boundary, to allow himself to be defied, and to situation in a new way."²² Similarly, Sharon Ringe says the Gentile woman's story has significance because of her gifts and ministries to Jesus. Ringe calls her an uppity woman, who wins the argument with Jesus and opens the way for Jesus' mission beyond the Jewish community. The least expected person, a Gentile

20 Kwok Pui-lan, *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), 76.

21 Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), 168-169.

22 Hisako Kinukawa, *Women and Jesus in Mark: A Japanese Feminist Perspective* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994), 59.

woman, helps Jesus.²³ For Fiorenza, she is the woman who overcomes Jesus' prejudice, the foremother of all Gentile Christian women; she is a paradigm for feminists who transgress intellectual and religious boundaries. Fiorenza notes that "She represents the biblical theological voice of women, which has been excluded, repressed, or marginalized in Christian discourse."²⁴

In general, feminist interpretation sees this Gentile woman, who won an argument with Jesus, changing his mind about limiting his mission to the Jews and hence opening the way for the Gentile mission. This woman is portrayed as challenging the dominant paradigm of relationships that discriminated against her because she was a polluting outsider and because she was a woman.²⁵ Some people might be satisfied with this feminist interpretation in general. But how will the interpretation be different when a Third World woman is reading this text?

4. The Gentile woman and postcolonial feminist interpretation

Cherokee scholar Rayna Green remarks that, "the written record is of course an important source of information when reconstructing any history. But for a long time it was provided by outsiders who were male and non-Indian, such as missionaries, diplomats, traders, and explorers; thus, much of it was biased. Therefore, historians have to examine the sources of such information and ask what interests and

23 Sharon H. Ringe, A Gentile Woman's Story, in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed., Letty M. Russell (Westminster: The Westminster Press, 1985), 70-72.

24 Fiorenza, *But She Said*, 11.

25 Aruna Gnanadason, "Jesus and the Asian Woman: A Post-Colonial look at the Syro-Phoenician woman/Canaanite woman from an Indian perspective," *Studies in World Christianity* 7.2 (2001), 163.

opinions the informer might have had.”²⁶ Along with this, postcolonial feminist hermeneutics concerns “who” speaks for “whom.” In this regard, Donaldson says,

When a scholar receives her/his vision of colonialism solely from such problematic misrepresentations, disseminating oppressive practices and attitudes of Western scholarship becomes almost inevitable. But the question of responsible interpretation remains, especially in terms of producing knowledge about indigenous women.²⁷

Postcolonial feminist critics scrutinize various interpretations of the text to see if their readings support the colonizing ideology by glossing over the imperial context and agenda. For further reflection, I take a closer look on two postcolonial feminist scholars’ works: Musa Dube and Kwok Pui-lan. In her article, “Decolonizing White Western Readings of Matthew 15:21-28,” Dube shows that white male scholars have not paid attention enough to how the divine claims of salvation history and universal mission can be used as colonizing ideology. Moreover, they have not shown many efforts to investigate the relation among gender, mission, and empire.²⁸ Dube sharply observes that the patriarchal category of analysis does not necessarily translate into imperial criticism by dominant feminist interpretations.²⁹ Aruna Gnanadason argues that the Syrophoenician woman must be viewed not just as a

26 Rayna Green, *Women in American Indian Society* (New York: Chelsea House, 1992), 16.

27 Laura Donaldson, “The Breasts of Columbus: A Political Anatomy of Postcolonialism and Feminist Religious Discourse” in *Postcolonialism, Feminism and Religious Discourse*, eds., Laura Donaldson and Kwok Pui-lan, (London: Routledge, 2002), 51.

28 Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, 168-169.

story of a woman challenging patriarchal power and finally having her say; rather, it is a story that articulates relationships of domination and subordination in a colonizing setting. This requires that the text be not just depatriarchalized but also must be decolonized.³⁰

Kwok, Pui-lan says that the role of religion has functioned in sustaining colonial ideologies and even so called “progressive” theologians have not sufficiently addressed theology’s collusion with colonialism in their theoretical frameworks. Therefore, postcolonial hermeneutics look at the connection between religion and colonialism in terms of gender, religion, and colonialism’s interplay. A postcolonial reading needs to pay attention not only to women, but also to the political conflicts between different people.³¹

Postcolonial feminist critics see imperialism and sexism in the text. It is possible to imagine the following: a *Gentile woman receiving the Gospel*. One Gentile woman’s humble attitude enabled the Gospel to be spread to the Gentile people and to all over the world. It reminds me of one of the colonial cartoons, which describes the indigenous people receiving the Bible from the British colonizers.

Postcolonial interpretation of this story concerns how a Gentile woman functions in the biblical narrative. Kwok addresses that this woman’s story has not been interpreted by her own people-Syrian-Phoenicians but by Christians. She raises questions as follow:

Our backgrounds and interests often shape the ways we formulate questions, gather and interpret data, and choose reading

29 Ibid., 184.

30 Aruna Gnanadason, “Jesus and the Asian Woman,” 164.

31 Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 65.

strategies to approach the text. My guiding questions in approaching the Syrophoenician woman's story are as follows: How does an unknown Gentile woman's story serve to legitimate the Gentile mission of the Christian Church? How can we interpret the story in such a way as to further the liberation of Third World women? In our postcolonial world, how can we reread the story so that we can respect one another as persons of different gender, race, religion, and social origin?³²

The story of the woman in the text may present the complex matrix of the relationship among different racial groups, the interaction between gender, imperialism, and colonization. Among other things, a closer attention to three characters in postcolonial readings will be given in this text: 1) imperialism; 2) sexism; 3) multi-religious context.

1) *Imperialism*: The Gentile woman's story cannot be interpreted as proclaiming the universality of the Gospel of the inclusion of Gentiles without exploring the issues of Christian imperialism.³³ Kwok investigates three questions in this story. The focalized in Mark is the narrator. The woman is displayed as an object. Her speech displays the unequal positions of women and men in patriarchal society. Her body language, bowing and kneeling, demonstrates her subordinate position as well. The salvation history motif was further elaborated on with the result that the faith and humility of the Syrophoenician woman served as a model not only for Christians, but also for Gentiles to ease the spread of colonialism and imperialism. Just like the Gentile woman, colonized peoples were expected to be as obedient, and loyal

32 Kwok, *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World*, 72.

33 Ibid., 79.

as a devoted dog.³⁴ Kwok observes the master discourse in the Gentile woman's story. It is understood by many as framed within the context of the discourse of the master Jesus. White feminist critics have moved her from the margin to the center by either reclaiming her as a foremother of Gentile Christians or by praising her faith and her wit, which enables her to win the argument over Jesus and broaden Jesus' perspective toward the Gentiles. Postcolonial critics, however, emphasize that she is a woman of another faith and her story is inscribed within the master discourse and her story is often interpreted or misused to justify the mission to the Gentiles.

2) *Sexism*: The Syrophenician woman is a Gentile. She is a stranger to Jesus—in an ethnic sense. What is different if she is only a Gentile and not a woman? In order to point out sexism in this text, Musa Dube compares this Gentile woman in Matthew with the Centurion-Gentile man.

The Canaanite woman and the centurion are both outsiders who seek healing for their dependents and who receive healing on the basis of their exceptional faith. But the plots that lead to the final result are drastically different and call for interpretive attention. With the centurion, Jesus' response is immediate and positive. The Canaanite woman, on the other hand, is forced to beg three times before her request is considered; there is a negative comparison between her, her people, and the people of Israel. Only after she has accepted the degrading social status of a dog is her request granted. These differences in the plots make the whole difference in the meaning of the two stories. Is the

34 Ibid., 78.

centurion assisted quickly because he is a man, an imperial official, or an outsider? Is the Canaanite woman ignored because she is a woman, a Canaanite, and an outsider? Obviously, the variable of outsider is struck out since it is common to both, leaving one with the categories of gender, race, and class.³⁵

In both Mark and Matthew, the woman is portrayed as an object to be seen and displayed. In both stories her body language demonstrates her subordinate position in respect to Jesus. One thing different in Mark is the woman has a voice. Although given a voice, the woman's speech is clearly framed in a Christocentric and androcentric discourse.³⁶ Unlike most white feminist interpretations, Kwok reads the Gentile woman's response to Jesus—"Yes, Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs"—is neither "confrontational" nor "argumentative."³⁷ Rather, her speech displays the unequal position of women and men in patriarchal society compared to the story of the centurion. This claim is resonant with many postcolonial feminists' argument, that is, colonized women and men do not experience colonialism in a same way and women—who are already multiply oppressed because of race, class, conquest, and colonialism—has one more hurdle of sexism than men.

3) *Multi-religious Context*: The Gentile woman's story has been seen as the prototype of Gentile Christians. Several Asian theologians, however, are conscious of the fact that the story has too often been read from a Christian perspective and it may create difficulties in interfaith

35 Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, 164-165.

36 Kwok, *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World*, 73.

37 Ibid., 74.

dialogue. For instance, Sugirtharajah also objects to interpreting this passage from the church's missiological point of view. According to Sugirtharajah, the woman has come forward not because of a spiritual need but because of the reputation of Jesus as a healer. Also, Jesus grants her request because of her manner of speech. Sugirtharajah agrees that the woman's faith might help Jesus' ministry. But the faith is not doctrinal confession of his messianic identity but rather an act of trust, or engagement, risking everything. Therefore, it is her faith that touched Jesus. Sugirtharajah goes on stating, "It is the evangelizer who is evangelized now."³⁸

The Syrophenician woman who belongs to another faith illustrates religious pluralism existing in Jesus' time, just as in Asia today. This woman may be seen as an Asian woman as she represents the multi-faith context. Kwok writes, "Too often interpreters rush to baptize her as a Gentile Christian without acknowledging the different culture and religious tradition she represents."³⁹ In Matthew, Jesus praises the woman's faith, but there is no suggestion that she then follows Jesus. Plus, although the Gentile woman's faith never mentioned in Mark, many bibles title Mark 7:24-30 "The Syrophenician Woman's Faith." Such reading may hinder the meaningful dialogue with members of other faiths around us.

In sum, a postcolonial reading of this Gentile woman tells that a postcolonial interpretation must expose and investigate the intersection of sexism, cultural and religious imperialism in the history of the

38 Sugirtharajah, "Jesus and mission: some redefinitions," in *The Scandal of the Cross: Evangelism and Mission Today*, eds., Wendy S. Robins and Gillian Hawney (London: The United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, 1992), 3.

39 Ibid., 82.

text's interpretation. We cannot follow a single approach, separating race, gender, class, and culture from one another. In other words, we need to examine the woman's story in the text from a multidimensional perspective. Postcolonial feminist reading of the Syrophoenician woman is a process of decontextualizing, decolonizing and depatriarchalizing. Through this articulation, the Syrophoenician woman may get more voices with a different view.

III. Conclusion: The many faces of the Gentile woman and implication for Korean society

In historical criticism, interpreters have been regarded to silence their own subjectivity to gain detached objectivity so that the text itself can speak and not merely mirror the ideas of the interpreters. But, to me, the text often functions as a mirror where the readers see the ideas of the interpreters. For example, Sharon Ringe revised her views in the previous article (1985) about the Syrophoenician woman in 2001. In 16 years, the Syrophoenician woman re-appears as a totally different figure. The Gentile woman, who was once regarded as a marginalized outsider along with other early feminist interpretations, is newly interpreted as a 'privileged and elite woman' in a dominant group. In this new look, the Syrophoenician woman might have been a rich woman and an oppressor; the woman got disdained by the poor Jewish man because of her privileged place. Ringe writes: "As one of the world's 'non-poor,' I am uncomfortable with the picture of the privileged woman's acceptance of the subordinate posture 'under the table' as the price of her participation in the blessings Jesus offer."⁴⁰ What

has been changed was not the Gentile woman herself but Sharon Ringe's perspective and social status as a white feminist scholar and professor. By saying "The privileged one who takes her place under the table,"⁴¹ she identifies herself as a Syrophoenician woman—a wealthy, privileged woman in a dominant group who should lower herself for a blessing from a poor Jew, Jesus.

While reading various approaches about the Gentile woman, I came to the conclusion that people see the Gentile woman through their perspectives and their specific contexts. The Syrophoenician woman can be seen as marginalized or privileged—depending on the contexts. Jesus can also be interpreted as a master, discriminator, a proactive Jew or more. People expose themselves to the Gentile woman upon their contexts. As Laura Donaldson observes, this re-visioned narrative manifests both a "pluralistic and political anatomy of feminism and postcolonialism": "one that emanates from many different sites and assumes that disguise of many different figures."⁴² Ringe also says her new interpretation does not have a solid end but open to various perspectives within diverse communities. Therefore, the Gentile woman has many faces now and looks more ambiguous.⁴³

As illustrated above, the main emphasis and contribution of this research is to provide multi-faceted interpretations on Gentile woman's story. By inviting more hermeneutics and perspectives, the story of the

40 Sharon Ringe. "A Gentile Woman's Story Revisited: Re-reading Mark 7:24-31," 97.

41 Ibid., 99.

42 Donaldson, "The Breasts of Columbus," 57.

43 In addition to multiple readings on the text, religious symbols can provide various meanings given one's specific context. For more discussion on the multivalent meanings on the cross, see Hee Sun Kim, "The Cross-Violence, Compassion and the Resurrection," *Madang: Journal of Contextual Theology* 23 (June 2015), 107-128.

Syrophoenician woman may have special insights for people in the society. When it comes to Korean society, there are many challenges each generational group faces: young adults give up on achieving milestones in life in order to merely survive; married women are pushed out of the workforce if they choose to raise children; the elderly encounter high rates of poverty and suicide rates among this age group are high. Many Korean people think that their current society is unfair and feel that they live in an extremely competitive environment.

In this social structure, the resulting psychological state of Koreans can be described as frustration-‘anxiety’ and ‘anger.’ Some Korean people may see a person kneeling down with frustration in the Syrophoenician woman’s story, asking Jesus for healing. Some may see a gentle woman in the text being frustrated and angry in front of insult and discrimination. Some mothers may give special attention to the fact that Gentile woman approached to Jesus because of her ill child. Also, it can be resonated with some reality of married migrant foreign women in Korea.

Despite the various circumstances as above, many faces of the gentile woman may have some common ground. *The woman came to Jesus with the most urgent problems in life, talked with him while expressing her emotion such as frustration and anger. She finally got her solution through the dialogue with Jesus.* Through dialogue, Jesus provided an environment in which a woman could express her feelings. From practical theological perspective, genuine dialogue with an empathy can be a big relief of emotional distress. I see Jesus’s words to the woman can be a greater comfort to exhausted people in Korea. I propose that practical theologians can use this story of gentile woman for healing purposes. In the process of one’s story in the light of the marginalized woman’s story

in emotionally safe place, one may find meaning and emotional relief and have strength to go on one's life journey.⁴⁴ As they see their own stories in the Syrophoenician woman's text, I hope they are able to see other's pains as well. Namsoon Kang, an Asian feminist theologian, says, "I believe recognizing the presence of the face of the other as existent, no matter who / what one is, is one of the core messages of Jesus' teaching."⁴⁵ Kang sees seeking to live together in justice and peace as the essence of following Jesus. Along with Kang, whatever the readers find in this story, I suggest the "good news" in the text can be reaching and echoing to contemporary readers.

Perhaps what is the most challenging for all of us is to recognize that none of us can see alone; *none of us can hold the final truth*. We encounter the text as individuals who interact with our situation and via this existential interaction, the text can be truly alive and understood. For us, openness to the interpretation of the text is needed as it speaks to us over time and into an unknown future. Here are the stories of Gentile woman who has many faces. May this marginalized, vulnerable yet brave Gentile woman's story be passed on-not lost, not forgotten, but remembered-to other people who are in a similar context. Maybe, one day, one face of this woman would be trying to communicate with you to respond to your sorrow and agony. Like the mustard seed, like the yeast, may these multi-colored interpretations scatters, spread and bloom, from one broken heart to another, making meanings, shedding light, seasoning life anew.

44 For further study on pastoral reflections on Syrophoenician woman, see Hee Sung Chung, *Pastoral Counseling for Korean Women* (Seoul: Ewha Woman's University Press, 2018), ch.8.

45 Namsoon Kang, *Cosmopolitan Theology: Reconstituting Planetary Hospitality, Neighbor-Love, and Solidarity in an Uneven World* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2013), 129.

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