

The Danger of a Singular Order: Engaging with Controversial Texts

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This essay deals with Joshua's conquest narrative of Canaan and Jesus' dealing with a Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:21–28. These narratives present difficulties in interpretation because they involve ethnic conflicts and oppression.¹ This essay argues that while naming external oppressors is critical, they are also found internally within the community, often masquerading with a cause of liberation. Revealing their ideology is also required to interpret such texts. Louis Althusser's definition of ideology should be noted and helpful, as he says: "Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence."² Ideology is not a delusion or illusion but a prevalent concept at work for all people, good or bad. So, our concern is what kind of ideology one has, and who is served by it. Biblical narratives embed various ideologies. Different people at different times, individually or communally, engage in ideology. As a postmodern or postliberal interpreter, I am interested in unraveling harmful, destructive ideologies in the narratives, seeking undergirding ideologies reconstructed from an alternative perspective.

From the outset, there are two types of oppressors: those perennial oppressors and the liberated individuals who have become oppressors themselves. The first group is easily identified and warned against, as their ideology is explicit and militant because they use a massive ideology about the liberation of America from Satanic powers, as often found in Christian nationalists.³ They have their ideology and practices in the guise of the singular story of God while focusing on their power and privilege. However, the latter group can be harder to recognize because they disguise themselves as advocates for some sort of liberation for them. We must test their spirit and purpose, revealing their ideology to the same degree as external oppressors.

1. For a general understanding of race/ethnicity in the Hebrew Bible and its relation to monotheism, see Yung Suk Kim, *Monotheism, Biblical Traditions and Race Relations* (Cambridge University Press, 2022).

2. According to Louis Althusser, ideology is unavoidable to humanity. All have certain ideologies. The question is what kind of ideology one has. See Louis Althusser, trans. Ben Brewster, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, 121–176, (153).

3. Samuel L. Adams, "The Bible in Christian Nationalist Rhetoric," *Interpretation* 78.4 (2024), 298–309.

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The danger of a singular order in the Book of Joshua

Joshua received a singular order to annihilate all Canaanites and everything associated with them, and he followed this command without questioning it. This view of Joshua contrasts with Abraham, who expressed concerns about God's destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah as he heard of God's plan to destroy those cities and all people therein. Abraham had legitimate, ethical concerns about them. But later in the narrative of Genesis, he is ethically dumb and silent about the divine order to give his son as a burnt offering. He does not raise any questions about the divine order.

Similar to the perspective of later Abraham, Joshua did not question the divine command to destroy all Canaanite entities. He did not take the time to discuss or reflect on his thoughts with other leaders in the community. As a result, all Israelites became oppressors, despite having once been oppressed themselves. They forgot about God's liberation of them from slavery and adopted Pharaoh's mindset of defeating others through military power. Although they were freed from slavery, they had not yet truly embraced the kind of liberation that values the lives and cultures of others. They were naive, focusing solely on the covenant and promise while overlooking their responsibilities as free individuals.

The concept of covenant has been significant since God entered human history, choosing Abraham and making him the father of faith for all people, including the Gentiles. However, this Abrahamic covenant is not intended to solidify their exclusive community. Instead, they must serve as a beacon of light for

all nations. If this understanding of the covenant is maintained throughout the Hebrew narrative, even the promise of God regarding the blessings of the land should be interpreted carefully, without adopting ideologies that subjugate others.

Robert Warrior, a Native American scholar, highlights the issue of ideology in the context of the Israelites and questions whose story is told in the narrative of Joshua's conquest.⁴ For the Israelites, this may be a tale of victory, promise, or covenant; however, for the Canaanites, it represents a story of subjugation, tragedy, and death framed within a divine mandate. Warrior also critically examines the concept of liberation theology in alignment with the Exodus story, noting that the subsequent conquest narrative of Joshua remains unchallenged.

If the Egyptians were oppressors to the Israelites during their time of slavery, the Israelites become the oppressors of the Canaanites. The narrative of Joshua's conquest illustrates how the oppressed can turn into oppressors. Wars and violence should never be seen as viable options for fulfilling God's will, and such interpretations must be approached with discernment. Invasion cannot be justified under any circumstances; it is not part of God's way. Those who invade others or act against other nations in the name of God demonstrate that they are not aligned with divine intent. They are misguided, influenced by an ideology of superiority that skews their understanding.

In summary, the problem with a singular narrative is that one version of a story cannot encompass all that has occurred. We must consider who is responsible for writing history, as it is often the victors who shape it. Regardless of the history or story we encounter, we should scrutinize its ideology and the real individuals behind it. Those in power have the authority to write and control the means of communication. Michel Foucault's perspective is relevant here, as he asserts that power produces knowledge, and vice versa. Additionally, biblical narratives should not be regarded as definitive history; they represent stories that reflect various ideologies throughout a long history. However, the reality is that stories often become intertwined with history, and history can transform into stories. Therefore, it is crucial to explore history in all its complexity and ambiguity. A well-known African proverb highlights this issue: "Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter."

When discussing Joshua's conquest narrative, we should avoid treating it as a historical account that unfolded exactly as described. Moreover, the conquest of Canaan and the killing of its inhabitants cannot be justified, even if framed as a divine mandate. It is unreasonable to expect the true God to endorse such actions. Even if Joshua believed he received this command, he should have taken the time to discuss and reflect on it more critically.

4. See Robert Warrior, "Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians: Deliverance, Conquest, and Liberation Theology Today," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 59.1–2 (2005), 1–8.

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Jesus' exclusivism in dealing with a Canaanite woman (Matthew 15:21–28)

In the Roman world, Jews are marginalized. Within Jewish society, Jesus is also a minority and faces marginalization. He comes from a poor and humble background, living in poverty as a rural radical. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is portrayed as a powerful teacher and prophet, akin to Moses, but greater than him—essentially, a new Moses. Jesus fulfills the scriptures and teaches new commandments based on God's love, justice, and righteousness. However, on two occasions, he appears to adopt an exclusivist stance against non-Jews. In Matthew 10:5–6, he instructs his disciples not to enter the towns of Gentiles to proclaim the good news, stating: "Do not take a road leading to Gentiles, and do not enter a Samaritan town, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Similarly, in Matthew 15:21–28, he emphasizes his exclusivist position by saying: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (15:24) and "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs" (15:26). This raises a perplexing issue: how can Jesus, who confronts Roman rule and advocates for equality and human dignity, also appear to align with a Roman ideology that divides people into Romans and everyone else? In the narrative of Matthew's Gospel, he fights for the oppressed Jews in his society, yet in this instance, he seems to dismiss the plight of a non-Jewish woman—specifically a Canaanite woman whose daughter is tormented by a demon. How can we make sense of this contradiction?

We can examine this issue from two historical times: Jesus' historical time and Matthew's time and context. The Gospel of Matthew reflects Jesus' story, and we may focus on his teaching and theology. As a historical figure, Jesus embeds Jewish tradition about the covenants of Abraham and Moses. So, his exclusive position is not strange in his time. This story in Matthew 15:21–28 may represent his struggle to open the good news to other non-Jews. His slurs and burglar language, which are bad and

immoral, represent his culture. He is challenged by the Canaanite woman, who courageously challenges him to be gracious toward other marginalized people. In the end, he may have changed his perspective on other ethnicities.

When we focus on Matthew's community in the late first century, a key concern is how to make the gospel accessible to the Gentiles. The central issue at hand revolves around ethnicity and belonging. One question is: What requirements should be placed on the Gentiles? Should they show an exceptionally submissive faith that positions them as second-class citizens? Should they prove their respectability through submission to the colonial Christ?

Some interpreters see the woman's challenging faith, which unsettles Matthew's implicit or explicit superior, exclusivist ideology and theology.⁵ The Canaanite woman perhaps saved Jesus from the limitations of his ethnocentric gospel or theology. But we do not know what Jesus learned from the woman. Was he transformed positively? In what ways? By the end of the story, he commends her faith. But what kind of faith is this? It is our responsibility to interpret this complex text for our time.⁶

Christian nationalists' reading of the Bible and their singular ideology

Christian nationalists consider the United States to be a new biblical Israel, a covenanted partner with God, who will serve as God's last-day hands and warriors to achieve their kingdom. This view is similar to the earlier European settlers' ideology that America was a promised land from God. Behind all these motives lies American exceptionalism and their power and privilege. They use the Bible to forge their own exclusive superior identity and culture while ignoring a more inclusive biblical mandate of the love of neighbors, including enemies.⁷ Their interpretation is rigid, and they view modern events politically and theologically, serving their own needs. For example, they interpret natural disasters, wars, or social changes as either warnings or blessings tied to their ideology. These Christian nationalists incorporate apocalyptic interpretations, seeing current events as signs of biblical prophecy fulfillment. This perspective can shape views on foreign policy, especially concerning Israel and the Middle East, where they believe U.S. support aligns with divine mandate. In sum, Christian nationalists put the Bible in their service to their superiority and power in the guise of God or with their vision of God.

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Conclusion

Joshua's conquest narrative and Jesus' interaction with a Canaanite woman highlight themes of ethnicity, belonging, and culture. In the Hebrew Bible, the concept of ethnicity is often contested. While Ezra and Nehemiah advocate for a singular covenant based on a single ethnicity (the Jews), the Book of Ruth challenges this notion by allowing for the inclusion of other ethnicities who wish to join the Jewish community.⁸ In this context, Ruth is welcomed into Jewish society; however, she sacrifices her own identity and agency, becoming a surrogate mother and effectively fading from the narrative by the story's end. Although she is viewed as a model minority among the Jews, she ultimately feels empty and desperate, remaining a second-class citizen. Her significance stems solely from the fact that she bore a son who is part of the Davidic lineage, rendering her presence relevant only to their story.

In the New Testament period, specifically in first-century Palestine and throughout the Roman world, issues of ethnicity were significant. This is illustrated by challenging stories in the Gospels, such as Matthew 15:21–28 (where a Canaanite woman encounters Jesus), John 4:1–42 (where Jesus speaks with a Samaritan woman), and Luke 10:25–37 (the parable of the Good Samaritan). Ultimately, as seen in the Gospel of Matthew, all ethnicities are included in the people of God. However, questions remain about the role and nature of faith in joining God's household. Is faith directed toward God, Jesus, or both? What is the content of that faith? How does ethnicity relate to a beloved community? What needs to occur for individuals to remain in such a community, and what must they do to unite with one another?

5. For more about critical readings of Matthew 15:21–28, see Yung Suk Kim, ed. *At the Intersection of Hermeneutics and Homiletics: Transgressive Readings for Transformational Preaching* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2025).

6. For various readings of the Gospels, see Yung Suk Kim, *How to Read the Gospels* (Lanham, MI: Rowman & Littlefield, 2024).

7. Samuel L. Adams, "The Bible in Christian Nationalist Rhetoric," *Interpretation* 78.4 (2024), 298–309.

8. For more about critical readings of Ruth, see Yung Suk Kim, ed. *At the Intersection of Hermeneutics and Homiletics: Transgressive Readings for Transformational Preaching* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2025).

I propose that true liberation and transformation can occur when one confronts the enemies that surround them—those external, internal, and even those within themselves. Liberation does not entail defeating others or feeling superior; rather, it involves accepting human weakness and embracing God's impartial grace.⁹ The "us versus them" mentality is not confined to conflicting communities or cultures; it can also emerge within one's own community and culture. It is crucial to confront and identify all forms of oppression we might face. Furthermore, the enemies or issues we detest can sometimes be found within ourselves.¹⁰ Jesus highlights this when he asks, "Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye but do not notice the log in your own eye?" (Matthew 7:3). Let us confront oppressors from outside and within and seek transformation with opacities of enemies.

9. For the role of race/ethnicity in biblical interpretation, see Yung Suk Kim, Chapter 24, "Racial Identity Hermeneutics," in *Handbook on Postconservative Theological Interpretation*, edited by Ronald T. Michener and Mark A. Lamport (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2024).

10. The parable of the Wheat and Weed emphasizes the reality of the world/community mixed with good and bad people. The challenge is how to live together with enemies, so to speak, and how to be patient toward them.

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