

ARE WOMEN DOGS? The Reality of Racism in Indonesia Reviewed from Matthew 15:21-28

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Abstract

This study explores the theme of discrimination based on ethnicity and religion as reflected in Matthew 15:21-28, particularly in the Indonesian context. The background to the problem lies in the persistent social issues surrounding discrimination in various forms, which can be seen as a reflection of deeper cultural and theological gaps. The purpose of this study is to analyze the text of Matthew 15: 21-28 in relation to contemporary discrimination issues and to obtain messages that can contribute to the promotion of inclusiveness and understanding in Indonesian society. This study uses the method of textual analysis of the scriptures along with socio-cultural examination of the current landscape in Indonesia. Through this approach, the study identifies key themes and insights in biblical narratives that resonate with the modern experience of marginalized groups. The results show that the section challenges prevailing attitudes towards discrimination and calls for a reevaluation of social norms. It highlights the importance of compassion and the recognition of shared humanity, offering a theological foundation for overcoming discrimination.

Keywords: racism; Canaanite women; Matthew 15:21-28; Indonesia.

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is a multi-cultural and multi-faith country that is heterogeneously united with the state doctrine called Pancasila. However, the relationship between various social, ethnic, and religious groups is still problematic and national unity is still easily fractured. The reality of the diverse ethnic and racial conditions in Indonesia, which consists of more than 17,000 islands and 1000 language groups, is a cultural treasure. Indonesia's population is 238 million with an estimated 88 percent declaring themselves to be Muslims, 9.3 percent to be Christians, 1.8 percent to be Hindus and 0.6 percent to Buddhists, and the rest to various local faiths.¹ According to Agus Joko Pitoyo and Hari Triwahyudi, in 2000 there were 25 main tribes in Indonesia. Of these, the population of 11 major tribes is more than one percent, while the other 14 tribes have a

¹ Human Rights Watch, *In Religion's Name Abuses against Religious Minorities in Indonesia*, 2013, 25, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/02/28/religions-name/abuses-against-religious-minorities-indonesia>.

population percentage between 0.2 and 1 percent. The three most popular ethnic groups in Indonesia are the Javanese who account for 41.71 percent (about 83.9 million people), the Sundanese with 15.41 percent (about 31 million people), and the Malays who have 3.45 percent (about 7 million people). This fact indicates that the Javanese are the largest tribe in Indonesia that can be found in various regions throughout the country.²

Based on SETARA Institute data, throughout 2023 there were 217 incidents and 329 acts that violated human rights in Indonesia. Of the 329 incidents of human rights violations that occurred in 2022, the monitoring results showed a significant decrease in the number of incidents, namely 175 incidents and 333 actions. Of the 329 incidents of human rights violations, 215 were non-state actors and 114 state actors.³ Of the total 114 acts of violation committed by state actors, the details of the perpetrators are as follows: the local government took 40 actions, the police 24 actions, Satpol PP 10 actions, the TNI 8 actions, Forkopimda 6 actions, and educational institutions 4 actions. On the other hand, for non-state actors, KBB violations were most committed by citizens with 78 actions, followed by individuals (19 actions), the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) with 17 actions, and religious organizations that recorded 8 actions. With 47 incidents, West Java is again the region with the highest number of violations in 2023. Meanwhile, East Java recorded 29 incidents, DKI Jakarta 19 incidents, North Sumatra 17 incidents, Central Java 14 incidents, and South Sulawesi 11 incidents.⁴

Quoting Adam Tyson, the cause of racism emerging in Indonesia, he said that a number of analysts have identified indications that ethno-religious strife has arisen as a result of political strategies and military tactics implemented by 'covert units' that exploit situations of instability to gain advantage. Thus, there are segments in society that seek to take advantage of ethnic, cultural, linguistic diversity, and beliefs to create disputes and incite violence. Elite groups from previous governments and the military

² Agus Joko Pitoyo and Hari Triwahyudi, "Dinamika Perkembangan Etnis Di Indonesia Dalam Konteks Persatuan Negara," *Populasi* 25, no. 1 (2018): 64, <https://jurnal.ugm.ac.id/populasi/article/view/32416>.

³ SETARA, *Kondisi Kebebasan Beragama Berkeyakinan (KBB) 2023 - Dari Stagnasi Menuju Stagnasi Baru* (Jakarta, 2024), https://setara-institute.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Rilis-Data-Kondisi-KBB-2023_Setara-Institute_Ind.pdf.

⁴ SETARA, *Kondisi Kebebasan Beragama Berkeyakinan (KBB) 2023 - Dari Stagnasi Menuju Stagnasi Baru*.

used similar strategies to mobilize people to support their efforts to return to power and create stability to protect their personal interests.⁵

Schröder-Butterfill further concludes the threats to the elderly posed by macro trends such as urbanization, women's labor force participation, and education. These failures usually lead to inadequate care, unmanageable burdens, or premature death for low-income households or small households. To determine the extent to which this accurately describes the real experience in Indonesia.⁶

In February 2013, the United Nations through its Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Heiner Bielefeld, warned that elements in Indonesia's draft law on mass organizations "have the potential to violate freedom of religion or belief." Bielefeld, together with the special rapporteur on freedom of association and expression, urged the government to revise the bill "to bring it into line with human rights norms and standards at the international level."⁷ In a 2013 report published by Human Rights Observer titled *In Religion's Name*, it was explained that although Indonesia has legal guarantees for freedom of religion, a number of laws and policies have been implemented over the past 60 years, such as the establishment of the Ministry of Religion in 1946, the blasphemy law in 1965, the Decrees on houses of worship in 1969 and 2006, as well as various other provisions and regulations at the national level. Provinces and counties have reinforced discrimination against religious minorities.⁸

One of the most controversial Bible texts is Matthew 15:21-28, which contains a conversation between Jesus and a Canaanite woman. This text seems controversial because Jesus initially responded to the woman's plea by calling her a "dog." This expression can give rise to the perception that there is an element of discrimination in Jesus' attitude towards the woman, who is not only ethnically different (Canaan) but also of different genders.⁹ How can we understand the use of harsh words like "dog" in

⁵ Adam Tyson, "Realities Of Discrimination In Indonesia: The Case Of The Civil Service," *Jurnal Administrasi Publik* 2, no. 2 (2003), <https://journal.unpar.ac.id/index.php/JAP/article/view/1526>.

⁶ Elisabeth Schröder-Butterfill et al., "Vulnerable, Heroic ... or Invisible? Representations Versus Realities of Later Life in Indonesia," *Progress in Development Studies* 23, no. 4 (2023): 408-426, <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/14649934231197277>.

⁷ Human Rights Watch, *In Religion's Name Abuses against Religious Minorities in Indonesia*, 35.

⁸ Human Rights Watch, *In Religion's Name Abuses against Religious Minorities in Indonesia*, 36.

⁹ Andri Vincent Sinaga and Roby Hendra Tumangger, "Misi Yesus Melampaui Batas-Batas: Memaknai Misi Yesus Dalam Konteks Lintas Budaya Berdasarkan Markus 7:24-30 Dan Implikasinya Bagi

the context of such speech? How can we say that Jesus, who is known to be loving, takes sides with the oppressed? What really happened in this story? Did Jesus really show racist attitudes? In the account of Matthew 15:21-28 concerning the Syro-Phoenician woman, although Jesus praised her great faith, he also seems to be making statements that could be considered racial slurs or ridicule when comparing the Israelites to "children" and the women to "dogs."

This article aims to review the text of Matthew 15:21-28 in its social and theological context, as well as reflect on the reality of racial discrimination in Indonesia. By understanding how Jesus ultimately responded to the faith of the Canaanite woman, this article attempts to highlight a gospel message that transcends social, ethnic, and gender boundaries. It is hoped that this reflection can provide a more inclusive and relevant perspective for the church and society of Indonesia in an effort to fight discrimination and build a more just coexistence.

This study uses the textual analysis method of the holy book along with socio-cultural examination through literature review. The methodology of literature review has a fundamental role in research, as stated by Leedy that the wider a researcher's knowledge, understanding, and introduction to previous research, the better the results obtained. In this research, I try to explore theories that are relevant to the problems raised, with the aim of formulating a theoretical framework that will be the basis for the preparation of the expected hypothesis.¹⁰ The purpose of this research is to formulate a theory of racism and solutions to overcome racism in Indonesia through the study of the exegesis of the text of Matthew 15:21-28. The book of Matthew generally describes marginalized groups. Several texts in Matthew's Gospel deal with various aspects of social systems, such as gender, sexuality, land ownership, ethnicity, and social class. The book pays special attention to women, as seen in Matthew 15, which tells of a Canaanite woman – a native of Canaan and an old enemy of the Israelites. Matthew portrays this Canaanite woman as a political enemy who has religious differences with the Jews. The woman even showed courage by meeting Jesus in a public space, which at that time was a male-dominated area.

Misi Kristen," *Jurnal Arrabona* 6, no. 2 (2024): 182-206,
<https://jurnal.sttarrabona.ac.id/JurnalSTTA/index.php/JUAR/article/view/110>.

¹⁰ Paul D. Leedy and Jeanne Ellis Ormrod, *Practical Research: Planning and Design* (Boston: Pearson, 2013), 106.

RESULT

Racism Studies

It is impossible to define racism without first identifying race. "Race" is usually seen by social scientists as a social construct. Race has a huge impact on how social reality is structured, while biologically meaningless when applied to people because physical differences such as skin color have no inherent correlation with group differences in terms of talent or behavior. In fact, the definition and use of the term throughout history have varied, which is an example.¹¹ From a sociological perspective, race is distinguished from ethnicity based on its basic concepts. The main difference lies in the biological assumptions in the concept of race, where race is defined by visible and immutable physical characteristics. Meanwhile, ethnicity is more related to lineage, history, and cultural practices. For example, a person can be categorized as an Asian race, while his ethnicity is Malay. However, these three categories – race, ethnicity, and nationality – often overlap and are the result of social construction. Racism can appear in various aspects of human life, both in internal forms such as ethnicity, skin color, gender, and physical form, as well as in external forms that include social, economic, political, and religious aspects. Different treatment of these groups can have a major impact on society, including the emergence of prejudice.¹²

Banaji highlights individual prejudice and interactional racism, which together highlight the inherent characteristics of systemic racism. Those human beings individually, both individually and in social interactions, further develop an inclusive understanding of this systemic racism. Institutional structures (practices, policies, climate), social structures (state/federal programs, laws, culture), individual mental structures (e.g., learning, memories, attitudes, beliefs, values), and patterns of daily interactions (norms, scripts, habits) are all influenced by systemic racism in a society. In addition to functioning on several levels, systemic racism can manifest itself with or without hostility or malice, as well as with or without awareness of its existence. Its strength comes from the incorporation into one cohesive system of racial

¹¹ Matthew Clair and Jeffrey S. Denis, "Racism, Sociology Of," In *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences* (2015), 857–863,

<https://linkinghub.elsevier.com/retrieve/pii/B9780080970868321225>.

¹² Clair and Denis, "Racism, Sociology Of."

discrimination and discrimination that determines, regulates, and decides opportunities and outcomes for future generations.¹³

Discourse and symbols, a category of boundary-making tools according to Wimmer, require two steps: categorizing individuals and creating categories. Most sociologists view this as the formation of group boundaries for the process that directly shapes or enforces racial dominance, rather than categorizing it as racism.¹⁴ Classification, for example, relies on symbolic markers that "keep an eye on the boundaries of potential crossovers," that is, assigning certain behaviors as characteristics of the group, highlighting visually striking signs that are difficult to manipulate, and documenting group membership on official records.¹⁵

Grosfoguel quotes Fanon as saying that people who are categorized as above the human lineage are recognized by society as human, and thus, they have access to material resources, social recognition of their subjectivity, identity, epistemology, and spirituality, as well as rights (human, civil, women, and/or labor rights). People who are below the human lineage are seen as non-human or sub-human, which means that their humanity is questioned and, thus, denied.¹⁶

Was Jesus racist?

These interpretations challenge the notion that Jesus was merely testing the woman's faith; rather, they argue that Jesus' rejection of the woman's request was sincere and that she changed her mind, which allowed Jesus to begin a broader outreach among the Gentiles. Some may argue that the story of the Greek woman of the Syro-Phoenician race is evidence of racism in the Gospel narrative.¹⁷ The question of whether this story really contains elements of racism arises from Jesus' interaction with the

¹³ Mahzarin R. Banaji, Susan T. Fiske, and Douglas S. Massey, "Systemic Racism: Individuals and Interactions, Institutions and Society," *Cognitive Research: Principles and Implications* 6, no. 1 (December 20, 2021): 82, <https://cognitiveresearchjournal.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s41235-021-00349-3>; Rona Ganta Barus, Khatriana Rintis Lintang Rahayu, Ester Agustini Tandana, Liantoro Liantoro, and Darmadi Darmadi. "Peran Pendidikan Agama Kristen Melawan Diskriminasi Di Masyarakat Majemuk Indonesia". *Indonesian Journal of Religious* 5, no. 2 (2023):91-107. <https://doi.org/10.46362/ijr.v5i2.32>.

¹⁴ Andreas. Wimmer, *Ethnic Boundary Making: Institutions, Power, Networks* (New York,: Oxford Press., University, 2013), 65.

¹⁵ Jiannbin Shiao and Ashley Woody, "The Meaning of 'Racism,'" *Sociological Perspectives* 64, no. 4 (2021): 495–517, <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0731121420964239>.

¹⁶ Ramon Grosfoguel, "What Is Racism?," *Journal of World-Systems Research* 22, no. 1 (2016): 9–15, <http://jwsr.pitt.edu/ojs/jwsr/article/view/609>.

¹⁷ Matthew Malcolm, "Did the Syrophoenician Woman Change Jesus's Mission?," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 29, no. 2 (2019): 174–186, <https://scholarlypublishingcollective.org/biblical-research/article/29/2/174/197551/Did-the-Syrophoenician-Woman-Change-Jesus-s>.

Canaanite or "Syro-Phoenician," as recorded in Matthew 15:21-28 and Mark 7:24-30. In the account, Jesus referred to the woman by a term that was considered insulting, namely "dog," which historically in Jewish tradition was used as an insult, especially since the animal was considered unclean.

In the sacred texts, calling someone a "dog" is a severe form of insult.¹⁸ This negative connotation continues to carry over to the present day, where the term is still considered derogative. The interpretation that this interaction was merely a mild banter is inappropriate, given the serious context, in which the woman is fighting for the healing of her demon-possessed child. Emotionally, the reader's initial response to Jesus' seemingly harsh reaction may be correct, for there seems to be no need for such firmness in this precarious situation. The encounter between Jesus and the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:21-28 raises a debate about discrimination, both in terms of gender and ethnic differences.¹⁹ Critics have even called Jesus' behavior on this occasion racist, suggesting that it was a reflection of the general attitude of the Jews at the time.²⁰

Sechrest argues that in Matthew 15:24-26, Jesus expresses his unwillingness to deviate from his exclusive mission to Israel through a metaphor that compares the woman and her sick son to a "dog." Some interpreters have sought to soften this controversy by portraying dogs as puppies or treating the situation as a test of the woman's faith, but these explanations are often not entirely satisfactory.²¹

In the Gospel of Mark, this story is also written, and the woman is more specifically referred to as Syro-Phoenician, referring to her ethnic background, while the term "Greek" describes her religious beliefs. This emphasized that the woman was not Jewish and came from a different ethnic group and religion. This interaction also shows the gender dynamics, where Jesus as a Jewish man meets women from other nations who dare to approach him in public spaces. Theologians such as Rukundwa, Van Aarde, Saga, and Klancher have discussed the social aspects of the story of the Canaanite

¹⁸ Christopher E. Alt, "The Dynamic of Humility and Wisdom: The Syro-Phoenician Woman and Jesus in Mark 7:24-31a," *Lumen et Vita* 2 (2012): 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.6017/lv.v2i1.1901>.

¹⁹ Alt, "The Dynamic of Humility and Wisdom: The Syro-Phoenician Woman and Jesus in Mark 7:24-31a."

²⁰ Love L Sechrest, "Enemies, Romans, Pigs, and Dogs: Loving the Other in the Gospel of Matthew," *EXAUDITU* 31 (2015): 71-105. https://www.academia.edu/34269177/Enemies_Romans_Pigs_and_Dogs_Loving_the_Other_in_the_Gospel_of_Matthew.

²¹ Sechrest, "Enemies, Romans, Pigs, and Dogs: Loving the Other in the Gospel of Matthew."

woman, particularly regarding the theological challenges and ambiguities in the encounter.²²

Jesus' initial silent response to the woman's plea may be understood in an ethnic context, as she was considered the traditional enemy of the Israelites and their God.²³ However, on a broader level, the woman made her plea with full awareness and persistence. Finally, Jesus tested her faith, deepened her understanding of spiritual truth, and then granted her request by praising the woman's faith.²⁴ Sechrest also points out that Jesus, in Matthew 15:26, described the Israelites as "children" and outsiders as "dogs," in harmony with the descriptions of wild beasts in Matthew 7:6 and Matthew 8:28-34.²⁵

Instead of rejecting the categorization, however, Canaanite women accepted the image and used it to defend themselves. While this acceptance can be seen as an internalized form of racism, a more accurate understanding is that the woman acknowledges that the label is part of the social reality she faces. However, he believed that Jesus' love could overcome those limitations and create the relationship he desired, even if it meant overcoming the obstacles of history and prejudice.²⁶ The reader is forced to reconsider the presumption that led to the woman's mistaken expectation when Jesus rejected her. Through this process of defamiliarization, the text uncovers two false norms that readers may hold: the idea that the gospel erases ethnicity as part of social identity and the opposite idea that one must reject one's specific ethnic identity in order to respond to the gospel in a faithful way.²⁷

According to Battersby, Matthew once again refers to Old Testament scripture with the use of the symbol of a dog, highlighting the boldness of the non-Jewish woman's statement. It is important to remember that dogs (Greek: *kuón*) were considered unclean scavengers and hated in Jewish culture (see 1 Kings 14:11; Exodus

²² Mookgo S Kgatle, "Crossing Boundaries: Social-Scientific Reading of the Faith of a Canaanite Woman (Mt 15:21-28)," *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 4, no. 2 (2018): 595-613. <https://doi.org/10.17570/stj.2018.v4n2.a27>.

²³ Dorothy A. Lee, "The Faith of the Canaanite Woman (Mt. 15.21-28): Narrative, Theology, Ministry," *Journal of Anglican Studies* 13, no. 1 (2015): 12-29. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740355314000187>.

²⁴ Lee, "The Faith of the Canaanite Woman (Mt. 15.21-28): Narrative, Theology, Ministry."

²⁵ Sechrest, "Enemies, Romans, Pigs, and Dogs: Loving the Other in the Gospel of Matthew."

²⁶ Sechrest, "Enemies, Romans, Pigs, and Dogs: Loving the Other in the Gospel of Matthew."

²⁷ Julien C.H. Smith, "The Construction of Identity in Mark 7:24-30: The Syrophenician Woman and the Problem of Ethnicity," *Biblical Interpretation* 20, no. 4-5 (2012): 458-481. <https://doi.org/10.1163/156851512X643832>.

6:1-2). Jesus used the word *kuón* during the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:6), but in Matthew 15:27, he used a smaller form, *kynariois* (Greek: Κυνάρσιος), which can be translated as "little dog" or "puppy." The use of this term may conjure up a different image in the minds of the students compared to the women involved in the conversation.²⁸

For the Syro-Phoenicians, keeping a small dog in the house was common and socially acceptable, while for the Jewish community, the use of the term had a derogatory connotation, especially when describing the enemies of Israel. In Jewish tradition, the term "dog" is a nickname often used to describe enemies, based on the fact that dogs are considered unclean animals and in Palestine often serve as worthless scavengers. The disciples and women in the story may understand the stereotypical characterizations presented in the narrative: Jesus as the Teacher, the Jews as "children," and the Gentiles as "dogs".²⁹ Matthew consistently uses parabolic and comparative messages to convey deeper meanings, possibly with a dual purpose. For Jewish cultures, the term *kyaria* (dog) places dogs geographically "outside" their environment, whereas in Hellenistic cultures, the word is more commonly associated with pets that live inside the home as part of a family unit. This difference of view reflects the cultural contrast between the Jewish and Hellenistic communities, which reinforces Matthew's message about the difference in perception and interaction between Jesus, his disciples, and the non-Jewish woman.³⁰

Could it be that Jesus gave a secret code that only the woman could understand through the use of the term *kynariois* (puppy)? Some interpreters argue so, including the possibility that Jesus signaled an "opening" to the woman through his choice of words.³¹ For Battersby, the metaphors Jesus used, including the term *kynariois*, served as a bridge connecting him to the Canaanite woman. Battersby also points out that Jesus later added the metaphor of bread to his narrative, which has significant significance in

²⁸ Colin Battersby, "Beyond Our Borders" A Study of the Canaanite Woman Narrative in Matthew's Gospel (Mt. 15:21-28)." *Academia*, Whitley College, University of Divinity, Victoria, Australia, 2016, 1-14. https://www.academia.edu/28672072/_Beyond_Our_Borders_A_Study_of_the_Canaanite_Woman_Narrative_in_Matthew_s_Gospel.

²⁹ Battersby, *Beyond Our Borders" A Study of the Canaanite Woman Narrative in Matthew's Gospel (Mt. 15:21-28)*.

³⁰ Cedric E. W. Vine, "Repatriating the Canaanite Woman in the Gospel of Matthew," *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, 58, no. 1 (2020): 7-32, <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3797&context=auss>.

³¹ Battersby, *Beyond Our Borders" A Study of the Canaanite Woman Narrative in Matthew's Gospel (Mt. 15:21-28)*.

the Hebrew tradition. The bread symbolizes provision and blessing from Yahweh, as seen when the Israelites received manna in the wilderness (see Exodus 16).³² The similarity Jesus made between the Canaanite woman and the dog has attracted much attention.

According to France the interpretation of the word *kynariois* actually increases the offensive potential of Jesus' statement. In the context of ancient times, dogs did not have the same status as they do now; calling someone "dog" is deliberately offensive and demeaning, as seen in some biblical references (2 Samuel 16:9; Psalm 22:16; Philippians 3:2). Jews often use this term to refer to non-Jews. Although some interpreters have argued that Jesus' use of the term in the Gospel of Mark adds a certain appeal, this view does not completely eliminate its negative connotations. The depiction of violence and humiliation of non-Jews as "dogs" as opposed to "children" remains strong in this narrative, and it still creates tension in understanding how Jesus interacted with the Canaanite woman.³³

Canaanite Women

Textual clues, such as the fact that the Canaanite woman was a woman, provide evidence to support her low status. On behalf of the public Canaanite woman went to seek help on her own indicates that she did not have a brother to support her or speak on her behalf in public, although we cannot be sure of her economic situation. Poverty is inevitable in the face of rural poverty and widespread eviction of family land, which is highlighted by the contrast with the metropolitan wealth of Tyre. As a single mother in a remote area around Tyre, Canaanite women would be accustomed to scarcity on a daily basis.³⁴

The Canaanite woman in the narrative of Matthew's Gospel is presented as a powerful figure, with characters that develop as the story progresses. In one section, she has the distinction of being one of two women who directly called Jesus (Matthew 15:22; see also 20:21). However, in other parts, she is also portrayed as a marginalized

³² Battersby, *Beyond Our Borders" A Study of the Canaanite Woman Narrative in Matthew's Gospel (Mt. 15:21-28)*.

³³ Richard.T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* France. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 298.

³⁴ Jane E. Hicks, "Crumbs, Dogs, and Border - Crossings: A Postcolonial - Feminist Rereading of the Syrophoenician Woman Story Rereading of the Syrophoenician Woman Story," *Verbum* 1, no. 1 (2005), <https://fisherpub.sjf.edu/verbum/vol3/iss1/11>.

individual, in three contexts: as a woman, as a non-Jew, and as the mother of a possessed child.³⁵ In rabbinic literature, representations of women are often less positive and rarely display deep theological faith or thought. Jesus' disciples viewed Gentile women as unclean (see Acts 10:28). Theologians agree that the context of Canaanite women is relevant to contemporary issues of discrimination related to race, region, ethnicity, social class, and gender. They emphasized the need for analytical tools in understanding the interpretation of this text to examine how these social systems are formed and interact with each other.³⁶

The Canaanite woman's response in the narrative of Matthew 15:21-28 may seem surprising to modern readers, as she shows no pain or rejection. Instead, he accepted Jesus' statement in a unique way. By acknowledging the truth of what Jesus said and acknowledging the superiority of the Israelites, the woman used a metaphor to reinforce her argument: even dogs, which were part of the house, were allowed to eat the crumbs that had fallen. This response shows his intelligence as well as deep and resilient belief. He didn't ask for food for the children but only asked for leftovers. In this way, the Canaanite woman succeeded in reversing the image that Jesus gave and winning the argument in the metaphorical dialogue.³⁷

Evidence in support of the inferior position of the Canaanite woman can be found through textual clues as well as the fact that she was a Gentile woman. Although the economic status of the Canaanite woman cannot be ascertained, the narrative suggests that she went alone, without the support of a brother or anyone else to represent her interests in public.³⁸ In the context of rural poverty in contrast to the wealth of the city of Tyre, the woman, as a single mother in a remote area, is likely to face scarcity in her daily life. He may have to collect crumbs of food to feed his daughter, which reflects his survival intelligence. For the poor, the crumbs of food are enough or at least have real value to meet their basic needs.³⁹ Canaanite women understood the

³⁵ Kgatle, "Crossing Boundaries: Social-Scientific Reading of the Faith of a Canaanite Woman (Mt 15:21-28)."

³⁶ Kgatle, "Crossing Boundaries: Social-Scientific Reading of the Faith of a Canaanite Woman (Mt 15:21-28)."

³⁷ Lee, "The Faith of the Canaanite Woman (Mt. 15.21-28): Narrative, Theology, Ministry."

³⁸ Hicks, "Crumbs, Dogs, and Border - Crossings: A Postcolonial - Feminist Rereading of the Syrophoenician Woman Story Rereading of the Syrophoenician Woman Story."

³⁹ Matthew L. Skinner, "'She Departed to Her House': Another Aspect Of the Syrophoenician Mother's Faith in Mark 7:24-30," *Word & World, Luther Seminary* 26, no. 1 (2006): 14-21, http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/faculty_articles/193.

meaning and implications of Jesus' initial response. Wisely and courageously, he reframes the situation. The challenge that Jesus posed to him reflected the status quo regarding gender, ethnicity, culture, religion, and political differences. In this context, the courage and perseverance of the Canaanite woman is an important highlight in the narrative, showing how she was able to overcome social stigma and fight for her rights and the rights of her children.⁴⁰

Canaanite women had a significant role in the eschatological context of the Kingdom of Heaven, serving as witnesses for the church. In his figure and similar individuals, Jesus portrayed God's racially diverse people, creating an inclusive community that welcomed His presence. In this case, the woman became a pioneer of faith for women and non-Jews in the context of church and mission ministry. Meanwhile, Jesus' early revelation as the Savior of Israel shows that His mission and identity expanded according to the vision that had been established from the beginning of the Gospel, not only to include the Magi, but also to include Canaanite women in the Messiah's lineage, along with Ruth, Rahab, and possibly Tamar.⁴¹

The encounter between the Canaanite woman and Jesus in Matthew 15:21-28 provides important insight into the dynamics of the early church and its challenges in overcoming discrimination rooted in Jewish traditions, as well as its evolving mission to other nations. After the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD, religious, social, cultural, and political boundaries became very visible, especially as Jewish Christians separated from synagogues and began to interact with non-Jewish Christian movements as well as non-Jewish communities. Although Matthew's Gospel was written from the perspective of the chosen Israelites, there are indications that *the Ecclesiastes* began to move toward a more inclusive theology, one that transcended religious and ethnic boundaries without ignoring the historical significance of the covenant with David.⁴² Matthew's author emphasizes the theme of Jesus as the son of David not through narratives of war or political liberation, but through stories of healing and love. Readers of Matthew's Gospel

⁴⁰ Daniel S. Schipani, "Transformation in the Borderlands A Study of Matthew 15:21-28," *Vision, A Journal for Church and Theology* 4, no. 1 (2003): 13-24.
<https://press.palni.org/ojs/index.php/vision/article/view/601>.

⁴¹ Lee, "The Faith of the Canaanite Woman (Mt. 15.21-28): Narrative, Theology, Ministry."

⁴² Schipani, "Transformation in the Borderlands A Study of Matthew 15:21-28."

are expected to see that David's Son was a good figure, a deliverer for the marginalized, as well as a healer of material sickness and desires.⁴³

Jesus' interaction with the Canaanite woman recorded in the Gospel of Matthew confirms Jesus' role as a deliverer (15:21-28). In response to the plea of Canaanite women, Jesus verbally repeated what He had previously forbidden His disciples in their mission (10:6), declaring that "I am only sent to the lost sheep of Israel" (15:24). Nevertheless, the Canaanite woman confessed her faith in Jesus by calling Him the Son of David and begging for His mercy, showing that she believed Jesus had the power to provide help. The fundamental differences between Israel and the Gentiles in this context were overcome by Jesus through the acceptance of Canaanite women, which reflected His love for the faith shown by them, despite the discrimination between the two groups.⁴⁴

DISCUSSION

Reflections on Canaanite Women and Racism in Indonesia

Canaanite women are a model of humility that shows how faith and respect can overcome racial differences and pride. In the Gospel account of Matthew 15:21-28, a Canaanite woman came to Jesus crying out for help because her son was possessed by a demon and was suffering greatly. Although Jesus did not answer her directly, the woman still came close and worshipped Him reverently, saying, "Lord, help me" (Matthew 15:25). Jesus then gave a seemingly condescending answer, saying, "It is not right to take the bread prepared for children and throw it to dogs" (Matthew 15:26). However, the Canaanite woman rightly replied, "Yes, Lord, but the dog ate the crumbs that fell from his master's table" (Matthew 15:27). With great faith, Jesus acknowledged the truth in his humble reply and declared, "Mother, great is thy faith, and let it be unto you as thou wouldest" (Matthew 15:28). Her son recovered instantly. The Canaanite woman showed humility by not returning hostility even though Jesus dealt a degrading blow in her time of need and despair. Jesus' first response to women and people of different races was not harsh, but he showed how he was the embodiment of wisdom by his own practice of humility. His actions and responses were the catalyst for Jesus'

⁴³ Ulrich Luz, *The Theology of the Gospel of Matthew* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 71.

⁴⁴ Skinner, "She Departed to Her House': Another Aspect Of the Syrophenician Mother's Faith in Mark 7:24-30."

change of mind, demonstrating the priority for the concept of humility in biblical theology.⁴⁵

From a legal point of view, the protection against anti-discrimination in Indonesia is regulated in the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia (UUD RI), which provides a constitutional guarantee to every individual to adhere to his religion and beliefs, and to carry out worship in accordance with his or her beliefs.⁴⁶ The state must consistently issue laws that restrict the rights of citizens who profess a religion or belief that is considered inconsistent with generally accepted norms. The lack of public understanding of the civil rights of individuals also contributes to the emergence of intolerant practices as well as criminal acts against other citizens. The book of Matthew presents a positive picture of Jesus' personality through interactions with people who are different from him. For example, he recounts the arrival of the Magi who sought to worship the new king of Israel in a scene widely read by proleptic non-Jewish missionaries (Matthew 2:1-12). In addition, passages praising the faith of a Roman centurion and a Canaanite woman (Matthew 8:5-13; cf. Matt. Matthew 15:21-28) shows a positive attitude toward Gentiles. This is also seen in the global eschatological banquet (Matthew 8:11) and the exorcism of two demon-possessed people (Matthew 8:28-34).

From the perspective of Christianity in Indonesia today, the narrative of Canaanite women can be understood as a substantive solution to racism and relevant in the multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, and multi-religious context in Indonesia. To address existing discrimination, it is important to pay special attention to anti-discrimination-based character education.⁴⁷ In this context, humility in Indonesian Christianity is very important as part of the development as an ally. Sechrest argues that humility can be developed through self-reflection and perspective taking, by studying the point of view of others and imagining oneself in their situation.⁴⁸ The importance of understanding discrimination must be emphasized so that individuals do not get caught up in discriminatory behavior. The relationship between Jesus and the Canaanite women

⁴⁵ Sapta Baralaska Utama and Yusak Tanasyah, "The Impact of Identity Politics on Democracy and Religious System in Indonesia," *Kurios* 9, no. 3 (2023): 661–673, <https://doi.org/10.30995/kur.v9i3.763>.

⁴⁶ Mei Susanto, "Kedudukan Dan Fungsi Pembukaan Undang-Undang Dasar 1945: Pembelajaran Dari Tren Global," *Jurnal Legislasi Indonesia* 18, no. 2 (2021): 184–203, <https://doi.org/10.54629/jli.v18i2.739>.

⁴⁷ Yusak Tanasyah, Bobby Kurnia Putrawan, and Ester Agustini Tandana, "Religious Freedom in Indonesia: Worldview of Bhinneka Tunggal Ika for Multicultural Education," *TAPE: Journal Theology and Philosophy of Education* 3, no. 1 (2024), <https://tape.academy/index.php/tape/article/view/46>.

⁴⁸ Sechrest, "Enemies, Romans, Pigs, and Dogs: Loving the Other in the Gospel of Matthew."

reflects differences in culture, religion, gender, economy, and social status that can be overcome through a dialogue that respects each other and upholds the value of human rights.

Studies of Canaanite women show that the best way to end discrimination in Indonesia is to engage comprehensively in education aimed at changing people's mindsets. Education that promotes open-mindedness and mutual tolerance is key to resolving many conflicts involving minority groups. Some stressed the need for greater integration of SARA issues into society, ensuring that no area is closed to adherents of other religions or tribes, and combating all forms of discrimination against minorities. In Jesus' day, the Roman Empire set an example of tolerance by allowing different cultures, races, and beliefs to coexist in accordance with Roman law.⁴⁹ The history of ethnic development in Indonesia shows that ethnic groups in the country have a diverse distribution and are rich in differences. One way to achieve national unity in a diverse society is to develop a multicultural society. With a multicultural society that respects differences in terms of beliefs, ethnicities, cultures, and status, it will be possible to create a community that has similar visions, passions, and goals. In addition, the realization of ethnic development in Indonesia needs to be supported by government policies that do not only benefit the majority group. The principle that must be upheld is equality and respect for diverse rights, both in the fields of religion, culture, social, and gender.⁵⁰

In the final section, it is necessary to examine the concept of "epistemic humility" demonstrated by the Canaanite woman and Jesus in this narrative. Jesus taught that he embodies wisdom through the "path of humility," which does not reflect weakness, but rather strength that comes from a willingness to listen to the experiences of others, consider perspectives that differ from his beliefs, and even reflect on his statements. Jesus is not an arrogant God who dominates conversation; rather, as Augustine states, it

⁴⁹ Yusak Tanasyah and Andreas bayu Krisdiantoro, *Dunia Perjanjian Baru* (Tangerang: Moriah Press, 2023), 33. In the context of church in Indonesia, one may refer to Yedida Mauk, Amran Simangunsong, and Antonius Missa. "Implikasi Teologis Pelayanan Tahbisan Perempuan Di Gereja Pantekosta Pusat Surabaya (GPPS) Gatotan Surabaya: The Theological Implications of Female Ordination in the Pentecostal Church of Surabaya Central (GPPS) Gatotan Surabaya." *Journal of Religious and Socio-Cultural* 6, no. 1 (2025): 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.46362/jrsc.v6i1.275>; Rima Patintingan and Iswahyudi Iswahyudi. "Program Pemulihan Kaum Perempuan Dari Luka Batin Di Gereja Bethel Indonesia Jemaat CBM Ganggeng Raya Tanjung Priok Jakarta Utara". *SERVIRE: Jurnal Pengabdian Kepada Masyarakat* 4, no. 1 (2024): 19-32. <https://doi.org/10.46362/servire.v4i1.193>.

⁵⁰ Utama and Tanasyah, "The Impact of Identity Politics on Democracy and Religious System in Indonesia."

is a representation of humility that paradoxically "relinquishes the power of certainty" and, thus, finds a new form of authority. The Canaanite woman's response reflects her humility, especially when she prostrates herself before Jesus and shows strong faith, while Jesus' response further reflects her humility as a compassionate figure willing to expand her mission.

In the Indonesian context, this lesson of epistemic humility emphasizes the importance of banning and removing the terms "indigenous" and "non-indigenous" in all aspects of life. All forms of legal regulation, whether written or unwritten, that support discrimination based on ethnic or ethnic background must be abolished. Discriminatory quotas implemented in schools, governments, or other institutions should be replaced with a system that evaluates individuals based on their merit and track record, regardless of ethnicity, religion, or ethnicity.⁵¹ This step will contribute to the formation of a more just and inclusive society, in line with the spirit of humility and equality reflected in the gospel narrative.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the interaction between Jesus and the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:21-28 not only reflects the issue of racial and gender discrimination but also offers deeper insight into the social and theological dynamics that existed in his day. Through this account, we can see how Jesus, despite being tied to a particular cultural and religious context, still paved the way for inclusivity and acceptance of those who were considered to be the "other". The study also highlights the importance of humility, both in Jesus' approach and in the response of Canaanite women, as key to overcoming discrimination and building a respectful dialogue in diverse societies. In the current Indonesian context, the lessons of this story can serve as a guide in efforts to eliminate discrimination and build a more inclusive society, where every individual, regardless of background, can be recognized and valued. Thus, an approach based on humility and openness to listen to different perspectives becomes very relevant in the face of the challenges of discrimination that still exist in our society.

⁵¹ Alt, "The Dynamic of Humility and Wisdom: The Syrophenician Woman and Jesus in Mark 7:24-31a."

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