

## SCRIPTURES ON ATTITUDES ABOUT FOREIGNERS

In the scriptures, a foreign woman approaches Jesus, asking him to heal her daughter. Jesus' response to her is shocking as he refuses and even compares her to a dog. Why was he so harsh?

It is helpful to remember that, while Christians affirm the full divinity of Christ, we also affirm his full humanity. Jesus grew up in a particular time, place, and culture, and that had an influence on him. In his day there was a great fear of losing God's favor by mingling too much with foreigners. Here are a pair of scriptures that give us an idea what the attitudes of the community Jesus grew up in would have been.

### Deuteronomy 20:10-18

#### Dealing with foreigners in wartime

When you draw near to a town to fight against it, offer it terms of peace. If it accepts your terms of peace and surrenders to you, then all the people in it shall serve you at forced labor. If it does not submit to you peacefully, but makes war against you, then you shall besiege it; and when the Lord your God gives it into your hand, you shall put all its males to the sword. You may, however, take as your booty the women, the children, livestock, and everything else in the town, all its spoil. You may enjoy the spoil of your enemies, which the Lord your God has given you. Thus you shall treat all the towns that are very far from you, which are not towns of the nations here. But as for the towns of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, you must not let anything that breathes remain alive. You shall annihilate them—the Hittites and the Amorites, the **Canaanites** and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites—just as the Lord your God has commanded, so that they may not teach you to do all the abhorrent things that they do for their gods, and you thus sin against the Lord your God.

### Ezra 9:1–2, 5, 10–12

#### Dealing with foreigners in peacetime

After these things had been done, the officials approached me and said, “The people of Israel, the priests, and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations, from the **Canaanites**, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and for their sons. Thus the holy seed has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands, and in this faithlessness the officials and leaders have led the way.”

At the evening sacrifice I got up from my fasting, with my garments and my mantle torn, and fell on my knees, spread out my hands to the Lord my God, and said...

“...God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken your commandments, which you commanded by your servants the prophets, saying, ‘The land that you are entering to possess is a land unclean with the pollutions of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations. They have filled it from end to end with their uncleanness. Therefore do not give your daughters to their sons, neither take their daughters for your sons, and never seek their peace or prosperity, so that you may be strong and eat the good of the land and leave it for an inheritance to your children forever.’”

Matthew 15:21-28

### The Canaanite Woman's Faith

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

Mark 7:24-30

### The Syrophenician Woman's Faith

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.

## A Timeline of the Romans in Judea

If relations with foreigners in general were difficult, they were much worse with the Romans. The Jews had endured centuries of being ruled by one foreign empire after another with only a brief experience of home rule. Things were tense and would lead to a series of bloody Roman-Jewish wars a generation after Jesus' death.

- 63 BC Judea was ruled by the Hasmonean royal family but a power struggle had broken out between two princes, Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus II. Both appealed to the Roman general, Pompey the Great for help. Pompey took advantage of the situation to make the country a Roman protectorate. He also made himself unpopular by entering the holy of holies, which desecrated the temple.
- 40 BC High taxes to pay for the lavish excesses of Antony and Cleopatra turn the Jewish people against Rome. The Parthian Empire steps in and takes Jerusalem.
- 34 BC With Roman backing, Herod the Great defeats the Parthians and becomes a client king of the Romans. Herod was an unpopular king because of his high taxes, lavish spending, and lack of sensitivity to Jewish culture and religion. His most unpopular act was to place a golden Roman eagle at the entrance of the temple.
- 4 BC Herod the Great dies and splits Judea between his three sons: Herod Archelaus, Herod Antipas, and Philip.
- 6 AD Herod Archelaus has become very unpopular. His soldiers try to put down a demonstration and end out killing 3000. Archalaeus is deposed by Rome and his territories come under direct Roman control. They brutally put down the subsequent Jewish insurrection.
- 26 AD Pontius Pilate is appointed governor of the Roman portion of Judea. He was a very unpopular ruler who provoked the Jews by setting up blasphemous decorations on Herod's palace. Philo of Alexandria says this about him:
- “When Pilate, who was a man of inflexible, stubborn and cruel disposition, obstinately refused (to remove the decorations), they shouted: ‘Do not cause a revolt! Do not cause a war! Do not break the peace! Disrespect done to our ancient laws brings no honor to the emperor. Do not make Tiberius an excuse for insulting our nation. He does not want any of our traditions done away with. If you say that he does, show us some decree or letter or something of the sort, so that we may cease troubling you and appeal to our master by means of an embassy.’
- “This last remark exasperated Pilate most of all, for he was afraid that if they really sent an embassy, they would bring accusations against the rest of his administration as well, specifying in detail his venality, his violence, his thefts, his assaults, his abusive behavior, his frequent executions of untried prisoners, and his endless savage ferocity.”

## Who Was the Centurion's Servant

There has been some interesting study recently around the nature of the relationship of the centurion and his servant. The word in Greek is *pais*, which has several possible meanings. It can mean a male or female child, and could imply that the servant is actually the centurion's son. This is probably not the case because the word *huios* is usually used for "son."

It can also mean a personal attendant, like an orderly (which is how some British translations use). There isn't a close translation in American English, but in British English, a valet or a "gentleman's gentleman" are similar.

The last use of *pais* is for a man's younger, male lover. This was often the same thing as a personal attendant for young men were often apprenticed to older men who were considered their mentors, and sex was considered part of that apprenticeship.

We don't know whether the centurion and the servant were lovers, but the language suggests that it is possible. If so, what would that mean?

Maybe the servant is just a servant, but if the servant is also the centurion's male lover, Jesus doesn't say anything to condemn them. He heals the servant and praises the master's faith.

Jesus reaches across social barriers all the time. Here he is reaching across the wall between Jews and Gentiles. Is he also reaching past the social barrier of straight and gay? It could be.

## Matthew 8:5–13

When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help. “Lord,” he said, “my servant lies at home paralyzed, suffering terribly.”

Jesus said to him, “Shall I come and heal him?”

The centurion replied, “Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and that one, ‘Come,’ and he comes. I say to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.”

When Jesus heard this, he was amazed and said to those following him, “Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Then Jesus said to the centurion, “Go! Let it be done just as you believed it would.” And his servant was healed at that moment.

## Luke 7:1-10

When Jesus had finished saying all this to the people who were listening, he entered Capernaum. There a centurion’s servant, whom his master valued highly, was sick and about to die. The centurion heard of Jesus and sent some elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and heal his servant. When they came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with him, “This man deserves to have you do this, because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue.” So Jesus went with them.

He was not far from the house when the centurion sent friends to say to him: “Lord, don’t trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and that one, ‘Come,’ and he comes. I say to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.”

When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, “I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel.” Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well.