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JESUS'S FEEDING OF THE GENTILES IN MATT 15:29–39: HOW THE LITERARY CONTEXT SUPPORTS A GENTILE FOUR THOUSAND

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***Abstract**: Quizzically absent from much of the discussion of the ethnicity of the four thousand in Matthew 15, the literary context surrounding Matthew 15 actually proves essential to any consideration of the crowd's ethnicity. Interacting primarily with J. R. C. Cousland, this paper contributes a fresh literary perspective on this discussion, building upon the Matthean literary work of Wim J. C. Weren and Janice Capel Anderson. I argue that a Gentile four thousand best satisfies the Gentile trajectory of the literary context surrounding Matt 15:29–39. After briefly addressing the most commonly discussed factors in the debate—the geography of the passage, the makeup of the crowds, and the crowd's glorifying "the God of Israel"—I turn to the most significant factor in determining the ethnicity of the four thousand—Matthew's literary context. This Gentile reading provides the most fulfilling literary climax to the Gentile trajectory of the surrounding passage and fits well with Matthew's consistent foreshadowing of the Great Commission.*

***Key words**: literary criticism, Gospels, Jesus, Matthew, Gentiles, Jews, feeding of the four thousand*

When reading Matthew's Gospel, it is easy to overlook the feeding of the four thousand. In Matthew and Mark, where the story is preceded by the almost identical feeding of the five thousand, the feeding of the four thousand often fades into the background as an odd case of déjà vu, failing to catch the reader's attention. Throughout history, however, the story has fostered a variety of creative readings, and while little consistent concern for the ethnic identity of the four thousand arose until the twentieth century, seeds of the discussion began to grow just centuries after Matthew's composition, with some throughout history taking the crowd as Jewish[1] and others Gentile.[2] Matthew's account is particularly ambiguous with re-

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[1] Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, Chapters 13–28* (trans. Jeremy Holmes; Latin/English Edition of the Works of St. Thomas Aquinas 34; Lander, WY: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2013), 83; Erasmus, *Paraphrase on Matthew* (trans. Dean Simpson; Collected Works of Erasmus 45; Toronto: University of Toronto, 2008), 239; C. H. Spurgeon, *The Gospel of the Kingdom: A Popular Exposition of the Gospel according to Matthew* (New York: The Baker and Taylor Co., 1893), 248; Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Matthew* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910), 219; John P. Meier, *Matthew* (NTM 3; Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1980), 174; W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (ICC; 3 vols.; New York: T&T Clark, 1988), 2:562–65; Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28* (WBC 33B; Dallas: Word, 1995), 452; Ulrich Luz, *Matthew* (trans. James E. Crouch, Hermeneia; 3 vols.;

spect to the crowd's ethnic identity, so spirited arguments on both sides of the debate—Jewish and Gentile—are common, generally centering on the geography of the passage, the makeup of the crowds, and the crowd's glorifying "the God of Israel."[3]

Quizzically absent from much of this discussion, the literary context surrounding Matthew 15 actually proves essential to any consideration of the crowd's ethnicity. In this paper, I argue that a Gentile four thousand best satisfies the Gentile trajectory of the literary context surrounding Matt 15:29–39.[4] After briefly addressing the most commonly discussed factors in the debate—the geography of the passage, the makeup of the crowds, and the crowd's glorifying "the God of Israel"—I will turn to the most significant factor in determining the ethnicity of the four thousand: Matthew's literary context.

I. COMMONLY DISCUSSED FACTORS

1. *Geography*. There are generally two stances on the geography of Matt 15:29–39. For those who see a Jewish four thousand, Jesus is on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, but for those who see a Gentile four thousand, Jesus is on the eastern shore. This debate is only exacerbated by Matthew's bare-bones description geographically and his ambiguous redaction of Mark's account. There are several differences between Mark and Matthew's accounts of the feeding of the four thousand. Both occur after the account of the Canaanite woman (Matt 15:21–28; Mark 7:24–30, where she is Syro-Phoenician), but Matthew omits Mark's healing of the deaf mute (7:32–37) in favor of the healing of the crowds on the mountain (Matt 15:29–31). While Mark's account is unclear whether the crowd of 7:32–37 is the same as the four thousand (Mark 8:1–10)—"In those days, when again a great crowd had gathered, and they had nothing to eat"—Matthew provides a clearer transition. Directly after healing the crowds, Matthew writes, "Then Jesus called his

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Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 2:344; John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 640–41.

[2] Origen, *Commentary on Matthew* 11.18 (*ANF* 9:448); Hilary of Poitiers, *Commentary on Matthew* (trans. D. H. Williams; FC 125; Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 2012), 164–76; John A. Broadus, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (ed. Alvah Hovey; Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1886), 344; A. T. Robertson, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (The Bible for Home and School; ed. Shailer Mathews; New York: Macmillan Company, 1911), 185; Robert H. Mounce, *Matthew* (Good News Commentaries; New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 154–55; Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew* (NAC 22; Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 245; Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 319; D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 356–59; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 596–99; Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew* (ZECNT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 601–2, 608–9.

[3] J. R. C. Cousland, "The Feeding of the Four Thousand *Gentiles* in Matthew? Matthew 15:29–39 as a Test Case," *NovT* 41 (1999): 1–23.

[4] By arguing this thesis, I am not claiming that the Gentile ethnicity of the four thousand is the only important thematic detail in this particular story. It is, nevertheless, a key theme in the development of Matthew's surrounding narrative and essential to Matthew's presentation of Jesus's increasing openness to Gentile mission.

disciples to him and said, 'I have compassion on the crowd because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat'" (Matt 15:32). For Matthew, then, the crowds that Jesus heals in 15:29–31 are the same as those he feeds in 15:32–39.

Perhaps the central difference is the route that Jesus takes after the account of the Canaanite woman. In Mark, Jesus "returned from the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis" (7:31). In Matthew, he "went on from there [the district of Tyre and Sidon] and walked beside the Sea of Galilee" (15:29). The key point of debate here is whether we should understand Matthew as (1) giving a stripped-down version of Mark's route yet placing Jesus at the same destination in the Decapolis; (2) giving a simpler route and thereby placing Jesus on the western side of the Sea of Galilee; or (3) intentionally redacting Mark to exclude any possibility that Jesus is among Gentiles.

To complicate matters further, Mark and Matthew each have Jesus departing to different areas after the feeding. Mark has Jesus "immediately" getting into a boat and going to "Dalmanutha" (with some manuscripts saying "Magadan" or "Magdala") while Matthew has Jesus getting into a boat and going to "Magadan" (Mark 8:10; Matt 15:39). We know very little of either locale, but it is helpful to note that once there Jesus encounters Pharisees in both accounts (Mark 8:11; Matt 16:1). These two areas could, indeed, be the same area by different name, or they could be totally separate areas. This piece of information, then, does not help answer the geographical question.

In trying to see whether Mark and Matthew place the feeding on the same side of the Sea of Galilee, Cousland provides a helpful chart where he tracks every instance of Jesus crossing the Sea of Galilee in both Gospels.[5] Matthew almost always follows Mark in his verbiage, but it is again unclear whether or not ἀπέρχομαι, ἀναχωρέω, or ἔρχομαι (as in Mark 8:10 and Matt 15:39), as opposed to the more normal διαπεράω or εἰς τὸ πέραν, refer to sea crossings. Cousland understands ἔρχομαι to refer to a crossing in Mark 8:10 because Jesus must get to the western coast before crossing again "to the other side [εἰς τὸ πέραν]" (Mark 8:13). In Matthew, however, Cousland, despite seeing Matthew as generally following Mark geographically, sees Matthew as using the same verb as Mark, ἔρχομαι, to indicate "movement along the western coast" instead of crossing the Sea of Galilee.[6] As Cousland notes, ἔρχομαι "can hardly, of itself, be taken as a technical term for a crossing," yet taken in conjunction with Mark's clear use in the context of crossing and Matthew's clear use of Mark, it is strange to see Matthew as using the verb differently at this point without a clearer indication otherwise.

Jesus's route, then, is at best unclear in Matthew. There are three explanations possible. First, Matthew may simply be following Mark while stripping down his potentially wordy description of Jesus's route. Matthew certainly has a penchant for simplifying Mark's description and word count in corresponding stories, and it would not be out of character for Matthew to do so here with no ulterior motive

[5] Cousland, "Feeding of the Four Thousand," 10–12.
[6] Ibid., 13.

other than smoothing out and simplifying Mark's story.[7] Second, Matthew may be placing Jesus on the western shore instead of Mark's eastern shore simply by giving a simpler route. Taken at face value without knowing Mark's route, it seems that Matthew has Jesus leaving Tyre and Sidon and traveling alongside the Sea of Galilee. The easiest route by that description would have Jesus traveling directly southeast and traveling along the western coast of the Sea of Galilee and would thus place the healing and feeding on this west coast. Third, Matthew may be omitting mention of the Decapolis in order to exclude any misunderstanding that Jesus may be in a Gentile region. Matthew may clearly see the four thousand as Jewish and, therefore, redact Mark's story to exclude any inkling of Gentile identity.

The second option seems the weakest. It would be very strange, given how much Matthew follows Mark in geographic routes, for Matthew to arbitrarily change Mark's route for Jesus and place him in a different destination. The third option, then, gives a compelling explanation for why Matthew might edit Mark's story in this way, but it also overcomplicates the matter. As the first option shows, there are simpler explanations for Matthew's omission of the Decapolis from his route than a theological desire for the four thousand to be Jewish. Furthermore, there are other indications, both in Matthew's isolated story and the literary context as a whole, that point toward a Gentile region—indications to which this paper will eventually turn. The first option, then, represents the simplest explanation for Matthew's editing of Mark's route. Matthew strips down Mark's overly complicated route, opting to show his reader that Jesus is ministering to Gentiles through the section's literary context rather than through Jesus's geographic route.

A second geographic consideration is that once "beside the Sea of Galilee," Jesus "went up on the mountain and sat down there" (15:29). Terence L. Donaldson traces the mountain theme throughout Matthew, and the feeding of the four thousand represents "the christological fulfilment of the expectations of Zion eschatology."[8] While he understands the four thousand to be Jewish, he nevertheless sees a "secret connection" between this mountain scene and the mountain scene at the end of Matthew (28:16–20). He writes, "The mountain fellowship from which Gentiles are excluded in 15.29–39 is offered to them in 28.16–20. The banquet on the mountain is a sign to the Gentiles that the time of their inclusion is near."[9]

As Osborne shows, however, Donaldson's conclusion on the eschatological nature of the mountain scenes in Matthew is compatible with a Gentile four thousand. He writes, "The remarkable thing is that this takes place in Gentile territory, a further harbinger and preparation for the universal mission."[10] Indeed, simply because a theme is Jewish does not require that Matthew intends the theme to be applied only to Jews in Jesus's ministry. While avoiding replacement theology, Matthew indisputably has included hints and foreshadowing of a Gentile ministry up to

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[7] France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 20–21; Osborne, *Matthew*, 37.

[8] Terence L. Donaldson, *Jesus on the Mountain: A Study in Matthean Theology* (JSNTSup 8; Sheffield: JSOT, 1985), 131.

[9] Donaldson, *Jesus on the Mountain*, 135.

[10] Osborne, *Matthew*, 601.

this point: the wise men (2:1–12), the centurion (8:5–13), the two demon-possessed men (8:28–34), and of course, the Canaanite woman (15:2–28). Using Jewish themes, then, to describe Jesus's ministry to Gentiles would have a striking literary effect on Matthew's reader, essentially redefining what God's people looks like. As Jesus teaches Israel on the mountain in chapters 5–7, so here he heals Gentiles on the mountain. As he has fed Israel (14:13–21), so here he feeds Gentiles (15:32–39).

While the geographic evidence does lean toward a Gentile four thousand, it should be noted that the geographic evidence could conceivably be compatible with either identity. As Cousland notes of his opposite conclusion, "While this remains the more likely hypothesis, it is still not conclusive, and ultimately it is safer to affirm that there is simply too little unambiguous evidence on which to construct a judgement."[11] If geographical considerations do not answer the question of the ethnic identity of the four thousand, it is now necessary to turn to other literary features of the text that may approach an answer.

2. *Crowds*. Cousland elsewhere studies extensively the "crowds" throughout Matthew. He notes that ὄχλος is the only word that Matthew uses to describe the crowds in Jesus's public ministry, and he argues that the crowds throughout Matthew form a literary construct, thinking and acting as one.[12] He will then use this static understanding of Matthew's crowds to argue for an across-the-board Jewish identity for them throughout the Gospel. For example, Cousland gives three examples of clearly Jewish characteristics of Matthew's crowds. First, the crowds possess "scribes" in Matt 7:29. Second, the crowds, amazed by Jesus's healing in 9:33, say, "Never was anything like this seen in Israel." Third, the crowd in 15:31, wondering at Jesus's healings, "glorified the God of Israel." In the first two, Cousland is correct in finding Jewish flavors in Matthew's portrayal of the crowds, but his static understanding of the crowds as a single literary unit throughout Matthew's Gospel has forced him to apply the characteristics of the crowd in these three passages to the crowds in the rest of the Gospel. Clearly, Matthew can have a much more nuanced understanding of his literary characters than Cousland understands here. While the crowds throughout Matthew have similar reactions to Jesus, they may still hold different characteristics throughout. As this paper will continue to argue, the crowd in Matt 15:29–39 in particular takes on new characteristics that force us to reconsider its Jewish identity.

Most central to Cousland's understanding of the identity of Matthew's crowds is Matt 4:23–25.[13] The passage reads,

> And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people. So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, those having seizures, and paralytics, and he healed them. And great

[11] Cousland, "Feeding of the Four Thousand," 14.

[12] J. R. C. Cousland, *The Crowds in the Gospel of Matthew* (NovTSup 102; Leiden: Brill, 2002), 39–51.

[13] Cousland, *Crowds*, 53.

> crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decapolis, and from Jerusalem and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.

Matthew largely follows Mark 1:39 and 3:7b–8, but he adds Syria and excludes Idumaea, Tyre, and Sidon from his list. Cousland goes on to argue that all of these locations apart from Syria represent Jewish regions, and Syria is not actually included in the crowds. It is simply a parenthetical remark to indicate how far Jesus's fame has spread.[14]

Without Syria, the Decapolis is the only non-Jewish region in Matthew's list (Cousland takes "beyond the Jordan" to refer to Perea). The Decapolis was a group of ten Greek cities, yet they did still have a substantial Jewish population. This passage is the only place where Matthew mentions the Decapolis, and Mark only mentions it twice (5:20, 7:31). Cousland agrees that the Decapolis is historically a predominantly Gentile region but argues that Matthew's list of regions has a more theological (as opposed to geographical) bent, being "an expression of the idealized boundaries of Israel, the Israel of the fathers."[15] The Decapolis had at different times been a part of Israel throughout history, and thus it joins with the other three regions to form "a symbolic Israel: the northwest (Galilee), the northeast (the Decapolis), the southwest (Jerusalem and Judea) and the southeast (Perea)."[16] Thus, the crowds form a sort of eschatological gathering of all Israel to their Messiah.

Cousland concludes that Matthew likely did not interpret the Decapolis as a Gentile region, yet concedes slightly by noting that Matthew may also simply wish "to prefigure the future influx of Gentiles to the kingdom."[17] For Cousland, however, the Decapolis being the only seemingly non-Jewish region in Matthew's list proves that the entire list must actually be Jewish. This line of reasoning simply does not hold, however, especially in such a small list. One out of four regions being non-Jewish, while not a majority, is a significant portion of the whole. It cannot simply be explained away to conform to the slight majority.

Furthermore, there is another explanation that perhaps provides a middle ground. Cousland has a fairly binary understanding of the crowds in Matt 4:25. Matthew, however, may have a much more nuanced understanding. Matthew may see the Decapolis as a Gentile region and make the statement that Gentile crowds are coming from the Decapolis to Jesus, and he may, at the same time, be making the same theological point that Cousland proposes. These four regions represent the fullness of Israel, and by including a Gentile region, Matthew foreshadows, as he does elsewhere, the Gentile inclusion revealed further on in his Gospel. As this paper will continue to show, Matthew's Gentile inclusion comes much sooner and

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[14] Because Matthew mentions Galilee in 4:23 and then includes it again in 4:25 but mentions Syria in 4:24 and excludes it from 4:25, he must be intentionally leaving it out of the list of places where the crowds come from (Cousland, *Crowds*, 57).

[15] Cousland, *Crowds*, 64. Matthias Konradt, *Israel, Church, and the Gentiles in the Gospel of Matthew* (trans. Kathleen Ess; BMSEC; Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), 49–53, makes a similar argument.

[16] Cousland, *Crowds*, 64.

[17] Ibid., 68.

much more emphatically than many commentators suppose, and Matthew foreshadowing that inclusion from the outset in a symbolic way fits his purposes well.

3. *God of Israel.* For many, the crowd glorifying "the God of Israel" is the most significant factor in determining the identity of the four thousand. Cousland writes, "The cardinal feature of the debate becomes, without doubt, the editorial remark at 15:31 that 'the crowds praised the God of Israel.'"[18] Generally, those who take the four thousand to be Gentile see "the God of Israel" as a clear indicator of their non-Jewishness. If they were Jewish, there would be no need for them to delineate which God they are glorifying. As D. A. Carson writes, "The clause 'they praised the God of Israel' (v. 31) could be naturally said only by Gentiles."[19] On the other hand, those who take the four thousand to be Jewish argue that, in actuality, "the God of Israel" is a very Jewish title for God that expresses the covenantal nature of God's relationship with his people.[20] It makes perfect sense, then, for a Jewish crowd to praise "the God of Israel" without being redundant.

Cousland, for example, argues that the title "God of Israel" is virtually nonexistent in contemporary Greco-Roman sources, but 193 of the OT's 204 occurrences of the title come on the lips of Jews.[21] Furthermore, in Matthew alone, Gentiles generally use the term "Jews," instead of Israel.[22] The wise men search for "he who has been born king of the Jews" (Matt 2:2). Pilate calls Jesus "the King of the

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[18] Cousland, "Feeding of the Four Thousand," 14.

[19] Carson, *Matthew*, 357.

[20] Some on the Jewish side see the Jewish nature of "God of Israel" as a smoking gun. Konradt writes, "Here ["the God of *Israel*"], too, there is nothing to indicate non-Jewish crowds. On the contrary, with the phrase "the God of *Israel*," Matthew takes up an expression that is pervasive in the Old Testament and rooted in Jewish praise of God and thereby—like 9.33—resonates with salvation-historical tones: in Jesus, the God of Israel is attending to his people." As this section will continue to show, however, the Jewish nature of "God of Israel" (1) assumes a delineating function against other nations' gods, which could fit into Gentile usage; and (2) can be applied theologically to Gentiles as part of God's new people. This absolutist argument from the Jewish side of the discussion does not further the conversation. Konradt concludes, "We can therefore conclude that there is no support whatsoever in the text itself for the thesis suggested occasionally that in 15.29–31, Matthew follows the example of the Canaanite woman with large-scale activity among Gentiles." Answering the question of the ethnic identity of the four thousand—whether one ends up on the Jewish or the Gentile side—is significantly more nuanced than Konradt's statement indicates (*Israel, Church and the Gentiles*, 54–55).

[21]Cousland, "Feeding of the Four Thousand," 15–18. One important occurrence is Isaiah 29, the chapter from which Jesus quoted at the beginning of chap. 15. Isaiah writes, "For when he sees his children, the work of my hands, in his midst, they will sanctify my name; they will sanctify the Holy One of Jacob and will stand in awe of the God of Israel" (Isa 29:23). Just verses before, Isaiah describes the restoration to come, with at least one outcome—the blind seeing—matching Matthew's description in 15:31. He writes, "In that day the deaf shall hear the words of a book, and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see" (Isa 29:18). Only one of the examples of future restoration—the blind seeing—actually corresponds between the two texts, however, so an allusion is difficult to defend fully. The title "God of Israel" is present, however, in a way similar to Matthew speaking of Jews standing in awe of "the God of Israel." Right after Isaiah's signs of future restoration, though, he writes, "The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the LORD, and the poor among mankind shall exult in the Holy One of Israel" (Isa 29:19). "The meek" and especially "the poor among mankind" could certainly refer to Gentiles, and regardless, the delineation "of Israel" on both titles serves to set God apart from the gods of the other nations of Isa 29:5–9.

[22] Cousland, "Feeding of the Four Thousand," 19.

Jews" (Matt 27:11), as do the Roman soldiers and the charge written against Jesus (Matt 27:30, 27:37). This distinction becomes even more stark after realizing that the Jewish leaders, in the exact same story, mock Jesus as "King of Israel" (Matt 27:42).

The evidence, then, seems stacked in favor of Jews using this title for God. Cousland's presentation of the evidence, however, does not address several important factors. Graham Harvey, from whom Cousland takes his statistics on the use of "God of Israel" in the OT, makes two important observations. First, a majority (118) of these 204 occurrences are attached to "Yahweh": יהוה אלהי ישׂראל.[23] Second, as Harvey notes, "The most common opposition to the phrase 'the God of Israel' is some word denoting foreigners or outsiders or their Gods."[24] Indeed, France mentions the example of Exod 5:1, where the title occurs with "Yahweh" to identify Israel's God to the Egyptian Pharaoh.[25] While the phrase is certainly most often used by Jews in extant literature, the Greco-Roman sample size referring to the Jewish God is quite small and thus inconclusive, and the OT evidence proves that, though often on the lips of Jews, the title does have a delineating function, separating the God of the nation of Israel opposed to the gods of other nations.

Furthermore, this delineating function of "God of Israel" fits nicely with another instance of a crowd glorifying God in Matthew. While most twentieth- and twenty-first-century commentators do not mention this point, John Broadus, in 1886, compares the crowd's reaction in 15:31 with that of 9:8, where Jesus heals the paralytic and forgives his sins. Scribes are present, so the crowd is presumably Jewish. After Jesus heals the man, the crowds "were afraid, and they glorified God [καὶ ἐδόξασαν τὸν θεόν], who had given such authority to men" (9:8). Broadus concludes, "It was natural [in 15:31] to mention that these heathen people glorified 'the God of Israel.'"[26] One could certainly argue that "of Israel" emphasizes the covenantal nature of the story in 15:31, whereas that dynamic is absent from 9:8, but the simplest explanation for the different title for God, in conjunction with the geography and OT use of the title, is that the title differentiates Israel's God against the crowd's regularly worshiped gods.

Another difficult question is whether the crowd's glorifying of the God of Israel is an example of direct or indirect discourse. Matthew writes, "And they glorified the God of Israel [καὶ ἐδόξασαν τὸν θεὸν Ἰσραήλ]" (15:31). France takes this as a clear example of Matthew's own summary, which implies that the crowd may not have actually used this language.[27] Matthew simply uses this title to specify that the Gentiles were glorifying the God of Israel rather than their own gods. It is not inconceivable, however, that Matthew may be both summarizing the crowd's reaction and giving an accurate description of the name by which they glorified him. It is

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[23] Graham Harvey, *The True Israel: Uses of the Names Jew, Hebrew, and Israel in Ancient Jewish and Early Christian Literature* (AGJI 35; Leiden: Brill, 1996), 168.

[24] Harvey, *True Israel*, 172.

[25] France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 597.

[26] Broadus, *Matthew*, 345.

[27] France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 597.

impossible to know which option Matthew employed, yet a Gentile crowd fits with either. Clearly, if it is simply summary and the crowd did not use this language, the problem of a lack of Gentile usage of "God of Israel" falls away and only Matthew's usage remains. Matthew, of course, is Jewish and may be specifying the god that they glorified and potentially making an inclusive theological point—that the Gentiles are now part of God's covenantal people. If, on the other hand, it accurately summarizes the crowd's actual words, the problem of the lack of Gentile usage remains.

Would, then, Gentiles use a distinctly Jewish title for God? Cousland argues that the Jewish nature of the title precludes Gentile usage, but interestingly, none of these commentators acknowledges the immediately previous Gentile use of a distinctly Jewish title. In the story of the Canaanite woman just verses before, an indisputably Gentile woman says to Jesus, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon" (Matt 15:22). "Son of David" is an exclusively Jewish title, and in the OT and early Jewish literature, whether the title itself or the idea of the Davidic Messiah, it is always used by Jews or God himself.[28] In Matthew alone, the title occurs seven other times in direct discourse (1:20; 9:27; 12:23; 20:30; 21:9; 21:15; 22:42). In all of these but the first—which is when the angel speaks to Joseph—the speaker is Jewish. Thus, there is precedent in Matthew for a non-Jewish speaker to use a Jewish title to speak of someone, even in starkly covenantal terms, and it comes directly before the present story. Could it not be, therefore, that Matthew presents the Canaanite woman referring to Jesus as the "Son of David," shortly followed by the crowd referring to God as "the God of Israel"—two unlikely characters exhibiting great faith in and worship of the Son of David and the God of Israel?

It may be possible, then, that Matthew would portray a Gentile crowd referring to God in such starkly Jewish covenantal terms as "the God of Israel," but the question remains, why would he do this? First, he could be doing exactly what most proponents for a Gentile four thousand propose, delineating Gentiles worshipping the God of Israel rather than the gods of their individual nations. Second and more importantly, by placing this covenantal, distinctly Jewish title in the mouths of Gentiles, Matthew effectively does the opposite of what those who see the four thousand as Jewish want him to be doing. Rather than reinforcing Jesus's commitment to his own people Israel, Matthew is opening the door to the inclusion of Gentiles in God's covenantal people. Of course, the use of this title alone does not indicate this reading, but it certainly supports the Gentile trajectory of the literary context of this section of Matthew's Gospel, which the next section of this paper will address.

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[28] 2 Sam 7:12–16; Isa 9:6–7; 11:1–9; 55:3; Jer 23:5; Ezek 34:23–24; 37:24–25; Hos 3:5; Amos 9:11; *Psalms of Solomon* 17:4, 21; 4Q174 1:10–13; 4Q161 8–10; 4Q522 9 2:1–12; 4Q504–6 4:5–8. Yuzuru Miura, "Son of David," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (ed. Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown, and Nicholas Perrin; 2nd ed.; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 881–82. All pseudepigraphical citations come from James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (2 vols.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1983). All DSS citations come from Geza Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (New York: Penguin, 1997).

II. LITERARY CONTEXT

1. *Literary structure.* The most significant factor pointing toward a Gentile four thousand is the Gentile trajectory of the surrounding literary context. To see this context clearly, one must begin with Matthew's macrostructure. Wim Weren observes five "hinge" passages upon which Matthew's macrostructure sits. Matthew's five discourses fall between these hinge passages, each of which reaffirms patterns in the previous section while also introducing and developing patterns for the following section.[29] Weren's five hinge passages are below:

Table 1. Weren's Five Hinge Passages

4:12–17	11:2–30	16:13–28	21:1–17	26:1–16
Jesus's mission begins in Capernaum	Review of the work of John and Jesus	The Son of God is a suffering Messiah	Arrival in Jerusalem and first confrontation in the temple	Jesus is anointed and will be handed over

It is immediately clear that Matt 15:29–39 falls right before the central hinge passage where Peter declares Jesus to be the Christ. Weren also sees the main "corpus" of Matthew, consisting of the five discourses, as falling into two main sections.[30] In the first, 4:18–16:12, Jesus gradually moves away from Jerusalem and Judea. In the second, 17:1–25:46, Jesus begins to journey to Jerusalem and minister there, where he will ultimately die and resurrect. Thus, the feeding of the four thousand comes at the pinnacle of Jesus's gradual move away from Jerusalem and just before his pronouncement as the Christ and the commencement of his final journey to Jerusalem.

As we trace the structure more closely around Matt 15:29–39, one finds that the discourse and narrative section in which our passage finds itself also holds significance. In the first block, Jesus teaches and heals on the mountain and then sends out the Twelve (4:18–11:1). He is Messiah in both word and deed. Shortly after Matthew's second hinge passage, there is a stark change as Jesus begins to teach more about the kingdom in a progressively more veiled manner, as he begins to use parables. At the end of chapter 12, Jesus's mother and brothers want to speak with him, but Jesus denies them, saying, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers? … Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (Matt 12:26–50). Jesus begins to reorient his followers' understanding of family identity. No longer does blood dictate who is family or, by implication, God's people. God's people are

[29] Wim J. C. Weren, *Studies in Matthew's Gospel: Literary Design, Intertextuality, and Social Setting* (Biblical Interpretation Series 130; Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2014), 14–41.

[30] Ibid., 41.

those who do his will, and as the narrative moves on, God's will is more and more centered around Christ himself.

Honing in on 15:29–39, the surrounding section—14:1–16:12—is itself a coherent subunit.[31] Food language weaves throughout each of its stories, the Sea of Galilee serves as an important geographic stake, and Jesus's discussion of the leaven of the Pharisees reflects back to the feeding of the five thousand (14:13–21) and of the four thousand (15:29–39). All the while, Matthew traces both Jesus's revelation and reorientation of the kingdom around a new definition of God's people. The feeding of the four thousand comes at the pinnacle of this block, leading into the hinge passage in which Peter pronounces Jesus the Christ and then shortly afterward the transfiguration, where Jesus is fully revealed to his closest disciples. As Jesus moves further and further away from Jerusalem, he reveals more both about himself and the kingdom.

While Matthew's placement of the feeding of the four thousand is significant both in Jesus's journey away from Jerusalem and as the precursor to Jesus's pronouncement as the Christ, Matthew also arranges several stories quite deliberately in a chiastic pattern surrounding Matt 15:29–39. Janice Capel Anderson studies doublets and triplets in Matthew, finding a clear chiastic pattern with its center around the Canaanite woman (15:22–28):

A – Two blind men ["Son of David"] (9:27–31)
  B – Sign of Jonah (12:28–42)
    C – Feeding of the 5,000 (14:13–21)
      D – Canaanite Woman ["Son of David"] (15:22–28)
    C' – Feeding of the 4,000 (15:30–38)
  B' – Sign of Jonah (16:1–4)
A' – Two blind men ["Son of David"] (20:29–34)[32]

For Anderson, the chiastic pattern moves from (Jewish) supplicants, to the Jewish leaders, the disciples, a Gentile woman aligned with the other supplicants, back to the disciples, the Jewish leaders, and finally to the supplicants again."[33] The linking of the Jewish blind men with the Gentile, Canaanite woman is also quite significant for Anderson. She writes, "It is they who exhibit the most faith, not the Pharisees who would reject contact with them both, nor the disciples whose faith and understanding waivers. One of the main themes of the Gospel is the extension of the mission to the Gentiles; what better way to justify that extension!"[34] This chiastic pattern, then, serves two primary functions for Anderson: (1) to show the progress of the disciples and the Pharisees, as the disciples slowly show more recognition of Jesus and the Pharisees become more hardened; and (2) to contrast

[31] Ibid., 38.

[32] Janice Capel Anderson, *Matthew's Narrative Web: Over, and Over, and Over Again* (JSNTSup 91; Sheffield: JSOT, 1994), 179.

[33] Ibid., 180.

[34] Ibid.

the faith of those the reader least expects—outcast Jews and Gentiles—with that of both the disciples and the Pharisees.

2. *Sign of Jonah.* Within this second function, the passage does more to point toward the future Gentile mission than Anderson describes. In this chiastic pattern, especially between the two signs of Jonah (12:28–42; 16:1–4), Jewish-Gentile relational themes abound. Just before the sign of Jonah, of course, Matthew notes Jesus's fulfillment of Isaiah: that "he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles" and "in his name the Gentiles will hope" (Matt 12:17–21; cf. Isa 42:1–4). The sign of Jonah, then, continues to weave the Gentile theme into this section. Jesus says:

> The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here. (Matt 12:41–42)

Jesus contrasts Jonah's Gentile audience with the current Jewish generation. The Gentiles of Jonah's day repented and will, therefore, condemn the current Jewish generation because they have Jesus himself to witness to them. If that example were not enough, Jesus goes on to include another Gentile, the queen of the South (1 Kgs 10:1–13; 2 Chr 9:1–12). This Gentile queen will also condemn the current Jewish generation because she heard the wisdom of Solomon, but the current generation has Jesus himself. This clear contrast between Gentiles and Jews is striking and sets the stage for these same themes in the following section.

3. *Purity laws.* At the end of chapter 13, those in Jesus's hometown, Nazareth, reject him at the synagogue (13:53–58), and then at the beginning of chapter 14, Herod rejects and kills John the Baptist (14:1–12). Jesus feeds the five thousand (14:13–21), followed by his walking on water (14:22–33), and the healing account at Gennesaret (14:34–36). At the outset of chapter 15, Jesus disputes with the Pharisees about their tradition of washing hands before eating (15:1–20). While not as strong as Mark's conclusion—"Thus he declared all foods clean" (Mark 7:19)—Jesus nonetheless condemns their traditions, quoting Isa 29:13, "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men." He then concludes, "It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person."

While Jesus does not explicitly make this debate about Jewish-Gentile relations, France notes, "The purity of God's people separated them from all others, and the food laws thus became a barrier to social intercourse between Jew and Gentile."[35] Davies and Allison contend that Jesus's conclusion was an attempt both to preserve and to reform the Jewish Torah.[36] Matthew struck this balance in Jesus's response because he held both that "the law and the prophets were still valid

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[35] France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 576.

[36] Davies and Allison, *St. Matthew*, 2:517–37.

(5.17–20)" and that "the Gentiles had come to a full share in God's salvation (28.16–20)."[37] For Matthew, then, Jesus's shift away from the strict interpretation of the Torah by the Pharisees toward a more moderating position, emphasizing what comes out of the mouth rather than what goes in it, deals very clearly with Jewish-Gentile relations.

4. *Canaanite woman.* While Jesus has just reoriented the Pharisees' understanding of what defiles a person, Matthew now gives an example of a Gentile woman whom Jesus commends precisely for what comes out of her mouth (15:21–28). Jesus is now in Gentile territory in Tyre and Sidon, and she cries out to him with almost the exact same request as the blind men in 9:27–31 and 20:29–34: "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David." Her request begins, as this paper has shown, in starkly Jewish covenantal terms with an appeal to the Davidic Messiah. Jesus responds to her, emphasizing his mission to Israel alone. He says, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. … It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." She then responds, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." Her response clearly impresses Jesus, and he responds to her, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." Jesus emphasizes his mission to Israel, yet Jesus's words draw out a faithful response from her that brings Jesus to extend his blessings even to her. Her ethnicity—Canaanite—brings even more tension to the story as she is not simply a Gentile but a descendent of Israel's historic enemy. Nowhere else in Matthew's Gospel does Jesus refer to anyone's faith as "great," yet here, amidst the fear and doubt of the disciples and the antagonism of the Pharisees, a Gentile woman shows the greatest faith in the entire Gospel.

5. *Jesus's response.* The healing account on the mountain and the feeding of the four thousand come directly after the Canaanite woman (15:29–29), and right after that, the Pharisees once again demand a sign. Jesus responds with almost the same answer as 12:38–42. He says, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah" (16:4). While he does not discuss the Ninevites and the queen of the South as in 12:38–42, the previous context of the sign of Jonah, especially in light of the Jewish-Gentile themes of the preceding chapters, should bring this to mind again. Jesus reminds the Pharisees that they have access to a greater sign than that which was necessary for Gentiles of the past to believe. Jesus then begins to warn the disciples about the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees (16:5–12). This leaven certainly has a broad meaning, likely referring to much of the unnecessary tradition and hardness of heart that these groups promote, but at least one aspect of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees—especially in the context of the previous discussion of purity in eating and the following account of the Canaanite woman—may be Jewish-Gentile relations.[38]

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[37] Ibid., 2:537.

[38] John Lightfoot connects the discussion of the leaven of the Pharisees with Jewish-Gentile relational issues as well. He writes, "Because very exact care was taken by the Pharisaical canons, what leaven was to be used and what not; disputations occur here and there, whether heathen leaven is to be used, and whether Cuthite leaven, etc." John Lightfoot, *Matthew–Mark* (Commentary on the NT from the

Whether one does or does not take the leaven this way, the trajectory of 12:38–16:2 is clear, and especially in 14:1–16:12, there is a clear focus on Jewish-Gentile relations.

Where, then, does the healing on the mountain and feeding of the four thousand fit into this section interwoven with concern for Jewish-Gentile relations? There are two options. First, Matthew may want no confusion as to Jesus's relation to Gentiles, not wanting his reader to misunderstand Jesus's interaction with the Canaanite woman to endorse a wholesale, immediate ministry to the Gentiles. Instead, Jesus immediately returns to feeding his people, Israel, in a second large feeding. As Plummer writes, "Matthew at once shows that the children did not suffer through the granting of a crust to a Canaanite."[39] Second, Matthew may be continuing the Gentile trajectory of the section, essentially climaxing the section with Jesus literally providing bread to the Gentile crowd and extending his ministry to them.[40] While the second option seems to fit the increasingly Gentile trajectory of the section and provides a more fitting literary climax, the first option is also viable, nuancing the Gentile trajectory with Jesus returning to his primary mission.

The Jewish option, however, fails to answer one important question. Why does Matthew include two almost identical feeding accounts with only a handful of different details so close to one another? Some details are so strikingly different—the size of the crowd, the amount of food to begin with, and the number of baskets left over—that there must be some reason for the inclusion of two separate stories. One might argue that the disciples' increasing ignorance to Jesus's abilities as shown by their again protesting the possibility of feeding such a large crowd explains the doubling. This reasoning could find its climax in Jesus's questioning their misunderstanding of his warning against the leaven of the Pharisees (16:5–12).

Jesus, in fact, shortly after both accounts makes clear distinctions between them. After warning the disciples about the leaven of the Pharisees and the disciples' misunderstanding him to mean physical bread, Jesus says,

> O you of little faith, why are you discussing among yourselves the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive? Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? How is it that you fail to understand that I did not speak about bread? Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

We have already suggested that the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees may partially refer to their traditions that remove them from Gentiles (15:1–20), and Jesus's reference to the Jewish disciples' "little faith" juxtaposed to the "great" faith

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Talmud and Hebraica 2; 1859; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 233. Lightfoot's source for this dispute between the Pharisees is unclear, so it may be too late to be applicable to Jesus's discussion. If, however, the source is near contemporary, Jesus's mention of the leaven of the Pharisees may also have even clearer notes of the Jewish-Gentile relational themes of the preceding chapters through a veiled reversal of the ethnocentric conclusions of the Pharisees' own disputes.

[39] Plummer, *Matthew*, 218.

[40] France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 601.

of the Canaanite woman is striking. There are, then, already Jewish-Gentile themes to this answer from Jesus. He then goes on to ask if they remember the two feeding accounts. Many commentators simply explain this answer as Jesus telling the disciples that they had more than enough bread, so why should they be concerned about bread now? Jesus's deliberate distinction between the two stories, however, should make the reader reevaluate this understanding. For Jesus, the number of loaves, the number of people, the type of baskets used (κόφινος vs. σπυρίς), and the number of leftover baskets are all different.[41]

While it is certainly possible to overemphasize the numbers in this story, this may be a point where the Fathers' emphasis may be informative for us today. Jesus himself seems to point to significance in the two different numbers of baskets left over. He could have just asked if the disciples remember how much bread was left over in the feedings, but instead he specifically calls to mind the distinct differences between the two feedings and the number of baskets left over in each. The twelve baskets left over in the first feeding seem to be a clear allusion to Israel, as the number twelve consistently serves as a symbol for Israel throughout Matthew.[42]

Seven, on the other hand, is not quite as clear. Despite its slight diversity of use throughout Matthew, seven does seem to have a connotation of fullness. In his *Commentary on Matthew*, Jerome understands seven to be a "perfect number."[43] Jesus and the Sadducees each use it in hypothetical stories, where the number represents an endless recurrence that serves as a precedent (12:45; 22:23–28), and when Peter asks if he really has to forgive his brother seven times, he uses seven as an outrageous number of times (18:22). In Matthew, then, the number seven does often represent completion or a number large enough to be representative of a vast amount. In the feeding of the four thousand, this meaning could fit nicely with a Gentile understanding. The twelve leftover baskets call to mind the Jewish identity of the crowd while the seven leftover baskets call to mind the crowd's Gentile identity, representing the fullness of God's people being brought in. On the other hand, those who hold to the Jewish identity of the four thousand could argue that this meaning represents the second feeding pointing toward Jesus returning to the fullness of Israel, the primary recipients of his ministry. Perhaps, then, the differing numbers do not hold the final answer for the identity of the four thousand.

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[41] Some, as Carson does cautiously, emphasize an ethnic difference between the more Jewish κόφινος and the more Gentile σπυρίς, but there is little justification for this much ethnic distinction being placed upon the type of basket one uses, not to mention the fact that the baskets present may simply reflect on the disciples and not the crowd itself (*Matthew*, 359).

[42] Matthew uses the number twelve ten other times throughout his Gospel: seven times referring to the disciples (10:1–5; 11:1; 20:17; 26:14, 20, 47), one time to the number of years that the woman had the discharge of blood (9:20), one time to the twelve thrones on which the disciples would sit and the twelve tribes of Israel (19:28), and one time to the twelve legions of angels that Jesus could call down to his aid (26:53). If the parallel between the twelve disciples and the twelve tribes of Israel may be assumed, there is at least some precedent for seeing an allusion to Israel in the number twelve within Matthew.

[43] Jerome, *Commentary on Matthew* (trans. Thomas P. Scheck; FC 117; Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 2008), 185–86.

Some commentators take the second feeding's similarity to the feeding of the five thousand as proving that it must be a Jewish crowd.[44] Without significant indicators otherwise, the crowd must be Jewish. France, however, contends that this is the very point. The close similarities to previous Jewish healing and feeding accounts, coupled with the indicators of a Gentile crowd emphasize Matthew's theological point. France writes, "It is the extension of Jesus's ministry to the Gentiles in such a way as to parallel closely what he has previously done among Jews that justified the otherwise puzzling 'redundancy' of this section."[45] By emphasizing the differences between these two seemingly redundant feedings, then, Jesus invites the disciples to consider the two feedings more deeply, understanding that though they seemed exactly the same, they were actually quite different in purpose.

Matthew's literary structure, here placing two doublet stories in close proximity, further emphasizes Jesus's point. Doublet stories, as Anderson notes, call the reader to attend more closely to the stories' context, ordering, and details, especially contrasting details.[46] While Anderson takes the doubling of the feeding accounts to point mainly to the disciples' continued ignorance, the Gentile identity of the crowd of four thousand gives a more satisfying literary conclusion to this section. Throughout this entire section, the theme of Gentile-Jewish relations has threaded many of the stories, and the Canaanite woman bookended by these two feedings lies at the center. Her response serves as the template for the two feedings. The children, represented by the five thousand Jews, have received their bread, and the dogs, represented by the four thousand Gentiles, now may receive the crumbs fallen from the table.

At the culmination of Jesus's move away from Jerusalem and revelation about both himself and the kingdom, Jesus's ministry opens to the Gentiles. The Canaanite woman serves as the crux of this turn, and the following Gentile feeding contrasted with the preceding Jewish feeding emphasizes Jesus's ministry both to Jews and Gentiles. Followed by his declaration as the Christ at Caesarea Philippi and his transfiguration, the feeding of the Gentile four thousand pronounces the importance of the Gentile ministry to Jesus's mission and foreshadows his ultimate Great Commission (28:19–20).

III. CONCLUSION

Jesus's feeding of the four thousand in Matt 15:29–39 proves to be a central story in Matthew's Gospel, and scholars have answered the question surrounding the ethnicity of the four thousand in different ways throughout church history. This question has received more sustained interest in the last two hundred years, yet no consensus has been reached over whether the four thousand are Jewish or Gentile. While three factors—the geography of the passage, the makeup of the crowds, and the crowd's glorifying "the God of Israel"—have dominated the dis-

[44] Luz, *Matthew*, 2:344.
[45] France, *Gospel of Mathew*, 597.
[46] Anderson, *Matthew's Narrative Web*, 191.

cussion, I have argued in this paper that understanding the literary context surrounding the passage provides a way forward. While there are strong arguments on both sides of the debate, a Gentile four thousand best satisfies the Gentile trajectory of the literary context of Matt 14:1–16:12. This reading provides the most fulfilling literary climax to the theme of Jewish-Gentile relations surrounding the passage, ultimately offering perhaps the clearest foreshadowing in Matthew of the Great Commission.