



The Savior and the Dog: An Exercise in Hearing

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HEBREW	GREEK	LATIN	ENGLISH
כלב (<i>caleb</i>)	κην οἱ κηναριον	canis	dog
ישועה (<i>yeshua—Joshua—Jesus</i>)	σωτηρ	salvos	savior

SCENE ONE: ALONG THE ROAD, IN THE REGION OF TYRE AND SIDON, WHEN PILATE WAS GOVERNOR OF JUDEA¹

But not a dog shall growl at any of the Israelites—not at people, not at animals—so that you may know that the LORD makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel.

Exodus 11:7

Matthew, Andrew, and the others had traveled for weeks through the hill country of north Galilee. They were following a new teacher, the son of a Nazareth carpenter. At every point on the way, be it road or lake shore, they were met by dogs. This

¹Mark 7:24-30 and Matt 15:21-28.

town on the borders of Tyre and Sidon was no different. Long before they entered the village, the howls and barking announced the band's arrival.

The dogs came slinking out of the garbage pits and from behind the dung heaps. The hair on their backs was stiff, tails were taut, necks were extended, yet half turned away from the strangers. But dog eyes remained focused on them. Thick-necked males, all growl and hate, came out of their hiding places. They were followed by skinny, sand-colored bitches with paps flopping like the tassels on a circus camel's saddle. Half-grown pups on big sloppy feet circled in and around their elders.²

Andrew hated dogs. So did Matthew. But while the scribe turned tax-collector would cringe and hesitate as the dogs met them on the road, Andrew and the other fishermen of their company showed no such fear. They knew how to handle dogs. They remembered the dogs that waited on the shore when the fishing boats came in. Yellow dogs would watch in tight silence as the men emptied the boats and then mended their nets. They waited for the chance to pick up any

fish that might slip out of a basket. To the dogs, even the smallest piece of gut or roe pulled from the nets and thrown on the sand was a treasure worth fighting over.

Andrew shook his head, “Stupid, filthy, dung-swallowing animals, licking up blood, waiting for an execution!” He was convinced that the only thing worse than Canaan’s dogs were the black hogs that rooted through the garbage outside every Gentile town.

Every man who followed the Carpenter carried a basket. A few days earlier, the baskets had been full of barley bread and cold fish. All that remained of the fish were oily stains. The bread was stale and the broken pieces were crumbling. By now the dogs knew the men carried food, and half begging, half demanding a handout, they circled round the band of thirteen men and a few women.

Matthew shifted the weight of the basket on his shoulder, drawing it closer to his side, protecting it from the dogs. Andrew watched the tax collector and smiled. He nodded to his brother, pointed at the dogs and slipped Peter’s basket onto his shoulder.

Peter gave his Roman sword to James. Free from his load, the fisherman rolled his huge shoulders, cocked his head from side to side, and shook the stiffness out of his arms. He kicked at the roadbed, picked up a few stones and rolled them in his hand so that he lost all but the heaviest ones. Andrew, James, and John had been through this before and began gently tossing stale bread to the dogs.

The animals moved closer to the small company to claim their portion. Any fear disappeared with the bread crumbs.

When the yellow dogs were just a few feet from them, Peter threw the first stone. Other stones followed. There were squeals and barks running in all direc-

²This description of the dogs is based on the standards of the Canaan dog, *kelefk’naani*, as established in the Shaar Hagai Kennels in Jerusalem. These are yellow or sandy colored, medium sized, spitz-type animals, much like the other pariah dogs of North Africa and Asia, or like the feral dogs of India or Australia. See David Alderton, *Dogs* (London: Dorling Kindersley, 1993) 281.

tions. The dogs’ ears were pinned back. Tails went between their legs. Fresh blood poured down the head of one old bitch.

Matthew shook his head and spit at all this. He had no time for grown men acting like naughty boys. But Andrew and the others laughed and slapped Peter on the back. The Carpenter kept walking. Both Andrew and Matthew followed the flight of the wounded dog, wondering how far she would go. It wouldn’t be the first time Peter had killed a dog with a stone.

The wounded dog ran along the edge of a trail that lead to a cluster of low clay brick buildings and disappeared in a clump of tall grass and brambles. It was then that the men saw that a woman from the village had been watching them. She was haggard, dirty, and bordering on old, with strands of grey hair falling to her shoulders. She opened her mouth. The men expected a curse. Instead, these words rolled across the path, “Have mercy on me, oh Lord, son of David; my daughter is severely possessed by a demon.”

Again, the Canaanite woman of Tyre and Sidon cried out. Peter let the remaining stones fall to the ground. Matthew, Andrew, and the others turned as she howled. They had heard others challenge their teacher like this, and while they had seen wonders, they were tired and confused by it all. The Carpenter kept walking.

“This man’s silence is deafening,” Andrew and Matthew thought together. As the woman’s screams continued, the twelve gathered around Jesus so that he had to stop.

SCENE TWO: THE CAMP OF ISRAEL, AT KADESH, IN THE YEAR OF THE EXODUS³

On Jordan’s stormy banks I stand and cast a wishful eye;
Oh, who will come and go with me where my possessions lie.
Samuel Stennett (1787)

For days, the people had been marching north and east through the Sinai wilderness. Now they were at a place called Kadesh, in the wilderness of Paran, not far from the southern border of the land of promise. Moses told his brother Aaron that it was in this place that the LORD wanted them to camp.

The men who carried the holy vessels of Israel stopped and set up the tent of worship. The long column of men and women, children and cattle, formed the square of the camp around the great tent. The divisions within Israel took their places in the square. There were three tribes on each side of the square. Tribes were divided by clans and families. The ritually unclean were outside the square. Finally, those who were not of Israel took their places in a loose mass beyond every one else.

The people on the edge of the assembly were a mixed body. Israel called them the rabble of Egypt. They were slaves from many different lands caught up in the

³Numbers 13-14.

wonder of exodus. But some of those outsiders were closer to the twelve tribes than the children of Israel would admit. Abraham was the father of many nations, and Joseph was not the only one to have been hated and betrayed by his brothers. Children of Abraham’s other women, Hagar and Keturah, as well as their cousins by Lot’s incest were among the rabble. Ishmaelites, Midianites, Edomites, Amalekites, Moabites, Ammonites, all of them once slaves, now free through the Red Sea, followed the pillars of fire and smoke.

Taking his place outside the camp of Judah was a man they called the Caleb, which means “the dog.” Caleb was an Edomite of the clan of Kenaz and could trace his line back to Jacob’s brother Esau.⁴ From Esau, Caleb could go back all the way to Abraham and Sarah. But the Israelites were not impressed. They said Esau was more wolf than man and that his children were the mongrel offspring of a beast and a Hittite whore. Even in the brickyards the Israelites had mocked Caleb. They saw in him the same thick sandy-red hair they saw in Esau, the same heavy beard, the same simple speech, the same trusting nature, and the same explosive temper. They had given him the name Caleb, “the dog,” and their children threw stones at him just to see him growl.

When Caleb was sixteen, he had been taken from his home on the eastern borders of the land of promise. The details of how he became a slave were a blur to him, and maybe now they did not matter. What was important to Caleb was that he might be going home.

When the company of Israel and the rabble had taken their places, Aaron, the brother of Moses, spoke to the gathering: “The Lord, the God of Abraham and Isaac, has called to Moses

saying, ‘Select twelve men, one from each tribe, those whose hearts are lifted up, and send them into the land of Canaan.’”

“How strange,” Caleb thought, as he listened from a distance. “Those whose hearts are lifted up... He’s asking for volunteers?”⁵

This was not the way Caleb had seen Moses and Aaron choose from the tribes of Israel. No one volunteered for an office or duty. When Levites were called to perform their duties and when the seventy elders were chosen to judge the Israel-

⁴Genesis 36; Num 13:6; Josh 14:6; Judg 1:11-20 and 2:7-11; and 1 Chronicles 1 and 2. Establishing the ancestry of Caleb is something of a problem within the Bible. Most references make it quite clear that he was an Edomite, but Chronicles attempts to link him into the third generation of Judah’s family. The issue here revolves around the very nature of the people, of God. Is Caleb an outsider, like Ruth, Rahab, and many others, who make their claim to the promise by faith, or is he another “child of the promise” by birth? The bulk of the evidence points to the former more difficult reading of the information. See Trent C. Butler, *Joshua* (Waco: Word, 1983) 186-189, and Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989) 392.

⁵The Hebrew *nasi*’ of Num 13:2 is most often translated “chieftain” or “leader.” But some scholars, including Rashbam (1080-1174), suggest that the root *ns*’ used with the subject *lev*, “heart,” literally means, “whom the heart lifts”; they understand the phrase as a call for volunteers. See Exod 35:21 and Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers*, 100 and 335-336. The main point in all this is that the text clearly indicates that the “spies” are selected in a way far different than the typical casting of lots. Thus, the selection of the spies and their subsequent report is not so much a matter of the Lord’s choosing as it is either a confession of faith, as in the case of Caleb and Joshua, or an act of rebellion, as is the case with the other ten.

ites, there had been a lottery. Tribes were divided by clan, clan by family, fathers and sons all in order. Stones were shaken in the breastplate of judgment. It was always a matter of sacred choice. The tossing of a stone.

But now, Aaron and Moses walked around the tent of meeting and asked for one volunteer from each tribe. Slowly men came forward: Shammau from Reuben, Shaphat from Simeon, Igal and Palti from Issachar and Benjamin, Nahbi from Naphtali, Joshua from Ephraim, and others. Eleven men said their hearts were lifted up for entering the land. But Moses and Aaron had asked for twelve. All eyes turned towards the company of Judah.

Aaron called out again, “Whose heart among you is lifted up? Who will enter the land for Judah?”

No one from Judah answered him. Silence.

Caleb called from outside the camp, “I’ll go... I’ll go for Judah.”

Moses looked at Caleb and motioned for him to join the eleven others. They were all men in their late thirties or early forties. They were no longer young, but not yet elders. All of them had once been slaves and carried the scars of shackle and lash.

Moses spoke to them, “Go through this wilderness into the hill country to the north and study the land. Be sure to remember how many people live there and how strong they are. See what kind of cities they have, and what kind of crops and timber grows on the land. It’s the season of wine, so bring us back some grapes.”

The next day, the twelve started out on their journey. They followed the path Moses had laid out for them, heading north and then west towards the tomb of Abraham and Sarah at Hebron. Caleb led most of the way. Memories that had been buried in the brickyards and flat lands of the Nile delta came back to him. The birds’ song, the scent of the dry grass and brush

lands, the sound of the wind in the trees, the taste of fresh fruit and sweet water, the rhythms pounded out by sheep and goats on hollow ground, all these things and more came back to him.

Caleb took the twelve to a field near Hebron that Abraham had purchased from the Hittites so that he might bury Sarah in his own place. He told them that when he was a boy his father had brought him to that place and showed him where Jacob and Esau had buried Isaac. Not far from Hebron the twelve cut grapes from a single vine such that it took two men to carry the cluster. Caleb showed them the walled city that was as old as any in Egypt and introduced them to the Anakim, a people descended from the giants of old.

When they returned to Kadesh, the elders of Judah met Caleb. They told him that his family and belongings were no longer to be counted among the rabble, but among the clans of Judah. Later that day Caleb and the others gave their report concerning the things they had seen in the land.

All twelve spoke of a land filled with fruit trees and vineyards, rich pastures and lush grain. But ten reported that those living in the land were too strong for them, and that the people who walked through the Red Sea were like grasshoppers compared to Canaan's children. Caleb alone did his best to make a case for

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entering the land. But the people mocked his accent and refused to trust him. Joshua, the one they called "the savior," was silent.

That night was touched by madness. The people complained, wept, and eventually revolted. Joshua finally spoke and joined Caleb in saying that if the Lord was at their side there was no reason why the Israelites could not enter the land. No one listened. The people threatened to stone Moses and Aaron. Moses, in turn, cursed them, saying, "You will all die in the wilderness. But the Lord's servants, Joshua and Caleb, 'the savior and the dog,' they have a different heart about them. Those two and no one else shall walk the land of promise."

SCENE THREE: ON THE BORDERS OF TYRE AND SIDON

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 master's table."

Matthew 15:23-27

SCENE FOUR: THE GATHERING OF THE TRIBES OF ISRAEL AT GILGAL ON THE JORDAN, FIVE YEARS AFTER THE BATTLE OF JERICHO⁶

O let me see Thy foot-marks,
And in them plant my own;

My hope to follow duly
Is in thy strength alone.
O guide me, call me, draw me,
Uphold me to the end;
And then in heav'n receive me,
My Savior and my Friend!

John E. Bode (1869)

Joshua was old, and the word came to him saying that it was time to divide the land. The tribes gathered around the tent of worship. They gathered around the square, just as they had so many years before in the wilderness of Kadesh. Eleazar the priest, the elders of the twelve tribes, and Joshua all took their places. The names of all the cities and high places in the land of promise were read to the people. Joshua told the assembly that these places would be divided and assigned according to tribe and then clan and then family. The choice was by lot, and Eleazar rattled the stones of judgment.

The elders of the twelve tribes listened. They were hardened by many battles and had seen victory and defeat. The taste of both wilderness manna and the new

⁶Josh 14:6-15 and 15:13-19.

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wine of Canaan lingered in their mouths. They waited for the lottery to begin and for their wars to end. But before Eleazar could draw the first stone, the elders of Judah broke rank and approached Joshua. At their head was the one they called Caleb, “the dog.”

Caleb was the same age as Joshua. The red hair of his head and beard had turned white long ago. But the hair on the back of his hands and arms still burned with the sandy color of a stray dog. His stride was sure and his eyes were clear. His voice was strong, quiet, and steady.

“Before you begin, tell me about the place of the dog.”

Joshua nodded his head and let Caleb continue.

“Do you remember what Moses said about you and me? I was forty years old when he sent me from Kadesh into this land. And all that I said about this land was true. But the ten who were with us took the heart out of the people. I was faithful to the Lord. On that day, forty-five years ago, Moses said that I and my children would receive the land where we walked. Now, the Lord has kept me from harm all these years. Today, I’m as strong as I was back then, for work and for battle. So before you cast the first lot, give me what Moses and the Lord said I could have.”

Joshua held his breath, exhaled, looked at his old friend, and said, “What place do you want? What is the allotment for Caleb, the place of the dog?”

“Assign me the hill country we walked so long ago. Give me Hebron.”

“We have never defeated the giants who live in those cities. What makes you think that you and your family can live in Hebron?”

“The Lord was with me in the brickyards and flat lands of Egypt. The Lord was with me through the Red Sea, and through forty years in the wilderness. The Lord has been with me all these years of battle. Give me the hill country of Hebron and I trust that the Lord will still be with me.”

Joshua motioned for Caleb to come to him. He laid his hands on his old friend. Joshua blessed Caleb just as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had blessed their children. Caleb, “the dog,” received the land of Hebron as his birthright. And the land had rest from war.

THE FINAL SCENE: ON THE BORDERS OF TYRE AND SIDON

The Carpenter heard the woman’s cry, “Son of David, even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” He looked around and a thousand images flooded over him...

yellow dogs
twelve baskets of broken bread
stones in a fisherman’s hand
Esau wolfing down a pot of red beans
birthrights, allotments, inheritance, divisions
Caleb and Joshua...the savior and the dog
David, child of Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth...Bathsheba...Mary
David...king at Hebron...Caleb’s city
Jezebel dead in the street...dogs eating the flesh of a queen

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a daughter’s madness
a mother’s pain
the wedding feast of the Messiah
water turned to wine
compel them to come in
blood and water in the sand of Golgotha
the place of the dog.

Jesus answered her,
Woman, great is your faith!
Let it be done for you as you wish.”
And her daughter was healed instantly.

Matthew 15:28

CONCLUDING NOTES

The old saying is that if you must explain a story, its point has been lost. Still, some explanations may be in order.

These scenes are based on the Caleb stories coupled with the story of the Canaanite women’s encounter with Jesus. Much of what I have written concerning Caleb’s ancestry is based on the genealogical data provided by Genesis 36, Numbers 13, and Judges 1. There is, however, a great deal of speculation and imagination at work here. Nevertheless, there are some themes worth exploring, such as the connection between Caleb and Esau, as well as the significance of Hebron. We see that biblical lists of names need not be boring or inconsequential. There is great power in a simple list of names—just take a look at the black stones of the Viet Nam memorial in Washington, D.C., or walk through a country cemetery with the pastor who has

served that place for half a generation. Sometimes the most profound piece of literature a generation produces is but a list of names! The tables of generations in the Bible link one story to the next in such away that the line inevitably leads to Christ and from there to you and me.

The behavior of the dogs in this story and their treatment at the hands of the fishermen is a reflection of my personal experience and observations. I grew up on the Minnesota/Ontario border, both in white and native communities. In these places unclaimed dogs are treated with a strange combination of affection and contempt. The life of a stray dog is one lived out in hunger, persecution, and the shadow of an early death. Yet folks tolerate the animals and children always treasure a puppy. I hope never to forget one sublime moment from a little town in northern Manitoba. I was trying to gill and gut a trout with a dull knife when I felt something watching me. I looked up into the unblinking eyes of a half a dozen unemployed sled dogs, all waiting in frozen silence for what I would surely give them. When Martin Luther's puppy, Topel, gave him that look, he saw nothing but

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faith, saying, "Oh, if I could only pray the way this dog watches the meat! All his thoughts are concentrated on the piece of meat. Otherwise he has no thought, wish, or hope."⁷

All talk of Caleb's genealogy and yellow dogs aside, there is a deeper issue flowing through these scenes. That issue revolves around some very basic questions about the unity of scripture. What is it that holds the books of the Bible together? How is it that these little stories, legal pieces, genealogies, dreams, epic narrations, and all the rest function as scenes in a greater story?

Northrop Frye, the great Canadian literary critic, wrote, "The unity of the Bible as a whole is an assumption underlying the understanding of any part of it. This unity is not primarily...a metonymic consistency of doctrine addressed to our faith; it is a unity of narrative and imagery and what we have called implicit metaphor." He went on to suggest that "if we freeze the Bible into a simultaneous unit, it becomes a single, gigantic, complex metaphor."⁸ In other words, the glue that holds the Bible together is the language of poetic images.

At the risk of restating the obvious, I have tried to show you that what brings the stories of Caleb and the Canaanite woman together is a language of faith understood in poetic or even musical terms. Graphic images, horrible puns, strange definitions of names, and plays on words as well as elaborate metaphors are not incidental or accidental flourishes within these texts. Rather, when played off the great themes of law and promise, inclusion and exclusion, exile and return, death and life, they are the chords that bind together saviors and dogs.

We cannot take the imagery of the Bible for granted. Caleb, Joshua, the Canaanite woman, and Jesus, as well as you and I, are brought together through the power of this language, as images are formed and reformed, neglected and found anew, built up and collapsed against each other.

Was it simply by chance that the Canaanite woman responded to Jesus' rejection by speaking of the "dogs who eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table"? Was hers just a snappy comeback to a harsh word? Or was she diving deep into the poetic rhythms and images of scripture? Perhaps, at some level she knows the story better than any of us, and she stands as one of the great critics of biblical literature.

⁷Martin Luther, *Table Talk*, in *Luther's Works*, vol. 54, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967) 37-38, number 274.

⁸Northrup Frye, *The Great Code* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1983) 62ff.