

Jewish Sheep or Other Sheep?

DAVE BAST

On today's *Groundwork* program, we are looking at two passages from the Gospels where Jesus seems to contradict himself. The question is, what did Jesus think his own mission was? What was his understanding of the purpose and work for which he had come into the world? Was it to save everyone, or was he merely the Jewish Messiah who came for the people of Israel? Let's dig into that question today on *Groundwork*.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and this is part of a series, Scott, in which we are looking at contradictory texts or statements that seem to be the opposite or cancel each other out. Today, we have two great passages, both of which involve Jesus' description of his own mission or ministry.

SCOTT HOEZEE

As we have been seeing in this series, these are texts that are not usually right next to each other in scripture, but they are never too far apart. It is when you bring them together that you say, "What gives here? What is going on?" In this particular program, we are thinking about what was Jesus' own understanding of his mission; and we have a lot to talk about there in terms of what Jesus knew and what he did not know just generally; but we can maybe dive right into a passage in Matthew 15, where in part Jesus says: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." Maybe we should just hear the whole passage and the story that it comes in.

DAVE BAST

Right, so it is Matthew 15:21-28: ²¹Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. ²²A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David; have mercy on me. My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly." ²³Jesus did not answer a word. So, his disciples came to him and urged him, "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us." ²⁴He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." ²⁵The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me," she said. ²⁶He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs." ²⁷"Yes, it is, Lord," she said. ²⁸He replied, "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." ²⁸Then Jesus said to her, "Woman, you have great faith. Your request is granted," and her daughter was healed at that moment.

Perhaps Jesus' least attractive miracle in the Gospels, the one that causes the most problems, that raises the most questions, Scott.

SCOTT HOEZEE

If we have an image of Jesus in our minds of always speaking kindly and serenely, this story shakes it up a little bit because at first glance – actually, this is only one of our two texts, but there is a contradiction even within this text – because at first glance, it looks almost like Jesus is being rude; he is being dismissive of a woman in need; he seems to compare her to dogs. What is going on here? How could Jesus speak – again, apparently on the surface of it, at first blush – how could he speak so harshly?

DAVE BAST

Well, that is exactly the problem. Here comes this woman with a desperate cry for help, and every time in the Gospels we see someone like that, we see Jesus immediately reach out to them.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Every time!

DAVE BAST

Even the lepers he would touch, and always healing people who asked him. As we are reading this story along, we might say to this woman, “Well, do not worry; you have come to the right place.” No one ever cried out for help to him in vain. But instead, first he ignores her for a while; then when the disciples say, “Hey, come on, get rid of her, will you? She is starting to get on our nerves,” he has this enigmatic statement, “I have come only for the lost sheep of Israel.” Now, that seems clear enough. He is saying, in effect, my mission is only to the Jewish people.

SCOTT HOEZEE

This Canaanite person is not in that group.

DAVE BAST

Right; except that later he is going to say, “I have other sheep from all over the place,” so that is the dilemma of the contradictory text; but let’s try to figure out a little bit more about this story in Matthew first before we go on to that, because it is troubling and it is problematic for us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, this text has generated quite a bit of controversy; especially in recent years, there have been some interpretations of this that said: Look at this. Here is an example of Jesus learning something new; something he did not know before; and this woman is his teacher. So, some have interpreted this text to flip it to say, in this case, the woman is the teacher and Jesus is the student, and Jesus is learning something from this woman he absolutely did not know. Well, that has some theological problems connected to it, too; especially when you ask the question: What did the Son of God know? Was he still totally omniscient or had he given some of that up? There are a lot of questions like that. Could Jesus ever be genuinely startled? When he went to school, did he really learn or was he just faking it? He already knew all of the math in the world, but he just pretended to be learning addition and subtraction? A lot of complicated questions here, but one of the questions that comes up here as well is, is it possible that Jesus did think at this point, “I am just for the Israelites; for the lost sheep of Israel,” such that he did learn something new here. Would it count as something sinful if Jesus was ignorant of something? Those are the kinds of questions that come up and there are no easy answers.

DAVE BAST

Yes, that is kind of a Revisionist approach to the story, and I do not personally buy it myself. I think that Jesus’ understanding of his mission was so saturated in the Old Testament, and in particular the book of Isaiah, which has all of these universalistic themes – I will make you a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach the ends of the earth. That sort of thing; and that was what really formed Jesus’ self-understanding, even as a purely human person. I do not think he had to learn from this gentile woman: Hey, oh, hey, guess what? I should care about Gentiles, too.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But then the question is, who did need to learn something here? And so, a more traditional interpretation, which I also favor, is that the disciples had to learn something. So, what Jesus was doing here was mouthing the conventional wisdom of his day, which is probably exactly what the disciples thought. The disciples say, “Send her away! What an annoying, foreign woman,” so then Jesus says, “Yeah, I was sent only for the lost sheep of Israel,” and the disciples are going, “Yeah, that is right, Jesus. Now we can get rid of her.” But

maybe he was baiting them. Maybe he was playing the disciples a little bit; playing into their own prejudices; their own narrow-mindedness, so that he could, at the end of the story when he heals this woman's daughter, turn around their thinking; begin to open them up to new possibilities. I think that is the more likely scenario, that Jesus was not racist; he did not hate this woman; that would be sinful and we know that is not possible for Jesus. It flies in the face of too much else in the New Testament and in the Gospels. So, it seems very likely here that Jesus is mouthing the conventional wisdom of the day because he knows that that is exactly what the disciples are thinking, and how can he get underneath that? Well, I will pretend to play into it and then I am going to explode it from the inside and open them up to new horizons.

DAVE BAST

What is also consistent with that is the fact that, as we read through the New Testament and into the book of Acts, we see that many of the disciples did need this lesson repeated over and over. You think of Peter – we did a program, I think, on Peter's vision of the clean and the unclean from Acts 10; so, Peter needed this lesson, as did the others.

The other thing is, speaking of lessons; surely, he is teaching this woman a lesson, and us as well, about coming to him in persistence and in prayer with our needs; just as he would tell a story later in Luke about the woman who would not take no for an answer from the judge, and I think this is a wonderful example of the fact – Calvin says somewhere that, if God seems to close the door in your face, press through the cracks in the door; press through the chinks – do not take no for an answer, like this woman.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we do not know because the Bible almost never tells us how somebody said something. So, we do not know what Jesus' tone of voice was here; but, there is good reason, I think, to speculate that there must have been something about Jesus' tone, the facial expression he had on, that encouraged this woman to – so, he seems to have called her a dog...

DAVE BAST

But, she sort of makes a joke out of it, doesn't she? Hey, even the dogs get the crumbs off the table.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Fine; I will be a dog; go ahead...

DAVE BAST

Throw me a bone here, will you?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Something encouraged her. There was something loving in Jesus' demeanor that did not scare her away. Indeed; so I do think he was teaching the disciples here, and what was he teaching them? Well, the mission is wider; it is bigger; more than just for the lost sheep of Israel, even though there are verses that seem to indicate that, the mission is a lot wider, and when we come back, we will look at another text where Jesus says that quite plainly.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where today we are discussing a couple of Jesus' statements that seem flatly opposed to one another. In Matthew 15, he says, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel; but then when we turn to John Chapter 10, we hear something quite different, and it goes like this:

¹⁴"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me. ¹⁵Just as the Father knows me, and I know the Father, and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They, too, will listen to my voice and there shall be one flock and one shepherd."

So, which is it, Scott? Only the lost sheep of Israel or other sheep not of this fold out there somewhere, and I am going to bring them, too.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The sheep and the shepherd imagery keeps coming up. This particular text is easier to understand just by itself than the Matthew 15 text, where Jesus seems to be limiting – initially, as we saw in the first segment – he seems to be limiting his own mission. Here he is, the Psalm 23, Good Shepherd stained-glass window shepherd; kind, loving, saying directly now to the disciples and to others here in John 10 – one of his “I am” sayings in John’s Gospel – they are unique to John – that I am the good shepherd, but not just for Israel; not just for the people you think I have come for. I have actually come for others. So, we said in the Matthew 15 context, when Jesus seems to be rejecting of the Canaanite woman, that probably he was being deliberately provocative to teach the disciples to widen their vision. Here, it is not so much a deliberate provocation, but he is still saying to the disciples, “It is not just us; this club is not just going to be a for-Israel-only club. I am telling you right now, I have other sheep, and I have to go find them, too; and it is going to go beyond the borders of Israel.

DAVE BAST

Right. We were talking in the opening segment about what did Jesus know and what didn’t he know, and as a human being, was he somewhat limited, perhaps; could he learn things along the way, and no doubt, that is true, but in John we get a very different take on Jesus’ knowledge, don’t we? Again and again, he says things that are absolutely startling in the claims that lay behind them. So, he starts out here, for example, saying, “I know my sheep and they know me; just as the Father knows me and I know the Father.” He is saying that he has a unique knowledge of God; a personal sort of intimacy that goes far beyond anything that we might have. He is really setting himself apart, isn’t he, in terms of his knowledge?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and that is so typical of the Gospel of John. John, as most everyone knows, breathes of a different spirit than Matthew, Mark, and Luke. John covers different territory. He is much more overtly theological in interpreting of Jesus’ words; and a key theme in John was Jesus as the new Temple, which is why John’s Gospel begins with the cleansing of the Temple. The other Gospels have that after Palm Sunday, but John puts it right up front because that is a theme he is establishing. Jesus has come to make room for far, far more than just some narrowly defined group; and so here now in John 10, he is working that same theme, saying: I have got to make room; you have to make room, my disciples; there are other people coming.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and so then, when he says, “I have other sheep not of this sheep pen,” or fold, traditionally, he is saying, in so many words within the context of the metaphor: Look, there are outsiders; there are Gentiles who also belong to me and I am concerned about them. I am interested in them. You are not the only people of God. The people of God, actually, will be multinational; will be multiracial; will be multilingual. It is going to be this wonderful thing; and that is what I am really about.

To me, maybe the most striking thing in here – that is striking enough, the idea that it transcends the narrow confines of the Jewish people – but the most striking thing is the tense of the verb that he uses. I have other sheep –

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, present tense.

DAVE BAST

Yes, present tense. They already belong to me; I already know who they are. He has already said, “I know my sheep.” So, most of them have not been born yet. It is not just that they are gentiles; that they are non-Jewish; it is that they are nonexistent. He is talking about us; he is talking about the Church through the ages. It is a staggering claim for a Jewish rabbi to make.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it is also – and you hinted at this in the first part of this program, Dave – it is also startling, staggering, all by itself – how long it is going to take Jesus' disciples to learn this lesson. You mentioned Peter in Acts 10 still believing that it was going to be a for-Jews-only thing and he had to keep kosher, but you can go all the way out to Acts 15 in the Jerusalem Council, where Paul by this time, Saul of Tarsus became the Apostle Paul, was doing amazing work among the Gentiles, among the non-Jews, and the Church was so confused by that – so, there are the other sheep coming in – the Church became so confused by that, that they had to have the first-ever general synod of the Church to say: Is it okay that these Gentiles are coming into the Church without becoming Jews first? Is that okay?

Jesus, here in John 10, is already using that present tense: I *have* them. They are already mine, these other sheep, but for the apostles – the disciples and later apostles – this is a lesson that is going to take a long time to sink in.

DAVE BAST

Well, the other thing he does here is to describe his mission, and it is quite simple: I must bring them also. It is one thing to say that they are mine in the sense that I know them, I hold them in my heart; maybe we could even say divine foreknowledge – there is a text in the New Testament that says that before the foundation of the world God chose us in Christ, those who belong to him; but going on from that, in history, in the story of the Church as it unfolds, there is the actual process of preaching the Gospel and bearing witness to what Jesus is and has done, and inviting people to turn to him in faith and actually be converted; become Christians; become followers of him. So, that is what is going on, and Jesus describes it all as himself bringing them: I must bring them and there will be one flock and one shepherd; which is incredibly encouraging, you know, if you happen to be a preacher, right?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right. Or actually, if you are a Christian today who does not come from a Jewish family, it is good news because it is us. He is talking about us. If you are not a Jewish person before you became a Christian, Jesus is talking about us; but, he is also pointing to the disciples. This is ultimately going to be their mission; so, Jesus is prophesying here as well; this is what the future of the Church – to use a term that was not being used while Jesus was on this earth – but he is giving a preview of what the Church is going to look like, and by implication, he is setting the agenda for the Church: You are to be a people of mission, and you are not to ever be satisfied that it is just cozy, little us in our own little church; our own little club. The mission is to go and find those other sheep, whom again, in the present tense here in John 10, Jesus says: They are already mine, but you have to go out and find them for me and bring them in. So, there is a lot of mission built into this text as well.

DAVE BAST

So, we have these two statements: I have come for the lost sheep of Israel. I have other sheep that do not belong to Israel. They are also mine and I have to bring them, too. Let's try to put them both together in just a moment as we turn to our last segment on this *Groundwork* program.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we are now bringing together, Dave, these ideas of what was Jesus' mission? What did he think his mission was? What did he want the disciples to think his mission was? We have seen the texts that say: It is

just for the lost sheep of Israel, and then we have seen the other text, where Jesus says: No, it is for lots and lots of sheep that I already have well beyond Israel, and you have to bring them in. How do we bring that together and what are the implications for the Church, even now today?

DAVE BAST

Right. So, we are looking for some way to synthesize these two statements, or put them together; take what is true in each one and maybe come up with a more detailed or nuanced statement of Jesus' mission to the world; and we start with the obvious fact that he was the Jewish Messiah. He was intentionally sent to Israel, and the fulfillment of all of the promises that God had expressed through the prophets, and even as far back as the Garden of Eden, that a child would be born who would accomplish his purposes of salvation for his people. So, yes, he is sent to the lost sheep of Israel during the time of his earthly, human ministry, primarily. Actually, we quoted this little story from Matthew 15. It is one of only one or two times in the Gospels where Jesus left the territory of the Jewish people, either Galilee or Judea.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, but what that all reaches back to, of course, as well, is what God said to Abram already in Genesis 12: The start of the Covenant. God makes it clear: I am calling you, Abram, out of the nations and I am going make a nation out of you, but it is never going to be an end in itself. The mighty nation that would come from [Abraham] and Abraham and Sarah's child, that was never the end of the story. God says right at the beginning: And through you, you will be a blessing to all the nations. So, Israel all along was God's beachhead. This was the starting point, but never the end point, which Israel forgot. You can think of a lot of Old Testament stories of ethnocentrism, as we call it, where it was a for-Israel-only club and they had no interest in bringing in outsiders, but God made it clear all along: Look, I want you to be open to strangers and the alien within your gates. I want you to be open to other people because I told you right from the beginning, what I said to Abram: You are my starting point to save the whole earth. You are my starting point to save, not just this nation that I am going to build, but through you, all the nations. So, now that Jesus, as the culmination of God's salvation, comes as Messiah, it only makes sense that now it is time to open those floodgates fully and bring in everybody.

DAVE BAST

Right. So Jesus clearly understood that his mission was ultimately universal because Israel's mission was ultimately universal. So, if he is the Messiah of the people of Israel, then by definition he is also the savior of the world. Maybe a way of thinking about this – I don't know if this is helpful or not, but this is how I think about it – is to distinguish between tactics and strategy. Whenever you have something that you want to accomplish, your strategy is the grand design or the ultimate purpose. The tactics are the means you use to get there. So for example, if your strategy is to defeat the Germans and win World War II, the tactics are, you plan D-Day, and all that goes into that, and you invade. So, for Jesus, and for God, and for God's people, the strategy is to win the world; to save the world; to redeem the world. The tactics are, you choose one people initially. You make yourself known to them. You promise them a savior. You send their Messiah, and he ultimately dies and rises again; and then, as Jesus will say at the end of the Gospel: Go now, and make disciples of all nations.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The problem is, of course, that there is always this temptation to focus on the tactic and to make the tactic the end of it; so, think how foolish – by your analogy, Dave – think how foolish it would have been for soldiers, after D-Day was successful and they invaded Normandy and got onto the European continent, for the generals of the soldiers to say, "There, that's it. We're done now."

DAVE BAST

Yeah, "Okay, let's go home."

SCOTT HOEZEE

No, that is just the tactic. But the problem is – and the Church still faces this today, and we all do, right? We are in our churches; we are in our church community; we know who our fellow believers are, but there are always other people – different groups, people not like us, people of different backgrounds, different socioeconomic statuses – and the temptation is always to say, “Well, we are in the church and we like the way we do things and so we do not really feel the need to reach out to and be welcoming to strangers and people not like us,” and these types of texts, like the one from John 10, remind us, no, no, no; the Church itself, and your congregation, is a tactic in the larger strategy to save the world. We always have to be reaching out. It is never enough just to be satisfied with our own little community.

DAVE BAST

So, there is maybe one good lesson we can take away from this – it is not just about us and our own and our own kind and people like us; and if we are not actively looking outward and engaged with others who are outside with the other sheep – Jesus’ other sheep –

SCOTT HOEZEE

Whom he already has – present tense.

DAVE BAST

Right. If we are not reaching out to them, then our vision is too small. If we are just saying, “No, the food is for the children, not for the dogs,” then we are wrong.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into the scriptures. So, visit groundworkonline.com and tell us topics, passages, or questions you would like us to take up next on *Groundwork*.

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