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## 2024 VHLE Conference: "Rooting Access" Panel Talking Points

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# 2024 VHLE Conference: “Rooting Access” Panel Talking Points

*“What Can We Learn From an Evolving & Complicated Biblical Depiction of Access?”*



- The Bible is considered authoritative within Christianity in general and Lutheranism in particular. The Reformation doctrine of sola Scriptura affirms that Scripture should be understood as the sole source of divine revelation, the only inspired, infallible, final, and authoritative norm of faith and practice. While this doctrine has been used to promote the idea that there is a singular, consistent biblical perspective, the Bible reveals that human understanding is flawed and must always be open to change and evolution.

- The Bible is a mess. It is a collection of writings by dozens of authors and redactors spanning over

1000 years. You can find texts in the Bible that support virtually any perspective or position you can think of. Critics of the Bible often say it is useless because it is full of contradictions, and defenders of the Bible frequently deny its contradictions. Both critics and defenders are motivated by a belief that the Bible can *only* be meaningful if it presents a clear and consistent perspective that represents the unchanging will of God.

- However, both Bible critics and Bible defenders fail to understand what the Bible actually represents. The Bible is meaningful not because it presents a singular perspective but instead because it presents an **ongoing evolution of thinking**, which is always messy and complicated. Many books in the Bible are conversing with each other, and there is much we can learn from that conversation. When we learn to read the Bible as an ongoing conversation, we witness an evolution of thinking regarding various topics and issues. For our brief time together today, I want to look at the continuing conversation and evolution of thought regarding the issue of “accessibility.”

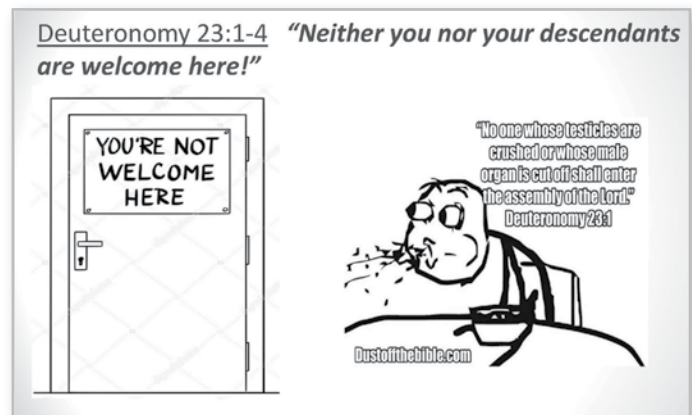
While the Bible’s depiction of “access” is complicated and messy, we can learn much from the *evolving* biblical message.



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## Deuteronomy 23:1-3

- Dating biblical texts is a challenging and, at times, contentious practice. There is rarely scholarly unanimity regarding the assigning of dates to biblical texts. The internal evidence of Deuteronomy indicates several stages of composition and editing. While the book of Deuteronomy refers to a much earlier time, most scholars date the stages of composition between the fall of the Northern Kingdom of Samaria (721 BCE) and the beginning of the Judean restoration (535 BCE). The text, therefore, spans an almost 200-year window. Let's take a look at Deut 23:1-3.
- The explicit exclusionary perspective of this text is undeniable. Christians and people who embrace this text as part of their sacred collection of writings cannot ignore or deny the hatred and bigotry contained in the text. Trying to do so or making excuses for the text is "inexcusable."
- The text comprises one of the many biblical texts that feminist biblical scholar Phyllis Trible calls "Texts of Terror." The text proclaims a divine mandate to exclude people based on genital impairment, based on what was considered at that time to be improper [i.e., "illicit"] sexual unions, and based on ethnic identity. Descendants of such people were also excluded. While contemporary readers rightfully condemn this text, later biblical writers also condemned the text.
- While it is uncertain if the book of Ruth was written as a direct challenge to the prohibition against Moabites found in the book of Deuteronomy (as well as the prohibitions against foreign wives presented in the book of Ezra), it is clear that Ruth presents a competing and conflicting depiction. The story of Ruth is about a Moabite woman who was the great-grandmother of David, one of Israel's most famous kings. As the great-grandson of a Moabite woman, David falls within the "tenth generation" of descendants excluded from the Lord's assembly by Deuteronomy. Ruth clearly presents an evolving understanding of "accessibility."



***"No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall come into the assembly of the LORD. Those born of an illicit union shall not come into the assembly of the LORD. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall come into the assembly of the LORD. No Ammonite or Moabite shall come into the assembly of the LORD, even to the tenth generation. None of their descendants shall come into the assembly of the LORD forever..."***

Wait a minute.... What about **King David**?

**Ruth 1:1, 4, 16**

*"In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of **Moab**, he and his wife and two sons.... These [two sons] took **Moabite** wives; the name of one was Orpah, and the name of the other **Ruth**.... But Ruth said, 'Do not press me to leave you, to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; **your people shall be my people and your God my God.**'"*

**Ruth 4:13, 17**

*So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife. When they came together, the LORD made her conceive, and she bore a son.... The women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, 'A son has been born to Naomi.' They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David.*

## Isaiah 56:1-8

- Like Deuteronomy, the book of Isaiah also spans more than 200 years. Scholars often divide the book into three periods, referring to the first 39 chapters of Isaiah as “First Isaiah,” chapters 40-55 as “Second Isaiah,” and chapters 56-66 as “Third Isaiah.”
- Third Isaiah presupposes an audience that has returned to the land of Judah *after* the exile. The people have intermarried with so-called “foreigners” and have raised families of mixed ethnicities while in captivity. In returning to their homeland of Judah, they also find new ethnic groups living in the land. The author of Third Isaiah challenges the xenophobia and ethnic purity exhibited in the book of Deuteronomy.
- Most biblical scholars understand Isaiah 56:1-8 as a direct challenge to the teaching and instructions found in Deuteronomy 23. As with the book of Ruth, this passage presents an evolving understanding of “accessibility.”



**“Thus says the LORD: ‘Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed.... Do not let the foreigner joined to the LORD say, “The LORD will surely separate me from his people,” and do not let the eunuch say, “I am just a dry tree.” ...the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD,... these I will bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar, for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.”**

## Acts 10

- The book of Acts presents a so-called “history” of the birth and development of the community of Jesus-followers, which will eventually become known as “the Church.” A vital component of that development is the expansion and evolution of the Jesus community from an exclusively Jewish community to a community of Jews and Gentiles (i.e., non-Jews). Within the traditional Jewish worldview at that time, there were essentially two types of people in the world: there were “the people of God” (i.e., “Jews”), and there was everyone else (i.e., “Gentiles”). Acts 10 is one of the many stories challenging this dichotomy. Once again, this passage presents an evolving understanding of “accessibility.”

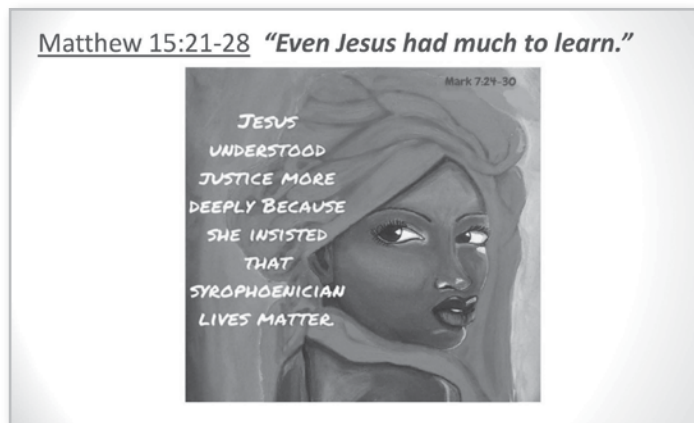


**“About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw the heaven open and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures, reptiles, and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ But Peter said, ‘By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.’ The voice said to him again, a second time, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.... Now while Peter was greatly puzzled about what to make of the vision that he had seen, suddenly the men sent by Cornelius appeared.... As he talked with him, he went in and found that many had assembled, and he said to them, “You yourselves know that it is improper for a Jew to associate with or to visit an outsider, but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean....Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every people, anyone who fears God and practices righteousness is acceptable to God.... While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles....”**



## Matthew 15:21-28

- The last passage is from the gospel of Matthew. While the slide references the version of the story found in Mark's Gospel, which most scholars believe to be older than Matthew's version, I will be referencing Matthew's version because I think the change the author of Matthew makes is significant.
- As we consider this passage, I want to introduce the notion of "privilege" and how it hinders "access." The author's decision to identify the woman in this story as a "Canaanite" is significant. There is a long history in the Bible of divinely sanctioned violence by Israelites against Canaanites. In the biblical story of Israel's god giving the "Promised Land" to the Israelites, God is depicted as giving instructions to the Israelites to enter into the homeland of other people, to take their land, and to destroy and kill every living being in the land. Canaanites are among the people to be killed (Deut 20:10-18). The "Promised Land" story reveals the way "Israelites thought of ethnic" others. It also illustrates how, throughout human history, people have used "God" to legitimate hatred and violence against other people by claiming such violence to be God's will.
- Fast-forward approximately 1200 years to the time of Jesus. By identifying this woman as a "Canaanite," the author of Matthew invokes the memory of this violent historical past between Jews and Canaanites. In Mark's version of the story, the woman is identified as "Syrophoenician." Matthew's change of the woman's identity appears to be deliberate.
- By the time of Jesus, people in this region were no longer called "Canaanites." It would be like Americans today calling someone from New York a "New Amsterdamian." While New York used to be New Amsterdam, it ceased being New Amsterdam hundreds of years ago. The author's decision to identify the woman as a "Canaanite" not only emphasized her ethnic *otherness* but also challenged the author's audience to reflect on a long history of ethnic hatred.
- After Jesus initially ignores the woman, and the disciples urge him to "send her away" (even though she is a resident of the region and they are the ones who are visiting), Jesus tells the woman, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Jesus informs her that he was not sent to help her, her daughter, or her people. Jesus is not only denying the woman "access," he is also denying "access" to an entire population of people.



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

- After the woman continues to beg for his help, Jesus replies with a vulgar response that reveals his understanding of his ethnic “privilege.” He tells the woman, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” I don’t know how any reader—especially an African American or female reader—can read this story without being troubled. As an African-American man who has and continues to experience the pain and humiliation of racism, this particular passage of scripture has always been problematic for me. I am uncomfortable, therefore, with anyone who tries to defend or make theological excuses or legitimations for Jesus’ behavior.
- While I find Jesus’ comparison of this woman, her daughter, and their people to dogs quite disturbing, I believe part of the message of this text is found amid this disturbance. Most biblical scholars believe that Matthew was written for a predominantly Jewish audience during a time when Gentiles were beginning to join the community of “Jesus-followers.” A story about the tenacity and faithfulness of a “Canaanite” woman would have not only highlighted the non-Jewish identity of these new members of the Jesus-following community, but it would have also caused the original audience of Matthew to reflect upon long and deep-seated prejudices harbored against ethnic (and religious) others.
- Matthew’s story highlights the realities of ethnic and biological “privilege” in order to challenge such privilege. The story reveals how easily people can be influenced by the prevailing sexist, racist, and ethnocentric views of their time and their culture. Even Jesus was influenced by such views. Jesus initially used his privilege to preserve an advantage for himself and his people while denying access to this woman and her people.
- In considering access, it’s essential for us as ELCA institutions to recognize how we might unwittingly privilege Christianity above other religious traditions, thereby creating a unique advantage for Christians, resulting in various denials of access to people of different religious traditions.

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- In Matthew’s version of this story, the author uses a Canaanite woman—a marginalized ethnic “other”—to challenge the ethnic privileging of the author’s time. The woman advocated for herself, her daughter, and her people, even though it meant confronting and challenging more than a thousand years of prejudice.
- While there is much more that needs to be said about the specifics of her challenge as well as Jesus’ response, I will conclude here simply by asserting that while Jesus still has a long way to go in this text, the challenge posed to Jesus by this “Canaanite” woman forced him to reflect upon his own cultural privilege and consider how he used that privilege to deny “access” to others.

### What can we learn from these biblical passages?

The *evolving* biblical message regarding “access” offers a hopeful perspective on improving “educational access” on our campuses. The passages reveal how **WE** and our institutions have to be open to change. When talking about “access” we often have a tendency to talk about “*student readiness*” rather than “*institutional readiness*.” While we often complain about students not being “ready” for college and focus on how to help **THEM** become better prepared for college so they can succeed, we rarely focus on how to better prepare our institutions to be “ready” for a diversity of students so that all students can succeed. The issue isn’t just about improving “*student readiness*” but also bolstering “*institutional readiness*.” This shift in thinking and focus presents opportunities for positive *evolution* in our thinking about “educational access.”

### Two Questions ~ ten-minute conversation



Tell a story about a time when a student challenged or changed one of your habits or practices in your work on campus (classroom, office, department, etc.). What was that experience like for you?



Discuss what it would mean for YOUR institution to shift the focus from “*student readiness*” to “*institutional readiness*.” What would that look and/or sound like on your campus?

### What can we learn from these biblical passages?

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