

1-1-2006

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Complicating the poor widow's gift:
Exegesis on Mk. 12:41-44

by

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A Paper Submitted to the Faculty of the School of Theology of Saint John's University,
Collegeville, Minnesota, in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of
Arts in Theology.

SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
Saint John's University
Collegeville, Minnesota

August 10, 2006

This Paper was written under the direction of

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Timothy Traynor
Has successfully demonstrated the use of
Biblical Greek
In this paper.

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August 10, 2006

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Description of the Project: The dominant understanding of the story of the widow's offering was thought to be as praise and encouragement for generous giving for much of the history of its interpretation, but was completely reversed and called into question by A.G. Wright's 1982 study. Attempts to reclaim the widow as a model for piety and methods of contemporary biblical scholarship have added significantly to the subsequent dialogue with Wright making the widow's offering an interesting narrative reflection on the early Christian community and a lens to look at women's contributions to the ancient church.

This paper may be duplicated.

Signature of Student Writer

Date

Complicating the poor widow's gift:
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He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.' (Mk. 12:41-44, NRSV)

If this passage is read in isolation and without second thoughts, there is a striking characteristic to this final verse. It has the ability to convict both rich and poor alike urging generous giving regardless of whether it is out of abundance or poverty. From the outset, the reader is moved by such generosity and what this might mean for his or her own giving. A church or other religious institution might even use this pericope to encourage selfless giving to its organization. What might appear as an obvious reading or straightforward message is really only a superficial look. In addition to preaching on offering, what lies beneath this simple paragraph are small pieces of prophecy, social commentary, and a gospel narrative in miniature.

My own study of this passage has yielded such very different interpretations, some of which might seem contradictory. The dimensions of a text like this one may allow for diversity that extends beyond a singular perspective. Such a point of view gives us a text that reaches off the page and critiques or convicts the readers on the basis of their values. It refuses to be explained away, but raises new questions in different lights. In pericopes such as this it may prove helpful to collect scholarship and interpret with a "both/and" attitude rather than quickly dismissing one or the other in deference to a more comfortable argument. I do not intend to prove one interpretation as a proper characterization of the text, because it is not unlike the meaning of biblical texts to transcend a singular interpretation. I am motivated, however, to present widow not as simply a victim of the villainous scribes or exclusively as a heroine

because of her piety, and to present her offering as a pre-meditated, deliberate action toward discipleship such that it provides a model for the discipleship Jesus is attempting to teach. The title of Addison Wright's article on this passage asks of the meaning of the widow's offering in its title, "Praise or Lament?"¹ I think that for us in the 21st-century the answer is both.

"Complicating" matters

Historically the interpretations given for this passage have been far from unanimous. Interest in it, however, is due to the possibility that buried within it is Jesus' teaching on what appropriate giving to one's religious community looks like. Classic interpretations of this passage have come about by isolating the story and explaining it as a brief, passing situation that Jesus uses pedagogically. More recently, however, scholars have used a variety of contexts surrounding the situation and text, i.e. how the story fits within its immediate textual context, its *sitz im leben*, or the whole Gospel narrative as a unit, to find a deeper meaning within.

The story's set-up involves the wealthy (*plousioi*), who already have a tainted reputation,² making large offerings to the temple treasury (v. 41). This sets the stage for the widow, who gives two *lepta*,³ which is defined in the text as a *quadrans*, i.e. a very small amount.⁴ The culmination of the piece is Jesus' explanation of the event to the disciples. Based on Jesus' comments, there is a significant relationship between the offerings of the rich and that of this particular widow. What that offering means for Jesus' disciples, the reader, and the widow's well-being all become crucial questions at the close of this passage.

Classic biblical commentaries focus on how the *absolute* relationship between the offerings is that those of the wealthy were large while that of the widow was very small, but the

¹ Addison G. Wright, S.S., "The Widow's Mites: Praise or Lament?—A Matter of Context." *CBQ* 44 (1982), 256-65.

² The other reference to the wealthy in Mark is 10:25—not a positive connotation.

³ *lepton*, refers to small coin. Also as the smallest in circulation, cf. Dennis E. Nineham, *The Gospel of St. Mark* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1963), 335.

⁴ *kodrantês* = Lat.: *quadrans*, one-quarter of an *as*, a whole measure, a pound of copper, an acre of land, etc.

relative relationship of the offerings is that the wealthy give “out of abundance” while the widow gives “her whole life” (*holon ton bion autês*, 12:44).⁵ Jesus, in his comparison to the disparity between the offerings, is using irony to say that the widow’s offering only *seems* insignificant at first, but symbolizes his ideal⁶ for giving when contrasted with the offerings of the wealthy.⁷ Thus the conclusion of the classic discussion is that Jesus is merely praising the widow’s selfless giving: the widow is instructed by the example of temple authorities and aristocracy and acts in turn, such that the act is pious, selfless, and worth more than that of the wealthy.

Whether we view Luke’s rendition of this as an early interpretation or adaptation of Mark’s work or as a separate witness entirely, the account in 21:1-4 bears some striking differences and bolsters our awareness of what the earliest understandings of this passage may have been. First, emphasis is placed on the contrast between the offerings of the wealthy and that of the widow, however the emphasis is changed. The parallel grammatical structure of both the narrator’s account and Jesus’ explanation are the same in both accounts,⁸ but the word used for what the rich offer—“large amounts” in Mark—is changed to merely “offerings” in Luke.⁹ Luke downplays the difference. Second, there is a disparity between how Mark and Luke report the magnitude of the widow’s gift. In Mark there are two explicit descriptors, *panta hosa eichen* and *holon ton bion autês* separated by the main verb *ebalen*, whereas Luke conflates the two into *panta ton bion hon eichen*. Mark appears to say, “she gave everything she had, her whole

⁵ Henry Barclay Swete, *Commentary on Mark* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1977), 294. See also Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 498.

⁶ See Jesus’ response to the rich man in 10:21.

⁷ Note Geoffrey Smith’s look at the parallel structure of the grammar in the story’s set up and Jesus’ statement. What the rich do and what the widow does is presented with the same grammatical structure, likewise Jesus’ comment presents a similar parallelism to create a sense of irony. Smith notes that the style is such to create a contrast between the good deed of the widow and the bad deeds of the temple authorities. See “A closer look at the Widow’s Offering: Mark 12:41-44,” *JETS* 40 (March 1997), 30-31.

⁸ *Ibid.*, different parts of speech are used because the main verb changes in the narrator’s portion in Luke, but the statements about the rich versus the widow are still parallel.

⁹ The rich give *dôra* in Luke 21:1,4 instead of *polla* in Mark 12:41,44.

life/livelihood,” while Luke says, “she gave every possession/bit of livelihood that she had.” Mark not only elaborates but leaves his audience with “*holon ton bion*” creating an alarming and abrupt ending. Luke appears more interested in style and accuracy than drama. Third, Luke’s impression of the story is that the entire action on the part of Jesus and his disciples is simply observational: *eiden* in Lk. 21:1, and *eiden...kai eipon* in vv. 2-3. Mark, on the other hand, has Jesus sitting (*kathisas*) while he watched (*etheôrei*) in 12:41, and calling (*proskalesamenos*) his disciples in 12:43. Mark gives us a more detailed account of Jesus’ immediate surroundings and better clues relating to his purpose in observing the widow.¹⁰ Finally, the emphatic “truly, I say to you” differs: Luke gives a very cerebrally stoic “*alêthôs*” for Mark’s Hebraic “*amên*”. The “*amên...*” construction is not unknown to Luke¹¹ but specifically not chosen for this circumstance. Luke sees this event in the life of Jesus as important, but because of the factors above, we can see that Luke does not regard it as terribly extraordinary or ironic. A conscious decision to withhold some of the irony here may indicate less of a sneer at the scribes and temple establishment, and more of a relief at the widow’s simple piety. If we look to Luke for further insight, the classic interpretation of this story may have been already underway.

Indeed, that Jesus would *praise* the widow is not a surprising conclusion to most readers. Wright notes that most commentators believe “that the text calls for little explanation,” and “that the story speaks for itself.”¹² The conclusion in which the widow is praised for her piety was reached by Jerome, Chrysostom, and Augustine,¹³ who refer to the story in order to encourage

¹⁰ Discussed further on pp. 9-10 below.

¹¹ See Lk. 4:24, 12:37, 13:35, 18:29, 21:32, and 23:43.

¹² Wright, 257. Wright’s comments are sarcastic given that his view is that most commentators are mistaken about the true meaning that Jesus, and consequently Mark, wants to convey.

¹³ Thomas C. Oden, Christopher A. Hall, Ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament II: Mark* (Downer’s Grove, IL: IVP, 1998), 176-80.

generous giving to the fullest extent possible. Wright notes that the praise conclusion continues up through the present with a variety of implications for Christian giving.¹⁴

Contemporary biblical scholarship has changed the message of this text by interpreting based on what is considered to be the context given by the author. I will look at two interpreters in particular who have explored this specific passage in Mark and created a dialogue around it. The first examines the immediate context, both in terms of the story's alleged chronological sequence and its location in the text of Mark's narrative. The second looks at multiple narrative contexts for the poor widow and their respective interpretations, as well as how they might discredit or illuminate each other. Both provide intriguing views and evaluations but have created a line that most interpreters who tackle this pericope find themselves well on one side or the other.

Wright, mentioned earlier, has compiled an impressive summary of prior attempts to deal with this pericope; however, his conclusion diverges considerably when it comes to the implications of Jesus words about the widow. Wright follows the classical commentaries as far as agreement over Jesus' statement that the widow's offering was indeed greater (*pleion*, v. 43), but hesitates when others draw conclusions beyond this.¹⁵ Wright would argue that this comparison is the *only* one that Jesus makes in the text when preaching to his disciples about the value of the widow's offering versus that of the wealthy, and there is no explicit mention of the relative quality, that is, whether Jesus truly praises or laments. The only obvious clue from Jesus' exclamation itself is his emphasis (*amen...*, v. 43). One has to judge the rest on the degree to which Jesus is being ironic.

¹⁴ Wright, 257-8.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Looking at the verse that directly precedes this passage, one will note that the word widow (*chêra*) occurs here as well. According to Wright, this is no coincidence. Jesus denounces the scribes by saying that “they devour widows’ houses” in 12:40.¹⁶ The reason that the widow’s story follows is to give an example of one such widow whose house has been devoured as a result of condemnable religious thinking.¹⁷ Moreover, in the verse immediately following 12:40, Jesus predicts the destruction of the temple (13:1-2).¹⁸ Because of this, Wright deems the widow misguided by the poor teaching on the part of religious authorities, whose actions warrant his condemnation, and her offering was merely a sign of the times.¹⁹ Based upon immediate context, therefore, Wright argues that the widow was not to be esteemed for her self-giving piety, but mourned because she fell victim to the improper teaching of the scribes.

Wright confirms his preference for this reading by its consistency with Jesus’ teaching on *Corban*. In Mark 7:10-13, Jesus explicitly criticizes the withdrawal of support from one’s parents and giving the withdrawn portion to God. The resulting portrait of the Markan Jesus is one who “is remembered for having said that human needs take precedence over religious values when they conflict.”²⁰ Thus, with Wright’s reading of the widow’s offering (above), her well-being conflicts with the scribes’ teaching and she gives it all anyway. Lamenting the widow here creates consistency with *Corban*.²¹

Wright’s addition has had a profound impact on scholarship surrounding this passage. Questions that have been asked about the implications of the story for the church have been completely changed and largely silenced. So much so that Mann, in his Anchor Bible

¹⁶ See also the parallel account in Lk. 21:1-4, and the same statement about scribes in 20:47.

¹⁷ Wright, 261.

¹⁸ See also Lk. 21:5-6.

¹⁹ Wright 263.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 261.

²¹ Smith follows Wright’s *corban* logic, but does not deem the widow misguided. Instead, he focuses on the deed as it fits into the context of only the pericope itself. The true, self-giving piety of the poor widow is the point, rather than what the giving means for the widow herself. See p. 35, note #27.

commentary on Mark, published after Wright, has said that “speculations [on these implications] have been effectively ended by [Wright’s] contribution.”²² Though this may sound excessively forthright, Wright’s article has successfully ended the belief that the message of the widow’s offering is to be obviously and exclusively interpreted as piety and generosity.

Perhaps this intriguing article properly understands Mark’s critique of the kind of religious teaching that the Markan community sought to undercut. Perhaps it attempts to relate the kind of bad theology that the Markan community believed led to the demise of second-temple Judaism. It appeals to the consistency of various statements of the Markan Jesus, as well as to the placement of the story of the widow’s offering in after the denouncement of the scribes and before the eschatological discourse. It is therefore an insightful, creative, and very logical conclusion.

Though Wright has presented a case for serious doubt, the pious widow has prevailed over the misguided widow in the history of her story’s interpretation. As interesting and logical as Wright’s conclusions seem to be, some still insist that this was a premeditated act of piety. Perhaps this is an occasion in which the female lead character in a biblical story is unnecessarily victimized, reading a great deal of victim status into position of women in ancient society and the role of widows in particular. This widow may not be a victim; perhaps she made a conscious decision and took deliberate action.

Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, in her work on the subject in question,²³ proposes a variety of interpretations based on a variety of contexts for the widow that she provides. Her first two essentially repeat Wright and provide short critiques, and the majority of what follows is her list

²² C.S. Mann, *Mark: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary, The Anchor Bible 27* (NY: Doubleday, 1986), 494.

²³ Elizabeth Struthers Malbon employs narrative criticism to analyze the characters that make up Mark’s Gospel. She discusses the varying degrees of complexity in the characters of Jesus, his disciples, and particularly female characters in Mark. See “The Poor Widow in Mark and Her Poor Rich Readers.” *CBQ* 53 (1991), 589-604.

of suggested alternatives. She frames Wright's method and analysis as ingenious but still only one among many possibilities for analysis. She suggests that Wright is correct in looking to the occurrence of "widow" in the prior verses as her first noted context, but incorrect in suggesting that our widow is a victim of the scribes who "devour widows' houses." Instead, the irony is on the widow's good deed versus the scribes' bad deeds. She also affirms Wright's characterization of the apocalyptic mood of the story when linked to the verses following in her second context: she agrees that the widow's offering is a sign of the times, but rejects his notion of what the nature of the sign is. She therefore turns to various alternative narrative contexts for the interpretation of the widow in answer to Wright.

Next, Malbon proposes contexts in which our widow is put together with other women in Mark's gospel. Instead of finding interpretive clues in preceding and succeeding passages, she looks to other stories in Mark that provide similar situations or characters, particularly women interacting with Jesus. One example brings the widow together with the woman who anoints Jesus in Mark 14. Here, Malbon explains, Mark's "central discourse is framed by two stories about exemplary women in contrast with villainous men."²⁴ The anointing woman is set in contrast to Judas and the plot to kill Jesus—a good deed done selflessly in the midst of evil. Another example of her narrative contexts, similar to the anointing woman, places the widow among *three* other women in the gospel. The stories of the other unnamed women in 5:24ff, 7:24ff, and 14:3 report specific examples where women take deliberate action towards discipleship. In these three instances, Jesus is moved by the faith of the women (5:34, 14:9) and even persuaded to change his mind (7:24-30). Grouped with these other instances, the act of the widow is *praised* by Jesus and the "classic" interpretation of the widow as heroine is upheld.

²⁴ Ibid.

Malbon's "gospel women" narrative contexts open up significant dialogue with Wright's analysis. They not only support the viability of the classic interpretation of the role of the widow as pious but eschew the idea that she is misguided or pitiable. As such they provide a corrective to Mann's blunt statement about how Wright has "ended" the speculation on the implications for faith that the widow poses.

Malbon presents a fifth context that focuses not merely on the action of the widow but on Jesus' role in the story as a teacher or Rabbi. She makes reference to how Jesus is sitting (*kathisas*) in 12:41 as if in the authoritative posture of a Rabbi who is going to teach.²⁵ She points to 12:43-4, where Jesus calls his disciples and speaks to them (*proskalesamenos tous mathêtas autou eipen autois*) as another indicator that his words will contain significant teaching.²⁶ Finally, Malbon notes the use of *amên* as Jesus' preface to his statement about the widow as a sign of his role as a teacher.²⁷ Jesus calls attention to the widow as presenting a teachable situation, a living parable symbolically representing his coming crucifixion.²⁸ With Jesus as a teacher, the offering of the widow is tied to the fate of Jesus and his followers. Here, instead of a context that demands a "praise or lament" answer, it is a "solemn proclamation about the Kingdom..., its Messiah, and the demands and rewards that fall to the followers of such a Messiah of such a kingdom." As such the debate is muted by the inevitability of an eschatological reversal. Malbon revisits the apocalyptic concern of Mark's gospel. Jesus' goal when read in this context is to inaugurate the Kingdom of God, and thus Mark's principal focus

²⁵ Malbon refers to 4:1 (*eis ploion embanta kathêsthai en tê thalassê*) and 13:3 (*kathêmenou autou eis to Oros tôn Elaiôn*), p. 600.

²⁶ Ibid., referring to calling the disciples in 1:16ff. and 3:13ff. as well as calling them to teach in 8:34 and 10:42 (using the formula *proskalesamenos...eipen/legei*) and 9:35 (*ephônêsen...legei*—note also the use of *kathisas*).

²⁷ Recall that this feature is only present in Gospel of Mark. The Lukan account does not include any mention of Jesus' posture or his interaction with his disciples. Given Luke's predominately gentile audience, the Rabbi Jesus is potentially a far less useful characterization and as such, the teaching posture is missing and *amên* becomes *alêthôs*. (See pp. 3-4 above.)

²⁸ The widow may be a symbol for Jesus' crucifixion much like the withering fig tree (11:12-14 and explained in 20-26) was a symbol for the destruction of Jerusalem: Jesus teaches these as signs of the times. See Malbon, 597.

is the transmission of the kingdom message instead of a debate over the piety of giving to the temple treasury.²⁹

Malbon uses her “fallible followers” motif, a phrase she coined for much of her work in narrative criticism, for her final context to characterize the function and action of our widow.³⁰ This is a very important context for comparing the good intentions of the widow and the greatness of her offering with Wright’s assessment of the improper religious teaching. To Malbon, Mark’s major characters are complex and he refuses to let them be one-sided. She says that the benefit of this complexity is the relationships and contrasts that might arise between the “goodness” of one versus the “badness” of another.³¹ Strangely, Malbon refuses to connect the two prevailing interpretations of the widow’s gift as such, due to her perception of the poor widow as a “flat” character. The widow only actually executes one deed, which Malbon deems good, and it is only given any depth or meaning when it is observed by Jesus and his disciples—round characters—and as it passes to the Markan community and beyond.³² In this interpretation, Malbon makes the widow much less of a true character than an illustration, and she calls the reader to identify with the disciples, gaining wisdom from the widow’s deed and Jesus’ explanation.

Thus Malbon presents a contemporary, even postmodern return to the “classic” idea that the poor widow is acting primarily in pious charity. Malbon rightly critiques Wright, stating that the widow does not merely fall victim to the scribes’ incorrect teaching and Jesus is simply not being cynical. She is, however, modest with respect to her creative alternatives, deliberately

²⁹ Ibid, 601.

³⁰ In a book published following her article on the poor widow, Malbon uses this term to refer to the complexity of Mark’s characters, particularly the disciples. See “Fallible Followers,” *In the Company of Jesus: Characters in Mark’s Gospel* (Louisville, KY: WJK, 2000), 41-69.

³¹ Malbon (1991), 601.

³² Ibid. Malbon writes, “It would be inappropriate to focus on the “goodness” of the poor widow in opposition to the “badness” of the twelve disciples without also observing her “flatness” in contrast to their “roundness”.”

leaving her readers completely open to make up their own minds. She concludes with a note about the complexity of the narrative and the multiplicity of interpretations in order to “complicate” matters, with the goal of inciting dialogue.³³

Dialogue

As seen above, both Wright and Malbon offer contemporary readings that have advantages and disadvantages. If this event involving the widow and the temple treasury actually occurred in real history, it would be pitiable indeed: a widow starves for a rather insignificant addition to the temple, a few ounces of copper, several bricks, postage for imported building materials! For this, Wright provides an excellent way to explore such a scenario. If one were to preach on this pericope, however, it would be useless to argue, with Wright, that this story might refer to an unfortunate failure on the part of first-century clergy to give proper instruction about contributing to the religious establishment. The resulting message could only counter giving one’s “whole life,” and the resulting action could only be a deep suspicion of any contemporary call to contribute to the “temple treasury.” On the other hand, Malbon provides little with regards to the pericope’s *sitz im leben* herself, but gives a wide variety of literary solutions to the nature of the widow and her gift providing interpretations of value to presenting a deeper meaning or reason why this story made it into Mark’s (and Luke’s) Gospel.

Both Wright and Malbon worked with the apocalyptic genre of Mark’s gospel as an interpretive key. Apocalyptic stories like this imply a sense of imminent doom and supernatural judgment and suggest ways to survive it and, if possible, keep it from destroying creation, especially Israel. Wright has a superior grasp of this concept in his assessment of the widow’s deed as a sign of the times and linking it with Jesus’ other instances of judgment on the temple

³³ Texts, at least “good” texts, “classic” texts, including most biblical texts, “complicate” readings of themselves. Thus interpreters of such texts take up their task from the text itself: To “complicate” is not to “clarify,” interpretation. The process of “complication” requires dialogue, listening as well as speaking.” Malbon (1991), 603f.

and its establishment.³⁴ Those who would make complete light of the situation would be casting aside Jesus' predictions about the temple and about his own fate completely. Smith notes,

“the widow is a symbol: she represents one of the last nails in the coffin of national Israel. The chronic disregard of God's law and the sham religion of the nation's leaders were summed up in her...there was no other remedy for Israel's apostasy except for divine judgment.”³⁵

The apocalyptic mood resonates with the flow of history as it may have been understood and reflects a possible first-century concept of time. Whether the widow's action is pious or pitiable, it would potentially be insignificant in a different literary genre, but since it occurs in an apocalyptic environment, it is a life or death matter.

Other commentators have taken approaches similar to Malbon's third and fourth contexts, reclaiming female biblical characters as exemplary instead of as victims. Generally speaking, these contexts, i.e. those in which the poor widow clustered with the three other women in 5:24ff., 7:24ff., and 14:3ff., provide a case for a feminist rendering of biblical discipleship and feminist Christology: the biblical women are seen as equal among the disciples:

“Women interact with Jesus in mutual respect, support, comfort and challenge...They befriend, economically support, advise, teach, and challenge Jesus...New possibilities of relationships patterned according to the mutual services of friendship rather than domination-subordination flower among the women and men who respond and join his circle. They form a community of the discipleship of equals.”

³⁶ More specifically, these stories portray women in a positive light and suggest that women were taking leadership roles in ecclesial society before being more formally suppressed by the church.³⁷ Here the Markan community may offer an early narrative reflection upon women's

³⁴ Wright, 264f., relying on L. Simon, “Le sou de la veuve: Marc 12/41-44,” *ETR* 44 (1969), 115-26. See also Malbon, 596f.

³⁵ Smith, 36. Wright is correct insofar as his method is concerned, but Smith discredits his conclusions suggesting that Jesus is not being cynical in his commentary but pointing toward the type of piety required to escape judgment.

³⁶ Elizabeth A. Johnson, “Redeeming the Name of Christ,” *Freeing Theology* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993), 127-8.

³⁷ Willard M. Swartley, “The Role of Women in Mark's Gospel: A Narrative analysis.” *BTB* 27 (1997), 16-22. Swartley's article applies Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's work, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological*

roles in the religious community before the established patriarchal church: “the widow exemplifies the kind of piety, which if it had been more widely present, could have averted Jesus’ judgment on the temple.”³⁸ Women’s roles in this apocalyptic-oriented community may have been just as important, urgent, and effective as men’s. An act of piety given in the stories of the widow and the other women may reflect women of great importance to religion as it was understood in the Markan community.³⁹

The context of Jesus as teacher or Rabbi might be coupled with the theme of women’s discipleship reclaimed from patriarchal religion. Beavis uses these two themes, analyzing the story of the widow and the other stories discussed (5:24ff, 7:24ff, and 14:3 etc.), alongside other Greco-Roman stories from antiquity that are known as *chreia*,⁴⁰ an ancient genre of teaching stories.⁴¹ Also called “pronouncement stories,” the *chreia* would include a situation in which some particular action occurs and pronouncement is made to teach the audience based on what transpired. Beavis reports that most ancient *chreiai* involving women “generally describe stereotypically “feminine” virtues, concerns and attitudes.”⁴² However, in Mark, they describe women in strong discipleship roles: “the widow’s act epitomizes the theme of self-sacrifice which runs through the second half of Mark.”⁴³ Again, we get a sense of women’s presence in Mark as disciples, properly demonstrating the teaching of Jesus, and a hint that the Markan

Reconstruction of Christian Origins (Crossroad: New York, 1984), which proposes a decline of women’s roles in the developing church of the New Testament period, and applies it to this passage as a narrative reflection on the high point before the decline.

³⁸ Ibid, 20.

³⁹ To Swartley, the gospels’ portraits of women demand a complete reevaluation of the role of women in the church of the first century, 21-2.

⁴⁰ *Chreia* (*chraomai*: use; Hence “useful for life”) were a Greco-Roman literary form featuring life lessons taught in the form of story.

⁴¹ Mary Ann Beavis, “Women as Models of Faith in Mark,” *BTB* 18 (1988), 3-19.

⁴² Ibid, 3.

⁴³ Ibid, 6.

community may have had a much more progressive attitude toward women than what was initially assumed.

In light of Malbon's final perspective dealing with Mark's flat versus round characters, it might be suggested that the widow's offering in itself is not flat but round, carrying with it both a positive and a negative result. Most of the above commentators refer to the popular opinion that widow's giving of "her whole life" in 12:44 as a move on the part of Mark to foreshadow the Jesus' giving his whole life on the cross. An interpreter from an incarnational, liturgical tradition may even tend to blur the deed of the widow into Jesus' crucifixion, in that the widow is not merely foreshadowing it but representing it. The Markan community may have, in fact, seen this as a story of the crucifixion—the emptying, self-giving gift of one's whole life. As with the widow, one might see Jesus' deed as worthy of either praise or lament—a minority opinion characterizes Jesus himself as mistaken and misguided.⁴⁴ I maintain that Wright's conclusion that the widow was misguided is inappropriate on these grounds. Her victim status is inextricably bound to Jesus' own. Whether Wright is correct or incorrect about the degree of the widow's coercion by the temple authorities, the deed of giving of one's whole life is a complex, "round" deed, and refuses to be bound to a simple good or bad characterization.

Recall that Wright's article asks whether the widow was to be praised or lamented and I proposed that it might be both praised and lamented. Perhaps a more ancient ideology might be supportive of such a both/and situation. Bonnie Bowman Thurston explores some early literature from Polycarp and *Didaskalia Apostolorum* reporting that widows in the early centuries AD were carrying out the function of prayer as a substitute for the temple sacrifice in the absence of

⁴⁴ E.P. Sanders, for example, suggests that Jesus was convinced of his second coming and the inauguration of the reign of God. The church was then able to rectify its understanding of eschatology because of this mistake was made so "very well." Cf. *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: Penguin, 1993), 180f.

the temple.⁴⁵ She calls these widows “altars of God.” In this case, they would have been performing a positive, desirable duty occasioned by negative, unfortunate circumstances. Mark’s report of the widow who “had the least” and yet “did the most” was perhaps (once again) a narrative reflection on such an event in actual history.⁴⁶ This woman may be one of Thurston’s “altars” contextualized in the Gospel narrative by the Markan community.

Prophecy, social commentary, the Gospel in miniature

Perhaps Thurston’s work comes closest to a possible amalgamation of both Wright and Malbon. The apocalyptic emphasis is stressed and drives the action to find some viable substitute for temple sacrifice. There is also emphasis on the positive roles of women, the women of the Markan church perhaps contextualized as disciples of Jesus. Finally, there is an emphasis on the complexity of the deeds of widows in the ancient Christian movement (in their “altar” roles) contextualized in the poor widows offering, especially as it parallels the complexity of the cross. While many puzzle over the perfect action to take at a pivotal moment, the poor widows of the world realize that something must be done, while action is still possible. Any deliberate, premeditated, and selfless act executed by this widow may have been lamented by many who witnessed it as misguided; but, in retrospect, it is lauded by the faithful. Recall that the crucifixion was lamented by Jesus’ followers, and, at least in Mark, its conclusion is left quite open. Mark’s Rabbi Jesus calls us to a discipleship like that of the poor widow: not by coercion, but by decision to act with ultimate generosity, giving one’s whole life.

Somewhere in between and among these interpretations is the meaning of this text. We are no less able to adhere to a singular interpretation, whether classical, historical-critical, or narrative-critical than we can call Good Friday a pleasant feast of the church. It is not at all

⁴⁵ “The Widows as the ‘Altar’ of God” *SBLSP 24* (Atlanta: Scholar’s Press, 1985), 279-89.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 289.

unlike the biblical texts to have historical meanings that contrast with ethical implications. It is impossible in this world of diversity and complex problems and relationships to say that the selfless giving of one's whole life or livelihood is good or bad without knowing fully the context and the audience, both then and now. Wright's historical criticism can only hypothesize on an ancient situation and cannot impart any wisdom to the faithful, nor can Malbon's narrative analysis say definitively that the widow was any better off with only a *quadrans*, even if she had kept it. However, it is not unlikely for the Spirit behind the words to make the best out of humanity's worst failures. As a result, this passage does not just provide historical insight but also gives us a model for discipleship: just as this widow gave her whole life and Jesus gives his whole life (Mk. 10:45), so are we, as the biblical narrative inspires following in their examples.

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