

The Widow's Mite and the Word-Faith Movement

Kirk R. MacGregor

During church stewardship season each fall, a text frequently preached upon to encourage sacrificial giving is Mark 12:41-44 and its parallel in Luke 20:45–21:6, the account of the widow's mite. According to the standard interpretation, Jesus praised the widow for literally giving her last penny to God, such that we should do the same by giving to the church until it hurts. In Word-Faith circles,¹ this text is simultaneously used more dangerously and more palatably. It is used more dangerously in exhorting lower-class people who are already socio-economically disadvantaged to give up whatever meager funds they have to live

¹ A summary of Word-Faith theology can be found in Kirk R. MacGregor, "Word-Faith Movement, Its Theology and Worship," *Cambridge Dictionary of Christianity* (ed. Daniel Patte; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 1329-30. For a critique of Word-Faith theology see *ibid*, "Recognizing and Successfully Averting the Word-Faith Threat to Evangelicalism," *Christian Apologetics Journal* 6.1 (2007): 53-70.

on to Faith churches, thereby exposing them to predatory lenders, exorbitant credit card debt, and even starvation. But it is used more palatably in promising that if people give all, then God will repay them one hundredfold, thereby providing them the financial security they so desperately seek. Both the danger and the allure were displayed by Juanita Bynum during a recent TBN Praise-a-Thon fundraiser:

If you got \$79.36, empty it out; empty it out at the voice of the prophet. O Jesus, if you got \$79.36 I double-dare you to write your last check and declare your bank account empty. Close your account...if all you have is a nickel, wrap it in a tissue and put it in an envelope. If all you have is your clothes, send them...[God says,] give it to me and you will live. Give it to me and you will have more than enough...We're going together into a spirit of wealth.²

Some, though not all, Word-Faith teachers even proclaim that the reason the widow gave was because of her “want,” or desire, for God to bless her financially and pull her out of her dire straits. The widow’s *do ut des*, or “give to get,”³ intent is

² Juanita Bynum, *Praise the Lord: Fall Praise a-Thon*, Trinity Broadcasting Network (8 November 2003).

³ Max Weber famously identified *do ut des* as the defining characteristic of magic in his classic *The Sociology of Religion* (Boston: Beacon, 1963)

articulated, along with some cheap shots at apologists and theologians who oppose it, by John Avanzini:

Now watch this: but she [gave] of her want. She wanted something. She wanted something. And even though she was a widow, she was smarter than the apologists. She was smarter than the theologians. She knew how to get God's attention. And she cast it in. She threw it in because she wanted something from her God. And do you believe that you can get the attention of God and not get that which God promised to give to you?⁴

A number of unwarranted presuppositions plague both the mainstream and Word-Faith interpretations of this text. For example, what reason is there for the assumption that Jesus praised the widow, or for the assumption that the widow gave to God? What evidence exists that Jesus held out the widow as a positive example for us to follow? Concerning the Word-Faith interpretation, what reason is there for the assumption that God thereafter rescued the widow from starving to death, much less supplied her a hundred times as much as she gave? Why think the

27. To understand the Word-Faith Movement as teaching religious magic would not be far from the truth.

⁴ John Avanzini, *Praise the Lord: Fall Praise-a-Thon*, Trinity Broadcasting Network (5 November 1990).

widow's motivation for giving was to receive something in return? This paper will argue that there is no warrant for any of these presuppositions and that, when approached through the canons of grammatico-historical exegesis, the text decisively points in the opposite direction of each one. To prevent possible misunderstanding at this point, let me emphasize that there are many passages in the Bible which, in context, teach that Christians should give, and give sacrificially, to meet the financial needs of poor members of the body of Christ, the poor in general, people who serve in vocational ministry, the local church, and the global church (*e.g.* 2 Cor. 8–9; Rom. 15:25-33; Matt. 25:31-46; 1 Tim. 5:17-18; Acts 2:44-45; 4:32–5:11). However, the account of the widow's mite is simply not one of them. Rather, this text stands in the prophetic tradition of condemning unscrupulous religious leaders who steal from the poor under the guise of their giving to God (*e.g.* Amos 5:11-12; 8:3-10; Isa. 3:14-15; 10:1-2; Jer. 23:1-2; Ezek. 22:26-31; Psa. 10:1-9; Prov. 22:16, 22; 1 Tim. 6:3-10; 2 Peter 2:2-3, 14-15; Jude 11). To demonstrate this fact, we will analyze the account of the widow's mite in its historical and literary context.

The Historical Context of the Widow's Mite

A virtual consensus has emerged among contemporary historical Jesus researchers across the liberal-conservative theological spectrum that Jesus was staunchly opposed to the

Temple and its leadership.⁵ Previously in the Gospel of Mark (11:15-19), Jesus enacted a symbolic destruction of the Temple by overturning the tables of the moneychangers, preventing the sacrificial cultus from functioning, and denouncing the Temple for being a den of *lēstai* (revolutionaries) instead of the house of prayer for all nations that God intended. Under close examination, Jesus' actions constitute a deliberate evocation and performance of Jeremiah 7, where the prophet Jeremiah announced that the First Temple, which his sixth-century BC audience relied upon as a

⁵ For verification see John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991) 357; Marcus J. Borg, *Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1984) 174, 384; E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (New York: Penguin, 1993) 257-69; Jacob Neusner, "Money-Changers in the Temple: The Mishnah's Explanation," *New Testament Studies* 35 (1989): 287-90; Ben F. Meyer, *Christus Faber: The Master-BUILDER and the House of God* (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick, 1992) 262-4; Craig A. Evans, "Jesus' Action in the Temple: Cleansing or Portent of Destruction," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 51 (1989): 237-70; C. K. Barrett, "The House of Prayer and the Den of Thieves," in *Jesus und Paulus: Festschrift für Werner Georg Kümmel zum 70. Geburtstag*, eds. E. Earle Ellis and E. Grässer (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975) 13-20; N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Christian Origins and the Question of God, Vol. 2; Fortress: Minneapolis, 1996) 413-28; Richard J. Bauckham, "Jesus' Demonstration in the Temple," in *Law and Religion: Essays on the Place of the Law in Israel and Early Christianity*, ed. B. Lindars (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1988) 72-89; Scot McKnight, "Who is Jesus? An Introduction to Jesus Studies," in *Jesus Under Fire*, gen. eds. Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995) 65; Ben Witherington III, *New Testament History* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001) 137.

talisman for protection against invaders, must be destroyed due to the corruption stemming from the Jewish leadership and permeating the nation. Similarly, Jesus felt that the Second Temple no longer served as the house of God but had been co-opted by the Jewish religio-political leaders as the talisman of nationalist violence against Rome. Since the Romans had made the Jewish people slaves in their own homeland, reducing over ninety percent of the population to the poverty level and progressively robbing them of their religious liberties, the Sanhedrin propagated a violent messianic scenario as the solution to the Roman problem. Popularizing an interpretation of *mashiach* along the lines of previous national deliverers like the Judges, Saul, David, and Judas Maccabeus, the Temple leadership maintained that the messiah would be a powerful, royal military conqueror who would lead a successful revolt against Rome, drowning in cold blood Roman governors like Pilate and Jewish collaborators with Rome like Herod Antipas and ethnically cleansing Israel from all pagan, Gentile influence. Through this holy violence, Israel would become an independent nation-state once again, as it was (in whole or in part) during the United and Judean Monarchy (1020-586 BC) and the Hasmonean Dynasty (164-63 BC).⁶

⁶ Kirk R. MacGregor, "Understanding 'If Anyone Says to This Mountain...' (Mark 11:20-25) in Its Religio-Historical Context," *Journal of the International Society of Christian Apologetics* 2.1 (2009) 29-31.

The messianic “job description” put forward by the Jewish religio-political leaders stood in diametric opposition to the type of Messiah Jesus claimed to be. By embracing their leadership’s violent messianic aspirations, Jesus proposed that the Jewish people found themselves in a far deeper slavery than simply to Rome: they had voluntarily become slaves to the kingdom of the world, the system of domination and oppression ruled by Satan according to which the world normally operates. In Jesus’ assessment, the Sanhedrin backed by popular opinion were chillingly attempting to become the people of God by capitulating to the worldly kingdom, aiming to employ political zeal and military wrath to usher in God’s great and final redemption and perpetuate it throughout the globe. But Jesus saw that any attempt to win the victory of God through the devices of Satan is to lose the battle. For by trying to beat Rome at its own game, the Jewish religious aristocracy had unwittingly become “slaves” and even “sons” of the devil, “a murderer from the beginning” whose violent tendencies they longed to accomplish (John 8:34-44) and who were blindly leading the people of Israel to certain destruction (Matt. 15:14; 23:15; Luke 6:39). Hence the Jewish leaders comprised the *lēstai* fomenting revolution in the synagogues, streets, and rabbinic schools who holded themselves up in the Temple. By uncritically accepting their program, Jesus contended that Israel had abandoned its original vocation to be the light of the

world which would reach out with open arms to foreign nations and actively display to them God's love.⁷ Nowhere was this abdication of divine calling more clearly seen than at the Temple, as Gentiles were barred from entering the Temple proper on pain of death. All around the Temple proper was a nine-foot high terrace with stairs, surrounded by a five-foot high wall designed to keep out the Gentiles, namely, the "dividing wall" described by Paul (Eph. 2:14). Pillars on the wall bore the following inscription in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew: "No foreigner is to enter within the forecourt and the balustrade around the sanctuary. Whoever is caught will have himself to blame for his subsequent death."⁸ Ironically, the very Temple which was divinely ordained to be a house of prayer and sacrifice for all the nations (1 Kings 8:41-43; Isa. 56:3-7) had become so nationalized and politicized that the Gentiles were barred from the areas where prayers and sacrifices were offered daily. Accordingly, Jesus proclaimed that, when the Jewish people would ultimately go the worldly way of violence and follow a would-be messiah into war with Rome, the Romans would destroy the Temple. Since that destruction would be the result of Israel's point-blank refusal to carry out God's vocation, it would be no mere historical accident. It would constitute the wrath

⁷ Wright, *Jesus*, 595.

⁸ Peretz Segal, "The Penalty of the Warning Inscription from the Temple of Jerusalem," *Israel Exploration Journal* 39 (1989) 79.

of God against Israel and its Temple, which had been taken over by Satan.⁹

Like the movements of John the Baptist and the Essenes, Jesus deliberately offered himself as a substitute to the Temple. What a person would normally get by going to the Temple—forgiveness of sins, purification, and restored relationship with God—Jesus freely offered to anyone, Jew and Gentile alike (Mark 7:24-30; Matt. 8:5-13; Luke 7:1-10), who chose to follow him.¹⁰ At the close of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus exhorted his hearers to build their house on the rock, not on the sand (Matt. 7:24-28; Luke 6:47-49), a clear usage of Temple language. Here Jesus communicated that the true Temple, the real house on the rock, would consist of the community that built its life on Jesus' words and actions. In short, Jesus was not only a one-man counter-Temple movement but also the foundation of a new Temple to be built from his followers, who served as its living stones (1 Cor. 3:10-17; 1 Peter 2:4-6).¹¹ For these reasons, it can be safely concluded that Jesus did not regard giving to the Jerusalem Temple as giving to God; in fact, he regarded it as unwittingly giving to Satan. Accordingly, Jesus sharply

⁹ Wright, *Jesus*, 459-461.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 108, 132, 161.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 415-416.

condemned the means through which people were pressured to give to the Temple as human traditions that violated God's commandments. Regarding their directive that people designate whatever financial resources they would have otherwise supplied their parents as *korban* (a gift to the Temple treasury), Jesus declared to the Jewish religious leaders:

You have a fine way of setting aside the commandment of God in order that your traditions might stand. For Moses said, "Honor your father and your mother," and "Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die." But you yourselves say that if anyone tells father or mother, "Whatever support you might have had from me is *Korban* (that is, an offering to the Temple)"—then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, nullifying the word of God by the tradition which you received (Mark 7:9-13).

Hence none of Jesus' followers would have given to the Temple, a fact evidenced by the fact that, in the account of the widow's mite, neither Jesus nor his disciples contributed anything to the Temple treasury (Mark 12:41). Jesus wouldn't have wanted anyone to give to the Temple, least of all this poor widow. Per Torah, Prophets, and Writings, she was one of the people the Temple ministries should have provided for, not the other way around. As Yahweh stated in Deuteronomy 15:11, "Since there will never cease to be

some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land’” (cf. Isa. 25:4; 58:7; Psa. 41:1; 72:4, 12; Prov. 19:17; 21:13; 28:27; 31:9).

The Literary Context of the Widow’s Mite

Structurally, the account of the widow’s mite (Mark 12:41-44) is the middle section of an ABA “sandwich-like” structure where A begins, is interrupted by B, and then finishes. Highly characteristic of Mark, this stylistic device renders the frame A sections (the two “slices of bread”) and the center B section (the “meat”) as mutually interactive, portraying A and B as indispensable for the interpretation of one another.¹² (The same middle section is found in the Lukan parallel). As the “meat” or substance, the B section supplies the *raison d’être* for the content of the A sections (just as a hot dog link necessitates a hot dog bun and not a hamburger bun or other bread product on either side

¹² From a critical perspective, John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999, 105-106) asserts that this is one of seven intercalations in Mark; the others are 3:20-35 (A begins: 3:20-21; B begins and ends: 3:22-30; A ends: 3:31-35), 5:21-43 (A begins: 5:21-24; B begins and ends: 5:25-34; A ends: 5:35-43), 6:7-34 (A begins: 6:7-13; B begins and ends: 6:14-29; A ends: 6:30-34), 11:12-25 (A begins: 11:12-14; B begins and ends: 11:15-19; A ends: 11:20-25), 14:1-11 (A begins: 14:1-2; B begins and ends: 14:3-9; A ends: 14:10-11), and 14:54-72 (A begins: 14:54; B begins and ends: 14:55-65; A ends: 14:66-72).

thereof). Hence the A sections contain their particular content because of the B section: the first A section furnishes the necessary background for setting up the B section, and the second A section gives the ramifications or consequences of the B section. Looking at things from the opposite direction, the B section is a case study of the events which are foreshadowed in the first A section and whose results are summarized in the second A section. The middle section, of which the account of the widow's mite constitutes the meat, runs as follows:

A begins: As Jesus taught in the Temple, he was saying, "Beware of the scribes (*grammateōn*), the ones desiring to walk about in long robes and to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have the chief seats in the synagogues and places of honor at the banquets. They devour (*katesthiontes*) the houses of the widows and for pretense pray long prayers. They will receive greater condemnation" (Mark 12:38-40).

B begins and ends: And having sat down opposite the treasury (*gazophylakiou*), Jesus was observing how the crowd threw copper coins into the treasury, and many rich people were throwing in much. And one poor widow came and threw in two lepta, which make up a quadrans (worth approximately one-

fourth of a cent).¹³ And having summoned his disciples, Jesus said to them, “Truly I say to you that this poor widow threw in more than all the people throwing into the treasury; for everyone threw in from their abundance, but this widow from her poverty (*hysterēseōs*) put in everything, as much as she had, all her life” (Mark 12:41-44).

A ends: And as he went out of the Temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher, what great stones and what great buildings!” But Jesus said to him, “Do you see these great buildings? By no means (*ou mē*, the strongest possible negation) will one stone be left here upon another; all will be thrown down” (Mark 13:1-2).

This middle (“meat”) section provides a failsafe test for ensuring the correct interpretation of the account of the widow’s mite. The only valid interpretation of this account will be one whose background is furnished by Mark 12:38-40 (the first A section), whose ramifications are spelled out by Mark 13:1-2 (the second A section), and which forms a case study with the power to explain both Mark 12:38-40 and 13:1-2 (both A sections). The

¹³ Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 729.

first A section shows Jesus condemning the *grammateis* (a collective designation for the Jewish religious leaders) to a greater punishment than other sinners specifically because they *katesthiontes* (devour in the sense of utterly reducing to nothing) widows' houses. In their authoritative *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, Johannes Louw and Eugene Nida state that in Mark 12:40 *katesthiontes* (lexical form *katesthiō*) specifically carries the following connotation: "to take over by dishonest means the property of someone else – 'to appropriate dishonestly, to rob.'"¹⁴ Like wolves in sheep's clothing, the religious leaders hypocritically covered up their criminal behavior by uttering elaborate prayers, sauntering about in priestly garb, and taking the seats of authority in the synagogues, leading the masses to trust and respect them as the guardians of sacred tradition. The second A section portrays a Jesus so angry over what has just taken place (in the B section) that he irrevocably sentenced the entire Temple compound to destruction, making it impossible for even one stone to remain upon another. Without even looking at the B section (the account of the widow's mite), we would expect for it to depict a widow getting taken for everything she is worth by the Jewish religious leaders, though in

¹⁴ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* (2 vols.; New York: United Bible Societies, 1989) 1:585; cf. 1:758.

such a sly and deceptive manner that the masses are none the wiser. This depiction would comprise precisely the kind of case study that explains why the first A section prefigures widows' homes being devoured and why the second A section presents an irate Jesus satisfied with nothing less than the Temple's demolition. A careful analysis of the account of the widow's mite shows that our expectation is indeed the case.

The Grammatico-Historical Interpretation of the Widow's Mite

The first observation that surfaces in the account of the widow's mite is the system the Jewish religious leaders set up whereby people would make provisions for the Temple, which is literally what the text says Jesus was observing: "*how (pōs) the crowd threw copper coins into the treasury.*" In direct violation of the Torah, this system for giving was not anonymous, or constructed so that the amount a person contributed was known only to oneself and to the officiating priest (Lev. 1–8). Rather, the amount was public and out in the open so that everyone knew what everyone else gave. The Temple authorities implemented this feature because it pressured people to give more than they otherwise would have, a practice contrary to Yahweh's command in Exodus 25:2: "Tell the Israelites to take for me an offering; from

all whose hearts prompt them to give you shall receive the offering for me.” Paul echoed this command while protesting the idea of giving under pressure: “Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9:7). In short, the Jewish religious leaders constructed an unbiblical system of giving to the Temple where people, both implicitly and explicitly, competed against each other for greater levels of piety through greater offerings. By fostering the false attitude that one’s closeness to God was proportional to the amount one contributed, this system victimized people who could not responsibly afford to give much or anything and still provide for themselves and their families. Since the Romans had driven over ninety percent of the *am ha’aretz* (people of the land) to the poverty level, the vast majority of Israelites were shamed by this predatory system into giving well beyond their means. This was accomplished brilliantly by putting the giving of the wealthy on the same stage as the giving of the poor. Hence we next observe precisely this contrast: “[A]nd many rich people were throwing in much. And one poor widow came and threw in two lepta, which make up a quadrans.” Consequently, the Temple system cultivated a vicious circle: for the poor to draw close to God they needed to give at a level which threatened their survival, and when they did, they were shamed as not doing enough for God because of the comparative paucity of their offerings with the

offerings of the rich.

The focus on a poor widow is highly significant because it provides a direct link with the first A section of the text, which made devouring the houses of widows the fundamental indictment against the Jewish religious authorities. Since, by definition, the first A section of a text prefigures what happens in the B section and the B section furnishes a case study of what is prefigured, the only contextually possible interpretation of the widow's mite is that we are witnessing her house being devoured by the corrupt system the authorities have put in place. As Addison G. Wright astutely comments in his study of the widow's mite, "The context is immediately at hand. In both Gospels [Mark and Luke], Jesus condemns those scribes who devour the houses of widows, and then follows immediately the story of a widow whose house has beyond doubt just been devoured. What other words would be more appropriate to describe it?"¹⁵ Because the present Temple revenue system was the only one Jesus' disciples and the crowds had ever known and was endorsed by all the rabbis they had ever encountered, they assumed its legitimacy and its conformity with Scripture. A revenue system which was *prima facie* unjust had become socially acceptable, as traditionalism had prevented the

¹⁵ Addison G. Wright, "The Widow's Mites: Praise or Lament?—A Matter of Context," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 44 (1982) 261.

people from going beyond the surface and seeing the massive corruption taking place before their eyes. But Jesus would not let this invaluable opportunity be lost to expose the authorities' corruption. So immediately after the widow threw her two lepta into the treasury, Jesus "summoned his disciples" and declared, "Truly I say to you that this poor widow threw in more than all the people throwing into the treasury; for everyone threw in from their abundance, but this widow from her poverty put in everything, as much as she had, all her life." The three aspects of Jesus' response systematically disclose the widow's oppression. First, Jesus exposed the fallacy used to shame her—namely, that she contributed less than everyone else. Rather, she contributed everything she possessed as opposed to the rich, who contributed a minute percentage of what they possessed. Second, Jesus highlighted that she should not have contributed anything to the treasury by calling attention to her poverty. That "this widow [gave] from her poverty (*hysterēseōs*)" immediately refutes the eisegesis of John Avanzini that the widow gave from her "want" for God to prosper her. Here Avanzini exploits the KJV translation of *hysterēseōs* as "want" ("she of her want did cast in") and neglects to tell his hearers that, in Elizabethan English, "want" meant "poverty" and not "desire." Louw and Nida leave no doubt that *hysterēsis* (lexical form of *hysterēseōs*) has nothing to do with desire but denotes a deep state of poverty, namely, "to be lacking

in what is essential or needed.”¹⁶ Hence this widow was a person for whom the Temple should have provided, not the other way around. Her being pressured to give to the Temple at all was a flagrant violation of the social justice proclaimed by Amos, Isaiah, and other Hebrew Biblical prophets. Third, even though it looked like she gave practically nothing, Jesus insisted that this illusion was carefully crafted by the Jewish religious leaders in order to devour her house, to fleece her for everything she was worth while preserving the air of social acceptability. This, of course, is precisely what Jesus denounced the authorities for in the first A section: being criminals who cloak themselves in sacred robes. Thus Jesus insisted with threefold repetition that she was taken for “everything, as much as she had, all her life.” This last phrase carries the clear implication that now the widow has nothing left to live on and will probably succumb to starvation. The very act which the widow falsely thought would bring her closer to God will likely lead to her death.

We can accurately paraphrase Jesus’ response as follows: “Truly I say to you, this widow, and everyone else thinks she put into the Temple treasury much less than all the rich benefactors. Don’t be fooled by this highly deceptive system the authorities have instituted—nothing could be further from the truth. Just think

¹⁶ Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 1:562.

about it proportionally. The rich each gave a tiny fraction of what they had, while the widow gave everything she had. Accordingly, the widow is the victim of spiritual fraud, since the false doctrine that she has given less than everyone else leads her to wrongly think that God is disappointed in her and that she is far from God. On top of that, this widow has been taken for everything she is worth by the authorities. For she was spiritually pressured to contribute literally everything she possessed. Her entire life is now gone. She has nothing to provide her with food, clothing, or shelter. The religious authorities have devoured her house. She will now likely starve to death, and if she does, the authorities are guilty of her murder.” Addison Wright draws precisely the same understanding of Jesus’ statement:

Jesus’ saying...is a lament, “Amen, I tell you, she gave more than all the others.” Or, as we would say, “One could easily fail to notice it, but there is the tragedy of the day—she put in her whole living.” She had been taught and encouraged by religious leaders to give as she does, and Jesus condemns the value system that motivates her action, and he condemns the people who conditioned her to do it.¹⁷

If our interpretation thus far is correct, we should expect to find in the second A section a furious Jesus who wants retribution for the

¹⁷ Wright, “Widow’s Mites,” 262.

widow and explains how that retribution will unfold. This is precisely what we find. When one of his disciples was impressed by the grandeur of the Temple compound, Jesus told him using the strongest possible negation (*ou mē*) that not even a single stone will be left upon another and reiterates that all of the great buildings making up the Temple compound will be destroyed. As a result of robbing the poor widow blind along with countless other widows like her, it is literally impossible for the Temple or a single part thereof to avoid destruction.

We may now return to our failsafe test to verify the accuracy of our interpretation of the widow's mite over against previous interpretations. Here the question is: which interpretation explains the content of the surrounding A sections, such that the first A section foreshadows it and the second A section explains its consequences? Only the true interpretation can succeed in this regard. On our interpretation, Jesus did not praise the widow for giving to the Temple. Given Jesus' antipathy toward the Temple, he did not even want the rich, much less the poor widow, to give to this corrupt institution now controlled by Satan. Rather, he pointed out how the widow had been taken for everything she possessed by the corrupt Temple authorities, as well as how the revenue system set up by those authorities made the widow feel alienated from God for giving much less than the rich, so shaming the victim. This interpretation brilliantly explains why the first A section

castigates the Temple authorities for devouring the houses of widows and exposes their lengthy prayers, religious robes, places of honor in the marketplace, and seats of prominence in the synagogue as masks to hide their corruption. It also explains why the first A section sentences these authorities to a higher level of damnation. Likewise, this interpretation skillfully explains why the second A section features Jesus angrily sentencing the Temple itself to utter destruction, as the Temple's annihilation is the divine consequence of the widow's victimization. As Addison Wright summarizes, "[T]here is no praise of the widow in the passage and no invitation to imitate her, precisely because she ought not be imitated....the immediate context in both Gospels [Mark and Luke] is clear enough: devouring the houses of widows..., not one stone left upon another."¹⁸

No other interpretation passes the failsafe test. On any interpretation (traditional or Word-Faith) that Jesus praised the widow for giving sacrificially, nothing in the first A section foreshadows it. Thus any such interpretation manifestly fails to explain why Jesus condemns the scribes for devouring widows' houses at all or why he is upset about their receiving the traditional honors customarily due to religious leaders. If Jesus wanted the rich or people in general to give as generously as the widow, we

¹⁸ Ibid., 262-263.

should expect to find some exhortation to sacrificial giving in the first A section, where there occurs nothing of the sort. Likewise, nothing in the second A section could plausibly be taken as a consequence of the widow's praiseworthy gift. If her gift were virtuous, we should expect to see in the second A section how her gift would bless the Temple and perhaps even ensure its protection from Roman attack, but the exact opposite is the case. Certainly it could never be said, per the literary requirements of the text, that Jesus' commending the widow furnishes a case study of his condemnation of the Temple authorities which yields the Temple's destruction as its inevitable result. In short, any interpretation that Jesus praised the widow and that we are to follow her example leaves us with no relation whatsoever between the B section and either of the A sections of this text, which renders the interpretation self-refuting. The Word-Faith versions of this interpretation present even greater absurdities. On the view that the widow would receive a hundredfold return, the scribes would not have been castigated but praised, since their devouring widows' houses would simply enable widows to get a hundred times more. There is no possible connection between a poor widow's receiving a hundredfold return through the Temple system and Jesus condemning that system (second A section) and its leaders (first A section) to destruction. As a champion of the poor (Luke 6:20-21), Jesus would have taken to the streets and

exhorted all who were in need to give to the Temple so that they could not only survive but thrive. On the view that Jesus praises the widow for her give-to-get motivation, we would find Jesus uttering an aphorism in the first A section like “Give to the Temple so that God will open up the windows of heaven to you.” Since the second A section necessarily conveys the result of the B section, the second A section would report the now wealthy widow basking in her financial overflow. If either Word-Faith view were correct, we would find two remarkably different slices of “bread” around the account of the widow’s mite than the slices we do in fact find.

Concluding Reflections

We have demonstrated that, in view of the religio-historical context and literary structure of the account of the widow’s mite (Mark 12:41-44; cf. Luke 20:45–21:6), Jesus was actually pointing out how the Jewish religious leaders fraudulently took the widow for everything she was worth, leaving one of the most vulnerable persons in society with nothing to live on. On top of such robbery, the Jewish authorities so deceptively set up the system of Temple contributions that it appeared the widow gave far less than the wealthy, thereby shaming the victim into feeling she had not done enough for God. For actions such as these, the Jewish authorities

merit God's greater condemnation, and the Temple will be destroyed. While this interpretation fits like a hand in the glove of the section to which it belongs, the traditional interpretation that Jesus praised the widow for her act of sacrificial giving as well as its bizarre Word-Faith variants do not fit the glove at all. In light of this fact, it is surprising that our exegesis is unknown in the history of premodern interpretation and little known in contemporary scholarship. Apart from a brief comment by Quentin Quesnell (1969)¹⁹ and the detailed study of Addison Wright (1982)²⁰ (whose results have been followed by Joseph Fitzmyer [1985],²¹ Ched Myers [1988],²² and Craig Evans [2001]²³), our exegesis appears to be absent from the literature. One cannot help but suspect that, rather than the proper function of

¹⁹ Quentin Quesnell, *The Mind of Mark* (Analecta Biblica 38; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1969) 151: "Widow's Mite. The point is probably an elaboration of the way the Scribes 'devour the houses of widows' (12,40) so that rebuke and rejection of the wrongdoers is central."

²⁰ Wright, "Widow's Mites," 256-265.

²¹ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke (X-XXIV): Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (Anchor Bible 28A; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1985) 1320-1321.

²² Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988) 321.

²³ Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20* (Word Biblical Commentary 34B; Nashville: Word, 2001) 282-283.

critical exegesis informing church thinking and preaching, church interests and homiletic efficacy in fundraising have adversely affected critical exegesis in the history of the interpretation of this text. Our suspicion is brought home nicely by the poignant rhetorical questions of Addison Wright:

[I]f any one of us were actually to see in real life a poor widow giving the very last of her money to religion, would we not judge the act to be repulsive and to be based on misguided piety because she would be neglecting her own needs? Do we really think that Jesus would have reacted otherwise? Do we really think that he would have enthused over such a donation?²⁴

We could add to this suspicion the heretofore overlooked observation that the Gospel of John (8:12-59) furnishes an independent account of Jesus' teaching in the *gazophylakiō*, or Temple treasury (8:20), precisely where he taught in the account of the widow's mite (Mark 12:41; Luke 21:1). Here Jesus' direct and repeated affronts to the Jewish authorities overseeing the treasury, including "You know neither me nor my Father; if you knew me, you would know my Father also" (8:19; cf. 8:54-55), "If you were

²⁴ Wright, "Widow's Mites," 256.

Abraham's children, you would be doing what Abraham did, but now you are trying to kill me" (8:39-40; cf. 8:37), "You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires" (8:44), and "If I would say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you" (8:55), renders unthinkable the notion that Jesus would want anyone, not to mention an impoverished widow, to financially support their demonic administration. Why the Markan and the Johannine account have never been harmonized so as to mutually aid in the interpretation of the other despite their clear grammatical link is truly mind-boggling.

Our study carries profound implications for the use of the account of the widow's mite in authentically Christian churches and in Word-Faith churches. Christian leaders must be careful never to employ this text in an attempt to solicit money, despite the fact that it "preaches well," "has proven financially effective in the past because of its emotional appeal," or for any other reason. Not only would this commit "sacred dishonesty," but it runs the perilous risk of unwittingly devouring the widows and less fortunate in our midst, so placing the same verdict upon our leadership and our churches as Jesus proclaimed for the Jewish authorities and the Temple. Rather, Christian leaders should apply this text by carefully considering if the donation systems their churches have in place unwittingly abuse the poor by placing undue theological or social pressure on them to give beyond their

means. More than that, the account of the widow's mite calls Christian leaders to reexamine any structure in the church, financial or otherwise, whose legitimacy is taken for granted because of its longevity. All such structures must be evaluated against the yardstick of Scripture and, if failing to measure up, must be revised in line with Scripture or replaced with a model compatible with Scripture. Further, our study discloses that what many authentically Christian churches are in danger of doing to people in lower socio-economic classes through the account of the widow's mite, the Word-Faith churches overtly and deliberately do. In precisely the same manner as the Jewish religious leaders in the text, Word-Faith leaders twist the text to take advantage of the poorest and most vulnerable segment of society for the sake of greed. By telling people with next to nothing that the only way to get God's attention is to give all they have to Faith ministries, Faith leaders propagate the same false doctrine as the first-century Jewish religious leaders. By filling the indigent with the false hope that God will financially take care of them at all, much less give them a hundredfold return, for supporting Faith ministries, Faith leaders perpetrate an even bigger spiritual fraud than their Temple counterparts. For while the widow had no expectation of financial remuneration, Faith adherents are led to trust God to provide for them in exchange for sinfully giving to Faith ministries, and when God refuses to reward their sin, they lose confidence that God

loves them and cares for their well-being. Hence the end result of the Faith sham may be not only physical but also spiritual death. Can anyone doubt that, in God's perspective, teachers like Kenneth Copeland are responsible for the potential starvation and spiritual alienation of the destitute through sermons such as the following?

Have you ever wanted to get God's attention? You can, you know. There's a certain kind of boldness, a certain kind of faith in giving that will get His attention every time. You can see that in Mark 12.

Read that chapter and just imagine the situation it describes. Jesus was sitting by the treasury watching as people put in their offerings.... Right in the middle of it all, this poor widow walked up and threw in her offering. I can just see her in my mind's eye. I can hear her say to herself, "By the eternal Almighty God that liveth, I've had enough of this poverty. I'm fed up with having nothing but want. I may just be a poor widow now, but I'm not going to be a poor widow anymore. I'm going to be a *broke* widow if God doesn't do something here because I'm giving Him everything I've got!"

Then, wham! She threw that last little dab of money she had into the offering....She gave in faith—not in fear. She didn't stop and calculate what she didn't have and say, "Boy, if I do this, tomorrow I won't eat." She just

boldly threw in all she had, expecting God to take care of her in return.

You and I need to catch hold of that same attitude. We need to start holding our offerings up to the Lord in confidence, throwing it boldly into His service, expecting His blessings in return.

If you have a need right now, get God’s attention by giving with boldness like that widow woman did. Throw open the door of your household by throwing everything you have at Jesus. Let God know that He is your source. Before long, the abundance of God will come pouring in!²⁵

Of course, one of the many ironies in Copeland’s rhetoric is that Jesus wanted the widow to stop and think, “If I do this, tomorrow I won’t eat.” A further irony noted by Jesus is that the widow would not only likely perish but her offering would also go to nothing, as the Temple for which she contributed her very life would be destroyed by God. Consequently, the widow’s offering and her death would prove vain. Tragically, those who heed the exhortation of Copeland and his ilk will not only descend into financial ruin, but the ill-gotten Faith financial empires to which

²⁵ Kenneth Copeland, “Throw Open the Door,” in idem and Gloria Copeland, *From Faith to Faith* (Tulsa: Harrison House, 2011) 18; emphasis in original.

they have contributed will be devastated by Jesus on the day of his coming if not before.

In closing, I would charge and encourage Christian leaders to cultivate a culture of sound grammatico-historical exegesis of Scripture in their churches so that laypeople will learn not to believe just any interpretation of the Bible but to only accept an interpretation after they have proven for themselves that it represents the author's intent. Only then will the deceptive claim of the Word-Faith Movement to represent biblical Christianity be forever abated.