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An Unruly Widow in Mark 12

Abstract

Die „arme Witwe“ in Markus 12,41–44 ist schon auf sehr verschiedene Arten und Weisen interpretiert worden, unter anderem als exemplarische Gläubige, als Opfer eines perversen religiös-ökonomischen Systems oder auch als besonders christusähnliche Person. In diesem Beitrag wird ein neuer Ansatz vorgeschlagen: Indem die Witwe ihr ganzes „Leben“ (gr. bios) verschenkt, ist ihr Handeln nicht nur besonders großzügig oder besonders tragisch, sondern ihre Gabe lässt sich als eine Äußerung von Widerstand oder Protest verstehen. Der Beitrag schließt an eine längere Tradition der gendersensiblen Exegese dieser Perikope an und versucht die im Text unhörbare Stimme einer Frau hörbar zu machen.

1. Introduction¹

The key thesis of this contribution is the following: according to Jesus' interpretation of her behavior, the widow in Mark 12:41–44 acts subversively when she puts all her possessions into the offering box. She is not just a paradigm of piety, no mere example of discipleship or true devotion,² and she is not primarily a Christological chiffre either.³ She is also more than just a living “advertisement” of the perversion of the ruling class and the economic system associated with the Temple,⁴ or a person lamented by Jesus because of her useless sacrifice.⁵ Instead, the woman opts for a tactic similar to turning the other cheek or going the second mile - at least in the understanding of Jesus' interpretation of her acts that is proposed here (and without access to what she may have thought herself), and reading from a perspective sensitive to questions of power and inequalities.⁶ By going beyond what would be required from her, she exposes religious and social wrongs because of which she is being exploited. This contribution, which outlines the logic behind this attitude on the part of the widow, aims to offer a plausible interpretation of Mark 12:41–44, both within the pericope itself and within its immediate literary background (and in its historical context).⁷ In doing so, it offers a new

answer to the question of the meaning and function of this striking, yet silent and nameless woman in Mark 12. A starting point for the interpretation is offered by the notion, broadly supported in exegetical scholarship, that the text deals with the functioning of the Temple (and its economics) as part of an unjust and exploitative society, which is related to forms of resistance on the part of the marginal as they occur elsewhere in Jesus' traditions. That Temple criticism is at stake is indicated by the distance between the ideals outlined in texts such as Psalm 84:3 on the one hand, and the criticism of religious leaders that immediately precedes Mark 12:41–44 (vv. 38–40) and the subsequent apocalyptic speech of Jesus in Mark 13, which sees little future for the Temple.⁸ Methodologically, this essay approaches Mark 12:41–44 from a narrative perspective and focuses on what takes place in the world “of” the text, rather than “behind” or “in front of” it. References to what characters may have thought or felt, as they occur in what follows, are to be taken in a metaphorical sense. In proceeding in this manner, this essay seeks to further an interpretative agenda that is informed by feminist concerns, such as an interest in the role of women and an exploration of their agency, should a text give reason to do so (and given that the widow in Mark 12 acts, there is such a reason). Naturally, the text has been the (frequent) subject of (feminist) interpretation. Important contributions include those of Wright,⁹ who initiated a shift in interpretation from understanding Jesus' words as a praise of the widow to a lament over her. Struthers Malbon,¹⁰ reacting to Wright, has argued that the narrative is set in multiple narrative contexts, which allows for multiple (valid) interpretations. Surveying some recent interpretations, including some by feminist scholars, gives an impression as to the current state of the question (in lieu of surveying all available literature, which would go widely beyond the scope of this contribution; although a short pericope, it has invited many interpretations).

In a contribution to the 2015 Festschrift for Ross Shepard Kraemer, Levine, the editor of the *Feminist Companion to the Gospel of Mark* (in which Struthers Malbon's contribution was reprinted), argues as follows:

“Mark's widow is, in her narrative context, a visual example of wholehearted dedication, self-sacrifice, and piety. She becomes, like the woman who anoints Jesus, an object lesson for Jesus and a moral exemplar for Mark's readers. But in Mark's narrative, causes of poverty go unaddressed; the widow's fate especially goes unnoticed, given the predicted destruction of

the temple - a temple in whose system she participates; and the widow's own interior thoughts go unnoted. She requires a political response."¹¹

Levine also includes some words of hermeneutical and historiographical caution in her essay that are worth quoting here as well:

"The widow is, for revisionist readers, a victim of a corrupt system. The good news in their readings can be found in institutional critique, anti-imperial polemic, and attention to economic inequity. The conclusions, however, can derive from ahistorical moves, and they can threaten to inculcate or reinforce anti-Jewish readings even as they strip away the widow's agency and awareness. The woman is necessarily an unreliable witness. She does not speak for herself, so we have to give her words. In doing so, we will project our own values and concerns, traditions, and ethics, onto her. These projections then become part of our common discourse today, as we interrogate the arguments, and the evidence. From this process, even unreliable witnesses may tell us something about themselves, and about ourselves as well."¹²

Taking Levine's words into account, it should be stressed that

- (a) the pericope is regarded as concerning an intra-Jewish event and commentary upon it, not an anti-Jewish one;
- (b) the "unreliable" witness, i.e. the widow, constitutes, in fact, a "gap" in the text, which, as scholars of narrative have pointed out,¹³ invites filling out. Naturally, this takes place, also in this essay, by making use of the imagination of the reader (the essay's author), yet this imagination should, in order to be more than just a flight of fancy and to contribute to (scholarly) reflection on the text, be substantiated: that is the purpose of the remainder of this text.

In the 2015 Festschrift for Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, Ira Brent Driggers also makes a case¹⁴ in which he seeks to mediate between the positions of Wright and Struthers Malbon. In particular, he argues that while there is a dimension of praise for the (pious) gift of the widow, the victimization of the widow is also a strong theme in the text, and the dissimilarity between the two should be taken into account in an interpretation of the text, noting that

“Ironically, it is in the extreme-ness of Mark’s language - ‘everything she had ... her whole life’ (12:44) - that both encourages a parallel to discipleship at the symbolic level and establishes the tragedy of the widow’s plight at the literal level.”¹⁵

Finally, in 2019, Becker argued that the story has three functions:¹⁶

“Vor diesem Hintergrund hat Jesu Anerkennung der ‚armen Witwe‘ drei Funktionen – und so bleibt die markinische Erzählung nicht bei der Beschreibung der Witwe (und ihrer Handlung) stehen, sondern zielt auf die Deutung, die Jesus dem Auftreten der Witwe verleiht: Der markinische Jesus übt in Jerusalem, ganz im Sinne einer jüdischen Prophetengestalt, erstens Tempel- und Sozialkritik. Indem er der armen Witwe und nicht den vielen Reichen, die am Tempel Geld einlegen, Recht und Würde zuspricht, erweist Jesus sich zweitens als wahrer und gerechter Herrscher, Königs- oder Gottessohn (s. auch Mk 12,35–37): Er verhilft der Witwe zu ihrer Anerkennung. Eine Motivparallele dazu findet sich in einem Makarismus im slavischen Henochbuch (42,9), wo es heißt: Selig ist, wer ein gerechtes Gericht für die Waise und die Witwe richtet und jedem Gekränkten hilft.

Die Episode über die ‚arme Witwe‘ steht schließlich im Zusammenhang der Zeitdeutung seit der Verfluchung des Feigenbaumes in Mk 11 (Vv. 12–14, 20–1). Im Lichte eines zweiten Henochbelegs (50,6) ist auch in Mk 12,41-4 unausgesprochen vorausgesetzt, dass die Missachtung der Witwe die Strafe Gottes heraufbeschwört.”

Thus, in many ways, there is a shift back to an interpretation of the widow in terms of an exemplum or paradeigma (and with that, of the entire episode as a chreia), either of piety or of Christ(ology), or both, while the dimension of criticism (or lament) is retained to a greater or lesser extent.¹⁷

Here, a different approach focuses on the woman’s agency and its potentially subversive character, which has been proposed before, for instance by Kim and Kozar. Kim focuses on the widow’s rejection of any and all ties to the Roman Empire and her allegiance with Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom, an interpretation that is not followed here, as neither topic seems to be particularly prominent in the (immediate) literary context of the pericope, nor in the pericope itself.¹⁸ Kozar seeks to focus on the widow’s silent action as a free act, which means that, although silent, she is not silenced by anyone:

“The widow’s contribution must be viewed as freely given. It is precisely the gift of her life and the ethic this might inspire that does justice to her silent act of total giving. I argue that the Temple widow is not silenced by any societal group. Viewing her as simple reference to male conflict devalues her silent and free action.”¹⁹

Taking its cue from these contributions and the broader tradition of interpretation that stresses the story’s character as one of protest against social (or rather, socio-religious) injustice, this contribution explores the silent agency of the widow further. In doing so, due attention is paid to the narrative contexts involved as well, both the immediate one (the criticism of religious leaders preceding and the apocalyptic discourse concerning the Temple following the pericope) and the broader one (the Christological narrative of Mark, in the sense of a narrative that unpacks the identification of Jesus as the Christ). In doing so, it will be argued that the widow’s free act of overabundant generosity is both subversive vis-à-vis the (economic and political) system in which she is trapped and restores her dignity,²⁰ while it can also be read as an interpretive lens through which the subsequent narrative of Jesus’ betrayal and passion can be read. In this narrative, the apparent victim is, seen on the background of Markian Christology and soteriology at large, an active agent who gives himself, albeit in the guise of being betrayed, which only happens willingly.²¹ In this way, while the widow can (logically) also be seen as an instantiation of Christ-like identity, Jesus can just as well be seen as an example of widow-like existence. The former is suggested by the inclusion of Mark 12:41–44 into the larger narrative of Jesus’ vita, yet Jesus’ identification in the course of this narrative also takes shape through the “company that he keeps” and with which he associates or even identifies himself.²² With this background, it is now possible to turn to those aspects of the Jesus tradition that will serve as a hermeneutical lens that permits the development of a “new perspective” on the widow in Mark 12:41–44.

2. Over the Top: A Way of Resistance

In the past decennia, a tradition of research has been developed that stresses the subversive character of seemingly mild or submissive attitudes that Jesus teaches his disciples (see recently Weidemann, in relation to masculinity studies).²³ They show that Jesus’ instructions

entail more than a call for humility. A key text is in this respect Matthew 5:38–41 (par. Luke 6:29–30):

38 Ἦκούσατε ὅτι ἐρρέθη· ὀφθαλμὸν ἀντὶ ὀφθαλμοῦ καὶ ὀδόντα ἀντὶ ὀδόντος. 39 ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν μὴ ἀντιστῆναι τῷ πονηρῷ· ἀλλ' ὅστις σε ραπίζει εἰς τὴν δεξιὰν σιαγόνα [σου], στρέψον αὐτῷ καὶ τὴν ἄλλην· 40 καὶ τῷ θέλοντί σοι κριθῆναι καὶ τὸν χιτῶνά σου λαβεῖν, ἄφες αὐτῷ καὶ τὸ ἱμάτιον· 41 καὶ ὅστις σε ἀγγαρεύσει μίλιον ἓν, ὕπαγε μετ' αὐτοῦ δύο.
38 You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” 39 But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; 40 and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; 41 and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. (NRSV)

By contextualizing such ethical instructions in their socio-political setting, Jesus' teachings gain additional relief. Going the (literal and proverbial) extra mile then becomes more than just a request for submissiveness, but an attitude that unmask and undermines the abusive exercise of power by embracing it and going beyond its demands. By foregoing retaliation - something that isn't possible for someone in a marginal or subordinate position to begin with, certainly not in a colonial context (such as first-century CE Palestine) - weakness is transformed into power (even silently so, as verbal protest does not figure here; also, the widow in Mark 12 is silent). Weidemann summarizes this approach, which is viable in situations of (institutional) powerlessness, as follows, focusing on going the second mile:

“In aller Öffentlichkeit einem der Besitzer das Gepäck hinterherzutragen, ist natürlich ebenfalls eine massive Form der Demütigung, die weit schwerer wiegt als der Aspekt der physischen Gewalt. Indem er jedoch freiwillig eine zweite Meile mitgeht, bestimmt der vermeintlich Gezwungene selbst, wie lange und wie weit er mitgeht, er behält also das Heft des Handelns in der Hand. Hinzu kommt, dass er zugleich öffentlich in Szene setzt, er halte den Soldaten zu schwach für den Fußmarsch.”²⁴

This contribution argues that precisely this dynamic and social logic also occur in Mark 12:41–44. This argument will be developed as a novel interpretative proposal for this text, which has particular attention to female agency (albeit agency constructed through the, probably, doubly male lens of the Mark/Markinian tradition, assuming male authorship, and

Jesus as a male protagonist in Mark's narrative; in addition, also the author of this essay identifies as male).

This manner of proceeding does not mean that a genealogical relationship is assumed between the Markinian text and this tradition as it is now found in Matthew 5:38–41 and Luke 6:29–30 (likely stemming from Q);²⁵ only an analogy between the contents of both traditions is constructed and argued for. That the two traditions seem to belong to different genres (direct instruction and, possibly, a chreia) does not need to be a problem, as the genres are much more akin than it might look at first glance. While Matthew and Luke offer ethical instruction without a broader narrative context (beyond the frame of the Sermon on the Mount/Plain), Mark's tradition offers Jesus' commentary in the context of a brief narrative. In that sense, the Markinian episode may be considered as a whole as a chreia (cf. also Jesus' teaching concerning a fig tree in Mark 11), which makes it very close to the kind of instruction that takes place in Matthew and Luke. Yet, as will be stressed below, the Markinian text does not contain an ethical instruction, but only uses the same logic that is part of Jesus' teaching in the two other synoptic Gospels to make a point related to both the dire straits and dignity of the widow and the hypocrisy and corruption of religious leaders (Scribes).

3. Mark 12:41–44 as a Subversive Text

The subversive interpretation of seemingly meek and submissive behavior can also shed light on Mark 12:41–44, in particular in the following manner and based on the following observations, which have given rise to constructing this proposal:

- By throwing her entire “living” (βίος) into the offering box,²⁶ the widow goes well beyond what may have been expected from her, at least reasonably and even by the standards of an unjust socio-political and economic system. By doing so, she takes the initiative herself, rather than just following orders or complying with conventions or expectations.
- By throwing into the offering box her “entire living” (ὅλον τὸν βίον), the widow also exposes the much more reluctant giving of the Scribes, as Jesus' commentary in vv. 43–44 confirms. Also, in this manner, she exercises agency.

Accordingly, the pericope is not just about exemplary behavior for true disciples, or primarily about a lamentably exploited widow whose fate illustrates the perversion of the Scribes. None of these interpretations has a clear basis in Jesus' words in vv. 43–44, or in Mark's description of the woman's behavior. Instead, the texts are about someone, a woman, a widow, a poor person without a name, who reclaims agency in a situation of complete powerlessness and marginalization and herself exposes forms of injustice. Her acts may be inspired by the courage of despair, but a reclamation of her own agency (and with that, dignity) it is, nonetheless. All of this is based on the poor and nameless widow's silent acts in the Temple, understood as the religious, political, and economic center of Israel, which are characterized by their voluntary character: no one forces her to give this much, as is suggested by Jesus' astonishment by it. Accordingly, this character of the gift is essential for its appreciation and for understanding Jesus' commentary on it.²⁷ After the widow has done what she came for in the Temple, Jesus interprets her acts in his commentary. He does not call for anything and does not do anything either.²⁸ His words do give meaning to her acts, however, as she herself does not do so and remains silent;²⁹ her acts only "speak" through Jesus' interpretation of them (to which Mark subscribes, of course). This interpretative proposal can be further unpacked and substantiated as follows.

The pericope preceding the account of the "widow's mites" indicates that the religious/socio-economic system functions in such a manner that widows are being marginalized (Mark 12:38–40). Scribes want to walk around in splendid garments, to be greeted in the agora, to have a place of honor in the synagogues and at banquets (vv. 38–39), yet they are also identified as those who "devour widows' houses" (v. 40) and say long prayers for the sake of appearance. These remarks of Jesus are the climax of a largely conflict-filled encounter with the Pharisees, Herodians, Sadducees, and Scribes in Mark 12 at large (exception: vv. 28–34). All of this is prefaced in Mark 12 by the parable of the unfaithful servants in the vineyard (vv. 1–11), which introduces the topic of conflict. Following a fitting intermezzo in v. 12, referring to the plans to have Jesus arrested, a discussion with the Herodians and Pharisees about the question of taxes follows (vv. 13–17),³⁰ which is, in turn, followed by a discussion with the Sadducees about the levirate marriage (vv. 18–27) and a complex account of Jesus' relationship to the Scribes, including a conversation about the love commandment with a Scribe who is "not far from the kingdom" in vv. 28–34. On this, Jesus deals negatively with aspects of the teaching of the Scribes in vv. 35–37 and proceeds to disqualify them as a group

in its totality in vv. 38–40, as already paraphrased above. The effect of this disqualification of the Scribes as a group contrasts with the portrayal of the one “righteous” scribe in vv. 35–37, a contrast that may add to the accusation of hypocrisy: even though Scribes can have perfectly good insight into the Law, their practice of it remains wanting.

The thematic link between vv. 38–40 and what follows in vv. 41–44 is provided, amongst other indicators, by the keyword “widow” (χήρα), which occurs in both pericopes and plays an analogous role in both of them.³¹ In both cases, the term χήρα indicates a socioeconomically vulnerable person.³² Therefore, “devouring their houses”³³ is particularly heinous (the Scribes are referred to as οἱ κατεσθίοντες τὰς οἰκίας τῶν χηρῶν “they devour widow’s houses” in v. 40), and for the same reason, it is striking that precisely a widow gives away all she has, her entire livelihood. These observations remain true even if the exact meaning of “devouring their houses” is debated. All interpretative proposals have in common that the expression is understood to mean that the Scribes exploit widows in a certain manner. Rather than protecting these vulnerable members of society, it looks as though the Scribes cause them to lose everything (a likely interpretation of “houses” is that it stands for a person’s livelihood or sum of possessions),³⁴ while profiting from this themselves.

Thus, widows are poor members of society who are also being exploited; and readers who have not understood the reference to widows in this manner are helped by Mark’s nearly pleonastic reference to the main protagonist of vv. 41–44: a χήρα πτωχή “poor widow” (v. 42).³⁵ Because of this qualification of the widow and the preceding account of the Scribes’ behavior in relation to widows, she appears in a particular light in vv. 41–44: as one of those persons whose house is being devoured and who is, accordingly, poor; her silence only adds to her marginality. The only term that Mark uses for this person is “widow” (not “woman,” and he also does not name her), stressing this role while not emphasizing her as a person. This is also suggested by the reference to her as μία χήρα πτωχή, “a certain poor widow”, in v. 42, and it is confirmed by the kind of gift she offers (λεπτὰ δύο, ὃ ἐστὶν κοδράντης “two small copper coins, which are worth a penny”), hardly an impressive sum of money.³⁶ Here, it serves as the small gift of a poor person (other people also do not give much, see the reference to copper coins in v. 41);³⁷ the true (existential) size only becomes clear though Jesus’ commentary in vv. 43–44. In particular, v. 44 works toward a climax regarding this topic, which becomes visible when following the Greek word order: Mark leaves the remark about

these coins constituting her entire livelihood till the very last (πάντες γὰρ ἐκ τοῦ περισσεύοντος αὐτοῖς ἔβαλον, αὕτη δὲ ἐκ τῆς ὑστερήσεως αὐτῆς πάντα ὅσα εἶχεν ἔβαλεν ὅλον τὸν βίον αὐτῆς “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.”).³⁸ This turns the negligible gift of a marginal “nobody” into an enormous donation, all the more because it seems to be a voluntary donation (suggested by the fact that she gives so much more than others and that no one seems to be forcing her). She certainly goes beyond being exploited passively. Also, although it is tempting to read this into the pericope, there is a complete absence of any conclusion on the part of Jesus regarding behavior by others. He never says, “and because of her example, everyone else should give in a similar manner”! Jesus only interprets the behavior of the widow in relation to her means (she gives her entire meager capital) and in relation to the behavior of the Scribes (who give only a little out of their abundance), and he does so with great emphasis, as evidenced by the introductory ἀμήν in v. 43.³⁹ Accordingly, the meaning of the pericope ought not to be sought in an absent call to a certain kind of behavior, but rather in what is there: a description of a poor widow’s behavior and its interpretation by Jesus, and this in relation to what was said about widows immediately prior to vv. 41–44. This leads, then, to the following interpretative scenario: from Mark’s perspective (partially “channeled” through the main protagonist, Jesus), the widow is a “typical” widow, poor, vulnerable, and likely exploited by dubious religious leaders; rather than throwing in the towel, however, she does something else: she enters the Temple and throws her last coins into the offering box (or Temple treasury - it does not matter for this interpretation). One could imagine her thinking, “well, you finagled me out of my house, here, you can have all of my savings as well!” In this manner, the widow operates in a manner akin to Jesus’ teaching in the traditions about turning the other cheek or going the second mile, or by giving someone both your coat and cloak if only sued for one of these items. By taking (likely voluntary) action in this manner, she regains agency and takes the initiative again while, at the same time, exposing very publicly, in the Temple, the injustice of what is happening to her and the hypocrisy of religious leadership. This is what Jesus’ words unpack for his disciples. He does nothing beyond this, but only makes explicit what he takes to be implicit in the act of this widow, who operates as a representative of all (women) in a similar situation (this role is both suggested and facilitated by her generic identification - it becomes easier both to identify with her and to see her as a representative of a certain kind of people).

The second effect of the widow's action, exposing the hypocrisy of the situation, can be unpacked further, beyond regaining agency. It is also made explicit by Jesus in his comparison between the widow and the Scribes that the latter give much less than the former, even if they position themselves as particularly pious and honorable (cf. vv. 38–40). Their willingness to give compares negatively with the voluntary gift of the widow. For this reason, the widow transforms from a hapless victim to someone who actively exposes those who abuse and exploit her: by making public their unwillingness to give and their own religious hypocrisy. This also means that the Scribes, not primarily the Temple, are the focus of the widow's/Jesus' criticism here; the Temple becomes a focus in Mark 13.⁴⁰

All of this should not romanticize the widow, or Jesus' perspective on her, but rather take the desperate situation in which she finds herself as starting point for interpretation and to give it its full weight. In the interpretation offered here, the widow does not act out of largesse, piety, or some other noble motivation, but rather with the courage of despair, both of which, the courage and the despair, are real. Her fate after her act remains unknown. Will she die when the Temple is destroyed (as Jesus indicates in Mark 13), or will she starve before that? Precisely the despair that gives her courage, it seems, makes what she does, from Jesus' perspective, a strong sign that contains an accusation against the society that impoverished her to such an extent that she is willing to act desperately. With her act, she regains, at least from Mark's perspective, her dignity, although she may well lose her life because of it.⁴¹

The (voluntary) gift of the widow in the Temple, which has so far been interpreted with reference to its immediate literary context, can also be read against the background of a larger theme in the Gospel of Mark. This becomes possible particularly when it is observed that her actions change her from a passive person and a victim, someone who belongs to the class of exploited widows (as mentioned in v. 40), to someone who acts actively, albeit silently, defiantly, and with potentially catastrophic consequences for herself. In the narrative vignette of Mark 12:41–44, something happens, therefore, that plays an important role in the Gospel of Mark at large as well, in particular with reference to Jesus and his fate - that is, as a Christological narrative that identifies Jesus and interprets his life as that of the Christ in a very specific manner. While the widow's gift of superlative bounteousness allows her to regain agency and reclaim dignity, Jesus' disgraceful death on the cross is also interpreted by Mark as his free gift of himself (even Mark 14:36 can be read as Jesus' intentional

surrendering of himself to the will of the Father). Key statements interpreting Jesus and his fate, such as Mark 10:45, are indicative of this, especially when reading them against the background of remarks that suggest a more passive role of Jesus and that are, in a way, reinterpreted by the more active statements. An example of this can be found in the sequence of 10:33 (ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου παραδοθήσεται “the Son of Man will be handed over”; note that Jesus says this about his impending fate himself, also suggesting intentional surrender to it) and 10:45 (καὶ γὰρ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου οὐκ ἦλθεν διακονηθῆναι ἀλλὰ διακονῆσαι καὶ δοῦναι τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ λύτρον ἀντὶ πολλῶν “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”).⁴² This similarity might invite an interpretation of the widow in terms of a paratype of Christ-like identity, and she has frequently been interpreted as such. Such a comparison goes, of course, both ways: if the widow is like Jesus, then Jesus is also like the widow, and his defiant gift of his own life can be well understood as echoing the gift that the widow makes.

4. Conclusion

The result of the exegesis of Mark 12:41–44, as it is offered here, is an understanding of this narrative as a text in which an exploited and seemingly powerless widow - “a certain poor widow,” without a name or any other identity than belonging to the group whose houses are being devoured - acts (silently, yet voluntarily) in a manner which, in Jesus’ eyes, gives her back her agency and dignity. Simultaneously, the deed exposes injustices and the insufficiency (or hypocrisy) of the piety of the Scribes. That is, at least, what takes place in Mark’s account; we will never know what the widow thought herself, only how she appears in this narrative. In this interpretation, with the widow acting with the courage of despair and in a subversive manner, by going the second mile, as it were, and voluntarily throwing in both of her coins, after all that had already been taken from her, the pericope fits its context well. It continues the criticism of the Scribes in the preceding verses and prepares, given the setting in the Temple, for the criticism of the Temple in Mark 13. This widow exposes in miniature, yet for Mark in a representative manner, all that is wrong with religious leadership in Israel - and therefore also with the cult. More than a Christological chiffre, a helpless victim or an exemplary, devoted, and sacrificially minded disciple, the widow is thus an unruly woman who seems to rise in dignity and agency, against all odds, at the very moment of her downfall.

One could even argue that Christ himself will give his life, in a similarly defiant manner, in her footsteps.

¹ This essay is a revised, updated, and expanded version of: Peter-Ben Smit, “Weerbarstige weduwe,” *Kerk en Theologie* 70 (2019), 312–320.

² Cf. esp. William Abbott, “Discipleship in Mark: Two Unlikely Models,” *Landas* 13 (1991), 59–80, *passim*, John Paul Heil, *The Gospel of Mark as a Model for Action* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 254 (identifying her as a disciple who is not far from the kingdom); also, John R. Donahue, Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2002), 364. Johannes Beutler, “Die Gabe der armen Witwe: Mk 12:41–44,” in: Josef Hainz, Hans-Winfried Jüngling, and Reinhold Sebott (eds.), “*Den Armen eine frohe Botschaft*” (Frankfurt am Main: Knecht, 1997), 125–136, varies on this theme by seeing in the widow an embodiment of the renewed people of God; cf. also Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 248. Different positions are taken by, e.g., Hans Leander, *Discourses of Empire. The Gospel of Mark from a Postcolonial Perspective* (Atlanta: SBL, 2013), 233, and Camille Focant, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2012), 516.

³ Cf., e.g., Adam Kubiś, “The Poor Widow’s Mites: A Contextual Reading of Mark 12:41–44,” *The Biblical Annals* 3 (2013), 339–381. Cf. also Jeffrey W. Aernie, *Narrative Discipleship: Portraits of Women in the Gospel of Mark* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2018), 89. Bas van Iersel, *Mark: A Reader-Response Commentary* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 385–396, combines an emphasis on discipleship with an emphasis on the widow’s embodiment of Jesus’ message; analogously: Joel Williams, *Other Followers of Jesus: Minor Characters as Major Figures in Mark’s Gospel* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 177.

⁴ Cf., e.g., Geoffrey Smith, “A Closer Look at the Widow’s Offering: Mark 12:41–44,” *JETS* 40 (1997), 27–36, who combines the image of the widow as a victim of the perversion of the Scribes with emphasis on her own faith. The faith of the widow, however, is mentioned nowhere in the text - and it is the thesis of this contribution that she is more than a defenseless victim. See, for emphasis on the widow’s faith, also, e.g., James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 17.349. Emphasis on socioeconomic/socio-religious exploitation can also be found in works including, for instance: Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man. A Political Reading of Mark’s Story* (Maryknoll: Orbis,

2008 [1988]), 321–322; Hisako Kinukawa, *Women and Jesus in Mark: A Japanese Feminist Perspective* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1994), 70–77, also opts for this interpretative emphasis.

⁵ Cf. for a survey of interpretative options (not including the one proposed here) that also stresses lament: Addison G. Wright, “The Widow’s Mites: Praise or Lament? - A Matter of Context,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 44 (1982), 256–265, 256–258 (proposing a “tragic” interpretation of the widow; cf. also Focant, *Mark*, 516); see further Markus Lau, “Die Witwe, das γαζοφυλάκιον und der Tempel. Beobachtungen zur mk Erzählung vom ‘Scherflein der Witwe’ (Mk 12,41–44),” *ZNW* 107 (2016), 186–205, 186–189. An earlier survey, to wit, is offered by Gerd Theissen, “Die Witwe als Wohltäterin. Beobachtungen zum urchristlichen Sozialethos anhand von Mk 12,41–44,” in: Max Küchler and Peter Reinf (eds.), *Randfiguren in der Mitte* (Luzern: Exodus, 2003), 171–182, 171–172.

⁶ The reading tactic on the basis of which the subversive character of turning the other cheek was uncovered can well be regarded as postcolonial, in the footsteps of which “empire critical” approaches were developed; see, e.g., Adam Winn, “Striking Back at Empire: Empire Theory and Response to Empire in the New Testament,” in: idem (ed.), *An Introduction to Empire in the New Testament* (Atlanta: SBL, 2016), 1–14, 3. For earlier approaches to both postcolonial criticism and empire criticism/studies and a discussion of the relationship between the two - the two are related, and postcolonial theory provides important hermeneutical impetus for empire criticism/studies, yet they are not identical - see, e.g.: Stephen D. Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse. Postcolonialism and the New Testament* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2006), 14–23, and Leander, *Discourses*.

⁷ As different from the complementary interpretation (and approach) of Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, “The Poor Widow in Mark and Her Poor Rich Readers,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 53 (1991), 589–604, the proposal made here is certainly also intended to render other proposals less plausible. Even if texts are polyvalent and capable of an infinite production of meaning, not all such meanings are equally valid, exegetically speaking, even if inspiring theological insights can be derived (and have been derived) from questionable exegeses.

⁸ See, for an outline of such criticism in emphatically materialistic terms, Kuno Füssel, *Drei Tage mit Jesus im Tempel. Einführung in die materialistische Lektüre der Bibel* (Münster: Edition Liberación, 1987), 82–83; Füssel also draws attention to both the fact that Mark narrates in 12:28–34 a positively connoted encounter between Jesus and a Scribe (see also

Moore, *Empire*, 36). In addition, he underlines that the Temple as such is not problematic for Jesus, whereas the Temple as an economic institution is.

⁹ Wright, “Mites,” concluding as follows: “To the degree that there is any probability to the interpretation offered in this article, to that same degree one runs the risk of doing precisely what Jesus would have condemned, if one uses the story in the traditional fashion simplistically to encourage generous religious giving from the poor. Even if one is persuaded that the text should still be used in the traditional fashion (something which the present writer would find indefensible), to use it without explicitly qualifying it with Jesus’ statements on Corban and on the devouring of widows’ houses would be to handle the gospel materials irresponsibly.” (265)

¹⁰ Struthers Malbon, “Widow,” taking a position against Wright as follows: “Wright’s argument to the contrary seems more ingenious than convincing. Of course the widow’s gift of ‘her whole life’ is not reasonable, but that is the same complaint that Peter makes (in 8:31–33) of Jesus’ willingness ‘to give his life as a ransom for the many’ (10:45). Wright’s narrow contextual focus results in an unfortunate, if not unusual, case of ‘blaming the victim.’” (596)

¹¹ Amy-Jill Levine, “‘This Poor Widow . . .’ (Mark 12:43) From Donation to Diatribe,” in: Susan Ashbrook Harvey, Nathaniel DesRosiers, Shira L. Lander, Jacqueline Z. Pastis, Daniel Ullucci (eds.), *A Most Reliable Witness: Essays in Honor of Ross Shepard Kraemer* (Providence: Brown University, 2015), 183–193, 193. Why Levine suggests that causes of poverty are not touched upon by Mark is not entirely clear, given the statement of *κατεσθίοντες τὰς οἰκίας τῶν χηρῶν* “they devour widows’ houses” (Mark 12:40). The interpretative combination of piety and socioeconomic/socio-religious criticism can also be found in Susan Miller, *Women in Mark’s Gospel* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 124–125.

¹² Levine, “Widow,” 193.

¹³ E.g., Wolfgang Iser, “The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach,” *New Literary History* 3 (1972), 279–299, 285–286.

¹⁴ Ira Brent Driggers, “Revisiting Mark’s Poor Widow (Mk. 12:41–44): The Case for Narrative Tension,” in: Edwin K. Broadhead (ed.), *Let the Reader Understand: Essays in Honor of Elizabeth Struthers Malbon* (London: London, T&T Clark, 2018), 147–174.

¹⁵ Brent Driggers, “Revisiting,” 169.

¹⁶ Eve-Marie Becker, “Was die ‚arme Witwe‘ lehrt: Sozial- und motivgeschichtliche Beobachtungen zu Mk 12,41-4par.,” *New Testament Studies* 65 (2019), 148–165.

¹⁷ The above three examples are by no means the only interpretations moving (back) into the pre-Wright tradition of interpretation; see also, e.g., Kubiś, “Mites,” 339: “Nevertheless, by widening the immediate narrative context and reading the account within the larger Markinian framework, the interpretative ambiguity disappears. The widow is presented to Jesus’ disciples, and to the readers of the Markinian story, as a positive example of self-denial motivated by faith, love and devotion toward God. Thus, she not only stands as a symbol of the faithful remnant of Israel, but, most importantly, presents a picture of Jesus’ own self-offering on the cross.”

¹⁸ Seong Hee Kim, “Rupturing the Empire: Reading the Poor Widow as a Postcolonial Female Subject (Mark 12:41–44),” *Lectio Difficilior* 2006:1 (http://lectio.unibe.ch/06_1/PDF/kim_rupturing.pdf, accessed 4 April 2021).

¹⁹ Joseph Vitek Kozar, “The Owl and the Pussycat: An Off Kilter Reading of the Widow’s Honorable Action at the Temple Treasury in Mark 12:41–44,” *Proceedings—Eastern Great Lakes and Midwest Biblical Societies* 28 (2008) 41–53, 41–42.

²⁰ In this respect, the interpretation offered here correlates with that of Moore, *Empire*, 40–44, in that he also concentrates on the overabundant gift of the woman, with the following focus: “The woman’s voluntary self-divestment of ‘everything she had, all she had to live on’—at once an absolute and a thankless gesture - may be read as an act of epiphanic extravagance whose immeasurable immoderation thrusts it outside every conventional circle of economic exchange” (42). In addition, he comments: “In common with other radically countercultural trends in Mark ... only more so - this gift beyond reciprocity would hint at liminal experiments in community that apocalyptically deconstruct the world as we know it.” The question of a possible reclaiming of her own dignity by the widow does not play a role in Moore’s interpretation.

²¹ In arguing this, this essay builds on: Peter-Ben Smit, “Food and Gift - On the ‘Words of Institution’ in the Gospel of Mark,” accepted for publication in: *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* (2021).

²² For an emphasis on the company that Jesus keeps as a hermeneutical key to understanding his identity, see, e.g., Nicholas Lash’s commentary on the Apostles’ Creed, *Believing Three Ways in One God* (Collegeville: Notre Dame, 1994). Moore, *Empire*, 44, suggests that Jesus should follow the example of the widow in terms of the gift that she gives, yet fails to do so; hence, it can well be contended that there is much more agreement between Jesus and the widow than that.

²³ Cf. Hans-Ulrich Weidemann, “Die andere Wange. Die Thematisierung von männlicher Gewalt in antiken Maskulinitätsdiskursen am Beispiel der Bergpredigt im Matthäusevangelium,” in: Uta Fenske and Gregor Schuhen (eds.), *Geschichte(n) von Macht und Ohnmacht. Narrative von Männlichkeit und Gewalt* (Bielefeld: Transkript, 2016), 31–50.

²⁴ Weidemann, “Wange,” 48.

²⁵ See, e.g., James M. Robinson, Paul Hoffmann, and John S. Kloppenborg (eds.), *The Critical Edition of Q* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), *ad loc.*

²⁶ Lau, “Witwe,” recently proposed that the widow does not give her money to the offering box but rather deposits it in the Temple treasury (which functioned as a kind of bank). His contribution is solid, but he overlooks a number of things: (a) the Temple treasury was also established by way of both a Temple tax and voluntary contributions (cf. the texts that Lau also refers to and comments upon them in: Josephus’ *Ant.* and *Bell.* in: Steve Mason, *Judean War 2* [Leiden: Brill, 2008], 34); (b) the scenario that the widow *deposits* all that she has to provide for her daily life is not very likely; a radical *donation* to the Temple might be more plausible, given the comments of Jesus and the narrative context; (c) the contrast with the Scribes should be taken into account more fully, as it may even concern a contrast between deposits (Josephus indicates that the wealthy tended to deposit their money in the Temple treasury) and a gift; (d) the amount of money that the widow deals with, namely a *quadrans*, makes it unlikely that this amount of money would be a viable deposit. In other words, even if Lau is correct that the text concerns the Temple treasury rather than an offering box, this does not mean that it concerns a deposit rather than a gift. The main issue with his interpretation is that he only considers one of the ways in which one’s money could end up in the Temple treasury (as a deposit rather than as a tax or a gift), without paying due attention to the narrative logic of the text and its details. In fact, he thereby falls into the trap that he sees other exegetes falling into: by supplementing things that are not in the text as such. This may be the case for the notion of an “offering”; however, it certainly is the case for making a “deposit.” Füssel, *Tage*, 82–83, assumes a background to the story of the Temple as a banking institution, yet still focuses on the widow’s gift, not as a deposit but as an offering.

²⁷ This is rightly emphasized by Heinz Giesen, “Poverty and Wealth in Jesus and the Jesus Tradition,” in: Tom Holmén and Stanley E. Porter, *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus 4* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 3269–3304, 3287.

²⁸ Struthers Malbon, “Widow,” 599, rightly emphasizes Jesus’ reactive attitude when it concerns encounters with women.

²⁹ Regarding her silence, see also Susan E. Miller, “Women Characters in Mark’s Gospel,” in: Matthew Ryan Hauge and Christopher W. Skinner (eds.), *Character Studies and the Gospel of Mark* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 174–193, 185.

³⁰ This is probably also a subversive text, cf. Peter-Ben Smit, “Subversive Faith and Competition in Patronage: A Note on πίστις in Mark,” *Journal of Theological Studies* (2020) (online first: <https://doi.org/10.1093/jts/flaa077>).

³¹ Cf. also Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (London: Black, 1991), 296, who stresses that the connection between the two texts is both linguistic and thematic.

³² The widow as a *chiffre* for a vulnerable person is part of broader Biblical and ancient Near Eastern cultural knowledge, cf. Annette Schellenberg, “Hilfe für Witwen und Waisen: Ein gemein-orientalisches Motiv in wechselnden alttestamentlichen Diskussionszusammenhängen,” *ZAW* 124 (2012), 180–200. In commentaries, see: Eugene M. Boring, *Mark. A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2006), 351. He stresses the seriousness of offenses against widows and points to a number of HB/OT regulations regarding it: Ex. 22.22; Deut. 27.19; Jer. 7.6; 22.3; Ps. 146.9; Ezek. 22.7; Zach. 7.10; Mal. 3.5; cf. Deut. 10.18; 14.29; Ps. 68.5; Isa. 1.17; Jer. 49.11. The understanding of widows is relativized and questioned somewhat by Michael Sommer, “Schriftkundige und Weltenbummler? Witwen, Schrifthermeneutik und die ‘Alltagswelt‘ der dokumentarischen Papyri,” in: Jörg Frey and Nicole Rupschus (Hg.) *Frauen im antiken Judentum und frühem Christentum* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 151-174. The widow in Mark 12 can also be seen as an older or even elderly person, which contributes to the intersectional construction of her identity, which cannot be explored here in detail. See, however, Stefan Zorn, “Wohltäterin, Systemopfer, Hilfsempfängerin oder Glaubensvorbild? Eine Auslegungsdiskussion zur armen Witwe in Mk 12,41-44,” in: Malte Cramer and Peter Wick (eds.) *Alter und Altern in der Bibel: Exegetische Perspektiven auf Altersdiskurse im Alten und Neuen Testament* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2021).

³³ Creative suggestions abound; these range at least from an interpretation in terms of sexual abuse by Günther Schwarz, “Die Häuser der Witwen verzehren? (Markus 12,40/Lk 20,47),” *Biblische Notizen* 88 (1997), 45–58, by way of a broader metaphor for “livelihood” (e.g., Lau, “Witwe”), and claiming ownership of or commercial access to the houses of widows and renting them out in order to literally eat so much (and so often) in these houses that it drove the widows into bankruptcy (e.g., Donahue and Harrington, *Mark*, 362–363).

³⁴ Cf. rightly Lau, “Witwe,” 204, and e.g., Peter Dschulnigg, *Das Markusevangelium* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2007), 329, with reference to Josephus, *Bell.* 6.282, which concerns the possessions of the wealthy (τούς οἰκοὺς τῶν εὐπόρων) that are stored in the Temple treasury (γαζοφυλάκιον) (as a deposit).

³⁵ Nearly pleonastic, as it has been shown that widows could also become economically independent (or relatively independent) persons. Cf., e.g., Angela Standhartinger, “Witwen im Neuen Testament,” in: Adelheid M. von Hauff (ed.), *Frauen gestalten Diakonie. Band 1: Von der biblischen Zeit bis zum Pietismus* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2007) 141–154. Their position at large, however, remained vulnerable, not least because of legal reasons. See also: Richard H. Hiers, “Transfer of Property by Inheritance and Bequest in Biblical Law and Tradition,” *Journal of Law and Religion* 10 (1993), 121–155.

³⁶ On the coins, see, e.g., R. T. France, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 492–494, as well as Van Iersel, *Mark*, 385, Miller, “Women,” 184. Hooker, *Mark*, 296, also indicates that, because the woman had *two* coins, she could have decided to give only one - that she gives both indicates that she intentionally gives all she has. She also calculates how small an amount it concerns: 1/64 of the daily wages of a day laborer (two *lepta* fit into a *quadrans*, four *quadrans* into one *as[sartion]*, of which sixteen fit into one *denarion*).

³⁷ Cf., e.g., Lau, “Witwe,” 192.

³⁸ This is a technique employed more often by Mark, cf. the observations in Peter-Ben Smit, “Synoptic, Redactional, Stylistic, and Narratological Observations on the Retelling of Mark 7:30 in Matthew 15:28,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 70 (2014) (<http://www.hts.org.za/index.php/HTS/article/view/2690>).

³⁹ Cf. Theissen, “Witwe,” 178; Giesen, “Poverty,” 3289; Focant, *Mark*, 515 - Jesus interprets the woman’s behavior with emphasis and authority.

⁴⁰ Cf. for the more *mainstream* position that the criticism is levelled against the Temple cult, see commentaries, such as: Myers, *Binding*, 303; Leander, *Discourses*, 265. They rightly emphasize that Mark/the Markinian Jesus criticizes the religious system and its leaders, yet up until Mark 12 the focus is on the Scribes and others; the Temple as such only gets the center stage in Mark 13.

⁴¹ In order to grasp the impact of what is described in vv. 41–44, the reference to the “entire livelihood” of the widow in v. 44 has to be taken literally (with, e.g., Moloney, *Mark*, 247; the broader use of the term elsewhere gives every reason to take it literally). Theissen, “Witwe,”

interprets it in terms of a voluntary fast, but there is little in the text that suggests this.

Theissen is right, however, in stressing that the woman also claims a position as a benefactor for herself by doing what she does, thereby acquiring a position for herself that would otherwise only be accessible to the wealthy.

⁴² See also Smit, “Food.”

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