CHARITY TOWARD WIDOWS IN EARLY CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

By

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To my dear wife Liz

Fallax gratia, et vana est pulchritudo: mulier timens Dominum, ipsa laudabitur.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important Early Christian Sources</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review of Secondary Literature</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rationale and Methodology</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview of Chapter Content</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 TERMS AND CONCEPTS RELATING TO WIDOWS AND CHARITY</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defining &quot;Widow&quot;</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Widow&quot;: Hebrew</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Widow&quot;: Greek</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Widow&quot;: Latin</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of Linguistic Evidence</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issues in Studying Poverty and Charity</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defining Poverty</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defining Charity</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 JEWISH CHARITABLE PRACTICES TOWARD WIDOWS</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widows in the Ancient Near Eastern Context</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widows in the Hebrew Bible</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Vulnerable Member of Society</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Independent Member of Society</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Valued Member of Society</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widows and Charity in the Apocrypha</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 THE BEGINNINGS OF CHARITY TOWARD EARLY CHRISTIAN WIDOWS</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widows at Risk in First Century Judea</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna: The Ideal Widow (Lk. 2:36-37)</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widows in the Gospels</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Summary ......................................................................................................................... 155
Jewish Charity Toward the Poor ......................................................................................... 157
   Jewish Widows in Need: Acts 6 ..................................................................................... 171
   Jewish Widows in Need: Acts 9 ..................................................................................... 197
Conclusions ..................................................................................................................... 203

5  WIDOWS AND CHARITY IN THE GENTILE CHRISTIAN CHURCH ..................... 207
   Portraits of Widows in the Roman World ................................................................. 211
      Summary .................................................................................................................. 238
   Widows in the New Testament Epistles ..................................................................... 239
      Summary .................................................................................................................. 258
   Charity Toward Christian Widows in the 2nd and 3rd Centuries C.E. ..................... 260
      Conclusions ............................................................................................................. 269

6  CONCLUSIONS ........................................................................................................ 272

APPENDIX
A   BIBLICAL TEXTS CONSULTED ................................................................................ 277
B   REFERENCE WORKS ............................................................................................... 279

REFERENCE LIST ....................................................................................................... 282

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH ........................................................................................... 301
# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aen.</td>
<td>Vergil, <em>Aeneid</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANET</td>
<td>Ancient Near Eastern Texts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.B.</td>
<td>Mishnah, Tractate <em>Baba Bathra</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didasc.</td>
<td><em>Didascalia Apostolorum</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eleg.</td>
<td>Propertius, <em>Elegies</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epig.</td>
<td>Martial, <em>Epigrams</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbreviation</td>
<td>Work/Authors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hist.</td>
<td>Herodotus, <em>Histories</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jos. BJ</td>
<td>Josephus, <em>The Jewish War</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Just. 1 Apol.</td>
<td>Justin Martyr, <em>First Apology</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Livy. A.U.C.</td>
<td>Livy, <em>Ab Urbe Condita</em> (&quot;From the Founding of the City&quot;)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LS</td>
<td><em>A Greek-English Lexicon: With a Revised Supplement</em>. Edited by Sir Henry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LXX</td>
<td>The Septuagint</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAL</td>
<td>Middle Assyrian Laws</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meth. Symp.</td>
<td>Methodius, <em>Symposium</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIV</td>
<td>The Holy Bible, New International Version (2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pliny, NH</td>
<td>Pliny the Elder, <em>Natural History</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plutarch, Vit. Cor.</td>
<td>Plutarch, <em>Life of Coriolanus</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plutarch, Vit. C. Gracchus</td>
<td>Plutarch, <em>Life of Gaius Gracchus</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poly. Philip.</td>
<td>Polycarp of Smyrna, <em>Letter to the Philippians</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sat.</td>
<td>Juvenal, <em>Satires</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satyr.</td>
<td>Petronius, <em>Satyricon</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tert. ad Uxor</td>
<td>Tertullian, <em>ad Uxorem</em> (&quot;To His Wife&quot;)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tert. de Virg. Vel</td>
<td>Tertullian, <em>de Virginibus Velandis</em> (&quot;On the Veiling of Virgins&quot;)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tKeth.</td>
<td>Mishnah, <em>Tractate Kethuba</em> (&quot;Dowries&quot;)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This dissertation provides a study on charitable practices towards widows in both the early Christian communities that were predominantly Jewish in ethnicity as well in those that were predominantly Gentile in composition. The study begins with Jewish charitable practices toward widows inherited from and influenced by the Old Testament. From this it is demonstrated that Jewish charitable practices, although directed and mandated by the Torah were, nonetheless, designed to be a thankful and generous response to God's goodness. By the time of the intertestamental period, we find the beginnings of charitable practices in which an increasingly important motive for giving is for the personal spiritual benefit of the benefactor. The study goes on to show that a similar pattern evolves in the early Christian communities. Whereas at the onset of early Christianity in Jerusalem the practice and motive for caring for widows was similar to the ideal set by the Torah, within the first few centuries we find the practice in place among predominantly Gentile Christian communities of matching up widows with donors. The former receives physical benefit; the latter receives spiritual benefit through the prayers of the widow on the donor's behalf. To support the thesis, the study explores the ancient Near Eastern understanding of the social status of the widow, as well as the status of
widows in the Roman world of the late republic / early empire. Understanding such societal views in turn helps shed light upon the seminal New Testament texts that deal with widows, namely, the epistle of James, 1 Corinthians 7, and 1 Timothy 5—the texts that become normative for early Christian charitable practices toward widows.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The widow who lived in the ancient Mediterranean world, whether Jewish, Christian, or secular Roman, is a touchpoint for a variety of scholarly pursuits. That observation underscores another one, namely, that the topic "widow" does not fit neatly into any one academically assigned box. By sheer number, widows comprise a notable segment of ancient societies. Yet, in many respects, the widow of the ancient world was herself somewhat of an anomaly. She was a legal anomaly in that she was an independent women living in a world where women usually derived their identity and legal standing from attachment to a male. This was especially true if her own father had already died as she entered widowhood. Her uncertain legal status often caused complications when it came to the execution of wills and the distribution of inheritances, as the extant writing of Roman jurists indicate.¹ She was a social anomaly in that it was difficult in many instances to say exactly where she fit into the family unit, especially if she had been involved in a remarriage. Yet, at the same time, it is important to try to find a place for her as social historians seek to understand the various strata of ancient societies and reconstruct plausible working models of the same. Subsequently, as the Christian church began to organize and regulate itself with ecclesiastical offices, church leaders, too, viewed the widow as an anomaly. The widow was not a virgin (perhaps!)².


At the same time, however, this woman had an aura of purity about her, a woman who had tasted the pleasure of marriage but who, upon entering widowhood, had devoted herself to God as a celibate. Some church fathers even seem to indicate that chaste widowhood was a means of regaining virginity. Further, how could such widows serve in the church? Saint Paul directed them to be actively involved in the training of younger women, but was this a position of leadership or authority in the early Christian communities? For these reasons and others, then, the widow was of great interest to church leaders and authors of the early Christian era. Conversely, it is also true that she was of less interest to the secular Greco-Roman society. Thus, the nature of the widow's status and situation was ambiguous, and—then as now—her person has precipitated much discussion in many fora as to exactly how and where she fit in.

**Important Early Christian Sources**

With Tertullian (ca. 200 C.E.), the role of the Christian widow begins to be codified in the western Church. Tertullian's pointed prose does not single out widows *per se*, but the principles he sets down for the behavior of Christian women in general certainly encompasses them. Important among his writings that address this topic are

3 Methuen, "The ‘Virgin Widow’, 288.

4 Titus 2:3-5

5 Scholars debate about an "order of widows" (or, The Order of Widows) that seems to have developed in the early Church. What was its nature? Who was in it? How did it fit in to the work of the Church? And, perhaps of paramount interest to many ecclesiastical scholars, was it an office that established women in positions of leadership among the early Christians?

6 The Eastern Church had already begun to do so with early church orders such as the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, discussed below in Chapter 5.
De Cultu Feminarum⁷ ("On the Apparel of Women") and De Virginibus Velandis⁸ ("Concerning Why Virgins Ought to be Veiled").⁹ While a cursory reading of the first might lead one to conclude that Tertullian is nothing but a patriarchal misogynist, a closer reading reveals a great degree of fear in the author's tone over the incredible power he perceives woman to possess, especially the power to lead a man away to eternal destruction. As for the second, whatever Tertullian argues about the dress of Christian virgins, by extension he also includes widows. The general conclusion he comes to is that the veil is an outward symbol of inward modesty, a trait becoming to all Christian women. Of special note for our purposes, Tertullian relates the somewhat strange situation of "a virgin less than twenty years of age has been placed in the order of widows!"¹⁰ He also articulates thoughts that later authors will develop more fully in respect to widows, especially as it touches upon the topic of remarriage:

For is not continence withal superior to virginity, whether it be the continence of the widowed, or of those who, by consent, have already renounced the common disgrace (which matrimony involves.)? For constancy of virginity is maintained by grace; of continence, by virtue. For great is the struggle to overcome concupiscence when you have become accustomed to such concupiscence; whereas a concupiscence the enjoyment whereof you have never known you will subdue easily, not having an adversary (in the shape of ) the concupiscence of enjoyment.¹¹

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⁷ ANF 4, 14-26.
⁸ ANF 4, 27-38.
⁹ Tertullian's letter to his own wife, De Uxore, also emphasizes similar points. Furthermore, his De Exhortatione Castitatis ("Exhortation to Chastity") and De Monogamia ("On Monogamy") touch upon our topic in a general way.
¹⁰ de Virg. Vel., 9 (ANF 4, 33)
¹¹ de Virg. Vel., 10. (ANF 4, 33-34)
By the fourth and fifth centuries, widows increasingly draw the attention of other famous Christian authors. Ambrose wrote *De Viduis* ("Concerning Widows") as a companion piece to his treatise directed at virgins.\(^{12}\) His protégé, Augustine of Hippo, likewise dedicated a later treatise to the topic of widowhood (*De Bono Viduitatis*).\(^{13}\) Augustine's contemporary, Jerome, touched on the same topic more than once, especially in his diatribes against marriage directed at Jovinian.\(^{14}\) Interestingly, the latter part of Jerome's ministry was entirely supported the wealthy widows Marcella and Paula, both of whom chose to lead lives of continence upon the deaths of their husbands. Wealthy widows played a prominent role in the life of Saint John Chrysostom as well, and Palladius' *Life of John Chrysostom* describes the powerful widows Chrysostom encountered as well as reforms that took place in the Eastern Church regarding the Order of Widows. A number of churchmen wrote letters directly to widows in a concerned, advisory capacity. Jerome's *Letter 54*, written to Furia,\(^ {15}\) Basil of Caesarea's *Letter 107* to the widow Julitta,\(^ {16}\) and Chrysostom's *Letter to a Young Widow*\(^ {17}\) are good representative texts. Also from the early Church period, canons such as the *Didascalia Apostolorum* (ca. 230 C.E.) and the *Apostolic Constitutions* (ca 375-—

\(^{12}\) Both *de Viduis* and *de Virginibus* are in NPNF2-10.

\(^{13}\) NPNF1-03. 441 ff.

\(^{14}\) *Adversus Jovinianum* (NPNF2-06, 346 ff)

\(^{15}\) NPNF2-06, 106 ff.

\(^{16}\) NPNF2-08, 219-20

\(^{17}\) NPNF1-09, 117 ff.
380 C.E.) are helpful for developing an understanding of widows and their role within early Christianity.\(^{18}\)

**Review of Secondary Literature**

As previously alluded to, the topic of widows is of interest to a variety of modern scholars as well.\(^{19}\) Broadly speaking, the study of widows touches upon sociology, jurisprudence, inheritance (and, in this respect, economics), feminist scholarship, and ecclesiastical history. As a result, scholars have produce a copious amount of secondary literature in these various areas.

For studies of the early Roman Empire and early Christian era that touch upon sociology, the works of Rodney Stark are standard introductions.\(^{20}\) Stark’s most valuable contributions to the field are his attempts at ascertaining the increasing number of Christians during the first four centuries C.E.\(^{21}\) Acceptance of his opinions, though, on the role of women within early Christianity has encountered some resistance.\(^{22}\) For a strictly secular analysis of sociological aspects of the Roman Empire, the introduction by

\(^{18}\) The majority of the material mentioned in this section lies beyond the chronological limits of this thesis set by the author. This present study has a ceiling of 250 C.E. in order to include the directives found in the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, and they are examined at the end of Chapter 5.


\(^{21}\) The statistical appendix in *Cities of God* (224-250) is especially useful.

Garnsey and Saller is the standard. Galinsky’s work, along with Cooley’s sourcebook, are necessary reads for a good understanding of the Augustan era, the age into which the Christian Church was born. Kesler's translation of Andreau's study of the Roman economy is approachable as an introductory volume to the topic. Several useful studies focus on family life among Christian adherents and secular Romans alike. Treggiari's monograph on marriage in the Roman world remains the most complete, and the reworked dissertation of Yarbrough on Paul's marital advice to the Corinthians proved helpful for the material in Chapter 5. Verner's monograph as well as the volume by Hellerman both affirm the plausibility of the Haustafel tradition, i.e. that the earliest Christian communities, meeting in homes as they were, were structured


as "the household of God" on par with any contemporary Roman *domus*. The study by Harlow and Laurence on aging in the Roman world is a shorter but rather insightful book, and was helpful especially for understanding the changing situation of the Roman woman as she passed through the various stages of life.\(^{32}\) The multi-faceted approach of *Early Christian Families in Context* by Balch and Osiek\(^{33}\) yielded useful information pertaining to this thesis in that much of it focuses on the lower strata of society as well as on Jewish families—the classes of people that Christianity first attracted. The collection of essays in *The Oxford Handbook of Social Relations in the Roman World* is comprehensive in scope.\(^{34}\) In rounding out literature that pertains to the realm of sociology, I would finally note that, most recently, gender studies as it relates to both Roman society and early Christianity, is a newer academic frontier, though I do not explore that venue here.\(^{35}\)


Since the widow in the ancient world is not only a social but legal anomaly, I will briefly mention a few books that help understand this aspect of the widow's situation. Two sourcebooks, one compiled by Grubbs\textsuperscript{36} and the other by Jane Gardner,\textsuperscript{37} are the most targeted volumes for this project as well as the most useful for understanding the Roman widow's legal situation. Clark's companion set\textsuperscript{38} as well as Champlin's study of Roman wills\textsuperscript{39} are informative volumes, but proved only marginally useful.

The amount of feminist scholarship that deals with ancient women in general is sizeable. A basic introduction for a general overview of the status of women in the Greco-Roman world is Sarah Pomeroy's \textit{Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves}.\textsuperscript{40} Fraschetti's volume on Roman women provides targeted studies of specific Roman women, both pagan and Christian, spanning the centuries of the empire.\textsuperscript{41} Several primary sourcebooks provide a plethora of information on various aspects of women in classical antiquity.\textsuperscript{42}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{36} Judith Evans Grubbs, \textit{Women and the Law in the Roman Empire: A Sourcebook on Marriage, Divorce and Widowhood} (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).


Expectedly, feminist scholarship has also addressed issues dealing with the role of women in early Christianity. Miller's sourcebook is a helpful starting point, though it is not, of course, an overtly feminist exposition but merely an anthology of texts. Malone provides a nice survey of women in Christian history, including a brief historical overview of feminist studies and the stated goals of the same. More in line with classic feminist scholarship is Barbara Reid's commentary on women in Saint Luke's Gospel, as well as Anne Jensen's book on Christian women breaking free (or trying to) from the constraints of a patriarchal Church and contribute to the movement as God had gifted them. Both Elizabeth Clark's and Margaret MacDonald's well-known books were helpful in gaining a feminist perspective on the interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7 and 1 Corinthians 11.


Timothy 5. Jo Ann McNamara's book on celibacy⁴⁹ was helpful for the same reason, although its primary focus on the rise of celibacy among Christian women lies just beyond the horizon of this study. One article by Clark continues to have influence in the circles of feminist scholarship.⁵⁰ In contrast, Susanne Heine's Woman and Early Christianity⁵¹ provides a critique and conservative challenge to some of the conclusions that feminist scholarship has reached.

Here I would also note the most recent contribution to the study of women in the early Christian church by Susan Hylen,⁵² a book that provides some balance to the traditional feminist narrative of gender egalitarianism in leadership being trammeled as the church eventually organized into a patriarchal hierarchy. She also expresses her wariness (along with some other prominent feminist scholars) of the popular formula "celibacy = freedom for women."⁵³ Hylen recognizes the weakness in attempting to recreate monolithic structures in ancient Roman society:

> From a modern perspective, the position of women in Greco-Roman culture is paradoxical: at the same time that women are ideally described as modest and

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⁵³ Hylen, A Modest Apostle, 32. Hers is a reaction, perhaps, to sentiments similar to Bassler’s: "Rarely has any attention been given to the sociological advantages derived by the widows from membership in their circle. Yet an understanding of these advantages should help us to understand the thrust of the Pastor's remarks. Indeed, the important concept of social freedom for these women may prove to be the key for unlocking the meaning of the widows' actions and the Pastor's response." (Bassler, "The Widow's Tale: A Fresh Look at 1 Timothy 5:3-16," 23.)
confined to the home, some virtues required women to exercise leadership and to pursue the broad interests of their households and cities…This more complex view of the cultural norms for women’s behavior points to a new way of understanding the varieties of evidence for women’s participation in early Christian communities.\textsuperscript{54}

Hylen also provides caveats about oversimplifying the picture of widows painted by ancient texts,\textsuperscript{55} and applies sound reasoning to her discussion of one of the primary widow texts of the New Testament, 1 Timothy 5.\textsuperscript{56} Hylen asserts that, given the demographics of the Greco-Roman world, the vast majority of widows were in the lower strata of society and only a very small proportion of widows, "those of considerable means, were likely to experience widowhood as something that brought independence," and, further, that "a widow’s subsequent remarriage would not necessarily decrease her independence."\textsuperscript{57} She then applies such principles to the interpretation of the early 3\textsuperscript{rd} century text, the \textit{Acts of Paul and Thecla}—the main focus of her book. This entire study beckons modern readers to take into account the predominant Greco-Roman virtue of modesty in our interpretation of ancient texts that shed light upon the roles of women in both church and society.\textsuperscript{58} This, more than the patriarchal structure of society, was primarily determinative of a woman's public actions in that era.\textsuperscript{59}

\textsuperscript{54} Hylen, \textit{A Modest Apostle}, 11.

\textsuperscript{55} Hylen, \textit{A Modest Apostle}, 36–37.

\textsuperscript{56} Hylen, \textit{A Modest Apostle}, 42–70.

\textsuperscript{57} Hylen, \textit{A Modest Apostle}, 37.

\textsuperscript{58} Hylen, \textit{A Modest Apostle}, 114–22.

\textsuperscript{59} Although, the point must be conceded that the Roman patriarchal society was most likely responsible for creating the Roman woman's attitude toward modesty in the first place.
A few books germane to this study deal directly with ancient Christian widows. Prominent among them is Bonnie Bowman Thurston's study of the "Order of Widows" in early Christianity. This, to date, is the most complete treatment in English of the subject. Although it provides much useful information, Thurston's main thesis suffers from a weakness that affects many similar studies dealing with the role of women in the early Church, namely, a clear definition of what "the ministry" is. The common assumption is to equate the ancient usage of the term "ministry" with the modern sense of "public ministry" or "ordained ministry." The modern term lacks precision, and there actually is a great need in the scholarly world to clarify exactly what the ancient Church meant by the word "ministry." A similar weakness holds true for Ute Eisen's interesting study on epigraphic evidence for women "officeholders" in the early Church. Bruce Winter's book, *Roman Wives, Roman Widows* is important. Winter's thesis is that at the time of the early Roman Empire, the increasing independence and liberality of women sparked a conservative reaction both in Roman government as well as in the incipient Christian movement. Carolyn Osiek's article on widows is a necessary read as well, while Stevan Davies' theory that an anonymous group of widows was


61 Ute E. Eisen, *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2000). In my opinion, one cannot help but notice that much of the source material providing evidence of women officeholders comes from the region of Phrygia, and thus may well be epitaphs to Montanist women, a movement whose practices placed them outside the developing mainstream of Christianity.


23
responsible for authoring those stories known collectively as the Apocryphal Acts (early 3rd cent. C.E.) is interesting in its approach, but has gained little traction for widespread acceptance in the scholarly world.

There are some German sources on the topic of widows that also need mentioning. The recognized standard is the series by Jens-Uwe Krause, the fourth volume of which is most pertinent to my topic. Christine Steininger’s study focuses on a period later than mine (the time of Jerome and Pelagius), but provided valuable information about a conceptual idea in the early Church of which I was previously unaware, namely, that Christian authors employed the terminology of Jesus' Parable of the Seeds (Mt. 13) to various classes of women; married women represented a "30 fold" harvest of righteousness, widows a sixty-fold, and consecrated virgins a hundred-fold. Most recently, Christian Back's publication of his reworked dissertation provides a comprehensive overview of Christian widows, leading up to a discussion of the Witwenamt—the church "office" of widow.

Finally, in the ecclesiastical realm, for standard histories I turned to Frend's *The Early Church* in addition to *The Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity*.

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64 Jens-Uwe Krause, *Witwen und Waisen im frühen Christentum* (Stuttgart: F. Steiner, 1995).


McKechnie’s *The First Christian Centuries* and Gonzalez’s history are good sources, the former particularly conservative in its approach and willing to challenge the assumptions of historical-critical reconstructions/interpretations with sound reasoning. To hear the most ancient Christian voices directly, Arnold’s compilation is a useful resource as well. Two commentaries by James Dunn are much more than mere commentaries on the Bible (especially that of Acts), but an excellent resource for historical and sociological information that pertains to the text.

Since the study of widows in early Christianity is intimately bound up with the loci of poverty and charity, a few more books are of import. Hamel's detailed study proved invaluable in understanding issues involved in poverty in Palestine, and Sperber's intensive economic study of goods and prices was a sure guide. As for the dynamic that existed between the "haves" and "have nots" in ancient Roman society, the book by

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Rhee\textsuperscript{75} and the collection of essays edited by Holman\textsuperscript{76} were insightful. As chronological bookends, Uhlhorn's study on Christian charity is the classic,\textsuperscript{77} while the very recent book by Anderson prompted deeper thought on these two entwined topics of charity and poverty, giving historical perspective while challenging the reader to think of applications for the modern world.\textsuperscript{78}

**Rationale and Methodology**

With so many topics touching upon the study of widows, the question naturally suggests itself, "Why charity?" It is a valid question. On a personal level, perhaps it is nothing more than the continuing relevance of the topic, suggested by Jesus himself in his simple words, "The poor you will always have among you (Jn 12:8)." In the professional circle, I am hopeful that this small effort will contribute to our understanding of the challenges and stresses that faced widows in the ancient world, as well as the ways that believers served Christian widows who, in turn, served others of their common faith.

In order to complete this task of understanding charitable initiatives towards widows in early Christianity, I will be developing an analogical comparison.\textsuperscript{79} In this


\textsuperscript{79} The idea for approaching the topic in this manner came to me through Reed's dissertation on 1 Corinthians 7 (David Alan Reed, "Paul on Marriage and Singleness: Reading 1 Corinthians with the
comparison, the Old Testament Israelite attitude toward and care for widows will be seen to have a direct influence upon the early Christian community of Jerusalem and, in turn, upon early Christian communities as they spring up throughout the Mediterranean world. Yet, although both Judaism and early Christianity developed practices in which widows became channels for obtaining spiritual benefit for the benefactor in exchange for some physical benefit to the (poor) widow, I am not suggesting that what happened in Judaism in this regard directly caused the same to happen in early Christianity. Although similar in outward appearance, the practices spring from two different sources. The first springs up among the Jews from certain passages in the Apocrypha. The second seems to arise among the Gentile Christians more from the pattern set by the book of Acts and the precepts of the Sermon on the Mount. The analogical comparison will note, as I stated, both similarities and differences between these two developments. Granted, there certainly may be reasons as to why such similarities develop in both spheres, but to me the pursuit of that question lies primarily within the boundaries of theology in that it deals with spiritual motivation, and so lies outside the parameters set by this current study.

To achieve the comparison described above, I will be utilizing linguistic and literary evidence. The linguistic evidence concerning the proper understanding of terms

Augustan Marriage Laws” (Ph.D., University of St. Michael’s College, 2013), 14-15.) Reed’s argument is an extended analogical comparison. In coming across this concept as I was developing my own thesis, the thought occurred to me that developing an analogical comparison was exactly the path I was pursuing. I adopted the concepts for the outline of this present work. Reed emphasizes, "In an analogical comparison one does not undertake the investigation in order to find direct parallels and/or relationships… As Smith contends, it is not so much the similarities that matter but the differences." Reed attributes the concept to Jonathan Z. Smith in Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity. (Pbk. ed. Jordan Lectures in Comparative Religion. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, 42-47)
germane to the study—widow, poverty, charity—comes from the Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. The literary evidence comes primarily from Roman historians, orators, and poets, utilizing the primary texts as warranted as well as from a few epigraphic texts. Of special importance is the small collection of patristic texts by Josephine Mayer that directly relate to the topics of widow, deaconess, and virgin in the early Church.\textsuperscript{80} Throughout, unless noted otherwise, the translations are my own. The amount of iconographic and numismatic evidence for widows was too insignificant to be of use. Naturally, I will make use of the abundant amount of secondary material referenced above.

**Overview of Chapter Content**

This present effort begins in Chapter 2 by defining terms and concepts vital to the study. The first task is to define the term "widow" as it was used in three different languages: Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. Since early Christianity flows out of Judaism, it is important to go back to the roots of the term in the Jewish community of the Old Testament period to see how the term was understood throughout the same. Since the ancient Jewish community also existed within the world of the ancient Near East, I will also briefly consider evidence from the non-Israelite cultures as to how their surviving literature employs the term "widow." Primary evidence comes from the text of the Old Testament, from ancient Near East legal texts, and from self-laudatory texts celebrating the achievements of monarchs. The second task is to define the terms "poverty" and "charity." The terms do not communicate as clearly as we might assume. What did it mean to be "poor"? What was considered, economically speaking, the threshold of

\textsuperscript{80} Josephine Mayer, *Monumenta de Viduis Diaconissis Virginibusque Tractantia*, Florilegium Patristicum, Fascicle XLII (Bonn: Peter Hanstein, 1938).
poverty? Was the label "the poor" strictly an economic one or did it also imply social status, or even worth? Then further, if "the poor" are the usual objects of "charity," what forms did such giving take? Why did people give help to other people? Or, perhaps an even better question, why should they? This chapter concludes by considering these questions in the context of both the Jewish world centered in Palestine as well as the Greco-Roman world during the period of roughly 200 B.C.E. to 250 C.E.

Chapter 3 takes us to the ultimate source of early Christianity, namely, Old Testament Judaism. In this chapter, I discuss the Old Testament widow as a vulnerable, somewhat independent, but also a valuable member of the ancient Israelite community. The chapter continues up through the intertestamental period to the dawn of the New Testament era. It shows that Jewish society viewed widows as people dear to God himself, and for that reason, they are also to be dear to the Israelite community. Their precarious economic position and ambiguous legal status left them vulnerable. Therefore, the Torah instructs the Israelite community to take care of the widow, and to do so as a joyful, thankful response to the goodness God had shown to individuals as well as to the nation, the primary evidence of which was the deliverance from bondage in Egypt. Love for God manifesting itself in love for one's fellow Israelite was to be the motivating factor in dealing with widows. However, by the end of the intertestamental period a noticeable shift in attitude toward charity begins to seep into Judaism, as evidenced in texts of the Apocrypha. The shift is that willing, thankful care for the less fortunate eventually gives way to a system by which Jewish people (primarily men) can "gain righteousness" through their charitable acts. Thus, the primary benefit—a spiritual
one—comes to the donor, not the recipient. Thus, the object of charity becomes, in part, a means to a self-interested end.

The focus of Chapter 4 is the early Christian community of Jerusalem and Judea, as depicted in the New Testament texts of the Gospels as well as that of the Acts of the Apostles. By exploring those texts that directly describe widows, I seek to establish a picture of what life was like for the average widow in that historical context. What we find are widows who are still vulnerable, somewhat independent, yet valued in the Jewish society. However, the most common descriptor of the widow at this time is that she simply is poor. The chapter continues by studying the various means of helping the poor of the Jewish community practiced at that time. I will note how caring for widows in Jerusalem was, at the beginning of the Christian community there, an expression of love for God and fellow man done in the spirit of the original directives of the Torah. The ultimate goal of the chapter to try to gain understanding of the remarkable initiative undertaken by the Jerusalem congregation to care for the widows in their midst, as described in Acts 6—a strikingly original program. Yet I argue that the Jewish leaders of the Jerusalem congregation were most likely influenced by the charitable practices of the Essenes as well as by some contemporary Jewish practices later codified in the Mishnah. The chapter concludes with a somewhat speculative exercise, based on the thorough studies of both Sperber and Hamel,\(^\text{81}\) as to what the economic impact on the Jerusalem congregation might have been in establishing such a programmatic care of widows. I even attempt to offer a plausible monetary figure of what it cost the Jerusalem congregation.

\(^{81}\) See footnotes 67, 68.
congregation to feed one widow per day. Then I further attempt to apply that *per diem* figure to what I believe is a reasonable number of specifically *Jewish Christian* widows in Jerusalem, derived from some standard demographic studies of the Roman world and of Palestine.

The fifth chapter concludes the study by giving attention to non-Jewish widows, i.e. Gentile widows of the Greco-Roman world. Since the rapidly expanding Christian movement rendered early Christian communities increasingly more Gentile than Jewish, it is important to understand what the average widow of the Roman world's lot in life was like. The challenge of the effort to establish some realistic picture lies in the fact that virtually all literature of the period that speaks extensively about widows refers to elite widows, a group hardly representative of the make-up of early Christian communities. In these texts, we find opposing portraits. Some widows come across as noble, especially those who practiced the ancient Roman ideal of the *univira*, the "one-man woman" who foregoes remarriage to honor the memory of her deceased husband. Other literature is less flattering. In comedy, satire, and epigram especially, Roman authors depict widows as sexually aggressive, unbridled in appetite, hideous in appearance, and proficient in occult magic. I include brief studies on the secular Roman society's views on both poverty and charity as necessary supplements for understanding the lot of the average Roman widow. It will be shown that Romans, in general, despised the poor and whatever may have looked like "charity" towards them to the outside observer was, in the end, simply another form of self-interested promotion more in line with the historic Roman patron-client relationship than with anything that resembles later Christian charity. The focus of the chapter then shifts in its purview to early Christian
communities. Utilizing two texts of the New Testament that deal specifically with widows I will show two things: 1) Paul's advice to the Corinthian widow concerning remarriage is not social rebellion or defiance of Augustus' marriage legislation of 18 and 9 B.C.E. Rather, the Augustan laws simply do not apply to the non-aristocratic widows of the Corinthian congregation; 2) that the directives found in 1 Timothy 5 concerning the care of widows is important not only for its description of what widows were to receive charity from the church, but also for linking widows to specific actions on behalf of the church. The most important of these actions is prayer, and this becomes important in the final section of the chapter, which deals with the later episcopal practice of matching up specific donors with specific widows. The latter receives a tangible physical benefit while the former receives a spiritual benefit as the widow prays specifically for blessings upon the donor. The primary texts considered here is the Didascalia Apostolorum of the 3rd century C.E., with further reference to the Apostolic Constitutions of the late 4th century C.E. A strikingly similar pattern emerges in both ancient Judaism and early Christianity. At the origins of each, both religions envisioned the care of widows to be a self-less, generous, and thankful response to the goodness of God, but eventually developed into a system by which both donor and recipient obtained some benefit, whether physical or spiritual.
CHAPTER 2
TERMS AND CONCEPTS RELATING TO WIDOWS AND CHARITY

At the onset, it is necessary first to define the subject of this study, “the widow,” as well as other important terms that touch upon the subject. In particular, defining “charity” and its symbiotically related topic, “poverty,” also is a necessity. After defining these vital terms, this chapter will then seek to create a composite picture of the ancient widow, considering her person from various perspectives.

Defining "Widow"

Since the present study focuses on widows of the early Christian church, a necessary first step is to define the term "widow." Recognizing that the Christianity had its roots in Jerusalem and from there spread out to the Greco-Roman world, we encounter the term in three different languages, all of which affect the present study. Here we briefly look at the etymologies and nuances of the term "widow" in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin: 'almānāh (אַלְמָנָה), chēra (χήρα), and vidua.

"Widow": Hebrew

First, we turn our attention to the various terms for "widow" found in the literature of the ancient Near East and the nuances in meaning it conveys. With this particular word, coming to a consensus on a definitive, common root for the various terms has proven elusive to scholars. In the Hebrew Old Testament, the predominant term for “widow” is 'almānāh (אַלְמָנָה). Klein notes that the word is of an uncertain etymology, but cites various linguistic hypotheses as to the origin of the term.¹ Barth, for instance,

derives the Hebrew term 'almānāh from the tri-literal root \( r-m-l \) (רמצ), in which he saw a plausible connection to the Arabic words murmil and armal ("needy, helpless"). Koehler-Baumgartner have further parsed this Arabic word to its basic form, ‘armal < ‘almar < ‘almar-tu, "the one without a man."² Others have connected it to a different Arabic word, the verb ‘alima ("he felt pain").³ Klein also suggests the following linguistic connections:

- Phoenecian ailm (אלם); Ugaritic ilmt; Akkadian almattu; Aramaic-Syrian armaltah (א랹לתא).
- Finally, there is the Arabic ‘armalah ("widow").⁵ Frazer links the noun to the Hebrew stative verb ‘ilēm (יאלם) ("to be mute, to be silent"); "widows [were] often bound to silence,"⁶ perhaps primarily in a legal sense, i.e. no means of or opportunity to speak in a legal assembly. Hiebert summarizes the fruits of all scholarly pursuit for the source of this unique word:

> The etymology is uncertain, and none of the proposals to date is satisfactory. The only thing that can be said with certainty is that ‘almānāh is a very old word with a strange pattern of consonants.⁷

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³ Koehler-Baumgartner cites the same Arabic verb, but render it “to experience grief.” (p.58)

⁴ J. Scott states that the cognate root for both “widow” and "widowhood" are found in both Assyrian and Ugaritic. See entry in R. Laird Harris and Gleason L. Archer, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2 Volumes (Moody Publishers, 2003), 47. (Hereafter, TWOT.)


The legal status of widows in ancient Israel was linked directly to their economic status, and this situation propagated a nuanced, technical vocabulary for the understanding of “widow,” as delineated by Naomi Steinberg. Recognizing the fact that there has existed in Old Testament scholarship a “romantic universalizing depiction of the widow’s circumstances based on sympathy,” Steinberg seeks in her essay to provide a more realistic depiction of the harsh realities of being an 'almānâh in ancient Israel. In the process of her study, though, Steinberg delineates not one, but three terms employed in the Old Testament, each referring to widows per se, but with differing shades of meaning equivalent to their differing economic situations. The key, she argues, to gaining a proper understanding of the differences between the three terms is to realize that the nuance “depends on the widow’s access to her husband’s property.” Thus, Steinberg defines the three areas of the economic distinction between widows in Old Testament Israel:

'almānâh a widow, in various stages of destitution, who may have had living male adult relatives, either too poor to help or unwilling to offer her economic support;

'iššā-'almānâh a widow who has redemption rights in her husband's ancestral estate which she exercises through her son;

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9 Steinberg, “Romancing the Widow,” 326.

10 Steinberg, “Romancing the Widow,” 333.

11 Steinberg, “Romancing the Widow,” 327.

12 Steinberg, “Romancing the Widow,” 334. The author cites four examples: 1) the wise woman of Tekoa (2 Sam 14:5); 2) the mother of Hiram of Tyre (1 Kgs 7:14); 3) the mother of Jeroboam I (1 Kgs 11:26); 4) the woman of Zeraphath (1 Kgs 17:8-24).
‘ēšet-hammēt  a widow whose husband has died before fathering an heir to exercise the redemption rights to his ancestral holdings.\textsuperscript{13}

Of the three categories listed above, Steinberg notes that the term ‘almānāh, in addition to being the most commonly used term, also indicates a woman who found herself at “the lowest end of the financial spectrum of widows in biblical Israel.”\textsuperscript{14} Hiebert had earlier arrived at the conclusion that the term “defines those widows who were bereft of not only a husband, but who had neither a son nor a father-in-law to protect them against the social and economic vulnerabilities of being a woman alone.”\textsuperscript{15} After briefly surveying references to the Akkadian cognate almattu (“widow”) found in other Mesopotamian literature (primarily Middle Assyrian laws) pertinent to such things as inheritance of land, bridewealth,\textsuperscript{16} and dowry, Hiebert comes to the conclusion that

\textsuperscript{13} Steinberg, “Romancing the Widow,” 334. The author cites two examples: 1) Ruth 4:5; 2) Dt 25:5. "Both should be defined as 'inherited widow.' "

\textsuperscript{14} Steinberg, “Romancing the Widow,” 327.

\textsuperscript{15} Steinberg, “Romancing the Widow,” 334. This is the author’s summary of Hiebert’s conclusions.

\textsuperscript{16} Hiebert (129 ff.) explains the difference between “bridewealth” and “dowry” and why the distinction is important. To begin with, the author shares the ancient Middle Eastern mindset concerning marriage, namely, that it “is not so much the union of two individuals as it is the union of two families (129).” This concept is testified to by the distinctive term ‘ēšet-hammēt as applied, for example to Ruth: “the wife of the dead man.” Thus, societal belief was reflected in practice, that “death does not dissolve the marriage bond (129).” Given this mindset, marriage is largely an economic endeavor with the ever-prevalent question “Who owns what? disputes over which then, consequently, are preserved for us in legal texts of the period. “Bridewealth” refers to one of the ways in which wealth was transferred between families at the time of marriage (131). Specifically, bridewealth refers to a gift of some sort from the groom’s relation to the bride’s relation (father or brothers). “The bridewealth is not destined for [the bride’s] use. Typically, the sister’s bridewealth is used for the purchase of her brother’s wife (132).” Thus, Hiebert shows, if widowed, the widow did not have access to any of this bridewealth as means of economic support (133). In contrast, the dowry comes from the bride’s family; “the daughter receives her part of the family estate at the time of her marriage (134). "But, again, while certain legal texts indicate the practice of giving and distributing dowries, there are serious questions as to how much benefit the widow actually received from them for her own support. Middle East examples aside, for our purposes we note that
“from an investigation of the resources available to the biblical widow to supply her economic needs, a grim picture emerges.”17 That said, Martha Roth, in studying widow references in legal texts of the Neo-Babylonian era (sixth century B.C.E.) admits that extant data about widows is, in general, quite sparse, as well as largely inferential and anecdotal.18 Others concede that the differences in terms may be, in the end, nothing more than stylistic preferences of the authors.19

In distinction to this term ‘almânâh, the other above-mentioned terms and their usage depend largely upon whether or not a widow has a son—a legal heir—who can exercise the right of redemption for the patrilineal property.20 In the Hebrew text the difference can be seen, for example, between the situation of the widow of Zeraphath to whom Elijah the prophet came (1 Ki 17:8-24) and that of Ruth (or Naomi). The former is categorized as an ‘iššâ-’almânâh, whereas Ruth and Naomi are categorized as ‘ēšet-

“Evidence for the practice of dowry in the Hebrew Bible is sparse,” and the examples that do exist usually are from aristocratic families (135-136).

17 Hiebert, “‘Whence Shall Help Come to Me?’: The Biblical Widow,” 137.

18 Martha T. Roth, “The Neo-Babylonian Widow,” *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 43 (1991): 2. “Our insights about widows in this period, no less than in any other, are largely inferential; the documentation almost never addresses issues relating directly to the legal, economic, or social roles of a woman whose husband has died.” Again, “The information gleaned about widows, therefore, comes to us only incidentally and anecdotally.”


20 Steinberg, “Romancing the Widow: The Economic Distinctions Between the Almana, the Issa-Almanah, and the Eset-Hammet,” 335.
hammēt, the difference being the possession of a son through whom familial property may be transmitted (redeemed).21

However, Chayim Cohen, in his article on the imagery of Lamentations,22 sees a further nuance in the Hebrew 'almānâh, especially when compared to neighboring languages, specifically Akkadian (almattu) and Egyptian (ḥ3rt). Citing examples from all three, Cohen concludes that a better definition of 'almānâh is "a once married woman who has no means of financial support and who is thus in need of special legal protection."23 Thus Judah, Tamar's father-in-law, sends Tamar back to her father's house after her two husbands (both Judah's sons) had died,24 and it is only at that point when she re-enters her father's house25 that Tamar is referred to as an 'almānâh (אַלְמָנָה).

Bereft of two husbands as she was and lacking a male heir, she is returned to a situation of legal and economic security26 that Judah (and his youngest son Shelah,...
slated to be the levîr for Tamar when the time came—Gn. 38:11) is unable to provide.28

On the other hand, it also is a possibility that Tamar's situation reflected a societal attitude towards widows; Judah may well have been able, but was simply unwilling to support his daughter-in-law.29 Likewise, as previously alluded to, in the entire account of Ruth none of the three widows involved in the narrative is referred to as an ‘almānâh, assumedly because even though widowed, they do have some financial means for support.30 The same line of reasoning would also apply to Abigail and Bathsheba, two of marriage as were virgins. Tamar took a great risk in her bold solution to her predicament, for she was regarded in society as a married woman and therefore subject to the death penalty for adultery. “Tamar is trapped in the customs of Biblical society. She is neither an independent widow nor a dependent wife. She is an abandoned woman who is barren, so she devises a plan that, at the risk of her life, will enable her to bear a child, the only means for her to attain status in society and security in life... A wife did not inherit from her husband, and Tamar acts according to a logic dictated by this patriarchal fact.” Bronner, From Eve to Esther, 153.

27 See the discussion below concerning levirate marriage of a widow under Dt 25:5-10.

28 Cohen, “The ‘Widowed’ City,” 76. Cohen delineates the Akkadian practice: a widow had the right to live in the house of one her adult sons or, if she had no son, to obtain another husband from among her father-in-law's sons, or to be married to the father-in-law himself. For a viewpoint contrary to that of the assumed vulnerability of Tamar, see the feminist reading of Genesis 38 by Nathan E. Rutenbeck, “A Liberating Look at Tamar in Genesis 38,” in Elizabeth A. McCabe, ed., Women in the Biblical World: A Survey of Old and New Testament Perspectives (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2011), 1-8. Rutenbeck asserts, "Gen 38 should be read as a positive affirmation of self-directed intellect, courage, muscle, and sexuality to make a breach in patterns of socialized patriarchal oppression (2).”

29 Bennett, Injustice Made Legal, 37. Here the author cites not only the situation with Tamar, but also notes 2 Sa 14:5-7, where an unnamed widow is refused any economic assistance by the males of her clan, as well as 2 Sa 20:1-13, where David willingly abandons his concubines. Seeing this as evidence that "this absence of support was voluntary," the author concludes: "The possibility that the ‘almānâh had living male relatives, and that these men were reluctant to protect and provide economic support for her, is critical, for this point of view elucidates the stigma associated with widowhood in ancient Israel. It suggests that the ‘almānâh was a woman whose adult male relatives, if any were still living, were either too poor to help her or wanted nothing to do with her. This social feature of her predicament invites suspicion and denigration of this person. It breaks ground for the exploitation of this individual by other social actors in the biblical communities also.”

30 Cohen, “The ‘Widowed’City,” 77. Naomi was left land by her deceased husband (Ru. 4:3), and, as described in the narrative, they exercised their divine right (Dt. 24:19) to glean from the edges of the fields of landowners, and so provide for themselves. Boaz extended extra benefits to Ruth in this regard.
David's wives, and both former widows. Had not David arrived on the scene, one gets the impression that, given the description of her husband's estate (1 Sa 25:2), Abigail would have been well-supported. Although we do not know precisely Bathsheba's financial situation, it also is not outside of the realm of possibility that, given her husband Uriah's elevated position in the army of David (2 Sa 23:39), she may, too, have had resources at her disposal as she entered widowhood, even without subsequently marrying David.  

In contrast, Karel van der Toorn offers a more balanced approach in her analysis of the Hebrew 'almānâh and the Akkadian almattu, and sounds a note of caution: "There is a tendency in the secondary literature to say that rich widows are not real widows—real widows, that is, by the standards of their time."  

Citing the examples of the widow of Tekoa (2 Sa 14), the widow of Zarapheth (1 Ki 17), and Judith, van der Toorn concludes that we, in developing our definition of 'almānâh, ought not limit it only to those widows who lack financial means or male support. In fact, "In the eyes of the Israelite public, the ideal widow was either poor or very rich; both conditions could signal a state of grace."  

31 Cohen, “The ‘Widowed’ City,” footnote 30. These are Cohen's opinions. However, one can also wonder about the security of Bathsheba's situation, given the fact that Uriah was a Hittite (non-Israelite). The Torah, in many places, makes it abundantly clear that YHWH had a special concern that the foreigner (often grouped with the "orphan" and "widow") was treated well (e.g. Dt. 16:11-14). Yet did that automatically translate into the same legal protections that Israelites enjoyed during the time of the monarchies?  


33 van der Toorn, “The Public Image of the Widow in Ancient Israel,” 23.  

34 van der Toorn, “The Public Image of the Widow in Ancient Israel,” 23.
"Widow": Greek

Next, we consider the Greek term \textit{chēra} (χήρα), beginning with the Classical era.

Both nouns \(χήρα\) (\textit{chēra}, "widow") and \(χηρεία\) (\textit{chēriah}, "widowhood")\textsuperscript{35} are derived from a pair of verbs, one intransitive and the other transitive: \(χηρεύω\) (\textit{chēroioh}), "to be without, lack; to be widowed, live in widowhood", emphasizes the status of a woman, while \(χηρόω\) (\textit{chēraoh})—"to make desolate; to bereave; to forsake, to deprive; to take away"—emphasizes more the exterior agent imposing a state of loss upon a woman.\textsuperscript{36}

Lysias, in his \textit{Funeral Oration} given during the Corinthian War, speaks of the brave dead:

\begin{quote}
oï pónta perí ēláttonos tῆς ἄρετῆς ἣγοιμενοι αὐτοὺς μὲν ἀπεστέρησαν βίου, χήρας δὲ γυναῖκας ἐποίησαν, (Lys. 2.71)\end{quote}

["Those ones conducting themselves entirely rather than for less virtue, on the one hand they robbed themselves of life, and on the other hand made their women widows…"]

The Middle Comedy playwright Sotades Comicus (1.26) depicts the essential meaning of the word family as "deprived" when he refers to a "widowed" dish, i.e. a dish

\textsuperscript{35} Other derivations, according to Liddell-Scott (Henry George Liddell. Robert Scott. \textit{A Greek-English Lexicon}. revised and augmented throughout by Sir Henry Stuart Jones with the assistance of Roderick McKenzie. Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1940.): a) derived from the intransitive \(χηρεύω\): \(χήρειος\), α, \(ων\), "widowed"; \(χηρεύσις\), η, "widowhood"; \(χηροσύνη\), η, "being bereaved". b) derived from the transitive \(χηρόω\): \(χηρώσις\), εως, η, "being bereaved"; \(χηρωσταί\), οί, ο, "far-off kinsman" who come to seize unallocated property from a man dying without issue; \(χηρικός\), η, \(ων\), "for a widow"; \(χηροσύνη\), η, "bereavement, widowhood." There is an early Greek term closely related in spelling and nearly cognate in meaning: \(χητεία\)—"want, need". Also, \(χηροίνω\)—"to be parted from one's husband" (only Herodotus, 1.21). An Ionian variant, \(χηρήϊος\), occurs in reference to children (LS Supplement, 1996). Finally, \(χηραιότης\), ητος, η—"widowhood" (\textit{P. Masp 523}, 6\textsuperscript{th} cent A.D.)

\textsuperscript{36} There are masculine counterparts to some of these terms, but they occur with much less frequency than the feminine.
without sauce.\textsuperscript{37} Isaeus (Oration 6) elucidates the plight of the widow who is deprived of not only her former husband but also of choice as to how her future would unfold in the context of a courtroom case involving Athenian inheritance law:

\begin{quote}
ἐνθυμεῖσθαι τοίνυν χρή, ὦ ἄνδρες, πότερον δεῖ τὸν ἑκ τὰύτης τῶν Φιλοκτήμονος εἶναι κληρονόμον καὶ ἐπὶ τὰ μνήματα ἰέναι χεόμενον καὶ ἐναγιοῦντα, ἢ τὸν ἑκ τῆς ἁδελφῆς τοῦ τον, ὅ ἔνων αὐτῶς ἐποίησάτο: καὶ πότερον δεῖ τὴν ἁδελφὴν Φιλοκτήμονος, ἢ Χαιρέα σὺ νύσκησε, νῦν δὲ χηρεύει, ἐπὶ τούτοις γενέσθαι ἢ ἐκδοῦναι ὅτω βούλονται ἢ ἐὰν καταγηράσκειν, ἢ γνησίαν οὐσαν ψφ’ ὑμῶν ἐπιδικασθεῖσαν συνοικεῖν ὅτι ἢν ύμῖν δοκῇ.
\textsuperscript{Isa.6.51}
\end{quote}

[At the present time there is now a need for you, O men, to ponder which of the two it will be: whether it is necessary for the son of this woman to be the heir of those things belonging to Philoctemon--to be both the one to go as the one who pours (libation) at the graves and offers sacrifices to the dead, or the son of his sister, whom he himself made (adopted) as son; also, it is necessary (to ponder) whether the sister of Philoctemon, who lived with Chaiareas but who now lives as a widow, is to be for these people (i.e. to become their property) either to give her away to whomever they wish or if they wish for her to grow old, or whether she, being legitimate, be assigned by you to have her live with whomever it might seem best to you.]

Thus, the basic idea found in the Classical era usages of the term \textit{chēra} (χήρα) and the variants of its semantic domain involve the idea of "loss," virtually always to one's disadvantage.\textsuperscript{38}

During the period of the writing of the Septuagint (LXX) and the New Testament, the word conveys essentially the same meaning. \textit{Chēra} (χήρα) becomes the standard rendering for the OT Hebrew \textit{’almānâh} (אַלְמָנָה), mentioned above. Likewise, the handful of references to widows in the apocryphal books are consistent with the various depictions of widows found in the Old Testament. While the majority of references

\textsuperscript{37} LS, \textit{χήρα}.

\textsuperscript{38} Back, \textit{Die Witwen in der frühen Kirche}, 20. The author here draws an etymological link between \textit{χήρα} and \textit{χώρα}, "vacant, empty land". 
speak of actual widows, occasionally one finds a metaphorical use, such as in Baruch, where Jerusalem, personified as a widow (similar to the one found at the opening of Lamentations) cries out, μηδείς ἐπιχαρέτω μοι τῇ χήρᾳ (4:12) ["Let no one rejoice over me the widow..."]. Also, καὶ ἀπήγαγον τοὺς ἀγαπητοὺς τῆς χήρας καὶ ἀπὸ τῶν θυγατέρων τῆς μόνην ἡρήμωσαν (4:16) ["These people carried off my beloved sons and took away my daughters, and I was left a widow, completely alone."]

Again, though, the metaphor of a "widowed" city adds nothing to the basic idea behind the Greek word, which underscores the idea of "loss." Similarly, the imagery of Babylon as a widow that appears in Revelation 18 is the only metaphorical usage of the term χήρα found in the New Testament:

ὅσα ἔδόξασεν αὐτήν καὶ ἐσπειρήσασεν, τοσούτον δότε αὐτῇ βασανισμὸν καὶ πένθος. ὅτι ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ αὐτῆς λέγει ὅτι κάθημαι βασίλεισσα καὶ χήρα οὐκ εἰμί καὶ πένθος οὐ μὴ ἰδω.

(Re 18:7)

[Give her as much torment and grief as the glory and luxury she gave herself. In her heart she boasts, 'I sit enthroned as queen. I am not a widow; I will never mourn.' (NIV)]

In all other instances where chēra (χήρα) occurs in New Testament literature, the context makes clear that the authors have in mind a woman either without or bereft of a husband, who usually is in a social position of disadvantage, making her both completely dependent upon God for her welfare as well as the target of the unscrupulous. Anna the prophetess (Lk 2:37) is a notable widow who, along with the apocryphal Judith, becomes a role model for later Christian widows.40 Luke also

39 Similar imagery is found in Isaiah 13 and John, the Jewish author of Revelation, may have drawn his imagery from it.

40 Apostolic Constitutions VIII.25.2: "And I Lebbæus, surnamed Thaddæus, make this constitution in regard to widows: A widow is not ordained; yet if she has lost her husband a great while, and has lived
highlights widowhood in the Parable of the Unjust Judge (18:3 ff) along with the economic and social struggles being in such a position entails. The poverty and humility of widows is underscored in the account of the widow putting her small offering into the temple treasury (Lk 21:1-3), where Jesus’ words concerning her turn her from an object of pity into a person for emulation.

As the early Christian communities began to organize first in Jerusalem and then in other centers of the Mediterranean world, widows became increasingly prominent. The account in Acts 6, where the Jerusalem community resolved a potentially divisive issue concerning charity towards widows, emphasizes the state of dependency many Jewish widows found themselves in; they lacked basic sustenance and were in need. With the writings of Paul, however, there is a shift in the manner in which widows are viewed. In 1 Corinthians 7, a chapter that essentially deals with issues concerning engagement, marriage, and celibacy, Paul speaks for the first time about widows in the context of remaining single: Λέγω δὲ τοῖς ἀγάμοις καὶ ταῖς χήραις, καλὸν αὕτοῖς ἐὰν μείνωσιν ὡς κἀγὼ· (1 Cor. 7:8 BGT) ["And I say to the unmarried and to the widows, a good thing for them if they should remain as I am (i.e. unmarried)."] This passage becomes, in soberly and unblameably, and has taken extraordinary care of her family, as Judith and Anna—those women of great reputation—let her be chosen into the order of widows. But if she has lately lost her yokefellow, let her not be believed, but let her youth be judged of by the time; for the affections do sometimes grow aged with men, if they be not restrained by a better bridle.” ANF 6, 493 (trans. Schaff)

41 Again, I will discuss the Acts 6 episode in greater detail in Chapter 4. However, it is interesting to note here that the Acts 6 episode, though important for this study on charity towards widows, was more frequently utilized by early Christian writers (especially bishops) to substantiate the institution of the public ministry (clergy) through the laying on of hands. The Constitutions of the Holy Apostles (Bk II, VIII) makes use of the Acts 6 installation of the deacons, almost to the exclusion of any mention of the widows.
subsequent centuries, the primary *sedes* for the practice of a future life of celibacy for Christian women once they become widows.

Perhaps the most important passage that touches upon the present topic of charity towards widows is found in the so-called "pastoral" epistle of 1 Timothy. Here, in addition to concluding from the context that widows are, in general, a stratum of society that finds itself in perpetual need, we find the author creating what essentially becomes a technical term for the early Church, "a true widow." The Greek text of 1 Ti 5:3 reads: Χήρας τιμα τάς ὀντως χήρας. ["Honor widows, the ones really widows."] The author emphasizes the point again in 5:16: εἴ τις πιστὴ ἔχει χήρας, ἐπαρκεῖτο αὐταῖς καὶ μὴ βαρείσθω ἡ ἐκκλησία, ἵνα ταῖς ὀντως χήραις ἐπαρκέσῃ. ["If any faithful (woman) has widows, let her assist them and let the church not be burdened, so that it may assist the ones really widows."] I will discuss this section of 1 Timothy later; it mandates fuller discussion due to its import to the topic of charity. For now, though, it is enough to note that this term—τὰς ὀντως χήραις—not only spawned much discussion and steered ecclesiastical protocol vis-à-vis widows in the early church, it has continued into the modern era to be a much scrutinized and discussed passage as present-day Christians seeks direction in ministering to dependent women of society.42

As the early church entered the post-apostolic era, the Greek term χήρα expanded in nuance and meaning. While the basic definition of "widow" as a woman,

42 See, for example, Miruka Philip et al., “The Role of the Church and the Christian Family towards Widow Care as Highlighted by Paul,” *Sociology and Anthropology* 3, no. 1 (January 2015): 52–57. The article describes the steps that the Africa Inland church (AIC) in Kenya has taken to minister to both Christian and non-Christian Luo widows—a group that has been rapidly expanding due to deaths of husbands from HIV infections, accidents, old age, etc.
either without or deprived of a man, never disappears, the nuances of the term expanded and, in some instances, the word became tantamount to an official title and/or technical term. Numerous early Christian writers exhorted congregations to faithfully minister to widows. These references are found in the earliest of the Christian writings where generosity towards them is never far from the author's mind. Yet as ecclesiastical organization developed, increasing attention was paid toward the widows especially in regards to remarriage, general behavior, and definition of what constitutes a "true widow." The term even eventually morphs into the title for an official congregational office, the so-called "order of widows." This group was so distinguished and readily identifiable that, in some houses of worship, the widows were assigned


44 E.g. Herm. Mand. 8:10; Ign. Smyrn. 6.2; Polycarp, ep.6.1; Justin, 1 Apol.67.6.

45 E.g. Tertullian, ad Uxor. 1.6

46 cf. Council of Elvira (306 A.D.), Canon LXXII: Si qua vidua fuerit moechata et eundem postea habuerit maritum, post quinquennii tempus acta legitima poenitentia placuit eam communionem reconciliari. Si alium duxerit relictio illo, nec in fine dandum ei esse communionem, vel si fuerit ille fidelis, quem accepit, communionem non accipiat, nisi post decem annos acta legitima poenitentia, nisi infirmitas coegerit, velocius dare communionem. [If any widow will have committed adultery and then, afterwards, this same woman takes the man as a husband, after a period of five years, with a legitimate act of penance accomplished, it is a good thing that she be reconciled into communion. If she marries another, having left her former [husband], she is not to be given communion even at the end, but if that [man] she will have [taken] is a believer (fidelis), she will not receive communion until after ten years, and with a legitimate act of penance, unless some infirmity compels [the Church] to give her communion before that time ("more quickly").]

47 See esp. Apostolic Constitutions, Bk. III; Chrys. Hom. 13.2 in I Tim.

48 Thurston, The Widows: A Women's Ministry in the Early Church. Also, Natallia Vasilevich, “The Order of Widows in the Pastoral and in the Didascalia Apostolorum. - Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn. - 2013,” accessed July 18, 2014. (https://www.academia.edu/7017989/) Further, Apostolic Constitutions, 8.25: "A widow is not ordained; yet if she has lost her husband a great while, and has lived soberly and unblameably, and has taken extraordinary care of her family, as Judith and Anna—those women of great reputation—let her be chosen into the order of widows."
special seating within the church. Finally, a still much-debated metaphor of the "widow as altar" began with Polycarp and continued in early Christian writing through Tertullian down to Methodius.

"Widow": Latin

As for the Latin counterpart to the Greek chēra (χήρα)—vidua—little else can be added to the discussion above to substantiate the essential idea of "loss" or "deprived" insinuated by the term. Yet a cursory look at the Latin term vidua indicates that it is broader in scope than its Greek counterpart.

The modern English word widow derives from the Latin term vidua. However, the linguistic history of the word for “widow” extents much further back in time, being “one of the first words that were recognized as Indo-European.” In his highly technical linguistic analysis of the word “widow,” Robert Beekes traces the word’s history from Sanskrit through Latin, addressing some of the incorrect assumptions about its etymology and cognates across various languages of the Indo-European linguistic pool. The chief problem Beekes addresses in his article is that of the long held assumption

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49 Apostolic Constitutions, 2.57.12.
50 Poly. Philip. 4.3
51 Tert. ad Uxor.1.7.4
52 Meth. Symp. Disc.5.6.8. By this point Polycarp’s allusion has morphed into Methodius taking a definitive stance that the widow is to be equated with the bronze altar in the outer court of Old Testament Israel’s tabernacle. He does this (as he explains at the onset) because many early Christians viewed the entire tabernacle as symbolic of the New Testament era church. So Methodius speaks of “the double altar”; the bronze altar of the outer court symbolic of widows within the church, and the golden altar of incense within the Holy Place as symbolic of the virgins within the church. For a complete overview of the passages and discussions, see Osiek, “The Widow as Altar: The Rise and Fall of a Symbol.”
that the word for “widow” was derived from an adjective meaning, “bereft of, deprived of, without,” an adjective that apparently was found in the Sanskrit *vidhú- as well as the Latin *viduus.* But Mayrhofer showed (1968) that the Sanskrit word wasn’t so narrowly defined; he provided one example from the Rigveda of where *vidhú* means “moon,” while stating his personal preference that the word was derived from **vi-dh-u, “the lonely one.”** Beekes challenged that conclusion in his argument, and through etymological reconstruction arrives at the conclusion that the noun “widow” is, in fact, directly derived from a Proto Indo-European (PIE) adjective meaning “bereft, deprived of, without,” the feminine form of which became the standard term. In the end, the author concludes that “widow” is a rather unique word; “no cognates for the word for ‘widow’ remain.” The uniqueness of the term, in turn, undoubtedly was the chief factor for the proliferation of creative etymological links to various other words in the Indo-European word family.

The fountainhead of the Latin word family—the verb *viduo*—is transitive in meaning: "to deprive, to bereave." Yet the adjective covers a broader range of meaning: "deprived or bereft of a husband or wife, bereft of a lover, spouseless, mateless,

58 Beekes, “Widow,” 184 ff. The author ends his article by addressing what he perceives to be faulty etymological links, though long-accepted. These would include the Sanskrit *vidhyati,* “to pierce”; the Sanskrit *vindháte,* “to be empty”; the Latin *divido,* which many seemed to superficially link with the idea of “to separate (e.g. through death)” with a woman separated from her husband.
widowed.” Lewis and Short further derives the Latin word from the Sanskrit vidhava, without a husband,”, and link it not to the Greek χήρα but rather to ἕθεος, "single, unmarried.” Seneca can even describe Medea as a coniunx viduata taedis, "a spouse deprived of marriage" i.e. "divorced." The word vidua, then, is more commonly used to depict a broader group of Roman women; all of the women are in a state of being unmarried, yet the word itself carries the nuances of "widowed," "divorced," "abandoned" and even describes women whose husbands have been away for a long time. In the context of early Christian literature, we even can find in the writings of Tertullian a reference to a very young "virgin-widow," a classification that disturbed Tertullian greatly. Such a reference leaves us with only one inference to draw: a betrothed woman who never consummated a marriage (for whatever reason) could also be labeled as a vidua, due to a break of engagement through either volition or premature death. It is also noteworthy to note that the term vidua also created a distinctive social class in the Roman mind, one of which there essentially was no counterpart for Roman men. The fact that the Roman mind readily embraced the concept of vidua as a distinctive social category undoubtedly fostered both the creation


61 Tert. de Vel. Virg. 9.2-3. For a full discussion of not only Tertullian's statement but also the broader category, see Methuen, “The ‘Virgin Widow’: A Problematic Social Role for the Early Church?”

of and delineation of such a category of women within the confines of the ecclesiastical structure.

**Summary of Linguistic Evidence**

This cursory overview of the Hebrew, Greek, and Latin terms related to "widow" indicates that the basic concept associated with the word, no matter what the language, involves "loss" or "deprivation." Most commonly, the word applied to a woman in reference to her marital status. The word can also be applied to men, yet less commonly because men were not, in ancient societies, defined by marital status to the same extent as women. However, in relation to marital status, the word over time acquires a broader range of meaning, especially in Latin. Thus, it can describe the following: a woman who has lost her husband in death; a woman whose husband has been absent for some time (but is not necessarily dead); a woman who has been divorced; a woman whose engagement has been broken off; a woman who has been abandoned and left to fend for herself. All these nuances involve the concept of "loss." Furthermore, all these definitions carry with them a social identification marker as well. In many cases, the status of being a widow also implied social disadvantage, though this of course cannot be assumed in respect to the privileged class.

**Issues in Studying Poverty and Charity**

Since the basic meaning of the term "widow" implies some sense of loss, the assumption is often made—correctly—that the majority of widows found themselves in an impoverished state upon the death of their spouse. However, what did it mean to be

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63 For another brief overview that touches upon all three languages, see Back, *Die Witwen in der frühen Kirche*, 19–22.
“poor”? What was considered “poverty”? At what level of subsistence did one have to be so as to be regarded as living “in poverty”? If we are going to consider the beginnings of charity towards widows in the early Christian communities, defining what society considered “poor”, clarifying what was “need”, and defining what people considered “daily bread” or “poverty relief” are necessary foundational stones. In short, the study of charity is inextricably bound to the study of poverty.

**Defining Poverty**

That said, it is precisely at this point that one problem in particular surfaces, that of coming to a scholarly consensus on the terminology for poverty. To date, the pursuit has been frustrating, largely because in extant Greek texts there appears to be no standardization in the terminology across the Greco-Roman world. The term *penēs* (πένης), for instance, seems to indicate a person who can work, albeit who does indeed struggle to survive with limited resources. In contrast, the term *ptōchos* (πτωχός) appears to apply more to people—usually beggars—without any sort of resources at their disposal. Thus, the former indicates someone who is “poor,” but the latter, perhaps, indicates someone who is “destitute.” Yet if we look in Josephus and Philo, we find that these authors prefer to use *penēς* to *ptōchos* when describing “the poor,” while in New Testament texts just the opposite holds true. We can observe the same distinction

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64. I will discuss these latter two in detail in Chapter 4.


67. Longenecker, “Exposing the Economic Middle,” 246. See also Ben-Zion Rosenfeld and Haim Perlmutter, “The Poor as a Stratum of Jewish Society in Roman Palestine 70-250 C.E.: An Analysis,”
also in ancient Hebrew texts that describe the Jewish “poor.” Longenecker warns that scholars need to “extra vigilant in arriving at conceptual precision,” as they deal with terms that are, admittedly, “vague and ambiguous.”

The reality of this terminological imprecision has implications for the study of poverty, as well as for such ventures as creating a “poverty scale” such as Friesen proposed. As Longenecker explains, Friesen’s effort was laudable since for over forty years the “binary” model of society, first developed by Moses Finley in the mid 1960s, held sway and was adopted by most scholars with only slight variations. Justin Meggitt, after Kevin Hopkins, is the latest advocate of the binary model of society, who made the drastic statement that “a bleak material existence… was the lot of more than 99% of the inhabitants of the Empire.” It appears that the development of a binary model of society takes it cue from Roman authors, who often divided the entire populace of

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68 Gildas Hamel, “Poverty and Charity,” in The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Daily Life in Roman Palestine, ed. Catherine Hezser, 1 edition (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010), 315. “A contextual study of the vocabulary of poverty in the Hebrew Bible indicates that very divergent biblical notions of poverty existed … In these traditions, a clear difference is made between the poor, defined concretely as dependent and oppressed (‘any, found eighty times), and the destitute in extreme circumstances (‘evyon, found sixty times).”

69 Longenecker, “Exposing the Economic Middle,” 244.

70 Cf. footnote 65.


72 Helen Rhee, Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich: Wealth, Poverty, and Early Christian Formation (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 19-20: “Defining and understanding poverty in this way, the elite both normalized it as part of the natural order of things and perpetuated the binary category of the rich and the poor by collapsing the various grades of socioeconomic structure into just two.” Further, “Although the poor did not constitute a single distinct socioeconomic ‘class’ or group, the elite authors closely associated poverty with social status and order. Therefore, they linked the poor with those who did not belong to the upper-stratum elite: i.e. the poor were the humiliores, the ones who had to work for their living whether in the fields or in shops, who lacked the leisure of the rich.”
society into two camps, the plebs and the optimates, or the honestiores and humiliores. In response to this situation, Friesen made the first attempt to offer some sort of nuanced understanding of the various strata of society in the Greco-Roman world, the Judean province included. Arguing that Meggitt’s binary model of society was overly simplistic, Friesen sought to rectify that situation by creating his own “poverty scale” by delineating seven different ranges of economic existence. Beginning with the “imperial elites” (PS1), Friesen worked down to PS7 (“poverty scale 7”), a group that denoted “some farm families, unattached widows, orphans, beggars, disabled, unskilled day laborers, prisoners.” These are “below subsistence level,” and the author speculates that this PS7 label could be affixed to approximately 28% of the Greco-Roman society. Friesen’s next level up, PS6, denotes those “at subsistence level (and often below minimum level to sustain life).” Friesen calculated this group to comprise 40% of Greco-Roman society. Thus, in Friesen’s model, 68% of Greco-Roman society

73 Cf. Jens-Uwe (München) Krause, “Honestiores/Humiliores,” in Der Neue Pauly, New Pauly Online (Brill, n.d.), 5:707-709, http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/der-neue-pauly/honestioreshumiliores-e517020. Accessed September 11, 2014. See also the distinction expressed by Atkins and Osbourne: “Division between those who were in a position actively to participate in imperial rule (essentially the wealthy and those who served in the legions), and those who were not, became formalized already under Hadrian in the distinction between honestiores and humiliores. When Caracalla extended citizenship to all freeborn inhabitants of the empire in the Constitutio Antoniniana of C.E. 212, the civic model was doomed. Where there was no distinction of political status to back them up, distinctions of social status could not survive unless they were also distinctions of economic status. The death of the city-state inevitably brought about the birth of the poor.” Margaret Atkins and Robin Osborne, eds., “Introduction: Roman Poverty in Context,” in Poverty in the Roman World, 1 edition (Cambridge, England; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 10.


75 Longenecker, Remember the Poor. 46

76 Longenecker, Remember the Poor. 46
was at the lowest two levels, PS6-7. Longenecker, in a proposed revision of Friesen’s model, made in desire to more accurately depict the groups of the “economic middle,” alters Friesen’s numbers slightly; PS6 shrinks to 30% and PS7 to 25%.\(^77\) In respect to these categories, Helen Rhee identifies Friesen's PS5-6 group with the word *penētes* (πενήτες), and his PS7 level with *ptōchoi* (πτώχοι).\(^78\) Even with such a revision, though, Longenecker’s model delineating the two most bottom categories applies to well over half of the population of the Roman Empire.\(^79\) Although this present thesis often highlights life in Judea, there probably isn't any compelling reason to assume that life among the Jewish commoners was vastly different in that part of the Roman empire as in the other areas.

Gardner, in his recent work on the origins of organized charity among the Jewish people as codified in rabbinic Judaism,\(^80\) also helps our understanding of the term “the poor” by making the following observations about them. He notes how “the poor” fall into the following categories:

- There was “biological poverty,” defined as “an acute problem in the ancient world, as large swaths of the inhabitants of the Roman Empire lived at or near the subsistence level, with barely enough to stay alive.” \(^81\)

\(^{77}\) Longenecker, “Exposing the Economic Middle.” 246. To distinguish his revised scale from Friesen's, Longenecker labels his strata “ES” (“economic scale”) as opposed to Friesen's “PS” (“poverty scale”).

\(^{78}\) Rhee, *Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich*, 10–11.


\(^{81}\) Gregg E. Gardner, *The Origins of Organized Charity in Rabbinic Judaism*, 56
There was “value judgment poverty,” which was "a failure to meet thresholds established by social conventions."  

There were also the “structural poor,” who are “those who are unable to participate fully in the economy due to a lack of ability or other barriers to entry into the labor force. In ancient society, the structural poor typically included widows, the elderly, the disabled, orphans, aliens, and simply those who were born into poverty so deep that they could not escape. No amount of training or environmental change could lift them from poverty and they remain poor even when everyone else prospers. For the structural poor, poverty was long term and often permanent.”

These categories, then, also add to our understanding of the nebulous term “poor” in the ancient Judea and Palestine. More than that, they also represent real people with real needs who once existed in a very trying—sometimes desperate—economic situation.

Still another issue that interpreters of the ancient texts also must deal with is the context of “the poor”; Hamel points out:

A primary consideration in regard to the ancient Jewish outlook on poverty and charity is that these phenomena were understood in a religious framework, where as in Greco-Roman society, philanthropy, patronage, and state subsidies were seen as civil duties.

Cohen notes that, “the study of poor relief involves several disciplines—including (at the very least) theology, sociology, and economics—to discuss (for example) the influence of religious beliefs on economic and social behavior.” For instance, what did

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82 Gregg E. Gardner, *The Origins of Organized Charity in Rabbinic Judaism*, 56-57: “Returning to ancient Palestine, those who were poor according to the value-judgment approach had the means to subsist, yet were considered poor because of the way that they subsisted.” (57)

83 Gregg E. Gardner, *The Origins of Organized Charity in Rabbinic Judaism*, 45

84 Hamel, “Poverty and Charity,” 315.

the word \(\pi\epsilon\nu\eta\varsigma\) mean to Jewish readers or Greek readers?\(^{86}\) Hamel provides an example: understanding the social implications of the term \(\pi\epsilon\nu\eta\varsigma\) also involves understanding the opinion that classical and later Greek thought had of work, since the term implies meager existence achieved through day labor.\(^{87}\) Thus, the mere mention of the terms for “the poor” produced various value judgments, depending upon the culture. Jewish society, following select passages from the Old Testament (especially the Psalms) viewed the poor more positively, since they believed the poor to be dear to God’s heart and objects of his special concern and protection. But, in contrast, Greek literature “usually saw little problem, not only in drawing attention to modesty of means and beggary but also in attaching blame or shame to the poor themselves.”\(^{88}\) To illustrate even further, when Greek became the representative language of the early Christian movement, Christian authors frequently nuanced \(\pi\tau\omega\chi\omicron\omicron\varsigma\) “in a favorable light [that was] shocking to the Greeks who…sought to explain away the \(\pi\tau\omega\chi\omicron\omicron\varsigma\) of the Gospels and to harmonize the Beatitudes and their own view of society.”\(^{89}\) So the Greek terms especially were impregnated with cultural significance, and early Greek Christians


\(^{87}\) Hamel, *Poverty and Charity in Roman Palestine First Three Centuries C.E.*, 168.

\(^{88}\) Hamel, *Poverty and Charity in Roman Palestine First Three Centuries C.E.*, 201. As mentioned in the overview of literature in Chapter 2, Hamel’s study quoted here broke new ground and essentially laid the foundation for further study of poverty and charity in the Roman world (as noted by Rosenfeld and Perlmutter, “The Poor As A Stratum Of Jewish Society In Roman Palestine 70-250 C.E.,” 273). His chapter, “The Vocabulary of Poverty” (p.164-211) remains influential.

\(^{89}\) Hamel, *Poverty and Charity in Roman Palestine First Three Centuries C.E.*, 193. Thus, the interpretation of these terms by early Christian Bible commentators—or as explained in letters and homilies—serve to reshape the mindset toward the poor among Gentile Christians.
struggled to overcome the biases that these terms carried in their culture when they were confronted with the positive—even blessed—status that the poor had not only in the Jewish scriptures but also in the eyes of Jesus himself.90 “In the Greco-Roman world, it was a new and revolutionary message. Its acceptance was not natural, and various ways of understanding the message developed.”91 Consequently, there was a shift in thinking that needed to occur, as Greek-speaking Gentiles became part of the early Christian movement.

Likewise, in the Roman world of the early imperial period and beyond, there were certain attitudes toward "the poor" that early Christians undoubtedly would have encountered. Humfress makes the interesting observation that in surviving Roman legal texts there really is no working definition among Roman jurists for "the poor"; their "case-specific" references to poverty "could result in nuanced discussions of poverty and its social implications."92 In general, in the pre-Christian world of Rome, upper society despised beggars, one reason being that Rome, as any modern city, had its share of "fakers" that played on peoples' sympathies to receive handouts.93 Many

90 The very first of the Beatitudes—“blessed are the poor” (Μακάριοι οἱ πτωχοὶ Mt 5:3) – was especially challenging. It should be noted that Matthew qualifies the statement by saying "poor in spirit..." (as does Mark, 5:3), but Luke does not (Lk 6:20).

91 Hamel, Poverty and Charity in Roman Palestine First Three Centuries C.E., 222.

92 Caroline Humfress, “Poverty and Roman Law,” in Poverty in the Roman World, ed. Margaret Atkins and Robin Osborne, 1 edition (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 198. And earlier: “In fact, classical Roman lawyers had been notoriously uninterested in defining a class or category of ‘the poor’, whether according to either juridical or economic criteria.” (183)

widows naturally filed into the ranks of "the poor," sometime reaching the point where they were forced to sell their children or contract them out for the payment of debt.94 The effects of poverty in the Roman world, especially on the urban poor, were multiple: vulnerability, social exclusion, and shame.95 Generally speaking, then, in the early first century C.E. Roman world, "no one claimed to love the destitute until the rise of Christianity as a power in the late empire, when patronage of the poor became an ideological and political force."96 Ironically, though, even well into the Roman imperial period there was a tendency among the elite to despise the urban poor while at the same time idealizing the rural poverty of a peasant farmer as an idyllic, simple life of "unwealth."97 However, this was the exception. Realistically, the poor, "the vast majority of the Roman population were most vulnerable to food shortages and crises, and infectious diseases, and were subject to the shame, alienation, and the bias and


95 Neville Marley, “The Poor in the City of Rome,” in Poverty in the Roman World, ed. Margaret Atkins and Robin Osborne, 1 edition (Cambridge, England; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press Cambridge University Press, 2009), 33–36. The author states that the social exclusion caused by poverty renders a person "incapable of developing their full potential as human beings." (34) Also Rhee: "The key to understanding the poor is to see that they had to work for their living, and work represented subservience and dependence and was therefore contemptable." (Rhee, Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich, 20.)


97 Rhee, Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich, 21.
indifference of the rich," a group that "did not associate moral excellence or virtue (dignitas) with poverty or the poor."98

The following text is representative of a number of the Roman attitudes discussed above, attitudes toward charity, the poor, widows, and superstitions (to which the poor were especially attracted). Lucian, the Roman satirist (130-200 C.E.) berated the Christian view of wealth and scoffed at their charity, as he simultaneously reveals his own attitude toward these "lower" people of society. In his treatise The Passing of Peregrinus, the rhetorician describes the imprisonment of the Christian preacher Proteus and the reaction of the Christian communities to the same:

Then at length Proteus was apprehended for this and thrown into prison, which itself gave him no little reputation as an asset for his future career and the charlatanism and notoriety-seeking that he was enamored of. Well, when he had been imprisoned, the Christians, regarding the incident as a calamity, left nothing undone in the effort to rescue him. Then, as this was impossible, every other form of attention was shown him, not in any casual way but with assiduity, and from the very break of day aged widows and orphan children could be seen waiting near the prison, while their officials even slept inside with him after bribing the guards. Then elaborate meals were brought in, and sacred books of theirs were read aloud, and excellent Peregrinus—for he still went by that name—was called by them 'the new Socrates.'

Indeed, people came even from the cities in Asia, sent by the Christians at their common expense, to succor and defend and encourage the hero. They show incredible speed whenever any such public action is taken; for in no time they lavish their all. So it was then in the case of Peregrinus; much money came to him from them by reason of his imprisonment, and he procured not a little revenue from it. The poor wretches have convinced themselves, first and foremost, that they are going to be immortal and live for all time, in consequence of which they despise death and even willingly give themselves into custody; most of them. Furthermore, their first lawgiver persuaded them that they are all brothers of one another after they have transgressed once, for all by denying the Greek gods and by worshipping that crucified sophist himself and living under his laws. Therefore, they despise all things indiscriminately and consider them common property, receiving such doctrines traditionally without any definite

98 Rhee, Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich, 22.
evidence. So if any charlatan and trickster, able to profit by occasions, comes among them, he quickly acquires sudden wealth by imposing upon simple folk.99

As we go on to consider briefly poverty and charity to the poor in the first century Judean world and interpreting the texts that document such interchanges, there is the further reality of religious implications of the terms over and above the sociological and economic ones just noted. For instance, Hamel points out that “poverty implied a certain physical appearance that could easily be interpreted as being impure.”100 Many Jews of that day were scrupulous about purity laws,101 especially those with more substantial means who were in a position to assist the poor. Thus even by interacting with the poor—who often were assumed to be ritually unclean—the giver ran the risk of incurring temporal cultic impurity.102 From the opposite perspective, that of the poor person, poverty became a roadblock in many instances, for poverty “implies an inability to participate fully and honorably in social and religious activities.”103

Defining Charity

Yet since the poor are close to God’s heart and objects of his special care,104 the Jews, in contrast to the Greeks and Romans, saw a much more of a religious dimension


100 Hamel, Poverty and Charity in Roman Palestine First Three Centuries C.E., 199.

101 Mt 15:2; Mk 7:4; Lk 11:48; Ac 10:14

102 Cf. Lk 17:12 ff where a group of lepers warns those who are clean to stay away from them. Also Nu 12:10, where Miriam, sister of Moses, is temporarily exiled from the camp because she was deemed ritually unclean.

103 Hamel, Poverty and Charity in Roman Palestine First Three Centuries C.E., 316.

104 Ps 68:10; 113:7 et al.
in their interaction with the poor. Numerous times in the Old Testament, this attitude of generously helping the less fortunate is the mark of a righteous person.\textsuperscript{105} Caring for the poor was also, of course, mandated by the law of Moses in various places, especially during high festival times.\textsuperscript{106} Or, with the nation operating on a seven year “Sabbath” cycle of years, during the third and sixth years the annual tithe of crops and goods was given to the Levites (as opposed to just the priestly caste) and then, in turn, distributed to such as the orphan, widow, and needy foreigner.\textsuperscript{107} Josephus also describes the practice:

Besides those two tithes, which I have already said you are to pay every year, the one for the Levites, the other for the festivals, you are to bring every third year a third tithe to be distributed to those that want; to women also that are widows, and to children that are orphans.\textsuperscript{108}

Furthermore, it is precisely this religious dimension in dealing with the Jewish poor that may have served as a catalyst for Gentile conversions to the Jewish faith, also known as becoming a “proselyte” of the Jewish religion.\textsuperscript{109} Such may have been the situation with Cornelius the centurion, as recorded in Acts 10. There the text singles out Cornelius for his gifts for the poor (Ac 10:4). Longenecker states:

\vspace{1em}

\vspace{1em}

\textsuperscript{105}Ps 37:21; Prov 21:26; Prov 31:20 (the virtuous wife); Job 29:12; Eze 16:49 (negatively).

\textsuperscript{106}See discussion of this point in the next chapter.

\textsuperscript{107}Dt 26:12.


\textsuperscript{109}Gentile converts to Judaism had two options. They could become somewhat of an “associate” member, a “proselyte of the gate” and honor the Jewish god without being bound to rigorously obey all the details of the ceremonial law of Moses (e.g. circumcision). A “proselyte of righteousness,” on the other hand, was a Gentile convert who did bind himself to follow the details of the law. Cf. Edersheim, \textit{The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah}, 745–47, Appendix XII: “On the Baptism of Proselytes."
The point cannot be over-emphasized: when Gentiles showed interest in honoring the deity of Israel and in living in conformity with his requirements, one of the things that emerged from them was a generosity towards others, including and/or especially the needy.\textsuperscript{110}

But apart from the proselytes to Judaism and the skeptical views of Lucian, what was a more common and realistic view of charity that existed among the Gentiles in the Greco-Roman world\textsuperscript{111}? One author provides this viewpoint:

The pagan concept of "charity" at the time [of the beginnings of Christianity] was really nothing more than politicking or an exchange of favors – to the extent it existed at all. This does not mean that certain pagans did not act in a charitable manner, but it is clear that such was not the cultural norm and was not supported or encouraged by the pagan religions, philosophers, or the Roman government.\textsuperscript{112}

Uhlhorn concedes that there are many examples of isolated acts of compassion in the ancient Greco-Roman world, but "there is no trace whatever of organized charity."\textsuperscript{113} Further, he offers an analysis that highlights the difference in motivation between pagan and early Christian charitable ventures:

The fundamental difference between the ancient \textit{liberalitas} and the Christian \textit{caritas} lies in this, that the latter always keeps in view the welfare of the poor and needy; to help them is its only object; whereas the Roman, who exercises the virtue of liberality, considers in reality himself alone (I do not mean always in a bad sense), and exercises his liberality as a bribe wherewith to win the favors of the multitude. Nor does he always exercise it in the spirit of common vanity, but

\textsuperscript{110} Longenecker, \textit{Remember the Poor}, 110.

\textsuperscript{111} The discussion, naturally, has to be centered on the attitudes of the elite, i.e. of those in an economic position of being able to bestow charity. Apart from the examples in Acts, there simply are not examples in texts of poor people exercising charity toward other poor people. Moreover, it is highly unlikely that such an exchange would have been regarded as charity by either the elite or the poor themselves.


\textsuperscript{113} Uhlhorn, \textit{Christian Charity in the Ancient Church}, 5.
in order that it may be the means of displaying and increasing the splendor of his name, of his position, and of his house, or what he considered of just as much importance, the splendors of his native city, and of the municipal community. Christian charity is self-denying; heathen *liberalitas* is at bottom self-seeking, even although personal selfishness be limited by the interests of the commonwealth, for the sake of which Greek and Roman alike were at all times prepared to make a sacrifice.\(^{114}\)

But what of the practice of providing grain relief in ancient Rome? Is it possible to consider this a form of charity on the part of emperors and other wealthy citizens? The grain dole is believed to have begun with Gaius Gracchus\(^ {115}\) and to have continued at least up through the time of Domitian and longer.\(^ {116}\) The numbers of people supported by this government project are large; Julius Caesar, at his accession to power, discovered that 320,000 people were receiving grain assistance.\(^ {117}\) While Caesar successfully trimmed that number back to 150,000, by the time of the beginning of Augustus' reign the number had risen again to its previous height, and needed to be curtailed once again.\(^ {118}\) Without detouring into a history of the Roman grain relief program, it is enough to say that a common assumption is that the program was

\(^{114}\) Uhlhorn, *Christian Charity in the Ancient Church*, 8–9. This older volume nonetheless remains a thorough treatment of the subject. The time frame covered by the author takes the topic from the early days of Christianity into the post-Constantinian church and the onset of the early medieval period. Also Parkin, "‘You Do Him No Service’: an Exploration of Pagan Almsgiving," 79: "Roman society was very concerned with status: giving without return is a way of declaring one's superiority."

\(^{115}\) Plutarch, *Vit. C. Gracchus*, 5

\(^{116}\) For a concise overview of the Roman grain dole history, see "Poor Relief in Ancient Rome," in Henry Hazlitt, *Conquest of Poverty* (Irvington-on-Hudson, NY: Foundation for Economic Education, 1996). Hazlitt, a respected economist, sees the burden of continuing the grain dole as one of the major factors leading to the collapse of the Roman Empire.

\(^{117}\) Hazlitt, *Conquest of Poverty*, 68.

\(^{118}\) Hazlitt, *Conquest of Poverty*, 68
directed mainly at providing relief for the poor. Undoubtedly, some poor benefitted from it. Yet in his fine analysis of dedicatory inscriptions found in Italy celebrating emperors and other benefactors who bestowed grain relief programs upon certain communities, Greg Woolf proves the point that this program largely was conducted for the enhancement of the donor's reputation, a thought completely in line with Uhlhorn's analysis above.\(^{119}\) Both municipal dedications and dedications to private donors indicate that these *alimenta* schemes did not primarily have the poor in mind as target recipients.\(^{120}\) After focusing the study primarily on the efforts of Trajan, Woolf concludes:

Poverty undoubtedly existed in Trajanic Italy, but the imperial alimentary schemes were not a response to it. They did not constitute the one exception to the rule that the Roman world had little compassion for the poor and that no ancient government ever regarded them as their responsibility. We do not know how the recipients of the *alimenta* were selected, but all the evidence suggests that they were eligible by virtue of their privileged status, either as citizens and inhabitants of a privileged area—Italy—or just possibly as members of a more elevated group within the Italian communities.\(^{121}\)

\(^{119}\) Greg Woolf, "Food, Poverty and Patronage: The Significance of the Epigraphy of the Roman Alimentary Schemes in Early Imperial Italy," *Papers of the British School at Rome*, 215. [https://www.academia.edu/5541111/](https://www.academia.edu/5541111/). Accessed December 10, 2016. He states: "If the imperial *alimenta* really were aimed at disadvantaged individuals, the poor as defined economically, by what they consumed, then they were almost unique in the ancient world. Neither charity nor state welfare can be shown to have been significant sources of assistance to the poor in the ancient world. Even those who regard the Roman corn-dole and the *alimenta* as motivated by concern for the poor make the point that they were exceptional, before the Christianization of the empire." (210) And, in speaking of surviving iconography depicting the corn-dole: "It is less easy to find iconographic representation of some of the other motivations that have been imputed to the founders of the alimentary schemes. Poverty, for example, does not figure. When recipients are shown they are depicted as babes in arms or youths, but do not appear ragged or thin." (225)

\(^{120}\) Woolf, "Food, Poverty and Patronage: The Significance of the Epigraphy of the Roman Alimentary Schemes in Early Imperial Italy," 208.

\(^{121}\) Woolf, "Food, Poverty and Patronage: The Significance of the Epigraphy of the Roman Alimentary Schemes in Early Imperial Italy," 227.
In contrast, early Christian attitudes toward charity sprung from the fountainhead of Judaism. They viewed the poor and disadvantaged in a similar manner, namely, that they are precious to God. Because of this inherited attitude, early Christians resolved to care for one another following the directive Jesus himself gave on the night before his crucifixion: "By this all people will know you are my disciples, if you love one another (Jn. 13:35)." The depiction of such mutual care found in the book of Acts shows that it was radical in its approach in that it was, economically speaking, an example of pure communism: "There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need." 122 The congregation in Antioch, moreover, seems to have invented the entire concept of a monetary relief offering for another group of believers they had not, by and large, ever met--the group in Jerusalem that was going through difficult times. 123 Also, the apostle Paul's third missionary trip involved the gathering of a special relief offering from the congregations in Macedonia and Achaia for the purpose of helping out the Jerusalem believers yet again. 124 Paul had earlier assured the Jerusalem leaders--Peter, John, and James the

122 Acts 4:34-35 (NIV). The practice continued. Price quotes the early Christian writer Aristides to prove the point. "And if there is among them any that is poor and needy, and if they have no spare food, they fast two or three days in order to supply the needy their lack of food (Apology of Aristides, 130 C.E.)." Likewise the historian Michel Riquet (also quoted by Price): "It has been calculated that at Rome in 250, under Pope Cornelius, ten thousand Christians obliged to fast could provide, from a hundred days' fasting, a million rations a year. These more or less regular offerings were supplemented by gifts made to the Church by rich converts." (Price, "Pagans, Christians, and Charity.")


124 This offering is described in the instructions Paul lays down for the Corinthians congregation as pertain to principles of giving in general. cf. 2 Corinthians 8:1 – 9:15. Paul also educates on the same in 1 Corinthians 16:1-3. Rumors of Paul traveling with this offering to Jerusalem may have reached the ears of the Roman regional governor Felix stationed at Caesarea. Following a riot in the temple precinct in
Just—that he remembering the poor was a priority for him as he conducted his ministry.\textsuperscript{125} Thus, "Christian almsgiving was distinctive in comparison with the pagan culture it competed with, where that distinction involves the range of practices but, more importantly, the meaning of those practices."\textsuperscript{126} Love for fellow believers and, ultimately, for all people—the hallmark of the early Christian movement—manifested itself in such a way as Christian communities began to form around the Mediterranean world.

\textbf{Conclusions}

Dealing with the topic of "the poor" in the first and second century Roman world needs to take into account a number of factors—sociological, demographic, economic, linguistic, and religious. These all touch upon the topic at hand, and play a role in determining how an ancient society cared for those who were less fortunate than others were. The challenges involved in this particular study involve establishing accurate definitions of the terms "widow," "poverty," and "charity." In the Greco-Roman world, the most common view of society was that of a binary society, which divided all people into two groups, the \textit{honestiores} (optimates), and the \textit{humiliiores}. Roman authors and historians reinforces these categories in their writings. In general, the Roman attitude in the late republican and early imperial periods was one of despising and ignoring the

Jerusalem, precipitated by Paul's presence (Acts 21), Paul was placed under Roman military protection and, due to his Roman citizenship, transferred to Caesarea for trial before the governor of Judea. Paul was kept there under house arrest for nearly two years, during which time Felix "was hoping that Paul would offer him a bribe (Acts 24:26)," the assumption being that he may have heard about the funds from the Greek collection for the believers in Jerusalem.

\textsuperscript{125} Galatians 2:10

\textsuperscript{126} Richard Finn, OP, \textit{Almsgiving in the Later Roman Empire: Christian Promotion and Practice (313-450)}, 1\textsuperscript{st} edition (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 32.
poor. While there undoubtedly were individual acts of compassion towards those less fortunate, in Roman society helping others was practiced as primarily as a tit-for-tat arrangement done to yield some future benefit to the benefactor. In addition, the elite of society viewed helping others mostly as a venue for enhancing either one's own reputation or the reputation of the community, while at the same time serving to reinforce social categories. Thus charity, in its purest sense, did not originate in the secular Roman society. However, ancient Jewish believers and, subsequently, early Christians embraced different attitudes which, in turn, led to a difference in practice as to how they approached and charitably dealt with the poor.

127 “Widows, orphans, migrants and the sick, whom the Church tended, were those whom Roman euergetism almost ignored. They were not the ‘deserving poor’.” (Whittaker 1993:24, quoted in footnote 54 in Longenecker, “Exposing the Economic Middle,” 271–72.)

128 “Christian charity did not develop out of pagan munificence. The two were concerned with fundamentally different sectors of ancient society.” (Parking 2006:60 quoted in footnote 54 in Whittaker 1993:24.)
CHAPTER 3
JEWHISH CHARITABLE PRACTICES TOWARD WIDOWS

As we look for common ground between Jewish and early Christian charitable endeavors towards widows, it is natural to consider briefly first how Jewish widows were regarded and fared prior to the first century C.E. In this chapter, then, I will consider the various Hebrew terms that designate the concept of widowhood, with its various nuances. Then I will turn to the Torah itself where various laws germane to widows are recorded. I will then consider other pertinent Old Testament texts along thematic lines. Finally, the scattered references concerning widows in the Apocrypha shed little light on the status of Jewish widows, but contain some important references to the Jewish mindset toward charity that was beginning to develop in the time between the testaments.

The title of this chapter is not meant to mislead the reader into thinking that we can distill a coherent, consistent Jewish "policy" towards the treatment of widows from the various and diverse texts that briefly mention them. Widows, both in ancient near Eastern literature and in ancient Jewish literature, are not a prominent or even a well-defined group. Nor, of course, ought we assume that the plight of widows everywhere in the ancient near East to be exactly the same. There are points of similarity, to be sure, but there is also notable divergence. To illustrate the point, consider the records we have of two of the more famous widows in Jewish literature, Judith and Ruth.
In the deutero-canonical Book of Judith\(^1\), the reader encounters a widow who is an almost larger than life figure. Judith, who, according to the apocryphal text, lost her husband Manasseh at an assumedly early age (8:1-3), does not fade away into anonymity or face the stereotypical challenges of a Jewish woman now forced to make a go of it on her own. Rather, Judith is depicted as both independently wealthy (8:7) and a competent estate manager. She is strikingly beautiful in the eyes of both her compatriots (8:7) as well as in the eyes of the adversary Assyrians (10:14). Moreover, the Assyrian commander Holofernes in particular is enamoured of her beauty (12:10-20)—the very hinge upon which the entire plot of the book swings. Her religious devotion and piety were beyond dispute\(^2\), and her reputation in the community was impeccable (8:8). Nor is she a passive participant in community life; it is Judith who proactively sends wise council to Uzziah, the leader of the Jewish community of Bethulia, who was vainly trying to bolster the flagging spirits of the citizens, half-starved as they were by the Assyrian siege. As the entire town of Bethulia was on verge of surrender and, consequently, on the brink of destruction, it was the widow Judith that stepped to the fore and not only offered encouragement, but, in essence, offered herself; deliverance for the people would come through her own person. If we are hesitant to call her role sacrificial, we at least need to recognize the intercessory nature of it, an intercession of


\(^2\) Yet, as Peter Lucas rightly notes, "An inherent difficulty in the biblical story of Judith is the underlying moral principle that the end justifies the means. Although Judith is a pious widow motivated by the noble aim of saving her people she uses deceit, enticement to lust, and murder to accomplish it." Peter J. Lucas, "'Judith' and the Woman Hero," The Yearbook of English Studies 22, no. Medieval Narrative Special Number (1992):17–18.
which she was fully aware as she pours out her heart in prayer to the LORD prior to embarking on her perilous journey to the camp of the enemy (Ch. 9). Using her noteworthy beauty to her advantage, the mission was a stunning success. Judith the widow returned to her hometown with the head of the Assyrian general Holofernes in tow, along with his bejeweled mosquito net woven with strands of gold that she would later dedicate to the LORD in his temple. Subsequent to her miraculous return and shocking triumph, Judith again delineates for the town council a wisely thought-out follow-up plan for the destruction of the Assyrian army (14:1-5). The plan was adopted and executed, and the Israelite victory was complete.\(^3\) In the post-victory celebration at Jerusalem, it is the widow Judith who leads all Israel in a song of praise (16:1-17) in the temple of God. Then, after retiring to her hometown, Judith lives out the rest of her days—to the age of 105—resisting all suitors, devoting herself to doing good, waxing in fame, and, as the writer suggests, by her mere presence providing blanket protection for the nation throughout the days of her life and even beyond (16:25). Stateswoman, adviser, a divinely appointed *femme fatale*, intercessor, deliverer, leader, protector, Judith the widow goes down in Jewish lore as the consummate tool in the hand of God used for the benefit of his people. She follows in the footsteps of Deborah the judge (Jud 5), and leaves a trail for Esther to follow in the days of Xerxes.

In stark contrast to Judith stands another widow, Ruth. The former was a legitimate daughter of Abraham; the latter, a Moabite woman. The former was

\(^{3}\) Lucas, “‘Judith’ and the Woman Hero,” 22. “Unlike Beowulf, who had the strength of thirty men in his hand (*Beowulf*, II.379-81), she wins a great victory not by brute strength but by her moral and mental prowess.”
independently wealthy; the latter, a willing exile from her homeland (Ru 1:16-17), cut off from any familial support she might have received.4 Thus, we find her in the text providing a meager existence for both herself and her mother-in-law from gleanings she gathered with her own hands from the fields of Boaz (Ru 2:2). The former, routinely pursued by suitors seeking her hand; the latter, the one who, at the advice of Naomi, coyly seeks out her suitor (Ru 3:7-8), and does so primarily in the best interest of providing security for her mother-in-law, whose poverty had forced her to sell her familial land (Ru 4:3).5 Both widows humbly played important roles at critical times in the history of Israel. Yet Judith’s contribution was immediately lauded, while Ruth’s role (unheralded by her contemporaries) as wife of Boaz6 and mother of Obed (Ru 3:17) would not even be recognized7 until the ascent of her great-grandson King David to Israel’s throne generations later when the scribes recorded his lineage. Only then, long

4 Elie Wiesel, Sages and Dreamers: Portraits and Legends from the Jewish Traditions, Reprint edition by Wiesel, Elie published by Touchstone Books Paperback (New York: Touchstone Books, 1993), 60–62. Wiesel relates the Midrashic tradition that both Orpah and Ruth were, in fact, daughters of King Eglon of Moab. The fact that Ruth willingly chose exile and poverty over returning the luxurious life of the royal family only endeared her to Jewish tradition all the more.


6 One Midrashic tradition records a tragic twist to the story: Boaz, being 80 yrs. old, dies on their wedding day, leaving Ruth a widow for the second time. See Wiesel, Sages and Dreamers, 63.

7 For instance, consider some details from a Talmudic version of the Ruth episode as related by Bronner: “Naomi tells [Ruth] that the Jews have been commanded to observe 613 (606 +7) commandments. Ruth replies, ‘Your people shall be my people’ (Ruth 1:16). Six hundred six commandments are incumbent only upon Jews. An additional seven, called by the sages the ‘Noahide Laws,’ are incumbent upon all the descendants of Noah, that is, all humanity. According to the gematria (the Talmudic tradition of numerology, in which each letter is given a numerical value), the name Ruth adds up to 606. Thus the sages claim that even Ruth’s name indicates her acceptance of all the 613 commandments of the Torah.” Leila Leah Bronner, From Eve to Esther: Rabbinic Reconstructions of Biblical Women (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 65.

71
after her death, was the full impact of her contribution to Israel both realized\(^8\) and embraced.\(^9\)

These, then are some of the differences between the lives of Judith and Ruth. Yet the question remains: what was life like for the *typical* Jewish widow of the Old Testament era?

**Widows in the Ancient Near Eastern Context**

A natural place to begin is with the wider context of the Jewish widow in the ancient Near East. Many scholars are in consensus that the concerns for social justice manifested in the Israelite law code have their origin in similar law codes of neighboring cultures that seek to protect the poor, the widows, and the fatherless.\(^10\) Fensham's article on the same is the seminal study,\(^11\) and Roth's study is considered a normative expansion upon Fensham's work.\(^12\) That said, Levine sounds a note of caution for

\(^8\) Jacob Neusner, *The Mishnah: A New Translation* (Yale University Press, 1991), 355. The *mishnah* on *Yebamoth* 8.3 discusses which foreigners are allowed to enter the congregation of the LORD. Ammonite and Moabite *men* are forbidden forever, but their women "are permitted forthwith," i.e. immediately upon conversion. It is quite possible that the difference in the handling of genders may be directly attributed to the conversion of Ruth.

\(^9\) Wiesel, *Sages and Dreamers*, 50. He writes: "Ruth ha-Moavia, Ruth the Moabite: her name conjures up a past filled with doubt and pain, and a future penetrated by an irresistible light that penetrates exile, the messianic light that will put an end to suffering and injustice. In our tradition she is love — oh, how she is loved. She ranks among the matriarchs....Without Ruth, our people might never have had a king, or else might have had another king, but not David, of whom it will be said: "Khai vekayam — He lives and shall go on living until the end of days."


\(^12\) Roth, "The Neo-Babylonian Widow."
scholars to approach comparative studies of cultures in the Near Eastern context carefully lest confusion instead of clarification results.\textsuperscript{13}

What evidence can we glean about the status and plight of widows from ancient Near Eastern literature? The earliest references come from the oldest extant legal text, the so-called Law Code of Ur-Namma, king of Sumer and Akkad, who rule in Ur from 2112-2095 B.C.E.\textsuperscript{14} Although the class of slaves finds mention, the code of Ur-Namma deals primarily with free persons–men, predominantly, yet also a class inclusive of the wife, the "first-ranking" wife, native-born woman, and the widow.\textsuperscript{15}

As announced in the prologue, Ur-Namma's overriding concern as he conducted his rule was to establish and maintain justice: "I eliminated enmity, violence, and cries for justice. I established justice in the land."\textsuperscript{16} Just prior to this all-encompassing claim that ends his prologue, Ur-Namma mentioned various people who were of special concern to him, including the orphans and widows: "I did not deliver the orphan to the rich. I did not deliver the widow to the mighty."\textsuperscript{17} Yet while there may be a temptation to view Ur-Namma as the first champion of human rights on record, it appears that the

\textsuperscript{13} Levine, "Biblical Women’s Marital Rights," 88. He writes regarding the burgeoning field of Biblical women studies: "Quite understandably, the most fruitful of these studies have been those which refrained from allowing the analogues and similarities between biblical literature and other ancient Near East texts to obscure the significant distinctions between them."

\textsuperscript{14} It should be noted, however, that the eponymous law code may have been even more the work of Shulgi (r. 2094-2047), the successor to his father. Cf. Martha Tobi Roth, \textit{Law collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor}, ed. Piotr Michalowski, 1st ed., vol. 6, Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1995), 13.

\textsuperscript{15} Roth, \textit{Law collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor}, 6:14.

\textsuperscript{16} Roth, \textit{Law collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor}, 6:17.

\textsuperscript{17} Roth, \textit{Law collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor}, 6:16. References for original text: A, iv 162-168 (Nippur Tablets); C, ii 30-39 (Sippur Tablets)
passage has primarily an *economic* focus, set as it is in the immediate context of various initiatives to insure fairness and safety in commercial ventures.\(^{18}\) The passage itself mentions "the rich" and "the mighty," i.e. those who would prey upon widows and orphans presumably to enhance their own estate at the expense of others. The economic emphasis appears later on in the code as Ur-Namma addressed two situations involving widows:

‡ 10. If [a man] divorces a widow, he shall weigh and deliver 30 shekels of silver.

‡ 11. If a man has sexual relations with the widow without a formal written contract, he will not weigh and deliver any silver (as a divorce settlement.)\(^{19}\)

Thus, Ur-Namma’s designed his legal code to eliminate injustice among the free widows of his realm and has, primarily, an economic focus; "oppression" is tantamount to "economic disadvantage." This concern for the economic welfare of widows need not surprise us; the relative independence of Mesopotamia women in general is well established, as Glassner notes in respect to the third millennium B.C.E:

> Women play a role at every level of society…All these groups [recruited for administrative and religious functions] consisted of both men and women with apparently no distinction between them beyond that of sex. In short, we may consider that in Mesopotamian society of the third millennium women behaved in the same way and on equal terms with men, whatever their social status, assuming the same tasks and the same duties and enjoying the same privileges as men.\(^{20}\)

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\(^{18}\) Roth, *Law collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor*, 6:16. Two paragraphs prior to the statement the author mentions the standardization of measurements for copper trading. The paragraph just prior we read of how Ur-Namma secured the Tigris and Euphrates waterways and inland roads for the safe passage of commercial traffic. Likewise, the conclusion of the cited paragraph mentioning widows goes on to say "I did not deliver the man with but one shekel to the man with one mina. I did not deliver the man with but one sheep to the man with one ox."

\(^{19}\) Roth, *Law collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor*, 6:18.

In subsequent centuries, the pattern of relative economic freedom for women in general and widows in particular seems to have persisted. In fact, widowhood, as depicted in much later Middle Assyrian texts, could be read as being both a liberating and empowering social state. Thus, the general observation about women and widows in the ancient Near East is warranted:

Throughout Mesopotamian history women of means are attested as having the right to conduct legal transactions on their own and to witness legal transactions. Women engaged in trade and in lending and borrowing. They might give gifts, dedicate objects to the gods, and acquire property.

Yet, admittedly, the caveat remains, "What is difficult to assess is how freely they could do all this."

What is clear, however, is that throughout the region of ancient Sumer the earthly rule of the king was to be a reflection of divine order and precepts. The Laws of Ur-Namma say as much in the prologue. Yet an even clearer witness to this tenet in

21 Rivkah Harris, "Independent Women in Ancient Mesopotamia?," in Women’s Earliest Records: From Ancient Egypt and Western Asia, ed. Barbara S. Lesko (ACLS Humanities E-Book, 2009), 147. "Nevertheless, widowhood too might have a liberating effect as evidenced by Middle Assyrian texts." Again, "Widowhood could thrust a woman into control of her family and might grant her the possibility of exercising personal power and making independent decisions for herself and her children."

22 Harris, "Independent Women in Ancient Mesopotamia?," 146.

23 Harris, "Independent Women in Ancient Mesopotamia?," 146. Harris further notes with caution: "I am not asking whether there were 'liberated' women in Mesopotamia who could 'do their thing.' Such a phenomenon is a twentieth century reality and goal and not really applicable to the ancient world." (146)

24 Roth, Law collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor, 6:15. "When the gods An and Enlil turned over the kingship of the city of Ur to the god Nanna, at that time, for Ur-Namma, son born of the goddess Ninsun, for her beloved house-born slave, according to his (the god Nanna's) justice and truth ... gave to him... I promoted Namhani to be the governor of the city of Lagash. But the might of the god Nanna, my lord, I returned Nanna's Magan-boat to the quay (?), and made it shine in the city of Ur." (A, i. 31-42)
literature from this same epoch is the famous *Hymn to Nanshe*.\textsuperscript{25} The text relates how Nanshe, "the lady of precious divine powers" and "mother of great things"\textsuperscript{26} seeks to establish her own city in ancient Sumer. She goes about establishing by divine ordinance all those things necessary for a just, prosperous, and divinely blessed society.\textsuperscript{27} The government was to be established at her direction, and draw its inspiration for governance from Nanshe herself, who…

... knows the orphan, she knows the widow.  
She knows that person oppresses person. A mother for the orphan,  
Nanshe, a caretaker for the widow,  
finding a way for houses in debt,  
the lady shelters the abducted person,  
seeks a place for the weak, 
swells him his collecting basket,  
(and) makes his collecting vat profitable.  
For an honest maid who seized her feet  
Nanshe counts a man of good means;  
(and) it is the widow that Nanshe endows with  
an unmarried person  
(who is for her) like a roof in a good house. (L. 20-31)\textsuperscript{28}

Further on in the hymn, potential violators of societal norms and laws are given ample warnings concerning the all-seeing eye of Nanshe, whose divine sight can even penetrate the recesses of the human heart, bringing motives to light and executing

\textsuperscript{25} For a complete overview of the Nanshe Hymn – summary, texts, and comments, see W. Heimpel, "The Nanshe Hymn," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 33, no. 2 (April 1, 1981): 65–139.

\textsuperscript{26} Wolfgang Heimpel, "Hymns: To Nanshe (1.162)," in *The Context of Scripture: Archival Documents from the Biblical World*, vol. 1 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2002), 526. Lines 9-11


\textsuperscript{28} Heimpel, "Hymns: To Nanshe (1.162)," 526.
judgment on the basis of the same.\textsuperscript{29} So the "violator" (l. 154) who is both a "powerful one" (l.157" as well as a "rich one" (l.158) will not escape the justice of Nanshe for such things as "getting the better of an orphan… a widow (l.165),"\textsuperscript{30} because "Nanshe… sees into the heart of a land as if it were a split reed (l.173-74)."\textsuperscript{31}

The Laws of Hammurabi (r.1792-1750 B.C.E.), considered to be the best example of legal legislation from ancient Mesopotamia,\textsuperscript{32} reflect in a manner similar to the Code of Ur-Namma this tenet that earthly justice reflects the divine order. Thus from the onset of the law code, the divinely appointed Hammurabi proclaims his over-arching agenda:

When the god Marduk commanded me to provide just ways for the people of the land (in order to attain appropriate behavior, I established truth and justice as the declarations of the land, I enhanced the well-being of the people.\textsuperscript{33}

While there are moral precepts in the Code of Hammurabi that involve the behavior of widows,\textsuperscript{34} the legislation most germane to their situation revolves around the

\textsuperscript{29} Heimpel, “The Nanshe Hymn,” 66. We note his comment: "An actual effect of this care cannot be documented. If we look through the records of the temple of Nanshe in the Ur III period, we are confronted with a strictly economic enterprise which shows no signs of preferential treatment of the weak members of society. On the contrary, they were organized into work gangs and supervised by armed guards. They frequently ran away from work, were caught, and put to work again (cf. comments on lines 104-112). It is easy to imagine that Nanshe's care is actually more ideal than real."

\textsuperscript{30} Heimpel, interestingly, originally rendered (1981) this phrase "Making the orphan of best repute, valuing the widow as a jewel," a reference to Nanshe. Both textual and contextual considerations led to the present rendering (2002).

\textsuperscript{31} Heimpel, “The Nanshe Hymn,” 529–30.

\textsuperscript{32} Roth, \textit{Law collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor}, 6:71.

\textsuperscript{33} Roth, \textit{Law collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor}, 6:80–81.

\textsuperscript{34} For instance, ¶ 157: "If a man, after his father's death, should lie with his mother, they shall burn them both." Roth, \textit{Law collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor}, 6:71.6:111.
economics of inheritance issues. Thus the dowry that a wife brings to a marriage is off-limits to the husband should she precede him in death; it is to go directly to any children produced by the union (¶ 162). This stipulation is to remain intact even if the husband should subsequently remarry (¶ 167). The general rule appears to be that any surviving children are to be provided for from the dowry\(^{35}\) of the mother. Yet if the father of a household should beget children with a slave woman and formally adopt them, such offspring would share in the estate of the father equally with the children of the "first-ranking" wife—although the "preferred heir" who gets to claim the first share of the paternal estate—is the oldest son of the "first-ranking" wife (¶ 170).\(^{36}\) Failure—or unwillingness—on the part of the father to adopt formally the children of the slave woman as his own leaves those children empty-handed. Properly securing the future, however, was not merely a familial issue; judges of the land seem to take great interest in providing both appropriate and rightful support for children who have lost their father (¶ 177).

The Code of Hammurabi also has much to say concerning the plight of widows. Striving for an ordered society as he is, Hammurabi does not tolerate the mistreatment of widows, nor even infers that they somehow are to fend for themselves upon the death of a spouse.

\(^{35}\) Although the terminology for "dowry" seems to be a settled matter in scholarly circles, there still is some debate about the nuances of other terms, such as "bridewealth" and exactly what this implied in ancient Near Eastern societies. The Laws of Eshnunna (ca 1770 B.C.E.) refer to "bridewealth" (¶ 17-18, cf. Roth, Roth, Law collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor, 61) yet the translator notes (note 6, p.69) that there is ambiguity in the pronouns of the text, so that we are left wondering exactly who gets what upon the death of a spouse.

\(^{36}\) Roth, Law collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor, 6:114. Although I have chosen to follow Roth's translation throughout this section, the Code of Hammurabi can also be found in the Pritchard's classic volume, The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures (Princeton University Press, 1958), 138–167 (commonly, ANET).
death of the husband. What we find instead is exceptional concern by the state for the widow and the granting of relative independence to her in conducting certain affairs. Thus the widow not only retains her dowry (to be used for her own support), but she may also have been "awarded in writing" her own personal portion of her husband's estate (¶ 171). Also, for the duration of her life she has the usufruct of the husband's residence (¶ 171) and any attempts by the heirs of the estate to pressure or force her to abandon the residence (presumably so they could sell it and divide the profits) incurred a penalty inflicted by the state, upon investigation of the situation by authorities (¶ 172). Since the surviving children would not have initiated such an investigation (for obvious reasons), the nature of the legislation assumes that the widow has access to the courts to instigate a legal claim against those treating her contrary to the law. Even if the husband had not by choice or neglect "awarded in writing" any portion of his estate to his wife while he was alive, nonetheless, in addition to receiving full restoration of her dowry, "...she shall take a share of the property of her husband's estate comparable in value to that of one heir (¶ 172)." Pointed legislation such as this indicates that Hammurabi's Code sought to provide meaningful protection to a legal wife upon the death of her husband.

37 Roth, Law collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor, 6:114.

38 The widow, however, could not similarly turn around and sell the house for her own profit either; it belonged to the estate (¶ 171).

39 Roth, Law collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor, 6:114.
Some 700 years after Hammurabi, the Middle Assyrian Laws\textsuperscript{40} (ca. 1076 B.C.E.) also proscribe pointed legislation concerning widows, some of it similar in nature to the Code of Hammurabi, some of it quite distinct. The wording of some of these laws seems to indicate the relative equality of free women and widows in certain aspects of their lives with contemporary men. Many of such laws deal with the possession and transmission of property. One law (MAL A\[26]) indicates that a widow, even if she has returned to her own father’s household following the death of her husband, has a legal right to all her husband’s valuables in the event that there was no living male issue from the marriage. Similarly, a widow's personal estate is retained as her own in the event that legal papers were not formalized for her own son, whom she bore to her husband subsequent to his death. In that instance, the son's inheritance was limited to taking from his father's estate, but the lack of formal adoption as heir meant that the mother’s estate that she brought to the marriage remained intact as her sole possession (A ¶28). In certain circumstance widows were given freedom of movement as well, in the (albeit rare) situation that both her husband her father-in-law are dead, and she has no sons (with whom she could live), then "…she is indeed a widow; she shall go wherever she pleases."\textsuperscript{41} The government also took care to protect widows from potentially harmful—or, at least, legally messy—situations. For instance, a man cannot simply take a widow into his home and treat her as his wife at his whim; if a widow lives with a man for two years, automatically she is to become his common-law wife, legally protected by that

\textsuperscript{40} Roth, \textit{Law collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor}, 6:71.6:155–92. Yet these eleventh century B.C.E. laws are almost all "copies of earlier fourteenth-century originals." (154) Hereafter, MAL.

\textsuperscript{41} Roth, \textit{Law collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor}, 6:165. MAL A ¶33.
status.\textsuperscript{42} Moreover, the law code also stipulates that, should a husband fail to provide documentation of legal transfer of his home to his wife, upon his death the widow must leave the home, but only to go to the home of one of her sons, who is legally bound to care for her.\textsuperscript{43} Finally, it is noteworthy that war widows were of special concern to the government. Any woman without a son whose husband went missing in action was to wait patiently for two years (in the same home) for his return. There she could use the property (possibly with her father’s assistance) to provide for herself. But if the property was insufficient to provide a livable income, then the woman had the right to appeal to the state for aid, who would then provide her—with a legally binding document—a house and land sufficient for her sustenance. After two years had passed, she was free to marry again, whomever she pleased.\textsuperscript{44}

Other ancient Near East literature sheds further light on both the status and public opinion of widows. A few examples will suffice. A West Semitic epic poem (mid-second millennium B.C.E.?) revolving around the life of a certain Kirta, described only as a minor local monarch,\textsuperscript{45} appears to be a tale preserving societal norms between various classes of people—people and kings, monarchs and their offspring, kings and deities. The main story line relates a tale of Kirta’s rule and subsequent near-death illness (healed only at the intervention of a goddess). During the ordeal, Kirta’s own, 

\textsuperscript{42} Roth, \textit{Law collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor}, 6:71. MAL A ¶34
\textsuperscript{43} Roth, \textit{Law collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor}, 6:171. MAL A ¶46
\textsuperscript{44} Roth, \textit{Law collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor}, 6:170-71. MAL A ¶45
impatient son Yaṣṣubu, desires to pressure his father into abdicating his throne, a
proposition that was met only with virulent curses from the recently recovered king over
the effrontery of his brash heir. Yet, for our purposes, interesting among the arguments
of the impertinent youth as to why his father is inept to continue his rule is this slander:
"You let your hands fall slack; you do not judge the widow's case, you do not make a
decision regarding the oppressed." Again, "Before you, you do not feed the orphan,
behind your back the widow." Another West Semitic poem from roughly the same era,
The ḫAquatu Legend, similarly deals with a father and his son, with the difference that
the son, ḫAquatu, is more noble and righteous than Yaṣṣubu, and garners the respect of
his countrymen. Upon ḫAqhatu's premature death at the hands of the goddess ḫAnatu,
his father, Dānīḫilu, rises at the city gate to eulogize his son publicly. He himself has the
earmarks of a righteous man: "He judged [the widow's case], made decisions [regarding
the orphan]." The two poems reinforce the truth that, in those ancient cultures, it was
deemed incumbent upon those who had been given power to exercise it upon the less
fortunate of society, a class into which widow's often fell.

Yet not all widows were deemed unfortunate. In a rather eclectic collection of
instructions for the reading of omens, from extirpicy to "water reading" (lecanomancy) to
analysis of various birth defects, we do find a passing reference to good fortune that can
come to a man through a levirate-type marriage to a widow: "If a woman, her husband

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46 Pardee, “The Kirta Epic (1.102),” 342.
47 Pardee, “The Kirta Epic (1.102),” 342.
48 Dennis Pardee, “The ḫAqhatu Legend (1.103),” in The Context of Scripture: Archival Documents
dies and a son of her fat[her-in-law marries her – that man will be rich.]{49} Thus the magi say.

Lastly, in our brief survey of ancient literature, we also turn to a few Egyptian texts that speak to the widow's situation in the Near East context. Similar to other literature we have considered, Egyptian texts provide admonitions to rulers in the land to wisely exercise justice on behalf of all, especially the poor and unfortunate. The *Instruction to Merikare* enjoins: "Do justice, then you endure on earth; Calm the weeper, don't oppress the widow…"{50} Similarly, one of the few complete texts preserved for the modern world, *Instruction to Amenope* (ca. 1300–1075 B.C.E.), advises

Do not move the markers on the borders of fields,
Nor shift the position of the measuring-cord.
Do not be greedy for a cubit of land,
Nor encroach on the boundaries of a widow (6.11-15){51}

In this passage, unlike many of the others we have considered, the mandate is not given to the ruler of a land but rather is the instructions of a father (apparently an Egyptian scribe) to his son, guiding him onto the path of a peaceful and blessed life, similar in style and content to the biblical text of Proverbs.{52} Also interesting to note in this passage is the assumption that widows could be, in fact, landowners. Other studies

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{49} Ann K. Guinan, "Divination: Mesopotamian Omens (1.120)," in *The Context of Scripture: Archival Documents from the Biblical World*, vol. 1 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2002), 425. ([¶ 45]


{51} Miriam Lichtheim, "Instructions to Amenemope (1.47)," in *The Context of Scripture: Archival Documents from the Biblical World*, vol. 1 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2002), 117.

{52} Lichtheim, "Instructions to Amenemope (1.47)," 115. "It can hardly be doubted that the author of Proverbs was acquainted with the Egyptian work and borrowed from it..."
support that conclusion. Schafik Allam, considering the copious Egyptian textual
evidence that survived from the Old Kingdom (2640-2155 B.C.E.) onward, came to the
conclusion that women were legally protected as owners of "immovable" (i.e. homes,
land, etc.) from very early times in ancient Egypt. An exceptionally bizarre document
that Allam cites involves a childless stable-master who, to preserve his estate, adopts
his own wife in the presence of legal witnesses for the sole purpose of passing on all his
property to her. Some years later, this same stable-master purchased a slave-girl and
fathered three children (one son, two daughters) by her. Years after his death, the
original wife, now a widow of some years, proceeded to make a will for the disposal of
all this property she had originally inherited from her husband. Prior to this, though, the
widow's own brother had married one of the daughters of the slave-girl—a daughter
whose father had been the widow's husband (the stable-master). Stranger still, the
widow then adopted her own brother (as a son!), emancipated the three slave-children
(now grown), and divided the entire estate among all four of them. Among other things,
the estate included fields out in the country. After citing more texts, inscriptions, and
ostraca, Allan's conclusion concerning women (including widows) in ancient Egypt is
that "Egyptian society recognized women's rights in immovable to as great a degree as

53 Schafik Allam, "Women as Owners of Immovables in Pharaonic Egypt," in Women's Earliest
Records: From Ancient Egypt and Western Asia, ed. Barbara S. Lesko (ACLS Humanities E-Book, 2009),
123–35.

54 The original study is Alan H. Gardiner, "Adoption Extraordinary," The Journal of Egyptian
Archaeology 26 (February 1, 1941): 23–29.

and that “beyond doubt...agricultural land could be held indeed in the hands of women and that law-courts fully recognized women’s titles to land tenures.” In this regard, Egypt seems to have been the most progressive of the regions in the ancient Near East for securing isonomy of both men and women.

Widows in the Hebrew Bible

Our earlier discussion focused on the linguistic nuances encircling the generic Hebrew term for "widow," and briefly focused on the legal and economic status of those women who had lost their husband. But when we consider the multiple references to widows found in the Old Testament a more composite picture of the Old Testament widow emerges: she is, above all, vulnerable and in need of special protection. Yet, at the same time, the Old Testament also describes her as somewhat independent and, finally, a valued member of the community.

A Vulnerable Member of Society

First, there can be little doubt that most of the widows of the Old Testament era were considered vulnerable members of society in need of special protection and care. The text of Exodus, for instance, describes the initial giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai, and there the widows are mentioned for special consideration. They are, along with the orphans (with whom widows are frequently linked) vulnerable members of society, often living at the mercy of others. Ex. 22:21 employs a rather harsh Hebrew verb, anāh (נפש),

56 Allam, “Women as Owners of Immovables in Pharaonic Egypt,” 133.


58 There are 95 occurrences of the Greek term χήρα throughout the LXX and Apocrypha.
to highlight such vulnerability. In its Piel form (used here), anāh has the general meaning of "to afflict." Yet it can also have implications of "humble by cohabitation,"⁵⁹ "to oppress," "to afflict," even "to rape."⁶⁰

The text of Deuteronomy seems especially concerned with the vulnerability of widows. Why so? A couple of reasons suggest themselves. If we deal with the text at face value and accept the historical context it claims,⁶¹ one reason may well be that at the time of the giving of this "second law" for a new generation of Israelites there may have already been a large number of widows in the camp of Israel, just prior to their entrance into the Promised Land. Numbers 14 records the incident of Israel's rebellion against the Lord subsequent to the return of the twelve spies, who had been sent into Canaan to scout out the land in anticipation of Israel's occupancy. Rejecting the optimistic report of Joshua and Caleb, the community of Israel became a rabble of dissidents, essentially clamoring for new leadership that would lead them back to Egypt instead of forward into the land of promise. The text tells us at this point that the Lord pronounces judgment: "In this desert your bodies will fall—every one of you twenty years old or more who was counted in the census and who has grumbled against me (Nu

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⁵⁹ The same verb is employed in the previous chapter to describe such a situation, where a wife is not to be "humbled" when the husband decides to take a second wife, giving her preferential treatment (Ex 21:10).


⁶¹ This author accepts the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, as well as the early dating of the exodus from Egypt (ca. 1445 B.C.). For a recent defense of the traditional dating of the Old Testament and the implications of it, see Sook-Young Kim, "Effects of Dating the OT Books Upon the Continuity of the Testaments" (Appendix D, p. 273-280) in The Warrior Messiah in Scripture and Intertestamental Writings, New edition (Newcastle on Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010).
In cross-referencing the description of this national census found in the initial chapter of Numbers, it is evident that only the male populace was included in the numbering (1:2, 44). Thus one could plausibly infer that during the allotted forty years of wandering in the desert in punishment for their rebellion, a large contingent of Israel's male population died off, leaving an elevated number of widows in the camp.\textsuperscript{62} Their increased number called for increased attention.

The latter Hebrew prophetic writings also provide a consistent depiction of the ancient Israelite widow. Here the dominant picture is that of vulnerability, the 'almānāh being one member of a group of unfortunates frequently mentioned in the texts. The absence of any references to male family members alongside the widow in these writings not only highlights her tenuous situation, but also "is a window on how the prophets understood the dilemma of this woman."\textsuperscript{63}

If there is one resounding theme that echoes throughout the prophetic references to widows it is that of "justice"; the writers consistently point to the lack of justice on behalf of the widow and other disadvantaged people in society as a telltale sign of corruption and spiritual decay among the Israelite community. Thus in the prophetic overture to the opening of the first half of the book, Isaiah introduces a motif that will frequently recur: "Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the

\textsuperscript{62} I have in view only the context of Deuteronomy. For the opinion that in later times there was a much more even balance between the sexes in the Israelite social demographic, see Levine, "Biblical Women’s Marital Rights," 122–23.

\textsuperscript{63} Bennett, \textit{Injustice Made Legal}, 36.
cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow (1:17).”\(^{64}\) Along with Isaiah, Zechariah (7:10), Malachi (3:5), and Jeremiah (17:10) all call the nation to collectively examine their hearts and practice true religion that understands the spirit of the Torah, actions that mimic the mercy of the Lord shown towards his people.\(^{65}\) Ironically, the people of Malachi’s day were eagerly looking forward to the long-expected "day of the LORD"—a messianic advent commonly understood to be a time of great prosperity and blessing to the people—but it took prophetic vision to see the true spiritual condition of the people. They were in a state of spiritual dysfunction that manifested itself in their oppression of the poor and the widows. So justice was distorted, "nor does the struggle of the widow come unto them (Is 1:23)", i.e. the widows are not even allowed into the courts to get justice. Even worse, the spiritual anemia of the nation even caused some to "make widows their plunder" (Is 10:2); greed spurred on oppressors to snatch away from the poor what little earthly possessions they had. Perpetuating the ungodly practices towards widows was a false sense of security that enveloped the nation, as many believed that Jerusalem could never be swept away by God’s righteous judgment and succumb to a foreign power because of the presence of the LORD’s temple (Jer 7:1-4). Jeremiah, however, sticks with his original diagnosis and calls upon Jerusalem to repent, the proof of which is that they would not oppress the alien, fatherless, and

\(^{64}\) The Hebrew text here employs a very forceful verb (רָיוְחָה תַּבָּרָה) that usually has military connotations. Yet it does also have a legal nuance to it, with God himself usually as the plaintiff seeking judgment against the sinful nation.

\(^{65}\) The epistle of James also emphasizes this theme: "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world." (Jam 1:27)
Indeed, a failure to change their ways would result in self-destruction. Even Moses and Samuel would not be able to intercede for them (Jer 15:1), and the proliferation of widows among them would be a testament to the devastating nature of God's verdict. Isaiah had previously underscored this very point, that the vileness of the people operating hand-in-hand with their brazen effrontery toward divine law would conjure up the harshest of judgments, namely, that in the devastation the Lord would even withdraw his pity from the widows and the fatherless, for "everyone is ungodly (Is 9:16)." Nor was the Judean king himself exempt from God's mandate to repent and "do what is just and right" (Jer 22:3) for the downtrodden society. In the time of the Jewish exile to Babylon, the prophet Ezekiel sounded a similar warning to the upper echelon of Judean society, the "princes," who are flagged in the text as being especially egregious violators of the rights of the poor and widows (Eze 22:7,25). Thus, even in the wake of God's judgment and the frightful memory of tisha b'Av, apparently little in the way of social justice had changed in Ezekiel's day. Moreover, in harmony with what the prophets had foretold, Jerusalem itself, bewailed especially by Jeremiah,

66 The verbal idea of the Hebrew word for "oppress" (‘āshāq עָשַק) "is concerned with acts of abuse of power or authority, in the burdening, trampling, and crushing of those lower in station." (TWOT Entry 1713.0)

67 LXX: ἐπλήθυνθησαν χήραι αὐτῶν ὑπὲρ τὴν ἀμμον τῆς θαλάσσης (Jer 15:8 BGT). "Their widows are filled up [in number] beyond the sands of the sea."

68 Here the Hebrew text employs the verb yānā (נָה), and this particular verb "seems to be used in the sense of 'doing wrong' to someone as in the Mosaic legislation which protects the rights of the gēr, the 'resident alien.'" Cf. TWOT entry 0837.0

69 The 9th (tisha) of the month of Av, falling on the modern calendar in either July or August, and commemorating the date(s) of the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. Jewish tradition holds that the destruction of the first temple (Solomon's) by the Babylonians and the destruction of the rebuilt temple by the Romans in 70 AD occurred on the same day.
became a widow,\textsuperscript{70} empty (Lam 1:1) and disgraced (Lam 5:3)\textsuperscript{71} A similar dirge for the fallen city was echoed later in the apocryphal text of Baruch. After giving a terse warning against \textit{Schadenfreude} over the desolate city (Bar 4:12), Jerusalem, personified, mourns:

Come here, neighbors of Zion! Remember my sons' and daughters' captivity, which the Eternal brought down on them. How he brought a distant nation down on them, a ruthless nation speaking a foreign language, they showed neither respect for the aged, nor pity for the child; they carried off the widow's cherished sons, they left her quite alone, bereft of her daughters. For my part, how could I help you? (Bar 4:14-17)

On a final note, is the vulnerability of the widow strictly economic? An interesting passage from Isaiah seems to indicate that there is more to the plight of the widow than mere finances and food.\textsuperscript{72} The text of Is 3:16-4:1 describes a judgment of the Lord specifically targeting the pride of the women of Judah. The description that follows is of a group of Jewish women apparently rather well off, as their immodest apparel indicates (3:18-23). They would feel the effects of invasion every bit as much as the men, the majority of whom would fall in battle (3:25), leaving behind a sizable contingent of widows in Jerusalem. Most shocking are the words of the widows themselves at the opening of Chapter 4:

\begin{verbatim}

\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{70} Babylon, the executor of God's judgment, would also one day be subjected to a state of perpetual widowhood (Is 47:9).

\textsuperscript{71} Not necessarily implying that it was a disgrace to be a widow; the circumstances that brought about Jerusalem's "widowhood" were disgraceful. Here, the context of Lam. 5:1 mentions herpa (חֶרְפָה), "reproach"; it is the antithesis of kāvēd (honor, glory) (TWOT 749a)—the very word God frequently reserves for himself and his telos for his people, namely, that his kāvēd dwell among them. This is especially a prominent theme in Ezekiel, where the kāvēd Adonai ("Glory of the LORD") departs at the onset of the book (Ch.10), only to return to fill a symbolically perfect, rebuilt temple and dwell in the midst of the Israelites once again. Thus, the widow imagery of Lamentations emphasizes the complete opposite of what is most desirable among the Jewish remnant.

\textsuperscript{72} For the line of thought that follows, my thanks to Dr. John Brug for this insight.
In that day seven women will take hold of one man and say, "We will eat our own food and provide our own clothes; only let us be called by your name. Take away our disgrace! (Is 4:1)

The text is striking in that here the widows portray themselves as economically secure, needing nothing from any man for survival; they will provide their own food and clothes. One aspect of the Jewish war-widow's plight that the text highlights is the desire to somehow be attached to a male; this is underscored as being a most desirable advantage. Does attachment to a man (even if it means sharing a man) give some social advantage? Probably so. It certainly implies that the opportunity also exists for bearing a son, a legitimate heir for the family line. The plea of the war-widow is that she be allowed to be identified with a specific male and family ("let us be called by your name"), even if she was in a position to support herself. In fact, to not acquire such a status was considered to be "disgrace," which, in the Jewish mind, "is the very antithesis of kābēd ("honor")."73

**An Independent Member of Society (Somewhat)**

In addition to the stereotypical depictions—poor, weak, vulnerable, and destitute—widows receive a more positive treatment at the hands of the Old Testament writers in a few isolated texts. In these texts, we find widows acting with a certain degree of autonomy. 2 Sam 14:5 recounts the famous incident of a wise woman of Tekoa74 getting the better of King David as she seeks, with her smooth rhetoric and

73 TWOT, entry 749a

74 2 Sa 14:9 ff.
shrewd parable,\textsuperscript{75} to foster reconciliation between David and his wayward son Absalom. Noteworthy is the depiction of a widow as an intercessor.\textsuperscript{76}

There is also a somewhat unusual reference to widows in Ps 77\textsuperscript{77} that invites a closer look. In a psalm where the context is a recounting of Israel's history, particularly the history of Israel's rebelliousness against God, the psalmist alludes to the latter days of the judges when the lax high priest Eli met his end along with his deviant sons, the priests Hophni and Phineas. These priests, in addition to their sexual offenses at the tabernacle,\textsuperscript{78} had impulsively taken the Ark of the Covenant into battle as a sacred talisman, superstitiously believing that the Ark's mere presence on the field of battle would ensure military victory over the raiding Philistines (1 Sa 4:3-4). When the two were killed on the battlefield and the Ark captured as a trophy of war, we read that Phineas' widow went into labor, distraught at the turn of events. 2 Sa 4:20 states that she, postpartum, "did not respond or pay any attention." Yet this profound despondency was apparently not due to the death of her husband or the contemplation of the realities of sudden widowhood. In her naming of her newborn son "Ichabod," Phineas' widow reveals what was dominating her thoughts at the time, namely, that the Ark had been captured and "no Glory" of the LORD was in Israel any longer (2 Sa 4:22). In reference to...
to this event, the text of Ps 77 offers this observation: "Their priests were put to the sword, and their widows could not weep." Kidner understands the phrase here, "could not weep" as equivalent to the portrayal of the young widow's mood in the 2 Sa 4 text, "she did not respond or pay any attention."\(^79\) There is a legitimate exegetical question here. The Hebrew text of Ps 77:10 has a simple Qal imperfect verb (tivkenāh), which allows for slightly nuanced renderings: 1) "they could not weep", being too shocked and thus unable to weep; 2) "they did not weep", a simple statement of fact but, perhaps, with the silence affirming God's righteous judgment upon the unfaithful priests.\(^80\) In other words, the text can read that the widows chose not to weep as a witness to Israel. Regardless of which rendering one prefers, in both instances the widows of the fallen priests are positive examples of spiritual maturity who understood the LORD's controlling hand and judgment in this sordid affair. Standing against such a view is the LXX, which renders the Hebrew verb as a Greek future passive: "they will not be wailed for." This provides yet another understanding of the verse, albeit one which turns the focus away from spiritual widows and onto unfaithful priests.\(^81\)

Other texts invite us to consider some actions of widows that seem to depict a relative independence in the Israelite community. For instance, Nu 30:9 reads, "Any vow or obligation taken by a widow or divorced woman will be binding on her." Numbers 30


\(^80\) For a similar reaction of silence to a judgment of God resulting in death, see Lev 10:1-3, where Aaron remains silent upon the untimely deaths of his sons and fellow priests, Nadab and Abihu, apparently for violating tabernacle worship protocol.

\(^81\) TWOT 0243.0 The author of the entry sees in the Greek an example of the inability to hire professional mourners for the occasion.
deals with, in general, all types of voluntary vows that the people of Israel had the option of taking for personal and religious reasons. The passage is unique in that it does not highlight—or even imply—the apparent dependence or vulnerability of a widow. Surrounding Nu 30:9 are passages depicting all manners of hypothetical situations where a wife or daughter's vow could be overridden or voided by the dominant male of the household. But, surprisingly, in the case of a widow, no male has the authority to override or nullify her vow; she is free and independent in this respect. She is, presumably, accountable to the LORD foremost, and then to the person to whom the vow was directed, and such a "widow's vow" is treated in the text with directives equivalent to those for the men of Israel (Nu 30:1-2).

Another extant text also provides an interesting description of a widow acting independently. Although not a biblical text per se, an extant letter written in pre-exilic Hebrew provides an interesting insight into the life of one Old Testament widow in respect to her independence. The text, in which a widow seeks a favorable court decision concerning properties left behind by her deceased husband, runs as follows:

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82 Religious reasons of a private nature seems to be the primary focus of Nu 30, following on the heels of an extended discussion (Nu 28-29) of Israel's public worship life. Lev 27 also deals with the regulation of vows.


84 Contra, cf. Louis H. Feldman, James L. Kugel, and Lawrence H Schiffman, Outside the Bible: Ancient Jewish Writings Related to Scripture, 2013, 3088. Lawrence H. Schiffman's comments on verses from the Temple Scroll, alluding as they do to the text of Nu 30: "The actual meaning of these verses is that if a woman had vowed or taken an oath while still married, then the applicability of the obligation after her marriage terminated would depend on whether her husband had confirmed or annulled it. Our author, however, takes these verses as a repetition of the laws for the normal married woman and therefore rearranges the order of the verses."

May YHWH bless you in peace.

And now, may my lord the official listen to your maidservant. My husband has died (leaving) no sons. (I request politely that the following) happen: (let) your hand (be) with me and entrust to your maidservant the inheritance about which you spoke to Amasyahu.\(^86\)

As for the wheat field that is in Naamah\(^87\), you have (already) given (it) to his brother.

In parsing out the text, the author sees in the Hebrew two notable features. One, the widow identifies herself in a subservient role, an inferior making a request of a superior. Secondly, the Hebrew verb for "entrust to" (bayad יַעֲדָה) carries with it the understanding "that the widow was not asking to become the legal owner of the land but only to have its use as a source of income to allow her to live."\(^88\) Granted, the context for this remnant text is minimal; even the archaeological context is missing as the brief was not found in situ but came to light through other venues. Nevertheless, the petition permits us to draw the rudimentary conclusion that widows—or at least some of them—had access to legal courts where they could proactively seek to secure a means of sustenance.\(^89\)

**A Valued Member of Society**

\(^{86}\) A Hebrew theophoric name, believed by the author to be the name of the dead husband (p.86) The ending yahu is a variant of YHWH.

\(^{87}\) According to Jos 15:41, the village of Naamah was located within the tribe of Judah, in the Shephelah.

\(^{88}\) Pardee, "The Widow’s Plea (3.44)," 86, footnote 4.

\(^{89}\) Consider also, in this light, the legal action that a widow could take in the context of levirate marriage (discussed below) where the widow had the right to shame publicly any male near relative who refused to fulfill the obligations of levirate marriage to the widow.
The tone in the Israelite legislation concerning widows in the Old Testament timeframe is markedly different from the other ancient Near East text we have considered. Especially in Deuteronomy, the text simply does not read like a dry legal code similar to those of Ur-Namma or Hammurabi, filled as they are with regulation upon regulation, one case of casuistry after another. Admittedly, there are large sections of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy that would seem to contradict that claim. Yet there is a different spirit, difficult to quantify, that runs as an undercurrent throughout those sections. Different from the other Near East law codes, in the Old Testament there is an attitude—a motivation—that the Lord wishes to see in his chosen people as they fulfill the requirements of his law. This attitude is rooted in Israel's relationship to their God, and patterned after the manner in which the Lord himself deals with the vulnerable members of society. "Leave your fatherless children; I will keep them alive. Your widows too can depend on me." (Jr 49:11)\textsuperscript{91} The Psalms and the other texts of the "Writings" also sound notes of hope for widows. They and the orphans of the land have God himself as their judge and defender (Ps. 67:6).\textsuperscript{92} Even though the character of the wicked is such that "they slay the widow and the alien (93:6),"\textsuperscript{93} the Lord faithfully defends those less fortunate and at the mercy of society (145:9).\textsuperscript{94}

\textsuperscript{90} "The LORD" presents himself this way, in distinction to the epithet "God" (\textit{Elohim}). The emphasis of the Hebrew Tetragrammaton \textit{YHWH} (יְהֹוָה), \textit{Yahweh}, "I Am", or "the LORD") is on \textit{faithfulness}; his asenity is intimately linked to his ability to perpetually bless or punish.

\textsuperscript{91} Jer 30:5 in the LXX

\textsuperscript{92} 68:5 in an English Bible

\textsuperscript{93} 94:6 in an English Bible

\textsuperscript{94} 146:9 in an English Bible
is further assurance that God not only would defend the widow physically, but also serve to protect the economic and legal interests of the widow as well (Prov 15:25). Kings even records how God's providential care extended to Gentile widows that are directly associated with his people. The woman with whom the prophet Elijah remained in Zarephath lacked nothing for sustenance during a time of severe drought (1 Ki 17:9-24) all the while the prophet boarded at her house. Ancient Israel, in turn, was to pattern their dealings with the less fortunate with attitudes and actions reminiscent of how the Lord himself deals with the same. In short, since unfortunate persons were considered valuable to God, they were likewise to be considered valuable members of the Israelite community as well.

The Israelite widows' value to society was also seen in their virtue. Judith is, again, the pre-eminent example. Her piety was well known—exemplary, in fact—to such an extent that none "found a word to say against her, so devoutly did she fear God (8:8)." Along with the wise widow of Tekoa who confronted King David, Judith's widowhood lent itself to be an effective intercessor, a position held in high repute in the ancient world. Tangential to the role of intercessor on a human level is the widow's close association with prayer—intercession on a divine level, as it were. Though the

95 Prov. 15:25 raises some interesting questions: "The LORD tears down the house of the proud, but he sets the widow's boundary stones in place." Does this imply that widows were landowners in the period of the monarchy? How many? How are we to understand the nuance of the word 'almānāh here, especially in light of what was said about above about the (seeming) absolute lack of any economic or legal resources? 


97 van der Toorn, “The Public Image of the Widow in Ancient Israel,” 24. These two also share the attribute of wisdom (25).
New Testament has clearer references that link the widow to the exercise of prayer, they also are scattered throughout the Old Testament texts as well (e.g. Ex 22:22).

The Israelite precepts, then, intended to foster the attitude among the populace that the widows in their midst were valued members of the community. In most general terms, the major concern reflected in the law code is that the less fortunate not be deprived of justice (*mishpāt*). Thus Dt 24:17: "Do not deprive the foreigner or fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of a widow as a pledge." The male Israelites, in patriarchal positions of leadership, must not give into the multitude of temptations to abuse authority and, in shameless self-interest, take advantage of those dependent upon the mercy of others. That responsibility placed upon the leadership of Israel is underscored dramatically as the Pentateuch closes, and the threatened curse for disobedience in this regard is made unmistakably clear. To abuse authority and wield power self-interestedly over the disadvantaged is to forget Israel's plight and bondage in the land of Egypt, and the Lord's mercy to Israel in rescuing them. To foster such a spirit of humility and thankfulness among the people, the Israelites were instructed to constantly remind themselves, "My father was a wandering Aramean (Dt 26:5)"; they were descendants of a patriarch whose family went from humble beginnings to being a great nation, but only by the Lord's mercy. So also the people from greatest to least are reminded that they were not chosen from all the other nations of the earth to bask in the special favor of the

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98 As Dt 27-28 describes, after the tribes of Israel entered the promised land and conquered it, they were to assemble in the valley at Shechem (roughly the geographic center) and listen to the curses of the law read from Mt. Ebal, and the blessings for obedience read from Mt. Gerazim—a truncated, antiphonal summary of Deuteronomy. Joshua 8 records the fulfillment of this injunction.
Lord because of anything inherently special in them; "It was [only] because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers… (Dt. 7:8)."

With such an understanding of their standing before the Lord, the Israelites, then, were to show special concern for those in need of mercy and kindness—the widow, the orphan, the poor, the foreigner. 99 One of those channels for showing concern was the triennial tithe. There were other tithes collected at different times for non-landowners such as the Levites and foreigners, but the offering of the third year's produce was to be given specifically so that "the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns may come and eat and be satisfied, and so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands (Dt. 14:28-29)." Later on in Deuteronomy (Ch 24) the directives for not greedily harvesting every last ounce of produce are given, directives that serve as a catalyst for the dramatic action in the narrative of Ruth. In this way the foreigner, fatherless, and widow could have some means of support by gleaning from the remnants left behind by the harvesters. 100

Not only were the downtrodden said to be dear to the Lord's heart, he regarded them as equals to any others of the people of Israel. Deuteronomy emphasizes as much in the precepts given for national worship during the three "high" festivals of the religious calendar: Passover, Pentecost (Weeks), and Sukkōth (Booths, Tabernacles). At such times of national solidarity, where all Israelites gathered not only to recognize the Lord's goodness but also to acknowledge his sovereignty over them, every Israelite


100 The directives, interestingly, encompass the entire Israelite agricultural year, from the grain harvest at the time of the Feast of Weeks in early June (Dt 26:19) to the olive harvest (Dt 26:20) and grape harvest (Dt 26:21) of the fall, near the time of Sukkōth, the Festival of Booths.
was to "rejoice before the Lord your God at the place he will choose as a dwelling for his Name—you, your sons and daughters, your menservants and maidservants, the Levites in your towns, and the aliens, the fatherless and the widows living among you (Dt. 16:11)." The Jewish festivals were established to be times for reiterating a truth that the entire Torah frequently emphasized, namely, that all were of equal worth and status before God.\(^1\)

This emphasis on equality and worth merits a bit more discussion in light of recent arguments by Veeder that the texts of the Old Testament which mention widows—especially those in Deuteronomy—could lead one to conclude that not only ancient Israelite society, but even the Lord himself, marginalizes the widow and regards her inferior.\(^2\) Veeder attempts to substantiate this claim by noting that in the Deuteronomic texts where the familiar triad appears, "widow" (‘almānâh) often is placed sequentially after "foreigner" (gēr) and "orphan" (yātôm).\(^3\) This "dead last" positioning of the widow in legislation is taken to be evidence not only of androcentric texts but also

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\(^1\) Malchow, “Social Justice in the Israelite Law Codes,” 305. “They are equal to monied people in their right to enjoy the festivals.”

\(^2\) Bunie Pehr Veeder, “The Hebrew Bible Widow: Somewhere Between Life -- Hers, and Death --Her Husband’s” (D.H.L., The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2011), 74: “Further, considering that this social legislation is also religious legislation ordained by the Lord (Dt. 26:13) it appears that the Deity Himself put her last. Does that not suggest that the people should also put her last in their own consideration? And, does being last on the list not suggest that the widow be accorded less respect, or even less equality, than the Levite or stranger?”

\(^3\) It should be noted that the Hebrew word for "orphan," יָתוֹם (yātôm) is male in gender and designates in Ex. 22:21 a young boy who has lost his father. The gender here of "orphan" is integral to Veeder’s argument.
of patriarchal dominance (oppression?) of Israelite women in general and widows in particular. This seems to be an unwarranted conclusion, for a number of reasons.

First, Veeder sees the issue primarily as a gender-related issue; the inferior status of the widow is essentially due to the fact that she is a woman living in a patriarchal society. Yet others have noted that the main focus of the Exodus 22 legislation, where the triad of foreigner, orphan, and widow appears, is really concerned more with the relationship of a creditor to a debtor, the "weak against the affluent." Moreover, the lower the social status the dearer to the Lord's heart the person is, and the ability of the downcast to cry out to God against their oppressors gives them, in actuality, a fearful power over the rich and affluent, a power which the privileged ought to avoid stirring up at all costs. The so-called "imprecatory psalms" are replete with such "dangerous" language.

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104 Veeder, "The Hebrew Bible Widow: Somewhere Between Life—Hers, and Death—Her Husband’s," 35.

105 "Orphan" may be misleading. "Fatherless" is probably more accurate; it was the loss of a father that really created the disadvantage for the child.


107 Ben-Dov, "The Poor's Curse: Exodus XXII 20-26 and Curse Literature in the Ancient World," 450–51. Although the author is speaking in general about "the poor" (ahni), the widow is certainly included in this designation. Concerning the poor person he writes: "He is no longer a miserable person of negligible importance, but rather someone who might be dangerous, if he properly knows how to use the means at his disposal...[O]ne who is not obligated by the standards of society is likely to be the representative of external powers, which can undermine commonplace practices."

108 E.g. Ps. 56, 58, 59 et al.
Secondly, Veeder's assertion can be challenged on the basis of Hebrew linguistic structure itself. Miller, in his article on Hebrew word patterns, analyzes the structural arrangement of this familiar triad, which not only manifests itself in the Pentateuch but in Israelite prophetic literature as well. Even in the book of Deuteronomy, the familiar pattern of "foreigner, orphan, widow" is not consistent; Dt. 10:18, for example, is an exception within the ten occurrences found in that book. Yet even in Deuteronomy, the triad does not—nor is it intended to—present a progression in thought, but rather to create a carefully balanced parallelism in the Hebrew text. Furthermore, it seems to be more accurate to think of the pairing "orphan-widow" as the common linguistic pair, and the third word, "foreigner" to be "quite flexible and not fixed." Thus, it would seem overly simplistic of Veeder to assert that the triad "foreigner–orphan–widow" indicates some kind of hierarchy among the lower class of society, with "widow" occupying the bottom rung on the ladder of concern for both the general Israelite populace as well as the Lord himself. In fact, it is interesting to note that in the Sinaitic covenant of Exodus 22, the word "foreigner" may not even refer to one of another ethnicity or nationality living in the midst of Israel as a migrant, a businessman, a trader—whatever.

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110 Miller suggests (p.82, footnote 5) that the unusual word order of Dt. 10:18, with “foreigner” relegated to the final position in the triad may simply by an instance of prolepsis, as the subsequent verse expounds in greater detail about the foreigner in Israel.

111 Miller, “Studies in Hebrew Word Patterns,” 81. For example, Dt 24:17: “This last instance is a case of parallelism in which the usual Deuteronomic order is maintained with gēr yātôm providing the object of the prohibition in the first colon and ‘almānâh providing the balancing object in the second colon. The result is a neatly balanced bicolon.”

translators rendered the Hebrew *gēr* as προσηλυτος ("proselyte"), an adult convert to Judaism.\(^{113}\) Granted, the term proselyte *ipso se* indicates someone of different ethnic group, but if the LXX’s understanding of the term "foreigner" is accurate, the emphasis on the Exodus 22 mandate would then be on ensuring full equality of treatment for someone who has already pledged himself to follow the God of Israel.\(^{114}\) In actuality, then, such a reading would indicate that the proselyte, orphan, and widow are of all equal status in Israel, not only with each other, but with all other members of the Israelite community as well.\(^{115}\) The law was given, then, to ensure such equality was upheld.

Thirdly, even if we grant the author’s understanding of the triad to be progressive in nature, it can also be argued that Veeder’s assumption of a "greater to lesser" hierarchy runs contrary to Hebrew triadic arrangement, both in poetry as well as prose. My personal observation is that Hebrew texts in which patterns such as the triad occur tend to progress from lesser to greater; there is an ascendency in the Hebrew thought process. A couple of examples illustrate the point. The first example is from the Pentateuch itself, in the famous "Aaronic Blessing" of Numbers 6. The text reads:

"Tell Aaron and his sons, 'This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them:

\[\text{[text]}\]

\[^{113}\text{Thomas Krapf, “Traditionsgeschichtliches Zum Deuterono-Mischen Fremdling-Waise-Witwe-Witwe-}
\[^{114}\text{Regardless, however, if one renders *gēr* as “foreigner” or “proselyte,” Krapf notes that “..der Schutz des Fremdling [ist] ein spezifisch israelisches Anliegen (Krapf, “Traditionsgeschichtliches Zum Deuterono-Mischen Fremdling-Waise-Witwe-Witwe-Gebot,” 88).” Other ANE law codes highlighted protection of the widow, but ancient Israel seems to have been unique in its mandated concern for foreigners.}

\[^{115}\text{A point made in the earlier discussion of equality of widows in the community as indicated by the nature of ancient Israelite cultic festivals.}
‘The LORD bless you and keep you;
the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you;
the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.”
(Num 6:23-26 NIV)

In Hebrew, this majestic blessing ascends not only in thought, but in word structure as well. The movement is from three Hebrew words (line 1) to five Hebrew words (line 2) to seven Hebrew words (line 3). Moreover, rabbis generally saw in this blessing a progression of thought from material blessings (line 1) to spiritual blessings (line 2) to either a combination of the previous two (line 3) or an emphasis on eternal blessings (also line 3). Yet no matter how one understands line 3, the ascendancy in thought is clear, from lesser to greater. For another example a bit closer to the prosaic triad under discussion, we might consider the frequently recurring triad of Jeremiah, "sword, famine, plague (e.g. Jr. 21:9)." The progression is here is from "quick death" to "slow death" to "slow painful death," with the added thought that bodily defilements and marring (as occur with plague) rendered one ceremonially unclean in ancient Israel, cut off from any participation the community worship life. Even though the thought progression is from "bad to worse," nonetheless this indicates ascendancy in thought with which the Hebrew mind was familiar. Or there is the passage from Ecclesiastes often used for weddings:

Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken. (Ecc 4:12 NIV)


Further examples could be cited. But my point in this brief digression is this:

Veeder has argued that the positioning of the Hebrew word 'almānāh ("widow") at the end of a fairly familiar triad could indicate not only inferiority but even oppression of disenfranchised women living (or trying to) in a patriarchal Israelite society. To be sure, there is no question that there were disenfranchised widows in ancient Israelite society who were, tragically, the target of the unscrupulous. Otherwise, there would be no need for such legislation. Yet to make the assumption that patriarchal chauvinism ranks her "lowest of the low" both in the texts and in societal practice seems unwarranted. As I have attempted to demonstrate above, given the nature of the Hebrew language and the ascending thought pattern frequently found therein, one could just as easily argue the reverse, namely, that it is the widow who especially ranked above the foreigner and the orphan. She is the concern of the Lord and, since she is, she is also to be of special concern to the followers of the Lord.\textsuperscript{118}

\textsuperscript{118}It should be noted that the LXX's rendering of Ex 22:22 differs from the Hebrew text, resulting in an interesting exegetical question about the verse and its understanding in its context. The Leningrad text reads: ‘אִם־עַנ ֵּ֥הִתְּעַנֶֶּ֖הִאֹת֑וִֹכ ִּ֣יִא ם־צִָעֹ֤וֹקִי צְעַקִ֙א לַַ֔יִשָמֵֹּ֥עִַאֶשְמֶַּ֖עִצַעֲקָתֶּֽוֹ’ ("If you indeed humble him and if he certainly cries out to me, I will surely listen to his cry.") (emphasis mine). The LXX reads: \textit{ἐὰν δὲ κακισθητε αὐτοὺς καὶ κεκράζαντες καταβοήσωσι πρός με ἀκοῆ εἰσακούσομαι τῆς φωνῆς αὐτῶν, "But if you mistreat them with evil and [they] having lifted their voices they will cry out to me, I will give ear in hearing their voice."} The Vulgate, Samaritan Pentateuch (Hebrew ver.), Syriac, and Targums also render the verse with plural forms. If plural, the question then naturally arises as to exactly whom is meant by the LXX's αὐτοὺς? It could certainly be argued that the presences of the waw at the beginning of 22:20 begins a section that continues through 22:22, thus treating the familiar triad of foreigner, widow, and orphan together. Perhaps, though, the plural refers only to the widow and orphan. The subsequent verse (v.24) makes it clear that mistreatment of the widow and orphan will directly result in the punishment of offenders being made, similarly, to be widows and orphans; punishment along the lines of "becoming a foreigner" aren't mentioned, leaving us with the impression that the correlation between widow/orphan is a tight one. An equally vexing question, though, is that if we read the Hebrew text at face value, who is referred to by "he/him"? The masculine pronoun could refer to either the masculine \textit{gēr} (foreigner) or the masculine \textit{yātôm} (orphan). It would seem more natural to see the 3rd masculine pronoun as referring back to the closer \textit{yātôm}, yet why then would treatment of the orphan be singled out so? The KJV and many modern English translations follow the variant readings with plural pronouns.
Returning to our overview of Old Testament texts concerning widows, two others deserve special mention. One is a passage in Leviticus that deals specifically with widows of priests. There we read the rejoinder that "[The High Priest] must not marry a widow, a divorced woman, or a woman defiled by prostitution, but only a virgin from his own people, (Lev 21:14)." The emphasis here is not on the "unworthiness" of a widowed woman to be a suitable wife; the emphasis is on the purity of the High Priest who is to serve Israel as the visible mediator between the Holy One and the profane.\footnote{The same idea is present in Ezekiel's eschatological vision of the rebuilt and purified temple (44:22) where this language of Leviticus concerning the marital status of the high priest is reiterated.} This, however, was an injunction only for the High Priest. The other reference in Leviticus (22:13) does not radiate the attitude that a widow is permanently "defiled" (as it were).\footnote{The priests also needed to radiate purity or lack of defect. Even if a man from Aaron's line were, by blood, eligible to serve as a priest, physical deformities of any kind prevented him from serving, either temporally or permanently (cf. Lev 21:16-23).} Rather, we find that should a priest's daughter find herself a widow, she is free to return to her father's house and is \textit{not} forbidden from eating the "priest's share" of a sacrifice,\footnote{Lev 7:28-37} considered to be holy and thus taboo for the general populace to eat. Her dignity and value as a member of a priestly family is thereby substantiated.

The other passage, Dt 25:5-10, is concerned with regulations involving the \textit{levir}'s (brother-in-law) obligation towards the widow of his dead brother.\footnote{For a brief overview of the practice see Dr Jeffrey H. Tigay, \textit{The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy}, 1st edition (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 2003), 482–83. Excursus 23: \textit{Levirate Marriage}. Rabbinic theology, culminating in the production of the Talmud, took keen interest in the issue.} This pericope, too, underscores the value of the widow to society by providing a very direct form of security.
in remarriage. The directive also not only provides a bulwark against present difficulties; it is, in its essence, a proviso for the widow's future. Again, this unique text's placement in Deuteronomy may also support the previous claim that at this particular time in Israel's history there may have been a dearth of males, warranting these added protections put in place, not only in the interest of legally maintaining familial property but also in interest of the widow as well. The mandate given here, namely, that the brother of a man who has died without issue is obligated to take the widow as his wife and produce a legal heir for his deceased brother has always been problematic in rabbinic thought. The command here seems to be in direct violation of Lev 18:16, a command which forbids a man to marry his brother's wife and which is categorized among the forbidden incestuous relationships of that chapter.\textsuperscript{123} Refusal to marry the widow triggered a social ceremony in which she played a prominent role, the role public prosecutor. If her brother-in-law (levīr) refused to fulfill his obligation, the widow of the dead man was to bring him before the city elders to apprise them of the situation and solicit their aid in bringing about a change of heart in him (Dt 25:7-8). If this overture was unsuccessful, the widow removed one of the man's sandals, spit in his face, and denounced him publicly in the presence of the elders. From this point forward, the discalced man's family was to bear the shameful moniker "The Family of the Unsandaed" (25:10). The practice undoubtedly persisted for some time in ancient Israel, for we hear of a variation of it in Ruth 4:7, where Boaz takes off a sandal to

complete the business transaction that involved the acquisition of the widow Ruth along with the property of Elimilech's family. While it is important to note the empowered state of the widow in this text, it is also probably true that if the levir persisted in his refusal to marry his brother's widow, it was the widow who left the encounter in a more tenuous economic and social state.\textsuperscript{124}

As this brief overview of references to widows in the Old Testament comes to a close, there are other factors that need to be taken into account as we compile a profile of the Hebrew 'almānāh in her social context. One of these factors is the radical change in the fabric of Israelite social structure that the development of the monarchy brought about.\textsuperscript{125} Along with the foreigner and orphan, the widow, too, was affected by the growing centralization of the government that tended to foster a weakening of the primary support system—family and clan—that had been the widow's principle source of security and support in pre-monarchical times.\textsuperscript{126} The prophet Samuel had cautioned the people of Israel about such a realignment of society that would inevitably come in the wake of the establishment of the monarchy (cf. 1 Sa 8:10-22). This realignment of primary allegiances, namely, from family / clan / tribe to monarch undoubtedly took a toll on the Israelite widow's support system. This change that gradually took place can, 

\textsuperscript{124} Plaut, \textit{The Torah: A Modern Commentary}, vol. V. Rabbinic law had much to say about the chalitzah ("the taking off") ceremony, and opinions varied. Plaut notes that modern rabbis have all but forbidden the practice, as has a ruling from the State of Israel. "Still, the halachah continues to consider a widow whose brother-in-law has not yet released her through chalitzah as unmarriageable, and this has produced a number of hardship cases." Undoubtedly, this was also the case in ancient Israel.

\textsuperscript{125} For a brief overview of divergent scholarly opinions on this issue, see Malchow, "Social Justice in the Israelite Law Codes," 300.

\textsuperscript{126} Preston Mayes, "The Resident Alien, the Fatherless, and the Widow in Deuteronomy: The Priority of Relationship with Israel’s God for Social Benevolence" (Ph. D, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2012), 135.
perhaps, account for the proliferation of references to abuses against widows that one finds in the post-Pentateuchal texts, particularly in the prophetic writings.

The other factor that needs to be considered as we profile the Old Testament widow has been briefly alluded to above, namely, that the entire Israelite legal system—while strikingly similar in places to other law codes of the ancient Near East—was designed to operate from an entirely different premise than neighboring legal systems. The difference was to be in motivation. Much of the analysis of the Mosaic legal code concerning widows and the prophetic denunciations of those who fail to comply with them tends to focus primarily on the threats and punishments that would / did ensue for failures in this regard. One cannot deny that threats and punishments are certainly part of the text. But an honest consideration of the grander, over-arching themes of the Old Testament corpus leads us to realize that the Lord's will for his people was that their conduct toward both him and their neighbor flow naturally out of a thankful response to his goodness to them. The prologue to the giving of the Law indicates as much, where the Lord tells his people:

This is what you are to say to the descendants of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites. (Ex 19:3-6 NIV)

Israel's behavior from that point forward, then, was to be motivated by—a response to—the Lord's acts of goodness to them. Their primary motivation, then, was to live in a spirit of thankfulness and gratitude, and not conduct their affairs under the
threat of punishment. In the Israelite law code, the weekly Sabbath rest itself was a testimony to this. Other deities of the ancient Near East required continual, round-the-clock service, sacrifice and devotion. In stark contrast, the Lord directed his people to take one day a week to rest and do nothing but reflect upon God's goodness to individuals and nation, and find spiritual refreshment in the uniqueness of their relationship to their deity. To put it another way, the Sabbath day itself was designed to foster an attitude of gratitude among the people so that their compliance with the Israelite legal code would be voluntary, not compulsory. As noted above, the Israelite concern for the foreigner—a precept unique among the law codes of the ancient Near East—also bears the marks of such motivation; Israel was to treat the foreigner with kindness and respect, remembering their own years of bondage in Egypt and the Lord's gracious deliverance (Ex 22:21). In fact, it is not too much to say that the entire Israelite law code was designed with this in mind, and that "proper reverence for the Lord is the key to making the system work." It was the law code's vision that, in addition to providential care provided by the Lord himself, widows would always have certain upright people in society, akin to Job, who as a practice of their faith made sure to care for the widows. "I made the widow's heart sing," Job says of himself, in justifying his

\[127\] E.g. Veeder, "The Hebrew Bible Widow: Somewhere Between Life--Hers, and Death--Her Husband's," 64 ff., tends to approach the entire Mosaic legal code in this manner.

\[128\] Mayes, "The Resident Alien, the Fatherless, and the Widow in Deuteronomy: The Priority of Relationship with Israel's God for Social Benevolence," 192. Similarly Malchow identifies gratitude as motivational, yet seems to indicate that the negative factors (fear of divine retribution, submission to God's authority) are foremost in view. (Malchow, "Social Justice in the Israelite Law Codes," 305-06)

\[129\] Job 31:16 also alludes to his care of widows, whom Eliphaz had earlier (22:9) depicted as destitute and in need of assistance.
lifestyle before man and God (29:13). The context indicates that Job pictured himself hypothetically present at the deathbed of a friend, who with his last breaths blesses Job in the peace that came from knowing Job would faithfully care for his vulnerable family that he was leaving behind.

**Widows and Charity in the Apocrypha**

The handful of references to widows in the apocryphal books are consistent with the various depictions of widows found in the Old Testament. Judith has already been mentioned, but two items are to be noted in developing a picture of the ancient Israelite widow. One item is her humility (9:9). The other is her role as an intercessor, jumping into the precarious gap between her city and the army of Holofernes. As intercessor, she pours out her prayers to the LORD on behalf of her people (9:4), imploring God to grant her success in her dangerous endeavor. Sirach also the prayer life of the suppliant widow: "[The LORD] does not ignore the orphan's supplication, nor the widow's as she pours out her complaint. Do the widow's tears not run down her cheeks, as she accuses the man who is the cause of them? (Sir 35:14-15) This association of widows with prayer will continue into the Christian era.

As we would anticipate, widows in the Apocrypha are objects both of mistreatment and of mercy. The Epistle of Jeremiah calls attention to Israel's failure to show mercy to the widow (1:37). What is interesting about this particular passage is the connotations the author creates as he denounces the perpetrators of injustice. Set

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130 Translation of passages from the Apocrypha here are from the *New Jerusalem Bible* (1985)

131 The Greek here has a long string of Strong Future Negations: "In no way do they show the widow mercy or treat the orphan well." (χήραν οὐ μὴ ἐλεήσωσιν οὐτε ὃφραν ἐν ποιήσουσιν.)
in the context of the prophet encouraging the people to not give in to the temptation to worship foreign gods during their stay in Babylon, it is as if the prophet were indicating that those who mistreat the unfortunates of society are, in essence, no different than those who worship idols. In fact, it may even betray them as such. Wisdom 2:10 speaks to the same problem, where the author recounts the talk of the wicked: "As for the upright man who is poor, let us oppress him; let us not spare the widow, nor respect old age, white-haired with many years."

Yet widows found mercy and care at the hands of Job-like Tobit, who seems to have followed the Deuteronomic code faithfully in providing them with the triennial tithe (Tob 1:8). Likewise, 2 Maccabees highlights the diligent care of widows by Judas Maccabeus himself, who made it his regular practice to share a portion of the plunder gained in his warfare with the widows, orphans, and others affected by persecution (8:28-30). Onias the high priest similarly cares for widows, and the inference he makes to the emissaries of the Syrian king (who came to Jerusalem demanding tribute) is that widows and orphans are provided for out of temple treasury (2 Macc 3:1-12). Exactly at what point in Israel's history the practice of providing for widows from temple funds was established is uncertain, but the connection between widows and the temple, first mentioned here, is noteworthy.¹³²

As mentioned at the onset of this chapter, the references to widows in the Apocrypha really add nothing new to the composite picture already developed from the

¹³² van der Toorn, “The Public Image of the Widow in Ancient Israel,” 21. "The urge [for widows] to be in the temple may have been mixed with financial motives." The practice may have had roots in the gathering of the triennial tithe (Dt 26).
Old Testament texts. However, what is interesting is that there is a noticeable development in the Jewish attitude toward charity that can be seen in the Apocryphal texts. As noted above, the copious references to the care of the widows and other unfortunates in ancient Jewish society emphasized that such care was to be prompted by a consideration of God's goodness to the individual (giver), and thus any subsequent act of charity was a testament to the gratitude the giver felt towards God. However, a few references from the Apocrypha make it clear that a subtle shift in thinking is taking place in Jewish thought concerning charity.\textsuperscript{133} The emphasis subtly swings more toward the giver and the spiritual benefit the giver will derive from performing acts of charity.\textsuperscript{134}

Two passages bear this out clearly.\textsuperscript{135} The first is from Tobit 12. The Apocryphal book of Tobit lays heavy emphasis upon both the mercy of God and the practice of true


\textsuperscript{134} Michael L. Satlow, “‘Fruit and the Fruit of Fruit’: Charity and Piety among Jews in Late Antique Palestine,” Jewish Quarterly Review 100, no. 2 (2010): 263: “As in other Hellenistic cultures, the reasons for giving charity are justified entirely by the benefits that charity confers to the giver; there is little attention paid to the poor themselves.”

\textsuperscript{135} There is a canonical passage that often comes up for discussion in this context, Dan. 9:27. (9:27 is the reference in English versions of the Bible; the Hebrew text is 9:24.) The Hebrew text of Daniel here is replete with variant readings. However, established by all Hebrew versions is the critical verb of the verse, the imperative פְרַק. Here in the Pe’al form, the meaning connotes something decisive, even violent: "tear away, abolish, break off." The preceding word (בצדק - be-tsid-chah) can be instrumental: "with righteousness; by means of righteousness." But the beth prefix can also simply relate a state of being / circumstance: "in righteousness." The LXX employs the aorist middle imperative of the verb λυτρόω / λυτρόμαι. Both have overtones of "redemption," but the idea is more in line with "loosing" or "setting free," the middle form used particularly in the context of slavery. Thus, the crux of the interpretive problem is whether Daniel is advising Nebuchadnezzar to "release" (i.e. forsake) his sins and do what is right, or "atone" for his sins by doing what is right. The latter is merit-earning, the former a response to goodness. Jerome’s Latin et peccata tua elmosynis redime (Dan. 4:24 VUL) seems to carry with it a stronger idea of redemption, and was attacked by Protestant reformers as a misuse of the passage by the Roman Church (cf. Melanchthon’s Apology to the Augsburg Confession, IV.140 ff.) As I stated earlier, the
righteous as the exiles of Judah wait patiently for restoration in the land of Israel. During the time in Babylon, it is true that the Jewish exiles needed to make adjustments in their worship life, deprived of access to the temple as they were. Other adjustments were made as well. One of these, as Tobit in particular bears out, is the heavy emphasis upon acts of charity and almsgiving as a testimony to the genuineness of one's faith.

Tobit describes his own life at the onset of the book, and shortly into it we find a list of his charitable acts—the tithe given regularly to the priests and Levites (1:6-7), as well as the care for the unfortunate (1:8). Likewise, Tobit emphasizes charity as a way of life in the instructions he gives to his son Tobiah as to how to lead a righteous life (4:1-21).

Throughout the entire book the reader senses the close connection between charitable works and righteousness, exemplified in the life of Tobit. At the climax of the book the angel Raphael, to this point operating incognito, reveals himself as the one who has been guiding both Tobit and his son Tobiah in their lives, and it is this divine being who exhorts Tobit:

> Prayer is good when accompanied by fasting, almsgiving, and righteousness. A little with righteousness is better than much with wrongdoing. It is better to give alms than to treasure up gold. For almsgiving delivers from death, and it will purge away every sin. (12:8-9)

The pattern of the “three tithes” laid out here in the opening of Tobit coincides with the pattern laid out in the Mishnah. The volume entitled Zeraim (“Seeds”) deals with all the directives for offerings, tithes, almsgiving, and charity. Frequently, throughout a number of the individual tractates comprising Zeraim, mention is made of “the first tithe”, “the second tithe”, and “the third tithe”, given in different years on a rotating basis. Cf. Philip Blackman, Mishnayoth Zeraim, 2 edition, vol. 1, Mishnayoth: Pointed Hebrew Text, English Translation, Introductions, Notes, Supplement, Appendix, Addenda, Corrigenda (New York: Judaica Press, 1979).

Quotes from the Apocrypha from here forward are from the English Standard Version (ESV), and taken from Edward Engelbrecht, ed. The Apocrypha: The Lutheran Edition With Notes. (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2012).
Gary Anderson notes that a remarkable linguistic development of the intertestamental period is that the Hebrew word for "righteousness"—ṣēḏāqāh (צדק)—comes to mean "almsgiving." The development is intertwined with the transition during this same period to the metaphor of sin as a debt. Once this happens, it is a very natural development that, in the popular mindset, works of charity obtain the power to erase sin (debt), as demonstrated by the quote from Tobit above. If the analysis of Anderson is accurate, this development will have major implications as to how Jews and Jewish Christians of the first century C.E. viewed and approached in practical terms the entire venture of charity toward the poor.

The second passage that strikes a tone similar to Tobit is from the apocryphal book of Ecclesiasticus (The Wisdom of Ben Sira). As we find in Tobit, there is a similar emphasis in Ben Sira concerning charity toward the less fortunate (e.g. 4:1-10), even describing the poor in exalted and advantageous terms (10:30-31). There are also warnings: "No good will come to the person who persists in evil or to him who does not


139 Anderson, "Redeem Your Sins by the Giving of Alms: Sin, Debt, and the 'Treasury of Merit' in Early Jewish and Christian Tradition," 39. "The metaphor of sin as a debt is rarely attested in the bulk of the Hebrew Bible. But as soon as it became a commonplace to view a sin as a debt—and this took place early in the Second Temple period—it became natural to conceive of virtuous activity as a merit or credit."

140 Not all are so ready to come to that conclusion. "In no way does the performance of such acts of mercy merit God's favor." Francis M. Macatangay, "Acts of Charity as Acts of Remembrance in the Book of Tobit," Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha 23, no. 1 (September 1, 2013): 84. Rather, Macantangay sees Jewish acts of charity as a testament to the command to "remember" the Lord in every aspect of life.
give alms (12:3).” The clearest statement concerning charity as a means of erasing sin, though, is found early in Ben Sira, as the author continues his exhortation to righteous living:

Water will extinguish a blazing fire:
and almsgiving will atone for sin.
Whoever requites favors gives thought to the future;
at the moment of his falling he will find support. (3:30-31).

The mention in v.31 of the giver giving "thought to the future" also, undoubtedly, is meant to have the reader consider the fruit of charitable endeavors persisting past the present life and into eternity. Ben Sira reinforces the idea later in the book (29:12)—a thought similarly expressed in Tobit, in the verse subsequent to Raphael's mention of almsgiving being efficacious for atonement: "For almsgiving delivers from death, and it will purge away every sin. Those who perform deeds of charity and of righteousness will have fullness of life; (Tobit 12:9)" Thus Satlow: "Whether as a means to absolve sin or as 'treasure in your strong-room' that 'will deliver you from every misfortune (29:12), charity in Ben Sira especially protects its giver from divine punishment in the afterlife."141

Conclusions

This chapter first sought to define what cultures of the ancient Near East understood by the term "widow," and how that understanding affected the manner in which they interacted with widows. Linguistically, we noted that it is overly simplistic and inaccurate to define a widow merely as a woman whose husband has died. Rather, the ancient literature describes various nuances of the term, largely created to clarify the

141 Michael L. Satlow, “'Fruit and the Fruit of Fruit': Charity and Piety among Jews in Late Antique Palestine,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 100, no. 2 (2010): 263.
widow's legal and economic status. Granted, some scholars have concluded that these various definitions of "widow" may be nothing more than stylistic preferences of various authors. This should be regarded as a minority view. Most scholars believe that the various terms found in ancient Ugaritic, Akkadian, Aramaic, Egyptian, and Hebrew literature indicates real and significant differences between various types of widows. The Akkadian term almattu seems to indicate an economic status and parallels the later Hebrew term 'almānāh most closely. Based on available evidence, both terms point to the definition of "widow" as a woman, bereft of a husband, who has no financial /economic support of any kind. Male relatives, who normally were to be counted on as channel of support for the widow may either have been too poor to support her or, due to self-interests, unwilling to support her. As such, the widow without any means of financial support is in need of special legal protection. Naomi Steinberg also delineates two other nuances of the Hebrew language in respect to "widow": 1) the ‘iššâ-'almānāh has no husband but does have a living son, through whom she is able to exercise redemption rights on her husband's estate; and 2) the ‘ēšet-hammēt, a widow who has no living son and yet does have access to the financial support of her husband's estate. Steinberg suggests that both of these terms should be rendered in a way that expresses the concept of "inherited widow."

After discussing the various nuances of the term "widow" found in literature of the ancient Near East, we next considered the context of the term in the literature itself. The law code of Ur-Namma (late third millennium B.C.E) depicts the widow as a woman in need of special legal protection from "the rich" and "the mighty," who might attempt to prey on her, even in her abject state. The emphasis of this law code is on ensuring that
the widow is not placed into a position of economic disadvantage. Tacitly, this implies that there were, indeed, certain economic opportunities open to widows. Ur-Namma’s code, Hammurabi’s code, and, later, the Middle-Assyrian laws all point to a status of relative independence for women (including, presumably, widows) in ancient Near Eastern cultures. This was especially true of ancient Egypt, which appears to be (based on surviving texts) the most egalitarian in providing legal protection and economic opportunities for women. Yet multiple authors caution against making sweeping generalizations about such equality between the sexes of these ancient cultures.

The law codes of the ancient Near East to point to the fact that the earthly rule of governments is to be a reflection of divine rule. Thus, the *Hymn to Nanshe* depicts the goddess as protector of all citizens, especially the poor and unfortunate who have no earthly protector to insulate them from injustice. Likewise, Ur-Namma and Hammurabi freely admit in the prologues to their law codes that they have been charged by the gods themselves to utilize their ruling power to watch over all classes of society. Frequently the widow and orphan are highlighted as direct beneficiaries of their administration of justice. The thrust of their legislation, again, is ensuring the economic security of society’s disadvantaged. The West Semitic *Kîrta Epic* and *The Aquatu Legend*, as well as the Egyptian *Instructions to Merikare* and *Instructions to Amenope* emphasize the same. In short, as the divine powers sought to protect the weak and disadvantaged of society, so also earthly rulers of the ancient Near East, who derive their power to rule from the gods and pattern their rule after the same, are to have similar concerns for the various classes of people under their governance.
There are obvious similarities between the plight of the widows in ancient Israelite society and those of the surrounding cultures. As in the other cultures, widows frequently are poor and in need of special legal protection. As in the other cultures, we do also have surviving texts that point to the fact that widows did, indeed, have access to courts regarding legal matters. We also have ample witness that widows were frequently the target of more powerful and unscrupulous members of society who sought their own gain at the widow's expense. Thus, the Old Testament mandates the protection of widows frequently. Yet one also finds frequent rebukes aimed at those in ancient Israelite society who wrongfully ignored the directives of Exodus and Deuteronomy. The text of Deuteronomy is especially concerned with the treatment of widows perhaps, as I noted, for reasons that may well have included a substantial decline in male population at that particular time.

Yet, in addition to the similarities, notable differences distinguish the Hebrew corpus on widows from other literature of the ancient Near East. First—and perhaps most noteworthy—is the difference in motivation regarding the treatment of widows that we find in both sets of literature. For the various rulers and administrators in societies of the ancient Near East, the motivation to safeguard the welfare of the less fortunate was, to a large degree, for self-aggrandizement. Ur-Namma and Hammurabi both concede that they have received divine mandates to protect the less-fortunate, but the entire tone found at the onset of these legal texts indicate that the faithful execution of these mandates is also for their own glory and good, namely, that they be regarded and (later) eulogized as just rulers. In short, the just treatment of such down-casts as the orphans and widows is to be one of the pillars of their lasting legacy. In contrast, the motivation
to follow the precepts of the Hebrew law code was to be ideally rooted in the idea of thankfulness—a thankfulness that showed mercy for no other reason that because every individual of the Israelite community had been shown—and daily continues to be shown mercy by the Lord. Since the giving of the law code is intimately connected to the deliverance from slavery in Egypt, Israel was always to remember that their change in status came about not by their own might or will, but only because they were the objects of God's mercy, on whose behalf he exercised his own power to deliver them. Those, then, who had been shown mercy were to be motivated by God's goodness to show mercy to others. The writer of Lamentations emphasized that this motivation was to be the driving force in each Israelite life:

Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. (3:22-23)

A second distinction between the law codes of the ancient Near East and the Old Testament legal code deals with the responsibility for caring for the downtrodden, such as the widows and orphans. In the literature from the ancient Near East that we have considered in this chapter, the texts largely delineate the responsibilities of leaders within their respective societies. Most often, the chief administrator (i.e. ruler, king) carries this responsibility, but sometimes (as in the case of Instructions to Amenope and the Kirta Epic) this responsibility is also to be shouldered by the aristocracy. This makes sense, of course, that the more fortunate care for the less fortunate, presumably because they have the nobility of character and economic resources to do so. Yet in the Old Testament texts, the responsibility to care for such unfortunates as widows and
orphans is incumbent upon each member of the Israelite community. This is especially true in pre-monarchial times. For example, the text of Deuteronomy implies that not just wealthy farmers, but every Israelite farmer was to leave the edges of the field un-gleaned, and in this way provide for the widows (Dt 24:9). This binding of all Israelites to obedience to the tenets of the covenant can be seen in this representative passage from the section of Deuteronomy where the covenant law is publicly ratified:

"Cursed is anyone who withholds justice from the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow." Then all the people shall say, "Amen!" (Dt 27:19, emphasis mine)

Binding all the Israelites (not just the rulers) to obey the directives of the Old Testament law code was to foster the attitude that all members of the community were valued and equal. Other legislation concerning the celebration of national festivals, especially Sukkoth (Tabernacles), similarly fostered the idea among the Israelites that such people as widows were equal members of the community, with full access to the rights, privileges, and blessings the Lord bestows. Moreover, widows such as Judith and the so-named "wise woman of Tekoa" (2 Sa 14:9 ff) both assumed the public role of intercessor on behalf of the nation, a valued role in ancient societies. In doing so, both a widow's wisdom and virtue is underscored. The argument of some, notably Veeder, that the semantic positioning of "widow" behind "foreigner" and "orphan" in the familiar

142 It can be argued, of course, that the ancient Near East law codes were established by the rulers with the understanding that they would direct everyone in their respective kingdoms to follow their lead. But my point here is that the sense of community is much more intimate in the Israelite law code; every member of the Israelite society is addressed directly, and the responsibility for caring for society's downcast is laid upon everyone directly. No one could dodge the issue by saying, "Well, that's the king's responsibility, not mine!" The 20th century transference of responsibility and care for the poor in American society from religious charities to government welfare programs invites some interesting comparison, but is beyond the scope of this present study.
Hebrew triad indicates an inferiority—"lowest of the low" status before people and God himself—can be regarded as tenuous. The same Hebrew passages can be utilized to argue the very reverse, namely, that the text indicates that the Hebrew widow is especially near and dear to the Lord's heart.

Finally, that is where the Israelite widow's ultimate security lay. Because such undesirable potentials exist for the vulnerable, in the Hebrew Bible the Mosaic law code depicts God as the God of free and faithful love who is the constant defender of the helpless of society (Ex. 22:23). If the leadership of ancient Israel would not provide justice or sustenance for the less-fortunate, the widow, nonetheless, had the comforting promise that the Lord himself would be her defender and provider, and God himself would see to it that she (along with the foreigner and orphan) would receive justice (Dt 10:18).

The Hebrew Old Testament sets forth these ideals, namely, that pious individuals as well as the Israelite community would care for the poor and, should they either fail or neglect to do so, God himself would make widows, orphans, and foreigners his special concern. Yet this chapter also noted that during the post-exilic period and into the Hellenistic period, a subtle shift began to occur in the understanding of charity toward the vulnerable members of society. The shift in understanding actually brought the mindset of Jews of the Second Temple era more in line with the distinguishing feature of charitable endeavors in other cultures of the ancient Near East. In those cultures, as we noted, the emphasis was placed primarily on the giver and what he would obtain from helping the poor—primarily fame and renown. The Hebrew Bible, especially in the
Torah, originally presented a different motivation, i.e. the care of the poor as both an individual and community response to the goodness of the God of Israel.

The linguistic shift that appears to have occurred during the post-exilic period leaves us, at the beginnings of the early Christian church in Jerusalem, observing that the Jewish mindset, too, began to speak of works of charity in terms of benefits primarily to the giver, with the poor becoming merely a means to an end. Those perceived benefits included the acquisition of merit that atones for sin, and acquisition of rewards in the afterlife.\textsuperscript{143} As noted above, this shift in mindset undoubtedly had implications as to how widows—Jewish widows—were to be treated by the Jewish community and the Jewish Christian community respectively.

\textsuperscript{143} Anderson, “Redeem Your Sins by the Giving of Alms: Sin, Debt, and the ‘Treasury of Merit’ in Early Jewish and Christian Tradition,” 54. “Mere mammon becomes heavenly merit (zĕkût; also recall Sirach 29:10-11—‘lose silver for a friend … and lay up your treasure [in heaven]’). But, secondly, the saying is significant for it shows how deeply into popular imagination this notion of heavenly merits has penetrated.”
CHAPTER 4
THE BEGINNINGS OF CHARITY TOWARD EARLY CHRISTIAN WIDOWS

Somewhat lost amid the history of the early church, with its ever-burgeoning emphasis on celibacy as the ideal Christian life, is the detail that the most famous woman in all Christian history who stood at the foot of the cross watching her son die outside Jerusalem was not only the Virgin; she stood there also as a widow. The scene from John's Gospel is touching, and with two short sentences, Jesus not only tends to the physical and emotional needs of yet another of Israel's widows, but also sets the pattern for his followers in their care for this class of people so dependent upon the good will and mercy of others. James of Jerusalem, the leader of the church in that place, writes to fellow Christians at a very early date, "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world (Jam 1:27 NIV)." It was in Jerusalem (as we shall later see) that the early church, presumably under James' leadership, took up the cause of the widows to "look after [them] in their distress."

Yet in doing so, James and the members of the Jerusalem fellowship were, in reality, simply following established patterns of care for widows dictated first by the Old Testament, codified and refined in detail by rabbis of the intertestamental period, and observed both by pious Jews as well as by their own teacher from Nazareth. The apostle Paul, too, was raised in this first century religious milieu, and his writings would further shape the understanding of the church and its relationship to widows. All of
these—the Gospel accounts,¹ the narrative of Acts, the letters of Paul—are seminal texts that lay the foundation for any attempt to interpret the early church's praxis concerning widows.

In the following two chapters, I wish to explore those texts of the New Testament that open to us the world of widows. The texts themselves fall into two categories, the descriptive and the prescriptive. The former texts, upon which I focus in this chapter, simply shed light on the social and economic situation of widows in this era, and come from the Gospels and the book of Acts. In the next chapter, the latter texts come from the Pauline corpus and, although they do contain some descriptive elements of the widow's situation, they are primarily prescriptive in the sense that these texts gave direction to the first century church, both to widows and to congregations of believers. Specifically, the texts of the Pauline corpus prescribe to widows the parameters of their behavior while at the same time giving directives to Christians as to how they were to interact and care for widows in their midst. The texts also may be organized (as I have chosen to do) along ethnic lines; Luke and Acts present descriptions of charity toward Jewish / Jewish Christian widows. Then, quite naturally, as early Christian communities began to spring up throughout the Mediterranean world, the more formal organization of Christian charity toward widows would include Gentile widows as well.

Widows at Risk in First Century Judea

Anna: The Ideal Widow (Lk. 2:36-37)²

First, we begin by attempting to understand the life of Jewish widows in Jerusalem and around Palestine in the first century, C.E. Very early in Saint Luke’s Gospel the family of Jesus of Nazareth encounters a widow in the court of the Jerusalem temple. The narrative reads:

There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.  (Luke 2:36-38 NIV)

This first, brief encounter with a widow on the pages of the New Testament presents us with some interesting details. Who is this woman? Why does she apparently live in the temple complex? How does she live? What is Luke trying to tell us by using the descriptor, "prophet"? Was she a prophet before the encounter with Jesus’ family…or did she, by "speaking about the child to all" enter into the prophetic office? Was her testimony about Jesus the substance of what she prophesied, or were there other revelations she had previously disclosed to the people of Judea? Some of these questions are unanswerable. Yet others can be answered, and in doing so we gain some insight into the life of this particular widow of Jerusalem in the early first century C.E.

² I use the term “ideal” here only in this sense: later on many early Christian authors regard Anna as the ideal paradigm for all Christian widows. As the concept of widowhood gradually takes on a more spiritual nuance, Anna serves as a model for widows who are a) encouraged not to remarry and b) devote their celibate life to prayer. While the correlation between Judith, Anna, and the development of the practice of Christian widowhood might serve as a good foundation for some other study, it is beyond the scope of this work. Representative of the thought: Ambrose, De Vidua; Augustine, De Bono Viduitatis.
Luke sets the encounter between Anna and the young family of Jesus to be at the temple in Jerusalem. By all standards, the temple renovation project of Herod the Great was impressive to say the least. Begun in 20 B.C.E., the Jerusalem temple complex would not be completed in its entirety until shortly before the Roman destruction of the city by the Tenth Legion in 70 C.E. (although the temple building proper was entirely renovated in a relatively short 18 month period.).

So magnificent was the temple renovation project that the Talmud records, "Whoever has not seen Herod's temple has never seen a beautiful building." The Law of Moses required purification for a woman who had given birth. The period for such purification was forty days following the birth of a male child. Normally, it was not a requirement of the Mosaic code that the parents physically bring their first-born male child to the temple at Jerusalem to "present him to the Lord (Lk. 2:22)."

3 I will not enter into issues of New Testament chronology here. However, we can note that at the time of the encounter between Anna and the family of Jesus, the temple renovation project had been underway for at least 15 yrs. For more on possible New Testament chronologies, see John Brug, “Recent Debate Concerning the Chronology of the New Testament,” Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly 90, no. 4 (2000): 276–88.

4 B. Bava Batra 42

5 The Greek text of Lk. 2:22 is a bit misleading. It reads αἱ ἡμέραι τοῦ καθαρισμοῦ αὐτῶν κατὰ τὸν νόμον Μωσέως. The problem is with the plural, "their purification." Lachs suggests, "What has to be recognized is that Luke, not being a Palestinian Jewish Christian, is not accurately informed about this custom of the purification of a woman after childbirth." (Samuel Tobias Lachs, A Rabbinic Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke (Hoboken, NJ : New York: KTAV Publishing, 1987), 31.) However, we could be more generous to the Gospel author by concluding that he had in mind also that part of the ritual that did involve the infant male child, namely, the redemption of the first-born son, as described in Num 18:15-16. Stern allows the possibility that Joseph—although not required, but permissible—may have opted to undergo a purification ritual along with his wife (David H. Stern, Jewish New Testament Commentary: A Companion Volume to the Jewish New Testament, 6th edition (1999) (Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publications, Inc., 1992), 109.

6 Cf. Lev 12:1-14

7 Lachs, A Rabbinic Commentary on the New Testament, 32. Lachs notes the important thing was the payment of the five shekels for redemption, which could have been given to any priest anywhere.
However, if we read the Lukan narrative\(^8\) closely we realize that at this point the family was still residing in Bethlehem, a mere five miles to the south of the temple. The proximity of the temple undoubtedly played into their decision to bring the child to Jerusalem for this particular rite.

Upon arriving in Jerusalem, Mary would have proceeded to the southern wall of the temple and performed her purification at one of the multiple *mikvaot* ("ritual baths") that were located there, nearby the ancient Huldah Gates.\(^9\) After this step in the purification process, the young family would have then passed through the Hulda Gates and ascended to the temple platform itself. In all likelihood they would have proceeded to the Gate of the Firstborn, located near the temple building itself to the south, in the shadow of the 172 ft high façade of the temple proper.\(^10\) The gate—sparsely mentioned in the rabbinic sources—apparently was the locale for the ritual of redeeming the first-born of Israel.\(^11\)

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Moreover, "taking a child up to Jerusalem for redemption is found nowhere in the MT, the intertestamental literature, or the Mishnah (32)."

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At some point amid the day’s events, the young family encountered the widow Anna. Luke records her lineage as "the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher (2:36)."

The statement is revealing. Notably, it strikes us odd that a widow would be referenced in respect to her father, and not her husband. Why so? Léonie Archer provides the following insight, perhaps germane to Anna’s situation. I quote her at length:

However brief her passage into the marital state might be, as a widow or divorcee she remained legally independent of her father (Ned. 11.10; Ket. 49a). On a practical level, however, there did remain the problem of a single woman functioning in a male oriented and controlled society. The widow or divorcee might well return to her father's house or seek protection from other male relatives. Note that *almanah* (usually translated 'widow') denotes someone without the means of financial support rather than simply a woman whose husband is dead (= *almattu* in the Middle Assyrian Laws, 'a woman without male support'; see *EJ*, XVI, cols 487-96.) With regard to her functioning independently, there is limited evidence (except for the Babatha archive), presumably because it was such an anomaly.\(^{12}\)

Archer again, commenting on the burial of widows:

On the other hand, a widow could have chosen to forgo the maintenance which was her due, collected her kethubah and left her dead husband's estate. If she did not remarry, she would again look to her father's family for burial, similarly *reassuming the title "N. daughter of N."* The scenario of a widow choosing to heave her dead husband's house with no security for the future arranged is, however, an unlikely one. (emphasis mine)\(^{13}\)

\(^{12}\) Léonie J Archer, *Her Price Is beyond Rubies: The Jewish Woman in Graeco-Roman Palestine*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament. Supplement Series 0309-0892, 60. (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), 45. *Baba Bathra* (aka Baba Batra) is one of ten subsections of the larger Mishnaic order Nezekin ("Damages"). One of the six major orders of the Mishnah, *Nezekin* deals with, in a general way, legal restitutions of all kinds. Specifically, *Baba Bathra* deals with acquisitions of property, joint ownership of property, and legal inheritance issues. Archer also notes that *B.B. 6.4 (Baba Bathra)* "refers to building of a 'widow house' for the daughter who returned to her father's home following the death of her husband." (115)

\(^{13}\) Archer, *Her Price Is beyond Rubies*, 269–70.
Thus the nomenclature employed here in reference to Anna "daughter of Penuel" sheds some light on her economic status; unable to make her way independently in a male-oriented society, following seven years of marriage to an unnamed Jewish man\footnote{Perhaps a priest? Edersheim cites the Midrash Bereshith Rabba (71, Commentary on Genesis) as proof that the women of the tribe of Asher were highly prized for their beauty and "their fitness to be wedded to the High Priest or King." (Edersheim, The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, 200.) Contra J. Jeremias, who rejects the entire notion of the high priest preferring daughters of the tribe of Asher as "a worthless pun on Gen. 49:20." (Joachim Jeremias, Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus (Fortress Press, 1969), 155, footnote 29.)} Anna returned to the economic security of her father's home.\footnote{Further, on the various situations young widows found themselves in as well as the nature of their legal status (along with financial situation), see Boaz Cohen, "On the Theme of Betrothal in Jewish and Roman Law," Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research 18 (January 1, 1948): 67–135.}

Furthermore, Luke's reckoning of Anna's age has also given rise to scholarly opinions about its accuracy and/or symbolism. The major questions revolve around the understanding of the Greek phrase that Anna was αὐτὴν χήρα ἕως ἐτῶν ὀγδοϊκοντα τεσσάρων (Lk 2:37 BNT), "she was a widow until the eighty-four years." Most Biblical commentators understand the phrase simply to mean that Anna was married for seven years (v.36)\footnote{"The Sinaitic OS version shortens it to 'seven days.'" Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, The Gospel According to Luke I-IX: Introduction, Translation, and Notes, 1st edition (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1982), 431.} and then a widow until she was eighty-four. On the assumption that Anna may have been married at a common age for a young Jewish woman–14 years or so–this would mean that she was married from age 14-21, and then widowed from age 21 to 84 yrs., totaling a widowhood of 63 yrs. Yet others understand that the period of 84 years that Luke describes is a reference to Anna's period of widowhood. According to this alternate reckoning, the numbers naturally shakeout differently: 7 yrs. of marriage + 84 yrs. of widowhood = 91 yrs. + 14/15/16 years at time of marriage yields a total of
105-107 years. At least one author sees symbolic significance in this reinterpretation of Luke's text in that an age of 105 yrs. would not only be a multiple of seven (a holy number in the Bible) but also would reckon a life-span exactly the same as another blessed and God-fearing widow, Judith.\textsuperscript{17} If this insight is accurate, it also follows that Luke crafts his depiction of Anna in such a way as to create a portrait of the ideal believing widow.

The final phrase of interest from Luke's text is this: "She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying (2:37)." This information only raises more questions about this particular widow, especially concerning her lifestyle and means of support. If we agree with Archer's analysis of widows returning to their paternal home, then at what point did Anna then depart and "never leave the temple"? For that matter, why did she choose to live near / in (?) the temple complex? Furthermore, was "never leaving the temple" even a possibility for a widow?

\textsuperscript{17} This argument is advanced by J. K. Elliott, "Anna's Age (Luke 2:36-37)," Novum Testamentum 30, no. 2 (April 1, 1988): 100–102. He bolsters his claim by also seeing in the assumed period of Anna's widowhood—84 yrs.—another symbolic number as $84 = 7 \times 12$. Yet one cannot help but wonder how in tune the Gentile author Luke would have been with the Jewish apocryphal writings (such as Judith), or why a Gentile author, writing his Gospel primarily to other Gentiles, would insert such overtly Jewish symbolism into his text. More plausible is his argument that Luke's description of Anna's years as προβεβηκναι ἐν ἡμέραις πολλαῖς (Luk 2:36 BGT) "having advanced [in age] in many days" is unexpectedly pleonastic, in contrast to Luke's descriptions of other aged people in his Gospel (e.g. Zechariah and Elizabeth, Lk. 1:7). This may indicate that Anna was, indeed, unusually old. Montgomery precedes Elliot in seeing the similarity between Anna and Judith (Montgomery, "Ascetic Strains in Early Judaism," 190. For contemporary support and the insight that Anna's seven years of marriage is similarly symbolic, cf. Reid OP, Choosing The Better Part?, 93. For grammatical analysis of ἐως ἔτον ὑγδοήκοντα τεσσάρων (Luk 2:37 BGT) versus the Byzantine Majority reading of ὡς ἔτον ὑγδοήκοντα τεσσάρων (Luk 2:37 BYZ), cf. Fitzmeyer, The Gospel According to Luke I-IX, 431. John Nolland, (Word Biblical Commentary Vol. 35a, Luke 1:1-9:20 (Thomas Nelson, 1989), 122) allows for the rendering of ἐως ἔτον ὑγδοήκοντα τεσσάρων as "for all of eighty-four years," and allows that there may be a symbolic element present in the reckoning of "twelve-times-seven years." Further, "Her age (seven-times-twelve years) may symbolize the completion of her waiting for the messiah." (125)
This last question can be handled first and easily dismissed. Simply put, there is no record of anyone—male or female—permanently residing in the temple complex in Jerusalem. The temple complex did have a number of chambers utilized by the priests as they came to Jerusalem for their turn at serving in the priestly rotation, but these were temporary quarters. The high priest had a separate, lavish residence elsewhere in Jerusalem, and would only reside in the temple complex proper in his days of isolation preceding Yom Kippur, when he would be expected to enter the Most Holy Place of the temple to perform the atonement rite for the nation. Thus, there is no warrant for an overly literal reading of Luke at this locus, namely, that Anna the widow actually resided in the temple complex itself. Where she did reside, then, is an entirely different question, and probably unanswerable. But whether she owned her own residence in Jerusalem or was dependent upon the charity of another for shelter—these must remain

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18 Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 200, footnote 4.


20 Leen Ritmeyer and Kathleen Ritmeyer, *The Ritual of the Temple in the Time of Christ*, illustrated edition (Carta Jerusalem, 2002), 63. Ritmeyer cites the Mishnaic tractate *Yoma* for support. *Yoma* Ch. 1 reads: “MISHNA: Seven days before the Day of Atonement the high-priest is to be removed from his house to the Palhedrin Chamber (παρεδρων), and another high-priest is appointed to substitute him in case he become unfit for the service by becoming unclean. R. Jedudah says another wife is to be appointed for him also, in case his own wife dies, whereas it is said [Lev. xvii. 11], “and shall make atonement for himself and for his house”; “his house”--that is, his wife. But it was objected that in this manner there will be no end to the matter. (The other wife may die too.).” (Babylonian Talmud)

21 Fitzmeyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX*, 431. “The double expressions 'day and night' and 'fasting and prayer,' are Lucanisms.” However, the extracanonical Infancy Gospel of James (aka the Protoevangelium of James) seems to indicate that Mary actually was raised in the temple complex (Ch. 19).
unknowns. If, as was mentioned above, Anna had indeed returned to her father’s household, the possibility exists that she would have also stood to inherit a portion of his estate, thus enabling her to live largely a self-sufficient life.\textsuperscript{22} Nothing about that situation would have run contrary to rabbinic law.

At the same time, it is also true that later rabbinic law was very scrupulous about defending the welfare of a widow, particularly in respect to her housing arrangements.\textsuperscript{23} Details about such arrangements can be found in the Talmudic tractate \textit{Ketubah}. There we find that upon the death of her husband a widow had essentially two basic choices: 1) she could claim her \textit{ketubah} (“dowry”) which she brought to the marriage, and in the process willingly forgo any ongoing maintenance from her husband’s estate; 2) should she not remarry, she could opt for maintenance for the rest of her life from her dead husband’s estate, with the administration of said maintenance falling to the legal heirs of the deceased man. However, housing was a separate issue. A widow, over and above the options for ongoing maintenance (above) which she chose—and the legal status that went along with that choice—also had the additional right to remain in the home where

\textsuperscript{22} B.B. 6.4 (Baba Bathra) refers to building of a 'widow house' for the daughter who returned to her father’s home following the death of her husband. Noted in Archer, \textit{Her Price Is beyond Rubies: The Jewish Woman in Graeco-Roman Palestine}, 115.

\textsuperscript{23} Edersheim, \textit{Sketches of Jewish Social Life}, 145–46. “According to Jewish law there were four obligations incumbent on a wife towards her husband, and ten by which he was bound. Of the latter, three are referred to in Exod. 21:9-10; the other seven include her settlement, medical treatment in case of sickness, redemption from captivity, a respectable funeral, \textit{provision in his house so long as she remained a widow and had not been paid her dowry}, the support of her daughters till they were married, and a provision that her sons should, besides receiving their portion of the father’s inheritance, also share in what had been settled upon her.” (emphasis mine)
she and her husband had lived together while married, and that in perpetuity. Rabbinic teaching was so insistent on this additional right that under regular circumstances, should the legal heirs of the decedent try to profit from the sale of the couple’s home, such home sales were frequently invalidated.

The other questions naturally lend themselves to more theological than sociological answers. The Psalms (as noted in the previous chapter) frequently emphasize that the “poor,” i.e. such persons as the orphans and widows, are of special concern to the God of Israel (Ps. 68:10; 112:9; 113:7; 146:9, etc.). Undoubtedly, too, Anna’s desire to remain in the temple complex, close to the site of daily worship, was an expression of her personal piety. Finally, the revelation of the long-expected Messiah of Israel to a widow fits into the thematic emphasis of Luke’s Gospel, namely, the exaltation of the lowly and the debasement of the high and mighty. She is, as the shepherds before her, entrusted with the news of the Messiah’s arrival. However, at least one commentator also notes that even though Anna immediately began witnessing


26 This theme is first introduced in Luke 1, where Mary’s song (The Magnificat) speaks of it (1:52). The thought, of course, applies first and foremost to Mary, a no-name teenage girl from a no-name family from a hill-billy town in the highlands of Galilee (the sophisticated urbanites of Jerusalem considered the Galileans so, and even in the region, Nazareth was looked down upon. Cf. John 2). The poverty of Mary and Joseph is also attested to in the description of the sacrifice they brought at the rite of purification. Luke (2:24) relates that they offered “two doves / pigeons”, which was the humblest of the offerings allowed by the ceremonial law. “The substitution of the [dove] for a young lamb was expressly designated ‘the poor’s offering.’” (Edersheim, The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, 96.)
to her experience, her lowly station also caused people to ignore this great revelation, for the most part.\textsuperscript{27}

**Widows in the Gospels**

Not every widow in Palestine found herself in such an “ideal” situation as Anna. In the Gospel texts the reader encounters any number of widows in difficult circumstances. Some of these widows are real persons while others are the central characters in parables. Nonetheless, these encounters and depictions enable to draw some conclusions about the life of a widow in first century Judea.

One of the more impressionable encounters with a widow that can be found in the Gospels occurs in Luke 7:11-15:

Soon afterward, Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went along with him. As he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out—the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the town was with her. When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, "Don't cry." Then he went up and touched the bier they were carrying him on, and the bearers stood still. He said, "Young man, I say to you, get up!" The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother. (NIV)

The Greek text of this pericope highlights the strong emotions accompanying the encounter. For one, the verb \( \kappa \lambda \alpha \iota \omega \) “expresses strong inner emotions”\textsuperscript{28}–the verb in the text used when Jesus says to the widow, “Don't cry.”\textsuperscript{29} Moreover, the verb depicting

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\text{\textsuperscript{27} William F. Arndt, \textit{Luke} (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1986, 96: “If one inquires why the testimony of Simeon and Anna did not create more of a stir, an explanation easily suggests itself. These persons were socially and politically without importance.”}}
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\text{\textsuperscript{28} Timothy Friberg, Barbara Friberg, and Neva F. Miller, \textit{Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament}, Baker’s Greek New Testament Library (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), BibleWorks, v.8.}}
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\text{\textsuperscript{29} Danker further notes that this verb is used to “express grief or sorrow aloud” (not a silent dropping of tears or weeping such as ordinarily denoted by \( \delta \alpha \kappa \rho \iota \kappa \dot{\iota} \omega \))” Walter Bauer, \textit{A Greek-English Lexicon of the}}
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Jesus’ emotional state is similarly strong: ἐσπλαγχνίσθη (Lk. 7:13). There was good reason for the strong emotion expressed by all present in the text; the death of an only son left the unnamed widow with nothing but the prospect of an even more difficult existence. Archer, as she relates certain rabbinic attitudes towards the preference of having sons over daughters, notes:

Absolute security therefore was to be found only with a son.... Although he did profit from her labor and received the monies of her bride price, in the main he had the expensive task of rearing a child from whom he would later derive no benefit, for when married she and her services could only profit her husband’s family. (cf. Talmud Nedd 31b).  

Moreover, given the fact that the text labels him as νεανίσκος, “young man,” could possibly imply the relative youth of the widow herself, but it certainly does imply that, under normal circumstances, she could expect many years of support from her son.

Rosenfeld and Perlmutter, in a study aimed at analyzing the sub-stratum of Jewish society during the late 1st century C.E. and beyond, depict the general pattern of socio-economic development over the preceding centuries that give insight into the situation this destitute widow at Nain may well have suddenly found herself in:

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30 Thayer notes: “In the Greek poets from Aeschylus down the bowels were regarded as the seat of the more violent passions, such as anger and love; but by the Hebrews as the seat of the tenderer affections, especially kindness, benevolence, compassion; hence, equivalent to our heart (tender mercies, affections, etc.).” Joseph Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (n.p.: n.p., 1889), 4865, BibleWorks, v.8.


This economic pressure (of the day-laborer) coincided with the gradual process of the breaking down of the tribal paternal social structure of the extended family, which was prevalent during the Persian and Hellenistic Periods, changing to a social structure of towns and villages consisting of nuclear families with no familial ties between them. The transformation to nuclear families created a situation in which the welfare of the family was dependent entirely upon the income of the breadwinner—usually the male in the household, but also the woman and mother. When the source of income faltered, there was no larger family from which to receive assistance. When there was insufficient work available, or the laborer grew old, or was sick, the seeds for poverty and destitution were sown.33

The widow, then, as she leads the funeral procession out of the village, suddenly found herself in a socio-economic category that would become increasingly important during that time when early Christian communities were rapidly developing and organizing; she was a “widow left all alone” (1 Ti 5:5).34 Moreover, apart from the obvious looming financial hardships that lay ahead, what also puts this particular widow of Luke 7 at risk is her changed social and legal status as well. Although I have not chosen to read the Biblical narratives in the “honor-shame” framework common with many studies focusing on life in the ancient Mediterranean world, nonetheless Malina and Neyrey provide this insight as to the status of any widow bereft in a manner similar to the woman at Nain:

A widow is in a precarious situation in regard to her ‘shame’ because she has no male to defend her and the honor of her children and household…The issue at stake is not simply or primarily the financial status of the widow and her children (Luke 20:47), but rather the danger to her reputation, which in this culture is more precious than gold.35

33 Rosenfeld and Perlmutter, “The Poor as a Stratum of Jewish Society In Roman Palestine 70-250 C.E.,” 294.

34 This the very class of widow that the pastoral epistle of 1 Timothy has in mind as it gives directives about who is—and who is not—to be supported by Christian congregations, and will be looked at more closely in the next chapter.
Other gospel pericopes also show, in various ways, widows at risk in the Jewish society of ancient Roman Judea. The Parable of the Persistent Widow (aka The Parable of the Unjust Judge) found in Luke 18, is one such pericope. Although context makes it clear that the tertium of the parable certainly focuses on an encouragement to persist in prayer no matter what obstacles (18:1), nevertheless we can gain some insights concerning Jewish widows by pressing those details of the parable, details that were undoubtedly familiar to the original audience.

The Luke 18 parable is, broadly speaking, placed in the context of the legal system. We read of a woman (later identified by the judge himself as a widow) who has some legal complaint, and will not desist until she receives justice:

Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. 2 He said: "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared what people thought. 3 And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.' 4 "For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care what people think, 5 yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually come and attack me!'" 6 And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. 7 And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? 8 I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" (Lk. 18:1-8 NIV)

The assumptions is that the woman is elderly. Yet we ought not exclude the possibility that the widow in Luke 18 was young—perhaps even quite young—a woman betrothed to be married whose fiancée suddenly died. Such women were also classified

as “widows” and were entitled to certain monetary settlements.\textsuperscript{36} The exact nature of her lawsuit, however, must remain speculative.

As I mentioned above, the point of the parable is not to provide social commentary on the plight of widows over against Jewish legal authorities. That said, though, the parable suggests a number of questions: How did she have direct access to a judge? Was this typical public behavior for a widow?\textsuperscript{37} Who was her adversary and what type of legal redress was she seeking? How does she continually manage to get his attention?\textsuperscript{38} Finally, what kind of power does this widow yield that would cause the judge to fear that she would eventually “attack” (\textit{ὑποπιάζω})\textsuperscript{39} him? For obvious reasons, the strength and indomitable spirit of this nameless woman have made her an icon of those espousing a feminist reading of the text.\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{36} Boaz Cohen, “On the Theme of Betrothal in Jewish and Roman Law,” \textit{Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research} 18 (1948): 108–9: “When a betrothal was ended by the death of the husband, or by divorce, the fiancée was entitled to the full marriage settlement, that is the minimum amount of 200 \textit{zuz} if she were a virgin otherwise 100 \textit{zuz} as provided by statute, plus the additional sum the bridegroom obligated himself to pay.”


\textsuperscript{38} A question raised by K. Bailey, \textit{Through Peasant Eyes} (134–35), cited by Just: “How did the widow get attention? Obviously her shouting was different from [that of] the others. In traditional society in the Middle East women are generally powerless in our man’s world. But at the same time, they are respected and honored. Men can be mistreated in public, but not women. Women can scream at a public figure and nothing will happen to them.” (Just, \textit{Luke 9}, footnote 9, 673)

\textsuperscript{39} \textit{ὑποπιάζω} – Friberg (\textit{Analytical Greek Lexicon}, op.cit.) cites the literal meaning of “to strike under the eye; to give a black eye” as well as the figurative, “to annoy greatly, pester, wear out”. He prefers the figurative here. Others (Gingrich, Danker, Moulton, Thayer) generally follow suit, raising questions about the preference of NIV 2011 for “attack.” L.T. Johnson, cited in Just (Just, \textit{Luke 9:}, 669-670) translates the phrase “end up giving me a black eye,” and comments that “in this case the literal render of \textit{hypopiazō} maintains the delicious ambiguity of the original. She may in fact give him a sock in the eye! The term may also mean to damage the reputation, as it does in English.” Whatever the rationale behind that rendering, we can say with certainty that it is an aggressive verb.

Barbara Reid, in her study of women in Luke’s gospel entitled, *Choosing the Better Part?*, presents this particular story of a widow as one “which shatters stereotypes and highlights the power of the seemingly powerless,” approaching the text as she does from a feminist perspective. In an interpretative milieu where the vast majority of bible commentators simply assume the widow to be in a position of helplessness and at a socio-legal disadvantage, Reid sees in her a resilient strength that overcomes all obstacles in her persistent demand for justice. In fact, that this woman is a widow actually works to her advantage in that she is able to operate with more freedom and assertiveness in the public forum than younger, married women, for “with widowhood comes the opportunity to cross the gender divisions that assign passive endurance to women and decisive action to men.” In fact, Reid sides with those exegetes who take the implied threat of giving the judge a black eye quite literally, writes: “Jesus parable of the widow and the unjust judge (Luke 18:2-5) in its immediate Lukan setting (18:1-8) represents a locus classicus for constructive feminist-theological biblical interpretation. Here a female victim of injustice—the ever-vulnerable widow (chera)—at the hand of an exploitative male oppressor (antidikos) and in the face of an unresponsive male judge (krites) rises above her victim position to secure justice through persistent speech and action.”

41 Reid OP, *Choosing The Better Part?*, 196.

42 Nor does she stand alone. Cf. Spencer, *Salty Wives, Spirited Mothers, and Savvy Widows*, 10. There he writes: “Luke features more widows than any NT writer. Far from being a lamentable, limiting condition, celibacy and singlehood afforded women in the Jesus movement and early church ‘the possibility of a power and an authority from which they were otherwise excluded and an opportunity to move outside the limiting constraints of their conventional roles as daughter, wife, and mother. By withdrawing their sexuality from control by others, they achieved a sort of control over their lives and their possessions.’ (quoting Seim, *Gospel of Luke*).” More specifically (in Spencer’s view), ascetic women could become: free from the patriarchal dominance by either father or husband; free from risky pregnancies; free from painful and often life-threatening childbirth; free from the demands of constant caring and; even free from great economic worries.

and that the judge’s concern for this possibility is well founded. Nor is the fact that she is openly pressing her issue in the public eye seen by Reid to be much of an anomaly either.

Though thought provoking, are the conclusions that Reid arrives at through her exegesis a proper depiction of reality? Is the widow in the parable truly not “at risk”? Are there any details of the parable that accurately paint the Jewish social scene of the first century C.E., or are these particular details merely conventions of story-telling that help to create a scene somewhat detached from reality?

As I mentioned above, it is not the primary point of the Luke 18 narrative to try to give us an accurate picture of what life as a widow in first century Judea was like. Rather, the parable’s central messages concern prayer, the nature of God’s kingdom, and the eventual Parousia that will bring true justice to the earth. That said, the parable does invite further study about especially the legal status of Jewish widows, and whether or not the legal system worked, in general, for their advantage or disadvantage.

44 Reid OP, Choosing The Better Part?, 191.

45 Reid OP, Choosing The Better Part?, 193: “The widow of this parable is not unique in her assertive action for justice. The stores of Ruth and Tamar before her, widows who take critical action for the salvation of their people, shatter the stereotype of widows as poor and helpless.”

46 There is a legitimate question about using rabbinic sources, such as the Mishnah and Tosefta (the earliest sections of the Talmud, compiled at roughly the same time—200 C.E.) as source material for compiling an accurate picture of Jewish life in the 1st cent. C.E. It is a legitimate question. Katzoff highlights the problem: “It should be said at the onset that this presupposition, that the law as presented in rabbinic literature of antiquity or Late Antiquity can be used to interpret the Judean Desert papyri, is controversial. There is a growing trend in Jewish historical study of Late Antiquity to claim that in the second century of this era rabbis and rabbinic tradition, if there was any, had no substantial influence on the lives of Jews outside the rabbis’ own small coteries.”(Ranon. Katzoff, “P. Yadin 21 and Rabbinic Law on Widows’ Rights,” Jewish Quarterly Review 97, no. 4 (2007): 545, n.1.) The debate centers on whether or not the world of Jewish law codified by the Tannaim (“teachers” cited in the Mishnah covering the period from roughly 10-200 C.E.) represents an ideal world, or if it is truly reflective of the practice of law.
To begin, is this an accurate detail that widows would have had seemingly unfettered access\(^{47}\) to legal courts, together with the ability to press their own cases before a judge?\(^{48}\) We know, for instance, that women in classical Athens usually were unable to pursue legal action apart from a male representative; the lawsuit entitled *Kata Neaira* being illustrative of the truth.\(^ {49}\) Or later, we think of Cicero’s vitriolic denouncement of Clodia in his celebrated defense speech, *Pro Caelio*. Clodia and _______________

in ancient Jewish society. Such a point is difficulty to prove. In my opinion, the choice need not be polar opposites. What has come down to us in the Mishnah and Tosefta probably is a combination of both; following the destruction of the temple in 70 C.E. and the destruction of Jerusalem and expulsion of all Jews from the same under Hadrian, there probably was an earnest desire on the part of the Tannaim to codify Jewish teaching in an effort to preserve Jewish identity and religion. Thus, in part, the precepts laid down probably contain elements seeking to establish/preserve an ideal Jewish community (much in the same way as America has its Constitutional Party that seeks to reorient society, politically, around our founding documents).

That said, it is also true that in the great, centuries long, theological struggle between the Pharisees and Sadducees, it was ultimately the Pharisees who prevailed, whose teachings become the foundation of later rabbinic Judaism. (This makes sense since the party of the Sadducees was comprised primarily of priests, and with the destruction of the cult center in Jerusalem both their purpose and influence wane rapidly.) I make this point because it is Pharisaic religion that had the long tradition of *oral law* as a legitimate source of doctrine that was equal in weight to the written law of the Torah (on this point, cf. Edersheim, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life*, 261 ff.) Thus the question is legitimate: how much of what was preserved in the Mishnah and Tosefta are recollections of *oral law*–the sayings of revered teachers? Also in this mix is the collection of oral rabbinic sayings that are not included in the Mishnah, the *Barayta*. Can the possibility not exist that, although these sayings were finally collected and scribed a century and a half later, nonetheless they may actually provide an accurate picture of 1st century life in Judea? Quite possibly. But proving a given point in the Mishnah to be an accurate reflection of earlier Jewish life is the difficulty and, in many cases, an impossibility. Finally, Rosenfeld / Perlmutter: “A compromise opinion maintains that, although one must be aware of bias and selective accounts in rabbinic literature, nevertheless, it is possible with careful scrutiny to study the history of the day from their writings as they portrayed what they witnessed.” (Rosenfeld and Perlmutter, “The Poor as a Stratum of Jewish Society in Roman Palestine 70-250 C.E.,” 282.) I find myself in agreement with this sentiment.

\(^{47}\) The imperfect verb at 18:3 \(\epsilon\eta\rho\chi\epsilon\tau\omicron\) (“she kept on coming”) indicates an ongoing, repetitive action.

\(^{48}\) Gaylyn E. Ginn Eddy, “Contributing out of Her Poverty: A Study of the Widow in Luke-Acts” (Vanderbilt University, 2001), 228–29. Eddy states three ways to evaluate the actions—or inaction—of the judge: 1) Her badgering causes him a loss of honor in that, since widows frequently were stereotyped as women who crossed social boundaries as sexual predators, her frequent visits may have given people reason to assume improprieties on his part; 2) her frequent requests may indicate that the judge is simply incompetent or unwilling to carry out his appointed role as judge (following Derrett); 3) his actions may imply that the judge has possibly sided with the widow’s adversary, having been bribed.

\(^{49}\) Demosthenes *Oration* 59.
Neaira as women (and Clodia was a widow at the time) were unable to appear in their own defense in a legal setting, and so simply had to find a way within the system to use some male having legal status in an effort to even have their voice heard. For a woman to have the ability or even opportunity to act independently in a court of law in her own legal interest was simply not commonplace in Greco-Roman society. That, however, does not seem to be the situation for this Jewish woman. Fortunately, archaeology may help to shed light on this widow’s legal situation. In 1960, Yigael Yadin discovered in the Dead Sea area a leather purse containing the personal papers of a Jewish woman who had resided in a Nabatean village (Mazoa) on the southern shore of the Dead Sea. The letters date from August 94–August 132 C.E. and provide information germane to the situation here in Luke 18. Through the letters we discover that this woman named Babatha was involved lawsuits concerning inheritance from the estate of her first husband. Although Babatha eventually remarried, the legal matters involve the guardianship of her orphaned son. Later letters of the archive (ca. 130 C.E.) also indicate that Babatha’s legal issues continued upon the death of her second husband. The issue at that time involved her support as a widow out of the proceeds from the sale of a date crop owned by her husband.\(^{50}\) Thus, the archive helps us to understand, in part, the interaction of Jewish widows/women with legal courts.\(^{51}\)


\(^{51}\) For texts from the Babatha archive, see Ross Shepard Kraemer, Women’s Religions in the Greco-Roman World: A Sourcebook (Oxford University Press, 2004), 143–52.
Without pressing all the details of the litigation found in the Babatha archive, it is possible to glean some information that sheds light on Luke 18. For one, in the archive letter 14 (P.Yadin 14) we read that not only did this Jewish woman have access to the court, she even had the power to issue a *parangelia* ("summons"), i.e. the right to initiate legal proceedings.52 P.Yadin 13 also substantiates this, in which Babatha’s direct appeal to the Roman governor is recorded; she approaches the governor with her petition.53 In fact, the archive also mentions off-hand another woman, Iulia Crispina, who likewise initiates a *parangelia* in a court of law (P.Yadin 25).54 To answer one of our questions, then, historical documentation substantiates the description of the widow in Luke 18, namely, that is plausible to assume that she would have been within her legal rights to approach a judge and initiate a court case seeking justice.

However, the text of Luke 18 also sparks another question that the Babatha archive may help clarify: does the text have in mind a Jewish judge or a local Roman official / judge who is being badgered by this widow? There are valid reason for assuming, following Edersheim’s reasoning, that the situation in Luke 18 involves a non-Jewish (secular court) judge. The context of the parable’s original setting warrants the conclusion that this judge, in fact, is some local official with a modicum of authority. Edersheim notes that “one man could not have formed a Jewish tribunal.”55 The fact


55 Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 287. Further, the author notes (ibid.) that these local judges were often referred to a “Robber-Judges,” and that “the Talmud speaks in very depreciatory terms of these ‘village Judges’ (Dayyaney deMegista), in opposition to the town tribunals
that we read of this widow seeking the legal assistance of a single judge proves the argument. He sees him rather as a local official appointed by Herod or the Romans—"perhaps a Jew, but not a Jewish Judge". Yet the description provided in the parable that "he neither feared God nor cared what people thought" might tip the scale in favor of a non-Jewish judge.

Sections of the Babatha archive, as studied by Cotton, further establish the plausibility of the scenario in Luke 18, namely, that of a Jewish widow approaching a secular [Roman] court and seeking redress for injustice. Although it must be conceded that the parable is set "in a certain city" and the Babatha archive largely represents provincials, nonetheless Cotton concludes that the evidence of the Babatha archive is such to lead us to believe that Jewish people had absolutely no qualms about utilizing the Roman legal system for personal matters. In fact, they may have even preferred to.

Further, she sees trend of heading to secular courts as evidence of the rapid Romanization of the empire, even in its furthermost reaches. She writes:

There is nothing in the documents we have reviewed here to suggest that recourse to Roman law and Roman courts was anything but voluntarily adopted. Without coercion or attempts to impose uniformity, the very presence of the Romans as the supreme authority in the province invited appeals to their authority, to their courts as well as to their laws. The provincials seem more than willing to let the central government handle their disputes; they take the trouble of preparing blank forms of the actio tutelae, of searching for Roman legal arguments and of introducing into their personal claims Roman propaganda

(\textit{Bey Davar}), and accuses them of ignorance, arbitrariness, and covetousness, so that for a dish of meat they would pervert justice. Frequent instances are also mentioned of gross injustice and bribery in regard to the non-Jewish Judges in Palestine."

\footnote{Edersheim, \textit{The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah}, 287.}
slogans of 'the most blessed times'. They are active and enterprising in inviting intervention.\(^57\)

Although Luke 18 presents a widow in the context of a parable, the primary purpose of which certainly is not to depict the Jewish widow's place and struggles in the society of that day, nevertheless, we have seen that the small details about widows provided in the parable plausibly reflect some elements of historical reality. As substantiated by the Babatha archive of letters, we can see that it was not unheard of in that ancient context for a woman (widow) both to have access to legal courts and to initiate proceedings for legal action.

Yet for a widow, merely having access to legal action did not guarantee that she would either receive justice or remove her entirely from being “at risk.” Finally, in the end, it makes little difference if the judge of the parable is Jewish or non-Jewish; widows of that day still frequently lived in tenuous situations, along with others who occupied the lower stratum of society.\(^58\) Corrupt judges aside, sometimes the widow’s precarious situation may even have been caused by the religious leaders themselves—a fact noted and harshly criticized by Jesus later in Luke’s Gospel.

The short invective of Jesus in Luke 20:47 is directed against the teachers of the law who “devour the homes of widows” (οἱ κατεσθίουσιν τὰς οἰκίας τῶν χηρῶν). The

\(^{57}\) Cotton, “The Guardianship of Jesus Son of Babatha,” 107. It should be noted, however, that Katzoff (“P. Yadin 21 and Rabbinic Law on Widows’ Rights,” 545–47) does not share this opinion of the wholesale assimilation of 1\(^{st}\) century Jewish people into the Roman legal system.

\(^{58}\) See Bruce W. Longenecker, “Exposing the Economic Middle: A Revised Economy Scale for the Study of Early Urban Christianity,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 31, no. 3 (March 1, 2009): 245. Citing Steven Friesen’s landmark study in which he establishes stratification of Roman society and a nuanced “poverty scale,” widows are marked as “PS7”—the lowest of the strata indicating people living “below subsistence level.”
regular verb "to eat" (ἐσθίω) is intensified by the prefix kata (κατά), indicating not only an aggressive action but also a thorough one.\(^{59}\) It can also rightly be described as a self-interested action, and it is particularly in this vein that Jesus' words should be taken.

But what action are we talking about? What does it mean to “devour” a widow's home? A small detail in the text of Luke 20 may help us here. The text specifically targets “teachers of the law.” Each of the synoptic Gospels has a section toward the end of the respective book in which Jesus is described as denouncing the “scribes and Pharisees”.\(^{60}\) “Teachers of the law” could have come from either of these camps, as well as from the party of the Sadducees.\(^{61}\) The Greek text is even more precise: προσέχετε ἀπὸ τῶν γραμματέων (Lk. 20:46 BGT). What some versions translate as “teachers of the law” others translate (more accurately) as “scribes.” The scribes were, in actuality, the most learned in all the details of the law of all the various groups and,

\(^{59}\) The LXX in Isaiah 1:17 uses the verb to describe the complete destruction of the lands of Judah by her enemies, and is translate variously: “your fields are devoured,” or “your fields are stripped.” It is an old word, found in tmesis at the very opening of the *Odyssey* (1.8) as Homer depicts the recklessness of the hero’s men, who “ate up” the cattle of Apollo. Demosthenes, in his speech *Against Nausimachus and Xenopeithes* (38.27) lambasts these men as ὅτι τῶν αἰσχρῶν ἐστι, μᾶλλον δὴ οὐδὲ δικαίων, τὰ μὲν ὄντα κατεσθίοντας καὶ παροινοῦντας, (“that this is [characteristic] of shameful men, or rather of unjust men – wolfing down and drinking up their possessions…”). As for the rest of the NT, Thayer also provides the rendering “to forcibly appropriate”, specifically in reference to this passage.

\(^{60}\) Mt 23:1-19 (the longest); Mk 12:38-40; Lk 20:45-47

\(^{61}\) The origin of the term “Sadducee” is uncertain, but many scholars believe it to derive from the name “Zadok,” the high priest whom Solomon appointed to replace Abiathar of the House of Eli (cf 1 Ki 2:35). For origin of the name, cf. Edersheim, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life*, 221–22. If this is so, then the Sadducees are largely associated with the priests and Levites. The OT has specific directives to the priest as to being teachers and exegetes of the law for the common people (cf Neh 8:8; Mal 2:7). It was especially during the high Jewish festivals that “teachers” of the Sanhedrin would publicly teach in the temple courtyards, specifically on the steps of the chel, the platform upon which the temple was built (Ritmeyer and Ritmeyer, *The Ritual of the Temple in the Time of Christ*, 50.)—an image consistent with the description of Jesus as a boy in the temple complex, discussing points of law with the teachers (Lk 2:46).
arguably, the most honored among the masses. The scribe may have been a Pharisee or a Sadducee, but either of these monikers was the lesser of his designations. The scribe was not merely some member of a religious party; the term was indicative of both status and an office. He is, in essence, not only a teacher but a lawyer to whom people with legal issues might turn for advice or resolution.

Whatever the case, the main point is that the text describes men in Jewish society who had greater degrees of education in the finer points of Jewish jurisprudence than the common man, to say nothing of a common Jewish widow. It is unlikely that Luke has in mind, in this particular pericope, the widows of Pharisees, for since the party of the Pharisees was a *chabura* ("fraternity, guild"), "the wife or widow of a 'Chaber' and his children, were regarded as members of the fraternity." With the laws of the fraternity even forbidding Pharisees to conduct most personal business with "outsiders," (i.e. non-members) it seems unlikely that a Pharisee who was a "teacher of the law" or "scribe" would not seek to gain some legal yet unethical advantage at the hands of one of the widows of the fraternity. The nature of the statement recorded

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63 Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, i.94.

64 Education of girls and women beyond a certain rudimentary level was strongly discouraged, especially the deep study of the Torah. Babylonian Talmud, *Sotah* 21b: "Whoever teaches his daughter Torah teaches her obscenity (Rabbi Dr. Isidore Epstein, trans., "Socino Babylonian Talmud," 1990, [http://www.come-and-hear.com](http://www.come-and-hear.com).)" The Babatha Archive does, admittedly, depict a Jewish women who appears to be somewhat savvy in her engagements with the courts, but this certainly is an exception to the norm.

in Luke 20 does seem to indicate that this is the best way to describe their practice – legal, but unethical,\textsuperscript{67} keeping in mind the overall charge found not only in the Luke section but the parallels in Matthew and Mark: these religious leaders are denounced for their hypocrisy.

What could they have done, and what property of a widow was there to actually “devour”? Earlier I noted that the Mishnah devotes and entire tractate to the issue of marital financial arrangements (\textit{t. Ketubah}) of all kinds between spouses, and gives guidelines for the legalities involved in the dissolution of a Jewish man’s estate.

Sometimes this was a relatively simple matter for a small estate, but sometimes it was a rather involved matter for other reasons. Disposal of assets could especially become complicated if there were no children, or if there was a situation similar to Babatha’s in that nearby relatives are involved as guardians, or if the estate of the decedent was of considerable size, to conceive of a few scenarios. Then as now, widows could suddenly find themselves in a quagmire of legal-ease with the only option being to hire a skillful lawyer (aka “scribe”) to help them muddle through. Derrett pursues this line of thought in his short study\textsuperscript{68} and, further, draws a plausible connection between the two seemingly unrelated phrases, “devour widows’ houses” and “make lengthy prayers for a show” (Lk

\textsuperscript{66} Modern free masonry also places a strong emphasis upon the honoring and support of the widows of departed lodge members. Cmp. \url{http://www.widowssons.com}, where the focus is primarily upon financial help.

\textsuperscript{67} The charge is strikingly similar to what one hears in our modern day about shrewd fund managers who know how to create tax shelters and off shore / foreign accounts to the considerable advantage of their client. Though legal, the revelation of high-profile names in the so-called “Panama Papers” (2016) stirred up public outrage.

\textsuperscript{68} J. Duncan M. Derrett, “Eating up the Houses of Widows: Jesus’s Comment on Lawyers?,” \textit{Novum Testamentum} 14, no. 1 (January 1, 1972): 1–9.
20:47). He points out that οἰκία in the passage most naturally refers to “property” and not merely the “house” proper. Also, Derrett relates how common Jewish practice was to have “trustees” (ἐπίτροποι) appointed to oversee the orderly concluding of the dead man’s affairs, either appointed by the (previous) owner of the estate or by a court. In short, this trustee was the executor of the dead man’s will. Two other things are of import: 1) the trustee was usually a man well known in society for his personal piety; 2) it was fairly common practice that remuneration was given to the trustee for all the legal work that he did on the dead man family’s behalf, and these expenses (usually ongoing) were taken directly from the value of the estate. The text from Luke seems to link the two; a widow would seek out a competent lawyer who, at the same time, was known for his personal piety but one who would–completely within the established parameters of the law and practice–literally “gets fat at their expense.”

Other exegetes wrestle with the juxtaposition of the two phrases of Lk 20:47 and arrive at different conclusions. Some see the scribes as ones who show up at widow’s homes (sometimes for a meal) and put pressure on them to contribute generously from their estate to various public and religious causes. In exchange, they would offer pious

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69 As noted previously, a widow did have the right to continue living in the spousal home for the rest of her life, provided that she did not exercise the option to return to her father’s home and put herself under his legal custody. Cf. Edersheim, Sketches of Jewish Social Life, 145–46.

70 Derrett, “‘Eating up the Houses of Widows,’” 3.

71 Derrett, “‘Eating up the Houses of Widows,’” 4-5.

72 Derrett, “‘Eating up the Houses of Widows,’” 3 ff.

73 Derrett, “‘Eating up the Houses of Widows,’” 4.
prayers up on the widow’s behalf for her welfare. Others see in the scribes a certain Jewish form of “legacy hunting.” We cannot put them in the same camp with the notorious captatores of Juvenal’s satires, yet we do find some who were unashamed to use another for his own advantage. The piety, according to the text, is a “pretense.” Fitzmeyer has a lengthy list of exegetical possibilities as to how the phrase “devouring widow’s houses” might be interpreted. Yet of all the exegetical options, Derrett’s is most compelling. He concisely summarizes his argument:

It would not make sense to suppose that men made long prayers in order to persuade widows to make gifts to them, and at the same time to say that they are “eating up” the “widows’ houses”, when that phrase belongs to the sphere, not of parasites in that sense, but of trustees and guardians, who were constantly suspect of misappropriation of others’ property, and who obtained the facility to misappropriate it only through their public reputation for piety.

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75 Sat. i.5. Also in i.4, while speaking of the conscience-less Crispinus: consilium laudo artificis, si munere tanto /praecipuam in tabulis ceram senis abstulit orbi. [“I praise his bold plan… if he placed himself ahead of the rest in the wax of the childless old man’s tablet (i.e. “will”).]


77 “Generally, of what is made to appear to others to hide the true state of things, opposite ἀλήθεια (truth);” Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament.

78 Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV: Introduction, Translation, and Notes, 1 edition (Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday & Co., 1985), 1318. His options for how scribes “devour” widows’ houses: 1) they accepted payment for legal aid to widows, even though such was forbidden; 2) they cheated widows of what was rightfully theirs; 3) they took advantage of the rules of hospitality of these women of limited means; 4) they mismanaged the widows’ property; 5) they took large sums of money from credulous old women in return for promised prolonged prayer on their behalf; 6) they took the houses as pledges for debts that could not be paid. This insight per Reid OP, Choosing The Better Part? (196).

This image of the Jewish widow suffering at the hands of the religious authorities has even infiltrated the exegesis of one of the most traditionally positive texts concerning widows, namely, the text of Luke 21:1-4,\textsuperscript{80} the account of a widow placing two small coins in to the temple treasury. Historically, exegetes often understood the widow of this text to be a giver worthy of emulation.\textsuperscript{81} The text certainly can be read in that manner.\textsuperscript{82} However, a number of recent studies have forced scholars to reevaluate that position, giving more consideration to the social position of the widow as well as to the broader context of where the pericope lands in the overall Lukan account.\textsuperscript{83} In them, the authors invite readers to reconsider the words of Jesus himself, whether they are in

\textsuperscript{80} The parallel account is in Mark 12:41-44.

\textsuperscript{81} Ancient authors: Archelaus, \textit{Disputation with the Manes} 42 (ANF-06); Ambrose \textit{De Vidua} 5.27-32 (NPNF-10); Augustine, \textit{Exposition of the Book of Psalms: Psalm CXXIX} (NPNF1-08); Jerome Letter CXLV. \textit{To Exuperantius} (NPNF2-06); Cassian, XX.VIII \textit{Conference of Abbot Pinufius} (NPNF-211); Gregory the Great, Epistle XXXV. \textit{To Leontius, Ex-Consul.} (NPNF-212); Leo the Great, \textit{Sermon XLII.2} (NPNF-212). Modern authors: Godet, \textit{A Commentary on the Gospel of St. Luke Vol. II}, 256. This incident, witnessed by Jesus at such a time, resembles a flower which He comes upon all at once in the desert of official devotion, the sight and perfume of which makes Him leap with joy.; Lange, \textit{Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Mark-Luke}, 315–16. is…a single rose upon a heath full of thistles and thorns…"; F. W. Wenzel, \textit{The Wenzel Commentary: An Exegetical Study, Based on a Harmony of the Gospels} (Arrow Printing, 1986), 603–4. Wenzel sees the widow as simply paying the required temple tax (as opposed to a freewill offering), but doing so with a cheerful, humble spirit.

\textsuperscript{82} Timothy Traynor, “Complicating the Poor Widow’s Gift: Exegesis on Mk. 12:41-44,” \textit{School of Theology and Seminary Graduate Papers/Theses}, January 1, 2006, 6. “Classic interpretations of this passage have come about by isolating the story and explaining it as a brief, passing situation that Jesus uses pedagogically.” (\url{http://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/sot_papers/759}. Accessed May 28, 2016.)

actuality words of praise for the woman or words spoken in frustration over a religious system that binds the consciences of simple yet pious people to act in compliance with the dictates of the religious authorities. Kim is representative of the general view of these studies:

While the majority of scholars interpret the poor widow as a positive exemplary figure, contrasting the genuine piety between the rich scribes and the poor widow, there are, in fact scholars who view the act of the poor widow as a symbol of the corruption of religious authority. C.S. Mann explains [Mark 12:41-44 as a continuation of 12:38-40 which suggests Jesus’ attack on the scribes and their official establishment. The scribes led the poor widow to make offering with all she had, even though she was poor. Thus, the story of the poor widow’s offering is used as evidence to exhibit the oppression of the scribes towards the widows who were the weakest and the oppressed – socially, economically, and politically.  

Addison Wright was the scholar to first break ground in this approach to the text. Noting that “the story itself is not about the duty of almsgiving”, Wright asserts that the statement of Jesus really contains no word of praise for the widow, but just an observation of her actions, that she was more a victim than anything else of improper teaching and motivation on the part of the religious leaders. Finally, he sees the entire episode as completely consistent with Jesus’ statement condemning the religious leaders for avoiding the duty of providing for aging parents by dedicating (i.e. the Corban) their money to God (Mk 7:10-13), as well as consistent with condemnation of

86 Wright, “The Widow’s Mites,” 262–63. “And, finally, there is no praise of the widow in the passage and no invitation to imitate her, precisely because she ought not be imitated.”
87 Wright, “The Widow’s Mites.” 262.
the scribes for “devouring widow’s houses” that just precedes this pericope. Moreover, Wright insightfully noted how the episode of the widow’s offering immediately is followed in both Mark and Luke with Jesus’ prediction of the complete destruction of the temple. Thus, “her contribution was totally misguided, thanks to the encouragement of official religion, but the final irony of it all was that it was also a waste.”

Smith’s work followed Wright’s, but provides more of an exegetical rationale for similar conclusions. He especially highlights the connectives καί and δέ in this regard, and how their positioning between clauses serves to heighten the contrasts found in the text. But whereas Wright saw the placement of the discourse on the future desolation of the temple in terms of general judgment, Smith tightens the connection to the Widow’s Mite story by asserting that it is the manner in which Israel’s widows were being treated was “one of the last nails in the coffin of national Israel. The chronic disregard of God’s Law and the sham religion of the nation’s leaders were summed up in her.”

Kim’s “Korean feminist postcolonial perspective” of the text offers some thoughts similar to the above-mentioned, but then pushes her reading of the widow herself in a completely different direction. Rather than merely poor and victimized, Kim sees the widow as insightful and defiant:

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89 Wright, “The Widow’s Mites,” 263.
91 Kim, “Rupturing the Empire,” 11. She explains later: “Postcolonial feminist biblical interpretation enables the Two-Thirds World women to deconstruct androcentric, imperial, and western dominated interpretations, and to read the Bible in their own way and from their own perspective.” (13)
The poor widow is the one who recognizes the portent of the destruction of the temple which has been the symbol of power of both the Jewish rulers and the Roman empire in Jewish colonized society. She throws out all the money she had even though it was a small amount not because she wanted to be devoted totally to God, nor because she was misled by the scribes, offering the money in obedience to the scribes’ false teaching. The poor widow who has been waiting for the kingdom of God acknowledges the clashing of the two kingdoms. In between those collapsing spaces, the poor widow throws out all that she obtained from the ruling imperial system and radially chooses to live on the side of the kingdom of God in front of Jesus, thinking that Jesus will know what she is doing.92

Although also writing from a feminist perspective, Barbara Reid's short exposition of the Luke text really is a concise summary of the various view and ideas just discussed above. However, she does offer this insight for reading the text:

Perhaps, like the parables, [this passage] is open-ended, and conveys a different meaning depending on where one stands. For those who would align themselves with the voracious scribes, it offers a challenge to reject all ways of feeding off the poorest, particularly under the guise of religion. For those who are oppressed and poor, it issues an invitation to reject giving support to those very systems that treat them unjustly.93

Summary

We have considered a number of widows of the New Testament, primarily found in the Gospel of Luke. All of these widows can be seen to be “at risk” in their various situations. The widow of Nain was at risk because the loss of both her husband and her only son put her into a situation where she was not only lacking legal representation in a patriarchal society, but also probably her only sure and steady means of income and sustenance. The persistent widow in Jesus’ parable of Luke 18 is not an historical

93 Reid, OP, Choosing The Better Part?, 197.
figure, but a stereotype. Yet from the stereotype we can infer that widows were
generally looked on as vulnerable, perhaps especially to legal manipulation by
unscrupulous people. Even though from the Babatha archive of texts it seems valid to
assume that Jewish women did have access to courts and judges without male
representatives, we can also infer her lowly status from the fact that she has to beg
repeatedly to get her court case even heard. Moreover, even after that there was no
guarantee that justice would come her way.\textsuperscript{94} The legal vulnerability of the typical
Jewish widow can also be infer from the Luke 20 text, where Jesus denounces the
scribes for, in some way or another, taking advantage of widows with the result that
their estate (“house”) is “devoured.” Finally, apart from the interpretation as to whether
or not Jesus’ comments about the widow who offered up two small coins into the temple
treasury is a positive one or negative one, the one word of the pericope that we can’t
overlook is Jesus’ own description of the woman; she is a poor widow. This, more than
anything, was a defining trait of first century widows living in Judea. Granted, of the
widows considered above it is true that it is difficult to infer anything about Anna’s
financial status from the Luke 2 text. Likewise, one could plausibly argue if the scribes
of Luke 20 were devouring the estates of certain widows, then those particular widows
must have had sufficient resources to make them a target in the first place; who would
go after the possessions of a poor widow? However, the other two widows along with
the stereotype widow of the Luke 18 parable lead us to conclude that despite differing

\textsuperscript{94} The judge in Lk 18:5 refers to her as “this widow” (διὰ γε τὸ παρέχειν μοι κόπον τὴν χήραν τοῦτην).
Danker notes in his grammar that the Greek demonstrative can be used in a contemptuous manner, and

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circumstances, many widows of ancient Judea could have and probably did have this common label affixed to them: they were poor.

**Jewish Charity toward the Poor**

The book of Acts describes the beginnings of several Christian communities throughout the Greco-Roman world. However, the first section of Acts (ch. 1-12, where Peter’s ministry is in the fore) is centered primarily in Jerusalem. The leaders of the fledgling movement are all Jewish, prominent among whom is James the Just, leader of the Jerusalem church. His emphasis on concern for the poor is evident as he challenges the wealthier followers of Christ to prove their faith genuine, and put their confession into practice:

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet, have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are the rich who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong? If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself,"¹ you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.⁹⁵

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The Organization of Jewish Charity

It is no great revelation that ancient Jewish teachers, following the Old Testament, expressed concern and ratified precepts concerning the treatment of the poor; the Mishnah is teeming with such concerns.\textsuperscript{96} Jewish Christian leaders raised in a rabbinic context would naturally be concerned about the plight of the poor and less fortunate. However, just as we raised the question, “What is poverty?” we also need to raise the question, “What is charity?” Bird is helpful at this point:

At the outset, we must define what we mean by the practice of charity. Too narrow definitions must be avoided. Charitable practices cannot be restricted only to acts of voluntary, unreciprocated generosity. Charity programs often involve involuntary as well as voluntary elements, unreciprocated as well as reciprocal activities, generous as well as begrudging contributions. Charity programs have been undertaken as public welfare policies as well as private benevolences; they have involved self-sacrificing altruism as well as quite self-serving philanthropy.\textsuperscript{97}

Naturally, we cannot look for evidence where none exists; we cannot examine the multitude of spontaneous private acts of generosity that must have occurred on a daily basis in the ancient Jewish culture. We must limit ourselves, then, to what texts and other material evidence reveal about the subject.

But we must also keep in mind that the question has been raised numerous times as to what extent the traditions of the Jewish teachers influenced the charitable

\textsuperscript{96} Such as the entire Mishnah Zeraim (“seeds”) that dealt with provisions for the poor, taking its name from the precept in Lev 19:9 that forbids Jews from going over their fields a second time to get the “scraps” of the harvest for themselves. Instead, they are to leave the edges (“corners”) unpicked, leaving the remnants for the poor of the land to harvest (The second of the tractates, after Zeraim, is Pe’eah--“corners.”) Cf. Blackman, Mishnayoth.

practices of the early Christians; this continues to be debated.98 Gardner, in the most recent and thorough study of the subject, sees no evidence of organized charity among the Jews before 70 C.E.99 Nor does Satlow in his recent work.100 The implication, then, is that organized charity among the Jews could not have influenced the earliest Christians in Jerusalem for the simple reason that such practices did not exist. David Seccombe, in a short but influential article dating to 1978, challenges the presupposition that Christians patterned their own charitable practices after contemporary Jewish arrangements.101 On the other hand, in Jeremias’ mind “there can be no doubt” of a link between the two, and speculates that the latter rabbinic classification of two basic types of charity (discussed below) could have been a later development, while in the days of the early Jerusalem church Jewish charity “originally was simply a daily distribution to the poor.”102 Others, too, seem to indicate some measure of agreement with Jeremias’ position,103 perhaps most prominent among them being Craig Keener, author of a

98 Hamel, “Poverty and Charity,” 322. “Many questions remain to be investigated. In particular, the evident influence that Jewish care of the poor had on Christian caritative institutions needs to be further examined.”


100 Michael L. Satlow, “Fruit and the Fruit of Fruit’: Charity and Piety among Jews in Late Antique Palestine,” Jewish Quarterly Review 100, no. 2 (2010): 271. He writes, “Despite the impression sometimes created by the New Testament that early Christians had organized charitable giving, it appears that these institutions began only in the late first century. In the second and third centuries, Christian charitable giving was loosely organized and, apparently, directed mainly at poor Christians.”


103 Dunn, Beginning from Jerusalem, 251–52. Dunn summarizes the various positions on the question in footnote 45. Capper sees a definite link, but more from the Essenes than from rabbinic thought and practices (“The Palestinian Cultural Context of Earliest Christian Community of Goods,” 335.) McGinn,
massive four-volume exegesis on the book of Acts.\textsuperscript{104} His moderate position is most sensible; while conceding the fact that the written sources describing Jewish charitable practices certainly do not exist before the destruction of the temple in 70 C.E., nonetheless “later rabbinic practices probably say more about villages and small towns than about how charity could be organized and supervised in a massive population such as Jerusalem’s.”\textsuperscript{105} Keener does not see that the description of the charitable practices in various place, especially Acts 6:1-7, need necessary mandate the conclusion that an organized system of charity needed to be in place.\textsuperscript{106} In fact, it would have been a most natural development in the Jewish context of Jerusalem with its traditional concern for the poor. So Keener concludes:

This does not suggest that the apostles had developed the system without Jewish precedents; the Essenes, for example, reportedly ate together daily and also distributed to those in need. The synagogue undoubtedly exerted its influence as well, but the apostles adapted the system, as they were preparing to adapt it again in response to new circumstance (6:1-4).\textsuperscript{107}

similarly, does not hesitate to see a connection: “The fact that at this early date (ca. 36 C.E.? material support for widows is taken for granted (and seems more deeply rooted among the Hebrew speakers) suggests that the practice was taken over directly from the Jewish tradition.” (Thomas A. J. McGinn, \textit{Widows and Patriarchy: Ancient and Modern} (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2008), 38.)


\textsuperscript{105} Keener, \textit{Acts: An Exegetical Commentary: 1264}

\textsuperscript{106} Cf. Gardner, \textit{The Origins of Organized Charity in Rabbinic Judaism}, 20–21. The author shares this insight germane to the discussion: “Moreover, Aharon Shemesh and Steven Fraade, among others have increasingly highlighted the similarities of laws prescribed by the Tannaim and those found in the Dead Sea Scrolls. While a direct link is unlikely, it seems possible that the Tannaim drew upon isolated developments in poverty relief from Second Temple era traditions, some of which were paralleled in CD [Codex Damascus]14. They thoroughly rabbinized this handful of received traditions into a single, coherent vision of what organized charity ought to look like—a vision whose comprehensiveness was unprecedented in Jewish traditions. We may conclude that the earliest rabbinic discourses on organized charity were not created entirely \textit{ex nihilo}, but rather drew upon some ideas—however disparate, isolated, and possibly marginal—from an earlier age.” The same author also warns about the reliability of rabbinic writings as an accurate witness to social life as it existed centuries before (p.23).

\textsuperscript{107} Keener, \textit{Acts: An Exegetical Commentary: 1264}
Frederick Bird explored possible connections between the Jewish and Christian ethic of charity, and concluded that there were definite similarities, yet notable differences. What makes the pursuit difficult, though, in Bird's mind is that "neither religion ever developed an explicit, distinct charity ethic as such." The major difference between the Jewish and Christian approach to charity was, while outwardly the various acts of charity may have appeared quite similar, it was the starting point—the motivation—that was different. The Jewish rabbis sought to articulate and specify certain acts of charity that sought both God's favor and to avoid his judgment, whereas the Christians proceeded from a few overarching principles, all under the umbrella of the two great commandments of love for God and love for neighbor. Thus with the codification of practices and emphasis more on the act of giving than on the beneficiary, Jewish charity continued to pursue the same path that we noted at the end of the previous chapter, namely, the redefinition of charity "subtly but increasingly …in ways that pictured it as an individual and meritorious activity rather than as a whole series of communal obligations and norms."

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110 Bird, “A Comparative Study of The Work of Charity in Christianity and Judaism.” 156: "Unlike the contemporary Jewish charity ethic which was embodied in a whole fabric of specific norms and institutional practices, the early Christian charity ethic largely was expressed and communicated in relation to two or three fundamental principle. Briefly, primitive Christians adhered to a communal ethic of mutual assistance summarized by the second great commandment about loving one's neighbor."

111 Bird, “A Comparative Study of The Work of Charity in Christianity and Judaism,” 161. Yet, as I note below, this was a development that seems to have begun after the writing of the Mishnah under the Tannaim, and more during the period of the flourishing of the Amoraim (200-500 C.E.).
But, going back to our original question, if there are connections between the charitable practices described in Acts and contemporary Jewish practices, what “Jewish precedents” might there have been? First (as Keener noted above), there may have been the practices of the Essenes, the pietistic, separatist sect of Judaism formed in the first century B.C.E., seemingly in direct response to the usurpation of the high priesthood by a non-Levite (non-Zadokite), the Hasmonean Jonathan Maccabaeus around 153 B.C.E. In addition to the Essene emphasis on such things as purity and celibacy, Josephus also describes the charitable aspect of Essene life:

And truly, as for other things, they do nothing but according to the injunctions of their curators; only these two things are done among them at everyone’s own free will, which are to assist those that want it, and to show mercy; for they are permitted of their own accord to afford succor to such as deserve it, when they stand in need of it, and to bestow food on those that are in distress; but they cannot give anything to their kindred without the curators.\footnote{112}{BJ 2:134 (Whiston translation). The Greek reads: Τῶν μὲν οὖν ἄλλων οὐκ ἔστιν δ’ τι μὴ τῶν ἑπιμελητῶν προσταζόντων ἐνεργοῦσι, δύο δὲ ταῦτα παρ’ αὐτοῖς αὐτεξούσια, ἐπικουρία καὶ ἔλεος: βοηθεῖν τε γάρ τοις ἃξιοις, ὅπως δέωνται, καὶ καθ’ ἑαυτός ἐφιέται καὶ τροφὰς ἀπορρομένους ὀρέγειν. τὰς δὲ εἰς τοὺς συγγενεῖς μεταδόσεις οὐκ ἔξεστι ποιεῖσθαι δίχα τῶν ἑπιτρόπων. (Niese text, 1895)}

Philo also speaks of the Essenes—their common life, common purse, and common purpose. He also highlights the attitude toward which the Essenes ministered to the elderly:

With the common purse there is plenty from which to treat all illnesses. They lavish great respect on the elderly. With them they are very generous and surround them with a thousand attentions.\footnote{113}{Philo, \textit{Quod Omnis Probus Liber Sit}, XII.87}
While we can cautiously assert that the Essene practices were the direct inspiration and model for the practice of charity (especially toward the elderly) among the early Christians in Jerusalem as described in Acts, with greater certainty it can be argued that certain attitudes and practices certainly did exist. One of these was having a commonality of goods from which free distributions were made to those in need. Moreover, although there may be a tendency today to link the Essenes to the Dead Sea Scrolls and thus confine them to an isolated, almost monastic existence on the shores of the Dead Sea, the simple fact that not all Essenes lived at the desert commune. Philo sets their number at a little more than 4000 living in Palestine and Syria114, and Josephus mentions that a number of them lived in various cities.115 In fact, by the time of the first half of the first century C.E., many Essenes had migrated to the newly established “Essene Quarter” of Jerusalem. The Essenes, moreover, seemed to have had a particularly favorable rapport with Herod the Great, and he showed his deference to them (over the Sadducees and Pharisees) by setting aside a portion of the city for their habitation, even creating a special gate in the city wall known thereafter as the Essene Gate.116 Granted, Pliny the Elder was familiar with the Essenes and located them on the shores of the Dead Sea,117 but it we must keep in mind that Pliny never

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114 Philo, Quod Omnis Probus Liber. XII.75
115 Josephus, BJ 8.4 (125)
117 Pliny, NH 5.15; 5.73
actually visited Judea, possibly obtaining his information about it from M. Agrippa.\textsuperscript{118} Archaeological studies, however, indicate that the Essene Gate not only existed but was in all probability burned in the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus in 70 C.E.\textsuperscript{119} The number of Essenes living within Jerusalem itself during this period is difficult to ascertain. Pixner suggest that perhaps 50 Essene cohenim ("priests") inhabited this dedicated section of the city, located in the southwest corner, from approximately 30 B.C.E. to 70 C.E.\textsuperscript{120} Thus, during the formative period of Christianity in Jerusalem, a sizeable group of Essenes living and following their precepts in a well-marked, distinguished part of the city. Philo further notes about the Essenes and their reputation:

> This now is the enviable system of life of these Essenes, so that not only private individuals but even mighty kings, admiring the men, venerate their sect, and increase their dignity and majesty in a still higher degree by their approbation and by the honors which they confer on them.\textsuperscript{121}

Although sectarian and discreet to the point of nearly isolationist, nevertheless the beliefs and practices of the Essenes must have become well known. If this holds true for Philo living as their contemporary in Alexandria, then certainly it also holds true for those living in Jerusalem, in whose midst lived a sizeable contingent of Essenes. In respect to the commonality of goods and the attitude toward helping the needy (and


\textsuperscript{119} Pixner, “The History of the ‘Essene Gate’ Area.” 98.


\textsuperscript{121} Philo, \textit{Hypothetica}, XI.18.
honoring the elderly), there certainly are striking parallels between the descriptions that both Josephus and Philo provide and the earliest Christian community in Jerusalem as recorded in Acts. Brian Capper, though approaching the topic by a different route—with a focus on the communal nature of the early Christian group gathered in Jerusalem—essentially came to this same conclusion:  

There are, in fact a sufficient number of close terminological and administrative parallels between the Acts account and our sources on Essene community of goods to suggest that the property sharing which took place in the earliest Christian community was substantially similar to Essene community of goods, and was probably modelled upon Essene practice.  

Another possible influence on early Christian charity can be inferred from rabbinic writings that give directives for the care of the poor. As mentioned above, Jeremias was a strong proponent of the position that the Jewish charitable practices described in later rabbinic writings were not only established and operative in the first century C.E., but also that they were known and emulated by the early Christians as well. Others have dismissed this assertion as anachronistic.  


123 I was pleased to find this validation after I had fleshed out my argument. One difference between our conclusions, though, is this: Capper is ready to say that the Essenes mostly abandoned the Essene Quarter of Jerusalem and returned to Qumran in the days of Herod’s son Archelaus. (But he does concede that “some kind of Essene presence continued” afterward—p.349.) I follow Pixner who indicates that a substantial number of Essenes remained in Jerusalem up until the time of the destruction of the city by Titus, 70 C.E. Capper’s argument is centered more on the similarity of the Essene term yachad (“together”) with the Greek of Acts, ἐπὶ τὸ κοινός (Ac 2:44) and κοινός at the same place; he links the concepts noting that even as early as John Chrysostom, it was noted that the Greek at this verse “was not natural” (cf. footnote 42), thus supporting the idea that what was being referred to here with “they had everything in common” was a Greek rendering of the Hebrew concept yachad. (Capper, “The Palestinian Cultural Context of Earliest Christian Community of Goods,” 1995)


125 In particular, Seccombe, “Was There Organized Charity in Jerusalem Before the Christians?”
Bird offers an insightful comment: “The charity ethic of early rabbinic Judaism represents an expansion, specification, and idealization of the charity ethic of postexilic Israel.” In other words, Bird implies that even though the written codification and delineation of Jewish charitable practices was not made until the time of the Tannaim, the ethic was firmly in place for some time prior to this (even centuries), and the plausible assumption is that if the ethic was in place, the acts of charity were as well. Some scholars simply do not view it as a legitimate conclusion that in the rabbinic writings there are historical traces of charitable practices that must have been firmly in place before the formal writing of the Mishnah. This view asserts that the Mishnah does not—cannot—describe actual Jewish practices but rather describes an idealized state that the rabbis aimed to create as Judaism moved forward into the post-temple era.

If we are warranted in concluding (and I think we are) that the Mishnah does describe historic practices that were well established, the question then arises: what charitable precedents might have existed concurrently with the rise of Christianity, and perhaps served as models for Christian charity? When we consider the descriptions


127 “The Repeaters” i.e. “teachers.” Their views date from 10 – 220 C.E., and are first recorded in the Mishnah (ca. 200 C.E.).

128 Rosenfeld and Perlmutter, “The Poor as a Stratum of Jewish Society In Roman Palestine 70-250 C.E.” 284: “It is unclear when the public charity institutions mentioned in the Mishna came into being, but by the time the Mishna was redacted they were established and effective.”

129 Peter Brown (Poverty and Leadership, 9) suggested that the Christian care for the poor must have been patterned after practices in early Judaism. Cited by Gregg E. Gardner, “Concerning Poverty: Mishnah Pe’ah, Tosefta Pe’ah and the Re-Imagination of Society in Late Antiquity,” in Envisioning Judaism: Studies In Honor of Peter Schäfer on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday, ed. Ra’anán S. Boustan et al. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 215.
of charity toward widows in Acts, there are essentially only two viable candidates from rabbinic sources, the *quppah* and the *tamhui*. Of the two possibilities, the *tamhui* is the more likely source of influence. Others have made this connection, but the recent work of Greg Gardner explores these two Jewish avenues for charity more thoroughly. There was a marked difference between the two, as indicated by Mishnah *Pe’ah*:

A poor man who wanders from place to place must not be given less than a loaf worth a *dupondium* when four *seahs* cost a *sela*; if he lodge overnight, he must be given the cost of lodging; if he stay over the Sabbath, he must be provided with food for three meals. Anyone who possesses the means for two meals must not accept anything from the *poor soup-kitchen*; means for fourteen meals, he must not accept help from the *public poor-box*. And the *poor-box* is taken round for collection by two persons and is shared by three. The Hebrew words that indicate distinction in the ways the poor are to be dealt with are here translated “poor soup-kitchen” and “public poor-box,” or *tamhui* (תמהי) and *quppah* (קפא) respectively. The *quppah*, as implied in the passage above, indicates stricter requirements for acquisition of aid; people who have a two-week’s supply of food on hand are ineligible for a distribution from the *quppah*. The earliest commentary on the Mishnah, the Tosefta (ca. 300 C.E.), makes a distinction between the two forms of charity. The *quppah* has in mind someone who has come on hard times, but who has

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130 Gardner, “Concerning Poverty: Mishnah Pe’ah, Tosefta Pe’ah and the Re-Imagination of Society in Late Antiquity,” 206. “The *tamhui* is a dish (usually ceramic) used for serving food, while the *quppa* is a wicker basket used to carry food and other items…The *tamhui* is a ‘soup kitchen’ while the *quppa* is a ‘charity fund.’”


lived in a given community for at least thirty days, and so "the communal fund [gives support only] to the poor of that locale." In addition to the requirement that the recipient was to be someone known in the community, the *quppah* also had a different purpose than the *tamhui*, as Gardner explains:

> While the *quppah* certainly supports the poor, it is more accurate to say that it supports the impoverished. The beneficiaries of the *quppah* are not those who were born poor, but rather those who were born wealthy or well off and have fallen into poverty for one reason or another.\(^{134}\)

The goal of the *quppah* was not, in essence, to provide immediate relief. Rather, it was more to come to the aid of a citizen who had suffered a reversal of fortune for one reason or another, and to bring that person back up to the standard of living to which they were accustomed.\(^{135}\) The *quppah*, moreover, was to be closely supervised; two chosen individuals were to collect funds from the community and three were chosen to

\(^{133}\) Jacob Neusner, *The Tosefta*, 1st Edition edition, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002), 71. Gardner (Gardner, "Concerning Poverty: Mishnah Pe’ah, Tosefta Pe’ah and the Re-Imagination of Society in Late Antiquity," ) also notes that the Mishnah and the Tosefta do, in fact, have different conceptions of who is poor. The Mishnah views poverty exclusively in material terms, whereas the Tosefta "accounts for the individual's residential status and civic identity as well." Gardner sees the latter as influenced by Greek and Roman civic culture (213–14).

\(^{134}\) Gardner, *The Origins of Organized Charity in Rabbinic Judaism*, 139.

\(^{135}\) Gardner, *The Origins of Organized Charity in Rabbinic Judaism*, 139. More pointedly, Tosefta *Pe’ah* 4:10: "[If he used to wear] find wool [before he became poor], then supply him with [clothes of] fine wool. [If he used to receive] a coin [as a salary], then give him a coin."
distribute them. Finally, the fund apparently provided more than just food; the Tosefta (4.9-10) speaks also of such items as clothing, money, even dough.

In contrast, Jewish believers established the *tamhui* to provide relief to "a poor man who wanders from place to place" and who apparently has so little means that he is not even able to provide for himself on a daily basis. The charter of the *tamhui* is open-ended as well; this form of aid was available to *anyone*. Blackman's commentary on the passage clarifies that the *tamhui* was intended for the "outside poor (not the town's own poor)," and the later rabbinic authors of the Babylonian Talmud tractate *Baba Bathra* also understood this to be the distinguishing factor. The goal of the *tamhui* was also different from the *quppah*. Whereas the *quppah* was much more concerned about social dignity of the one who had experienced an unexpected reversal of fortune, the goal of the *tamhui* was simply to provide enough food to a poor person to

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136 Gardner, “Concerning Poverty: Mishnah Pe’ah, Tosefta Pe’ah and the Re-Imagination of Society in Late Antiquity,” 210. See also *Baba Bathra* 8b (Babylonian Talmud) where the details of collection, supervision, and distribution for both the *quppa* and *tamhui* are spelled out in much greater detail. Finally, it should also be noted that these organizers of community charity held a fairly prominent position, as is indicated by the Babylonian Talmud, *Pes.* 49b: "Our Rabbis taught: Let a man always sell all he has and marry the daughter of a scholar. If he does not find the daughter of a scholar, let him marry the daughter of [one of] the great men of the generation.2 If he does not find the daughter of [one of] the great men of the generation, let him marry the daughter of the head of synagogues. If he does not find the daughter of the head of synagogues,3 let him marry the daughter of a charity treasurer. If he does not find the daughter of a charity treasurer, let him marry the daughter of an elementary school-teacher, but let him not marry the daughter of an 'am ha-arez, because they are detestable and their wives are vermin, and of their daughters it is said, Cursed be he that lieth with any manner of beast.” (emphasis mine). Translation from [http://juchre.org/talmud/pesachim/pesachim2.htm#49b](http://juchre.org/talmud/pesachim/pesachim2.htm#49b). Accessed Aug 18, 2016.


139 *Baba Bathra* 8b: "The soup kitchen is for all comers, the charity fund for the poor of the town only." (Talmud, *Baba Batra*, 8b)
keep them alive for another day. The Mishnah Pe’ah mentions that the amount of food needed to do so, according to the calculations of the rabbis, was a dupondius worth of food. Gildas Hamel, in his work on poverty and charity in Roman Palestine, discusses the support that husbands are to provide for their wives and concludes that "daily bread" consisted of one loaf of wheat bread (about 550 grams) or double that if the bread was made of barley. This seems to be comparable to what the rabbis had in mind as the amount to be distributed from the tamhui to needy people on a daily basis, with additional provisions provided for the Sabbath. A system of supervising both the collection and distribution also existed for this fund, similar to the quppah.

What is interesting to note in regards to rabbinic writings concerning the actual donations toward these charity funds is this, that the first authors of the Mishnah (the Tannaim) seemed to have a great concern for preserving the dignity of the poor as much as possible. To that end, the original directives concerning giving to both the quppah and the tamhui was that giving was to be done anonymously, with the donor and the recipient never interacting face to face; the system of supervised distribution

140 Gardner, The Origins of Organized Charity in Rabbinic Judaism, 85.

141 Hamel, Poverty and Charity in Roman Palestine First Three Centuries C.E., 40-41.

142 Rabbi Jill Jacobs, There Shall Be No Needy: Pursuing Social Justice through Jewish Law and Tradition, 1 edition (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2010), 85. "Judaism emphasizes that tzedakah is obligatory upon every member of the community, even those who themselves accept tzedakah. A person who has lived in a community for thirty days becomes obligated to contribute to tamchui [sic], a system for distributing food to the hungry; and someone who has lived in a community for three months must donate to the kuppah, a fund that gives financial assistance to the poor. Someone who buys a home, thus declaring an intention to stay in a given community, becomes obligated to contribute to these funds immediately (Talmud, Baba Batra, 8a)."

143 Gardner, The Origins of Organized Charity in Rabbinic Judaism. "Whereas the institutionalization of charity would be used by others in subsequent years for instrumental purposes to gain and maintain social and religious authority, it was designed by the Tannaim as a systematic means for discharging one's obligation to give charity in a way that protects the poor from the indignity of begging." (83)
was established with this goal in mind. Yet the goal was not equality in an egalitarian or socialistic sense; the goal was an equality of dignity that hearkened back to the Exodus from Egypt. This concern for the dignity of the poor who found themselves in need of assistance was unique in the Mediterranean world where "the poor were generally despised and derided." Later on, though, what we observed in its incipient form during the intertestamental period–redemptive almsgiving in the self-interested acquisition of *tzedekah*–became commonplace from the days of the Amoraim forward, thus reshaping the initial vision of the Tannaim in respect to charity towards the poor.

**Jewish Widows in Need: Acts 6**

The issues noted above–poverty, charity, the plausible precedents for charity set by the Jewish community--sets the background for the further consideration of Acts 6 and 8, where we read in the New Testament texts specifically about Jewish widows

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144 Gardner, *The Origins of Organized Charity in Rabbinic Judaism*. The organization of charitable giving that strove for anonymity did have benefits. Gardner explains that the "simplest form of charity, when one individual hands over food, money, or some other asset to a beggar, was the most prevalent form of support for the poor in the ancient world. This straightforward transfer, however, created moral, ethical, and social dilemmas (2)." Among these dilemmas he lists: a) such a face to face exchange wounds the receiver; b) it likewise reinforces social strata; c) it reminds the recipient of charity of his inferiority.

145 Jacobs, *There Shall Be No Needy*. "The wilderness acts as the great economic equalizer. During their forty years of wandering, the Jewish people can own only what they can carry with them...God constantly reminds the reader that "the land is mine..." (18-19).


147 The Amoraim ("the Speakers") were those Jewish scholars who flourished from 200–500 C.E.

148 Gardner, *The Origins of Organized Charity in Rabbinic Judaism*, 39: "Thus the Palestinian Amoraim developed instrumental uses for organized charity that were never intended by the Tannaim–who, by contrast, focused on protecting the dignity of the poor by bringing an end to the shame and humiliation of begging."
being the objects and beneficiaries of charity in the context of the early Christian community at Jerusalem.

Prior to the text of Act 6:1-6, the author of Acts presents the early Christians as a group without much wealth nor pursuing it. Rather, the first community of Christians appears to be committed to detachment from materialism and communal living. Acts 2:44-45 provides a description:

All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.

Commentators often point to James, a prominent leader in the Jerusalem congregation, and his attitude toward material wealth as described in the letter that bears his name:

Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming on you. Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. Look! The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. (Jas. 5:1-5 NIV)

This man, however, was a noted ascetic, his reputation preserved by Josephus and later church historians as a man renowned for his personal piety and strict self-discipline.¹⁴⁹ When we look at the text of Acts and the attitude of the early believers toward wealth, James’ outlook does not appear to be the prevailing sentiment. There is little doubt that the early Christian attitude toward wealth was reflective of their belief in

¹⁴⁹ Josephus Antiq. XX.9; Eusebius, based on Hegisippus HE. XXIII (NPNF2-01); Origen, allegedly based on a non-extant manuscript of Josephus, Cont. Celsum I.xlvii.
an imminent return of Christ to earth. Also helping to shape the early Christian mindset towards wealth and its proper use may have been a passage recorded in Luke's gospel where Jesus states:

I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings. (Lk. 16:9 NIV)

Although this teaching is not usually discussed in connection with the early Christian community in Jerusalem, nonetheless it undoubtedly helped shape the attitude of Jesus’ followers towards earthly possessions. Earlier in the same Gospel Jesus had encouraged his disciples to “sell your possessions and give alms” (12:33), and shortly following this injunction from Luke 16 comes the famous account of the “Rich Man and Poor Lazarus,” with its strong message about the temporary nature and dangers of excessive wealth (Lk 16:19-31). This statement of Lk 16:9 also highlights, indirectly, the transitory nature of wealth; it will eventually run out. Yet the implications of Jesus’ words remain, what will one of my followers do with the wealth they have? How will he use it? One way is to use wealth “to gain friends.” This, however, is not enjoining the use of wealth to create some marketing campaign or employ some politician’s lobby for the gospel. Rather, “he is enjoining the display of merciful generosity by those who have been shown generous mercy by God.”

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When we turn to the description of the early Christian community recorded in Acts 2, it is interesting to note the connection between the teaching of Jesus in Luke 16 and how following it seems to have played out in Jerusalem (emphases mine):

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47 NIV)

This willingness to give to the common fund and distribute freely is emphasized also in other incidents recorded in Acts prior to the section on widows in Chapter 6. For instance, in the next chapter (Ac 3), as Peter and John encounter a beggar at the temple gate, Peter testifies, “Silver or gold I do not have… (3:6), we can infer that Peter was not simply saying, “I don’t have any cash on me right now,” but that this was his lifestyle. Moreover, Acts 4 records the example of Joseph Barnabus, “a Levite from Cyprus” who sold a field and gave all the proceeds to the apostles, presumably to give to those who had need.

152 The Greek here reads: καὶ τὰ κτήματα καὶ τὰς ύπάρξεις ἐπίπτομεν καὶ διεμέριζον αὐτὰ πάσιν καθότι ἂν τις χρείαν εἶχεν. (Acts 2:45 BGT) Note the string of imperfect tenses that describe the ongoing, customary nature of these behaviors. The English of the NIV2011 here (quoted above) is a bit misleading as well. What sounds like a purpose clause (“to give to anyone…”) is, in actuality, a simple description of what was taking place: “and they were giving…” Similar to this: the Vulgate, NASB, KJV and most other translations.

153 εἶπεν δὲ Πέτρος ἀργύριον καὶ χρυσίον οὐχ ὑπάρχει μοι. (Acts 3:6 BGT)—commonly labeled as a Dative of Possession construction.

154 Daniel B. Wallace, Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 150, BibleWorks, v.8. In respect to the Dative of Possession: “Hence, since a state rather than an act is in view, the emphasis naturally falls on the object, and any notion of recent acquisition is absent.”
be distributed in keeping with the community’s ethic. His example reinforces the practice mentioned just prior to this particular act of generosity: “All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had (Ac 4:32).”

Harmony among the community of believers did not continue unabated. The episode in Acts 6 relates problems arising concerning the care of widows in the Jerusalem congregation’s midst. The text reads as follows:

Ἐν δὲ ταῖς ἡμέρας ταύταις πληθυνόντων τῶν μαθητῶν ἐγένετο γογγυσμὸς τῶν Ἐλληνιστῶν πρὸς τοὺς Ἑβραίους, ὅτι παρεθεωροῦντο ἐν τῇ διακονίᾳ τῇ καθημερινῇ αἱ χήραι αὐτῶν. 2 προσκαλεσάμενοι δὲ οἱ δώδεκα τὸ πλήθος τῶν μαθητῶν ἔπαν. οὐκ ἀρεστὸν ἐστὶν ἡμᾶς καταλείψαντας τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ διακονέων τραπέζας. 3 ἐπισκέψασθε δὲ, ἁδελφοί, ἄνδρας ἐξ ὑμῶν μαρτυρομένους ἑπτά, πλήρεις πνεύματος καὶ σοφίας, οὓς καταστήσαμεν ἐπὶ τῆς χρείας ταύτης, 4 ἡμεῖς δὲ τῇ προσευχῇ καὶ τῇ διακονίᾳ τοῦ λόγου προσκυνησάμενοι. 5 καὶ ἤρεσεν ὁ λόγος ἐνώπιον πάντων τοῦ πλήθους καὶ ἐξελέξαντο Στέφανον, ἄνδρα πλήρης πίστεως καὶ πνεύματος ἀγίου, καὶ Φίλιππον καὶ Πρόχορον καὶ Νικάνωρα καὶ Τιμώνα καὶ Παρμενᾶν καὶ Νικόλαιον προσήλυτον Αντιοχέα, 6 οὓς ἔστησαν ἐνώπιον τῶν ἀποστόλων, καὶ προσευξάμενοι ἐπέθηκαν αὐτοῖς τὰς χεῖρας.

(Acts 6:1-6 BGT)

[In those days, when the disciples were multiplying, there happened a grumbling of the Hellenists over against the Hebrews, because their widows were (continually) being neglected in the daily ministry. When the Twelve had summoned the full assembly of the disciples, they said, “It is not agreeable that we serve at tables, having neglected the word of God. But, brothers, select carefully seven approved men from (among) you, (men) full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will put in charge for this need, and we will persist in prayer and the service of the word. And this proposition was pleasing in the eyes of the entire assembly, and they selected Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Proxoros, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenos, and Nicholas of Antioch, a proselyte—(all) who stood before the apostles, and after they had prayed they placed their hands on them.]

The text raises several important questions: What is the timing of this event?

Who are the “Hellenists”? What is the “daily ministry”? What exactly does it mean to “serve at tables”? Where does this assembly meet “daily”? How big a group of widows is this, and is the number of chosen men (all with Greek names) merely a biblically
symbolic number or does the amount of daily work that this ministry entailed necessitate this? What were these Christians providing to widows on a daily basis? In seeking answers to these questions, we are able to gain some measure of insight into what exactly comprised this charitable endeavor in Jerusalem. The later patristic writings help us but little; they are much more concerned about the principles of ordination and the role of new offices in the ecclesiastical structure than in the social and charitable aspects of Acts 6.

To begin, who are these widows and how many widows might we be talking about that were the objects of concern for the fledgling congregation? The text of Acts 6 has a few ambiguities that need discussion. First, the text states, “there was a grumbling of the Hellenists toward the Hebraic” (ἐγένετο γογγυσμὸς τῶν Ἑλληνιστῶν πρὸς τοὺς Ἑβραίους). Thus, it was not the widows who actually did the grumbling, but rather the men of the respective groups who did so on their behalf. The word γογγυσμὸς (“grumbling”) is a strong but infrequently used term; it occurs in the LXX when the Israelites complain about Moses’ leadership (Ex 16:7 ff.), and when the Jews of Jerusalem murmur against certain teachings of Jesus (Jn 7:12). Some understand the Greek term to refer to grumbling that is a “secret murmuring that was not done openly.” Whatever the case, there was some element of discontent in the ranks of the congregation, and the objects of concern were “their widows.” There was daily care

155 Kim-Kwong Chan, “The Organization of the Caritative Ministry in the Early Church,” East Asia Journal of Theology 2, no. 1 (1984): 107. “The ‘Seven’ have never been clearly identified; the ‘Seven’ seemed to be more a collective title than an official title.”

being provided to widows, but some of these were being overlooked either purposefully or unintentionally. Given the atmosphere of care and concern of the Christians consistently depicted in Acts up to this point, the latter seems more likely.

The mention of the two separate groups comes upon the reader unexpectedly, and we wonder what these labels “Hellenists” and “Hebraic” meant at that time.¹⁵⁷ Most commentators take the distinction to be linguistic. Bruce sees the distinction a “largely social. In origin, however, it was cultural, and mainly linguistic.”¹⁵⁸ Some are of the opinion that the two groups actually represent Jews and Gentiles, that is, the distinction between Christians and non-Christian.¹⁵⁹ In Keener’s long discourse covering the most recent scholarship on the text,¹⁶⁰ he notes several things. For one, he agrees with the consensus that the distinction here points primarily to a linguistic difference; “the now-dominant view that ‘Hebrews’ may have known some Greek in addition to Aramaic whereas ‘Hellenists’ spoke only or mainly Greek.”¹⁶¹ In fact, the number of people living in Jerusalem proper who spoke Greek as their first language may have been as high as 10-20%, providing a rough estimate of some 10,000 Greek speakers dwelling in the

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¹⁶¹ Keener, Acts, 1255. Keener then provides ample proof of the interplay of Greek and Aramaic in Judea, noting among that, “even rabbinic literature includes some fifteen hundred Greek loanwords.” (1256)
city.\textsuperscript{162} We know from later in this same chapter of Acts that Stephan, one of the seven deacons chosen to minister to the widows, debated with fellow Jews in the “Synagogue of the Freedmen”, defined by the author as “Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia.” (Acts 6:9 NIV) Edersheim notes that the rabbis placed the number of synagogues in Jerusalem just prior to the destruction of the city by Titus (70 C.E.) at 480, but conceded that this may simply be a symbolic number; if taken literally it would be “a gross exaggeration.”\textsuperscript{163} Yet it is reasonable to conclude that in the city of Jerusalem there must have been a large number of synagogues of various types, such as the one mentioned here in Acts. To have synagogues that spoke only Hebrew, or read Hebrew and translated into Aramaic, or simply read the Septuagint and conducted the entire service in Greek is a realistic scenario.

Even though much of the scholarly opinion points to the distinction between the “Hebraic” and “Hellenistic” as merely a linguistic preference or difference, the term may imply much more. For example, just as Herodotus coined the term “Medizing” (μηδισμός)\textsuperscript{164} in reference to Greeks who sympathized with the Persians and allied themselves with them during Xerxes’ incursion of 480 B.C.E., so also the term here “Hellenic” (Ἑλληνιστής) may speak more to “a cultural as linguistic divide,” and could possibly indicate something as strong as active support for Greek culture or at least some

\textsuperscript{162} Keener, 	extit{Acts}, 1256. He states, “In fact, the percentage of Greek inscriptions in Jerusalem may be as high as 40 percent.”

\textsuperscript{163} Edersheim, 	extit{Sketches of Jewish Social Life}, 232.

\textsuperscript{164} Herod. 	extit{Hist.} 6.109
degree of influence from Greek lifestyle. In fact, it is precisely in this latter sense that 2 Maccabees employs the term. In this regard, it was somewhat of a surprising discovery at Sepphoris in 1993 when archaeologists uncovered the well-preserved mosaics embedded in the synagogue floor, depicted traditional scene from the Old Testament, but also having a large depiction of the zodiac in the center of the floor, with Helios in his golden chariot arising from center of the circle. Besides the obvious tension over the proper provisions for widows, are there cultural tensions also at play in the text of Acts 6? Perhaps.

Yet another possibility exists, namely, that the “Hellenistic” Jews are in fact Diaspora Jews, who “were certainly Hellenized.” Many Jews dispersed throughout the Mediterranean world returned yearly to Jerusalem, in keeping with the precepts of the Mosaic law code that they do so for major festivals. This may have been the immediate goal, and so the group described as “Hellenists” in Acts may have included temporary residents of Jerusalem; it would probably make sense to remain in Jerusalem

165 Keener, Acts, 1258. Keener mentions “Medizing” here, but also offers some definitions of “Hellenist.” The author also notes (ibid.) that “the term cannot be a question of cultural loyalties here, for the fiercest defenders of traditional Judean institutions in the narrative are also Hellenists (Acts 6:9-11; 9:29).”


167 Granted, this synagogue has been dated to the early sixth century C.E., and fits more into the Byzantine Period. Yet a similar motif exists in the excavated synagogue of Tiberius as well, and scholars are still debating the significance of these pagan symbols adorning the main worship space. For a good overview and summary of various views, see Stuart S. Miller, “Epigraphical Rabbis, Helios, and Psalm 19: Were the Synagogues of Archaeology and the Synagogues of the Sages One and the Same?,” The Jewish Quarterly Review 94, no. 1 (2004): 27–76.


169 Ex 23:17.
for the fifty days from Passover to Pentecost, especially if the travelers came from quite a distance. But it could also be that the Diaspora Jews were Jews who had returned—or even retired—to Jerusalem to live out their days, but who after years abroad could not but help have been influenced by other cultures, particularly Greek.⁷⁷ Thus, their desire to return to the historic heartland of Judaism was noble, but the cultural remnants with which they returned perhaps marked them in some way as a Jew of a different category. More specifically, if we keep in view our present context dealing with widows in Jerusalem, some have suggested that these women were those who accompanied their husbands back to Jerusalem to die and be buried in the Holy City, but with the passing of their husbands, they lacked the resources to return to their previous home.⁷⁸ We can with certainty eliminate the possibility that “Hellenic” refers to Gentile proselytes, such as the Greeks who came to Passover in Jerusalem and desired to meet Jesus (Jn 12:20) or the eunuch from Ethiopia mentioned in Acts 8. These are usually referred to in Acts by the epithet “God fearers,” such as Cornelius the centurion in Caesarea (Ac 10:2).

Dunn notes that whatever the exact meaning and implications of the terms, there is one inescapable conclusion:

The terms “Hellenists” and “Hebrews” indicate a degree of suspicion and possibly even hostility between the two groups thus denoted. The Hellenists more than likely looked down on the Hebrews as parochial and traditionalist. Equally, the Hebrews probably regarded the Hellenists as those who were diluting and compromising key traditions of their shared faith and praxis as Jews.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem*. 249.


⁷⁹ Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem*, 251.
If this is the situation, the ideological differences between the *men* was causing the most vulnerable group of *women* to be affected. The complaint from the Hellenists was not against the leadership of the Jerusalem church,\(^{173}\) but directed at the Hebraic men who, apparently, had been assisting with the distribution mechanism for the congregation’s charity. The verb describing the problem is in the imperfect tense—*paratheorounto* (παραθεωροῦντο)—indicating that this was not a singular oversight but an ongoing problem. A one-time mistake calls for patience and understanding in a congregation, but the situation here is beyond that. Thus, the Hellenistic believers asserted themselves in an effort to call this deficiency in the charity program to the attention of the leadership, who apparently was ignorant of the state of affairs.

The call from the Hellenists was for equity in the “daily distribution” (ἐν τῇ διακονίᾳ τῇ καθημερινῇ). The phrase harbors some ambiguity. The noun rendered “distribution” could also be rendered “service.” Even if some commentators chose to take it that way, either option does not eliminate the vagueness of the phrase. What is meant by “distribution”? Or what is meant by “daily service?” Some have put forward the option that what the author here is speaking of, when he employs the term *diakonia*, is a worship setting involving the distribution of the Lord’s Supper. Reid, in her feminist reading of the text, sees the situation as one where the Hellenistic widows are being overlooked “in the assignment of ministries,”\(^ {174}\) perhaps even the “distribution” of the

\(^{172}\) Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem*, 251.

Lord’s Supper itself. Others see a similar worship context, but one in which the widows are being skipped in the distribution of the sacred meal.\footnote{David W. Pao, “Waiters or Preachers: Acts 6:1-7 and the Lukan Table Fellowship Motif,” \textit{Journal of Biblical Literature} 130, no. 1 (2011): 137. “Therefore, rather than the imagery of the ‘soup kitchen,’ τῇ διακονίᾳ τῇ καθημερινῇ is best understood to refer to ‘the common sacred meal,’ as already noted in 2:46. The complaint of the Hellenists is therefore that their widows ‘were not allowed to participate in the daily meal.’ As to the nature of the meal from which the widows are excluded, some have suggested that this is a reference to the eucharistic meal. This reading is built on the reference to the Eucharist as “the Lord’s table” (τραπέζης κυρίου) in 1 Cor 10:21, but in Luke-Acts the “table,” especially in the plural, does not acquire this specific sense.”} However, these interpretations seem out of place in the immediate context. For one, such an interpretation does not take into account the nuances of the word "ministry." While it is true that later New Testament usage of the noun διακονία frequently carries with it the meaning of “ministry” in the sense of representative, public ministry,\footnote{That is, an ordained position of leadership in the church. Compare Ac 12:25; 20:24; 21:19; Ro 11:13; 2 Co 3:7-9; 4:1; 1 Ti 1:12, et.al.} at this point in Acts the term has only appeared twice, both uses occurring in Chapter 1 and both in reference to the remaining apostles choosing a replacement for Judas.\footnote{Ac 1:17, 25} Thus it seems most natural to understand the noun διακονία as referring to some kind of official work done by the leadership of the congregation.\footnote{The other times Luke employs the term in Acts also indicate a public function exercised by the leadership, done on behalf of the body of believers, usually at God’s own directive: Ac 11:25; 12:25; 20:24; 21:19. Even here in the context of Acts 6, the apostles refer to their own work as “the ministry of the word” (τῇ διακονίᾳ τοῦ λόγου, 6:4).} Even though earlier chapters of Acts make it clear that the early Christians did share many things in common, striving towards some level of equality among the membership,\footnote{“nothing in the text indicates that these widows were poor, and thus in need of goods distributed by the community” is surprising (83).} I believe it to be an
unwarranted conclusion to assume that such an egalitarian approach to material possessions automatically transferred to an egalitarian approach to spiritual duties in the congregation. The fact that the apostles, in Acts 6, speak of their own work as “the ministry of the word” indicates that even by the time of these early chapter of Acts, there exists in basic form a clear, if rudimentary, division of spiritual work and authority.

Granted, we do not know precisely how the Jerusalem Christians conducted their worship service or by what method they distributed the Lord’s Supper. The argument put forward that the widows were being excluded from some established rotation for “service” assumes a level of ecclesial organization that is hard to envision at this point in the life of the Christian movement. The other suggestion, that the Hellenistic widows of Acts 6 were being skipped for their turn to distribute communion might be more plausible, but it hinges entirely on the argument that “daily distribution” must be the equivalent to the type of daily gathering described in Acts 2, and that the phrase “to break bread” is a standard phrase consistently employed in reference to the celebration of the Lord’s sacred meal. This is a debatable assumption. While there may be places that it does refer to the Lord's Supper, it certainly cannot mean that in a situation such as is described in Acts 27, where Paul is sailing to Rome in a ship beleaguered by a fourteen-day storm. There Paul encourages all on board to eat—a largely unbelieving

\[\text{\textsuperscript{179}}\] As it was later Paul’s goal, expressed in 2 Co 8:14: At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. The goal is equality…”

\[\text{\textsuperscript{180}}\] “All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.” (Acts 2:44-47 NIV)
group with a few Christians mixed in. In this context, “After [Paul] said this, he took some bread and gave thanks to God in front of them all. Then he broke it and began to eat. (Acts 27:35).” Moreover, given the fact that *diakonia* also is used in the New Testament to indicate services voluntarily rendered to fellow believers (especially in respect to *offerings* given for the relief of fellow Christians), it is just as warranted to argue that the situation being described in Acts 6 is one where the Hellenistic widows’ *offerings* are being “overlooked” (i.e. rejected). However, all these arguments aside, the reference in Ac 6:4 to “tables” (ἐπὶ τῆς τραπέζης) forces us to take the passage in the most natural and simple sense, that the text is describing a situation where there is some “serving at tables”, that is, a type of service that involves a meal. Some have argued that the “distribution” involved monetary disbursements instead of victuals, but the burden of proof lies on those who attempt to read that understanding into the text.

In this context, we also should note that serving at tables was not something beneath the rank of the apostles, the majority of whom sat in the Upper Room with their

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181 Ac 11:29: τῶν δὲ μαθητῶν, καθὼς εὐπορεῖτό τις, ἄρισταν ἐκαστος αὐτῶν εἰς διακονίαν πέμψα τοῖς κατοικοῦσιν ἐν τῇ Ἰουδαίᾳ ἀδελφοῖς: ["The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea." (NIV)]; 2 Co 8:4 (in the context of gathering a mission offering for Jerusalem’s relief) μετὰ πολλῆς παρακλήσεως δέομεν ημῶν τὴν χάριν καὶ τὴν κοινωνίαν τῆς διακονίας τῆς εἰς τοὺς ἁγίους. ["they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord’s people." (NIV)]

182 Ac 6:2 διακονεῖν τραπέζαις (diakonein trapedzais)–“to serve at tables.” Again, some have tried to set this phrase in the context of a worship service, largely on the basis of the word “table.” For example, Pao: “Returning to the connection between Acts 6:1-7 and the Lukan account of the Last Supper (Luke 22:14–38), one significant parallel also needs to be noted. In the Last Supper narrative, not only does Jesus, who is sharing a meal with his disciples “on the table” (ἐπὶ τῆς τραπέζης, 22:21), identify himself as “the one who serves” (ὁ διακονῶν, 22:27); he also calls the disciples to be “like the one who serves” (ὡς ὁ διακονῶν, 22:26) as he himself is.” (Pao, “Waiters or Preachers.” 141.) While it is also true that Paul in 1 Co 10:20 speaks of the Eucharistic meal as “the Lord’s table” (τραπέζης κυρίου), we should note the presence of the plural form (“tables”) in Ac 6:2, which leads us away from seeing a commonality of meaning. The meaning of Acts 6 is literal, whereas the reference in 1 Co 10 is metaphorical.
master on Maundy Thursday and watched him wash their feet.\textsuperscript{183} It was the very nature of the office of apostle to be a servant, following the pattern set by Jesus himself.\textsuperscript{184} Rather, in Acts 6 there is an administration problem that must be rectified, and the steps taken by the apostles were an expression of concern to meet the needs of society’s most vulnerable—the widows—and not to assert the importance and dignity of their office over against other forms of service done by Christians.

Next, what did the leaders envision giving these widows on a daily basis? In reality, we cannot answer this question with great precision. However, it is possible to make some educated speculations in this regard, drawing guidance and inference from studies on the common diet of Judea in the first century, as well as from the descriptions provided in the aforementioned precepts of the Jewish \textit{tamhui}, the daily “soup kitchen” approach to charity discussed in the Mishnah. The assumption I make here is that if there is a “daily distribution” in Acts 6, is tantamount to “daily bread,” or what was commonly considered in those days to be a basic daily meal. Of what might that have consisted? Hamel’s seminal work on poverty in Roman Palestine provides some insights into the general diets of the various strata of society. He notes that “only a few elements were of decisive importance in everyone’s real diet: cereals, legumes, olives, water, and salt.”\textsuperscript{185} Eating meat was much rarer, and people generally avoided

\textsuperscript{183} John 13:1-17

\textsuperscript{184} Luke 22:27, “For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.” (NIV)

\textsuperscript{185} Hamel, \textit{Poverty and Charity in Roman Palestine First Three Centuries C.E.}, 9. The entire first chapter, entitled “Daily Bread” encompasses the gamut of the Palestinian diet.
eating vegetables. The possibility does exist that the system in place in Acts very literally was a “soup kitchen”; porridges and gruels were quite common, according to later sources from the Talmud. Yet bread was the most important type of food, and thus considered the most basic staple in the Palestinian diet. As noted earlier, Mishnah Pe’ah, in its directives for daily gifts to the poor, expresses such charity in terms of bread, the most basic sustenance for those in need:

A poor man who wanders from place to place must not be given less than a loaf worth a dupondium when four seahs cost a selä; (Pe’ah 8.7)

The ideal bread in the Palestinian world was wheat bread in that it was the tastiest and superior to all other grains for bread production. However, Sperber, in his lengthy study on the cost of living in Roman Palestine, concludes that the wheat harvested in Palestine was inferior to that of Egypt, and further reckons that the price of wheat was roughly half of what it was in Palestine. Cost factors, then, prohibited the common resident of Jerusalem from enjoying a regular diet of bread made from wheat

\[\text{186} \quad \text{Hamel, Poverty and Charity in Roman Palestine First Three Centuries C.E., 9.}\]

\[\text{187} \quad \text{Hamel, Poverty and Charity in Roman Palestine First Three Centuries C.E., 9.}\]

\[\text{188} \quad \text{Hamel, Poverty and Charity in Roman Palestine First Three Centuries C.E., 12.}\]

\[\text{189} \quad \text{Daniel Sperber, “Costs of Living in Roman Palestine II,” Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient 9, no. 3 (December 1966): 190. Sperber also note (ibid.) that in Rome the price of Egyptian wheat was twice as high as in Palestine, i.e. four times as high as in Egypt. Moreover, the close proximity of Egypt to Palestine allowed Palestinian importers to bring wheat into Palestine quite reasonably, and then undercut the native Jewish wheat market by quite a bit. Thus, as early as the 2nd century B.C.E., one of the Jewish rabbis, Joshua ben Perachia, apparently tried to have all Alexandrian wheat declared impure in an effort to force Jews to buy locally grown wheat. “Alexandrian traders could still undercut the Palestinian prices by 30% and be left with a clear profit of almost 30%” (191-92). All these factors, though, tended to put access to wheat on a regular (daily) basis out of reach for the common Jewish family.} \]
flour. It is much more likely that the common—and certainly the poor—resident of Jerusalem ate more bread made from barley than from wheat, inferior though it was.\(^{190}\)

The scene in Acts 6 in all likelihood depicts poor people (widows) receiving a most simple, basic meal from the hands of Jewish Christians who, for the most part, were also people of limited means.\(^{191}\) The directions for the tamhui (cited above) indicate that the amount of bread (assumedly for a man; widows may have eaten less) that comprised “daily bread” was “a loaf worth a dupondium.” Determining monetary equivalents across cultures and centuries is a challenge, but if Sperber’s calculations are accurate, then in the I-II centuries C.E. one loaf of bread cost one pundion (1/12 denarius).\(^{192}\) The average loaf was about 1/18 seah (6 kabs), with 1 seah being the equivalent to 1 denarius, and 1 sola (= 4 seahs) also equivalent to one denarius.\(^{193}\)

Pe‘ah 8.7, then, indicates the amount of bread that is to be provided under the stated

\(^{190}\) Hamel explains that barley had a much lower gluten content than wheat, and thus did not bond into a loaf as well. Further, eating this “black bread” denoted low social status. (Hamel, “Poverty and Charity,” 317.) Barley also cost half as much as wheat, according to Sperber (Daniel Sperber, “Costs of Living in Roman Palestine I,” Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient 8, no. 3 (December 1965), 257.

\(^{191}\) “Concerning the reality of food consumption in general in Roman Palestine, one may adopt what R. J. Forbes says of classical antiquity: ‘roughly speaking, classical diet consisted mainly of bread and porridge made from wheat or barley supplemented by vegetables, fish and spices and not much else. One should add legumes and olive oil as major elements, whereas the ‘not much else’ should include the main fruits when in season. Curiously enough, although bread clearly was the essential food, especially barley bread, it is not always mentioned in texts speaking of a desirable meal. The same was true of legumes. The reason for these omissions ust simply be that bread was taken for granted. People’s desires normally did not concern bread itself but its whiteness, sweetness, puffiness, and so on.” (Hamel, Poverty and Charity in Roman Palestine First Three Centuries C.E., 22-23.)


market conditions. Blackmon simplifies by stating, “in practice the quantity of the loaf works out to about a third of a kab.”¹⁹⁴ This is consistent with Sperber’s calculations. Mishnah Pe’ah, in its directives for Jewish charity, considers this to be the minimum amount for providing “daily bread”: one loaf = 1 dupondium = 2 pondion = 2 x 1/12 d. = 1/6 d. for 2 loaves of 1/18 seah each, with each loaf being between 10–14 oz.¹⁹⁵ In other words, Mishnah Pe’ah considers “daily bread” for charity purposes to be (presumably for a man) a minimum of two loaves of wheat bread of approximately 10-14 oz, and costing roughly 1/6 of a denarius, at a time when the common rate for a vineyard worker was 1 denarius / day.¹⁹⁶ Then, if we extrapolate this out and take into account (as noted above) that the cost of barley was roughly half of wheat in 1st cent. Roman Palestine, then the cost for providing a comparable meal with two loaves of barley bread at the center drops to 1/12 denarius.¹⁹⁷ Again, it needs to be emphasized that these calculations are approximate and based entirely on relative price calculations across a number of monetary systems operating in Palestine in the first century world. That said, though, our purpose is to discover what plausibly could have been considered to be “daily bread,” adhering to the guidelines for Jewish charitable practices

¹⁹⁴ Blackman, Mishnayoth, 130.


¹⁹⁶ Sperber, “Costs of Living in Roman Palestine I,” 261. Sperber’s table of wages is on 251-52.

¹⁹⁷ It is interesting to think how this might compare with a per diem for someone earning minimum wage. Given an 8 hr. work day at minimum wage of $9.25/hr., a minimum wage worker in the US earns $74 per day. So 1 denarius would be equivalent to $74. If 1/6 goes for “daily bread”, that would mean $12/day for food. If we use the barley figure (1/12 d.), then a minimum wage worker in the US would spend $6 on food per day.
that may have been in place during the same time frame (though not formally codified until later). This calculation allows us to speculate what the “daily distribution” of food in Jerusalem may actually have consisted of.¹⁹⁸

Finally, is it possible to envision what the magnitude of this early Christian charitable undertaking entailed? How many widows might we be talking about? Further, given the parameters discussed above regarding the provisions and possible cost, what sort of expense was the early Christian community in Jerusalem incurring on a daily basis as they conducted this charity program? Again, a word of caution is in place that demographic studies of the period come to widely varying conclusions concerning such things as numbers in the general population, the ratio of adults to children, the ratio of men to women, and the ratio of Christians to non-Christians in the city of Jerusalem at the time of Acts 6. To arrive at a precise number is an impossibility. For instance, we cannot even know if the Jerusalem congregation only took care of its own widows, or whether the “Hellenistic” and “Hebraic” widows mentioned in the text also included women who viewed themselves entirely as. This scenario is quite realistic, since the early Christians in Jerusalem did not initially view themselves as members of a separate religion.¹⁹⁹ Nor can we even assume that absolutely everyone living in Jerusalem at the

¹⁹⁸ One Bible scholar has used Walter Scheidel and Elijah Meek’s interactive geospatial network of the Roman world (orbis.stanford.edu) to calculate the cost of Paul’s missionary trips recorded in Acts (“Calculating the Time and Cost of Paul’s Missionary Journeys, at: https://www.openbible.info/blog/2012/07/calculating-the-time-and-cost-of-pauls-missionary-journeys/”). This is a very interesting exercise that essentially takes Sperber’s work into the digital age, via Scheidel and Meeks. The drawback is that it only calculates the basic cost of travel, without taking into consideration anything such as a per diem for food.

¹⁹⁹ It is interesting, for instance, how Paul as he faces trial in the Sanhedrin following his third missionary trip, states, “I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee” (Ac 23:6). It would seem on that basis that Paul did not consider himself as a member of a separate rival religion, but merely as part of a movement within Judaism that saw Christianity as the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies.
time of Acts is either a Jew or a Gentile convert to Judaism. Thus, many variables prevent derivation of a highly accurate number.\textsuperscript{200}

Yet it is possible, I argue, to derive a realistic range for the number of widows for which the Jerusalem congregation may have cared for on a daily basis. Rodney Stark’s \textit{The Rise of Christianity} is the classic study involving the demographics of Jerusalem,\textsuperscript{201} although Jeremias before him also suggested some numbers.\textsuperscript{202} Keith Hopkins also has studied various aspects and implications of demography involving early Christianity (largely triggered by Stark’s work and in response to it), though he does so with an oft-repeated assertion that his study is purely “speculative and exploratory.”\textsuperscript{203}

It lies beyond the scope of this thesis to go into all the aspects of the demography of early Christianity. Our goal is simply to try to determine a reasonable number of inhabitants of Jerusalem between 30–40 C.E., and see if we can derive a

Likewise, Paul states in just the previous verse that he lived “according to the strictest sect (\(\alpha\iota\rho\epsilon\sigma\iota\zeta\)) of our religion” i.e. the Pharisees. Elsewhere the Christian movement is referred to by the same term--\(\alpha\iota\rho\epsilon\sigma\iota\zeta\) (\textit{haeresis})--indicating that even the authorities were inclined to view Christianity as the equivalent of another religious party, such as the Pharisees, Saduccees, Herodians, Essenes, etc. (cf. Ac 24:5; 26:5; 28:22).

\textsuperscript{200} Bruce W. Frier, “More Is Worse: Some Observations on the Population of the Roman Empire,” in \textit{Debating Roman Demography}, ed. Walter Scheidel (Leiden Netherlands ; Boston: Brill Academic Pub, 2000), 139. What he says about the Roman world in general also applies to Palestine: “The reason is that surviving evidence on population seems to me exceedingly fragile both in its quantity and quality, and accordingly I have little confidence in our ability to arrive at more than vague (if arguably "educated") guesses as to gross population levels and change.”

\textsuperscript{201} Stark, \textit{The Rise of Christianity}. Stark’s subsequent study, \textit{Cities of God} (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 2006), excludes Jerusalem in that it begins its study following the destruction of the city by Titus in 70 C.E.

\textsuperscript{202} Discussed below.

plausible number of widows that may have lived in the city, and what percentage of them might have been under the sort of care of the Jerusalem congregation described in Acts 6.

To begin, what is a believable number for the population of Jerusalem during the period of the early chapters of Acts? There are considerable challenges to even attempting to arrive at a general number, though several attempts have been made over the past few decades to do so, all having somewhat different approaches to the problem.\footnote{For an overview of early attempts, see I. Finkelstein, “A Few Notes of Demographic Data from Recent Generations and Ethnoarchaeology,” Palestine Exploration Quarterly 122 (1990) 47-52. Also, the list provided by Fouts (3) includes: tax lists; refugee lists; available roof space; analogy with present populations; and the maximum agricultural production for a given reason. (David M. Fouts, “The Demographics of Ancient Israel,” Biblical Research Bulletin: The Academic Journal of Trinity Southwest University VII, no. 2 (2007): 1–11.}

Jeremias states that in the days of Jesus, Jerusalem’s population was roughly 25,000-30,000.\footnote{Jeremias, Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus, 1969, 84. There are other numbers that both Josephus and Tacitus relate about the population of Jerusalem, but these are related to the number of pilgrims who journeyed to the city for Passover and (in Tacitus) the number of people suddenly trapped inside the city as the siege of Titus began (at Passover time). Jeremias relates the numbers on p. 78. The one number – 2,700,000 is extrapolated from the number of lambs slain at Passover (1 lamb for every 10 Jews). The other number—1,200,000–is a compilation of the numbers recorded by Josephus in BJ 6-7. Again, though, this included the large number of visitors to Jerusalem. Cf. also Edersheim, The Temple: Its Ministry and Services, 168.} In 1974, Wilkinson, basing his number on a detailed analysis of the city’s water supply, thought the figure was more around 76,000.\footnote{John Wilkinson, “Ancient Jerusalem: Its Water Supply and Population,” Palestine Exploration Quarterly 106, no. 1 (January 1, 1974): 33–51.} In 1978, Broshi took issue with Wilkinson’s methodology and argued that the number was considerably higher, and derived a figure of roughly 100,000 by 66 C.E.\footnote{John Wilkinson, “Ancient Jerusalem: Its Water Supply and Population,” Palestine Exploration Quarterly 106, no. 1 (January 1, 1974): 33–51.}
based upon calculating a “density coefficient,” an approach that has proven popular with other demographers.\textsuperscript{208} Shanks sets the number in 44 C.E. at 80,000–90,000, following a considerable rise in population during the time of Herod the Great.\textsuperscript{209} Most recently Geva has taken a “minimalist” view which is, surprisingly, quite close to Jeremias’ original estimate; he places the population number at 20,000, based largely placing a premium on archaeological evidence over textual.\textsuperscript{210} As is readily seen, there is no scholarly consensus on this issue.

For the purposes of illustration (and simplicity), I will set the population of Jerusalem at 50,000 in the period of the early chapters of Acts, and consider some implications for the charitable work described there. Naturally, we cannot assume that every single one of the 50,000 is Jewish, but it is reasonable to assume that the vast majority is. Next, then, we need to ask what percentage of the 50,000 is associated with apostolic congregation in Jerusalem. Here, again, scholars differ in their opinions. Stark’s study sets the number at no more than 1000 Christians \textit{empire wide} in 40 C.E.\textsuperscript{211} He (along with Conzelmann, Grant, and others) does not take seriously the

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item Magen Broshi, “Estimating the Population of Ancient Jerusalem,” \textit{The Biblical Archaeology Review} 4, no. 2 (June 1, 1978), 10. This article is the English distillation of “La population de l’ancienne Jérusalem” \textit{Revue Biblique} 82.1 (Jan 1, 1975), 5. Also, see useful overview of various methods at Fouts, “The Demographics of Ancient Israel.”
\item Fouts, “The Demographics of Ancient Israel,” 3.
\item Hillel Geva, “Jerusalem’s Population in Antiquity: A Minimalist View,” \textit{Tel Aviv} 41, no. 2 (October 1, 2014): 131–60. In actuality, Jeremias and Geva agree; Jeremias had broken down the profile of Jerusalem to 20,000 within the city proper, with another 5000–10,000 living in close proximity with 30,000 for greater Jerusalem being the upper limit (Jeremias, \textit{Jerusalem}, 84).
\item Though by this point, the majority of those must be located in Jerusalem as well.
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numbers in Acts,\textsuperscript{212} regarding them as a rhetorical flourish to suit the author’s theme of recording the growth of the kingdom of God.\textsuperscript{213} Keith Hopkins took issue with Stark’s conclusions, and ran through a number of scenarios showing the impact of suggestions such low numbers; in particular, concerning the implausibly low number of literate Christians there must have been according to Stark’s calculations.\textsuperscript{214} McKechnie, however, makes a persuasive argument for accepting the numbers recorded in Acts at face value, bringing a reference to Suetonius’s description of the “Chrestus” riots (\textit{Claudius} 25.4) into the discussion. His conclusion: “The impact of the Chrestus riots implies that when Christianity first started in Judea, it probably attracted support more on the 10,000-adherent scale than the 1000-adherent scale.”\textsuperscript{215}

Again, then, suppose we take a middling position for Christians in the city of Jerusalem around 40 C.E., say 5,000.\textsuperscript{216} This would take into account the reality of the number of converts at Pentecost (Ac 2:41), and take into account the references from Acts 2:47 and 5:14 (those references prior to Acts 6) and allow for some initial growth. If

\textsuperscript{212} Stark, \textit{The Rise of Christianity}, 5.

\textsuperscript{213} Ac 2:41, 47; 4:4; 5:14; 16:5; 19:20.

\textsuperscript{214} Hopkins, “Christian Number and Its Implications,” 208-209.

\textsuperscript{215} McKechnie, \textit{The First Christian Centuries}. His analysis of both Stark and Hopkins, p. 55-58. Also, “Christianity was more popular in its earliest decades than academic studies in recent times have wanted to allow. The balance of evidence for its first-century rate of growth tends to point in the same direction as Acts, the biblical text most often suspected of exaggerating the size and importance of the apostles’ following.” (64)

\textsuperscript{216} Hopkins, who sees the numbers in Acts as inflated, calculates that only 1 in 30 Jews (3.3\%) converted to Christianity before 175 C.E. In our theoretical scenario, that would mean that only 1650 people were Jewish Christians at this time. (Hopkins, “Christian Number and Its Implications,” 216)
we follow Hopkins’ lead, we can assume that of these 5000, roughly 30% are women. We follow Hopkins’ lead, we can assume that of these 5000, roughly 30% are women. This means that, in our conjectural scenario, 1500 of these Christians in Jerusalem are women. What percentage of these, in turn might be widows? One third? One-half?

Satlow, in his study on Jewish marriage practices in Late Antiquity, offers this observation, which may be helpful:

Assuming a male life expectancy at birth of thirty years, nearly 20 percent of men who reached the age of thirty would not live to see their fortieth birthday. Similarly, of women who lived to the age of fifteen, we expect that about 15 percent will die before their twenty-fifth birthday. Put more starkly, more than 40 percent of women alive at age twenty would die by their forty-fifth birthday, with men doing only slightly better. Assuming some, but not complete, overlap, anyone who married around the age of twenty would have expected to have been widowed within the next twenty-five years.

If we utilize these numbers, we can parse out our theoretical scenario as follows:

- 1500 women in Jerusalem are Christian around 40 C.E.
- Of these, 15% die before their 25th birthday, leaving 1275 women who, in all likelihood, were not widows yet.
- 40% of these remaining women would die by their 45th birthday, leaving 510 women who are 45 yrs and older.
- Those living past 45 could expect to be a widow.
- Life expectancy for women in first century Judea was ????

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217 Hopkins, “Christian Number and Its Implications,” 204. He writes, “According to modern historical demographers, ancient populations were usually made eup, roughly speaking, of 30% males, 30% females, and 40% children of both sexes under age seventeen. Mortality was particularly high among infants and children under five, but by modern standards continued to be very high in adult populations. For example, rougly speaking, half of those surviving to the age of fifteen, died by the age of fifty. Sickness and death, and presumably the fear of death, were pervasive. Hence, crudely speaking, the significance and appeal of immortality.

“These basic figures are fundamental for understanding the structure and growth of early Christian communities and house cult-groups. So, for example, if by 100 [C.E.], there were one hundred Christian communities, then the average community consisted of seventy people (7000/100 = 70) with perhaps twenty adult males, twenty adult females (or twenty families), and thirty children.”

218 For the illustration, I assume that the charitable efforts of Acts 6 primarily targeted widows only associated with the Jerusalem congregation, and not the general populace of Jerusalem.

I tried to follow Hopkins’ model, as I stated above, in an effort to try to produce some kind of picture of how many widows could possibly have been involved in the Acts 6 scenario in Jerusalem. However, as one can readily see, the information available for determining such a figure is sorely lacking. Ze’ev simply says:

It is impossible to determine how many people live in the Land of Israel during the Mishnah and Talmud periods. We do not know how many people lived there before then and we also do not know the ‘population threshold’ of the Land of Israel or even how it can be determined. There have been a number of estimates regarding population numbers in the Land of Israel, but none is based on data which has been sufficiently examined.220

Several important pieces of information are missing and would need to be in place to draw any kind of remotely accurate picture. For instance, the above numbers do not—cannot—take into account the remarriage rate, which was higher for Jewish women as opposed to her Gentile counterpart in the Greco-Roman world, since remarriage was encouraged both by the Old Testament as well as by the rabbis. Or this: was the life expectancy rate lower for those urban dwellers as opposed to country or small village dwellers? The research of Bagnall and Frier on census records from Roman Egypt from the mid first century onward seems to indicate so. They concluded that in a typical Egyptian town (as opposed to a village) one could only expect to see 14 women over the age of forty-five walking down the street, and that “perhaps as little as a fifth” of the Egyptian women during this period survived from their teens into their sixties.221 If the situation in Egypt is analogous to Judea, this might imply that, in our


221 Roger S. Bagnall, Bruce W. Frier, and Ansley J. Coale, The Demography of Roman Egypt (Cambridge England; New York, NY; Cambridge University Press, 2006). For chart on female life expectancy, see p.71. Also, note Satlow, “Working from the contemporaneous census records in Roman
hypothesised scenario above, of the women of marriageable age (1270) only 255 would have made it into their sixties. Of course, there is no indication of the age of either the Hellenistic or Hebraic widows in Acts 6. Yet it might be possible to infer from the text that the urgency to rectify the situation (i.e. they “grumbled”) may indicate that the widows of the text were toward the upper end of the age spectrum for widows, that is, elderly women more in need of attentive care than were younger widows.

It was also my desire in creating this hypothetical scenario to see not only if I could get a handle on how many widows that the Jerusalem congregation was caring for on a daily basis, but then, using the information from the previous section, to see if I could attach a monetary amount to the endeavor. More pointedly, I was interested in attempting to calculate what the financial impact might have been on the congregation(s) in their daily operation of such a program. Using the parameters derived above, then, if the apostles were in charge of caring for between 250 (on the low end) and 500 (on the high end) widows in “the daily distribution,” it would have cost the congregation between 41 denarii and 83 denarii per day (wheat loaf meal), or one-half that amount if the daily distribution involved barley loaves. These figures are based on my earlier calculation that it would have cost roughly 1/6 denarius to provide daily (wheat) bread to one man (1/12 denarius if it were barley bread), and that (in keeping with Sperber’s numbers) at this time a day’s wage was one denarius. The bottom line is that this must have been a challenging financial endeavor for the Jerusalem

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Egypt, Roger Bagnall and Bruce Frier have suggested that after the age of thirty-five, the sex ratio tilts heavily and quickly toward males. Should a similar pattern apply in Palestine, then there would have been a growing population of widowers who would look for second brides among young women.” (Satlow, *Jewish Marriage in Antiquity*, 184.)
Christians. Yet, if the scenario above is plausible, it also may speak to the generosity of the early Christian community and reflect the measure of their desire to provide for one another.

Jewish Widows in Need: Acts 9

There is one last section concerning charity toward Jewish widows that we need to consider briefly; the account of Tabitha (Dorcas) providing clothing for widows. The text is from Acts 9, and the scene is that Tabitha has recently died rather unexpectedly, provoking the following show of griefs from those who were touched by her kindness:

In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (in Greek her name is Dorcas); she was always doing good and helping the poor. About that time she became sick and died, and her body was washed and placed in an upstairs room. Lydda was near Joppa; so when the disciples heard that Peter was in Lydda, they sent two men to him and urged him, "Please come at once!" Peter went with them, and when he arrived he was taken upstairs to the room. All the widows stood around him, crying and showing him the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was still with them. Peter sent them all out of the room; then he got down on his knees and prayed. Turning toward the dead woman, he said, "Tabitha, get up." She opened her eyes, and seeing Peter she sat up. He took her by the hand and helped her to her feet. Then he called for the believers, especially the widows, and presented her to them alive. This became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord. Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon. (Acts 9:36-43 NIV)

The setting of the text is the coastal city of Joppa. As Acts 8 describes, a persecution of the Christians in Jerusalem, led by Saul of Tarsus, broke out following the death of the deacon Stephen, causing many of the Christians to leave the city. This episode and others, however, indicate a tight structure for the entire book of Acts; the

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222 Then again, we have no idea what resources the apostles had at their disposal. Joseph Barnabas, at the end of Acts 4, sold a piece of land and donated the proceeds to the congregation...but how much was land worth? Was the land in Judea or Cyprus, his native land? In other words, for how long could the congregation in Jerusalem utilize the funds provided by Barnabus? All these are variables, and lead to questions unanswerable.
author’s theme is set in Ac 1:8 where he describes the pattern of progress, from Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria, and then to the ends of the earth. Acts 9 describes the expansion of the Christian mission, relating how Philip began work in Samaria, and how Peter here is in greater Judea.

Joppa was essentially the port of Jerusalem, situated roughly forty miles slightly northwest. Here also, it is difficult to assess accurately population at this time. Josephus mentions that during the First Jewish Revolt (66-73 C.E.), the city was captured by the Roman general Cestius Gallus, and 8400 inhabitants of the city were killed. Thus, Joppa was a city of noteworthy size. It also then follows that the city must have had a good share of women living out their days in widowhood. Again, we are not able to ascertain the number of widows for whom Tabitha cared, or whether they were simply Jewish or Jewish Christian as well.

But is Tabitha herself a follower of Jesus? The text states that the disciples sent for Peter (9:38), presumably Jewish Christians. Tabitha herself is described in 9:36 by a hapax legomenon of the Greek New Testament, literally “a female disciple” (τις ἦν μαθήτρια ὀνόματι Ταβίθα), so it is safe to assume that she is Jewish Christian. Why, then, is her Greek name Dorcas also mentioned? Was it only for the sake of the (presumably) Gentile readership of Acts, or does this indicate that she may have been one of the “Hellenists” herself? The possibility exists.


224 Chan sees all the charity recipients in Acts as only members of the Christian community (Chan, “The Organization of the Caritative Ministry in the Early Church,” 107).
Our concern, however, is with Tabitha’s regular, well-known acts of charity towards the widows of Joppa. Whereas in Acts 6 the material of charity was food, here it is one of the other essentials for life, clothing. Upon the death of Tabitha and the arrival of Peter, the widows of Joppa who were direct beneficiaries of Tabitha’s charity came to the site of mourning and displayed to Peter the clothing that they had been provided. The Greek text describes two types of clothing, the “tunics and cloaks” (χιτώνας καὶ ἰμάτια, Ac 9:39). The two pieces were distinct and both were necessary for daily life.

Jewish marriage contracts (ketuboth) frequently described in detail the minimal legal requirements for support of a wife after the death of her husband, and some of the details found in these shed light on the situation here in Acts 9. To begin, it is difficult for us moderns to understand the importance of clothing in ancient Jewish society and what a minimal amount or lack thereof implied. “Nakedness” (not to be


226 Keener notes that some scholars “arguing from the definite article and the distinction from the saints in Ac 9:41” that in this text we have the beginning of the ecclesial “order of widows” that later patristic writers mention (Keener, Acts, 1781.) Bruce, Keener, and others, though, simply see the widows here as a group who were direct recipients of Tabitha’s charity. (See Bruce, The Acts of the Apostles, 249)

227 Some take the middle voice verb here—ἐπιδεικνύμεναι (Act 9:39)—to mean “showing on themselves” i.e. “they were wearing the clothes which she had made.” Cf. Bruce, The Acts of the Apostles, 249.

228 Ketubah law can become rather complicated, and rabbinic discussions about the applications of the principles to various situations populate the Mishnah and Talmud. For a good basic overview of marriage contract law (ketubah) see Singer, Isidore; et al., eds. (1901–1906). “Ketubah (Ketubbah)”. Jewish Encyclopedia. New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company. (Online at: http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/9290-ketubah)
understood as “nudity”\textsuperscript{229} was completely unacceptable, and either complete or relative nakedness “indicated a very low status.”\textsuperscript{230} The tunic was the standard clothing unit. The cloak was much more expensive and served as the primary protection against the weather and, especially, the cold at night. It was an overcoat and blanket in one. For that reason, the Old Testament law code pointedly speaks about borrowing or taking a neighbor’s cloak. If one did so, it was incumbent upon the borrower to return it to the owner by sunset.\textsuperscript{231} Concerning such clothing, Jesus asserted in the Sermon on the Mount: “And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well (Mt 5:40).” Such a statement must have been truly shocking to the listeners, for it implies both nakedness and exposure to the elements.\textsuperscript{232} So vital was the cloak for Jewish life that Jewish men, as part of the \textit{ketubah} (marriage contract) even took an oath to mortage all their property, “even the mantle on my shoulders,” to fulfill the terms of the \textit{ketubah}.\textsuperscript{233}

For this reason, the Jewish \textit{ketuboth} sought to protect the vulnerable when it came to clothing. One situation, described in detail by Hamel,\textsuperscript{234} (who in turn bases his

\textsuperscript{229} “Nakedness” was even considered to be wearing only a tunic without a mantle. Hamel, \textit{Poverty and Charity in Roman Palestine First Three Centuries C.E.}, 74.

\textsuperscript{230} Hamel, \textit{Poverty and Charity in Roman Palestine First Three Centuries C.E.}, 73

\textsuperscript{231} Ex 22:26-27

\textsuperscript{232} The Greek contains the very two same words (\textit{xiton, himatia}) for "shirt" and "coat" as the Acts 9 account does here: καὶ τὸ \theta\ellοντι σοι κριθήναι καὶ τὸν χιτώνα σου λαβεῖν, ἄφες αὐτῷ καὶ τὸ ιμάτιον· (Matt. 5:40 BGT)

\textsuperscript{233} This promise remains part of the traditional marriage contract to this day, especially among the Orthodox Ashkenazic community.

\textsuperscript{234} Hamel, \textit{Poverty and Charity in Roman Palestine First Three Centuries C.E.}, 64-67.
calculations on Sperber’s price lists, shows how such protections played out in the life of a Jewish wife whose husband had not died, but who was frequently gone for extended periods of time due to the nature of his work. The rabbinic law mandated that such a wife be provided with 50 zuz worth of clothing each year. What did that amount actually provide? Hamel concludes that in the I-II cent. C.E., this amount provided “one or two tunics and a cloak of modest quality, or tunics and undergarments. This was not much.” Moreover, even though the mandate was in place, what guarantees were there that the husband would faithfully meet this obligation, especially if the couple were in the lower strata of society? The same holds true for a widow. Tractace Ketubah indicates that a common contract stipulating the amount of support due a widow from her husband’s estate was 200 zuz (if she was a virgin at marriage) or 100 zuz (if she had been previously married). These figures are considerably higher than in the one situation described by Hamel. Later rabbinic exegesis stated that the widow had two options: 1) she could return to her father’s house as a widow, in which case she could receive 200 zuz annually for the rest of her life or, 2) she could remain in her dead husband’s home, in which case she could only receive 200 zuz annually for twenty-five years.

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235 Sperber, “Costs of Living in Roman Palestine I.” 252.
236 t Keth. 5.8-9
237 Hamel, Poverty and Charity in Roman Palestine First Three Centuries C.E., 66. Further, “This text suggests that, in the second century C.E., minimum clothing for a woman among the poor consisted of a tunic (or tunics) and a cloak, a belt and a headdress, and three pairs of shoes, all this per annum.” (ibid.)
238 t Keth. 12.4 Cf. Roman A. Ohrenstein and Barry Gordon, Economic Analysis in Talmudic Literature, 3 Revised edition (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2009) where the author calculates 200 zuz to be the equivalent of $666 US, in 1984 dollars (166). Updating that to the present day, adjusted for inflation: 200
Theoretically, then, Jewish widows were to be provided an amount that ensured basic survival, in respect to clothing. What strikes us, then, about the situation in Acts 9 is that here is a group of women apparently without resources left to them even to provide tunics and cloaks. “The spirit of this Mishnah, however, may have been very far from the reality.” Any number of factors—economic, social, legal—could have played a role in creating the challenging situation that each of these widows found themselves in. However, Sperber’s price lists also helps us to understand the generosity of Tabitha in meeting the needs of these widows. On the very low end, a tallit (tunic) of very cheap material cost one denarius (135-170 C.E.), and a normal tallit, 12 denarius in the same time frame. Likewise, the “cloak of a poor man” is listed as costing 100–200 denarii. There is a reference, though, also to “clothing of sacking to last 4-5 years” as costing a mere four denarii. Then as today, prices ranges reflected the quality of garments. In comparison, Sperber’s list notes that the suit of high priests in the pre-70 C.E. world had a range of 10,000–20,000 denarii. We cannot know, of course, how many widows benefitted from Tabitha’s handiwork, or what the quality of the clothing that she provided was. Perhaps she spun her own thread and wove her own fabric.

\[zuz = $1526.43\text{ per annum in 2016 dollars. Also noted is that the Mishnah sought to establish a definition of “poverty” by establishing the poverty threshold at 200 zuz (ibid.).}\]

239 Hamel, Poverty and Charity in Roman Palestine First Three Centuries C.E., 67.

240 Again, Sperber’s assertion that prices were very stable during the I-II centuries C.E. must be emphasized (“The Cost of Living in Roman Palestine I,” 249).

241 Sperber, “Costs of Living in Roman Palestine I.” 252.

242 Sperber, “Costs of Living in Roman Palestine I.” 252.

243 Sperber, “Costs of Living in Roman Palestine I.” 252.
Perhaps she was a woman of means and could simply buy the cloth. However, if she provided each widow with one tunic and one cloak each, it speaks to her generosity toward these women at risk in that society.\textsuperscript{244}

\textbf{Conclusions}

To this point, we have seen the following situations in respect to charity in the Jewish society of the first century C.E. First, there are issues that need to be taken into account when studying the very concept of "poverty," such as asking the basic questions, "What is poverty?" and "Who are 'the poor'?" Next, although there are legitimate concerns about using texts of later rabbinic authors to try an ascertain whether or not they provide an accurate picture of a society that existed two centuries earlier, nonetheless I asserted that some texts must certainly be historic—or have kernels of historicity—in their depictions. In other words, I hold to the opinion that rabbinic texts (especially of the Mishnah) sought to describe and codify traditions that were already in place and functioning in Jewish society, as opposed to an intent in their writing to create a model, idealized Jewish society for the future.\textsuperscript{245} Archaeological discoveries, such as that of the Essene Quarter in Jerusalem, can also be used to cautiously assert that there may well have been some influence on the Christians from

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\textsuperscript{244} Sperber notes in respect to his discussion about bakers that the rabbis capped the profit margin for them at 33\% (Sperber, "Costs of Living in Roman Palestine II." 185.) If Tabitha made the clothing at cost, she perhaps could have done so for under 75 d. (probably even much less than that.) On the other hand, if Tabitha simply \textit{purchased} a cloak for 100 d. and a tunic for 12 d., according to Sperber's lists the total would have been 112 \textit{denarii}, or roughly 1/3 a yearly day laborer's salary.

\textsuperscript{245} Along the lines, by comparison, of Ezekiel's idealized vision of the future, rebuilt temple in Eze 40-48.
the Essenes and other Jews in Jerusalem in respect to charitable practices.\textsuperscript{246} Thirdly, I raised the other important question, “What is charity?” and showed that, based upon the previous assertions, it is plausible to assume that there were some Jewish charitable venues established and functioning prior to the writing of the Mishnah around 200 C.E. Among them, the \textit{quppah} and \textit{tamhui} stand out in prominence, and the latter especially may have served as a model for the early Christian community in Jerusalem. The charitable practices described in Acts 6 involved providing food to widows in need, whereas the charity of Tabitha described in Acts 9 involved providing clothing to a group of widows who apparently had trouble acquiring even this other basic necessity for life, a necessity not only for physical life but social life as well. The apostles provided the widows in Jerusalem with sustenance, but Tabitha provided the widows of Joppa with both protection and dignity.

Equally important is that these sections of Acts set \textit{patterns} for giving that will be emulated by subsequent generations of Christians, both Jewish and Gentile. Kim sees the descriptions of the charitable activities recorded in Acts as prototypical and “extraordinary precisely in its sacrificial character and its significant scale.”\textsuperscript{247} Using self-identification and social group theories, Kim goes on to analyze the leaders of the early

\textsuperscript{246} Chan, “The Organization of the Caritative Ministry in the Early Church,” 107. The author sees no connection: “Although Jeremias tried to link this work with the Jewish public relief system, after careful study Seccombe concluded that the already existing relief (Jewish) work was meant only for temporary use or for emergency situations, but definitely not intended for an organization such as the one mentioned in Acts. Furthermore, there is no evidence of organized relief work carried on by the Jews prior to the destruction of the Second Temple. The caritative ministry headed by the "Seven" was, therefore, a new establishment.”

Christian communities specifically in respect to charity. His observation is that the modeling done by such leaders is disproportionately influential “in determining prototypical or normative behavior within the group,”\(^{248}\) to such an extent that adherents, the more that they identified themselves with the early Christian movement, the more they acted in accordance with the group’s norms that were established by the first leaders.\(^{249}\) In contrast to what we saw in the previous chapter beginning to develop in post-exilic Judaism, the nature of early Christian giving was that it was not self-interested, but done from a genuine desire for parity and meeting the physical needs of others.

Such was the case as described in the book of Acts. The apostles set the pattern for charity, and the members of early Christian communities imitated them. More than an organized program of relief,\(^{250}\) practicing charity became a way of life for the early Christians. Aristides, a pagan opponent of Christianity explained to the emperor Hadrian around 133 C.E., that as for the Christians:

> Falsehood is not found among them; and they love one another, and from widows they do not turn away their esteem; and they deliver the orphan from him who treats him harshly. And he, who has, gives to him who has not, without boasting. And when they see a stranger, they take him in to their homes and rejoice over him as a very brother; for they do not call them brethren after the flesh, but brethren after the spirit and in God. …And if there is among them any


\(^{250}\) Concerning the organization—or lack thereof—of charitable practices throughout the first few centuries of Christianity, Chan observes: “The caritative ministry was not in the hands of a particular group of church workers; instead all levels of church staff had to be involved with this ministry...Finally, there seemed to be no standardization of the structure of caritative ministry during this Period. In some places, it was the individual's duty to do charitable work; in other places, this duty was in the hands of the deacon, or bishop, or presbyter.” (Chan, “The Organization of the Caritative Ministry in the Early Church.” 109.)
that is poor and needy, and if they have no spare food, they fast two or three
days in order to supply to the needy their lack of food. They observe the precepts
of their Messiah with much care, living justly and soberly as the Lord their God
commanded them.251

251 Apology of Aristides the Philosopher, ANF-09, 276-77. Translation is based on the Syriac version.
CHAPTER 5
WIDOWS AND CHARITY IN THE GENTILE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

As Christianity expanded westward from Jerusalem, its message penetrated into the very heart of the Roman Empire. The book of Acts describes how Christianity began as a movement within established Judaism. But the vision for the movement was that it would not remain confined there. Rather, as a stone dropped on the surface of a placid pond, Christianity would ripple out from its epicenter in ever expanding concentric circles—“Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Ac 1:8). The progress described in Acts follows this pattern. Scenes in and around Jerusalem (Acts 1-12) dominate roughly the first third of the book. By Acts 8, Philip the Evangelist and Peter the Apostle were conducting missionary expeditions in Samaria and greater Judea. With the outbreak of open persecution of the Christian movement in Jerusalem, the text of Acts shifts its attention northward to Antioch of Syria, which soon became the base of operations for early Christians as they sent out Paul and his companions from there on three successive missionary journeys (Acts 13-20).

The book of Acts especially highlights the natural tensions that arose among the earliest Christians when the Jewish religious mindset and culture came into direct contact with the Gentile world. There had been early incidents of this in Peter’s ministry, most notably, when he visited the home of a Roman centurion named Cornelius who was residing in Caesarea Maritima (Acts 10). A conservative Jewish-Christian faction of the Jerusalem church confronted him and roundly criticized Peter: “You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them (Ac 11:3).” Peter defended his actions and confessed his firm belief that the future of the Christian movement would certainly also include the Gentiles.
The incident also shed light on what seems to have been the assumption of the early Jewish-Christians in Jerusalem: in order to become a true follower of Jesus, Gentiles must first become Jewish converts. In particular, the issue of circumcision loomed large among the Jewish Christians. The book of Acts describes how these early followers wrestled with two very important questions. The first was this: is the gospel (good news of salvation) intended for the Gentiles? As the Cornelius incident unfolded, though, we read how the Jerusalem conservatives gradually began to understand that the parameters of the gospel mission was indeed larger than they could have initially imagined. Then, intimately connected to the first question was the second: is obedience to the laws of Moses then also required? If there was a gradual understanding that the good news as proclaimed by Peter at Pentecost (Acts 2) was also for the Gentiles, the second issue was much more intricate and more difficult to resolve. Paul, himself a circumcised Jew, took the position that the Mosaic law code was intended for Jews, not Gentiles. This brought Paul and his companion Barnabus “into sharp dispute and debate”\(^1\) with a conservative Jewish faction that had come to Antioch of Syria from

\(^1\) The entire letter to the Galatians addresses the very same issue. Although there are two prevalent theories concerning the date of the writing of Galatians, its Pauline authorship has been generally accepted by Christian scholars down through the ages. Without going into all the arguments concerning the North Galatia Theory (late dating of the letter) and the South Galatia Theory (early dating of the letter), it seems to this writer that the South Galatia theory fits best into the chronology of Acts. The South Galatia Theory holds to the opinion that the recipients of the letter were those same congregations that Paul founded on his first missionary trip, as described in Acts 13-14. *Argumenta ex silentio* can, in general, be tenuous grounds upon which to tread, but in the case of the South Galatia Theory, such an argument strengthens its claim: if the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 had taken place by the time of the writing of Galatians, Paul surely would have mentioned both it and its decision, being a key participant as he was. However, the complete lack of mention of this most important Council in the letter to the Galatians can be taken as proof that the letter was penned prior to the assembly. It may, in fact, have been the direct product of the debate Paul had with the conservatives in Antioch. It should be noted, though, that the debate over early or late dating of the letter began already in the patristic era. For a general overview and comparison of both theories, see J. B. Lightfoot, *The Epistle of St. Paul to the Galatians: With Introductions, Notes and Dissertations*, Reprint (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing
Jerusalem and were promulgating their views concerning Gentiles and their relationship to the ceremonial laws of Moses (Ac 15:1-2). This debate led directly to the calling of the first “convention,” the Council of Jerusalem. There the issue of circumcision as a condition of salvation was thoroughly discussed and debated, with the acknowledged leader of the Jerusalem church, James the Just, summarizing the debate and issuing a ruling that Gentiles were not to be forced to obey the ceremonial laws of Moses (as represented by circumcision). The Council also directed the Gentiles to express their love and to preserve the unity of believers by willingly living in a manner that would not offend their fellow believers who were Jewish and who still adhered to Mosaic ordinances (Ac 15:22-29).

My point in highlighting this particular history of early Christianity as described in the book of Acts and letters of the New Testament is to simply call attention to the tensions that inevitably arose when a movement essentially Jewish in origin, came into contact with people who were non-Jewish. Yet as the Christian movement expanded across the Mediterranean world, it is important to note the flexibility of the movement as they took the principles of Jesus’ teachings (and Old Testament laws) and applied the same to new situations and new people groups that they would encounter as they executed their mission to preach the gospel in all the world. In other words, it became apparent early on that if Gentiles were to be incorporated into the body of believers, this

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2 Most recently, Dunn has produced Vol. 3 of his massive study, Christianity in the Making, and calls attention to this very thing—the struggle for the identity of the early Church. Dunn, Neither Jew nor Greek.
would not occur under the paradigm of simply transferring Old Testament Jewish religious laws onto new Gentile believers and enforcing their practice.

As it pertains to our present thesis, a brief study of charity toward widows in early Christianity, this observation also implies that Gentile widows brought into the fold of Christianity would not necessarily be cared for or dealt with in a manner similar to Jewish Christian widows. The Gentile widows come to Christianity from a different context than their Jewish counterparts. While the principle remained the same among both Jews and Gentiles—widows are to be cared for and honored—the particulars of how that principle was applied varied.

This chapter, then, studies how the early Christians exercised the practice of charity toward Roman widows who had joined the movement and some unique situations and challenges that arose with the same. To do this, I will first show the typical lot of the Roman widow of secular society, highlighting those items that contrast them with their Jewish counterparts, such as those discussed in the previous chapter. Then I will demonstrate how the letters of 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy spoke to some of these unique situations involving Gentile Christian widows. It is in 1 Timothy we especially find the Apostle giving prescriptive guidance for not only to the original recipients of the letter, but also laying down precepts for the future Christian church to follow. Finally, this chapter ends with a brief study of how charity toward Gentile Christian widows gradually evolved into a system matching certain donors with certain widows. In this sanctioned exchange, the one received material benefits and the other spiritual benefits from the exchange—a system strikingly similar to the Jewish practice
gaining of tzedekah ("righteousness") through almsgiving mentioned previously, yet also differing at certain points.

Portraits of Widows in the Roman World

To begin, how were widows of the first century Roman world regarded? How were they cared for? What comprised the typical Roman widow’s lot in life? These questions touch upon many issues—marriage, inheritance, economics, poverty relief, social class, misogyny, life expectancy, etc. etc. In this short survey, we can only touch upon such items briefly. Even so, we still can gain a fairly clear picture of Roman attitudes toward widows and the nature of their existence in that society.

First, there certainly were Roman widows that were held in very high esteem, and some were even depicted by Roman authors as worthy of emulation. Generically speaking, the Roman world of the first century acknowledged with a great deal of respect a Roman matron who could also be distinguished as being an univira—a “one man woman.” Such a woman had married young, lived in fidelity and peace with her husband until his passing, and then chose in honor of his memory not to remarry.

Servius, quoting Varro, provided a working definition: Varro pronubam dicit quae ante nupsit quaeque uni tantum nupta est, ideoque auspices deliguntur ad nuptias. [Varro


3 Gardner, “Women in Roman Law and Society,” 50. The conduct of certain religious rituals was reserved exclusively to such women.” (Although the author goes on to note that widows also lacked necessary ritual purity required for the performance of some ceremonies.)

4 Commentary on Vergil’s Aeneid, 4.166 However, the reference in the Aeneid is, of course, to the seemingly spontaneous marriage of Dido to Aeneas, dodging a storm in a cave, where Juno flashes lightning in approval of the arrangement—a marriage that Aeneas later denies ever actually took place. Smith states in his dictionary that pronuba is primarily an epithet for Juno, the goddess of marriage (William Smith. A Dictionary of Greek and Roman biography and mythology. London: John Murray. Currently out of print but found at Perseus (www.perseus.tufts.edu). E.T. Merrill, though, in his commentary on Catullus (also at Perseus (www.perseus.tufts.edu) notes at 61.186: “the pronubae were
says that the “pronuba” is she who was married earlier and also was married to only one (man), and for this reason they are chosen for the auspices at the marriage rituals.]

Such women, whose distinction arose in the pre-imperial period, were highly regarded among Romans, as poets, historians, and monuments attest. For instance Catullus, in one of his marriage hymns, mentions the role that the *univira* would play in the bridal ceremony, being the one to lay her hand of blessing upon the joined hands of the nuptials. As the text reads:

\begin{verbatim}
o bonae senibus viris
cognitae bene feminae,
conlocate puellulam.
o Hymen Hymenae ae io,
o Hymen Hymenae ae. (61.186-190)
\end{verbatim}

[O good women, to old men well known, give this dear sweetheart away in marriage.

wives of one husband, and of the dignity of character that comes with honored age.” (Catullus. E. T. Merrill. Cambridge. Harvard University Press. 1893.)

5 See Galinsky, *Augustan Culture*, 131, 369. Galinsky asserts that Augustus “ran roughshod” over this time-honored tradition with his marriage legislation of 18 B.C., which mandated in part that Roman widows remarry.


8 cf. Augustus’ marriage legislation. Aug. Nupt. 1.9: “However, for the advancing of the human race, good women are joined to certain good men.” (ref. per Merrill, Catullus, in his comments on Catullus 61.186)

9 “Give…away…” (conlocate) Interestingly, Sir Richard Francis Burton’s 1894 translation renders the nuance, “Ye wives time-tried to husbands wed, Well-known for chastity inbred, Dispose the virginitet a-bed”, and Leonard Smither’s translation from the same year also renders the passage: “You good women of fair renown to aged spouses, put the maiden to bed.” Both, then, speak to the role of the *univira* as the very one who ushered the maiden into the nuptial bedroom for the consummation of the marriage. Lewis and Short’s dictionary does indicate that Tacitus employs the verb in the sense of “to quarter, to establish in quarters,” but this appears to be a nuance used primarily in a military setting.
O Hymen Hymenae, yo!
O Hymen Hymenae.]\(^{10}\)

As Fraschetti notes, the honorable status of *univira* was primarily confined to the aristocracy.\(^ {11}\) Among the aristocracy, perhaps the most celebrated *univira* was Cornelia\(^ {12}\), the mother of the Gracchi brothers. The second daughter of the famed victor in the Second Punic War, Scipio Africanus, Cornelia and her sister received an unusually thorough education in Greek culture and literature at the insistence of their Hellenophile father.\(^ {13}\) Cornelia married the much older yet highly respected Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus, who died in 154 B.C. and left her a widow at a relatively young age. Independently wealthy through inheritance, Cornelia set about devoting herself to


\(^{11}\) Fraschetti, *Roman Women*, 8. “Noble women could choose to remain *univirae* after their husbands’ deaths, but for those of humbler condition, solitary widowhood was simply the normal course of things. It was not easy for a woman of the lower classes to find a man willing to assume responsibility not only for her, no longer young, but also for her children. Such cases must have been rare.” However, a study by Lightman and Zeisel suggests, on the basis of both literary and epigraphic evidence, that the term *univira* underwent evolution as time passed. (Majorie Lightman and William Zeisel, “Univira: An Example of Continuity and Change in Roman Society,” *Church History* 46, no. 1 (1977): 19–32.) The earliest and most traditional definition “identified the *univira* of the early Republic as a woman of high social standing who lived all her life under the auctoritas of her father or husband. She was, in fact identical with the ideal *matron*…” (20). But the term *univira* eventually began to be applied to women of non-elite status (22), and later even to those women of servile origin (23). Then, as societal shifts in Rome led to easy and multiple divorces, *univera* acquired a more exclusive nuance to separate it from *matrona*. Thus, “its use proffered no formal claim to social status, but implied respect for the mos maiorum.” (26). The Christians embraced the term as it harmonized with their ideals for marriage, and “one-man woman” became a respected epithet in Christian circles. More than that, “When the Christians added their ideal of continent widowhood to the pagan epithet *univira*, they altered the usage of *univira* in a fundamental manner.” (27) Not only among the Christians, though, “By the Christian period use of the word had spread to all social levels, and the epithet became a common social commonplace.” (32)


motherhood and utilized her wealth to have her children educated by Greek tutors, as her father had done for her.\textsuperscript{14} What endeared her to the Roman people was that, following her husband’s passing, she may well have been the most sought after widow in Rome, and yet spurned all offers of marriage (most notably that of Ptolemy VIII, ruler of Cyrene)\textsuperscript{15} choosing instead to live in a dignified widowhood.\textsuperscript{16} One anecdote relates that once, when a visitor called upon Cornelia and expressed a desire to see her fabulous collection of jewels, Cornelia showed the visitor her children with the remark, “These are my jewels.”\textsuperscript{17} Upon her death in 121 B.C.E., the people of Rome accorded her the rare honor of erecting a bronze statue of her in the Forum, as a tribute to her devotion to the ideals of Roman womanhood.\textsuperscript{18} She, in fact, was the prototype of the \textit{univira}, the model for generations to come.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{14} Lightman and Lightman, \textit{Biographical Dictionary of Ancient Greek and Roman Women}. 78. Cornelia had borne 12 children with Gracchus, but only three survived into adulthood.

\textsuperscript{15} Plutarch, \textit{Tiberius Gracchus} 1.7

\textsuperscript{16} In contrast, cf. P. Walcot, “On Widows and Their Reputation in Antiquity,” \textit{Symbolae Osloenses} 66 (1991): 5–26. “But Cornelia’s motives perhaps were not entirely altruistic, for this woman seems to have been one of those mothers not uncommon in antiquity, who attempted to achieve her own ambitions vicariously through pressurized children.” (8)

\textsuperscript{17} The story is found in Valerius Maximus 4.4, who attributes its origin to a collection of anecdotes from Pomponius Rufus. Its validity has been questioned. However, at least one painting of the Classical Revival period dwells on the theme of Cornelia displaying her children as her treasures. (Angelica Kauffmann, artist. Housed at Virginia Museum of Fine Arts).

\textsuperscript{18} Pliny, \textit{Nat. Hist} 34.31. Pliny discusses this in his chapter on various metals. He also notes that Cato was vocal in his opposition to statuary raised in honor of women, but Fraschetti notes (\textit{Roman Women}, 62) that there were a number of statues in Rome honoring women, among whom were Cornelia, Quinta Claudia, Clelia, Tanaquilla, and Gaia Taracia.

\textsuperscript{19} Fraschetti, \textit{Roman Women}. 15. The author also notes (\textit{ibid.}) that “in ancient times a collection of [Cornelia’s] letters was circulated.” This is a reference to a supposed letter of Cornelia’s to her son Gaius, preserved in fragments of Cornelius Nepos. Cicero, a friend of Nepos, seems to make a reference to this letter in his \textit{Inst Orat}. 1.1.6, where he describes Cornelia as a woman with “extremely learned speech.”
Antonia the Younger, niece of Augustus (via Octavia and Marc Antony, her parents) and widow of Drusus fits into this category of the noble univīra, though with not nearly the amount of renown as that garnered by Cornelia. Born in 36 B.C.E., she was married at the age of twenty, but found herself a widow a mere seven years later when Drusus unexpectedly died in Germania after being thrown from his horse. He lingered on for a month before he died from the injuries. The mourning was great for Drusus as his funeral procession made its way back to Rome, as depicted in the lengthy poem Consolatio ad Liviniam. The elegy describes her thus:

Quid referam de te, dignissima coniuge Druso atque eadem Drusi digna parente nurus? par bene compositum: iuvenum fortissimus alter, altera tam forti mutua cura viro. femina tu princeps, tu filia Caesaris illi nec minor es magni coniuge visa lovis.

tu concessus amor, tu solus et ultimus illi, tu requies fesso grata laboris eras. te moriens per verba novissima questus abesse et mota in nomen frigida lingua tuum.

[What shall I say about you, most upright spouse to Drusus, and the same a worthy daughter-in-law for the mother of Drusus? A pair well matched; the one a most brave youth, the other, such a brave man’s care were you … and vice-versa. You were a regal woman to him, a daughter of Caesar, no less, you seem, than the very spouse of mighty Jove.

You were love itself, freely given – you, his only love… and his last; you were welcome respite [for him] from weariness of labor. Dying, in his last words he lamented your absence and his frigid tongue was moved [to speak] your name.] (l. 299-308)

20 Reported by Cassius Dio, Hist 55.1. Suetonius (Vit. Claud.) related a rumor that Augustus had poisoned him, but dismisses it (I.1-5).

21 Historically attributed to Ovid, but now considered spurious. Latin text available at Bibliotheca Augustana: http://www.hs-augsburg.de/~harsch/Chronologia/Lsante01/Ovidius/ovi_cons.html
A widow at the age of twenty-five, Antonia remained so for until her death shortly after the accession of her grandson Caligula to the emperorship. She lived in the Palatine palace following Drusus’ death, invited to remain there by Livia, wife of Augustus. Although one could plausibly argue that no one living a Julio-Claudian dynastic household remain untainted, Antonia seems to have navigated imperial politics and succession schemes with a reasonable amount of dignity, enjoying the company of an elite group of senators as well as the good opinion of the common people.22

We also could include here among the list of honored widows the mother of Gaius Marcius Coriolanus, Venturia,23 whose dramatic exploits (at the instigation of the other matrons of the city24) saved Rome in the 5th century B.C.E. Marcius, slighted by the Romans, in retribution for his offended honor joined with the Volscians, the perennial Roman adversary. Eventually, with a Volscian army in tow, Marcius turned his vengeance toward the city of Rome itself. Within the city, a group of women faithfully flooded the altars of the temples with tears, beseeching the gods for assistance in the crisis. While praying thus, one of the women (Valeria, sister of the famous statesman Publicola) dreamed up the idea of incorporating Coriolanus’ mother into a scheme for saving the city. Along with other Roman matrons, Valeria went to Venturia’s home and


23 Plutarch, Vit. Cor. 33.5 names her Volumnia, the name that finally ends up in Shakespeare’s play Coriolanus.

24 The exploits of the matrons of Rome was used to bolster the claims of Roman matrons in the days of the Oppian law, ca.195 B.C.E. Livy records the incident (34.1) when the women of Rome openly, publicly rebelled against the decree of the Senate that enforced a law forbidding Roman women to own or display all but a minimal amount of jewelry. Cato pressed for the enforcement of the law, but the tribune Lucius Valerius testified to the generally noble character of the matrons of Rome. See Lefkowitz and Fant, Women’s Life in Greece and Rome, 174.
begged both her and Marcius’ wife to go out to the enemy camp and personally make a
tearful entreaty to Coriolanus to break off his planned assault and spare his native city\textsuperscript{25}. Venturia agreed. After a few verbal repartees, Venturia tearfully brings her argument to a climax:

When you were left an orphan by your father, I took you as an infant, and for your sake I remained a widow and underwent the labors of rearing you, showing myself not only a mother to you, but also a father, a nurse, a sister, and everything that is dearest. When you reached manhood and it was in my power to be freed from these cares by marrying again, to rear other children, and lay up many hopes to support me in my old age, I would not do so, but remained at the same hearth and put up with the same kind of life, placing all my pleasures and all my advantages in you alone.\textsuperscript{26}

Rome recognized the great service paid by the matrons to the city with the dedication of a temple to the female goddess Fortuna, raised at public expense.\textsuperscript{27} We do not know if Venturia subsequently married again or not. If not, it is legit to classify this matron among the famous \textit{univira} of ancient Rome.

For our purposes, we note how the ideals of Roman motherhood in the above examples are highlighted—and even heightened—within the context of widowhood.\textsuperscript{28} Propertius celebrated one \textit{univira} who died young and left her husband a widower,\textsuperscript{29} yet there appears to be even more respect accorded the widow \textit{univira} who managed the

\textsuperscript{25} This incident is recorded by Plutarch, \textit{Vit. Cor.} 33.


\textsuperscript{27} Livy, \textit{A.U.C.} 2.40

\textsuperscript{28} See also Pliny’s views on the noble widow / matron Ummidia Quadratilla (\textit{Ep.} 7.24), discussed briefly in Harlow and Laurence, \textit{Growing Up and Growing Old in Ancient Rome}, 129.

\textsuperscript{29} \textit{Eleg.} 4.11.36
household and raised her children properly without the assistance of a husband. In either case, the ideal of the Republican univira persisted into the days of the early empire and beyond. Centuries later, Saint Jerome in his Adversus Jovinianum quoted fragments of Seneca’s essay De Matrimonio where the Stoic philosopher relates the response of Porcia Minor to a comment about a well-regarded woman who had a second husband: “Porcia Minor replied: ‘The fortunate and proper matrona marries only once.’” Tacitus himself had rare words of high praise for the mother of his father-in-law Agricola, Julia Procilla, who lost her husband when Agricola was but a boy. Nevertheless, she devoted all her attention to the proper raising of this noble Roman man. In his estimation, Julia was a woman of rarae castitatis.31

In contrast to the ideal, virtuous Roman widow, numerous Roman authors present widows in a less than savory light.32 “The concept of the virtuous widow was balanced by that of the widow as predator, and both concepts persisted throughout antiquity.”33 Plutarch, for instance, in his Amatorius, relates the story of a wealthy widow named Ismenodora from a noble family who lived in respectable widowhood for a while without tarnish to her own reputation.34 However, in the process of trying to arrange a


32 Winter traces the origins of all later Roman literary attitudes towards woman to the New Roman Comedy of Plautus and Terrence, quoting Crisafulli: “The depiction of women in Comedy had an enormous impact on other forms of literature that followed.” Winter, Roman Wives, Roman Widows: The Appearance of New Women and the Pauline Communities, 30–31.


marriage between a young man named Baccho and an eligible young maiden close to her family, Ismenodora's passions were reignited. She sought out the young man for herself, causing Baccho quite a bit of distress, "being only recently come into adolescence, he was ashamed at the thought of cohabitating with a widow (ἡδεῖτο γὰρ ἔφηβος ἐπὶ ὄν χήρα συνοικεῖν)," largely due to the age difference.\(^{35}\)

We might think also of the manner in which Vergil portrays the noble Dido throughout the early books of the *Aeneid*, culminating with her mental breakdown and suicide as Aeneas' ship leaves behind the shores of Carthage for his rendezvous with a heaven-ordained destiny in Italy.\(^{36}\) A strong, stable widow who is the driving force behind Carthage's burgeoning greatness,\(^{37}\) nonetheless when widow and widower begin to fall in love, it is Dido who abandons reason and duty to follow her passions.\(^{38}\) Juno seized the opportunity afforded by Dido's crumbling resistance to try to set a trap to divert Aeneas from fulfilling his divine mandate to found the city of Rome.\(^{39}\) Spurred on by Venus at Juno's prodding, Dido convinces herself, following the famous cave

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\(^{36}\) Walcot, discusses the Dido episode at length, and here I draw guidance from him ("On Widows and Their Reputation in Antiquity," 13–15).

\(^{37}\) *Aen.* 1.494 ff.

\(^{38}\) Cf. especially *Aen.* 4.1-30 where Dido highlights the conflict in her heart to her sister Anna. Also Renate Johne, "Women in the Ancient Novel," in *The Novel in the Ancient World*, ed. Gareth L. Schmeling. Revised ed. edition (Boston: Brill, 2003), 170. "As a woman she tries to perform a man's business in building a new city as a home, but she is defeated by the conflict between her duty and her passionate love."

\(^{39}\) *Aen.* 4.90 ff.
scene of Book 4 that she and Aeneas actually had become husband and wife under the auspices of Hymen. However, Vergil's assessment was different:

Ille dies primus leti primusque malorum
causa fuit; neque enim specie famave movetur,
 nec iam furtivum Dido meditatur amorem:
coniugium vocat; hoc praetexit nomine culpam.

[That day first was the day of death, the day first that was the cause of evils; for she was moved neither by the appearance of this or her reputation, nor did Dido now consider it to be a secret love: she called it "marriage"; and covered over her guilt by this name.]

(Aen. 4.169-172)

Admittedly, one cannot argue with complete certainty that the main reason Vergil created the character of Dido in the manner he did was to provide a social commentary on the nature of widows. Yet we cannot ignore Dido's social status either. Nor should we overlook the connection between the poet, the emperor, and the emperor's agenda for conservative social reform at the onset of his rule, reforms that dealt much with order in society and marriage. True, Vergil had died one year before the first of Augustus' famous marriage laws appeared, namely, the lex Julia de maritandis ordinibus of 18 B.C.E. Yet it is also true that the Aeneid was penned during the decade following Actium, a battle which ended Rome's 15 year entanglement with that most notorious, ambitious, problem-causing widow of all (in Roman estimation)—Cleopatra Ptolemy VII

\[\text{220}\]

\[\text{40 See footnote 5.10 above.}\]

\[\text{41 Discussed in greater detail below.}\]
of Egypt. Does Vergil draw his inspiration for Dido from Rome's entanglements with Cleopatra? Perhaps.

Other authors, however, are more direct in their negative depiction of widows. Arguably, the most bizarre portrait of a widow is found within the pages of Petronius' *Satyricon*. There the narrator Eumolpus (who himself, by this point in the story, had escaped the attack of a bleary eyed old woman's dog) sets upon a tale to "hurl many things against the levity of women—how easily they conceive desire, how quickly they forget even their sons, and how there is no woman so chaste who could not be turned aside all the way into mad passion by a foreign desire." The episode is one of the more memorable ones in the *Satyricon*, and the brief overview is as follows: In Ephesus there once lived a matron well known for her integrity whose husband


43 Janice M. Benario, "Dido and Cleopatra," *Vergilius* (*1959-*) , no. 16 (1970): 2–6. The author raises several points of comparison between the two queens, yet the emphasis on their respective widowhood is my own. Her study contrasts Horace's views on Cleopatra (Ode 1.37) with Vergil's depiction of Dido in the *Aeneid*.


45 On the literary figure of Eumolpus as both mediocre poet and raconteur, see Roger Beck, "Eumolpus 'Poeta', Eumolpus 'Fabulator': A Study of Characterization in the 'Satyricon'," *Phoenix* 33, no. 3 (1979): 239–53.

46 *Satyr.* 95


48 *Satyr.* 110-113
unexpectedly passed away. So distraught was this young widow that she and her maidservant refused to leave the tomb of her husband, intent on letting her grief take her life as well through starvation.\textsuperscript{49} Her mourning in the sepulcher at night attracted the attention of a young soldier, a member of an execution detail nearby that had recently crucified some law-breakers. His curiosity aroused by the sound of mourning and the light from the burial cave, the soldier leaves his post to investigate. Thereupon the soldier finds the young grieving widow and her attendant. Moved to pity by the pathetic scene, the soldier encourages the women to eat something. The widow at first refuses, but after her servant eats she also is convinced to abandon her death wish. Moreover, the soldier was immediately struck by the beauty of the young widow and sought to win her hand. This unexpected turn of events was enthusiastically supported by the maidservant, who helps break down the widow's resistance.\textsuperscript{50} The widow and soldier spend the night in the arms of love within the cave where the dead husband lay. Eumolpus relates that it was not just one night of love either; the first was followed by a second and third as well. In addition, the lovers took the precaution of shutting the door to the tomb not merely so that they would not be seen but also so that the pretense of the widow's loyalty could be propagated; all passersby would assume that the widow

\textsuperscript{49} McGinn, \textit{Widows and Patriarchy}, 35. McGinn notes: "In fact, women who killed themselves at the time of or just after the deaths of their husbands were widely admired, although the evidence also yields the sense that such behavior might be regarded, at best, as above and beyond the call of duty, and so hardly a routine expectation. At worst it could be deemed excessive and unnecessary."

\textsuperscript{50} Robert E. Colton, "The Story of the Widow of Ephesus in Petronius and La Fontaine," \textit{The Classical Journal} 71, no. 1 (1975): 46. Colton notes the similarity of the servant's persuasive speech (nearly verbatim) to that of Anna trying to convince her sister Dido to leave behind the memories of a dead husband and pursue new love.
had accomplished what she intended to do, namely, starve herself to death in loyalty to her husband.\(^51\) However, in the midst of all this newfound bliss, one of the bodies entrusted to the guardianship of the soldier mysteriously disappears from the cross nearby. The panic-stricken soldier knows that his own life was forfeit for having left his post and lost his captive, and so he (in a manner strikingly similar to the widow just the day before) resolves to end his own life. However, the widow, now completely taken with the soldier, preserves their future life together by offering to the soldier the corpse of her own dead husband,\(^52\) which the soldier accepts and affixes to the cross, to the great bafflement of the locals. As Eumolpus ends his yarn, the reactions to the tale vary. The sailors double-over in laughter. The sole woman in the crowd, Tryphaena, blushes in embarrassment, presumably on behalf of women everywhere. Another passenger named Lichas becomes enraged at the woman's sordid behavior, and emphatically states that the widow ought to have been affixed to the cross by the locals, and her husband's defiled corpse restored to the tomb in proper burial.\(^53\) Walcot underscores

\(^{51}\) *ut quisquis ex notis ignotisque ad monumentum venisset, putaret expirasse super corpus viri pudicissimam uxorem.* (Satyr.112).

\(^{52}\) Colton, in his analysis of Le Fontaine's French version of this tale, notes that there it is the maidservant who instigates the body-swapping plan and deals directly with the soldier. Also, unlike Lichas, La Fontaine “does not consider the widow's conduct reprehensible.” (Colton, “The Story of the Widow of Ephesus in Petronius and La Fontaine,” 50–51.)

\(^{53}\) But Lichas does not perceive that Eumolpus' tale is a *fabula*, and accepts it as non-fiction, perhaps jaded by having recently been jilted by his wife. Edward Wheatley, “Rereading the Story of the Widow of Ephesus in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 51, no. 4 (2014): 629–30.
the cynicism inherent in the tale, and Amy Richlin opines that the main role of women in this tale is "to express the common Roman stereotype of [them] as sex-crazed."

Interestingly, Petronius' unsettling tale may have been taken directly from the work of a contemporary author, Phaedrus (ca.18 B.C.E.–ca.54 C.E.). His Fable 48 is strikingly similar in content; we know it from texts used by medieval schoolmasters for rhetorical exercises. It that rendition, Phaedrus preserves this interesting detail from the fable: after affixing the dead husband's corpse to the cross, the guard (and widow's lover) recalls that the previous man on the cross—the thief—had been missing some teeth. Without hesitation, the widow tells the soldier not to fret, and thereupon picks up a rock and knocks out a few of the teeth of her dead husband. The fable preserves Phaedrus' moral:

Sola permit vivosque metu penaque sepultos Femina: femineum non bene fuit opus.

[Only a woman oppresses the living with fear and the entombed with


56 For comparison between Petronius' and Phaedrus' tales, see McGinn, Widows and Patriarchy, 32–33. McGinn concludes: "It is fair to say that the story [of Petronius] contains plenty of raw material encouraging both misogynistic and/or widow-friendly readings, to give two extreme possibilities, while that of Phaedrus is both relatively monotone in nature, that is, more unambiguously anti-female, and also more consistent with mainstream Roman notions of desirable conduct on the part of widows." (33)

57 Wheatley, “Rereading the Story of the Widow of Ephesus in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance,” 630. Medieval schools seem to have employed the text "to augment the disdain of women in their readers, ostensibly young male school pupils, some of whom would have been destined for a life of celibacy."

58 Wheatley, “Rereading the Story of the Widow of Ephesus in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance,” 631.
punishment; feminine work does not end well.\textsuperscript{59}

Other authors, notably poets, also reinforce some of the then-prevailing stereotypes concerning widows. Prominent among them are Martial, Horace, and Juvenal, and I will briefly consider some examples from each in turn. That said, the point must be conceded that these authors do not \textit{specifically} target widows simply because they are widows. However, it is warranted to \textit{include} widows in the general picture of women—especially old women—that these poets paint.\textsuperscript{60} And concerning old women, these poets have many things to say.

"The vices for which Martial attacks women can be reduced to a single common element: too much interest in sex."\textsuperscript{61} In that pursuit, old women try to regain their youth by attempting to look young, and in so doing make themselves the target for the epigrammist's harsh invective "when they are imagined as adopting the role of pursuer rather than pursued."\textsuperscript{62} One exchange depicts one widow in precisely that \textit{manner}:

\begin{quote}
\textit{abnegat et retinet nostrum Laronia servum;}
\textit{respondes, "Orba est, dives, anus, vidua."}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{59} Text and translation both, Wheatley, "Rereading the Story of the Widow of Ephesus in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance," 631. The Latin text--from \textit{Fabulae Aesopiae}. Phaedrus, Augusti libertus. L. Mueller. Leipzig. B. G. Teubner. 1876. -- may be found at the Perseus Digital Library (http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:latinLit:phi0975.phi001.perseus-lat1:appendix.13.) Interestingly, the heading for this fable in the Teubner text is \textit{Mulier vidua et miles: Quanta sit inconstantia et libido mulierum}.

\textsuperscript{60} McGinn, \textit{Widows and Patriarchy}, 19. In speaking of women in classical antiquity: "As to sheer numbers of widows, it appears that almost all women who survived into adulthood did marry at least once, although this is largely a matter of inference."

\textsuperscript{61} Richlin, \textit{The Garden of Priapus}, 134.

\textsuperscript{62} Yet Martial (1.49) does depict widows as being hounded by legacy hunters, the \textit{captatores}, as does Pliny the Younger (2.20.1-5) and Juvenal (3.129-130). Noted by Mary Johnston, "Widows in the First and the Seventeenth Centuries," \textit{The Classical Weekly} 25, no. 6 (1931): 48. Martial 4.56 is also an invective against one Gargilianus, who sends huge presents to old men and widows, presumably to gain their favor.
non bene, crede mihi, servo servitor amico. (Epig. 2.32)

[Laronia denies it, and so retains our servant; you reply, "She is childless, rich, and old widow woman." Not good—believe me—a slave to a slave who is a friend.]  

Likewise, Martial can speak of his friend Licinianus, about to enter into the bliss of luxurious retirement, one of escaping the groveling clients in addition to the imperia viduarum—the "dictates of the widows," a depiction critical of their haughtiness.64 As to their physical attraction, Martial in his usual terseness makes plain his thoughts:

"An possim vetulam" quaeris Matronia; possum et vetulam, sed tu mortua, non vetula es.

[You, Matronia, inquire, "And are you able (to love) a little old woman?" I am able – yes, even a little old woman. But you're not even that; you're just…a corpse.]

Horace also has little good to say about sexually aggressive old women, especially in his surprisingly harsh Epodes 8 and 12, the latter being more harsh than the former.65 Similar images and themes appear in both: the poet's revulsion at the physical appearance of the old woman; the wealth and high lineage of the woman; the old woman's inability to spark any interest on the male poet's part.66 Occasionally the

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63 McGinn, Widows and Patriarchy, 31. McGinn takes this as advice to Martial from a friend, "not to tangle with a widow who is both old and rich."

64 Epig. 1.49.34


66 The most notable effect is impotency.
old women appear as witches as well. Horace's satire of Canidia and her companion Sagana scouring about in the dirt of the Aventine graveyard looking, presumably, for ingredients vital to the casting of spells. As the scene unfolds, the small statue of Priapus standing erect in the garden, frozen in fear, as he witnesses the cultic worship of Hecate and Tisiphone taking place. The tension building up in his wooden body eventually precipitates a loud cracking in his buttocks, causing the hags to scurry away in fear. But, as they flee, the now jovial Priapus couldn't help but note that his flatus caused Canidia's false teeth to fly out, and Sagana's wig to fall off--marks of their physical ungainliness. Also noteworthy is the fact that the two appear to be gathering ingredients for love potions.

67 More cautiously, McGinn, Widows and Patriarchy, 33. [Old women] were, moreover, often identified with the practice of witchcraft. Widows, perhaps because they were not automatically and absolutely associated with old age in antiquity, are relatively rarely singled out in this way." But McGinn also footnotes Pliny Hist Nat. 28.48 where the names of widows are utilized in magic spells. The text at that point reads: *inguinibus medentur aliqui liceum telae detractum alligantes novenis septenis nodis, ad singulos nominantes viduam aliquam atque ita inguini adalligantes.* [Some (tumors) in the groin region are healed thus: a thread of spider web taken, binding it into seven or nine knots, for each knot naming a certain widow, and thus attaching it to the groin.] Thus even though we cannot automatically assume that Canidia and Sagana are widows involved in witchcraft, it is conversely true that we cannot reject the thought outright, especially given the fact that Horace's scene seems to involve the art of making love-potions--a situation which certainly does harmonize with the stereotype mentioned previously, namely, that widows are obsessed with sex.


69 Sat.1.8.

70 This scene, coupled with that of the Widow of Ephesus, calls to mind a much later Christian decree from the conservative Council of Elvira (309 C.E.). Canon 35 of the same forbids widows from spending the night in a cemetery since under the pretense of prayer they secretly commit evil deeds.

71 *Canidiae dentis, altum Saganae caliendrum / excidere atque herbas atque incantata lacertis /vincula cum magno risuque iocoque videres.* (Sat.1.8.48-50)
The Silver Age satirist Juvenal writes with the most acerbic pen of all in his criticism of women. At the onset of his collection of satires, Juvenal diagnoses the degree of sickness of Roman society, a place in which younger men shamelessly chase after the wealth of old women, usually through a sexual relationship. The poet's thoroughly misogynistic sixth satire harshly criticizes women in general, especially the outspoken female who flaunts traditional societal norms. Juvenal states that the gossipy woman-about-town who "can say who got the widow pregnant, and in which month (dicet quis viduam praegnatem fecerit et quo mense)."

The question naturally presents itself: why are these poets so harsh towards elderly women? What is it that really rankles them? We are correct to assume that it runs deeper than boyish "locker room talk" about the appearance of the opposite sex. More probable, the poets are using verse as a medium for norming women into following appropriate social conventions. As Richlin suggests: "It seems at least possible that invective against vetulae constitutes a sort of apotropaic satire that attempts to belittle and control the power of old women, pitting the phallus against the threat of sterility, death, and the chthonic forces." Thus the invective, prominent especially in Horace at the onset of Augustus' conservative reign, becomes a tool for social control.

72 Sat. 1.38-44
73 Sat. 6.405-06
75 Richlin, The Garden of Priapus, 113.
Reminding women of their place was nothing new, of course, in earlier Greek or Roman literature. Moreover, thus far we have considered only purely literary creations of the authors. At least one other well-known episode from actual late Republic history demonstrates a similar attitude over against prominent women. In this case, the prominent woman also happens to be a widow, the infamous Clodia Metelli, one of the three daughters of the distinguished aristocrat Appius Claudius Pulcher. Although rumored to be wayward much earlier, it was after Clodia allegedly poisoned her husband, Metellus Celer, and entered into widowhood that her unabashed indulgences caused much scandal in Rome. Her harshest critic was Cicero, and his vitriol against the woman was unleashed in his defense of Clodia's former lover, Marcus Caelius Rufus, accused of murdering Clodia's brother. Set against the backdrop of the early April festival of the Megalesia, the Pro Caelio is one of Cicero's oratory masterpieces as he provides theatrical entertainment by his performance for the crowd forced to choose between the opening of the festival games and the drama of this celebrated trial. However, the speech becomes much more of an attack upon Clodia (present at the trial) than a defense of his young client. Seizing the opportunity afforded him by the

76 Not to be confused with Clodia Pulchra, her niece, who was briefly married to Octavian.

77 Plutarch (Vit. Cic. 29) infers that—ironically—Cicero's marriage had dissolved because of his wife Terentia's suspicion that the orator was having an affair with Clodia. Plutarch also comments on Clodia's character, relating how one of her nicknames was "Quadrantia," after a certain lover sent her common copper coins (quadrans) in a purse instead of silver.

78 The standard study is Katherin A. Geffken, Comedy in the Pro Caelio (Leiden: Brill, 1973).

79 Nor is the Pro Caelio Cicero's only verbal attack upon the nature of wayward widows. Sassia's character was also openly called into question in Pro Cluentio, and McGinn asserts, "Sassia's lust is an issue central to the criminal case..." (McGinn, Widows and Patriarchy, 31.) Sassia was the one who accused her own son Cluentius of having poisoned her third husband, Oppicianicus.
trial and the crowd, Cicero took center stage, even pretending at one point to conjure up
the spirits of long dead ancestors of the Claudian line to pass judgment upon the
wantonness of their descendant. Although never directly accusing her, nonetheless
Cicero makes it painfully clear to whom he refers in his hypothetical scenario, which
suggests that her recent widowhood has done nothing but afforded even more
opportunity for debauchery:

I am not saying anything now against that woman: but if there were a woman
totally unlike her, who made herself common to everybody; who had always
someone or other openly avowed as her lover; to whose gardens, to whose
house, to whose baths the lusts of every one had free access as of their own
right; a woman who even kept young men, and made up for the parsimony
of their fathers by her liberality; if she lived, being a widow, with freedom, being a
lascivious woman, with wantonness, being a rich woman, extravagantly, and
being a lustful woman, after the fashion of prostitutes; am I to think anyone an
adulterer who might happen to salute her with a little too much freedom? [Pro
Caelio 16.38]

Anne Leen has noted the prevalence in Cicero’s speech of the word domus, a
term latent with social nuances and implications and the egregious violations of the
same, of which Clodia was also guilty. Cicero, of course, is exaggerating the behavior
of his target for rhetorical effect, a common trick of trial lawyers then and now. Whether

80 In particular, Appius Claudius Caecus the famous patrician (340–273 B.C.E.). Cicero impersonates
the long dead Caecus at Pro Cael.14.33-34

81 Translation by Albert Curtis Clark (1908). Accessed via Perseus Digital

82 Anne Leen, “Clodia Oppugnatrix: The Domus Motif in Cicero’s ‘Pro Caelio,’” The Classical Journal
96, no. 2 (2000): 141–62. The home was supposed to reflect a woman’s strict adherence to the rules of
social conduct which, no matter how different the actual practice in the late Republic, customarily
demanded chastity, fidelity, and wifely obedience. Tradition dung to the ideal of the chaste matrona who
stayed at home attending to domestic duties like spinning and weaving, and remained faithful and
obedient to her husband. Sexual impropriety, whether consensual or not, destroyed a woman’s reputation
and that of her home.” (145)
or not the historical Clodia was actually so outlandish in her scandalous behavior is difficult to ascertain. At the same time, Cicero's speech certainly does reveal certain standards and societal norms that the widow Clodia appears to have violated. Artfully, the orator even plants in the mind of his audience the question of whether or not a Roman domus headed by a female can actually even function in an appropriate manner.\textsuperscript{83} As with the invectives of Horace against old women, the issue here of a widow's freedom seems to be a main concern of Cicero and, perhaps, of male aristocrats in general at this point in Roman history. Jo Ann McNamara notes that many modern scholars attribute this freedom and power of women as "an outgrowth of the popular sine manu form of marriage," a marriage arrangement that enabled the woman to remain under the power of her father instead of her husband.\textsuperscript{84}

Yet all of the above portraiture of widows—noble and scandalous alike—found in extant literature are portraits of aristocratic women. This, however, represents only an extremely small percentage of the overall Roman demographic. Moreover, as we pursue our main thesis of charity toward early Christian widows of the Gentile world, there is a need to compose a more realistic portrait of the average Roman widow, the type of which were attracted to the early Christian movement.\textsuperscript{85}

\textsuperscript{83} Anne Leen, "Clodia Oppugnatrix: The Domus Motif in Cicero's ‘Pro Caelio,'" 146. "Nonetheless It is clear from what Cicero says that, with no husband present and other irregularities on display, there is something radically wrong with Clodia's household: at best it is poorly run, at worst it is a pathological anomaly."


\textsuperscript{85} Bruce W. Longenecker, "Exposing the Economic Middle: A Revised Economy Scale for the Study of Early Urban Christianity," \textit{Journal for the Study of the New Testament} 31, no. 3 (March 1, 2009): 270: "In my view, it would be very difficult to argue for a double-figure percentage for members above ES5 in early Christian communities." Cf. Friesen's poverty scale as discussed in Ch. 2.
To begin, if the aristocratic Roman women were only a small percentage of the overall Roman demographic, is it even possible to calculate some plausible numbers as to the number of widows that there may have been in ancient Roman (and, by extension, throughout the empire) in our selected time frame? That, indeed, is a formidable task and one really beyond the reach of high accuracy. Scholars generally recognize this. Despite this, some have attempted to compile a rudimentary demographic picture—more of a mosaic, in reality. Various factors, however, complicate the attempts. Most importantly, McGinn notes that "widow" was not an independent legal category at Rome and "it is disputable whether it even qualifies as a sociological type." In other words, the Romans never really thought of their widows as a separate and distinct legal entity, much less one they tracked statistically on a census. Another factor that must be taken into account when trying to reconstruct plausible demographic numbers is that widowhood was not necessarily a permanent state; remarriage was quite common among aristocratic women, less so among lower-class women past the age of 30. Moreover, the Lex Iulia de maritandis ordinibus of 18 B.C.E. required

86 McGinn, Widows and Patriarchy, 12. "From antiquity down to the early modern period we are left to some fairly unreliable sources in attempting to measure human populations, a fact well recognized by scholars, who are sensitive to the difficulties in reading such facts from literature, for example. Demographers characterize the last century and a half as the 'statistical era' when developed countries such as England and the United States have sought to record precisely and preserve accurately such data as births, deaths, and marriages, creating a lopsided abundance of 'necessary knowledge' for this period."

87 McGinn, Widows and Patriarchy, 29.

widows to remarry within a year after the death of their husbands or face penalty.\textsuperscript{89} Or we might think of how times of active war in the empire might well escalate the number of widows at that time. Thus, the point is clear: the number of widows was constantly in flux, adding to the challenge of developing a realistic demographic.\textsuperscript{90}

Yet scholars have made attempts. Since there are no preserved statistics from antiquity on widows, of necessity attempts need to be made in an indirect manner, usually via such things as the average age of a woman at first marriage and calculations of life expectancy. Concerning the former, McGinn reckons that there was a difference

\begin{quotation}
\textsuperscript{89} For text and commentary on the \textit{Lex Iulia} see Cooley, \textit{The Age of Augustus}, 356–57. It is true that there was resistance to the perceive harshness of the law vis-à-vis widows in particular; the \textit{Lex Papia} (9 B.C.E.) softened the requirement, allowing widows up to two years to remarry. These laws, which must be taken into account when discussing Saint Paul's advice to widows about remarriage in 1 Corinthians 7, will be discussed below. Gardner notes that widows "seem to have attracted no disapproval in society at large by re-marrying." (Gardner, \textit{Women in Roman Law and Society}, 51.) Also, upon the law's passage, widows younger than 20 or older than 50 were exempt (McGinn, \textit{Widows and Patriarchy}, 35.)

Augustus seems to have been following the guidance of Romulus (as the founder of a 'new Rome') who set the time for remarriage of widows at 10 months (i.e. one year) following the death of her husband. Ovid mentions the law of Romulus in the introduction to the \textit{Fasti} (1. 27-36) as he relates the historic establishment of the calendar. The 10-month year seems to have been following the pattern of the Greek year. Ovid chides Romulus for knowing about swords more than calendars (\textit{scilicet arma magis quam sidera, Romule, noras}), yet acknowledges there was a logic (ratio) to his method: \textit{quod satis est, utero matris dum prodeat infans, hoc anno statuit temporis esse satis;} [that which is enough (time) while an infant grows in the womb of the mother, thus also stands as enough time for a year.] While moderns would also find just as much fault with this reasoning—since everyone knows human gestation is 9 months, not 10— I can't help but speculate that the 10-month calculation must be based on a \textit{lunar} year calculation. Following a lunar calendar, human gestation is actually closer to 10 months than to 9. The task is also before a wiser mind than mine to flesh out this idea as to how a 10-month gestation period harmonizes more with Biblical symbolism, where the number 10 consistently represents a number of completeness.

Finally, Gardner also notes that should a widow remarry before the established mourning period was over, the marriage remained legally binding but the widow incurred \textit{infamia} (Gardner, \textit{Women in Roman Law and Society}, 54.) And Caligula refused to allow reduction of the mourning period for pregnant widows (ibid.) With the arrival of Christianity, remarriage for widows becomes increasingly discouraged, and even penalized by the Church. For more on \textit{infamia}, cf. Harmut Leppin, \textit{Between Marginality and Celebrity: Entertainers and Entertainments in Roman Society}, in \textit{The Oxford Handbook of Social Relations in the Roman World}, ed. Michael Peachin, 2011, 671–72.

\textsuperscript{90} For challenges in general, see Walter Scheidel, \textit{“Progress and Problems in Roman Demography,”} in \textit{Debating Roman Demography}, ed. Walter Scheidel (Leiden Netherlands ; Boston: Brill Academic Pub, 2000), 1–82.
\end{quotation}
between the average marrying age for elite young women when compared to non-elite young women: "What this means is that elite males tended to marry for the first time in their early twenties, elite females in their mid-teens, sub-elite males by around 30, sub-elite females by 20." Thus, an average age difference between spouses for elite couples was probably not more than seven years, while for non-elite couples it rose to ten years. The implications of this are as follows:

This difference alone suggests, first, that most women lost a husband in a first marriage to death and second, that there were large numbers of widows, particularly among the lower classes. In other words, the "typical" marriage, when not interrupted by divorce, ended after less than 20 years through the death of one of the spouses, usually the husband.

The latter concern, namely, life expectancy calculations, likewise can only give a very general picture at best due to the lack of accurate information preserved in ancient texts. Harlow and Laurence note that evidence points to the fact that there was a high infancy mortality rate (300 per 1000), and a sharp increase in the death rate after age 50. Even the chronological ages inscribed on some 55,000 known tombstones need to


be handled with care as they may not reflect accurately a demographic pattern but rather a "pattern of commemoration." ⁹⁵

Concerning widows specifically, naturally similar problems remain. Apart from the sweeping generalization that there were a large number of widows, specific numbers are difficult to come by. Krause suggests that, in all likelihood, "about 40% of all Roman children lost their fathers before they reached the age of 15." ⁹⁶ Yet what does this mean? Is it as simple as concluding that 40% of women lost their husbands? Not necessarily. The mother may have already passed away. Multiple children in a family also can also be assumed in many cases, ⁹⁷ meaning 40% of children is not the equivalent of 40% of wives. One attempt at translating vague observations and percentages into actual numbers is by Treggiari in her standard work on Roman marriage. ⁹⁸ Some of her observations on demography are useful and germane to the study of widows, selectively culled for our purposes. Since Treggiari’s conclusions below have implications of how we will later approach the text of 1 Timothy, I quote her at some length:

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⁹⁵ Harlow and Laurence, *Growing Up and Growing Old in Ancient Rome*, 11. See also Mueller, “Single Women in the Roman Funerary Inscriptions,” for her analysis of some 30,000 funerary inscriptions from the city of Rome in an effort to analyze “the commemorative pattern for women at various stages in their life cycle” in an effort to find out who among elderly women of the senatorial and equestrian elite was most frequently commemorated and why (295-96).

⁹⁶ Krause, “Children in the Roman Family and Beyond,” 634.


⁹⁸ Treggiari, *Roman Marriage*. 

235
A high percentage of the population would not reach an age to marry, and of those who did many women would not survive to the end of what might have been their child-bearing years and many men would not reach 50. In a modern stable population where females’ life expectancy at birth is 25, of an original cohort of 100,000 females born, about 46,000 would reach 15, about 43,000 live to 20. So well under half of all girl babies would reach the age which Romans considered normal for first marriage. But a girl who survived to 10 had an average expectation of life of forty more years and at 20 of thirty-seven, so that it would be reasonable for a Roman girl who survived the perils of childhood to look forward with some confidence to marriage and child-bearing. Approximately 27,000 of the hypothetical cohort, just over a quarter of all females born, would reach 50, by which time they can be regarded as having completed and survived their child-bearing years. About 20,000 would survive to 60.⁹⁹

Ilse Mueller, in the afore-mentioned study of funerary inscriptions, offers other conclusions that supplement the information above. Mueller deduced from the epigraphic information that as the reported age on the respective tombstones of decedent females increased, formal commemoration on the same by a family member decreased, with servants often left to provide the commemorations. The implication is that not only have the spouses of these elderly women passed from the scene but, in all likelihood, their adult children have as well.¹⁰⁰ She also notes this: “Given that Roman women were regularly married to men between seven to ten years their seniors, it would be demographically impossible that almost fifty percent of women over fifty still had a living husband.”¹⁰¹

The above information gives us a consistent picture that there were a large number of widows in the Roman Empire during the late republican and early imperial

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periods. Most of the source material naturally relates information concerning the elites—the senatorial and equestrian classes. When we take into account the silent majority of the Roman world, i.e. the slaves, freedmen, and common laborers, the number of widows proliferates proportionately.

Yet what of the daily life of widows? There is not much of a need here to substantiate the obvious: a few widows had means at their disposal to ensure a comfortable existence, the vast majority did not and had to live a meager—if not day-to-day—existence. Much of what we concluded in the previous chapter as to the lot in life of the poor applies here as well. As for the wealthier widows, it should be noted that by this point in Rome's social history it had become the norm for a woman to marry *sui iuris*, that is, under her own authority. This had implications concerning not only how much wealth an elite bride brought to a marriage but also how much she could take (or retain) from a marriage once it was dissolved by either divorce or death.\(^\text{102}\) Treggiari makes an interesting comment in respect to wills and inheritances that "Legacies to husbands rarely provoke juristic discussion; legacies to wives are frequently mentioned."\(^\text{103}\) Some legacies were conditional, to be received by a surviving wife only if she had born children during the course of the marriage or if she promised not to remarry (presumably so they would not jeopardize the inheritance of legitimate heirs), although this latter condition was deemed largely unenforceable during the Augustan era.\(^\text{104}\) At a

\(^{102}\) Cf. Treggiari, *Roman Marriage*, 324–69..

\(^{103}\) Treggiari, *Roman Marriage*, 387.

\(^{104}\) Treggiari, *Roman Marriage*, 387. Furthermore, forbidding remarriage would have clashed directly with Augustus' *Lex Iulia* and *Lex Papia* of 18 and 9 B.C.E. respectively, which placed an obligation upon widows of the upper classes to remarry.
bare minimum, it was common practice to for a widowed wife to receive back her dowry.

To summarize, then, elite widows had means of survival at their disposal that the greater majority of widows in the Roman world did not.\footnote{As Juvenal’s sixth satire indicates, widows were the constant targets of notorious \textit{captatores} ("legacy hunters"). Cf. Johnston, “Widows in the First and the Seventeenth Centuries,” 48.} The lot of most Roman widows was the lot of the Roman poor in general, perhaps to an even greater degree:

A great many found themselves trapped in utter destitution, without home or savings, without a family to support them, unable to find sufficient work to feed and support themselves...Those who were citizens of the cities in which they lived might hope to benefit from the occasionally benefactions of the rich, but those who could not claim citizenship were excluded even from this assistance.\footnote{Finn OP, \textit{Almsgiving in the Later Roman Empire}, 19.}

\textbf{Summary}

From the brief demographic information presented above, we can conclude that there was a significant number of widows in the Roman world, the majority of whom were socially and economically disadvantaged. Like their Jewish counterparts in Roman Palestine, the majority Roman widows faced many uncertainties in respect to obtaining the necessities of life. Similarly, the best strategy for survival in both worlds was to remarry if possible; attachment to a male afforded more security than trying to survive as an independent woman. Elite Roman widows, however, frequently had means of survival at their disposal and thus could voluntarily forego remarriage and survive rather well. Some exercised this option as a witness to their belief in the ideal of the Roman \textit{univira}, others for less noble reasons.\footnote{Among these might be the so-called \textit{cautio Muciana}. In the late republic era, husbands often convinced their wives not to remarry so that legacies to their own children would remain intact and not}
independent widows was small. Having resources at their disposal as well as independence that came with such a status brought some wealthier widows of the Roman world into conflict with perceived societal norms. Hence, unlike their Jewish widow counterparts, Roman widows (and old Roman women in general) were targets of satire and harsh invective among Roman authors. All though not primarily in Augustus' mind, nonetheless widows also are affected by the emperor's sweeping marriage legislation of his early career, the *Lex Iulia* (18 B.C.E.) and the revision of the same, the *Lex Popia* (9 B.C.E.).

As the Christian movement expands westward from Jerusalem throughout the first century C.E., the composition of Christianity as a whole begins to shift from a primarily Jewish sect to a religion more comprised of Gentiles than of Jews. Given the well-known facts that Christianity often attracted adherents from the poorer, common masses (widows included), the above sketch of the widow in Roman society will serve to help shed some light upon the Biblical texts most directly speaking to the widow's situation, as we shall see in the next section.

**Widows in the New Testament Epistles**

As noted earlier, James of Jerusalem emphatically set the tone for his readers by delineating the principles of true religion in the eyes of God. One of those principles mentioned was to care for the orphans and widows "in their distress" (ἐπισκέπτεσθαι). 

pass into another family should the widow remarry. Thus, the widow gave a guarantee (cautio) not to break the promise to forego remarriage. If she chose to remarry, she also had to give up the right a legacy her previous husband had left her, on the condition that she not remarry. Q. Mucius Scaevola introduced this legislation in the late second century B.C.E. See Gardner, "Women in Roman Law and Society," 54–55.
Saint Paul especially underscores the teaching of James to his own readers. This fact is not surprising given the fact that the book of Galatians reports a face-to-face meeting of Paul with the leaders of the Jerusalem congregation, of whom James was pre-eminent.

It is in Paul's first letter to the congregation in Corinth that the widows receive mention. In this letter that addresses many issues confronting the Christians in Corinth and problems swirling about the congregation, widows receive mention not because there is some situation that needs immediate rectifying. Rather, Paul's instructions about widows is a brief sub-point of a longer discourse concerning Christians and the proper attitude toward marriage in general. The seventh chapter of First Corinthians speaks to various groups: the unmarried men; widows; young people who were engaged to be married; divorcees. The Apostle's goal is to guide the Corinthians to live God-pleasing lives in whatever situation they happen to be in, as they wait in reverent expectation for Christ's *parousia*. It is true that Paul speaks about a "present crisis" (7:26) that may certainly have exerted some influence on his pastoral advice concerning marrying, remarrying, or not marrying at all. Yet his statement in 7:29-31 really is the dominant thought of the chapter that is to guide both Paul and the Corinthians in all their actions:

What I mean, brothers and sisters, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they do not; those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were

108 Jas. 1:27 BGT

109 "All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I had been eager to do all along." (Gal. 2:10 NIV)
not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away. (1 Cor. 7:29-31 NIV)

Here Paul is calling for a sober evaluation of one's life as well as a healthy Christian Weltanschaung. The nature of things in this present world is ephemeral. While such things as marriage and companionship are blessings of God, each Christian needs to realize that such blessings are merely temporal, not eternal. In that respect, Paul echoes the words of Jesus recorded in Matthew 22 where the latter, arguing with the Sadducees about marriage and remarriage in the next age, asserts that marriage is a purely temporal arrangement and with the passing away of the earth in its present form so also marriage will not be part of the new cosmological order. Paul encourages his readers to have a similar mindset. He states that the Corinthians should neither be preoccupied with the idea of needing to get married nor strive strenuously to avoid it. From earlier chapters we can deduce that Corinth certainly was a place where sexual immorality was prevalent, and Paul advises his readers that if a person is unable to control sexual desires, the natural and God-pleasing outlet for such passion is

110 Paul speaks approvingly of the marriage bond in Ephesians 5:21-33, seeing in the intimate earthly union a deeper spiritual picture of Christ's relationship with his own bride, the church.

111 Jesus replied, "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven." (Matt. 22:29-30 NIV)

112 The entire chapter may have been written in response to an aggressive ascetic movement in Corinth who had gone to the other extreme of the libertarianism Paul had rebuked in the previous chapter by embracing celibacy."It has long been debated whether the words [of 7:1] 'it is goo for a man not to touch a woman' were coined by Paul and thus express his own negative view of the marital relationship, or whether they actually stemmed from the Corinthians, whose letter to Paul may have expressed their reservations about marriage in this catchy manner (cf. similar slogans of the Corinthians in 6:12,13). The latter suggestion goes back at least to Origen in the third century and has been accepted by many modern commentators and some English versions." Gregory J. Lockwood, 1 Corinthians (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2000), 224.
marriage (7:1-5, 9). His prayer, however, was that people could live as he did, unattached and devoted entirely to the Lord and his work. Yet he also recognizes that the ability to live in such a matter is a special spiritual gift that God has not given to everyone (7:7).  

It is in this context that Paul offers advice specifically to widows:  

Λέγω δὲ τοῖς ἁγάμοις καὶ ταῖς χήραις, καλὸν αὐτοῖς ἐὰν μείνωσιν ὡς κἀγὼ· εἰ δὲ οὐκ ἔγκρατεύονται, γαμησάτωσαν, κρείττον γὰρ ἐστὶν γαμῆσαι ἢ πυροῦσθαι. (1 Cor. 7:8-9 BGT)

[I say to the unmarried men and to the widows, it is a good thing for you if you remain as also I am. But if they cannot maintain self-control, let them marry, for it is a better thing to marry than to continually burn with desire.]  

Further:

Γυνὴ δέδεται ἕφ᾽ ὅσον χρόνον ζῇ ὁ ἁνήρ αὐτῆς· εὰν δὲ κοιμηθῇ ὁ ἁνήρ, ἑλευθέρα ἐστὶν ὁ θελει γαμηθῆναι, μόνον ἐν κυρίῳ· μακρακριβεῖνα δὲ ἐστίν ἐὰν οὔτος μείνῃ, κατὰ τὴν ἐμὴν γνώμην· δοκῶ δὲ κἀγὼ πνεῦμα θεοῦ ἔχων. (1 Cor. 7:39-40 BGT)

[A woman is bound for as much time as her husband lives. But if the husband falls asleep she is free to be married to one whom she wishes, but only in the Lord. But according to my opinion, if she remains such as she is, she is more blessed. And I think that I also have the Spirit of God.]  

Paul indicates that his advice to widows regarding remarriage or not falls into the category of "sanctified Christian judgment" as opposed to an explicit command of the

113 Lockwood, 1 Corinthians, 223. Lockwood notes (footnote 1) that it was really Jerome in his Adversus lovinianum I.3 ff. that influenced greatly the development of celibacy in subsequent ages: "Jerome's interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7 as a charter for the preeminence of celibacy and monastic life held sway for more than a millennium."

114 The verb κομιάω is frequently used in the New Testament in speaking of the death of a believer: Mt 27:52; J 11:11; Ac 7:60; 13:36; 1 Cor 7:39; 11:30; 15:6, 18, 20, 51; 1 Th 4:13–15; 2 Pt 3:4. Here, though, it is best not to read such a nuance into the verb.

115 I follow Thayer's Greek Lexicon here for οὖτος.

Lord (cmp. 7:25). As their pastor, Paul does have a concern for a widow who may be harboring the thought of marrying a non-Christian for whatever reason, whether simple personal desire or, presumably, out of some economic necessity—a common concern for widows of society's lower strata. Paul does not forbid remarriage. But with a parting shot, he closes the discourse by reminding those who may have been claiming to have an extra measure of the Spirit that enabled them to rise above the common believer to the status of spiritual celibate, he also has the Spirit as well as the authority of apostleship given to him by Christ. Therefore, the Corinthians should ponder further the advice he gives and apply it to their own lives in a God-pleasing manner.

In Pauline scholarship, however, the question has been raised lately concerning Paul's advice to the Corinthian widows, namely, if whether the advice as to what is God pleasing runs counter to what is "Caesar-pleasing."117 In particular, questions have surfaced about the appropriateness of Paul's directives of I Corinthians 7 over against the marriage legislation of Augustus regarding widows.118 Although not the primary target of the Augustan marriage reforms, widows too were included in and affected by two laws, the Lex Iulia (18 B.C.E.) and the Lex Papia Poppaea (9 B.C.E.).

Galinsky, among others, has documented well the conservative nature of the Augustan imperial regime.119 Augustus' reign was a conservative reaction to the turmoil

117 McNamara, “Wives and Widows in Early Christian Thought,” 1979, 584: “Thus, when Paul preached continence—when he urged the single to remain as they were and the widowed to avoid re-marriage—he was not only departing from his native Jewish tradition but defying the laws of the Empire whose citizenship he claimed.”

118 Reed, “Paul on Marriage and Singleness: Reading 1 Corinthians with the Augustan Marriage Laws.”

119 Galinsky, Augusitan Culture, 80–140.
of the preceding century of civil unrest. His reception of the *clipeus virtutis* in 27 B.C.E. heralded the dawn of a new era, as related by the emperor himself in his *Res Gestae*:

In my sixth and seventh consulships, when I had extinguished the flames of civil war, after receiving by universal consent the absolute control of affairs, I transferred the republic from my own control to the will of the senate and the Roman people. For this service on my part I was given the title of Augustus by decree of the senate, and the doorposts of my house were covered with laurels by public act, and a civic crown was fixed above my door, and a golden shield was placed in the Curia Julia whose inscription testified that the senate and the Roman people gave me this in recognition of my valor, my clemency, my justice, and my piety. After that time I took precedence of all in rank, but of power I possessed no more than those who were my colleagues in any magistracy.

In addition to such other things as the rebuilding of over eighty temples and the celebration of the Secular Games in 17 B.C.E. (with its prominent emphasis on family), Augustus sought to regulate marriage, divorce, and remarriage. Scholars

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120 Galinsky, *Augustan Culture*, 50.


123 Aug. *Res Gestae* IV.22. Horace’s *Carmen Saeculare*, the official poem penned for the celebration of the Secular Games, emphasizes marriage and family especially in lines 1-20, the very opening of the poem. Only children of intact, aristocratic Roman families were chosen as participants in this ceremony.

124 Augustus makes vague mention of *multarum rerum exempla imitanda posteris tradidi* that he recovered for use from the traditions of their ancestors (*Res Gestae* II.8). Suetonius provides greater details of the marriage laws in Aug. 34 and the popular resistance they incurred, which led to the modifications of 9 C.E. that allowed more flexibility in the treatment of bachelors of the equestrian class in particular: “He revised existing laws and enacted some new ones, for example, on extravagance, on adultery and chastity, on bribery, and on the encouragement of marriage among the various classes of citizens. Having made somewhat more stringent changes in the last of these than in the others, he was unable to carry it out because of an open revolt against its provisions, until he had abolished or mitigated a part of the penalties, besides increasing the rewards and allowing a three years’ exemption from the obligation to marry after the death of a husband or wife. When the knights even then persistently called for its repeal at a public show, he sent for the children of Germanicus and exhibited them, some in his own lap and some in their father’s, intimating by his gestures and expression that they should not refuse to follow that young man’s example. And on finding that the spirit of the law was being evaded by
of Roman law currently do not possess a complete text of either of the two marriage
laws. Their content, however, was preserved in the legal commentaries of Ulpian and
Paul the Jurist, dating from the late 2nd–early 3rd century C.E. Lefkowitz and Fant
capture the essence of the 18 B.C.E. legislation, the *lex Julia de maritandis ordinibus*:

In 18 BC, the emperor Augustus turned his attention to social problems at Rome. Extravagance and adultery were widespread. Among the upper classes, marriage was increasingly infrequent and, many couples who did marry failed to produce offspring. Augustus, who hoped thereby to elevate both the morals and the numbers of the upper classes in Rome, and to increase the population of native Italians in Italy, enacted laws to encourage marriage and having children, including provisions establishing adultery as a crime.

The primary thrust of Augustus’ marriage laws seems to have been concerns for
public morality, a diminished aristocracy, and, perhaps, a desire to acquire more
income from penalties imposed upon the upper class for flaunting marriage laws.

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127 “To prevent excessive divorce, Augustus tried fruitlessly to revive the cults of Patrician and Plebian Chastity which paid honor to faithful wives, but the effort earned nothing but mockery and contempt from observers like Juvenal.” (McNamara, “Wives and Widows in Early Christian Thought,” 1979, 583.)

128 For descriptions of the Augustan marriage laws along with compilation of ancient jurists’ opinions on the same, see the following: Cooley, *The Age of Augustus*, 354–67; Grubbs, *Women and the Law in the Roman Empire: A Sourcebook on Marriage, Divorce and Widowhood*, 83–87; Lefkowitz and Fant, *Women’s Life in Greece and Rome*, 127–35. Tacitus, in *Annales* (III.25) opines that Augustus’ marriage laws also had as a goal the increase of the imperial treasury. Yet McNamara also notes: “For a Roman man, therefore [because of *sine manu* marriage], marriage provided neither sexual nor financial comfort, and even threatened him with the humiliation of being cuckolded without the satisfaction of violent revenge. His wife was under no legal obligation to provide him with sexual intercourse and, unless she made a will to that effect, her husband could not even count on being her heir.” But she further notes: “On the woman’s side, however, this apparent freedom was largely illusory.” (McNamara, “Wives and Widows in Early Christian Thought,” 1979, 583.)
Nonetheless, the legislation affected widows too. The original law of 18 B.C.E., the *lex Julia*, had mandated that a widow remarry within a year of her husband's death.\footnote{129} This was later relaxed a bit by the revision of 9 B.C.E., the *lex Papia Poppaea*. Backlash from the upper class may have caused this adjustment, since the mandate that widows remarry seemed to directly clash with the nobility's long-held respect for the *univira*.\footnote{130}

With this background, I would briefly like to address the argument of a recent dissertation that assesses Paul's advice to widows in 1 Corinthians 7 as being somewhat rebellious against the Roman government.\footnote{131} Reed sees Paul's advice to widows that they not remarry as influenced by the Roman respect for the *univira*, a tradition the Apostle seems to embrace even if it means flaunting the emperor's law. Further, Reed sees Paul's views on marriage as influenced by Cynic views on marriage and childbearing, which discouraged procreation.\footnote{132} This is the general thrust of the author's argument.

In considering Reed's position, a few thoughts come to mind. For one, the author infers too much from scant passages that he uses to build his argument that the marriage laws of Augustus were both well-known empire wide and expected to be

\footnote{129}{It is interesting to note that Ovid, in the opening of his *Fasti*, mentions the fact that Romulus set up the Roman calendar as a ten-month calendar in light of the fact that this was the period of gestation for a baby, and thus also to be the period of mourning for a widow (*Fasti* I.26-35). Although the Roman year was increased to twelve months under Numa, Augustus' law originally set the time for a widow's remarriage at one year as well.}

\footnote{130}{Grubbs, *Women and the Law in the Roman Empire: A Sourcebook on Marriage, Divorce and Widowhood*, 87.}

\footnote{131}{Reed, “Paul on Marriage and Singleness: Reading 1 Corinthians with the Augustan Marriage Laws.”}

\footnote{132}{Reed, “Paul on Marriage and Singleness,” 61.}
followed by all who lived within. He relies too much on one passage of Tacitus in particular, *Annales* 3.25, where Tacitus speaks of *delatores* ("informers") reporting on people who were disregarding the marriage laws so that "every household" was in jeopardy of being reported. But what is a "household"? If Augustus has in mind to penalize the unmarried to increase the treasury, what do the "households" of the lower strata of society have to offer? For that matter, what is a legal "household" outside of Rome, in the outer areas of the empire (such as in Corinth)? To me, the author relies too heavily on Tacitus' passing comment.

There are other reasons to defend Paul's advice to the widows of Corinth as being non-subversive of Caesar's law. First, to portray Paul as intentionally flaunting the governance under which both he and other Christians lived is to paint a picture completely inconsistent with that of other portions of the New Testament. Paul had a high respect for authority, both sacred and secular. At his trial in Jerusalem Paul apologized publicly for unknowingly insulting the high priest before whom he stood. He also pointedly directed his readers at Rome to submit to the governing authorities since God himself had established them in their position to maintain order in society. The consistency of the position of the early Christian leaders can be seen in the writings of Peter as well. Secondly, there is the official title of Augustus' original marriage law

133 Reed, "Paul on Marriage and Singleness," 53.

134 Acts 23:5

135 Romans 13:1-17

136 1 Peter 2:13.
of 18 B.C.E. It is the *lex Julia de maritandis ordinibus* (emphasis mine). A study of the word *ordo* in standard Latin lexicons indicates that, in reference to society as a whole, this term applies primarily to the upper classes, the "orders."\(^{137}\) The marriage laws of Augustus aimed to reform the senatorial and equestrian classes.\(^{138}\) His legislation reflects the same agenda that Vergil put into the mouth of Anchises as Aeneas interviews him in the underworld, namely, that it would be Rome’s great task to impose order and legislation upon the world.\(^{139}\) Legitimate marriages producing legitimate upper class citizens who would handle the reins of government was, then, of high priority, especially in the wake of a century of civil unrest.\(^{140}\) Moreover, it is reasonable to conclude that "these laws were designed primarily with inheritance in mind."\(^{141}\) Rather than concluding that Paul openly flaunted Augustus’ marriage legislation in his advice that widows avoid remarriage, it is more probable that the marriage laws were simply a non-issue. How many, realistically, of the upper class orders were members of the

\(^{137}\) I am grateful to my colleague, Prof. Joel Fredrich, for sharing this insight.

\(^{138}\) Cooley, *The Age of Augustus*, 373: "It was regarded as a necessary part of the programme of restoration of stability to Roman society after the disruption of the civil wars that the hierarchy of Roman society should be demarcated more clearly, in particular by marking off clearly the two upper orders, the senators and equestrians (*equites*). Senators, as we have seen, were fenced off from certain lower ranks of society by a ban on intermarriage. Fixed property levels were set for membership of each order, whose members were expected to wear the dress appropriate to their rank on public occasions."

\(^{139}\) *Aen.* 6.851-853

\(^{140}\) Verner, *The Household of God*, 76: "Balch concludes convincingly from this and other similar evidence that members of the Roman ruling class of the early empire did indeed regard the traditional patriarchal family as a positive force in maintaining the stability of the political order and that, conversely, they would have viewed departures from the patriarchal pattern as subversive of that order."

Corinthian congregation and, if there were any, how many were widows? It is good to keep in mind how Paul himself characterizes the congregation in the letter’s opening:

Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him (1 Cor. 1:26-29 NIV)

Yet Paul's advice to the widows in Corinth would have some practical fallout in the future days of early Christianity. If widows were encouraged to remain single, who would care for them? If widows did not remarry and find support from a new husband, from where would such support come? Undoubtedly Gentile Christians in the various regions of the Roman empire knew about the situation in Jerusalem, how the widows were cared for in that congregation; Paul had personally been involved in gathering special offerings for the Jerusalem church so that they could care for their poor. Yet was the solution arrived at in Jerusalem to be a "working model" for other Christian congregations as they organized throughout the empire? Was it practical in every place? Would it be a sustainable model for caring for widows?

We can conclude from the text of 1 Timothy that the issue of caring for widows in the early Christian communities soon came to the fore. 1 Timothy 5:1-16 is the


143 The dating of 1 Timothy, the first of the "pastoral" epistles, is a contested issue. Conservative scholars hold to Pauline authorship in the mid to late 60's C.E., while scholars approaching the text with historical-critical presuppositions assert that 1 Timothy must have been written at a much later date in that the text reflects a level of congregational organization that simply did not exist in Paul's day. Contra this line of reasoning, see Gordon D. Fee, "Reflections on Church Order in the Pastoral Epistles, with Further Reflection on the Hermeneutics of Ad Hoc Documents.,” Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 28 (1985): 141–51. Many, thus, have dated 1 Timothy to the early 100's C.E. and even later. I personally hold to Pauline authorship of 1 Timothy. However, a digression into the dating of 1 Timothy is really beyond the scope of this present argument, and somewhat unnecessary. The text lays down a principle for the present and future congregations to follow, and certainly does not merely deal with a unique
directions to younger widows as to how best live in a godly manner.\textsuperscript{144}

\begin{quote}
Πρεσβυτέρω μὴ ἐπιπλήξης ἄλλα παρακάλει ὡς πατέρα, νεατέρους ὡς ἀδελφούς,\textsuperscript{2} πρεσβυτέρας ὡς μητέρας, νεατέρας ὡς ἀδελφάς ἐν πάσῃ ἀγνείᾳ.\textsuperscript{145}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{3}Χήρας τίμα τὰς ὄντως χήρας.\textsuperscript{4}εἰ δὲ τις χήρα πέθανε ἡ ἐκγονα ἔχει, μανθανότωσαν πρῶτον τὸν ἴδιον ὀἴκον εὐσεβείαν καὶ ἀμοιβὰς ἀποδίδοναι τοῖς προγόνοις. τοῦτο γὰρ ἐστιν ἀπόδεκτον ἐνώπιον τοῦ θεοῦ. \textsuperscript{5}ἡ δὲ ὄντως χήρα καὶ μεμονωμένη ἠπλικεν ἐπὶ θεόν καὶ προσμένει ταῖς δεήσεσιν καὶ ταῖς προσευχαῖς νυκτὸς καὶ ἡμέρας. \textsuperscript{6}ἡ δὲ σπατάλωσα χοῦσα τεῦθηκεν. \textsuperscript{7}καὶ ταῦτα παράγγελλε, ἵνα ἀνεπιλήμμποι υἱῶν. \textsuperscript{8}εἰ δὲ τίς τῶν ἴδιων καὶ μάλιστα οἰκεῖων οὐ προνοεῖ, τὴν πίστιν ἠρνεῖται καὶ ἐστιν ἀπίστου χείρων. \textsuperscript{9}Χήρα καταλείψαθο μὴ ἐλαττῶν ἐξήκοντας γεγονόν, ἐνὸς ἀνόρδος γυνῆ. \textsuperscript{10}ἐν ἐργοῖς καλὸις μαρτυρουμένη, εἰ ἐκτενορύφησαν, εἰ ἐξενοδοχῆσαν, εἰ ἄγιον πόδας ἔνυφεν, εἰ ἐλπισμέονοι ἐπήρκεσαν, εἰ παντὶ ἐργῷ ἀγαθῶ ἐπηκολουθήσεν. \textsuperscript{11}νεοτέρας δὲ χήρας παρατόθηκεν ὅταν γὰρ καταστρηματίσον τοῦ Χριστοῦ, γαμεῖν ἠλεύνησεν \textsuperscript{12}ἐξουσία κρίμα ὅτι τὴν πρὸτιν πίστιν ἠλέητον. \textsuperscript{13}ἀμα δὲ καὶ ἀγαθαὶ μανθάνουσαι περιερχόμεναι τὰς οἰκίας, ὦ μόνον δὲ ἀργαὶ ἀλλὰ καὶ φλόγαραι καὶ περίεργοι, λαλοῦσα τὰ μὴ δεῦτα. \textsuperscript{14}Βούλομαι οὖν νεοτέρας γαμεῖν, τεκνογονεῖν, ὀικοδομεῖν, μηδεμίαν ἀφορμὴν διδόναι τῷ ἀντικειμένῳ λοιποῖς χάριν. \textsuperscript{15}ὁ γὰρ τις ἐξετράπησαν ὡς τὸν σατάνα. \textsuperscript{16}εἰ τις πίστιν ἔχῃ χήρας, ἐπαρκεῖτο αὐτοῖς καὶ μὴ βαρείσθη ἡ ἐκκλησία, ἵνα ταῖς ὄντως χήραις ἐπαρκέσῃ. (1 Tim. 5:1-16 BGT)
\end{quote}

[Do not rebuke and elderlly man but rather encourage him as a father, (encourage) the younger men as brothers, the elderly woman as mothers, the younger women as sisters with all purity.

[Honor widows, the (ones) truly widows. If someone has children or descendants, let them learn first how to act reverently toward one’s own household and how to

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instance within the Ephesian congregation. In this respect, the number of widows that the congregation is to care for is somewhat irrelevant. Small number or large, 1 Timothy establishes the principle by which any Christian community is to operate in respect to the care of widows in their midst who are over sixty years old.


\textsuperscript{145} Although the Greek text above is from Nestle-Aland 28, I here am following the paragraph break found in the United Bible Society’s 5\textsuperscript{th} Revised Edition (Barbara Aland et al., eds., \textit{The Greek New Testament}, 5th ed. edition (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2014).
pay back to their parents for the benefits they have received. For this is a pleasing thing in God's sight. And the widow who is truly a widow, that is, having been left entirely alone, she has put her hope in God and continues in her prayers and petitions for nights and days. But the one who continues living for herself has already died, even though she lives. Instruct also these things so that they may be without reproach. But if anyone does not have respect for his own and especially those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. Let a widow be enrolled not being less than sixty years old, the wife of one man, (her character) testified by good works, (namely), if she brought up children, if she showed hospitality, if she washed the feet of saints, if she assisted the ones who were in affliction, if she dedicated herself to every good work. But refuse younger widows; for at some future time when they have a strong desire that replaces Christ, they desire to marry, having judgment because they forsook the first pledge. At the same time they are learning to be idle, going about from house to house. Not only are they idle but...
also gossipy and meddlesome, speaking about things that are not necessary to speak about.\textsuperscript{153} Therefore, I wish that younger (widows) marry,\textsuperscript{154} bear children, manage a home, and give no opportunity for an adversary to revile them. For already, some have turned aside after Satan.\textsuperscript{155} If any believing woman has widows, let her assist them and let her the church not be burdened, so that it can assist the ones truly widows.]

What 1 Timothy 5 describes, then, is a somewhat detailed plan for caring for congregational widows. If one accepts Pauline authorship of this epistle,\textsuperscript{156} it is reasonable to assume that the Apostle had seen how congregational care for widows had operated in Jerusalem, since he had visited there on a number of occasions following the establishment of the practice described in Acts 6.\textsuperscript{157} If so, Paul is then directly primarily Gentile Christians to behave toward widows in the congregation in a similar manner. Such care is to be motivated by two things: 1) it is a thing that is

\textsuperscript{153} Dillon T. Thornton, "‘Saying What They Should Not Say’: Reassessing the Gravity of the Problem of the Younger Widows (1 Tim 5:11-15)," \textit{Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society}, March 1, 2016.

\textsuperscript{154} "Jewish formal law and accepted Jewish custom undoubtedly agreed that a widow’s remarriage was both permissible and desirable and she was only required to wait long enough for it to be ascertained that she was not already pregnant at the time of the second marriage. There were in Judaism, however, some groups which considered a widow’s abstinence from remarriage to be a pious and proper act." (Rogers and Rogers, 496) While all this may be true, however, one wonders to what extent the recipients of 1 Timothy were Jewish, or if Gentile Christians shared this sentiment. Guthrie calls the advice here "common sense advice [that] is in striking contrast to the rage for celibacy which developed in the later history of the Church." Donald Guthrie, \textit{The Pastoral Epistles}, New Ed edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmann's Publishing Co; Leicester, England: Intervarsity Press, 1983), 104.

\textsuperscript{155} Since "Satan" means "The Adversary," one wonders if the author is making a play on words with the previous verse. Guthrie understands the phrase simply as "given themselves over to immoral conduct." (Guthrie, \textit{The Pastoral Epistles}, 104)


pleasing in God’s sight (v.4); 2) it is a channel for "repaying," i.e. for showing loving gratitude toward a widowed mother who had previously devoted her life to raising her children.\footnote{Philip et al., “The Role of the Church and the Christian Family towards Widow Care as Highlighted by Paul,” 54: "In the context of the Apostle, the word 'widow' specifically refers to a special category of widows, namely, those who are not receiving financial and material support from their children or relatives. It refers to those who are in need materially because they do not have children to support them materially. 'Give proper recognition' implies, to providing for widows who have no children to support them as an expression of honoring them. It was done as an expression of love and respect to the family of the deceased.”}

It is only when widow is "truly a widow" that she is to receive congregational support. Otherwise, the support is supposed to come directly from family or extended family members; they are to be the primary care givers, as 1Timothy directs. In the case of a congregational widow who is lacking such support, the members of the church become the primary support network. The defining characteristic of a "true widow" in the author's mind is the lack of relatives to care for her.\footnote{See Tsuji, “Zwischen Ideal Und Realitat,” 96–97. Here the author briefly analyzes the argument of U. Wagener, a scholar undoubtedly influenced by the "Haustafel" line of interpretation. This line of argument states that the earliest Christian communities, centered in house churches, organized themselves gradually, following the pattern of the Roman household. Wagener questions whether the imperative μανθανέντωσαν should (as is most natural) refer to "children or descendants" ("grandchildren" NIV). Rather, he sees it as referring to the widows themselves; they themselves are the ones who need to learn piety within the household by fulfilling their appointed duties. Grammatically, Tsuji questions the legitimacy of this, since the antecedent of the 3rd plural imperative would then be χήρα. But Wagener takes the antecedent as χήρας of v. 3. More interestingly, though, is that Tsuji sees the Greek term here used in reference to widows, ἤ δὲ σπαταλῶσα ζωσα (v.6), as not in any kind of sexual, sensual sense, but simply as "abundant"; she has a full life (üppig Leben) for the very reason that she does have children and other relatives who are providing care for her. Tsuji argues that the "ideal" widow is she who prays day and night and trusts in God. But the reality is that, among the target audience, there have developed official women / widow groups within the congregation who are exercising some forms of leadership. Tsuji sees that the goal of the author of 1 Timothy is to recall widows back to exercising their traditional conservative roles.}

S. Paulus ergo voluit dicere: 'Honora viduas, illas scilicet vere orbatas, privatus, destitutas ab omni auxilio; istae vere viduae sunt. Et similis lusus verborum
habetur etiam in versione latina Vulgatae, cum inveniatur etiam adjectivus "viduus" i.e. "orbatus", "privatus".¹⁶⁰

[Saint Paul, therefore, wishes to say: "Honor widows, those that indeed are truly bereaved, deprived, destitute of all assistance; these ones truly are widows. There also is a similar play on words in the Latin version of the Vulgate, since the adjective viduus also is found there, i.e. "orbatus", "privatus."]

The text of 1 Timothy is fairly clear, then, that the only legitimate recipients of congregational support are to be those widows who are at the end of their available resources. But why the apparent need for this clarification? Had problems similar to the situation in the Jerusalem congregation as described in Acts 6 developed in other places? Were Christians by this time known for charity and, subsequently, attracting a sizeable number of people who were taking advantage of the congregation's goodness?¹⁶¹ Alternatively, is the author simply addressing a natural development, namely, that the numbers of Christians had increased to such an extent that the number of widows also was increasing, and at a rate too rapid for the congregation to reasonably manage?¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ Duncker O.P., “"...quae Vere Viduae sunt' (1 Tim. 5.3),” 124.

¹⁶¹ The question is unanswerable solely from the text of 1 Timothy. Without implicating ancient widows, the possibility does exist that it was not the widows themselves who were seeking aid, but perhaps the families of the widows who were dodging their responsibilities and passing them along to the church. As a former parish pastor who used to routinely administer congregational funds to those in need who knocked on our church doors, I can testify that alongside those who genuinely needed help were also those who "gamed the system," going from church to church in an area. In some instances it became necessary to communicate with other congregations in the area about some of the more well known charity seekers.

¹⁶² Bassler suggests that both divorce and a broader definition of the term 'widow' may have played a role in increasing the number: "How can we explain this apparently dramatic increase in the number of widows in the community? It may indicate no more than the mortality rate of this period. If, however, χήρα is understood in more general terms, the increase in 'widows' (women living without a husband) could point instead to a high divorce rate between recently converted Christian women and their pagan husbands. Yet 'widow' need not even indicate an earlier marriage. In the context of this passage, the term seems to designate the life of renunciation of the bearer of the title more than her marital history." (Bassler, "The Widow's Tale: A Fresh Look at 1 Timothy 5:3-16," 34-35.)
I discussed in the previous chapter issues surrounding the application of demographic information to the early Jewish Christian community in Jerusalem. Much of the same reasoning applies here as well, to Christian congregations scattered throughout the first century C.E. Mediterranean world. However, some authors have attempted to quantify the number of widows in the Roman world, and the impact that such numbers might well have had upon burgeoning Christian communities. Among these is Ann Ellis Hanson, whose study focuses on secular Greco-Roman society without reference to early Christianity. She notes that "1994 was a turning point for 'young widow studies'" since that year saw the appearance of two studies, one by Richard Saller and the other by Jens-Uwe Krause. Both of these authors concluded that "the number of unattached, postmenarchic and premenopausal females, nearly all of them formerly married, represented a significant portion of the population." Christian Back distills Krause's numbers for us: 30% of adult women were widows; in the "under 30" age group, the proportion was about 10-15%, but in the 30-50 year old age group the number rose to 50%. More than 50% of women over the age of 50 were widows. Hanson further relates that Bagnall and Frier's study of census data in

163 I again reference Hopkins, "Christian Number and Its Implications," 204.

164 Ann Ellis Hanson, "Widows Too Young in Their Widowhood," in I, Claudia II: Women in Roman Art and Society, ed. Diana E. E. Kleiner and Susan B. Matheson (University of Texas Press, 2000).

165 Hanson, "Widows Too Young in Their Widowhood," 150.

166 Hanson, "Widows Too Young in Their Widowhood," 150. But also see Winter's discussion of both percentages of widows in the empire as well as what the label "young widow" might actually have meant. (Winter, Roman Wives, Roman Widows: The Appearance of New Women and the Pauline Communities, 124–26.)

167 These numbers are in Back, Die Witwen in der frühen Kirche, 56.
Roman Egypt also figures in debunking popular assumptions that the majority of women widowed at an early age simply were "recycled into the marriage market."\textsuperscript{168} The data from Egypt simply does not warrant such an assumption. In fact, Bagnall and Freier came to the conclusion that

\begin{quote}
...although virtually all women married, those who were still married reached its high point for women in their late 20s and then began to decline. In the model they configured for the entire population of Roman Egypt, just over 80% of adult females were currently married when they reached their thirtieth birthday; by their fortieth birthday the figure fell to 66%; and by their fiftieth birthday only about 48% were still currently married.\textsuperscript{169}
\end{quote}

If we apply the above rations to Rodney Stark's estimated numbers for the growth of Christianity,\textsuperscript{170} we can make some observations. Stark estimates that the number of Christians empire-wide was 1,000 in 40 C.E., 1,400 in 50 C.E., and 7,530 by 100 C.E. Accepting Pauline authorship of 1 Timothy, this would imply that the number of Christians in the Roman world was roughly 1,839 in 65 C.E.\textsuperscript{171} Later in his book Stark also concludes that while the male to female sex ration in the secular Roman world was about 13.5/10, in Christian communities there seems to have been higher proportion of female adherents, and sets the Christian male to female ratio in an average congregation at 15/18.\textsuperscript{172}

\textsuperscript{168} Hanson, "Widows Too Young in Their Widowhood," 151.

\textsuperscript{169} Hanson, "Widows Too Young in Their Widowhood," 151.

\textsuperscript{170} Stark, The Rise of Christianity, 6.

\textsuperscript{171} I arrived at this figure of growth of 122.6 Christians per year by taking the total increase from 50 C.E. to 100 C.E. and dividing it by 50 (yrs.).

\textsuperscript{172} Stark, The Rise of Christianity, 97–98. Stark bases his numbers for the first upon comments by Dio Cassius, writing about 200 C.E. about a shortage of females in the empire. The Christian gender ratio was first worked out by Adolph von Harnack, basing his conclusion largely upon the ratio of men to
4 concerning the population in Jerusalem—30% male, 30% female—this would mean that there were 552 male and 552 female Christian adherents empire wide in the year 65 C.E.\textsuperscript{173} How would these, then, be distributed among the various congregations? If we take into account Hanson's figures above, of the 552 Christian women, only 265 were still married after the age of fifty. How many at the age of sixty, then? Again, even if we distribute such a number among the known congregations (or house churches), how many widows per congregation might there actually have been at Harnack's ratio of 15/18 male to female? Further, of that small number, how many would have been both women in the catalogue of names found in Romans 16. Stark also notes that several ancient writers also noted how Christianity was largely a religion dominated by women.

\textsuperscript{173} Again, as in the previous chapter, here are Hopkins numbers: "According to modern historical demographers, ancient populations were usually made up, roughly speaking, of 30% adult males, 30% adult females, and 40% children of both sexes under age seventeen. Mortality was particularly high among infants and children under five, but by modern standards continued to be very high in adult populations. For example, roughly speaking, half of those surviving until the age of fifteen, died by the age of fifty. Sickness and death, and presumably the fear of death, were pervasive. Hence, crudely speaking, the significance and appeal of immortality. "These basic figures are fundamental for understanding the structure and growth of early Christian communities and house cult-groups. So, for example, if by 100 [C.E.], there were one hundred Christian communities, then the average community consisted of seventy people (7000/100 = 70) with perhaps twenty adult males, twenty adult females (or twenty families) and thirty children.” (Hopkins, “Christian Number and Its Implications,” 204.)


As an exercise, if we distribute all the calculated numbers above uniformly among these 47 congregations, this would imply that 552 Christian women would yield 11.75 women per congregation. However, taking into account Harnack's ratio of 15/18 men to women, this would mean that there was actually 14 women in each congregation. If only 48% of these are still married at age fifty (following Hanson), then there are 7 widows per congregation who are over fifty. But, again, what would be the number at age sixty? And what of life expectancy at that time?

This naturally is just a hypothetical exercise with too many unknown variables to be accurate. For one, we of course cannot assume a uniform distribution of said numbers equally among all 47 Christian congregations. The churches in Antioch, Jerusalem, Corinth, Ephesus, and Rome must have been larger in numbers. But, that said, I do think the above exercise is useful for trying to understand just how many widows Paul may have had in mind when 1 Timothy was written. If anything, it is useful for debunking any assumptions that in the earliest days of Christianity, the congregations were supporting a disproportionately high number of widows.
over sixty and "truly widows" without any familial support what so ever?\textsuperscript{174} The number must have been incredibly small initially to such an extent that Paul perhaps had in mind only a couple isolated incidents.

As for a few final observations concerning 1 Timothy 5, the nature of the provisions for widows truly in need supplied by a congregation must, likewise, remain speculative. If it consisted in food, then it may well have been similar to the type of distribution discussed in connection with Acts 6 earlier. Lastly, Hanson also makes the interesting observation that the Roman widows of Bagnall and Frier's study demonstrated a preference for joining the household of a grown son as opposed to that of a married daughter.\textsuperscript{175} How the directives of 1 Timothy concerning familial care of widows could be read in light of this is a topic that merits further research.

**Summary**

As early Christianity blossoms, challenges also arise in congregation that call for sound pastoral advice. Saint Paul spoke to widows in Corinth as part of his advice concerning marriage in general, especially in view of some present crisis in Corinth or the return of Christ (or both), believed by the Apostle to be in the near future. While his preference is that Christians learn to control themselves by remaining single and devoting their lives to doing the Lord's will, he also recognizes that marriage is a natural

\textsuperscript{174} It is interesting that Grubbs notes that the original Augustan marriage laws applied to men up to the age of sixty, and to women up to the age of fifty. (Grubbs, *Women and the Law in the Roman Empire: A Sourcebook on Marriage, Divorce and Widowhood*, 84.)

\textsuperscript{175} Hanson, "Widows Too Young in Their Widowhood," 152: "Older widows' preference for living in a household headed by their own male kinsman, rather than in a household whose head was related to them only by marriage, highlights the women's fears of disrespect, or even mistreatment, at the hands of in-laws."
part of God’s economy, and allows those who feel a pressing need to marry to do so. As a pastor with spiritual insight, Paul advises widows not to remarry if possible, but if they chose to do so, they must marry a Christian husband. Paul's advice concerning marriage is most likely set in the context of countering the claims of a celibacy movement in Corinth that may well have looked upon their non-celibate fellow Christians as less spiritual. Finally, it is improbable that Paul's advice to widows to avoid remarriage was given to deliberately fly in the face of Augustus' hallmark marriage legislation of both 18 B.C.E. and 9 B.C.E., the lex Julia and the subsequent lex Papia Poppaea.\textsuperscript{176} It is more likely that the Corinthian congregational membership was comprised mostly of non-aristocratic members to whom the marriage legislation simply did not apply.

Yet whether due to Paul's advice to the Corinthians concerning remarriage or other sociological factors, by the time 1 Timothy was penned we can infer that there are enough Christian widows within congregations to warrant special directives concerning their care. The basic directive is that a widow's primary care givers are to be her immediate family or her extended family. It is only widows that are “truly widows,” that is, widows who are over sixty and entirely without any support network who are to be

\begin{center}\textsuperscript{176} But Bellan-Boyer summarizes the Roman viewpoint: “Roman critics slandered early Christians by spreading rumors having to do with this cult of wicked, home-wrecking women under the spell of evil men: they wil insinuate themselves inside your honorable household and subvert it, with their sexual immorality, hysteria, witchcraft, incest, and cannibalism... Celibate women—in particular—were thought of as sexual deviants and outlaws, because of their defiance of the enforced convention. They rebelled against the state, which imposed strict marriage and childbearing requirements on women, backed up by severe punishments written into the Roman law codes. The very existence of Christian women who had deliberately chosen a life of celibacy posed an embarrassment to the honor of the law-abiding, paternalistic Roman household.” Lisa Bellan-Boyer, “Conspicuous in Their Absence: Women in Early Christianity,” \textit{Cross Currents} 53 (2003): 53.\end{center}
supported by the local congregation. A theoretical demographic exercise employing the numbers of Rodney Stark's study of first century Christianity reveals that at the time these guidelines were drawn up, the number of widows eligible for congregational support in a given place must have indeed been small, if there were even any present at all.

**Charity toward Christian Widows in the 2nd and 3rd Centuries C.E.**

The final portion of this present work will focus on developments in charitable practices toward Christian widows subsequent to the first century C.E. It is not a comprehensive survey. Rather, in the introduction to this dissertation, I stated that one of my goals was to develop an analogous comparison between how charitable practices evolved in Judaism and early Christianity. Comparison by analogy implies that it is not my desire to argue that early Christian charity toward widows developed along exactly the same lines as it did in Judaism, or that the one (Judaism) inspired the Christian communities to intentionally pattern their practices after the former. There are some striking similarities but also notable differences.

I begin with some similarities. For one, we cannot help but notice that as the Christian church became more institutionalized, charitable practices were standardized as well. This is not to deny the fact that there were in Christianity, as in Judaism, many unheralded acts of kindness and generosity exercised on behalf of the poor. Undoubtedly, there were, but the fact that they were private and unassuming also means that they are lost to the historical record. Yet in both Judaism and early Christianity, leading teachers and religious authorities begin to set guidelines and parameters charitable donors and recipients. Moreover, this general pattern emerges,
namely, that at the onset of both, caring for the poor is encouraged to be a generous response to taking inventory of God's blessings. Eventually, however, charity becomes a means by which not only the recipient, but the donor as well, receives some benefit from the charitable act. I noted at the end of Chapter 3 that, within Judaism, certain passages from Proverbs, Daniel, and intertestamental apocrypha begin to influence acts of charity in that rabbinic teaching begins to view almsgiving as a means of "gaining righteousness (tzedekah)" or atoning for one's sins. In early Christianity, a similar pattern emerges. The book of Acts describes situations in the early Christian communities where charitable acts towards the poor are done freely, almost spontaneously, out of Christian love.\textsuperscript{177} By the early 3\textsuperscript{rd} century C.E., we find that in one of the earliest of Christian church orders, the \textit{Didascalia Apostolorum}, Christian authorities have begun to codify charitable practices towards the poor—and widows in particular. The \textit{Didascalia} describes how bishops matched up donors with recipients, the latter receiving physical benefits to ameliorate their challenging situation somewhat, while the former receives the benefit of having a godly widow pray on their behalf.

In that general observation, however, there also are some differences. These early Christian church orders mentioned above, for instance, do not speak in a manner similar to the rabbinic texts in that there is no mention of "atonement" or "gaining righteousness" through a charitable act.\textsuperscript{178} There is some spiritual benefit, to be sure,

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{177} See Chapter 4. I especially have in mind Acts 2 (the mutual sharing of goods), Acts 4 (the gift of Barnabas for distribution to the poor), Acts 6 (the care of widows), and Acts 9 (the charitable acts of Tabitha toward the widows).
\item \textsuperscript{178} Although the language of 2 Clement borders on the same concept: "Almsgiving is therefore good as repentance from sin. Fasting is better than prayer, but almsgiving is better than both." (2 Clement 16:4)
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but it is different in nature. Likewise, in Judaism there were recorded instances of poor people even vocally spurring on those with means by volunteering themselves as a channel by which the donor might acquire eternal benefit.\textsuperscript{179} In the Syriac Christian communities described in the \textit{Didascalia}, we also find mention of some jealous widows confronting bishops about a perceived inequality in the distribution of charity, as well as widows discouraged from approaching donors themselves individually for alms. Further, the Christian channels for charity appear to be more regulated, with offerings funneled to recipients through the offices of the bishop and deacon. The \textit{Didascalia} also seems to highlight this particular difference as a necessary one. We are right to infer that there were abuses going on within the church; some widows were "gaming the system" while others ignored the trademark characteristic of a Christian widow, namely, humility, and became rather vocal in their discontent and unscrupulous in the solicitation of gifts.

As Christianity spreads over the first few centuries C.E., practicing charity toward the widows and other poor became a common feature.\textsuperscript{180} Polycarp, in his letter to the Philippian congregation (ca 120 C.E.), mentions among the duties of the presbyters in a congregation is that they are "not neglecting the widow, the orphan, or the poor, but

\textsuperscript{179} Anderson, \textit{Charity}, 25: "Jewish beggars in Late Antiquity used to address their potential patrons with the words \textit{zeki bi}, literally: "acquire heavenly treasure through me," or, more periphrastically, "make a deposit to your heavenly treasury through me."

\textsuperscript{180} For a concise overview of Christian care from the time of the Gospels until Late Antiquity, see Krause, \textit{Witwen und Waisen im frühen Christentum}, 6–11.
always 'providing for that which is becoming in the sight of God and man."181 Justin Martyr in his First Apology (ca 138 C.E.) describes this feature of congregational life:

Those who are well off and freewillingly wish to do so contribute as much as each one wants to. What is collected is deposited with the overseer. He uses it for the care of orphans and widows, for those who are suffering want arising from illness or any other cause, for prisoners, and for travelers staying with us for a short time. Briefly, he provides for all who are in need in the town. (First Apology 67)182

Conversely, the duties of a Christian widow over against the congregation of believers are also delineated early on in church history. Again, Polycarp:

Teach the widows to be discreet as respects the faith of the Lord, praying continually for all, being far from all slandering, evil-speaking, false-witnessing, love of money, and every kind of evil; knowing that they are the altar of God, that He clearly perceives all things, and that nothing is hid from Him, neither reasonings, nor reflections, nor any one of the secret things of the heart (emphasis mine).183

The emphasis on the role of widow as one who is involved in intercessory prayer begins with the description of a "true widow" that 1 Timothy 5 provides, namely, that a Christian widow continues in prayers "day and night (1 Ti 5:5)." Here we see that the next generation of Christian authors continues that exhortation for widows to be continual in prayer.

181 Polycarp, The Epistle of Polycarp, 6.1. ANF 1.34. Also, the Apology of Aristides, 1.15, for the concern of Christians in general for the poor and other disadvantaged people.


183 Polycarp, The Epistle of Polycarp, 4.3. ANF 1.34. Also, in a somewhat bizarre comparison, Clement of Alexandria, in his Paedagogus, denounces those who "overlook a chaste widow, who is of far higher value than a Melitaean pup." (III.4, ANF 2.278)
By the time that the early Christian document of church order, the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, appears in Syriac,\(^{184}\) these practices are firmly in place. One of the ecclesiastical functions of the Christian widow is to continually offer intercessory prayer, while supported by gifts given to overseers who, in turn, distribute them as they deem best to widows in need.\(^{185}\) Both duties are alluded to in *Didascalia* 15:

> Every widow therefore ought to be meek and quiet and gentle. And let her also be without malice and without anger; and let her not be talkative or clamorous, or forward in tongue, or quarrelsome. And when she sees anything unseemly done, or hears it, let her be as though she saw and heard it not, for a widow should have no other care save to be praying for those who give, and for the whole Church (emphasis mine).\(^{186}\)

There also is this very pointed admonition given to the bishops concerning such distribution of charity:

> As good stewards of God, therefore, dispense well, according to the command, those things that are given and accrue to the Church, to orphans and widows and to those who are in distress and to strangers, as knowing that you have God who

\(^{184}\) For background on this document, see Hubertus Drobner, *The Fathers of the Church: A Comprehensive Introduction* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), 125. Drobner here addresses the issue of authorship, noting that Hippolytus may, in fact, be the original author: "the *Traditio apostolica* (Apostolic Tradition) by Hippolytus, originating ca. 215, frequently is not treated under his name but in the framework of other early church rules (*Didache, Didascalia apostolorum*) because it is lost in its original form and is extant only in Coptic, Arabic, Ethiopic, and Latin versions discovered in the nineteenth century. For this reason, the authorship of Hippolytus is still not uniformly accepted. Yet it may be assumed that, in spite of all the differences, the versions are based on one and the same textual source, which G. Dix (1937) and B. Botte (1963) reconstructed as far as possible. After the *Didache*, it represents the most significant witness of early Christian community life and liturgy."

\(^{185}\) Toda explains that since in the *Didascalia* the widows and orphans are referred to as "the altar," "since it is allowed only to the priest to approach the altar and offer the sacrifices on it, people have to present offerings, not directly to orphans and widows, etc., but indirectly to their bishop; in this way concentration of the control concerning offerings is intended. On the other hand, the bishop is expected to be well acquainted with the situations of orphans, widows, and the poor, 'with those who are straitened, that thou mayest distribute to them like a good steward.'" Satoshi Toda, "Poverty and Charity in Early Christianity. Some Preliminary Observations," *Mediterranean World =地中海論集* 20 (June 2010): 194.

will require an account at your hands, who delivered this stewardship unto you. Divide and give therefore to all who are in want.\textsuperscript{187}

Yet as the \textit{Didascalia} continues, the reader readily gets the impression that situations within Christian congregations has deteriorated in respect to the behavior of widows. Some have seen the situation as a struggle to either establish or maintain patriarchal order.\textsuperscript{188} Other see the problem as rooted in unseemly behavior on the part of Christian widows that necessitated the clergy to reassert their authority.\textsuperscript{189} Although widows are mentioned some seventy-eight times in the \textit{Didascalia} in respect to varying situations, for our purpose I wish to focus on those sections that deal specifically with charity toward the same.

The key sections of the \textit{Didascalia} that deal with the relationship of the Christian widow to the reception of charity and prayer are chapters 15-22.\textsuperscript{190} Chapter 15, in particular, highlights some of the alleged abuses going on in respect to widows and charity. It begins by emphasizes the role or prayer in the widow's life: "For a widow should have no other care save to be praying for those who give, and for the whole Church." This should be her only avenue for speaking. Otherwise, she is to remain meek and silent, and certainly not raise her voice in the church to teach publicly. Nor

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\textsuperscript{187} \textit{Didasc.} 7.1
\textsuperscript{188} Reid OP, “The Power of Widows and How to Suppress It (Acts 6:1-7).”
\textsuperscript{189} Michael Penn, “‘Bold and Having No Shame:’ Ambiguous Widows, Controlling Clergy, and Early Syrian Communities,” \textit{Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies} 4, no. 2 (July 2001): 159–85. He states, "While such a noncritical acceptance of the \textit{Didascalia} is clearly problematic, even if the \textit{Didascalia} is solely the work of a single third-century idealist, the content still reflects the move toward an institutionalized church and strategies for greater centralized control (161)."
\textsuperscript{190} Quotes below are from Connolly's Oxford edition of the \textit{Didascalia}. (Richard Hugh Connolly, \textit{Didascalia Apostolorum}. (Oxford: Claredon Press, 1929).
are they to run about from house to house; the writer insinuates that some widows are conducting a visitation ministry of sorts only to lay the groundwork for greedily receiving handouts directly from members.\textsuperscript{191} Worse, some widows were even neglecting prayers for and visits to fellow Christians who were sick, preferring instead to make it their priority to visit former members who had been excommunicated solely because such people gave them more money, flaunting the bishop’s design for distribution:

\begin{quote}
But thou, O widow who art without discipline, seest thy fellow widows or thy brethren in sickness, and hast no care to fast and pray over thy members, and to lay hand upon them and to visit them, but feignest thyself to be not in health, or not at leisure; but to others, who are in sins or are gone forth from the Church, because they give much, thou art ready and glad to go and to visit them. You then who are such ought to be ashamed; for you wish to be wiser and to know better, not only than the men, but even than the presbyters and the bishops.\textsuperscript{192}
\end{quote}

The author emphasizes the whole matter of controlling one’s speech when he highlights yet another abuse of the ecclesiastical charity system. He rebukes those widows who, instead of speaking only in prayers on behalf of people, gad about and pressure other widows who have received a charitable distribution from the clergy into revealing how much they received. Instead of rejoicing with their fellow widow over the amelioration of her situation, such inside information (sinfully gained) become a source of discontent, even outburst, against the bishop:

\begin{quote}
But now we hear that there are widows who do not behave according to the commandment, but care only for this, that they may stray and run about asking questions. And moreover she who has received an alms of the Lord--being without sense, in that she discloses (the matter) to her that asks her--has revealed and declared the name of the giver; and the other, hearing it, murmurs
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{191} A widow must not therefore stray or run about among the houses. For those who are gadabouts and without shame cannot be still even in their houses [cf. 1Tim 5.13; Prov 7.11]; for they are no widows, but “wallets*, and they care for nothing else but to be making ready to receive.” (Connolly, 133-134)

\textsuperscript{192} Connolly, 140.
and finds fault with the bishop who has dispensed, or with the deacon, or with him who has made some gift, saying: 'Knowest thou not that I was nearer to thee and in more distress than she?'

Finally, within the fold of the congregation the writer of the *Didascalia* also calls out widows who themselves are not dependent upon charity from the bishops, but who instead of donating their wealth to the church for the relief of others instead usuriously make loans for profit:

Now we see that there are widows who esteem the matter as one of traffic, and receive greedily; and instead of doing good (works) and giving to the bishop for the entertainment of strangers and the refreshment of those in distress, they lend out on bitter usury; and they care only for Mammon, *whose god is their purse and their belly: for where their treasure is, there is also their heart* [Php 3.19; Mt 6.21]. For she who is in the habit of roaming abroad and running about to receive takes no thought for good works, but serves Mammon and ministers to filthy lucre.

Such were some of the temptations the writer of the *Didascalia* perceived to have ensnared unwary Christian widows, and so wrote the document as a corrective to abuses. Yet there are also positive statements as well. For instance, the author reiterates a commonly held belief in early Christianity—a thought that is even rooted in

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193 Connolly, 143-144. The *Apostolic Constitutions*, which is based on the *Didascalia*, even provides a prayer for a widow to say upon learning that a fellow widow has received a gift of charity. See *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles* 3.1.13, in ANF 7.430.


196 The epitome provided by Penn, “‘Bold and Having No Shame:’ Ambiguous Widows, Controlling Clergy, and Early Syrian Communities,” was most helpful in clarifying the main points of the *Didascalia* in this section.
the Psalms of the Old Testament—that widows are precious to God and, for that reason, God is attentive to their prayers:

And so, unsullied by iniquity, the widows will pray and receive from God all good things for which they ask and make petition, all of them together and each one severally: 197

For our purposes, we also note that early Christian charitable giving directed at widows also reaps a spiritual benefit for the donor. Chapter 14 of the Didascalia indicates as much in its instruction to bishops how to distribute gifts appropriately to the poor:

It behooves thee to be careful of all and heedful of all. And hence it is that they who give gifts do not themselves with their own hands give them to the widows, but bring them to thee, that thou who art well acquainted of those who are in distress mayest, like a good steward, make distribution to them of those things which are given to thee: for God knows who it is that gives, even though he does not chance to be present. And when thou makest distribution, tell them the name of him who gave, that they may pray for him by name. 198

Granted, in the following chapter the author, in speaking to the widows, does consider it a matter of high priority to protect vigilantly the names of donors. Bishops should especially be careful to do so in order that the donor may give from a humble heart, following the directives found in the Sermon on the Mount concerning the giving of gifts in secret:

And likewise also the widow who has received an alms of the Lord, let her pray for him that provided this ministration, suppressing his name like a wise woman, that his righteousness may be with God and not with men [cf. Mt 6.1]--as He said in the Gospel: When thou doest an alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth [Mt 6.3]--lest, when thou pronounce and reveal his name in praying for him that gave, his name be disclosed and come to the ears of a

197 Didasc. 18. Connolly, 160

198 Connolly, 131.
heathen, and the heathen, being a man of the left hand, know it. Or it may even chance that one of the faithful, hearing thee, will go out and talk: and it is not expedient that those things which are done or spoken in the Church should come abroad and be revealed; for he that divulges and speaks of them disobeys God, and becomes a betrayer of the Church. But do thou in praying for him suppress his name; and so shalt thou fulfil that which is written, thou and the widows who are such (as thou): for you are the holy altar of God, (even of) Jesus Christ.199

Yet, in the end, it is safe to assume that even though the donor may not have known the name of the widow who received his donation, he undoubtedly was aware of such order within the church, and could understand that a widow, whose prayers were deemed to be powerful and effective, was raising her voice to heaven on his behalf, for his blessing.

Conclusions

In the Roman world of the early imperial era, there was a two-fold view of widows. On the one hand, Romans greatly admired women who promoted the traditional Roman family values, especially those who voluntarily abstained from remarriage upon their husband's death, the celebrated univira. Yet Roman authors also stereotyped some widows as unsavory characters who exercised freedoms unbecoming a Roman woman, especially in the areas of speech and sexuality. Roman satirists depicted free Roman widows as wanton, extravagant, and insatiable. Cicero, in his Pro Caelio defense, depicted Clodia as a widow given to excess, a libertine who by her indulgent lifestyle was tarnishing the reputation of her famous lineage.

Yet the examples of Roman widows preserved in literary sources are, by and large, only reflective of the lives of a small portion of Roman society, the female Roman

199 Didasc.15. Connolly, 143.
elite. The vast majority of widows in the Roman world of the first century C.E. lived a silent and tenuous existence, if not in outright poverty. Remarriage often did not follow the death of their husbands, and so many remained widows and were left to fend for themselves. Several social historians have noted that the number of widows in the first century Roman world must have been significant. The elite segment of Roman society really felt no compulsion to care for the poor unless it was a channel for enhancing one's reputation.

As Christianity expanded across the Mediterranean world, the composition of the church as a whole becomes more Gentile than Jewish. Attracting the lower strata of society as it did, early Christian communities cared for widows and other disadvantaged people. Charity, in fact, begins to become a hallmark of the Christian movement. In respect to widows, the apostle Paul gave advice in his first letter to the Corinthians concerning widows and remarriage as part of a larger discourse concerning the Christian's attitude toward earthly matters such as marriage in view of both a "present crisis" as well as the return of Christ, believed to be imminent. We saw that his advice did not flaunt Augustus' marriage legislation of 18 B.C.E. or 9 B.C.E. Rather, I argued that the legislation, targeting as it did the upper orders of society, was simply a non-issue for the Corinthian congregation. The letter of 1 Timothy gave further prescriptions concerning congregational, institutionalized charity toward Christian widows. The most significant of these directives was that a widow needed to be "truly a widow," that is, a widow over the age of sixty without an support from either immediate or extended family. I also used Rodney Stark's and Keith Hopkin's demographic studies of early
Christianity to highlight the point that at the time 1 Timothy was written, the number of widows meeting the qualifications outlined in 1 Timothy 5 must have been small indeed.

In the final portion of the chapter, I concluded my analogical comparison by discussing the similarities and differences between the patterns of charitable giving as it developed in Judaism with the patterns that developed in early Christianity. As for differences, in early Christian charity toward the poor and widows as described in the Apostolic Fathers and the Didascalia Apostolorum of the early 3rd century C.E., we do not see an emphasis upon charitable giving as a means of atoning for one's sins or "gaining righteousness." Rather, in the Didascalia we find an emphasis on humble, even secretive, charitable giving. Yet there is this similarity between the two: in both Judaism and early Christianity, what once were encouraged to be generous charitable acts of free will became a method that was mutually beneficial, with the recipient receiving some physical benefit that betters their situation, and the donor deriving a spiritual benefit from the act of almsgiving.
The stated goal of this dissertation is to distill from ancient texts an analogical comparison between how charitable practices toward widows developed in two different contexts. The first context is that of Old Testament Judaism from its inception up to the time of the New Testament era, and the second is that of the early Christian movement as it transitions from a predominantly Jewish Christian church to a largely Gentile Christian church. As stated in the introduction, an analogical comparison seeks to highlight not only the similarities between the two but also to take note of the differences.

At the onset, I noted the difficulties associated with developing such a comparison. For one, the topic requires defining crucial terminology. One of those terms is "widow," a word that has several different nuances in various cultures. Another term, perhaps even more vague, is the term "poverty." One needs to realize that across cultures of the ancient world there is no uniform definition of poverty, and understanding labels such as "the poor" needs to take into account a number of factors: sociological; demographic; economic; linguistic; religious. The same factors also apply in the effort to understand a third term crucial to the present study, "charity." In view of these factors, two things become readily apparent: 1) that those who are poor in both Roman Palestine as well as the greater Roman Empire comprise a sizeable portion of the population; 2) that charitable practices among early Christians, in its purest sense, did not have its origins in secular Roman society, but grew out of Jewish attitudes toward poverty and charity that naturally transferred to the early Jewish Christians in
Jerusalem, and from the same into Gentile Christian communities as they developed throughout the Mediterranean world.

Perhaps here is a proper place for some observations of other scholars who have similarly studied these subjects. McGinn reminds us of certain limitations regarding the study of women in ancient societies, and especially widows:

At the same time, widowhood has never been monolithic, not only in the obvious sense that factors such as socio-economic status play a decisive role in shaping the experience of individual widows, but that the experience of each woman can vary considerably over the course of her widowhood. Widowhood, like marriage, has its own life cycle, no matter whether it ends in death or remarriage. This cycle is especially marked in societies where a significant number of widows are relatively young. The presence of dependent children can have a major impact. Just as when for any society, we write women we really mean only some women, so when we write widows we really refer only to some widows. In other words, generalizations about "widows" are often meaningless or certainly do not apply to all of them.¹

Likewise, concerning the study of charity, Toda also issues this caveat:

Making a similar survey of the sources concerning economic problems of the early church, Charles Munier stresses the difficulty in grasping the reality of the church’s activity of charity, although some insight can be obtained from time to time through the correspondence of a bishop (e.g. Cyprian). In order to go beyond a simple enumeration of the sources such as seen above, not only a precise evaluation of each source as to its date and place, etc. will be absolutely necessary, but also a methodological breakthrough might be needed.²

With these limitations in mind, I proceeded to survey ancient Near East literature for understanding in that context the plight of widows and how others cared for them. I noted how in those ancient cultures of the Near East, there certainly were charitable programs designed to care for the disadvantaged of society, of whom widows

¹ McGinn, Widows and Patriarchy, 11.

comprised a notable segment. Yet the charitable acts preserved in the literary record
highlight not the recipient of charity (the widow), but serve for the self-aggrandizement
of the donor, most often rulers and kings. The care of the poor, then, only served to
enhance the reputation or glory or monarchs and other rulers, serving as proof that they
were divinely appointed, since they were doing the will of the gods. In the Hebrew
Scriptures, however, we find a completely different motive for caring for the poor, the
widows, the orphans, and the foreigners in the midst of the Israelite community. The
motive for providing such care, as the Torah itself underscores, was to be
thankfulness—a thankful response of people to the goodness God had shown them
either as individuals or as a nation. Thus, the care for the disadvantaged was not only to
be the special purview of the rulers but, rather, the responsibility of the entire Israelite
community. However, in post-exilic Israelite communities, there begins to seep into both
literature and practice the idea that the donor of charity will also receive spiritual benefit
for the exercise of his charity. As Judaism moves into the Common Era, rabbinic
writings began to codify the practice of "gaining righteousness" through almsgiving. As a
result, the initial directives of the Torah that charity toward the poor is intended to be an
entirely selfless act of gratitude is tainted somewhat by the idea that charity can be a
mutually beneficial act by which both donor and recipient receive something desirable.

As the Christian movement first emerges in Jerusalem, the patterns of charitable
giving hearken back to the ideals set by the Torah, namely, that charitable acts are to
selflessly flow out of gratitude to God. Such selfless care for each other and the poor in
particular are depicted in the book of Acts as being a notable feature of nascent
Christianity. The sixth chapter of Acts, moreover, depicts the beginnings of organized
charity among Christians as the leaders of the Jerusalem church peacefully settle the contentious issue of how to care for needy widows in their midst. I also argued that some of aspects of such organization of charitable distributions may have been influenced by Essene practices in and around first century C.E. Jerusalem. The Jewish Christians, then, began to care for widows routinely, and the final part of my study in this section offered some plausible numbers as to what the financial impact for such a program might actually have been on the Jerusalem congregation. I attempted to derive such a figure not only to highlight the need but also the generosity of nameless donors who would keep such a program in operation.

The attitudes toward the care of widows undoubtedly flowed out of the Jerusalem congregation into other Christian congregations, increasingly Gentile in composition, through the missionary activity of Paul and others. From the writings of the Apostle, we can infer that soon the issue of the care of widows came to the fore. Roman society had a sizeable number of widows, and Roman attitudes toward both widows and the poor in general assured that Christian communities would always have the opportunity to provide care for the same, since neither Roman society nor government would ever do so. Even what may, from the outside, appear to be charity on the part of civic leader and emperors (e.g. the grain dole), in the end prove only to be venues for enhancing one’s reputation, and have much more in common with the traditional Roman patron-client relationship than with anything Christians were practicing in their care for the poor. Paul's advice to Corinthian widows not to remarry did not flaunt Augustus’ famous
marriage legislation, but it would have this effect, that the number of widows in Christian congregations would continue to proliferate. By the time 1 Timothy was written, the issue of the care for widows needed further attention. 1 Timothy 5 becomes the primary sedes prescribing how future generations of Christians are to care for Christian widows, the general rule being that churches are to provide relief only for "widows who are truly widows." These are widows who are over sixty years old and who have no family whatsoever to help care for them.

In time, however, an analogous pattern emerges in early Christianity as emerged in Judaism. Though similar in some respects, there are differences between the two developments. In Judaism, rabbinic theology begins to link almsgiving to such concepts as "gaining righteousness" or even atoning for sins as benefits to the donor. As early Christianity develops, early church orders such as the Syriac Didascalia indicate that while donors give gifts to unknown recipients, bishops inform widows of whom the donor is so that they can pray for their benefactor by name. Donors undoubtedly know this, and although they never interact directly with the recipient of their gift, they give secure in the knowledge that a Christian widow, whose prayer is powerful and effective, is carrying their name to the throne of God, and asking for his blessing upon those who gave these gifts. Thus in early Christianity, too, the selfless giving of generous gifts out of gratitude gives way to a more structured system in which both donor and recipient respectively receive benefits.

3 As did, for instance, Pope Callixtus' injunction around the year 220 C.E. that aristocratic women who were Christian could obtain a special dispensation to marry Christian men of the lower classes of society, even slaves, if they so desired. See Hippolytus' history and criticisms of Callixtus in his Refutation of All Heresies 8, where he specifically upbraids him for this decree. (ANF 5,131)
APPENDIX A
BIBLICAL TEXTS CONSULTED


APPENDIX B
REFERENCE WORKS


REFERENCE LIST


Reed, David Alan. “Paul on Marriage and Singleness: Reading 1 Corinthians with the Augustan Marriage Laws.” Ph.D., University of St. Michael’s College, 2013.


Satlow, Michael L. “‘Fruit and the Fruit of Fruit’: Charity and Piety among Jews in Late Antique Palestine.” Jewish Quarterly Review 100, no. 2 (2010): 244–77.


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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Keith C. Wessel was born in 1965 in New Ulm, MN, a community in which over 80% of the current inhabitants descend from German forebears and a statue of Arminius the Cheruskan (aka Hermann the German), victor over Varus at Teutoburg Forest in 9 C.E., towers over the Minnesota River valley. New Ulm is also home to America’s second oldest family owned brewery, in continuous operation since 1860. New Ulm was also ground zero for the outbreak of the U.S.–Dakota War in 1862.

The author is an ordained member of the Wisconsin Synod ministerium. After attending Minnesota Valley Lutheran High School, he graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree, cum laude, from Northwestern College of Watertown, WI (1987), and with a Master of Divinity, summa cum laude, from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary of Mequon, WI (1991). He received his Ph.D in Classical Civilizations from the University of Florida in the spring of 2017. He currently teaches courses in Greek, Latin, and New Testament at Martin Luther College, New Ulm, MN. He served a one semester visiting professorship at Asia Lutheran Seminary, Hong Kong (spring 2009) teaching courses in Matthew’s Gospel and Intertestamental History. He also served for eight years as a parish pastor at Beautiful Savior Ev. Lutheran Church, Marietta GA (1994-2002).

Keith Wessel was joined in marriage in 1991 to Elizabeth Ann Eckert of Caledonia, WI. They have been blessed with five children: Allison, joined in marriage to Brian Lee in 2017 and currently residing in Shaoxing, China; Emily, joined in marriage to Micah Ray in 2016 and currently residing in New Ulm, MN; Daniel, a pre-seminary sophomore at MLC; Joseph, a sophomore at Minnesota Valley Lutheran High; Joanna, an 8th grader at St. Paul's Lutheran School. Liz is gainfully and happily employed as a
librarian at the MLC library, and has aided her husband's quest to finish his dissertation by extending due dates of books for him far, far beyond what any librarian's conscience should allow. The kids are all Green Bay Packer fans, to the chagrin of their father.

As for the author, he recently set aside college football coaching after twelve seasons to spend more time in his woodshop. In earlier years, he was a devoted Tolkien reader, and of late an ardent Umberto Eco fan. Along with his family, he enjoys good music, and when not listening to Heinrich Schütz or Bach, he enjoys figuring out ethereal U2 guitar rifts on his 1982 special edition Fender Telecaster. The Hagia Sophia remains high on his travel bucket list (as does the underwater archaeological park at ancient Baiae), but will not complain if an excursion with his family to Minnesota's famed Boundary Waters happens first.