'Real and Fictive' Widows: Nuances of Independence and Resistance in Luke

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Luke’s antecedent widow sources: the powerless widow

Luke’s\textsuperscript{1} use of the widow tradition is more subtle than commentators have generally noted. Frequent reference is made to the Old Testament widow as symbolic of powerlessness, the victim of oppression, and therefore a subject of Yahweh’s care.\textsuperscript{2} This focus has also generated interest in the necessity for, and rhetoric of prophetic discourse, the prophets announcing Yahweh’s care of widows, because it was not consistently fulfilled by the community, which is deduced from the message of scathing judgment on society.\textsuperscript{3} Luke certainly makes use of this tradition, widows being a significant locale of the gospel’s unique presentation of God’s beneficence. Luke says more however, moving the imagery of widows into another key relevant to gender, which is closely related to Luke’s portrayal of discipleship. Drawing on Turid Karlsen Seim’s ‘bifocal perspective’ on widows in Luke, this article seeks to give further ambience to her suggestive thesis that Luke’s widows are deployed as an image of independent discipleship and resistance to patriarchal values.\textsuperscript{4}

Luke’s theological use of the widow tradition

Historical and sociological contexts are synthetically constructed, and may provide useful but not definitive readings of context from which to interpret gospel tradition. Luke usually portrays widows in a favorable way as an image of the poor, marginalized, and vulnerable, exposed to social and legal exploitation. Yet they are an example of faith and strength, and also indicative of faith and a degree of autonomy from patriarchal structures.\textsuperscript{5} One such expression appears to be the parable of a widow (18:2-5) who personifies an audacious challenge to a significant patriarchal structure—a judge’s authority. This
widow's status can never be constructed definitively, however the parable, which could be titled, *The Audacious Widow*, draws on a rich theme of judicial impropriety and prophetic protest. This injustice, indicated by the need for prophetic protest, has a significant impact on the poor, marginalized, and therefore powerless, such as the *almanah* or “silenced one,” in society. Considering her precarious, marginal social status as “silenced one,” the widow's quest for justice in this parable is remarkable. The audacious widow personifies a change of circumstance, which is also typical of Luke’s portrayal of the fortunes of the marginalized in the gospel. The widow is an image of the needy, for whom justice is imperative. The use of a widow is indicative of the theme of justice that is intrinsic to the kingdom of God in Luke.

Luke has drawn on a rich tradition in which the Hebrew-Septuagint widow has assumed powerful political and theological nuances in prophetic discourse. The widow is an evocative and emotive figure. The “silent one” of Hebrew society “speaks” and “warns” as an individual assuming mythic dimensions—like Ruth. She is also a generic identity evoking compassion and justice, and warning of dire consequences if covenantal righteousness, which encompasses justice, is neglected. Intertextually, Luke's audacious widow of the parable belongs to this tradition.

Luke’s citation of other widows, such as the widow of Zarephath (Sarepta), and the raising of the widow's son at Nain, recalls the Septuagint's story of Elijah and the foreign widow. Anna (Hanna), the widow in the Temple, who lives out the remainder of her days in worship and hope, consolidates Luke's evocation of the Septuagint image of devout widows placing their hope in Yahweh. Luke depicts Jesus having a special ministry to widows as those who personified the powerless, therefore marginalized and abused of society. Therefore, the widow is a site of the passionate concern of justice.

The widow in Luke is certainly "vulnerable to exploitation," and Luke has retained two Markan references to widows depicting this (Lk 20:47; 21:1-4). The first, without Matthean parallel, relates to the “devouring scribes” who deprive widows of their houses, or more generally, “all they have.” The second widow source, which Luke
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derives from Mark, again without parallel in Matthean tradition, and
now with sharpened focus on the central characters, is the story of the
widow's offering (Lk 21:1-4).\textsuperscript{17} Conventional interpretation of the story
posits the widow as a praiseworthy example of giving, in which giving
all out of one's poverty (the widow) is contrasted with giving little out
of one's wealth (the rich).\textsuperscript{18} However, some scholars propose that the
story is told to "lament" the inculcation of a certain ritual obligation
beyond a human capacity to meet such obligation.\textsuperscript{19} Seim contests the
proposal that the widow is a victim of the religious system. Instead,
she argues that like Anna (Lk 2:36-38), the widow abandons herself to
a radical, eschatological lifestyle of poverty and piety, which serves as
a sharp contrast to the rich. Luke's widows are exemplary characters,
depicting true piety.\textsuperscript{20} Luke, however, generates even further nuances
concerning widows, beyond the passive images drawn from the Markan
source. In addition to this portrayal of exploitation and vulnerability,
there are nuances of independent discipleship and resistance to
patriarchal marriage.

\textit{Nuances of independence and resistance}

Seim notes a "bifocal perspective" on widows in Luke, with
the widow, on one hand, portrayed as a paradigm of a poor, marginal
person at the limit of her resources. On the other hand, a number of
independent women with resources in Luke, according to Seim, are
"presumably widows." They enjoy a degree of freedom that was not
granted to them within patriarchal marriages, somewhat akin to the self
determination accorded to the unmarried and widows in Paul (1 Cor
7:39-40).\textsuperscript{21} Several scholars have suggested that the combination of
devout widows, and independent women with resources supporting the
itinerant ministry of Jesus, is indicative of a community of celibate
women, widows and virgins who are independent of patriarchal families
and roles, contemporaneous with Luke's community and writing.\textsuperscript{22}
Price suggests that Luke has used the "widow" image for an emerging
order of consecrated widows including virgins.\textsuperscript{23} Seim proposes that
Luke's critique of marriage and portrayal of pious widows (Anna)
works against the pseudo-Pauline subordination and containment of
widows (1 Tim 5:3-16), therefore placing Luke in a different tradition regarding widows.\textsuperscript{24}

According to Seim, the often cited parallels between Hannah and the 'true widow' of 1 Tim 5:3-16 are minimal, with similarities in piety and prayer only. Indeed, the differences are more significant, with the pseudo-Pauline writer emphasizing the priority of marriage and child bearing, in contrast to the ascetic independence from patriarchal marriage that Seim has noted in Luke.\textsuperscript{25} Stählin notes the high regard held for widows who have not remarried in Luke (2:36-37) and suggests a possible connection to the same value held in the Pastoral Epistles (1 Tim 5:5, 9, 11-12).\textsuperscript{26} However, for Seim, the pseudo-Pauline writer is seeking to contain, even "decimate," rather than promote the ascetic independence of widows or virgins. Hence an emphasis on "true widows,” to limit the number of enrolled widows being supported by the church community, and therefore alleviate the burden.\textsuperscript{27} (note the pejoratives used for independent women in pseudo-Paul: 1 Tim 5; 2 Tim 3.) "The ascetic ideal is presented as valid only for women no longer fit for child bearing, and who are old enough to be excused from the public pressure of remarriage." As to younger women capable of child bearing, they are encouraged to focus on their theologically endorsed function of fulfilling their roles and duties within patriarchal marriage.\textsuperscript{28} The pseudonymous writer, Seim notes, has used "\textit{Paul against Paul}," by advocating that the imperative to remain celibate only applies to widows past child-bearing age (1 Tim 5). This is contrary to the Pauline injunction for widows and virgins to remain celibate if their desire is to serve the Lord (1 Cor 7).\textsuperscript{29}

Luke appears to follow Paul and resist pseudo-Paul (or a developing trajectory, which is eventually expressed in pseudo-Paul), with marriage frequently depicted as a hindrance to discipleship. Seim notes that marriage, as an excuse for not attending the great feast (Lk 14:20), is unique to Luke; “wife” is included by Luke as one of the relational bonds which one must sacrifice for discipleship (Lk 14:26, 18:29), indicating that the demands of ascetic discipleship were a difficulty for men, but not for women, who embraced a freedom from the ambiguities of patriarchal marriage.\textsuperscript{30} It can be argued from Luke that there is a continuum of virgin, widow, independent, prophetic woman. This is to be distinguished from the pseudo-Pauline image of
the aged, pious widow, who prays constantly. A possible parallel exists between Paul's instructions to widows and virgins over "the Lord's business" and "worldly affairs" (1 Cor 7:34) with the apparent contrast between Mary and Martha (Lk 10:38-42). 31

Luke's ascetic perspective regarding marriage does not necessitate a negative view of sexuality, but rather stems from a negative view of patriarchal marriage for women. 32 Therefore for Seim, Lk 11:27-28 questions the traditional role of motherhood (the one paradigmatic mother in Luke is a virgin, and ponders the word of God), in preference to hearing and doing the word of God (compare Lk 8:19-21 and the "fictive" family of Jesus). Indeed, women with traditional, patriarchal roles receive a lament for the eschatological times of difficulty ahead (Lk 23:27-30). 33 It is as 'unmarried,' whether virgin or widow, that a woman finds the freedom outside patriarchal roles to fulfill the vocation of disciple as one who learns. 34 It is a role that Luke seeks to guard for Mary, without discounting the ministry role of Martha (Lk 10:38-41). 35 According to Seim, conjugal relationships, along with other activities of life that receive no moral censure, compose the activities in which people will be immersed in the face of Luke's warning of sudden eschatological events, which will overtake them unexpectedly (Lk 17:22-37). 36

Luke's "widows" - resistant tradition to patriarchal family

In summary then, Luke's portrayal of widows evokes a long tradition of prophetic critique against injustice. Widows represent the most vulnerable and exploited people in society. Working out who Luke's widows are, appears to be central to the narrative role of women in Luke. Luke's "widows" are not necessarily pseudo-Paul's "real widows," although, they may be that. Luke's widows most likely include "fictive virgins" (Anna, perhaps Mary, Martha, the women from Galilee) regardless of previous marriage status. These women have rejected patriarchal marriage and its prescribed gender roles. In this gospel, fictive family is to be preferred over patriarchal family. Luke appears to support the right of independent women to remain independent in their discipleship and modes of serving the community. Widows, real or fictive, are models of true piety, either with or without
possessions. Along with their independence, Luke's widows may have also exhibited a spirit of resistance to patriarchal structures and their unjust practices, perhaps quintessentially portrayed in the spirited resistance of a widow to a judge in the parable, *The Audacious Widow*.

End Notes

1The writer of this gospel is referred to as Luke, without affirming any particular theory of the author's identity. The *Gospel of Luke* is also referred to as Luke.


3Ps 94:4-7; Exodus 22:21-24; Deut 24:17-18; Isa 1:17.


6The parable evokes a long tradition of justice, prophetic protest against corrupt judges, and the rhetoric of Yahweh's vindication of the powerless. The image of the widow in Luke's parable *The Audacious Widow* draws on this extensive tradition. This tradition designates Yahweh as the defender of the oppressed. The parable depicts a widow audaciously securing justice against a powerful self-interested judge. The figure of a self-interested, or unjust judge is a quintessential expression of resistance to Yahweh's justice in the Hebrew tradition (Mic 7:3; Zeph 3:3; 2 Chron 19:5-7).

7The portrayal of a usually asymmetrical relationship between widow and judge is extra-ordinary with the aggressive tone of "wear me out" or "slap me in the face" (So the NRSV's note on Lk 18:5), ὑπωπτιᾷθη having either physical or verbal connections. For ὑπωπτιᾷθη Stählin suggests, "idiomatically [...] scratch my eyes out" (Stählin, "χήρα," 450 n 88).


Schüssler Fiorenza (In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins [London: SCM, 1983], 128, 141, 223) notes the vulnerability of women in the Greco-Roman world, especially if divorced, widowed, enslaved, or rented. Economic desperation meant such women often resorted to prostitution for a mere livelihood. This further compounded their exploitation within patriarchal society.


retained the Markan saying concerning the exploitation of widows—"They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers" (Mark 12:40; Luke 20:47a NRSV; oι κατευθύνουν τὰς οἰκίας τῶν χηρῶν καὶ προφάσει μακρὰ προσεύχονται; Lk 20:47a) —which sustains a particular perspective of widows within the tradition of exploitation and appeal to prophetic justice, (Johnson, The Gospel of Luke, 315). Luke's Jesus gives a scathing critique of Scribes' and Pharisees' avarice. Luke also highlights the vulnerability and marginal status of widows. Hence, Luke's imperative for just relations to prevail in the community. The contrasts could not be greater, although Johnson sees this as "stereotyped polemic" (The Gospel of Luke, 315). Ringe regards this as a condemnation of spiritual abuse, with the Scribes abusing their religious trust to protect widows. Ringe cites Deut 10:18; 14:29; 24:17; 19-21; 26:12; Job 22:9; 24:3; 31:16; Pss 68:5; 94:6; Isa 1:23; 10:2; Jer 49:11; Mal 3:5 (Ringe, Luke, 250). The critique of the Scribes is ironic, since they have extorted widows while feigning prayer. Widows are the true locale of piety and prayer in Luke (Seim, The Double Message, 245). Widows are extorted under the guise of prayer. Justice, rather than prayer is the primary issue then. 

Nolland notes the occasional suggestion that this story may have been a parable, and stresses the paradoxical and "hyperbolic" character of the interpretation (Luke 21:4) Luke's Jesus gives to the incident, which suggests either story or saying has a parabolic character (J. Nolland, Luke 9:21-18:34, WBC [Dallas, TX: Word, 1993], 978-980). Witherington (Women and the Genesis of Christianity, 35) also suggests the story may have been a parable.


Seim, The Double Message, 244-248, 256-259. Nolland suggests that the widow has comparable "priorities" with Anna, and exemplifies the radical call to discipleship. Nolland cites 9:59-61; 12:22-34 (Luke 18:35-24:53, 979). Danker makes a similar point about the exemplary faith of the widow, who is now a beggar, and to whom
the kingdom belongs (paradoxically, in an aside, Danker notes that "Jesus does not praise her action. Scribal teaching had indeed devoured this widow's house" [Jesus and the New Age, 327-328]). Witherington suggests the two stories, 'devouring Scribes,' and the 'widow's offering' are indicative of two types of widows. The first have resources that are exploited or devoured in some way by the Scribes. The second, have few resources that are devoured in self-giving, (Women and the Genesis of Christianity, 36).


22 Seim, The Double Message, 256-259; Seim, "The Gospel of Luke," 758; also Tannehill, Luke (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), 263. Are there widows among the women healed or exorcised who support the itinerant movement with independent resources (Lk 8:1-3)? Thurston notes that while Joanna's husband is identified, the absence of specific reference to husbands of Mary Magdalene and Susanna may indicate widow status (The Widows, 30). Other possible references to widows in Luke: many widows in Israel during the time of Elijah (Lk 4:25-26) as a continuing phenomenon; Simon's mother-in-law (at Simon's house, Lk 4:38-39); a woman who anoints Jesus at Simon's house (widow? Lk 7:36-50); Martha and Mary? (Lk 10:38-42). They might also be fictive widows.


26 Stählin, "χήρα," 457.

28 Seim, The Double Message, 239-240.

29 Seim, The Double Message, 240.


34 Seim, The Double Message, 126-127.

35 Seim, The Double Message, 112-118.