The Parable of the Persistent Widow: 
Luke 18:1–8 in Context

by

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Abstract

My project explores how a detailed exegetical treatment of one key Lukan text can offer an insight into the Lukan portrayal of women characters especially in regard to their role in discipleship. By critically examining Luke’s characterization of the widow in her dramatized role—encounter with the judge, I argue the view that in this Parable the widow demonstrates specific discipleship competencies. The thesis takes into account concerns relating to current feminist hermeneutics and connects them to Luke’s characterization of female characters, especially viewed against the backdrop of the widow’s place in the OT and the first-century world of Luke. This exegesis embraces literary, rhetorical, and contextual analyses, complemented with attention to narrative and theological observations that direct focus on the widow in her role exemplifying Luke’s message of discipleship for Jesus’ followers.
Statement of Originality

I affirm that this thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any
other degree or diploma in any university or other institution. To the best of my knowledge,
this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except
where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

John Tanner O’Connor
24 August 2019
Acknowledgements

I wish to take this opportunity to thank various people who have been instrumental in my progress towards this Master’s research degree.

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To our staff members at the Dalton McCaughey Library (DML), especially Chief Librarian Stephen Connelly, recently retired, who would often spend time with me in discussing my resource requirements, I am very thankful. Most especially, I wish to thank Sabine Voermans, who very graciously went out of her way many times to locate particular references I had difficulty in finding, both in DML and other resource centres.

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I also wish to thank the University of Divinity members on the Confirmation Panel, Dr John McDowell, Rev Dr Sean Winter, Rev Dr Robyn Whitaker, Dr Fotini Toso, and Dr Keith Dyer. They not only provided me with most valuable advice and suggestions at the time of the Panel Meeting, March 2017, but also, and in particular, Dr Whitaker and Dr Dyer, submitted for my benefit a detailed written report on my 5,000 word research proposal text.

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John O’Connor
24 August 2019
## Abbreviations

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<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BR</td>
<td>Biblical Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BS</td>
<td>Bibliotheca Sacra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CTM</td>
<td>Currents in Theology and Mission</td>
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<tr>
<td>HBT</td>
<td>Horizons in Biblical Theology</td>
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<tr>
<td>JB</td>
<td>Jerusalem Bible</td>
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<tr>
<td>JBL</td>
<td>Journal of Biblical Literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JNTS</td>
<td>Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JPCC</td>
<td>Journal of Pastoral Care &amp; Counselling (Online)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JTAK</td>
<td>Journal of Theta Alpha Kappa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LGNTL</td>
<td>Lectionary Greek – New Testament Lessons of the Revised Common and Narrative Lectionary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LTQ</td>
<td>Lexington Theological Quarterly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCBC</td>
<td>New Century Bible Commentary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIV</td>
<td>New International Version Bible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRSV</td>
<td>New Revised Standard Version Bible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NTS</td>
<td>New Testament Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RAE</td>
<td>Review and Expositor</td>
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<tr>
<td>RQ</td>
<td>Restoration Quarterly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAGL</td>
<td>The Analytical Greek Lexicon: A Complete Series of Paradigms with Grammatical Remarks and Explanations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TBT</td>
<td>The Bible Today</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TCGEL</td>
<td>The Concise Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament</td>
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<tr>
<td>TDNT</td>
<td>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TE</td>
<td>Theological Educator</td>
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<tr>
<td>TENTG</td>
<td>The Elements of New Testament Greek</td>
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<td>TNIB</td>
<td>The New Interpreter’s Bible</td>
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Introduction

In light of recent feminist literature that takes issue with regard to the perspective that Luke in various ways in his Gospel portrays women in a somewhat negative light, my aim in this thesis is to challenge this view and argue for a more favourable portrayal. Using the example of Luke’s Parable of the Persistent Widow (18:1-8), my purpose is to show, by way of an exegetical study, that the role characterization Luke attributes to the widow clearly manifests a portrayal that is in contrast to the feminist literature.

The feminist argument in question is also closely aligned with the perspective that Luke provides little indication that women are characterized with discipleship competencies. My argument is that not only are there instances where, in one form or another, discipleship traits are portrayed by a select number of women, but that the “persistent widow” in this parable of Luke clearly demonstrates remarkable characteristics that relate to discipleship.

I will argue that within this parable there are particular expressions and grammatical aspects within the text itself that deliver imperative force revealing Luke’s intended meaning and purpose of the parable in that they indicate explicit links that identify discipleship elements. And it is through the characterization of the widow that this imperative to discipleship is conveyed. I argue that these discipleship elements are demonstrated by the widow in positive
light by way of her encounter with the judge. I claim that Luke composes this entire passage to demonstrate, within the literary form of a parable story, the importance of discipleship for Jesus’ followers, and that the initiative taken by the widow in her resolute petitioning to address injustice expresses this message. The reader is invited to identify and interpret this widow’s resourcefulness, determination, and discipline of purpose towards accomplishing her objective, namely, addressing the injustice denied her by the unjust judge. Furthermore, in this parable the widow also exemplifies that characteristic faith called for that her goal is to be achieved.

In Section 1 we commence with a review of scholarship that identifies the concern three feminist scholars in particular have regarding what they perceive is Luke’s negative portrayal of women in his Gospel. This section also includes an explanation of terms and expressions and the methodological approach I utilize in developing this thesis’ argument. Section 2 provides a brief overview of the social world of Luke’s time for the purpose of clarifying the significance of that environment which impacts on the position and status of women and widows in particular. The exegesis in Section 3 analyses the Lukan parable in verse-by-verse detail to draw out the meaning of words and phrases that clarify the roles attributed to both the widow and the judge, along with the primary messages Luke intends to convey to his readers. This is complemented in Section 4 by various narrative and theological observations of the Gospel passage that attempt to draw together the implications of the parable. A summary and a conclusion in Section 5 completes the thesis. An appendix offers various observations of interest that relate to the reception history of the parable.
Section 1

Review of Scholarship

1.1 The Widow’s Lot and Luke’s Portrayal of Women

In Luke 18:3 we hear the cry of a widow: “Grant me justice against my opponent!” This appeal resounds with biblical significance. Whilst in the Old Testament the place of women and the attention given to them were matters generally held to be of less importance than those accorded to their male counterparts, for the widow there was even less concern or recognition.\(^1\) There is, however, an exception in this regard through Deuteronomy (10:18; 14:28-29; 16:11; 24:17-21; 25:5-10; 26:12; 27:19). Even so, the widow’s lot in life was one that gained no favours.

Even in today’s social order, in a variety of ways, there exist disparities regarding the position and status of women, relative to men, that provoke vexation. These contemporary issues can inform advocacy hermeneutics, including feminist scholarship that takes issue with the way women appear to be portrayed in the Gospel of Luke. My aim in the exegesis of this parable of Luke is to address this concern and to explore those elements that relate to this contention.

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in order to offer some resolution. I believe that this particular parable of Luke 18:1-8 in context suggests the need for further reflection on our knowledge and understanding of Luke’s general portrayal of women and his particular focus on widows.

1.1.1 **A literary review on various perspectives on Luke**

Content about and reference to women have more prominence in Luke compared with the other Synoptics. Some scholars, however, draw attention to an apparent negative portrayal of women in Luke’s account. Brendan Byrne suggests that Luke’s attitude to women is ambiguous and very controversial, and F. Scott Spencer remarks that:

> Whereas Luke was long regarded as the New Testament writer most supportive of women’s interests, largely because of the sheer number of women characters in the Third Gospel and Acts, and a major literary pattern of pairing male and female figures, closer analysis of what Lukan women actually say (not much), and do (primarily serve men), began to raise some disturbing red flags.

Spencer calls our attention to what appears to be “a third wave feminist movement flowing into some indeterminate form of post feminism” relating to the way women are characterized in this Gospel. This is borne out in the scholarship on Luke in which we find different assessments on the nature of Luke’s portrayal of women. Barbara Reid, Turid Karlsen Seim, and Jane Schaberg, among others, have argued that Luke confines women characters to roles

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of support and service, denying them significant agency, and downplaying their potential role as exemplary disciples.\(^5\) Others, and especially the recent study by Spencer, have sought to rehabilitate Luke’s account by drawing attention to motifs of “purpose and persistence” that are associated with women characters.\(^6\)

This ambiguity is seen in Reid’s report that many instinctively turned to Luke as “the Gospel for women” and aimed to see equality of women and men in Luke’s penchant for parallel pairs. However, Reid indicates that some feminist scholars draw on a hermeneutics of suspicion and perceive that Luke’s portrait of women is “ambiguous at best, and dangerous at worst.”\(^7\)

From Seim’s observation, she critiques that not only does the third evangelist write from a male viewpoint, her concern is with the issue of women “who follow and serve” (διακονέω – diakoneō, as presented in 8:1-3 and 24:8-11) and their “phlegmatic passivity,” her methodology employing “historical analysis, redaction criticism, and a feminist hermeneutic of suspicion,” according to Spencer’s analysis.\(^8\)


\(^7\) Reid, *Choosing*, 3; the expression “hermeneutics of suspicion” is explained in this Section 1.4 under the heading “Terms and Expressions.”

In the opening words of Schaberg’s literature, it is declared, “Warning …. The Gospel of Luke is an extremely dangerous text, perhaps the most dangerous in the Bible.”⁹ From Schaberg’s point of view, not only does Luke restrict the roles of women to what is acceptable to the conventions of the imperial world,¹⁰ according to Spencer her reader-response critique directs attention towards those “oppressive dynamics,” especially relating to “the paucity of women’s speech in Luke (and Acts) compared to men’s, and the tendency to confine women to supportive, serving roles in the Jesus movement, rather than developing their leadership and decision-making capabilities.”¹¹ Schaberg observes that, as in the other Gospels, there are in Luke no narratives of women called to follow Jesus, nor are women commissioned as apostles (contrast Mk 16:7).¹² Reid supports this view in claiming that “There is no story of a woman called by Jesus to follow him, and only one clear instance (23:49) in which women are said to have done so.”¹³ Aside from references to women’s presence at certain events, Schaberg also points out that full discipleship in Luke involves “the power and authority to exorcise, heal, and preach (9:1-6; 10:1-16),” and only the men are empowered with this apostolate.¹⁴ On this perspective there is again support from Reid who maintains that the Lukan portrayal of women is to be interpreted as focusing more on the issue of role

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¹³ Reid, Choosing, 30.

limitations, conceding with feminist supporters that a woman is said to have “chosen the better part” when she remains a silent, passive listener (cf. Lk 10:42 passim).\textsuperscript{15}

When examining the parable, which is the focus of this study (Luke 18:1-8), Reid considers that the wording in v. 1 comes from an androcentric perspective and that the parable’s impact is softened in posing the widow in a docile and acceptable “prayer” role.\textsuperscript{16} In this thesis, I will offer a different perspective, arguing that Luke’s characterization of the widow is far from one suggesting a docile role but full of significance. When taking into account the place of widows within the socio-cultural environment and influences of first-century Mediterranean life, and the definitive way the Greek text expresses the widow’s intent and performance, this widow is surprisingly forthright in contrast to what would be expected of women of this time and place. Furthermore, the profound significance of prayer and the importance that prayer needs to persist in the life of the disciples are features of the parable that are effectively and dramatically demonstrated by the action of the widow.

1.2 The Parable of the Persistent Widow (Luke 18:1-8)

1.2.1 Significance of this Thesis and the Parable

The significance of this thesis is that these alternative accounts of Luke’s overall perspective on the role of women are tested by means of a detailed exegetical study of a single text. Luke


\textsuperscript{16} Reid, \textit{Choosing}, 194; also Reid, “Petty Pursuits,” 293.
18:1-8 is read as an account of the “persistent widow,” in contrast to dominant readings which name the passage as the parable of the “unjust judge.” The focus of exegetical enquiry will be on the role played by the widow, as this is brought to life by an understanding of Luke’s social world and wider narrative and theological concerns. While the parable clearly deals with the subject of prayer, or the possible Lukan concern to deal with delay in the Parousia, the use of the character of a widow (χήρα – chēra) invites the interpreter to ask questions about the significance of this character choice and the nature of Luke’s character portrayal. In this essay the understanding of χήρα relates to 1) her femininity (low status), and 2) her social status in that she is now highly vulnerable with no male support and no advocate to represent her. We may presume she is in an impoverished state and possibly isolated from the rest of the community.\(^{17}\) We read that widows are taken advantage of by the scribes (20:46-47). In this passage, the judge, unjust as described (v. 6), also decides to take advantage of the widow in attempting to dismiss her case.

I consider this parable provides an excellent example where we read of a dramatized encounter between a widow and a judge that invites consideration of women’s capacity for individualized choice and action by way of specific focus on the Lukan widow. I will argue that this parable widow demonstrates discipleship characteristics the nature of which are in stark contrast to socio-cultural convention, especially when we take into account that women’s identities took shape in environments of subordination that were hostile to their interests, the prevalence of which is generally found in traditional androcentric social communities. For the purposes of this study, however, rather than attempting to discuss the

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broad range of exemplary female characters in Luke’s Gospel, the widow will primarily be
the focus of my attention.

Because of this parable’s striking dramatization between two people from opposite ends of the
social spectrum, and the explicit connection made between the woman’s action and that
expected of disciples (see the “them” of 18:1 and the “chosen ones” of 18:7), the parable is
significant as it offers an excellent opportunity to demonstrate the ways in which an
understanding of Luke’s socio-cultural environment, strategies of narrative characterization
and theological perspectives, can illuminate a particular text. It also illuminates what is at
stake in interpretation in relation to understanding the exemplary role of women characters in
the Gospel.

1.2.2 Purpose and perspective of the Parable

Only in 18:1 and in 18:9 does Luke preface a parable with its meaning. Luke’s reason for
doing so raises questions. It may serve to indicate the purpose and real point of the parable so
that the literary unit is observed from a particular point of view. Both verses relate to people
in prayer: 18:1 is concerned with the need to pray, while 18:9 relates to how some people
pray. Luke’s intention might also be to make clear that he is addressing a contemporary
problem in the Lukan community in which Christians under severe persecution are denying
their faith, a calamity many scholars testify was the situation at that time. Luke’s location of


19 Hicks, “Persistent Widow,” 213; also E. Earle Ellis, The Gospel of Luke, NCBC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,
1991), 212.
the parable in his narrative, following the teaching of Luke 17, discloses a strong possible connection to Luke’s account of Jesus’ eschatological teaching.

1.2.3 The Widow’s pedagogical role

The dramatic development taking place in this legal-drama courtroom scene reveals particular elements of importance that provide an insight into Luke’s general portrayal of women and his particular focus on widows. Luke’s choice of a vulnerable widow (χήρα), given centre stage in this exchange against injustice, appears to be an intention to have the role of women depicted in prominent place. The parable is clearly focused on prayer, faith, and the pursuit of justice and is thus designed to deliver instructive content on discipleship. Remarkably, we discover not a male player but a woman, a widow in fact, symbolized as impoverished, vulnerable, and in need (cf. Ex 22:22; Deut 10:18; Isa 1:17; 1 Kings 17:17-24; 2 Kings 4:1-7), whom Luke employs to exemplify important elements of discipleship.20

1.2.4 The Widow in confrontation with the Judge

The parable presents a challenge confronting the destitute widow in her encounter with the unyielding judge who is reluctant to bring about a resolution in her favour. However, we read that she too is just as unrelenting and needs to combat the institutional deadlock entrenched within this society by the powerful and influential legal system that has no interest in

supporting this person of little relevance. For the widow to have settlement against her adversary will mean that the justice system will need to be overturned in her case in order for this to prevail. As to what the issue of contention is about, or the identity of the third party with whom the judge may possibly be in active collusion, we are not told nor are we aware of any precise details regarding settlement.

1.3 Identification of the Research Question

*Benefit and identification of the Research Question*

The anticipated benefit from this research is in demonstrating that a detailed exegesis of Luke 18:1-8 in the context of Luke’s social world supports the view that Luke’s characterization of female characters is neither “conventional” nor “passive.” I demonstrate that Luke’s characterization of the widow intentionally describes a counter-cultural *modus operandi*, in contrast to interpretations from feminist scholars who claim that Luke’s portrayal of women as conventional, passive, and at times, servile, appears to be pervasive. In this parable the widow needs to step outside of her culturally determined role and demonstrate a capacity for perseverance and resistance against an unjust judge, and the consequences for her in this are fraught with uncertainty. I argue that Luke orchestrates this very significant role for the widow in order to condition and prepare his readers for the Gospel mission that is demanded of them (a continuation of that given by Jesus to the disciples). That Luke ascribes this instructive commission, not to a male, but to a widow as an exemplar, reinforces Luke’s

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reversal leitmotif, the elevation of the lowly, demonstrating that the women in Luke are as much endowed with an essential role regarding discipleship as “The Twelve” and others will be.

My aim therefore is to identify the ways in which a detailed exegetical treatment of this one key text, paying attention to its location within Luke’s social world, the Gospel narrative, and in relation to some central features of Lukan characterization and theology, can support the view that Luke uses the importunate widow to exemplify traits of authentic discipleship. These characteristics not only challenge some of the prevailing cultural expectations of his time but give due weight to female agency and the exemplary nature of women characters in relation to discipleship. It is the objective of this assignment to construct and develop an argument that establishes this perspective.

1.4 Terms and Expressions

To begin with it is necessary to define and explain some terms and expressions that are used throughout this exercise.

a) Exegesis and Hermeneutics

Borrowing Blomberg and Markley’s explanation, the word “exegesis” is derived from two Greek words, ἐξ (“from, of, out of”) and ἀγω (“to lead”), referring to the process of leading out from a text its original meaning in its historical and literary contexts. The discipline of biblical exegesis relates to the art and science of hermeneutics (from Gk. ἑρμενεύω –
“interpret, translate”). Hermeneutics deals with larger, theoretical questions that look for meaning and understanding in the text, whereas exegesis is the actual work involved in the interpretation process of the biblical text.23

b) Feminist Hermeneutics

Explained by Schüssler Fiorenza, “feminist hermeneutics” is described as “feminist theory that insists that all texts are products of an androcentric patriarchal culture and history.” 24 This has given rise to the expression, “hermeneutics of suspicion,” a phrase that applies to exegesis that “seeks to explore the liberating or oppressive values and visions inscribed in text by identifying the androcentric patriarchal character and dynamics of the text and its interpretations.” 25 Reid offers a further explanation:

A “hermeneutics of suspicion” recognizes that the biblical texts and their interpretations through the centuries have been written, for the most part, by men, for men, and about men, and that they serve the interests of patriarchy. One who reads with a “hermeneutics of suspicion” is wary that the text can be oppressive for women. This does not deny the inspiration of Scripture, but recognizes the limitations of the human authors who set forth God’s word.26

Schüssler Fiorenza affirms and extends this interpretation in suggesting that there is a need to pay attention to the ways in which contemporary concerns and sensibilities shape exegesis, and that traditional historical-critical method of analysis is now sharpened by a “hermeneutics


26 Reid, Choosing, 9.
of suspicion.”

We see the effects of this in our opening discussion on the review of scholarship where for some feminist scholars their perception is that Luke portrays women in a somewhat negative light and denied discipleship roles.

c) **Honour and Shame**

In describing honour and shame that relates to the first-century world, Malina suggests that these terms are gender specific where individual males symbol honour and individual females symbol shame. Malina describes honour as “a claim to worth that is socially acknowledged,” and this is founded on three defining features: authority, gender status, and respect. Our parable judge exploits his authority in dismissing the widow’s appeal, and while presuming he believes that prestige and social eminence have value worth securing, he nonetheless declares that he has no respect for people. Female shame, on the other hand, is symbolized in a range of various qualities such as modesty, shyness, restraint. We find our parable widow to be quite the contrary. Female shame is classified as positive shame and makes a woman honourable.

Moxnes explains that honour is fundamentally the public recognition of one’s social standing. Honour can be 1) *ascribed* as inherited from the family at birth, or 2) *acquired*, conferred on the basis of virtuous deeds. In the case of the parable judge, his decree is far from virtuous.

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27 Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, xv, xxiii.


Furthermore, honour status comes primarily from group recognition in that it depends ultimately on recognition from significant others in society.³² Malina and Neyrey express the idea in the following:

… publicity and witnesses are crucial for the acquisition and bestowal of honor. Representatives of public opinion must be present, since honor is all about the court of public opinion and the reputation which that court bestows. Literally, public praise can give life and public ridicule can kill.

… honor and shame refer to both males and females, people acquire honor by personally aspiring to a certain status and having that status socially validated.³³

The widow in our parable dismisses any sense of shame in her pursuit of justice and in doing so causes confusion for the judge. In spite of his initial declaration of having no respect for people, he needs to seriously reconsider how he might need to respond to the widow and what steps he needs to take in order to protect and retain “honourable” recognition in the community.

d) Textual Criticism

For our purposes we locate the original language of the text as in the Greek rendition.³⁴ It is understood that the Hebrew and the Greek text were written in the common ordinary language and that the greater portion of both the Old and New Testaments was written in more


³⁴ Besides the Greek manuscripts there are other ancient translations, e.g., Tatian’s Diatessaron, a late second-century harmonization of all four Gospels, and the patristic citations, several of which are discussed in the appendix to this essay (Blomberg and Markley, New Testament Exegesis, 2, incl. n. 3).
straightforward Hebrew or Hellenistic/Koine (κοινή = “common”) Greek.\textsuperscript{35} For textual criticism purposes on this passage of Luke we shall be using the NRSV of Luke’s Gospel.

e) \textit{Literary Conventions: Literary genre, literary form, form criticism}

Regarding literary conventions of which there are multiple forms in the New Testament books, our passage takes the form of a parable within the literary genre of a Gospel.\textsuperscript{36} The word “parable” comes from the Greek word παραβολή (parabolē) which means a comparison, an illustration, or even an analogy. Parables often employ analogies in the sense that an analogy is a comparison between two things in order to explain similarities.\textsuperscript{37} Establishing original form and historical context can be identified as “form criticism.” By way of form criticism we do not necessarily expect to find in a parable real people who actually lived. Yet, to enable Luke to demonstrate important instructive elements that need highlighting, he singularly characterizes his dramatis personae (the widow and the judge in our parable) in ways he requires and with a nature that is almost lifelike.\textsuperscript{38} We find that our parable widow’s behaviour and actions towards the judge are not quite what a reader would anticipate and are in fact unpredictably counter-cultural. Parables can offer surprise endings which we do not


\textsuperscript{36} Blomberg and Markley list the major New Testament literary genres as Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Apocalypse (Blomberg and Markley, \textit{New Testament Exegesis}, 103); according to Reid, while there appears to be at present no consensus on the literary genre of Luke and Acts, she explains that both Lukan books are a mixture of popular first-century Greco-Roman literary types (Reid, \textit{Choosing}, 19).

\textsuperscript{37} Hultgren classifies parables into two types: “Narrative,” where comparisons are made in the form of a story, such as with our parable of the widow and judge, and “Similitudes,” where there is no story and comparisons are made by way of analogies. A third type may be “Exemplary Parables” that provide examples of human conduct to follow (Arland J. Hultgren, \textit{The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary} [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000], 3-4).

necessarily expect.\textsuperscript{39} They can also be designed to offer the reader varying degrees of interpretations and understandings.\textsuperscript{40}

\textit{f) Rhetorical Criticism}

Rhetorical criticism is about patterns and meanings as to how people communicated and at what they communicated. Blomberg and Markley clarify that all the New Testament books were designed initially to be read aloud, so they would include various dimensions of rhetoric. Rhetoric analysis adds a further dimension to the literary context. It provides an understanding of the document’s narrative flow and “an appreciation of why the author says certain things in certain ways or places.”\textsuperscript{41} Rhetorical criticism can range from formal rhetorical criticism of antiquity (historical criticism) to forms of modern-language criticism.\textsuperscript{42}

\textit{g) Narrative Criticism}

We use this particular methodological approach that applies to “how the story is told in terms of its plot, character development, point of view, narrative patterns, events, and settings.”\textsuperscript{43} In light of narrative criticism, we gain an understanding of the time, place, and setting in which this Third Gospel was written which alerts us to how Luke’s text is communicated and


\textsuperscript{40} See Dornisch where she explains that “Several points of view will provide different perspectives” (Loretta Dornisch, \textit{A Woman Reads the Gospel of Luke} [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1996], pp. 6-7).


\textsuperscript{43} Reid, \textit{Choosing}, 6.
shaped. We can say with most scholars that Luke’s Gospel was written in the closing decades of the first century CE, and after the fall of Jerusalem to the Roman armies in the year 70 CE. According to Tanehill, “the primary audience for which Luke was designed was a group of late first-century churches of diverse social composition … that included people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds, social status, and wealth.” Furthermore, we are reminded that Luke was writing at a time when Christians were undergoing severe persecution. A combination of these factors contributes towards understanding a particular narrative and its implications. Further understanding of narrative criticism is covered more fully in Section 4 of this essay.

h) Social-Scientific Criticism

In describing the sociology element in this phrase, Blomberg and Markley define its meaning as “the study of interrelationships among humans and how those interrelationships define and shape the behaviour of individual persons and cultures.” Social-scientific criticism helps us

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44 Elliot explains that this process involves textual criticism that “analyses the Bible as a collection of texts and textual witnesses with individual and collective histories of textual transmission” (John H. Elliott, What is Social-Scientific Criticism? [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993], 7-8). Blomberg and Markley add that this is a science and an art “to determine, as best as possible, the exact wording of an original text that is either undiscovered or no longer exists” (Blomberg and Markley, New Testament Exegesis, 2).

45 Byrne, Hospitality, 5-6; also Robert C. Tannehill, Luke, ANTC (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 20, 26; according to Reid, “the oldest text of Luke is a portion of the gospel preserved on a papyrus manuscript, P75, which dates to the beginning of the third century CE. The earliest complete text of the Gospel dates to the fourth century CE.” Reid also notes that “Luke was not a native of Palestine but a Gentile Christian writing for a predominately Gentile community, and that earliest traditions associate him with Antioch. Furthermore, the third evangelist was well-educated as his Greek is polished and he uses well-known Greco-Roman literary forms” (Reid, Choosing, 4 [n. 11], 15). According to Johnson, “[Luke’s] stylistic fluency is demonstrated by his facile use of several Greek styles” (Luke Timothy Johnson, The Gospel of Luke, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, Sacra Pagina 3 [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991], 3). It is suggested that Luke was probably writing in a thoroughly Hellenistic environment (Green, Luke, 2, n. 8).


47 Cf. Lk 12:1-12; also Ellis, Luke, 212; and Green, Luke, 477-84.

“to recognize the cultural scripts of the New Testament world and how the inspired text either fits those cultural scripts or breaks from them in revolutionary ways,” as they appear to do in our parable in regard to role characterizations. Social-scientific criticism can be classified as a subcategory of historical-context analysis and it takes into account the pervasive sociological and cultural values of the New Testament world. Historical-context analysis relates to *diachronic* (throughout time) aspects, the history behind the text such as date, author, recipients, and historical events that affected the New Testament documents. Social-scientific analysis deals with “*synchronic* (within time) aspects of the text, namely implicit cultural values, social relationships, religious and political systems, and other social events or patterns of behaviour … that help to clarify the text as it stands.”

**i) Characterization**

Utilizing Cornelis Bennema’s research, in contrast to characters in modern fiction (round, individualistic, psychological), characters in Greco-Roman literature have usually been classified as “Aristotelian,” that is, unchanging, “flat” (less complex, predictable), or “stock” (plot functionary, few traits). It has also been assumed by many biblical scholars that the

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49 Blomberg and Markley, *New Testament Exegesis*, 85; also Green, *Luke*, 14. According to Neyrey, a member of the Context Group, any introduction to cultural anthropology and its interpretation requires a social-science reading that gives a “proper reading” of an ancient cultural system utterly different from our own so that we read these ancient texts as best we can on their own terms (Neyrey, *The Social World*, xxi).

50 Blomberg and Markley, *New Testament Exegesis*, 85-86; in older works historical-context analysis (sources, settings, or redaction) formed part of “literary criticism,” a heading that also includes “reader-response criticism” and “deconstructionism”; both these terms are relatively recent and relate to various meanings that can be derived from the text (Blomberg and Markley, *New Testament Exegesis*, 111).

51 Blomberg and Markley explain further: *diachronic* comes from the Greek διά “through” + χρόνος “time”; *synchronic* derives from the Greek σύν, “with” + χρόνος “time” (Blomberg and Markley, *New Testament Exegesis*, 67, 123).

Aristotelian view of character influenced the Gospels.\textsuperscript{53} Bennema however argues differently, that the Aristotelian analysis of character is, 1) not necessarily representative of Greek literature, 2) nor should it be applied to the Gospels. There are noticeable instances in ancient literature where characters “can be complex, change, have inner life, and even show personality.”\textsuperscript{54}

For character reconstruction we require knowledge of the first-century world and the influence of its historical, social, and cultural environment.\textsuperscript{55} With that understanding we can make an assumption that in our parable Luke’s characterization of the widow, expected to be “stock,” becomes unpredictable. The same situation evolves with the judge. He conforms to a characterization of many judges of Luke’s time known for ruling unjustly, yet he too, initially characterized as “stock,” subsequently undergoes a character change.\textsuperscript{56}

\textsuperscript{53} Bennema, \textit{Theory of Character}, 50.

\textsuperscript{54} Bennema, \textit{Theory of Character}, 37, 51; Bennema claims that we are able to reconstruct character indirectly through \textit{inference} (or “filling in the gaps”) and view different degrees of characterization along a continuum; this we gain from knowledge of the socio-historical context of the first-century Mediterranean world (Bennema, \textit{Theory of Character}, 56, 58, 59, 63).


\textsuperscript{56} Bennema, \textit{Theory of Character}, 6, 20-23, 62, 110.
1.5 Methodology

Sectional structure

Following this Section 1 on Review of Scholarship, I have designed the following strategy. Exegetical in focus, in Section 2 we draw on insights from social anthropology, sociology and cultural studies, and examine the situation that influenced life for women in general, and the widow in particular, within this socio-cultural first-century world of Luke. The purpose of Section 2 is to throw light on those social and cultural constraints impacting on the parable widow and how in her characterization she resists this influence in her appeal to the judge. We are given an understanding of authority figures, those in charge of the household, as well as those in the community, especially judges in their obligations to those who seek redress for wrongs done to them.

Section 3 provides a detailed verse-by-verse exegesis of the Greek text of the Lukan parable in order to draw meaning out of the text. In this we examine syntax and textural expressions that identify the tenor of the passage and advance the theme in the widow’s purpose role. We probe into the meanings of important words and phrases and analyse character descriptions, social and cultural settings, structure and patterns, literary form and devices, rhetorical statements and questions, all of which are purpose directed to illuminate the parable’s underlying messages.

Following the exegesis, Section 4 develops the thesis’ argument with discussions on both narrative and theological observations of the Lukan text. The former includes aspects of narrative criticism that analyse individual characterizations for both widow and judge for the
purpose of critiquing how the narrative is to achieve its objective. The social-scientific analyses in Section 2, and the exegesis in Section 3, provide the grounding for understanding this review of character in text and context. Narrative criticism also examines function, form, and structure. Particular themes are identified together with how other relevant passages in Luke provide foundational material to support the parable’s message. Attention is directed to the travel narrative and the disciples’ role in that journey and how the widow in her role characterization sets the example for the disciples’ continuing apostolate. In further examining the role of the widow and the judge we analyse notions of persistent prayer, faith and confidence that dominate the purpose of the widow’s role in her contest with the unjust judge.

Reid also reminds us that, “In recent years attention has been given to how the gender of the author and that of the reader can affect the manner in which the message is conveyed and received.”57 In the literature review we identified and highlighted particular feminist perspectives in the reading of Luke’s Gospel. It is in the light of these readings that this essay directs particular attention.

By its very title, “theological observations” focus on God. At this supreme level we embrace the overall salvation purpose of God for all people. At a lower level of abstraction, with our parable in mind, we determine as far as possible the originally intended applications of the text. That focus will be on how the disciples of Jesus are to function in their work and what particular path they need to take to continue the mission of Jesus to accomplish God’s plan. We explore how Luke’s characterization of both widow and judge contributes to the

57 Reid, Choosing, 6.
theological purpose of the parable that identifies the modelling Jesus intends for his disciples. We examine the analogy with the widow in her role as exemplar in how she encounters the difficulties she needs to face in accomplishing her objective. We then explore and identify those theological applications derived from the paradigm of the widow. Other passages relevant to this purpose are examined that offer instructive examples.\textsuperscript{58} We delve into the meaning of prayer, faith and justice, and how these virtues appear to be essential for Jesus’ commissioned disciples in their ongoing mission.

The aim of this eclectic approach, drawing on these methodological and hermeneutical perspectives, is to bring the exemplary nature of the Lukan characterization of the widow into clear view.

Following the summary and conclusion in Section 5, a supplement is added that describes how this parable has been received and interpreted by the Church Fathers since the beginning of the Christian era. While this discussion does not contain material that is intended to contribute in any substantial way to this thesis’ argument, it is of some particular interest and is included as an appendix.

Section 2

The Widow in Luke’s Social World

Retrieving important and meaningful background information that lies behind the text and the story of the parable helps to provide an understanding of the socio-historical realities and the culture-critical sensitivities of Luke’s time that represented the environment in which Luke’s narrative is written. Reading through this lens assists us by way of social-scientific analysis identifying those influences that affected the place of women in that first-century Mediterranean society. For widows especially, conditions then more often than not caused them to experience social and economic disadvantages and hardships.\(^59\) Not all widows found themselves at a disadvantage. There were some who enjoyed relative security, independence and freedom.\(^60\) However, the majority of widows were indeed destitute, vulnerable, and without support, and for this thesis’ argument, these conditions highlight the contrast between the socio-cultural reality of that time and the explicit way Luke in our parable characterizes our presumed impoverished widow in her pursuit of justice.

In this Section, I provide a composite portrayal of the widow, surveyed historically, identifying her place in Old Testament texts, examining her status within the cultures and


\(^{60}\) Stählin, “χήρα,” 443, 446.
customs of the Greco-Roman and Jewish worlds, and reviewing the legal arrangements for women who become widowed in the ancient world. This exploration provides us with an important context for consideration of the place of widows in Luke’s Gospel, setting the scene for our examination of the Parable of the Persistent Widow in Luke 18:1-8.

2.1 An understanding of “χήρα”

The gender-specific term “χήρα” (widow) in the ancient world identifies a woman’s marital and economic status. Bereaved of her husband the widow suddenly becomes deprived of financial support, rendering her potentially destitute. Thurston summarizes the connection: “The Greek term χήρα has a strong social and financial overtone, more appropriate to a widow than a widower.”61 The widow has precarious and marginal social status, particularly within a patriarchal structure; she is powerless, a notion reflected in the Hebrew term almanah (“widow”) or “silenced one” in society.62

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61 According to Thurston, “chēra comes from the Indo-European root ghē, which means ‘forsaken’ or ‘left empty’ …. It is also related to the noun chōra, ‘region’ or ‘empty space.’ The original meaning is a person ‘without’ or ‘left without.’ In the New Testament … chēra can mean not only a widow in the modern sense of the word, but also a ‘woman living without a husband,’ … [also] it signifies anyone destitute, miserable; anyone who lived in solitude” (Bonnie Thurston, The Widows – A Women’s Ministry in the Early Church [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989], 9-10).

2.2 Widows in the world of the Old Testament

Mosaic Law allows for explicit provisions for particular groups of people who are socially defenceless or in positions of dependence, helplessness, and vulnerability. They are to be cared for and protected, and this injunction is particularly associated, in almost stereotypical fashion, with particular disadvantaged and oppressed groups: orphans, aliens, the poor, the day-labourer, and the widows (Ex 22:21-22; Deut 10:18; 24:17-21; Job 22:9; 24:3; Isa 1:17, 23; 10:2; Jer 5:28; Lam 5:3; Zech 7:10; Mal 3:5; Wis 2:10). The Hebrew Bible contains constant denouncements of wrongs done to these groups and rights withheld from them (Ps 94:6; Ezek 22:7). There are regular reprovals against injustice against, as well as admonitions to show special concern for, widows: “Cursed be anyone who deprives … the widow of justice” (Deut 27:19; see also Deut 14:28-29; 24:17-21; 26:12; Job 24:21; Jer 22:3). The widow is paradigmatically presented: In response to the widow’s anguish, “a creditor has come to take my two children as slaves,” Elisha has all her husband’s debts attended to as well as providing for the widow and her children (2 Kings 4:1-7). Thus, the widow is permanently woven into the fabric of various scriptural passages, a paradigm of the vulnerable in the community who are to be protected and helped, in accord with God’s covenant code of Sinai with his people. In Ex 22:22-23 we find the widow, the orphan, and the poor, all fall under the protection of God. In Deut 10:17-18 we read that “the great God, mighty and awesome … executes justice for the orphan … the widow … and the strangers.”

The concern for widows expressed in these texts reflects the likelihood that widows, along with aliens and orphans, were poor and defenceless, highly vulnerable and dispossessed of material resources to sustain basic normal life. The widow could find herself drawn down to
the base level of recognition in her society, financially destitute, and lamentably at the mercy of her nearest male relative who was responsible for her care. Furthermore, she was socially defenceless and incapable of defending her own honour.

### 2.2.1 Defending the widows

One particular area where widows suffered most anguish and distress was in the legal sphere where they were denied and deprived of what was rightfully theirs. Isaiah demands they be granted their rights: “... defend the orphan, plead for the widow” (Isa 1:17). In other texts, God is portrayed as the stronghold and divine supporter for widows (Ps 146:9), the Judge who ensures their rights (Deut 10:18; Ps 68:5) and who vindicates the widow under the *ius talionis* (Ex 22:21-23; cf. Ps 109:9) and under the curse (Deut 27:19). The God who liberated his chosen people from slavery in Egypt, through his prophets, constantly directs his people to reciprocate God’s liberating beneficence to others, especially those who continue to be enslaved in poverty and destitution, namely, the alien, the orphan, and the widow. Supplemented by other statutes and practices, Jewish texts also make provision for the widow that relates to the security of her estate.

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63 Reid, “Petty Pursuits,” 292.

64 Malina, *World*, 42.

65 Stählin, “χήρα,” 446.


67 The widow had the right to remain in the house and on the estate of her deceased husband for as long as she remained a widow; she also had the right to have whatever money she had secured in the temple (2 Macc 3:10; 4 Macc 4:7) (Stählin, “χήρα,” 448).
2.2.2 Widows as exemplars in the Old Testament

In contrast to the potential for low regard and estimation for widows, the Old Testament identifies particular widows as worthy of praise and admiration for a variety of reasons. Luke gives us an initial hint of his interest in widows in his reference to the self-sacrificing and faithful widow of Zarephath who places her livelihood and trust in God’s servant, Elijah, thus extolling YHWH’s power to nourish and nurture the lowly (4:25-26; see 1 Kings 17:8-24). The Canaanite foremother, Tamar, faithfully perpetuates Judah’s messianic-covenant people, and God’s purpose is accomplished (cf. Ruth 4:12). In the LXX, the book of Judith recounts the story of God providing the Jewish people with an extraordinarily capable woman from the town of Bethulia who saves her country (Jdt 8-16). She does so as a widow (Jdt 8:1-8).

2.3 Widows in the Greco-Roman and Jewish Worlds

A widow who remained faithful to her late husband and did not remarry was considered exemplary within Greek and Roman society. In classical Athens, to remain and rear the children, placing their welfare above all else, was highly praised. The term univira was used

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68 Spencer, Salty Wives, 220.

69 The Davidic line continues through Tamar’s son, Perez, who becomes an ancestor of Jesus of Nazareth (cf. Gen 38:26; Mt 1:3) (Spencer, Salty Wives, 206).


71 Sabine R. Huebner, The Family in Roman Egypt: A Comparative Approach to Intergenerational Solidarity and Conflict (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 93-94; a third of Roman children had lost their
in approbation, specifically to refer to those widows prepared to live out the rest of their lives unmarried as a sacrifice for their dead husbands; they were seen as a “paradigm of female virtue and marital faithfulness.” However, the ideal and reality varied regarding frequency of remarriage. In express contradiction to the univira custom, the marriage legislation of the emperor Augustus as pater patriae sought to secure re-population and directed widows between twenty and fifty years of age to marry.

2.3.1 Legality and legal disputes

From a legal standpoint, the position of widows in these ancient societies varied widely “from culture to culture, age to age, and within the same historical period, from place to place.” We find in the Greek world there appears to be little information regarding legal protection or provision for widows. In the case of Jewish women, their role was attending to the home fathers by age ten and one in ten was an orphan (Peter Garnsey and R.P. Seller, The Roman Empire: Economy, Society and Culture [London: Duckworth, 1987], 146).

72 Stählin, “χήρᾳ,” 442.

73 Huebner, The Family, 93.

74 Apparently, in classical Athens, the incidence of remarriage for the widowed and divorced was high (Huebner, The Family, 93).

75 Huebner, The Family, 94; noted by Jeffers, “Augustus was seeking to stem the tide of childless aristocrats that threatened many old aristocratic families with extinction … [the] widowed or divorced were to remarry and bear children” (James S. Jeffers, Greco-Roman World – The New Testament Era [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999], 250); Seim adds that being childless meant being legally disadvantaged “while a freeborn woman who [gave] birth to at least three children obtained the right of sui juris” (Seim, “The Gospel of Luke,” 757).

76 Thurston, Widows, 10.

77 Stählin notes, “There is reference to an Athenian law to the effect that the archon (each of the nine chief magistrates in ancient Athens) must care for orphans … and [that widows can] remain in the houses of their dead husbands [if] pregnant … with a right to support from his estate” (Stählin, “χήρᾳ,” 444).
and they were exempt from scheduled religious duties in the temple.\textsuperscript{78} However, as widows they lacked the freedom of their first-century Roman counterparts, and under the Torah were considered inferior to men, not bound by the commandments, nor qualified to appear as a witness in court.\textsuperscript{79} Both Roman and Jewish widows barely had any rights to initiate legal action and imperial prescripts directed that it was beyond widows’ responsibilities to represent their fatherless children. However, it was possible for women to be made defendants in civil or criminal cases though preferably they were to be represented by a male.\textsuperscript{80}

It is no surprise then, that widowhood was often something to be feared in the ancient world. According to Oakman, “in a highly politicised, redistributive economy, the powerless were the standard victims,” and widows’ goods and their household were often “prey for legal disputes” (cf. Lk 18:3; 20:47). This caused further deprivation as “Loss of adequate means of subsistence” was to incur “loss of honor or status within the community.”\textsuperscript{81}

\textbf{2.3.2 Sensitivity of honour and shame, and levirate marriage}

First-century Mediterranean society was one in which the dynamics of honour and shame ruled in almost every aspect of daily life. Widows fared badly within this social and cultural

\textsuperscript{78} Everett Ferguson, \textit{Backgrounds of Early Christianity}, 3rd. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 58.

\textsuperscript{79} Ferguson, \textit{Backgrounds}, 58; also Thurston, \textit{Widows}, 12.

\textsuperscript{80} Judith Evans Grubbs, \textit{Women and the Law in the Roman Empire: A Sourcebook on Marriage, Divorce and Widowhood} (London: Routledge, 2002), 62, 70.

framework. Having no male to support and defend her and the honour of her children, if any, along with being deprived of access to the larger community and any vestiges of social status, she would find herself in a precarious situation suffering the stigma of shame. Malina and Neyrey explain that women, especially widows who were “not under the tutelage of a male … are viewed as stripped of female honor (i.e., ‘shameless’).” Only marriage restored their true societal roles (cf. 1 Tim 5:3-16), though often this was not socially possible. And as if such circumstances were not bad enough, the issue at stake was not so much the widow’s financial predicament, but rather the risk to her reputation, “which in [that] culture [was] more precious than gold.”

Within Judaism, if there were brothers-in-law who outlived the widow’s deceased husband, a levirate marriage was possible that would guard the endangered honour of her family, and provide for her and her children (Deut 25:5-10; Lk 20:28-33). If levirate marriage was not possible the childless widow had to return to her own home. Given regional diversity, in Jerusalem and the Galilee, the widow could exercise her legal right to remain where she was

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82 Green, *Luke*, 291; Schüssler Fiorenza notes the vulnerability of women in antiquity, especially widows, where economic desperation meant such women often needed to resort to prostitution for a mere livelihood which further compounded their exploitation within patriarchal society (Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 128, 141).

83 Malina and Neyrey, “Honor and Shame,” 44.

84 Malina and Neyrey, “Honor and Shame,” 63; Malina offers an explanation of first-century Mediterranean society as one where actually being “poor” would not belong to a permanent social standing but where one cannot maintain one’s “inherited status” in some honourable way; “personal assessment is not economic but a matter of lineage” (Malina, *World*, 100).

85 The term *levirate* is a derivative of the Latin word *levir* meaning “husband’s brother”; this is a marriage between a widow, whose husband had died childless, and her brother-in-law.

86 Stühlin, “χήρα,” 447, n. 60; it was not mandatory for an unmarried brother to marry his deceased brother’s wife (William R. Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994], 223).
and live off her husband’s property, according to her marriage contract (ketubah), yet in Judah, the heirs were entitled to send her back home.

2.4 Conclusion

From this survey we capture an overall conclusion that place and status of women in the Old Testament and in Luke’s world were not highly recognized. But for the widow, her situation was dire. While the Hebrew Bible contained reprovals and injunctions that addressed God’s concern for the widow, her situation continued to be marginal and precarious. Not only was she defenceless and vulnerable, the injustices of the social system deprived her of even the basic resources. The patriarchal environment in which she lived only further exasperated her situation. It is this historic reality that illuminates the plight of the widow in Jesus’ parable.

2.5 Widows in Luke’s Narrative

The background material surveyed above, the world behind the text, provides a framework for discerning the role and portrayal of widows within Luke’s narrative as it reflects the reality of the Sitz im Leben of first-century Palestine. Critiquing a literary understanding of Luke’s socio-cultural surroundings illuminates this narrative, or the world of the text. This Greco-

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87 The ketubah was the customary written contract which included the husband’s duties to his wife and the sum due to her in the event of a divorce or his death (her dowry plus any indirect dowry) (K.C. Hanson and D.E. Oakman, Palestine in the Time of Jesus: Social Structures and Social Conflicts [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998], 48).
Roman social setting also shaped the ways that Luke’s audience received his account in the latter part of the first century.

The Lukan Jesus has particular concern for the welfare of widows. There are six mentions of widows in narrative or parable (2:36-38; 4:25-26; 7:11-17; 18:1-8; 20:45-47; 21:1-4). The first three are from Luke’s own tradition; the fifth and sixth references are derived from Mark. Luke 18:1-8 is peculiar only to Luke and is the subject of the detailed exegesis in Section 3. To set the scene for that exegesis, we can consider Luke’s other accounts of widows.

2.5.1 Anna, the temple widow (2:36-38)

Anna never remarried, rather electing to conform to a state of univira (cf. 1 Tim 5:9), thus “[exemplifying] the ascetic ideal of marrying once and devoting oneself only to God in widowhood.” Similar to Judith, Anna never left the precincts of the temple (cf. Lk 2:49). She worshipped, fasted and prayed there “night and day” all those years, as a widow, until the age of eighty-four (2:37). Unwearying in prayer, along with this dedicated endurance within the temple (cf. 18:3ff.), according to Curkpatrick, Anna “consolidates Luke’s evocation of the

88 Stählin, “χήρα,” 449.

89 Green, Luke, 151.

90 As explained by Green, “Judith is presented as a woman whose long widowhood was valued as an emblem of her piety … ‘God-fearing [who] served the God of heaven night and day’ … whose piety found expression in fasting and prayer (Jdt 8:1-8; 11:17; 16:21-25)” (Green, Luke, 151).

91 In Green’s reckoning, “[Anna] is of great age, itself a symbol of respectful status in her world, but all the more so inasmuch as she has achieved her advanced age as a widow” (Green, Luke, 151).
Septuagint image of devout widows placing their hope in Yahweh.”⁹² She is portrayed by Luke, in Stählin’s terms, as “a model of the full-scale witness of the woman in the Christian community … a model for the first community of disciples (24:53; Acts 2:46),” exemplifying steadfastness and fidelity.⁹³ In subsequent sections throughout this essay we will find that these characteristics are revealed in a similar way with the widow in our parable and are aligned with discipleship.

2.5.2 The widow at Zarephath (4:25-26) and the widow at Nain (7:11-17)

The stories of Elijah (1 Kings 17:8-24) and Elisha (2 Kings 4:1-7) and the widow at Zarephath in Sidon (Lk 4:25-26) are stories we have already made reference to that recount God’s promises and his blessings on those who believe in him, especially those in dire need, as with our parable widow. The most telling however is Luke’s third citation of the widow at Nain, whose son Jesus raises from the dead (7:11-17). Unlike the widow in 4:26, χήρα here applies to a woman who has also lost her only son (μονογενὴς υἱός) having previously suffered the loss of her husband. For a second time the woman has been deprived of her provider and protector. This story illustrates a widow’s plight. The compassion Jesus shows to this widow is certainly to be regarded as a Messianic trait (cf. 7:18-23).⁹⁴ Jesus is well aware

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⁹² Curkpatrick, “‘Fictive’ Widows,” 216.

⁹³ Stählin, “χήρα,” 451; Anna is also granted to see the child Jesus and is given prophecy to speak about this child’s future (2:38); in the Hebrew Bible, women prophets do emerge in and out of stories; in particular, three women prophets, Miriam, Deborah, and Huldah, serve as foremothers for Anna; she is the only woman prophet in the Third Gospel and reminds us of these respected biblical women prophets (Judith Schubert, Questions and Answers on Women in the New Testament [New York: Paulist, 2014], 36-37).

⁹⁴ Stählin, “χήρα,” 450.
of the catastrophic state in which this widow now finds herself and he shows deep concern (7:13). As Pilch explains, “the death of a son is tragic enough, but for a widow it is double jeopardy since she relies on that male next-of-kin for her very livelihood.”95 A bleak future of “dire vulnerability” awaits her.96

Jesus revives the widow’s dead son and by doing so rids her not just of her “shamelessness.” With her son restored to life, she is restored to community and has male support to sustain her and defend the family’s interests.97 Jesus effectively saves her life by restoring her son to his life.98 In his action, Jesus also sets aside the regulations about corpse impurity for the sake of a more important principle.99 His mission is declared, namely, to assist those in special need and those with whom he especially chooses to associate (4:18-19, 24-27; 5:12-15, 20-25, 30-32, etc.), thereby effectively demonstrating the inbreaking of the Lord’s favour.100

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97 Malina and Neyrey, “Honor and Shame,” 63.


99 A person would become “unclean” simply by touching a corpse; should anybody else touch the person who has done so would become unclean themselves (see Lev 15:31; 21:10-12; Num 6:6-7; 19:11; Isa 52:11).

2.5.3  The community widows (20:47) and the widow’s gift (21:1-4)

The fifth and sixth references follow in sequence in both Mark and Luke. Lk 20:47 is word for word from Mk 12:40, and Lk 21:1-4 is closely similar to Mk 12:41-44. In the former we read Jesus attacking and condemning the scribes for their economic encroachments upon the chronically impoverished widows (cf. 2:37; 4:25-26; 7:12).\(^\text{101}\) These widows were people without the prospects of being able to fend for themselves.\(^\text{102}\) Seim captures the irony in contrasting the scribes demanding payment for praying long false prayers for widows whose properties they themselves devour, while in the Lukan context widows are portrayed as models in persevering prayer for the day of justice and redemption.\(^\text{103}\) We will be reminded of these common discipleship elements of perseverance in prayer and strength of faith as we address the plight of our parable widow in later sections. Green also notes the subtle irony of Jesus’ pronouncement of judgement on those in power and authority who perpetrate this injustice: “Seeking abundance in the public arena of status honor, they will instead receive abundance in the area of divine condemnation.”\(^\text{104}\)

The poor widow’s gift to the treasury in 21:1-4 certainly represents the ultimate dedication of sacrificing to God the last remnant of her means of survival; her action does not go unobserved by Jesus, as he indicates to his disciples. What this story reveals is a corrupt


\(^{102}\) Green, Luke, 726.

\(^{103}\) Turid Karlsen Seim, The Double Message: Patterns of Gender in Luke and Acts (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 245; on how the scribes might have devoured widows’ houses, see Reid, Choosing, 196, n. 3; Seim also notes that women appeal indirectly while others ask for help on their behalf (4:38), or they hide themselves in the crowd (8:43) (Seim, “The Gospel of Luke,” 739).

\(^{104}\) Green, Luke, 728.
political and religious system, devoid of any social-economic security for the vulnerable. In so far as this system requires this sacrifice, it deprives the poor and marginalized to the point where they have no option but to sell up to pay for debts and temple dues. They are the very people the temple rulers should have been looking after. Religious obligations were suppressing life rather than enhancing it. With our parable widow, she is also confronted with a dismissive judicial system which has no regard for her welfare. The story of the poor widow’s gift to the treasury contrasts the rich contributing out of “abundance” compared with the widow whose gift contributes out of “poverty,” which, for Jesus, was “more,” because it was “all she had.” All our parable widow has is her “presumed” poverty. For Jesus, that is more than enough to present her case.

2.5.4 The importunate Parable Widow (18:1-8)

The final mention of a widow in Luke’s Gospel is to be the focus of the exegesis to follow. In this parable we are told of a widow whose conduct before a judge is out of character when seen in the light of her first-century socio-cultural milieu. The concern of the widow relates to a matter she needs resolved in her favour, an outcome to which she demands she is justly

105 The most common procedure was to lend money to widows and peasants with economic troubles and forcing them to pledge their land as guarantee of repayment (Reid, Choosing, 196, n. 3/6).


107 Byrne, Hospitality, 161.

entitled. We have already seen how widows have relatively low standing in the community and now this widow finds herself having to deal with a powerful opponent, an unjust judge, whose juridical decision is not forthcoming.

This parable widow is defenceless and at the mercy of her adversary. In her desperation and against all social protocol, she badgers the judge in order to make her case and defend her vital interests (18:3). Culture brands her public reproach to the judge as shameless behaviour. The irony is that women, as outsiders, were not permitted to testify in court as they were not to be trusted. So Jesus’ listeners would have been shocked listening to a story about a woman stepping out of her conventional role, crossing boundaries, and appearing as shameless a character as this unjust judge. For the poor temple widow in 21:1-4 discipleship meant dedication and sacrifice beyond expectation. Our parable widow will be noted for similar resolve.

In the following sections we explore these counter-cultural characteristics of the widow and how resolved she needs to be in order to claim her rights. An appreciation of the socio-cultural environment in which the widow takes court action would suggest that she would have little hope of ever expecting a hearing let alone a just verdict from this unjust judge. That she commits herself to this task is courage indeed. Described by Weaver, “This is the world of

109 Some consider this concern of the widow relates to some financial matter (see David E. Garland, Luke, ZECNT 3 [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011], 709); also Herzog II, Parables, 223; and Green, Luke (“material resources”), 640; however, Levine is not of this opinion claiming that “the connection does not hold [as] the parable says nothing about money or wealth, a notable silence, given Luke’s condemnation of the venal” (Levine, “This Widow,” 134).

110 Malina and Neyrey, “Honor and Shame,” 63.


112 Perry, “God as an Unjust Judge?” 298; also Malina and Neyrey, “Honor and Shame,” 63-64.
Jesus’ story, a socio-economic pyramid marked by power and oppression at the top and by powerlessness and extreme vulnerability at the bottom.” Luke shapes the parable in such a way that demonstrates to the disciples that to gain justice, especially against unjust opposition, there will be need for courageous persistency and commitment in this task. These aspects are revealed in the following exegesis of the Greek text, and further in our observations on narrative criticism and theological analysis of the parable.

2.6 Conclusion

In our survey of the place of the widow in the world of Judaism, we have seen that the widow stands with the stranger, the orphan, and the poor as a special object of God’s concern. The people of God were consistently and strongly admonished to treat their widows and other vulnerable people well because God is their special helper and refuge. The position of women in the wider ancient world differed from culture to culture, yet throughout the Greco-Roman world widows were particularly challenged. Luke is mindful of the place of widows as the object of divine favour in the life and teaching of Jesus. This social context, and Luke’s special concern, mean that in the parable of Luke 18:1-8, the widow is presented as the “absolutely poor,” for whom justice is imperative. As Curkpatrick notes: “the use of [χήρα] is indicative of the theme of justice that is intrinsic to the kingdom of God in Luke.”


114 Curkpatrick, “‘Fictive’ Widows,” 216.
Section 3

The Parable of the Persistent Widow: Exegesis

In this Section, I offer a detailed exegesis of each verse of 18:1-8 using the NRSV translation, but with attention to the Greek text. In analysing the vocabulary, expressions, and syntax, I attempt to identify the following features: the composition of the passage, important textual variants, meanings of important words, etymology, phrases and images, characterizations, particular social and cultural situations of the writer and original readers, together with the main theological ideas and rhetorical aims Luke intends to convey to his readers.

3.1 Exegesis Overview of Luke 18:1-8

From a form-critical perspective there are questions relating to the unity of this parable. For instance, Curkpatrick suggests there are two parables that exist in Luke 18:1-8, and together they create “incorrigible dissonance.” Parable 1 (vv. 2-5), the story of a quest for justice, is dissonant with the interpretive frame (vv. 1, 6-8), the theme of persistent prayer; and “Parable 2 (vv. 1-8) is assumed to be a unity, the frame ‘correctly’ interpreting the parable, but this
reading also yields dissonance.” Together with Reid, these scholars maintain via redaction criticism that there is nothing intrinsic to Parable 1 (vv. 2-5) that requires its interpretation as a parable of prayer or indicating eschatological vindication. Rather it exemplifies persistence in demanding justice. The themes of prayer and of faith are more clearly identified in the interpretive frame (vv. 1, 6-8).

I would argue that themes of positive exhortation and persistence are embedded in v. 1 as well as vv. 2-5, suggesting their close connection. I concur with Weaver that three prominent and interconnecting Lukan motifs (prayer, faith, and justice) emerge from the canonical telling of this parable. I will argue further that we can identify implied motifs of purpose, persistency, and discipleship throughout the canonical version, even though these actual words do not appear in the text. Especially in view of the widow, already these themes are counter to feminist observations as debated in the literature review.

Reid goes further identifying redactional layers in the text. She claims that vv. 1, 6-8 are secondary Lukan additions that reflect early Christian attempts to understand the core parable. Freed disputes this, claiming all of 18:1-8 is from the hand of Luke. There is, however,

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115 According to Curkpatrick, “the dissonances of parable 2 are primarily those generated from an assumption that the frame is appropriate for the parable. Hence, puzzled interpreters ply various solutions for a neat join between parable and frame. The dissonances generated by parable 1 are recognized in an assumption that parables can never be framed adequately” (Stephen Curkpatrick, “Dissonance in Luke 18:1-8,” JBL 121, [2002]: 107-121, see p. 108).

116 Curkpatrick, “Dissonance,” 112; also Reid, Choosing, 192.


general agreement that 18:1 is Luke’s own as ἔλεγεν δὲ παραβολήν is characteristically Lukan.\textsuperscript{120} In addition, many scholars concede that v. 1 provides an interpretative framework that supposedly draws attention to the meaning of the parable that follows. Verses 6-8, classified by Herzog II as the “sayings” of Jesus, also seem to belong to the parable frame and are an application of the parable,\textsuperscript{121} leading Capps to claim that vv. 2-5 can virtually stand on their own and the framework is really unnecessary.\textsuperscript{122} Vinson avoids accreditation either way and comments that this parable is unique to Luke’s Gospel in that it is a “little narrative about two … stock characters; [it begins with] v. 2 and ends in v. 5, and the rest is commentary.”\textsuperscript{123}

While a number of scholars struggle to see how this parable’s framework relates to vv. 2-5, it is my purpose in this thesis to argue that Luke understands the parable as having imperative force, and thus related to discipleship. This imperative to discipleship is conveyed through the characterization of the widow. My argument is that vv. 1, 6-8 are essential in highlighting the meaning of the parable as they identify the important connection made between those discipleship characteristics, dramatically demonstrated by the widow in her persistent encounter with the judge to achieve justice in vv. 2-5, and Luke’s intention for his readers. It is my argument that Luke constructs the whole of vv. 1-8 to reveal the bold initiative taken by the widow in her resolute quest to achieve justice. What is revealed here is that this widow embodies an array of exemplary inherent resources. We identify these attributes in the widow’s initiative, competency, determination, persistence, and discipline of purpose that

\textsuperscript{120} Hicks, “Persistent Widow,” 209; also Hultgren, Parables, 253, n. 3; and Reid, “ Petty Pursuits,” 290.

\textsuperscript{121} Hultgren, Parables, 253; also Herzog II, Parables, 215.

\textsuperscript{122} Capps’ comment is one of comparison and restricted to his discussion on the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Donald Capps, “Pastoral Images: the Good Samaritan and the Unjust Judge,” JPCC 63, [2009]: 1-11, see p. 10).

enable her to accomplish the objective intended. These are characterizations of unique proportions that run counter to feminist perspectives. Furthermore, the widow exemplifies that special faith believing that her mission will be achieved as guaranteed in vv. 7-8. This widow may also be observed as a composite of those particular exemplary discipleship characteristics that are revealed in those other women and widows in Luke whom we have already recognized. In the detailed analysis to follow, I aim to identify those elements in the Lukan passage that rhetorically illuminate and deliver these themes. For this reason I have titled this research exegesis as the “Parable of the Persistent Widow” rather than the traditional “Parable of the Unjust Judge.”

We know beforehand that the parable is directed specifically to Jesus’ disciples (cf. 17:22) and v. 1 clarifies Luke’s purpose: that persistency in prayer for those disciples is paramount. For this reason I argue that Luke positions the widow as an exemplar of the discipleship expected of “The Twelve” in Luke’s narrative, and the readers who subsequently hear or read Luke’s account. This interpretative boundary does not diminish the potential for interpretations that may draw thematic contrasts between the judge and discipleship. It is incumbent on judges to rule with justice (Deut 1:16; 16:18-20; 27:19; 2 Chr 19:5-7), an obligation incumbent upon the disciples in their administration of duties and responsibilities towards their followers. The judge in this parable, however, is no such example – he is the antithesis of justice. I move now to this detailed analysis of the text in order to explore the process Luke has provided for us to gain some understanding of his intention with this parable.
3.2 Detailed Exegesis of the Verses

3.2.1 Luke 18:1

"Ἐλεγεν δὲ παραβολὴν αὐτοῖς πρὸς τὸ δεῖν πάντοτε προσεύχεσθαι αὐτοὺς καὶ μὴ ἐγκακεῖν,

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart (Luke 18:1).

Exegesis of the Text

When introducing parables Luke makes consistent use of the verb λέγω ("he told [ἔλεγεν] them a parable"). Here in 18:1 and elsewhere (5:36; 13:6; 14:7) the verb is in the imperfect tense. Other Lukan usages of the verb appear in the aorist as εἶπεν (6:39; 8:10; 12:16; 15:3; 18:9; 19:11; 20:19; 21:29) and in 20:9 the infinitive λέγειν is used.

The conjunction δὲ ("moreover") marks continuation implying that Jesus’ words in 17:22-37 need to be kept in mind for understanding the message within the parable he is about to relate. The parable does not simply commend or command us to pray. The Greek indicates that Jesus told his disciples this parable to make it necessary for them to pray always. As the

124 Grammatically the imperfect tense can denote an action in progress but not completed at the time in question.

125 Reid, “Godly Widow,” 27; the “aorist” is an unqualified past tense of a verb, especially in Greek, without reference to duration or completion.

126 While it could be conjectured that the English “Then” in NRSV translation may give the impression that Jesus is moving on to another topic altogether the multivalent marker δὲ generally indicates continuance and only a relatively slight transition of one narrative passage to another (Frederick William Danker, TCGEL [Chicago: University of Chicago, 2009], 84).
infinitive δεῖν serves as the object of the preposition πρός it needs to be articular but, like
Luke’s use of the more impersonal form δεῖ (“it behoves”), the usage marks necessity. The
phrase πρός τό plus an infinitive occurs only here in Luke’s Gospel (cf. Acts 3:19), and with
δεῖν it may be rendered as “in order to show the necessity.”

The articular infinitive with πρός requires some further analysis. Associated in this way, Luke
may be imitating a Semitic construction but in this context the sense seems to be one that
emphasizes purpose and the reason as to why persistent prayer is pre-eminently essential.
The suggestion therefore is that the parable does not simply show the disciples that “it is
necessary,” but is intended to result in the kind of prayer epitomized by the woman,
emphasizing it seems, the purpose component.

The verb δεῖ then requires another verb that identifies “what needs to be done,” in this
context, προσεύχεσθαι – to pray. According to Nygaard, the use of the term δεῖν possibly
belongs to a “salvation-historical argument (cf. the similar use of δεῖν and prayer in Jn 4:24),”
inferring that prayer not only is a necessity for the disciples who are to be absorbed in Jesus’
salvific work, but it also becomes an embodiment to faithful discipleship ensuring obedience
through trials and faithful commitment to God (cf. Lk 2:36-38; Jn 15:1-10).

127 Martin M. Culy, Mikeal C. Parsons, and Joshua J. Stigall, Luke – A Handbook on the Greek Text (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 561; according to Myallis and Rowe, the word δεῖ (“it is necessary”) carries
more force than “should”; it is used, for example, when Jesus says, “it is necessary for the Son of Man to die”; furthermore, the word “show” is never used; the Greek does not say this parable shows them why prayer is
necessary but the parable makes prayer necessary (Rob J. Myallis and James Rowe, LGNTL, Accessed 22


The exhortation πάντοτε προσεύχεσθαι (“to pray always”) is not to suggest intermittent or continuous prayer, rather, in Edwards’ understanding, it is praying “consistently and persistently, again and again without losing heart or giving up (21:36) … [it can become] “an existential battle, ongoing and ever present.”\textsuperscript{130} In Strong’s view, the emphasis appears to be less about the Pauline counsel to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess 5:17; cf. Col 1:9), rather upon the necessity of “perseverance in prayer.”\textsuperscript{131} The theme of perseverance and not giving up has already been highlighted by Luke in 15:8-10, where a woman is purposefully determined by all manner of means available to find her lost coin.

Coupled with the preceding adverb μή, the verb ἐγκακέω (“to despond/to lose heart”)\textsuperscript{132} is also found in Gal 6:9 with reference to not becoming weary in well-doing. Luke’s concern is that we do not become weary or “lose heart” in prayer, but must hold fast to the expectation of the eschaton, the time when deliverance comes. The two infinitives δεῖν and προσεύχεσθαι are in contrast to the negated infinitive (μὴ ἐγκακεῖν). Prayer is the response to potential despondency, and this sense of praying for God’s intervention in situations of hardship is not uncommon in the writings of Luke (11:2; 22:42; Acts 4:25-30; 12:5).\textsuperscript{133}

\textsuperscript{130} Edwards notes that “Rabbis typically exhorted disciples to limit prayer to three times a day (Dan 6:10), but not to pray constantly, which was considered tedious to both God and man” (James R. Edwards, The Gospel According to Luke, PNTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015], 497).

\textsuperscript{131} L. Thomas Strong, “The Importunate Widow and the Pharisee and Publican (Luke 18:1-14),” \textit{TE}, (1997): 85-92, see p. 86; a comment by Wallace on 1 Thess 5:17 is that believers are not expected to pray every minute of every day, “but that we should offer prayers to God repeatedly. We should make it our habit to be in the presence of God” (Daniel B. Wallace, Greek Grammar – Beyond the Basics [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], 521).

\textsuperscript{132} The present infinitive ἐγκακέω takes the adverb μή replacing οὐ used for the indicative mood.

From the analysis above, the overall tenor of v. 1 therefore suggests that this is a verse of implied imperatives:

(1) “about their need” (Jesus is instructing his disciples, πρὸς τὸ δεῖν … αὐτοῦς, with δεῖν as the present active infinitive of the impersonal verb δεῖ);

(2) “to pray” (προσεύχεσθαι – indicating the present middle infinitive of the verb προσεύχομαι);

(3) “always” (a time factor befitting πάντοτε); and

(4) “not to lose heart” (μὴ ἐγκακεῖν – present active infinitive of ἐγκακέω).

This parable is another example of what Freed calls Luke’s “imperative parables,” suggesting what Christians must do. He comments that, “Luke introduces an almost unbroken element of imperative parables into an almost unbroken tradition of indicative parables.”  

Within the context of this study’s analysis, the emphasis and my focus is towards highlighting the “imperative” nature of Luke’s characterization of the widow in her capacity and ability to exemplify discipleship. Her resolute petitioning develops into more than the “docile” prayer role Reid attributes to her.  

3.2.2 Luke 18:2

λέγων, κριτής τις ἦν ἐν τινὶ πόλει τὸν θεὸν μὴ φοβούμενος καὶ ἄνθρωπον μὴ ἐντρεπόμενος.

He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people (Luke 18:2).”

134 Freed, “Judge and the Widow,” 40.

135 Reid, Choosing, 194; also Reid, “Petty Pursuits,” 293.
Exegesis of the Text

In contrast to using the imperfect indicative ἔλεγεν in the introduction of v. 1, here Luke uses the present participle λέγων, a characteristic feature of Luke’s style to indicate that the preceding statement is illustrated in what follows.¹³⁶ The indefinite pronoun τις, both in the singular and plural, may be a stylistic trait of Luke which he frequently inserts in some form.¹³⁷

What can be said here in 18:2 is that in contrast to Jewish law and custom this judge is portrayed as having no moral or ethical standard whatsoever.¹³⁸ What Jesus states in this verse is ratified later in the judge’s boastful soliloquy (v. 4).¹³⁹ This judge is the antithesis of what a judge in Israel was ideally supposed to be. A judge who adjudicates with the fear of the Lord is the antithesis of injustice (Lev 25:17, 36, 43), and an exemplar of one who renders a wise judgement (Ps 111:10).¹⁴⁰ When Jehoshaphat appointed judges, he forewarned them:

¹³⁶ Noted by Freed, λέγων is characteristic of Luke when introducing parabolic material (Freed, “Judge and the Widow,” 40).

¹³⁷ Freed, “Judge and the Widow,” 40-41; Kensky suggests that the use of τις in v. 2 refers to a type rather than an individual judge (Kensky, “Courtrooms,” 72); the word κριτής (judge) appears in Lk 12:14, Matthew from Q (Mt 5:25 = Lk 12:58; Mt 12:27 = Lk 11:19), and twice in this parable (vv. 2, 6); in Acts the word occurs four times (10:42; 13:20; 18:15; 24:10); some commentators reason that in light of such parallels Luke’s proverbial language in describing the judge is derived from his educated and much travelled background, providing further concrete evidence of Luke’s hand at work in the parable (Freed, “Judge and the Widow,” 43).

¹³⁸ According to Weaver, “within the biblical context the term ‘judge’ connotes power and authority. Within the Hebrew community judges are recognized as the leaders of their tribes, wise and reputable individuals (Deut 1:15; cf. 2 Chr 1:2; Isa 1:26; 3:1-3), commissioned by God to shepherd God’s people (1 Chr 17:6). Their primary task is to make thorough inquiry (Deut 19:18; cf. 21:1-2) of the legal cases brought to them and to decide between the litigants, declaring one to be in the right and the other to be in the wrong (Deut 25:1)” (Weaver, “Luke 18:1-8,” 317).


Consider what you are doing, for you judge not on behalf of human beings but on the Lord’s behalf; he is with you in giving judgement. Now, let the fear of the Lord be upon you; take care what you do, for there is no perversion of justice with the Lord our God, or partiality, or taking of bribes. (2 Chr 19:6-7)

Although a character description is unusual in parables, here it is foundationalal, especially as it is self-confirmed (v. 4) as one who is accustomed in not meting out justice. The phrases “who neither feared God” and “nor had respect for people,” were combined regularly to characterize an irresponsible and dangerous person.141 While acknowledging that first phase is negative, some have debated whether the second element may be considered positive, in that the judge cannot be bribed.142 On the other hand, this lack of respect from the judge suggests either he is open for bribes, a common practice with dishonest judges at that time, or, according to Praeder, “he has carried impartiality too far.”143 Either way it would appear that Jesus expects his listeners to perceive the judge in a completely negative way, in Cotter’s terms, “as devoid of both pietas and humanitas.”144

The language of fear (φοβομα) appears frequently in the New Testament in several senses, but its use in emphasizing fearing God (cf. 23:40) is Lukan, as indicated by the two-fold repetitions in 18:2, 4, and Acts 10:2, 22; 13:16, 26.145 Mandated in Scripture and learned by every Israelite is the obligation to fear God and keep God’s commandments (Lev 19:14, 32;


142 Cotter, “Feisty Widow,” 331.


144 Cotter, “Feisty Widow,” 332.

145 Freed, “Judge and the Widow,” 43.
Deut 4:10; 5:29; 6:2, 13; 8:6; 10:12-13; 13:4; 14:23; 17:19; 31:12. It stands to reason that one’s commitment to either must presuppose the other as the commitments are inextricably linked. The judge in the parable is not only a contradiction to the primary expectation; his resolute lack of fear of God would make it almost impossible to deliver justice in his judgement. Yet, righteous judgement on the part of a judge is decreed by the Old Testament (Deut 1:16; 16:18-20; cf. Zech 7:9-10). The image of the ideal judge is portrayed in the book of Sirach (speaking of God as Judge):

Do not offer him a bribe, for he will not accept it; and do not rely on a dishonest sacrifice; for the Lord is the judge, and with him there is no partiality. He will not show partiality to the poor; but he will listen to the prayer of one who is wronged. He will not ignore the supplication of the orphan, or the widow when she pours out her complaint. (Sir 35:14-17)

The verb ἐντρέπω (“to turn one back upon himself/to put to shame”) has the sense of relating to change of position or condition, and in its passive form may describe a man who simply cannot be made to “be shamed.” Hultgren surmises that “in context the expression does not mean that [the judge] simply lacked respect for others, but that he had outright contempt for those who came before him.” Edwards brands him godless, declaring that he acts solely in self-interest. The word is also used in 20:13 when the vineyard owner thinks, “they will

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146 Hultgren, Parables, 253-254.
147 Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 381; according to Garland, in the active voice ἐντρέπω means “to make ashamed” (cf. ἐντρέπων – 1 Cor 4:14); “in the passive voice it means ‘to be put to shame’ (2 Thess 3:14; Titus 2:8); and in the middle voice it means [with μὴ] not ‘to have regard for, respect’ (Mk 12:6)” (Garland, Luke, 708).
148 Hultgren, Parables, 254.
149 Edwards recalls Plutarch’s telling “of a poor old woman who begged Philip of Macedon, father of Alexander the Great, unsuccessfully for justice [and] when Philip told the woman he had no time for her, she burst forth, ‘Then give up being king!’ Amazed, Philip proceeded to hear her case and others as well” (Edwards, Luke, 497).
But the tenants neither feared God nor showed concern for anybody and went ahead and killed the son. This parallel serves to indicate the resistance the widow encounters.

The ideal judge is righteous. Scripture informed judges to take direction from God and treat widows and others in distress with special concern (Deut 14:28-29; 24:17-21; 26:12; 27:19; Jer 22:3). In the parable, however, that is precisely what the judge does not do, a point confirmed in v. 4a where the judge ignores the supplications of the widow.

3.2.3 Luke 18:3

χήρα δὲ ἦν ἐν τῇ πόλει ἐκείνῃ καὶ ἤρξετο πρὸς αὐτὸν λέγουσα, Ἐκδίκησόν με ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀντιδίκου μου.

In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent’ (Luke 18:3).

Exegesis of the Text

In view of the interest in and concern for widows in the Old Testament, we might expect a similar degree of concern in the gospels, but that is not so. Apart from a late manuscript in Mt 23:14 (reported in Mk 12:40 and Lk 20:47) accusing the scribes that they “devour widows’ houses” and another tradition that relates to the widow’s gift (Mk 12:41-44; Lk 21:1-4), no

other sayings are recorded in Matthew, Mark or John.\textsuperscript{151} In contrast, and as we have seen, χήρα is a favourite of Luke.\textsuperscript{152} He refers to Anna the prophetess as a widow (2:37), then appends a reference to particular widows in ancient Israel, including the widow at Zarephath (4:25-26), and only Luke includes the widow of Nain (7:11-17). There are striking similarities in character descriptions with these widows and our parable widow especially in the light of their poverty, vulnerability, destitution, persistence, endurance, and having no male support.

In 18:3a, the postpositive conjunction δὲ links the widow to the judge, as residing in the same city (ἐν τῇ πόλει ἐκείνη – “in that city”). This implies that the judge is the one responsible for her well-being.\textsuperscript{153} Freed notes that widows appear to be singled out elsewhere in the New Testament as a special group deserving charity (Acts 6:1; 9:39, 41; cf. 1 Cor 7:8; Rev 18:7). He suggests that Luke’s special interest in widows, along with the notable absence of concern for the widow in Paul’s letters, make it likely that “the references to widows on the lips of Jesus, including that in our parable, reflect a time later than Jesus.”\textsuperscript{154}

The phrase καὶ ἔρχετο πρὸς αὐτόν (“and she was coming to him”) marks a repetitive process. The imperfect tense of ἔρχετο highlights the widow’s repeated attempts to persuade the judge.\textsuperscript{155} The verb is modified by a participle denoting attendant circumstance (λέγουσα) and

\textsuperscript{151} Freed, “Judge and the Widow,” 43-44.

\textsuperscript{152} The Greek term χήρα occurs 9 times in Luke’s gospel: 2:37 (sing. form); 4:25-26 (pl. and sing. form); 7:12 (sing.); 18:3, 5 (twice sing.); 20:47 (pl.); 21:2-3 (twice sing.) and 3 times in Acts; elsewhere in the New Testament, however, it occurs only 10 times including 7 times in 1 Tim 5 (Freed, “Judge and the Widow,” 44).

\textsuperscript{153} Strong, “Importunate Widow,” 87.

\textsuperscript{154} Freed, “Judge and the Widow,” 44-45.

so, from the perspective of verbal aspect, the *process aspect* conveys action viewed as ongoing, continuous or repeated. Here the action is going on at the same time as the main verb ἤρχετο. In other words, the widow “kept coming and kept saying” – she was continuous in her persistence.

The 2nd person aorist imperative Ἐκδίκησόν demands that the judge deliver the widow from her adversary for the sake of justice to which she is entitled. She desires a sentence that stops her oppressor on account of her defenceless situation. This vocabulary in the parable has possible eschatological implications. The verb ἔκδικέω here in vv. 3, 5, and especially the noun “justice” (ἐκδίκησις, vv. 7, 8), are illuminated by Luke’s use of the same language in 21:22, noted by Garland as referring to “days of vengeance.” We may compare the strong eschatological connotations of the notions of vengeance on behalf of those who suffer in 2 Thess 1:7-8.

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156 As opposed to *undefined aspect*, the *process aspect* describes a situation where something is being implied about the manner in which the action is occurring; furthermore, the participle λέγουσα is declined according to the 3-1-3 pattern so in this case as it requires a distinct feminine ending it needs to borrow from the 1st declension (Jeremy Duff, *TENTG*, 3rd. ed. [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005], 68, 148, 157).

157 Noted by Garland, “the typical court scene in the Middle East was not marked by sombre decorum but a great din of shouting and pushing. This woman would be heard only because she was the shrillest. She skips any honorific title in her appeal to the judge and pleads her case persistently and loudly” (Garland, *Luke*, 710).

158 Freed advises that the verb ἔκδικέω does not occur in classical Greek and is rare, and except in the LXX before the Christian era, it occurs only four times in the New Testament; Paul uses it twice (Rom 12:19; 2 Cor 10:6) (Freed, “Judge and the Widow,” 45).


The word ἀντιδίκου refers to a legal opponent or adversary in a lawsuit (cf. Mt 5:25; Lk 12:58). Carroll observes that this “suits the social-world context of the case where financial concerns could possibly have been in dispute” in regard to the widow’s claim.

Widows suffered immensely from perpetrators of injustice who conspired to deprive widows of their houses (20:47) and inheritances, symptomatic of the oppressive socio-legal world of first-century Palestine, a world of corruption and major power imbalances. Weaver provides a litany of woes that befall widows in the ancient world.

Because of the common δικ-root shared by the words ἐκδίκησόν and ἀντιδίκου in this verse, ἀπό here is often given the meaning of vindication against the widow’s adversary. However, while the phrase τοῦ ἀντιδίκου μου is correctly in the required genitive following ἀπό, the preposition usually means “away from/departure.” Thus, I would argue that the translation should reflect the widow pleading to be relieved from the attacks of her adversary (cf. 12:58 – as NRSV, NIV), rather than demanding “vengeance” as such. This supports the interpretation

161 Hicks, “Persistent Widow,” 216; Metzger notes that both ἐκδικέω and ἀντιδίκος were technical terms commonly employed in the judicial sphere (James A. Metzger, “God as F(r)iend? Reading Luke 11:5-13 and 18:1-8 with a Hermeneutic of Suffering,” HBT 32 (2010): 53-57, see pp. 45-46, n. 43). Cotter reports that there is “abundant evidence in first-century court documents that the words used in the widow’s command, ἐκδικεῖν and ἀντιδίκος are regular legal terms. ἐκδικεῖν is used in the sense of ‘set things right’ and refers to a magistrate’s official recognition that a petition has sufficient grounds to be brought to court. The noun ἀντιδίκος is the one regularly used to refer to ‘the accused’ or ‘the opponent’” (Cotter, “Feisty Widow,” 336-337).


163 Regarding inheritance issues see Hultgren, Parables, 254-255.

164 According to Weaver, “Within a patriarchal world, where women depend on men for protection, support, and a place to belong, the widow has none of these. If she does not return to her father’s house and live under his protection (Gen 38:1; Lev 22:13), she must either remarry (cf. Ruth 3:1-4:17) or depend on her son(s) to provide her with the necessities of life and continue the family line (cf. 2 Sam 14:4-7; 1 Kings 17:8-24; Lk 4:25-26; 7:11-17). Or, like Anna, she can take up the cloistered life of a prophet within the temple precincts (Lk 2:36-37). Life is precarious for widows and security at a premium for them (cf. Ruth 3:1). Widows are at the mercy of the powerful, who take their garments (cf. Deut 24:17), their oxen (cf. Job 24:3), and their houses (Lk 20:47), leaving them virtually penniless (Lk 21:2-3). Even within the early Jesus-community in Jerusalem Hellenistic widows are ‘being neglected in the daily distribution of food’ (Acts 6:1)” (Weaver, “Luke 18:1-8,” 317-318).
of Culy, Parsons and Stigall, and Hultgren.\textsuperscript{165} That does not necessarily negate the need for the widow to be accorded the justice she demands. We observe the appearance of the common δικ-root in the verses to come (vv. 5, 6, 7, 8) which maintains the imperative theme of justice/vindication throughout this passage.

3.2.4 Luke 18:4-5

καὶ οὐκ ἠθέλεν ἐπὶ χρόνον· μετὰ ταῦτα δὲ εἰπεν ἐν ἑαυτῷ, εἰ καὶ τὸν θεὸν οὐ φοβοῦμαι οὐδὲ ἄνθρωπον ἐντρέπομαι (v. 4), διὰ γε τὸ παρέχειν μοι κόπον τὴν χήραν ταύτην ἐκδικήσω αὐτὴν, ἵνα μὴ εἰς τέλος ἐρχομένη ὑπωπιάζῃ με (v. 5).

For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, ‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone (v. 4), yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming (v. 5).’’

Exegesis of the Text

The widow in our parable is not seeking revenge but simple justice. Scriptural references from the Hebrew Bible demand particular protection given to widows. In this case, the judge acts to the contrary.

\textsuperscript{165} See Culy, Parsons, and Stigall, \textit{Luke}, 562; cf. Hultgren, \textit{Parables}, 255. In contrast, Levine seems to align with the notion of “vengeance” but does suggest the language is juridical and not personal (Levine, “This Widow,” 130-132, 137, 145, 147).
As we have noted, the imperfect active indicative ἤθελεν, and the imperfect middle indicative ἤρχετο referring to the widow in v. 3a, are iterative and meant to identify persistent or repeated action. Luke has a predilection for the imperfect that has the sense of continuance. Here the imperfect verb ἤθελεν is negated with οὐκ: “he did not want to for a while” or “for a while he refused.” This negative characterization of people who “do not want to” is found in parabolic material and Luke has a preference for using it. The judge in our parable is one of those persons. Ignoring the widow and disregarding Torah prescripts, the judge’s response is to defiantly wait it out, aptly conveyed by Hick’s comment that the judge refuses “for a long time” to grant the widow her justice. Instead of a scene of litigant and judge, as one would expect, this interaction and confrontation between judge and widow now marks the judge as the widow’s opponent.

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166 These two imperfect indicative verbs require some clarification. Under the categories of aspect theory (sometimes called Actionsart – kind of action), both carry the process aspect. Distinct from the aorist (undefined aspect) they display an internal aspect in that they portray past action from within the event as it unfolds viewed as a continuous process without regard for beginning or end. While there is similarity with progressive (descriptive) and customary (habitual) aspects, there are slight differences. The former denotes a particular point in the past (cf. 1:62; 6:19), the latter denotes action at regular intervals over a long span of time (cf. 2:41; Acts 3:2). These specific aspects are not indicated in the text. Furthermore, there is no distributive aspect with either verb as each refers to only one person, the judge in the first and the widow in the other. Therefore, we describe the action in each as iterative in aspect as “in process, repeated, kept coming.” The widow kept coming and the judge kept refusing. This iterative imperfect also denotes the action of the widow as atelic, that is, incomplete in the sense that the judge reasons that there is to be no end to this widow’s “continually coming” (v. 5) (Duff, TENTG, 66-68, 209-210; Wallace, Greek Grammar, 540-548; K.L. McKay, A New Syntax of the Verb in New Testament Greek – An Aspectual Approach [New York: Peter Lang, 1994], 44-45).


169 Hicks, “Persistent Widow,” 216. The only indication of time the text provides is ἐπὶ χρόνον (“for a while”).

170 Bernard Brandon Scott, Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 183.
The sense of χρόνον is duration, an undefined length of time, yet with the preposition ἐπί and the phrase μετὰ ταῦτα following, a temporal sense is specified (the “while” the judge refused), thus, an end is in view. Still, in his continuous stalling, the judge shows disrespect, not only for the law of God, suggests Hicks, “but for common Jewish practice; the suit of an orphan must always be heard first; next, that of a widow (following Isa 1:17).”

In introducing the judge’s soliloquy Luke uses ἐν ἑαυτῷ which when used with εἶπεν forms part of an idiomatic expression meaning (“he said to himself”). This is another feature of Luke’s style introducing soliloquies of characters in his parables (cf. 7:36-50; 12:16-21, 45; 15:11-32; 16:1-8; 18:9-14; 20:13). The judge’s soliloquy not only repeats the characterization portrayed in v. 2 but his self-assessment also matches the description that Jesus assigns to him (v. 6), thus branding him as an unjust schemer. It appears Luke’s use of soliloquy is a technique of his to expose the thoughts of scheming parable characters, such as the rich fool, the unfaithful slave, and the unjust steward (12:17, 45; 16:3).

The second use of καί intensifies the drama as to what the judge’s next move is to be as his monologue implies that fear of God and respect for a person requires him to protect the widow. So he is well aware of his avoidance of God’s dictates that demand especial protection for the widow. The phrase εἰ καί (“even if”) introduces a protasis and may assume

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171 Hicks, “Persistent Widow,” 216.


a concessive force where εἰ (or ἐάν) is preceded or followed by καί.\textsuperscript{174} With this in mind and perhaps in deference to Luke’s penchant for working in “threes,” Culy, Parsons and Stigall highlight a literary device noting the use of three frames:

1) the \textit{temporal frame} – μετὰ ταῦτα, literally (“after these things”);
2) a \textit{conditional frame} – εἰ καὶ τὸν θεὸν οὐ φοβοῦμαι οὐδὲ ἄνθρωπον ἐντρέπομαι (“Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone”);
3) the \textit{causal frame} in v. 5a – διὰ γε τὸ παρέχειν μοι κόπον τὴν χήραν ταύτην (“yet because this widow keeps bothering me”).

By delaying the outcome, Luke effectively builds suspense and expectancy as to what exactly will the judge do.\textsuperscript{175} To this point (v. 4) in the parable the judge has no sense of justice, nor does he abide by the commandments and exhortations to take up the widow’s cause. He delays for a time, but in the next verse he reasons for a desired solution.

Verse 5 continues with the judge’s interior monologue as he now seeks an outcome, but it needs to be clarified that the judge’s commentary regarding the widow does not indicate at all that Jesus identifies with the judge’s depiction.\textsuperscript{176} Up until this point the judge remains intractable, but, as he reflects, because the widow has become such a nuisance, and her constant coming could be the end of him, he decides to settle her case.

\textsuperscript{174} Culy, Parsons, and Stigall, \textit{Luke}, 563; according to Danker these conditional particles εἰ, ὅν, (ἐάν), may produce “an aspect of tentativeness by introducing a possible circumstance that determines the realization of some other circumstance, along the lines: if x happens, y will follow” (Danker, \textit{TCGEL}, 104).


\textsuperscript{176} Praeder, \textit{The Word in Women’s Worlds}, 61.
The combination διὰ γε occurs in the New Testament only here and in Luke 11:8, the enclitic postpositive γε (“yet”) serving to emphasize the foregoing word (διὰ) and what follows, as contrasted with the fact that the judge does not fear God or respect man (v. 4b). The reason for the judge’s decision is emphasized by the articular (τό) infinitive παρέχειν (“to continuously cause/inflict”).\(^{177}\) Παρέχω with κόπους occurs also in Mark 14:6 (= Mt 26:10), where the plural κόπους (also in Gal 6:17) is used. Echoes of a previous annoyance we recall with the neighbour in the parallel parable in Lk 11:5-8, “Do not bother me” (μή μοι κόπους παρέχει, 11:7; τὸ παρέχειν μοι κόπον, 18:5).\(^{178}\) Luke had used the plural in 11:7, so in 18:5 he uses the singular κόπον, perhaps for variation, as Freed suggests.\(^{179}\) On the other hand, the plural form used in 11:7 could mean “troubles” not just for neighbour but for his children as well,\(^{180}\) whereas in 18:5 it is just the judge who is “troubled,” thus the singular κόπον. This is possibly a reason to assume that the parable envisages a “one judge trial,” an issue of ongoing discussion among scholars.

The demonstrative pronoun ταύτην is attributive to the widow. Just how long the widow has sought a settlement from the judge is unclear as ἐπὶ χρόνον (v. 4) designates an unspecified passage of time. While the drama is meant to be intense, Green considers the NRSV rendering of τὸ παρέχειν μοι κόπον (“keeps bothering me”) weak, “suggesting neither the duress the judge was under nor the level the widow’s shocking behaviour had reached in the judge’s

\(^{177}\) Παρέχω can focus on negative aspect.

\(^{178}\) R. Alan Culpepper, *TNIB*, 337-338.

\(^{179}\) Freed, “Judge and the Widow,” 49.

\(^{180}\) Jeremias explains actual procedure: “The oriental goes to sleep early. In the evening the house is dark; the little oil-lamp which burns during the night, only gives a faint light; ‘the door has already been locked’ (Lk 11:7), that is, bolted and locked. The bolt is a wooden or iron bar thrust through rings in the door panels; drawing the bolt is a tiresome business and makes a lot of noise” (Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, translated from the German by S.H. Hooke, 3rd rev. ed. [London: SCM, 1972], 157).
view,” as he, and others, consider she is acting so out of station as to heighten an expectation of a coming confrontation between them.181 As the English “bother” can also mean “a minor nuisance” a substitute word may be preferable. The Greek κόπος can translate as “laborious toil involving weariness and fatigue.”

The present middle participle ἐρχομένη (“coming”) coupled with the present active subjunctive ὑπωπιάζῃ (“she might harass”) emphasize a simultaneous process in this Greek syntax where both actions are going on at the same time indicating that the widow is continually coming to the judge with her request.182 Persistency is her only weapon since most likely she has little else with which she can bribe the judge if she were able to even consider that option.183 While the participle ἐρχομένη suggests continuing action rather than some future separate action,184 the position of the purpose clause ἵνα μὴ εἰς τέλος ἐρχομένη ὑπωπιάζῃ με does recommend a bold or strong conclusion, and it would be something of an anticlimax to learn that the judge expects more of the same from the widow and nothing more.185

The main verb in this clause is derived from the lexical form ὑπωπιάζω (ὑπό + ὤψ – face just under the eye) meaning “strike a blow to the eye so as to injure it/give a black eye to/wear


182 According to Duff the subjunctive does not have a single meaning but it is used in a range of different situations, often preceded by a particular word, such as ἵνα, the term in Luke’s passage; the use of the subjunctive only occurs as one part of a broader construction, and it is that construction that expresses its purpose; thus in v. 5 ὑπωπιάζῃ is viewed as part of a process which is continuous and repetitive (cf. Duff, TENTG, 191-192).

183 Hicks, “Persistent Widow,” 217.

184 Hultgren, Parables, 256.

down.” The only other place in the New Testament where the verb ὑπωπιάζω appears is where it is used figuratively by Paul in 1 Cor 9:27 where he refers to, in Edwards’ terms, “limits to which he pushes himself for the sake of the Gospel.”

There is the question whether εἰς τέλος modifies ἐρχομένη or ὑπωπιάζῃ. Τέλος means a point in time that marks termination. Hultgren, and Culy, Parsons and Stigall, offer similar interpretive options: the phrase εἰς τέλος could mean either that the widow will eventually desist from “continually coming,” or it could refer to some future action the widow is liable to undertake that would ultimately defame the judge publicly for not responding to her continual coming for vindication.

Perhaps it is on that expectation and the realization that he has been badgered enough that the judge decides to conclude this drama to avoid an action that may very seriously compromise his position. He needs to find a solution that benefits him and brings this troublesome mise en scène to a conclusion that in some way saves face. The conjunctive ἵνα introduces his reasoning and the adverbial modifier εἰς τέλος (“in the end/finally”), stylistically

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186 While the present tense ὑπωπιάζῃ suggests duration it presents lexical and syntactical puzzles. The word derives from ὑπώπιον the part of the cheek immediately beneath the eyes signifying literally to smite in the face, proverbially, to mortify or incessantly annoy. It was used as a boxing term for a blow that results in the bruising below the eye; “to blacken the eye” was and is a common expression for being shamed, much like the metaphorical “black eye” that one can receive in today’s culture (Hultgren, Parables, 255; also Freed, “Judge and the Widow,” 50).

187 Edwards, Luke, 499; the NRSV notes the possibility “that she may not finally come and slap me in the face” (18:5, n. a).

188 Hultgren, Parables, 255; also Culy, Parsons, and Stigall, Luke, 561.

189 Malina and Rohrbaugh, Social-Science Commentary, 381; also Spencer, Salty Wives, 288, 301.
corresponding to the imperfect ἤρχετο (“she was coming”) back in v. 3, both indicating the widow’s persistence, ensures some finality.190

Benjamin offers an interpretation suggesting that neither in 18:5 nor in 1 Cor 9:27 does “the purpose clause” mean “to nag, but rather to train or to coach. The widow is a teacher, an instructor. She teaches the judge the meaning of the law, something which no one else – human or divine – has been able to do.” From this perspective the widow demonstrates further resourcefulness in what she is potentially able to do.191

In counter distinction to feminist perspectives, Luke places before us this uncharacteristic portrayal of an allegedly impotent woman demonstrating initiative and determined persistence in the face of injustice.192 The aorist active imperative ἐκδίκησόν (“grant justice/vindicate”) is that which the widow demands of the judge back in v. 3. Those who desire ἐκδίκησις are God’s elect who seek from him a certain justice. The eschatological people of God call out and believe that God will vindicate his elect.193 Here in v. 5, in propositive mood, the judge finally relents: ἐκδικήσω αὐτήν (“I will grant her justice”).194 We are not told whether he honours his intention.195

190 Freed, “Judge and the Widow,” 50.


193 Hicks, “Persistent Widow,” 219, 222-223.


195 Culpepper, TNIB, 337.
3.2.5 Luke 18:6

Εἶπεν δὲ ὁ κύριος, Ἀκούσατε τί ὁ κριτὴς τῆς ἀδικίας λέγει·

And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says (Luke 18:6).

Exegesis of the Text

The judge’s soliloquy has now concluded. The 2nd aorist verb εἶπεν is common for introducing speech and with the exception of John 12:6 the order εἶπεν δέ is peculiar to Luke in the New Testament.196 The conjunction δέ links to and continues the theme of the Judge’s identity in this story. Jesus will declare and confirm God’s faithful and bounteous love for his chosen ones as a powerful contrast in v. 7. The insertion of ὁ κύριος into the narrative is also characteristic of Luke. The term “Lord” (Κύριος) is clarified as referring to the earthly Jesus as distinct from reference to God (e.g., in 1:6).197

As previously discussed, scholars often isolate vv. 2-5 as the parable and consider vv. 6-7, 8a, and 8b as Lukan additions. Snodgrass affirms vv. 1 and 6a (“The Lord said”) as clear Lukan introductions, and contends that the rest of v. 6 is “nothing more than an attention-getter, a call for discernment similar to, ‘Let the one who has ears to hear, hear,’ a feature of Jesus’ teaching.”198 Fitzmyer’s preference is to include v. 6 into the parable proper, others

196 The expression εἶπεν δέ is used 59 times in Luke and 15 times in Acts (Freed, “Judge and the Widow,” 50).


suggesting it is a secondary addition, while Byrne maintains that it is not altogether clear where the original parable ends.\textsuperscript{199}

According to Reiling and Swellengrebel, the aorist active imperative admonition from Jesus, ἀκούσατε (“listen”), addressed to the audience of the parable, refers to what has been said, not, as is often the case, to what will or is about to be said.\textsuperscript{200} Freed disagrees, arguing that Mark and Matthew use the imperative of ἀκούω to refer to what follows. While Luke usually does not, in this case Freed maintains that Luke has ἀκούσατε used by Jesus to refer to what follows.\textsuperscript{201} Certainly in vv. 7-8 the guarantee and endurance determinants impact with force and demand attention. Freed points out that Luke regularly uses the imperative form of ἀκούω to introduce speeches in Acts (2:22; 7:2; 13:16; 15:13; 22:1), and while various usages of this verb are characteristic of Luke’s style, the actual phrase ἀκούσατε τί occurs in the New Testament only here.\textsuperscript{202} Green notes that in Luke’s reference to Jesus as “Lord,” the audience is reminded of “Jesus’ role as authoritative teacher.” The emphasis is not just on listening but appropriate action needed (see esp. 8:1-21).\textsuperscript{203}

The judge is declared outright by the Lord as “the unjust judge” (literally “the judge of injustice” – ὁ κριτὴς τῆς ἁδικίας). The English “unrighteous judge” represents a Semitic

\textsuperscript{199} Fitzmyer, \textit{Luke X-XXIV}, 1176; also Byrne, \textit{Hospitality}, 142, n. 13.


\textsuperscript{201} Freed, “Judge and the Widow,” 50-51.

\textsuperscript{202} Freed, “Judge and the Widow,” 50-51.

\textsuperscript{203} Green, \textit{Luke}, 641.
idiom in Luke’s text. We find a similar characterization applying to the “dishonest manager” (“the manager of injustice” – τὸν οἰκονόμον τῆς ἀδικίας) in 16:8, where similar Semitisms are evident (vv. 8-9). The genitive ἀδικίας is a genitive of quality and together with the noun ἀδικία both are characteristic of Luke’s style.

The phrase Εἶπεν δὲ ὁ κύριος at the beginning of the verse may be considered as Luke’s editorial notation in order to set the parable off from its application. From what we have already evaluated from Luke’s characterization of the widow and the judge in previous verses, our next step is to extrapolate relevant meaning from these final verses of Luke since the widow and the judge are no longer expressly named.

3.2.6 Luke 18:7

ὁ δὲ θεὸς οὐ μὴ ποιήσῃ τὴν ἐκδίκησιν τῶν ἐκλεκτῶν αὐτοῦ τῶν βοώντων αὐτῷ ἡμέρας καὶ νυκτὸς, καὶ μακροθυμεῖ ἐπ’ αὐτοῖς;

And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? (Luke 18:7).

204 Hultgren, Parables, 256.

205 Praeder, The Word in Women’s Worlds, 63; also Hultgren, Parables, 256.

206 Freed, “Judge and the Widow,” 51.

207 Hicks, “Persistent Widow,” 210.
Exegesis of the Text

Again this verse seems to be from Luke’s hand. Freed observes that the words ὁ δὲ θεός reveal two things characteristic of Luke’s style, one of them uniquely Lukan. First, the position of δὲ is an example of the Lukan tendency to insert words between the article and the noun. The expression ὁ δὲ θεός occurs only in Luke’s special source 16:15 and 18:7 and he uses the same order of these three words in Acts 3:18 and 13:30, so while its use cannot be attributed to Luke’s Gospel source it appears to be a literary style of his. Second, apart from “the kingdom of God” expressions, the use of θεός in a parable of Jesus is found only in Luke. Importantly, the conjunction δὲ in this verse becomes contrastive as it now compares the judge with how God will act. It needs to be clarified that although God and the judge are similar in their seeing that justice is accomplished, they do so from completely dissimilar motives.

This verse contains two questions. Though rare in the New Testament similar question formulas appear in John 11:56 and 18:11. The first (18:7a) is an interrogative clause employing an emphatic double-negative οὐ μή with an aorist active subjunctive construction.

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208 Grammatically, however, postpositives such as δὲ are not placed as the first word in a sentence.

209 Freed, “Judge and the Widow,” 52.

210 The use of the word θεός is not in the parable proper (vv. 2-5) but only in the interpretation that Jesus provides. Luke uses θεός in the parables of the sower (8:11), the rich fool (12:20-21), the lost coin (15:10), the unjust steward (16:13), and the Pharisee and the tax collector (18:11, 13) (Freed, “Judge and the Widow,” 52).


212 Praeder, The Word in Women’s Worlds, 64.

(ποιήσῃ), “will not God grant justice?”\textsuperscript{214} This syntactical combination becomes the strongest imperative in Greek where this could read, “Will not God absolutely bring about justice?”\textsuperscript{215} The anticipated implied response must warrant a resounding affirmative, “Yes! God will vindicate his chosen ones!” (cf. v. 8a).

The periphrastic verb phrase, ποιήσῃ τὴν ἐκδίκησιν (“shall grant justice/vindication”) with the genitive τῶν ἐκλεκτῶν (“the chosen ones”) links to the use of the same verb in the parable itself: ἐκδίκησόν in v. 3 and ἐκδικήσω in v. 5, where in each case the accusative that follows draws attention to the widow’s purpose.

As to the concept of “the elect,” τῶν ἐκλεκτῶν appears elsewhere in Luke only in 23:35 and refers to the mocking of Christ as “the elect one” (ὁ ἐκλεκτός).\textsuperscript{216} For Luke, however, “the elect” are those who are constant in prayer, as the widow in her coming to the judge.\textsuperscript{217} The Greek βοάω (“cry out with a loud voice”) with dative pronoun αὐτῷ (“to him”) means here “to cry out in prayer,” and the temporal genitives ἡμέρας καὶ νυκτός, meaning “continually or uninterruptedly,”\textsuperscript{218} not only pick up the πάντοτε in v. 1 but are an amplification of it. We observe the notion of crying out to God in prayer and faithful

\textsuperscript{216} Freed explains: “… whereas the expression ‘elect of God’ occurs several times in the New Testament … with reference to a select group, Luke never uses it in that way. For him, Christ is ‘the elect one’ (23:35; cf. 9:35). Nor does Luke ever associate the concept of ‘the elect’ with the coming of the Son of Man in the same way Mark does (Mark 13:26-27 = Matt 24:30-31)” (Freed, “Judge and the Widow,” 52); cf. Garland, \textit{Luke}, 711.
\textsuperscript{217} Freed, “Judge and the Widow,” 52.
\textsuperscript{218} Reiling and Swellengrebel, \textit{Gospel of Luke}, 598; the order of “day and night” reflects a Gentile idiom, while “night and day” (2:37) reflects a Hebrew idiom.
perseverance in this practice to be a key trajectory that runs through these verses.\textsuperscript{219} The persistence and endurance themes accord with the widow’s role exemplifying determination and continuous striving to achieve her objective. The widow comes again and again and succeeds with the judge ultimately intervening in her case, an instruction in trust for the disciples of Jesus to petition God to intervene for them.

Regarding the second question in v. 7, there is a mood change from the subjunctive (ποιήσῃ) to the indicative (μακροθυμεῖ) which can make v. 7b an independent question. The phrase καὶ μακροθυμεῖ ἐπ’ αὐτοῖς appears to derive its meaning from Sir 35:22, reproducing a finite Semitic circumstantial clause with a concessive nuance.\textsuperscript{220} Sir 35:21 illuminates the meaning of the notion of “delay” as an encouragement to continue petitioning: “The prayer of the humble pierces the clouds and it will not rest until it reaches its goal; it will not desist until the Most High responds,” and God guarantees that his purpose will be fulfilled – God will respond (Isa 55:11).

3.2.7 Luke 18:8

\textit{λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι ποιήσει τὴν ἐκδίκησιν αὐτῶν ἐν τάχει. πλὴν ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἐλθὼν ἀρα εὑρήσει τὴν πίστιν ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς;}

I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (Luke 18:8).

\textsuperscript{219} The full clause τῶν ἐκλεκτῶν … νοκτός may also have the sense of referring to persecution and affliction (cf. Hicks, “Persistent Widow,” 213; also Ellis, \textit{Luke}, 212).

\textsuperscript{220} Jeremias, \textit{The Parables of Jesus}, 154-155.
Exegesis of the Text

The closing verse of this parable forms an *inclusio* with 17:20 where the Pharisees ask Jesus about the coming of the kingdom. Within this broad sweep of verses strong eschatological overtones culminate with what the Son of Man will hope to expect on his return.²²¹

The periphrastic verb phrase ποιήσει τὴν ἐκδίκησιν (“he will grant justice/vindication”) in v. 8a is linked to the equivalent phrase in v. 7a. It is Jesus’ emphatic response to the question in v. 7b, marked by the conjunction ὅτι (“that”). Jesus affirms that God will grant justice to his chosen ones and it will be effected quickly (ἐν τάχει). Luke’s use of the introductory words λέγω ὑμῖν (“I tell you”) conveys a solemn guarantee with this affirmation in accord with the faith of the widow believing that justice must rule. The future active indicative ποιήσει gives strong emphasis to God’s intention.

In terms of theodicy, the parable proper and this part of its interpretative conclusion (vv. 7-8) are linked by a common theme-structure that relates repetitively to the issue of obtaining justice as with the following:

a) the widow’s concern demanded in “Grant me justice” (v. 3b);
b) the judge’s decision, “I will grant her justice” (v. 5);
c) the rhetorical question, “will not God grant justice?” (v. 7a);
d) and the decisiveness, “he will quickly grant justice” (v. 8a).

The emphatic nature of these expressions intensifies the imperative tone throughout that complements the literary purpose of Luke’s composition and the tenacious role he assigns to the widow. The repetition of the “grant justice” theme helps solidify the double analogy from the unjust judge to God and from the widow to God’s elect enabling an appropriation of the parable within an eschatological frame.222

There is debate over whether the expression ἐν τάχει is to be interpreted as suddenly or soon. If suddenly, then vindication is to be expected swiftly when it does take place. There would be no delay in divine intervention. If soon, then vindication is temporally near, and this connotes “a divine postponement.”223

Regarding this “postponement,” Luke goes out of his way to inform the disciples in 19:11 not to expect an immediate appearance of the kingdom.224 Seim makes it clear that “eschatological excitement is [to be] tempered by parenetic reasoning and philosophical discourse.”225 A somewhat cautious parallel is drawn in the judge refusing the widow then later granting her demand based on a condition, with God by design delaying then responding following an expectation. Unlike the judge, God’s delays are for God’s reasons (Isa 55:8-9).226 Further, to allay any inconsistency around the understanding and interpretation

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223 Praeder, The Word in Women’s Worlds, 68.
226 Herzog II, Parables, 217; Perry offers an apt comment: “Are God’s answers often not about giving us the outward things we wish for, but the inward changes we need?” (Perry, “God as an Unjust Judge?” 299).
of μακροθυμεῖ (“deferring”) in v. 7, it is suggested by some that God’s patience allows for change of heart and repentance (cf. 2 Peter 3:8-9).227 Though selfish indifference consumes the judge’s intention and delayed response, Mappes suggests, “when God delays it is the tarrying of love.”228

Jesus turns the tables with the question in v. 8b. He shifts the discussion from the faithfulness of God in which he has utter confidence (v. 8a) to the question of human faithfulness. The concern indicates awareness of the tendency of faith to falter as time passes – what will the Son of Man find when he comes?229 We are not provided with specific information as for how long the widow needed to persevere. What we are told is that her persistency in supplication, implying enduring faith, eventually brings resolution.

The placement of the expression ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου (“the Son of Man”) with the aorist active participle ἔλθων (“having come”) before the interrogative particle ἀρα (“indeed”) suggests strong emphasis to the question that follows.230 As a marker of inference, ἀρα acts as an interrogative intensifier expecting a negative answer, and this is meant to connote anxiety

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227 Garland explains that it is the Lord’s wish for all not to perish but to come to repentance (Garland, Luke, 705, 712); see also Isaac the Syrian’s comment that some petitions are withheld to allow trial and temptation that will become cause to draw nearer to God (Isaac, Bishop of Nineveh, The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian, trans. Holy Transfiguration Monastery [Boston, Massachusetts: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1984], 69).

228 Mappes, “Meaning of ‘Faith,’” 300.

229 Mikeal C. Parsons, Luke (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 265; Augustine of Hippo cautions on the type of faith the Son of Man may find on earth knowing that some would arrogantly attribute this faith to themselves, as with the Pharisee in 18:11, who seemed to himself to be just and despised others (Arthur A. Just Jr., and Thomas C. Oden, New Testament III – Luke, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003], 279).

or impatience: ἄρα εὑρήσει τὴν πίστιν ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς; (“indeed will he find faith on earth?”).  

The inference is that the situation for Christians at the time was one of severe crisis where they found themselves in dire insecurity (cf. 12:11), so the implication of the question is that the coming of the Son of Man is to be God’s way of providing justice for his elect.  

The question is how are Christians to persevere maintaining their faith in the face of injustice, or will they “lose heart” (v. 1b) and find themselves unprepared for the coming of the Son of Man?  

The role of the widow in Luke’s parable is one that identifies the way for the disciples to follow.

3.3 Conclusion

For the lonely and vulnerable widow seeking justice against a system that does not acknowledge her rights she requires a strategy that calls for perseverance, insistency, and commitment. We clearly identify these features within the syntactical composition of the Greek words and phrases complemented with Luke’s literary refinement. They also identify with effective discipleship traits. The widow’s committed insistence in her appeals that right justice needs to take precedence troubles the judge to the extent where he needs to rethink his position. In contrast to perceptions within the feminist literature, this widow’s self-determination effectively causes a change in legal proceedings. Jesus encourages us to heed

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231 The conjunction ἄρα is an interrogative marker with its own meaning in v. 8 and needs to be distinguished from both ἄρα and ἄρα (Danker, TCGEL, 52).


233 Ellis suggests that “it was not delay qua delay but delay in the face of continuing death and persecution that caused hope to fade and apostasy to rise” (Ellis, Luke, 212).
what is taking place in this story (v. 6), and that this approach of the widow aligns with what his chosen ones need to do, and that in God’s time justice will be granted (vv. 7-8). This exegetical discussion on the Greek text of Luke 18:1-8 provides us with necessary evidence for wider investigation of its meaning. I turn now to critically analyse this parable within the context of narrative and theological observations.
Section 4
The Persistent Widow in Lukan Context: Observations

4.1 Narrative Observations

Luke’s Gospel is nearing an end and the directives given by Jesus to his disciples are now styled with an imperative edge.\(^{234}\) Following the eschatological discourse in the previous chapter, Luke’s literary progression in 18:1-8 switches to a parable form where Jesus invites his disciples to imagine a confrontation between a dishonourable judge and a desperate widow seeking justice.\(^{235}\)

By way of literary conventions, in form and function this parable is essentially a fictional story told by Jesus whose purpose is to instruct his disciples in the way they need to prepare themselves for the future after his departure. The story includes a widow, whose character identifies widowhood, commonly symbolizing vulnerability, status deprivation and need.\(^{236}\)

\(^{234}\) Strong, “Importunate Widow,” 92.


Also included is a judge who signifies authority, but this judge neither fears God nor has respect for persons, signifying, in Green’s terms, “one’s thorough wickedness.”

In this discussion we analyse Luke’s reason for this parable and the roles Luke applies to the two principal characters in the story, the widow and the judge. We observe aspects that relate to narrative criticism in that we are interested in how Luke uses individual characterization styles for the purpose of achieving the parable’s objective. We also critique the parable’s structure as to how the story is formed, possible reasons why the parable is placed where it is, important themes that emerge, and any relationship this parable has with other texts in Luke’s Gospel. Blomberg and Markley comment that “Luke is an artistic writer, knowing how to craft a plot that builds suspense, has peaks and valleys, reaches a climax, and ends with a denouement.”

**4.1.1 Narrative criticism on Luke’s characterization of the Widow and the Judge**

We have seen how the socio-cultural realities and sensitivities of first-century Mediterranean society conditioned the place of women, especially the widows, the majority of whom experienced severe social and economic disadvantages and hardships (Section 2). For our

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238 A further explanation is offered by Reid that narrative criticism “alerts the reader to how the text communicates and the ways in which the author shapes the auditor’s reaction to the discourse” (Reid, *Choosing*, 6).

thesis we highlight the contrast between these realities and the explicit and implicit characterizations Luke applies to the widow in her objective to obtain justice.

From an narrative criticism perspective with our focus on the widow and the judge, we find that the Aristotelian classification of character (as defined in Section 1), described as static, consistent and unchanging, which scholars once presumed as representative of the Greco-Roman literature of character evaluation, does not apply. Character can vary, be complex, and even show personality. For both widow and judge, they become much more than stock, flat, or one-dimensional type. We observe a surprising twist in topos. According to Bennema, narrative criticism can reveal a “continuum of complexity” where explicit and implicit multifaceted characterization is revealed.

For clarity on this complexity accorded to the widow and the judge, I rely on Bennema’s work. Utilizing his comprehensive, nonreductionist theoretical framework we can analyse, classify, and evaluate the role of the widow and the judge by taking a “text-centred” approach to reconstruct character focusing on the parable’s original socio-historical context which we have already critiqued in Sections 2 and 3. This social-scientific study of character in text and context reveals in the widow and the judge an indication of their personality, motive, and behaviour. The text for instance identifies the widow with both primary and secondary traits such as persistence, purpose, courage, dominance and faith. This widow keeps demanding

240 Bennema, Theory of Character, 51, 59.

241 Bennema, Theory of Character, 73, 76.

242 Bennema, Theory of Character, 110; a “text-centred” approach enables a reconstruction of characters from the Gospel text itself supplemented with relevant information from other sources, such as, the world outside or “behind” the text (Bennema, Theory of Character, 67).
justice even though the situation for her appears grim.\(^\text{243}\) In addition to being endowed with an enterprising ability for counter-cultural initiative, action and response, implicitly she becomes a teacher and an exemplar. Uncharacteristic traits such as these are meant to astonish and surprise hearers and readers of the Gospel story. From the widow’s introduction in the parable (v. 3), Luke characterizes her role as one who openly expresses herself, initiates action in her own behalf, unconventionally demonstrates persistency in her claim, and who acts with conviction that her quest for justice will be granted. The widow identifies with those discipleship characteristics that Jesus desires for his disciples to acquire.

Bennema also claims that the reader’s evaluation of the characters can also lead to the reader’s self-evaluation. This implies that the characters are potential change agents – they have the ability to effect transformation in the reader.\(^\text{244}\) Luke’s purpose, as a pastoral theologian, is to narrate this story of Jesus and his first followers, in a constituent literary form, “in such a way as to console, guide, and challenge his faith communities.”\(^\text{245}\)

As for the judge, at least at the beginning, he forthrightly and confidently demonstrates stock characterization. His response to the widow is as expected: no sense of justice, dismissive intent, disdain, lack of concern, characteristically exercising repressive authority and dominance. Yet here too there is character change. He surrenders, submits, and even contradicts his claim of having no concern for his reputation. Thus character change becomes integral enabling the parable’s objective to unfold in favour of the widow who is granted


\(^{244}\) Bennema, *Theory of Character*, 76, 188.

\(^{245}\) Reid, *Choosing*, 19.
resolution. Luke’s strategy in his composition of this passage is brought to fruition. Bennema explains that it is a matter of emphasis or degree as to how far Luke in his narrative needs to go with certain characteristics in order for the plot to peak and the story’s objective to be achieved.\textsuperscript{246}

4.1.2 Function, form, and structure of the Parable

The emphasis Luke places on the two instructions in 18:1 indicates the tenor of the verses to follow. The exhortatory commission throughout this parenesis clearly identifies its function, primarily to instruct a third person plural group about persistent prayer, a thematic and consistent obligation throughout the Lukan Gospel,\textsuperscript{247} as well as ensuring enduring faith, and the call to address injustice. Within Luke’s narrative, this group represents Jesus’ disciples or a larger group in this segment of his journey to Jerusalem.\textsuperscript{248} Penny provides us with a three point purpose: 1) the parable encourages us to tackle difficult issues with confidence, 2) it cautions us not to expect immediate results, and 3) the parable assures us that God’s justice will prevail in the end.\textsuperscript{249}

Structurally, v. 8 forms an inclusio with 17:20, this larger narrative segment signifying concern relating to the coming of the end, and also with v. 1, the more narrow concern

\textsuperscript{246} Bennema, Theory of Character, 74, 76,


\textsuperscript{248} Praeder, The Word in Women’s Worlds, 58.

regarding the nature of appropriate comportment to be expected of the disciples with respect to the eschaton. As already examined, scholars express difficulties in that the introduction seems misplaced. The parable itself (vv. 2-5) is certainly brief and, in Snodgrass’ view, “without its explanation (vv. 6-8) there is little indication of its intent”; yet, he says, it does function as a “contrast.” Hicks, for example, illustrates the widow-judge relationship in contrast to the disciple-God relationship by noting this chiastic literary structure:

A The activity of the widow (v. 3)  
B The judge's response (vv. 4-5)  
B' God's contrasting response (vv. 6b-8a)  
A' The faith of the disciples (v. 8b).

Contrast pervades this parable’s interpretation and its parallel counterparts with metaphor and *a minori ad maius* inferences. The parable is also accompanied by a combination of structural factors with an introduction that expresses the point (v. 1) – the need to pray always with confidence. Themes of demand and resolve are dominant. The parable follows introducing the judge and the widow with the story that “presumably” illustrates the point (vv. 2-5). A discernment is called for (v. 6), and an application appears in the form of two questions (vv. 7a, 7b), both answered by way of a pronouncement in v. 8a: Yes! God will grant justice, and No! There will be no delay – it will be “quickly.” The final question (v. 8b) ends the parable

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252 Hicks, “Persistent Widow,” 222.
narrative and goes unanswered, thereby requiring an implicit admonition as to whether
“tenacious, hopeful faith in the midst of present ordeal” will exist when vindication comes.\textsuperscript{253}

\subsection*{4.1.3 Linking the parables}

In both form and content, this parable is usually interpreted as a doublet of the parable of the
importunate neighbour (11:5-8), which relates to perseverance in prayer.\textsuperscript{254} This story
portrays a person in need rousing his neighbour at midnight and somewhat impertinently
demanding assistance with food at this late hour. There is annoyance at the call, but assistance
is provided. There also exists a close connection with “The Parable of the Pharisee and the
Tax Collector” (18:9-14) which is addressed to a wider audience of those who trusted in
themselves for righteousness and despised others. Luke provides no textual markers to
suggest that the narrative has taken a significant turn or a change of scene with the opening
verse (18:9).\textsuperscript{255} The parallel introductory styles in each create “an ironic backloop” in Luke’s
construction with the second parable dealing with prayer explicitly.\textsuperscript{256} We observe that 18:1-8
sits between the two, each dealing with prayer illustrating a preference Luke has for reporting
in threes.\textsuperscript{257}


\textsuperscript{254} Herzog II, \textit{Parables}, 215.

\textsuperscript{255} Green, \textit{Luke}, 643.

\textsuperscript{256} Scott, \textit{Hear Then the Parable}, 176.

\textsuperscript{257} Other examples where Luke reports in threes are noted in Freed, “Judge and the Widow,” 40.
4.1.4 The travel narrative and discipleship commitment

In Luke 9:51 Jesus “set his face to go to Jerusalem” (NRSV/“resolutely took the road” JB),\textsuperscript{258} and moves through the region on his way to that city (17:11).\textsuperscript{259} Within an understanding of Luke’s Gospel as a journey towards salvation, the Lukan theme of strong purpose to this end is already predetermined through the repetition of rigorous demands (9:57-62) identifying the nature of discipleship commitment required of those who would follow Jesus.\textsuperscript{260} Towards the end of this travel narrative Jesus heals ten lepers (17:12-19) and declares to the Samaritan that it is his faith, a key discipleship attribute, that restores him to health. The notion of the coming of the kingdom of God is of interest and concern to the Pharisees leading Jesus to explain to his disciples (17:22) the events that are to occur in future time, pre-eminently the Parousia of the Son of Man (17:22-37).\textsuperscript{261}

4.1.5 Eschatology, kingdom of God, and faith

Some commentators have queried whether 18:1-8 is not part of the foregoing eschatological instruction in view of the mention of the Son of Man in v. 8b, and that the instruction

\textsuperscript{258} The optional and arguably stronger translation with “resolutely” is certainly in keeping with the literal translation of the Greek ἐστήρισεν as “steadfastly set.” However, Byrne explains that “set his face” recalls the statement of the Servant figure in Isa 50:7, “I have set my face like flint” communicating “the sense of a fixed determination against a strong temptation to do the opposite” (Byrne, Hospitality, 93, and n. 3).

\textsuperscript{259} The travel narrative may be taken to begin from 9:51 up to Jesus’ entry into the city and the temple (19:48) (Green, Luke, 394).


\textsuperscript{261} Within this discourse narrative, Luke introduces eschatological themes that refer to the coming of the kingdom of God (17:20-21), the arrival of the Son of Man (vv. 22-24), much suffering yet to come (vv. 25-30), and the need for all mankind to prepare for these events (vv. 31-37).
continues without break or change of audience.\textsuperscript{262} Eschatological and kingdom of God themes are in fact carried over into 18:7-8, 16-17, 24-25, 29-30, and these gospel passages give rise to questions as to what is to be the proper attitude of the elect towards the kingdom of God and towards the Son of Man in the interim between his departure from this earth and his return (17:20-25, 30-37).\textsuperscript{263} As Carroll cautions, “Life in the real world in the era that will stretch out before the return of the Son of Humanity will nevertheless pose a challenge to faith.”\textsuperscript{264}

\textbf{4.1.6 The purpose of the Widow}

Upon this understanding, the parable illustrates the importance of persistency in prayer as strengthening faith and confidence that prayer to God is to be the channel through which the disciples are to prepare themselves prior to these eschatological events, and the call for justice is to be attained. Understanding this commitment is fundamental for discipleship, and for this reason I argue that Luke assigns this agency role to the widow to exemplify and demonstrate the process required for this purpose. And it is to this process we next move that marks the distinctive ways Luke’s portrayal of the widow develops, as also with the judge.

\textsuperscript{262} Fitzmyer even considers that 18:8b would be a better fit replacing the disciples’ question and Jesus’ maxim-answer in 17:37 (Fitzmyer, \textit{Luke X-XXIV}, 1175-1176); also Evans, \textit{Saint Luke}, 634.

\textsuperscript{263} Evans, \textit{Saint Luke}, 634-635.

\textsuperscript{264} Carroll, \textit{Luke}, 354.
4.1.7 Characteristic themes with the Judge and the Widow

The character of the judge is actually introduced before the widow in the parable, and for good reason as the audience is given an inkling of what is in store for anyone who comes before this judge.\(^{265}\) As Curkpatrick observes, “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 Chr 19:5-7).”\(^{266}\) Totally self-assured and exercising a prerogative he presumes he has, he adopts the approach he does in resolving to maintain his ground against the widow. However, Luke has matched this uncompromising judge with a woman unconventionally endowed with counterpart characteristics, and she too is obstinate, resolutely determined to achieve her purpose. We therefore have with the widow and the judge a clash of compelling and determined mindsets. The contrast is clearly defined. Standing opposite the judge this widow needs desperately to defend herself. As observed by Weaver, with this rather vivid clash of opposites, “Within the biblical world it would be difficult to find two characters more diametrically opposed. If the judge is the symbol of power and authority, the widow symbolizes powerlessness and vulnerability.”\(^{267}\) This only emphasizes just how determined and meaningful is Luke’s intent in affirming this widow’s role with such purpose in demanding justice; in all likelihood in her case, economic justice.\(^{268}\)

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\(^{266}\) Curkpatrick, “‘Fictive’ Widows,” 220, n. 6.


To make matters worse, inasmuch as the ancient court system belonged to a privileged insider coterie of men, this poor widow has no husband, no son or male to defend her, and as a result her capacity to deal with legal proceedings is minimal. That she is alone indicates her lack of economic resources to offer the appropriate bribe for a swift settlement. The standard customary pattern of reciprocity is assumed, yet, as Herzog II clarifies, “the widow’s plight is poor collateral for [the judge’s] greed.”

We have already identified that the image of the ideal judge is portrayed in Sir 35:14-17. Fearing God and respecting people is a phrase that is formulaic and proverbial, as it is also traditional literary criteria, and abuse against both elements condemns this judge as dishonourable and shameless. Concern over corrupt judges is endemic in prophetic and sapiential literature; the portrayal of two corrupt judges in the story of Susanna illustrates the problem. The judge in the parable is epitomized as no exception, well versed in iniquitous dealings using his position to line his pockets. Wisdom captures the attitude of this judge in its discourse on the ungodly, “Let us oppress the righteous poor man; let us not spare the widow or regard the gray hairs of the aged. But let our might be our law of right, for what is weak proves itself to be useless” (Wis 2:10-11).

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270 Herzog II, Parables, 227.

271 Wright clarifies that “not fearing God is unequivocally negative in biblical terms. In the Hebrew Scriptures the ‘fear of God’, an attitude of profound reverence before him, is seen as the beginning of wisdom” (Stephen Wright, Tales Jesus Told: An Introduction to the Narrative Parables of Jesus [Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002], 84).


273 Herzog II, Parables, 227.
These tropes of exploitation and oppression suggest that the injustice of the judge’s action would be of no concern to him – that’s how the system worked – “it was ‘honest graft,’” as Herzog II calls it. The same dynamics applied in the Roman world. Following a study of Roman court systems, Cotter argues that the judicial system there was “a closed circle of ambitious elites whose attentions were trained on amassing greater wealth and increasing personal prestige.”

4.1.8 **Who dominates in this Parable?**

There are conflicting views as to who is the dominant character in the parable. Freed certainly and possibly Levine suggest the widow is the main character in the story. In agreement, Schottroff observes that it is the widow’s resistance that draws the judge’s attention to her rights, that is, to the demands of the Torah. She is characterized as knowing that her obstinate persistence is possible because she knows that God’s law is on her side. She also expresses her resistance by violating social boundaries, especially with her persistent and aggressive behaviour in public. This indicates that the woman and her action are centre stage. Furthermore, interpreting the parable from the introduction and the conclusion, reference is to the widow (vv. 1, 7, 8), not the judge.

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276 Freed, “Judge and the Widow,” 51; also Levine, “This Widow,” 126.

From Curkpatrick’s observation, as with Nolland, Luke’s interpretation from the Lord’s instruction displaces the widow and turns the judge into the central character.\textsuperscript{278} Certainly the judge is apportioned more words than the widow in the full pericope,\textsuperscript{279} yet I would argue in favour of the widow, and more extensively than Freed, Levine and Schottroff. In view of the way Luke draws out the inner dynamic of the parable, I suggest that the parable reveals how skilful the widow becomes in the way she needs to navigate her difficult course through this crisis. This is evident when we consider that in her confrontation with the judge (vv. 3-5), in her ability to persist in her petitioning, in her not losing heart (v. 1) and crying out persistently (vv. 3, 5) “day and night” (v. 7), the widow is seen to demonstrate that faith the Son of Man expects to see in disciples (v. 8b). It is the widow, the outsider, who appears in the foreground. It is she who becomes the central prime motivator and accomplisher, an instructor no less, demonstrating what is essential to discipleship. It is the widow who overcomes patriarchal constraint and who impels the judge to administer justice.\textsuperscript{280} The parable also underscores the pattern of reversal, a literary irony thematic in Luke that benefits those oppressed who hold firm, especially those with strong belief in the Son of Man (18:7-8).

\subsection*{4.1.9 The Widow's initiative}

This parable then is a far cry from conventional perceptions of women generally seen as entrapped within vulnerable and compromising situations. In this instance, from the opening


\textsuperscript{279} Text content is given to the judge in vv. 2, 4-6, while the widow receives only one full line of text (v. 3) and a reference in the judge’s soliloquy (v. 5) (Schwartz, “Persistent Widow,” 29).

\textsuperscript{280} This is further supported with Schwartz, “Persistent Widow,” 30; also Green, \textit{Luke}, 642.
statement in 18:3, the widow is self-motivated, takes the initiative, and is unrelenting with persistence as her only means of encounter.\textsuperscript{281} Like the haemorrhaging woman of 8:43-48, the widow assumes unusual responsibility for her own well-being, trusts in her own capacity, and with steadfast faith, continually returns to the magistrate in her quest for justice.\textsuperscript{282}

Intertextual links are observed with similar remarkable women recorded in the Hebrew Bible, such as Tamar, Ruth, and others, who take proactive and assertive action in their own behalf.\textsuperscript{283} While the Lukan narrative does portray women as belonging to social categories of the poor, marginalized, and vulnerable, and as exposed to social and legal exploitation, Luke also reveals them as examples of faith and strength, amidst these tribulations, who exhibit qualities of “the elect” crying out to God.\textsuperscript{284}

One of Luke’s peculiar interests is that of using a “bad person” to convey a good point or to serve as a foil for the main character in a story.\textsuperscript{285} I agree with Levine that Freed goes too far

\textsuperscript{281} According to Herzog, “the case could be a life-and-death issue for the widow. She is faced with poverty and starvation if her rights are not respected. She has no male family members or kinship support; everything is in her hands” (Herzog, Parables, 228).

\textsuperscript{282} Green, Luke, 640; Jeremias relays a vivid description of the judicial court at Nisibis (Mesopotamia) where a poor woman breaks through the orderly proceedings with loud cries for justice; at length, her story is soon told; the case is quickly decided and her patience is rewarded – an exact analogy to Luke 18:2ff. (Jeremias, The Parables of Jesus, 154, n. 7).

\textsuperscript{283} Noted by Levine, “Biblical widows are the most unconventional of conventional figures: expected to be weak, they move mountains; expected to be poor, they prove savvy stewards; expected to be exploited, they take advantage where they find it. Tamar, the Bible’s first official ‘widow’ (Gen 38:11), Naomi, Ruth, Orpah, Abigail (1 Sam 27:3; 30:5; 2 Sam 2:2; 3:3), the guise of the wise woman of Tekoa (2 Sam 14:5), the widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17; cf. Lk 4:26), Judith, all manifest agency; all defy the convention” (Levine, “This Widow,” 124).

\textsuperscript{284} Curkpatrick, “‘Fictive’ Widows,” 215; Green explains: “the text introduces a straightforward analogy between the widow of the parable and God’s ‘chosen ones who cry to him day and night.’ This is consistent with the portrayal of the widow, Anna, in 2:37, who worshipped in the temple with fasting and prayer ‘night and day’” (Green, Luke, 642).

\textsuperscript{285} For other instances where Luke adopts this form of literary device see Freed, “Judge and the Widow,” 51.
when he claims that the judge serves “only” as a foil.\textsuperscript{286} His role is integral as judge representing, initially at least, stock characterization of judges at that time and their unjust treatment of widows. Judges were called upon to act justly in representing all people in matters of justice (Deut 1:16; 16:18-20; 27:19; 2 Chr 19:5-7). Furthermore, the entrenched androcentric socio-cultural environment gave little attention towards the welfare of widows. A combination of these factors frustrated the widow’s plea thus highlighting the extent of this widow’s agency role revealed in her courage, persistency and determination. In the words of Spencer:

\begin{quote}
I … find plenty of space within Luke’s arena in 18:1-8 for affirming the indomitable widow as a model of prayerful and faithful … quintessential capable [women] of purpose and persistence the coming Son of Man hopes to find vigorously advancing God’s just reign on earth (18:8).\textsuperscript{287}
\end{quote}

\subsection*{4.1.10 The Widow as an archetype of discipleship}

In 11:2, the disciples were advised to pray for the coming of the kingdom. Theologically interpreted, the prayer, “your kingdom come,” is answered by the Pentecostal gift of the Spirit (11:2, 13); the “cry” that God “see justice done for his chosen,” is answered by the coming of “the Son of Man” (18:7-8).\textsuperscript{288} Thus, Luke has positioned the widow as an archetype of discipleship such that the idea of “prayer” is to be expanded to signify \textit{active striving} for justice. Not just praying and crying to God against injustices, but, guided by the gift of the Spirit, purposefully engaged in effort, action, and protesting against injustice describes the

\textsuperscript{286} Levine, “This Widow,” 126, n. 3.

\textsuperscript{287} Spencer, \textit{Salty Wives}, 23.

\textsuperscript{288} Ellis, \textit{Luke}, 212-213.
whole life of believers in the coming of the kingdom: “Luke understands continual prayer not simply as passive waiting but as the active quest for justice.” Accordingly, the application of the parable is identified with the widow’s behaviour as a clarification of what resistance against injustice and crying to God day and night means, underscoring Luke’s role characterization of the widow, in stark contrast to any assessment of docility and passivity, or being unempowered and lacking leadership on the part of the widow.

4.2 Theological Observations

Theologically, the Gospel of the Third Evangelist is focused primarily on God and God’s overall salvation purpose for all. With the focus on our parable, we examine as best we can Luke’s intended theological purpose with this particular story and its intended application. Of particular note is Luke’s positioning of this parable and its strong connection to the eschatological discourse that immediately precedes it in the previous chapter. Our attention thus is directly focused on how the disciples of Jesus are to function after Jesus’ departure. We have in this story with the widow and the judge a parabolic example for the purpose of this instruction. We evaluate parallel and other related texts that support theological themes within the passage. Our observations are also to reveal techniques used by Luke that establish

289 Green, Luke, 638 and n. 78.


analogical connections where the widow’s role offers theological applications for Jesus’ disciples. These features relate to an understanding of prayer, faith, and the pursuit of justice, essential characteristics of discipleship placed before Luke’s audience.

**4.2.1 The message of salvation and preparedness**

The parable narrative can be revealed as an emotive conclusion to the teaching section (17:20-37), that is, the correct way for the disciples to understand Jesus’ eschatological discourse is by praying in a manner that “display[s] a readiness that fits those days.”

Accordingly, there is a need for the disciples to strengthen the outworking of their faith so as “not to lose heart” (18:1) in light of that coming crisis. The only way to remain faithful is for the disciples to continually train their thoughts towards the promise of the coming order. Of all those who were disciples of Jesus, a select few, “The Twelve,” are those to whom Jesus assigns leadership. It is they who are commissioned to follow on from Jesus as those appointed thereafter to continue the apostolate. This role attributed to the apostles, chief of whom is Peter (cf. 9:20), is one that will take time to be understood (cf. 9:44-45; 18:34), an assignment that will require enduring faithfulness (cf. 2:37), along with addressing the issues of injustice.

This theological review of the parable linked with supporting insights from parallel text references is an attempt to contribute towards further identifying the way Luke designs the widow’s role for the purpose of discipleship instruction.

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293 Nygaard, *Prayer*, 144.

4.2.2 Comparing Luke 11:5-13

The parable is frequently read together with 11:5-13, the passage on perseverance in prayer comprising the parable of the friend at midnight (vv. 5-8). Each speaks on prayer with common themes of persistency and determination as each deals with the importunity element of the petitioners, the principle presupposition being the certainty that the petition will be granted. However, each is differently distinguished and interpreted: “11:5-13 speaks of the strength and endurance of networks of solidarity among human beings” (it is an imperative duty in the East, for instance, to entertain a guest), while 18:1-8 is about “resistance to structures of injustice.”295 These passages direct our focus towards “the reliability of God’s closeness and mercy for those who call to God day and night, urgently and boldly.”296

In 18:1-8 the exhortation is to pray always (v. 1; cf. Phil 4:6-7), yet the point in 11:5-13 is an encouragement to even pray shamelessly.297 Within the verses of the parable itself, Byrne observes that any sense of “shame” that might be attributable to the friend in bed unwilling to help his friend at midnight is now transferred to the one shamelessly and persistently knocking on the door, rousing his friend to get up.298 While praying shamelessly may be the point here, Jesus gives us 18:1-8 to portray God as “relentlessly pursuing justice,” even, as Reid suggests, casting the widow in the image of God,299 much like God as housewife seeking

295 Schottroff, Parables of Jesus, 194; also Jeremias, The Parables of Jesus, 157.

296 Schottroff, Parables of Jesus, 194.


298 Byrne, Hospitality, 106.

the lost coin until found (15:8-9). This is not to suggest a theology of prayer in that if one badgers God long enough the request will be answered, cautions Reid. We would therefore need to ask how such an image of God is reconciled with that of a gracious God looking to give good gifts to all who ask (11:9-13; cf. Mt 6:7-8).

Accordingly, Luke cleverly crafts 18:1-8 in characterizing the widow whose only source of succour is to depend on God for her rights and social well-being. This will also be the case for the disciples, and so her persistence exemplifies the need to constantly petition and not lose heart. It becomes an exhortation to pray always. Luke has redacted both parables to underscore the virtue of persistence and determination in discipleship and how and by whom this is to be demonstrated. However, this is not to eliminate the relentless pursuit of justice as an important discipleship element of the story in its final form.

For all this, we are confronted with our attention being drawn to the enigmatic casting of God in negative stereotypes, described by Edwards as, “a reluctant paterfamilias in [one], and worse, as a reluctant and corrupt judge in the other,” both concepts providing a matter of considerable debate relating to this paradoxical contrast. Edwards interprets these “negative” ascriptions necessary and designed to exhort believers to continue their persistency with prayer and trust, even when the answer is long in coming. He describes the negative image of the judge as “counterbalanced by Jesus’ concluding assurance in [18:6-8], which recalls the

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300 Parsons, Luke, 262.

301 Reid, Choosing, 192.

plenary teaching of Scripture, that God not only hears the prayers of his elect, but surely responds. "^{303}

4.2.3 **Linking with Luke 18:9-14**

Both 18:1-8 and 18:9-14 are somewhat similar yet the inverse of each other in that the unjust judge neither fears God nor respects others (18:2) and is well aware of his dispositions (18:4), unlike the unnamed audience in 18:9, the target of Jesus’ teaching, who are presumably clueless who trust in themselves (rather than God) and despise others. ^{304} The latter parable plays on a further contrast that exists between the status of the Pharisee and the tax collector, just as 18:1-8 turns on the disparity in power between the judge and the widow. ^{305} At the same time, we observe an ironic relation between the two, as viewed by Scott: “The negative characterization of the judge] is a negative metaphor for God … the [self-proclaimed publican ‘sinner’] is a positive example to imitate."^{306}

Luke has redacted both parables to share a symmetrical relationship with one another focussed on the theme of prayer. Jesus warns against faintheartedness in the first, especially in

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^{304} Parsons, *Luke*, 265; note also John Chrysostom’s interpretation on this parable: “What madness! [The Pharisee’s] self-claimed superiority to all human nature did not satisfy his arrogance, but he even trampled the publican, who was standing nearby, under the foot of his great haughtiness. And what did the publican do? He did not try to evade the insults, he was not troubled by the accusation, but he patiently accepted what was said” (Paul W. Harkins, trans. and ed., “On the Incomprehensible Nature of God/St John Chrysostom,” in *The Fathers of the Church* [Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University Press, vol. 72, 1984], 159).

^{305} Culpepper, *TNIB*, 335.

^{306} Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 176.
prayer, and overconfidence in the latter, especially in virtue. Both these negative dispositions endanger faithful discipleship and become warnings for those praying to examine themselves, as focus should be above all upon God. Given the Lukan program of social reversal, it is noteworthy that the widow and the tax collector, both people of low social rank, are found to be worthy. I would further argue that Luke also characterizes each of these petitioners as the inverse of each other, yet in a positive way. The tax collector is presented as being most humble and accepting (18:13), the widow on the other hand, as with Anna (2:37), is forthrightly persistent with her objective and does not relent (18:5; cf. 11:8b): “The real widow, left alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day” (1 Tim 5:5).

Within a literary context both these prayer parables bring the attention of Luke’s readers back to the issue of justice but on a deeper level, as we see the widow granted justice in her case and the tax collector returning home “justified” (18:5, 14a). Each parable teaches that God is concerned with justice and will bring it into reality.

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308 Green, Luke, 644; Levine has reservations regarding the widow as a moral exemplar or even likable (Levine, “This Widow,” 136, 145).

309 Culpepper, TNIB, 336.

4.2.4 Injustice to the Widow

The injustice to the widow of 18:2-5 is on two levels. She is victimized by an opponent who has infringed on the economic basis of her life and against whom she seeks to defend herself with the aid of a judge. Unfortunately for the widow, she becomes the victim of an unjust judicial response that has no regard for her rights. The twofold injustice against this widow is the object of the Hebrew Bible’s continual lament against the perpetrators of such injustice to the extent that Old Testament material and this parable regard this double injustice against widows as structural.311

As we have noted, Sir 35:14-26 affords intertextual concepts and material from which this parable appears to be framed that ground Jesus’ portrait of God within Jewish interpretative traditions.312 Based on the qal v’homer argument suggesting that if an unrighteous judge will grant justice surely the Righteous Judge will do the same, the signals could not be clearer that this judge is not like God. He is represented as the negative version of the deity.313 The judge is expected to stand in the place of God. In this parable the judge is neither a metaphor nor a metonymy for God314 – he is the opposite, a counter-image of God. Presumably clear of his role responsibilities as judge and needing at least to wear the mantle of justice in public, he

311 So much attention is given the divine concern for widows in the LXX precisely because this concern was so little evident among God’s people (Green, Luke, 640); furthermore, the treatment of widows, orphans and foreigners amounted to a gauge for determining the faithfulness of the Jewish people (Kathleen E. Corley, Feminist Myths of Christian Origins [Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge, 2002], 58).

312 Jesus subverts the vengeance theme in Sirach and teaches that God has patience for the elect and focuses on their vindication (Snodgrass, Stories, 458).

313 Levine, “This Widow,” 134.

314 Scott clarifies: “As a metaphor, he fails to stand in God’s place, for he does not act from justice. As a metonymy, he is not a part standing for the whole, i.e., some aspect of God” (Scott, Hear Then the Parable, 186).
does not in fact judge accordingly as the narrative and his interior monologue verify. According to Levine, within progressive scholarly tradition this judge is representative of “systemic evil and institutional corruption,” thereby negating any suggestion of allegorization with God. Compounded with the double antithetical negative in neither fearing God nor respecting people is his apparent lack of concern for public honour. Thus, the *a minori ad maius* argument applies that if this widow, against all odds, accomplishes so much with a dishonest judge because of her persistent prayer, how much more will those receive who supplicate the upright God and Father of all who is both loving and just?

### 4.2.5. Defining “prayer”

Within all three parables Lukan redaction illustrates that there is much more at stake when prayer is defined as a “practice.” Prayer can be considered metonymic for a person’s dispositions and practices. In other words, prayer defines the character of persons, their behaviours, commitments, who they really are, what they hope for, and these will determine the mode of one praying and a person’s fitness for the kingdom of God. The importance of prayer suggests an on-going activity that virtually does not end, strengthened in the emphasis Jesus gives to persistency in prayer (see also Lk 21:36 and Rom 12:12; cf. 1 Thess 5:17) demonstrated by the widow, and certainly in response to the question posed by West as to

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315 Levine, “This Widow,” 134.


whether the widow’s active pursuit of justice is itself a form of prayer, a way to remain connected to the purposes of God.  

### 4.2.6 Defining “faith”

For the widow to commit to accomplishing her objective demands a special degree of faith. The apostles have already asked Jesus to increase their faith (17:5). Reid suggests that it is the smallness of the petitioner’s faith that is the obstacle to God’s response, yet Byrne refines this interpretation in that “Jesus’ response does not imply that his disciples have no faith but that the little faith they have (‘the size of a mustard seed’) is enough to work outstanding miracles if only they exploit its possibilities to the full.” For Jesus’ disciples the combination of “the eschatological persistence of faith (18:7b-8)” with “the spiritual practice of [unceasing] prayer (18:1, 7a),” not letting up or dropping guard, translates to being constantly aware of the presence of God in their lives and to go on praying “your kingdom come” (11:2). The maintenance of faith depends on persistence of prayer, enjoined in Luke’s parable and truly exemplified by the tenacious persistence of the widow. The underlying message points to defining faith, hope, and prayer as needing to effectively coexist. Luke is the only Gospel writer to associate faith with prayer (18:1-8; 22:32).

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319 Reid, “Godly Widow,” 28; Byrne, *Hospitality*, 139.

320 Spencer, *Salty Wives*, 293.


322 Freed, “Judge and the Widow,” 55.
The widow has an active role in the Lukan passage – to tirelessly persevere and not give up. This is evidence of her key role in Jesus’ overall parenesis.\(^{323}\) Luke’s existential concern is not prayer in general, but praying and not becoming weary, or giving up (ἐγκακεῖν) with respect to the eschaton, the time when deliverance comes. The opposite of becoming weary is faithfulness, readiness and steadfastness.\(^{324}\) Holding fast to these gifts would be, in Byrne’s terms, “to take the risk of faith seriously … to clothe oneself with the power of God.”\(^{325}\)

The exigent nature of the passage draws attention to the question relating to salvation for those who are not faithful in prayer.\(^{326}\) Edwards, too, cautions that the concern for Jesus (v. 8b) is “more with anthropodicy than with theodicy,”\(^{327}\) as the widow could easily lose hope and discontinue petitioning prematurely before the judge reneges on his refusal, just as Christians could easily abandon persistency in praying for the Parousia.\(^{328}\) The faithful, like Noah being mocked by his neighbours, must remain firm and pray faithfully and constantly to be eventually vindicated.\(^{329}\) That day will be when the Son of Man is revealed and those who pray in this way, as with the widow, are to receive prompt assurance of their vindication.\(^{330}\)


\(^{324}\) Snodgrass, *Stories*, 457.

\(^{325}\) Byrne, *Hospitality*, 139.

\(^{326}\) Kreitzer carries a warning that “no one will be saved who does not continually pray to the Lord” (Beth Kreitzer, *Luke* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015], 348).


\(^{328}\) Benjamin, “Persistent Widow,” 218.


\(^{330}\) González, *Luke*, 211; “The issue of faith, or readiness, is implied by references to the days of Noah and Lot and the repeated examples of one taken and one left (17:34-35)” (Culpepper, *TNIB*, 335).
4.2.7 Defining “faith through prayer and action”

The widow does not lose heart. Her persistent faith in action eventually wears down the intransigence of the judge as if, according to Scott, “the kingdom keeps coming, keeps battering down regardless of honor or justice. It may even come under the guise of shamelessness (lack of honor).”\(^{331}\) For Luke, prayer is faith in action relationship with God in the sense that how one prays reveals that relationship. Johnson clarifies: “If the disciples do not ‘cry out day and night’ to the Lord, then they in fact do not have faith, for that is what faith does.”\(^{332}\)

The great irony in this parable is that this judge who neither fears God nor respects man now fears a widow, the weakest member of society. The widow induces in the judge the fear that she might undermine his position and status in the community, yet “the expected denouement in which the judge turns to honor is missing!”\(^{333}\) “What moral obligation fails to compel,” Ringe observes, “the effect of the woman’s persistence accomplishes: She shames him into action.”\(^{334}\)

\(^{331}\) Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 187.


\(^{333}\) Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 185-186.

4.3 Conclusion

These theological themes evoked by Luke’s parable bring together our understanding of the widow’s place manifesting discipleship characteristics of persistent prayer, faith, and active striving for justice. Supported by the previous wider narrative observations in this Section 4, together with the verse-by-verse exegetical analysis of the passage (Section 3), and our review of the widow in the social world of Luke (Section 2), we can affirm that this body of material supports our claim and substantiates the research question that the importunate widow is a positive example for the disciples and Luke’s audience. We move now to summarize what we have discussed and argued for in this overall study and proceed to bring the research question to a conclusion.
Section 5

Summary and Conclusion

5.1 Summary

Luke’s Portrayal of Women: While acknowledging the concern feminist scholarship raises that suggests an undercurrent of androcentric bias in Luke’s Gospel, or claims that women are portrayed in negative light, appearing in silent passive roles and denied decision-making responsibilities and leadership commissions, this study has attempted to argue for a more positive reading of Lukan characterization in at least one instance. Conceding that in some cases Luke appears to employ inherited literary conventions in his portrayal of female characters, he characterizes the widow in 18:1-8 in ways that manifest an exceptional level of prominence and reflect a marked difference in portrayal that are in tension with convention and that emphasize agency rather than passivity. This reading suggests the possibility of a more positive appreciation of the roles that Luke attributes to women in this Gospel.

The Widow in Antiquity and in Luke’s Social World: Our analysis of the socio-cultural and historical place and status of widows in the ancient world clarified that widows are given clear acknowledgement in the Torah, often because of the wrongs done to them. The plight of
widows did not change within the sociological complexities of ancient Greco-Roman and Jewish societies. From this we were able to gain some understanding of how these ancient and well-established customs and conventions conditioned people in their interaction with one another, how dismally widows fared particularly. We read of Luke’s references to widows and the particular concern Jesus has for the welfare of widows. This overall picture provided us with helpful framework for understanding the dynamics in the Lukan parable.

*The Exegesis of the Parable:* In Section 3, a detailed analytical exegesis of this one key text revealed the complexity of the exegetical questions that are addressed in the scholarship on this text. In our own commentary, exploring Luke’s grammatical syntax, literary style and technique, we identified features of the parable that suggest a coherent focus and rhetorical intent. Luke 18:1-8 discloses a decisive imperative tenor that brings to the fore the parable’s purpose in its focus on discipleship. This is demonstrated by the widow who identifies for the disciples those characteristics needed to address the injustices against those most vulnerable in society. The exegetical analysis of the parable text identifies the widow as self-determined, resourceful, and persistent in her endeavour. Believing in herself, and knowing she is right, she persistently endures the process that enables her to successfully complete her objective. We were also challenged with the various hermeneutical approaches regarding applications of the parable in terms of the eschatological questions Jesus poses in vv. 7-8, and his definitive answer given to his disciples in v. 8a.

*Narrative Observations:* From a narrative perspective, Luke appears to design and position this parable as a highpoint, hallmarked with this apparent imperative sense in ways that strongly connect to the eschatological and kingdom of God themes in his Gospel.
A particular feature of major significance within these observations accounted for narrative criticism of character in text and context. Our review of the social and cultural environment of Luke’s time, supported by the exegesis with each verse in the Greek text, provided us with important and valuable grounding for understanding personality, motive, and behaviour relating to the widow and the judge. It is this understanding that enabled us to identify an evolvement of character change that Luke applies to both the widow and the judge in the development of the story.

We also identified the parable as a story demanding a resoluteness and fulfilment of purpose enabling a deeper appreciation of necessity and persistence in prayer, faith, and the call to address injustice. These themes are contextually advanced in supporting passages in the travel narrative, and highlighted as discipleship attributions for would-be followers of Jesus. These credentials Luke identifies as necessary both for salvation and to empower the disciples to face opposition in the present and to come. The parable’s function, form, and structure are firmly grounded with the themes of justice, firmness of purpose, and persistence that include noteworthy contrasts also evidenced in supporting parallel texts (11:5-8; 18:9-14) and elsewhere.

Within this dramatic courtroom scenario Luke presents the widow as an exemplar whose role characterization identifies significant features of purpose. Faced with overwhelming odds against a corrupt judicial system, the widow recasts herself, relocates from her default periphery to the foreground, and vigorously demonstrates her powerful and effective agency, resolutely determined to achieve her mission. While the judge in paradigmatic fashion shows no interest in the widow’s welfare, nor any initial intent of coming to her aid, Luke
characterizes this vulnerable widow in a role assignment that identifies her as a persistent combatant against injustice and a model of what is meant in an understanding of discipleship. In this parable the widow outmanoeuvres the judge. Through sheer determination she becomes the dominant protagonist. Her resolute initiative leads us to challenge any hermeneutics of suspicion that suggest convention, docility, and servility for this Lukan woman. There is no passivity evident here. Informed by our understanding of the place of the χήρα in Luke’s world, we can suggest that if the least in the community can initiate measures to counter the status quo and achieve as much in dealing with the shamefully corrupt, (achievements that echo exemplary women in ancient Scripture), the implication in the message Luke delivers is that the disciples of Jesus are expected even more so to accomplish as much.

Theological Observations:
Our observations on theology themes remind us of Luke’s overall teaching direction, that Luke’s narrative is focus on God and the fulfilment of God’s salvation purpose for all. With this in mind, especially following the eschatological discourse in Luke’s previous chapter (17:20-37), there is need for clear direction. Jesus offers his disciples this parabolic instruction. Jesus is fully aware of the difficult task that lies ahead for the disciples that will pose a challenge to their faith. It is important for Luke therefore to construct and deliver this parable with particular artistry that re-enacts the analogy Jesus provides that demonstrates how even a vulnerable widow seeking justice, while confronted with institutional corruption at the judiciary level, is yet able to effectively take up her cause.
The widow in this parable imitates the ancient chosen people of God in that she comes again and again as the elect are to petition and cry out to God day and night. The widow’s story is one of persistence to the end despite continuous rejection – persistence that demands patient endurance. The issue is around “readiness,” being found faithful rather than giving up. We would expect that the overarching power and authority this judge freely exercises for his own benefit would swiftly annul this widow’s plea. Yet the widow underscores the paradoxical power of seeming weakness and takes this corrupt judge to task. The prevailing Lukan pattern of reversal delivers God’s promise to the powerless, vulnerable, and persecuted, who hold firm and have strong belief in the Son of Man (18:7-8). Eschatological messages abound that have latent potential for further study especially as to women’s role in illustrating Luke’s effectual reversal theme in other subtle parabolic and story examples. While the parable illuminates the stark contrast between godly righteousness and that perpetrated by ungodly institutional injustice, the Torah and the Gospel call for integrity and high-principled leadership from those who are commissioned with authority.

Complemented with analogies, metaphors and contrasts, this parable indicates significant alignment with 11:1-13 that highlights effectiveness in prayer achieved through persistency and determination, as also with 18:9-14, where efficacy of prayer is guaranteed depending on a petitioner’s disposition before God. Furthermore, the effective combination of prayer and faith into practice is Luke’s feature imperative in striving for the kingdom. And, what seems to be God’s delay in answering the prayers of the faithful suggests a divine process at work whereby patience and repentance are strengthened.
Recontextualizing what Luke has presented in this parable sets challenges to all Jesus’ followers, women and men equally, to mount active resistance even against all socio-cultural convention, in order to obtain social justice. If there is to be any faith on earth when Jesus comes, it will certainly be found in those who face the challenges of everyday living with active and persistent prayer.

5.2 Conclusion and Implications

Understanding the sociological and cultural background of ancient Greco-Roman and Jewish societies provided us with a clearer picture of just how in conflict with society norm at that time is the role Luke assigns to the widow in our parable. In view of the parable’s purpose to encourage the disciples to persevere in prayer, “not to lose heart” (v. 1), and stand up for justice, we clearly see that the role of the widow is to demonstrate the nature of the task ahead for the disciples. The widow’s assignment is a challenging one. No less will it be for the disciples. Our attention was also directed towards other women and widows in Luke’s Gospel who likewise manifest similar strength and perseverance in their own discipleship journey.

Our detailed analytical exegesis revealed how Luke’s literary technique cleverly crafts the parable text to provide the decisive imperative throughout the verses that gives impetus to the parable’s objective. Themes of persistency and purpose pervade the Greek text in its grammatical syntax, terms and expression, revealing those elements that effectively enable the widow to fulfil her role. Emphasis on particular words, phrases, and motifs identifies this widow’s resourcefulness, determination, and discipline of intent that empowers her significant
agency. We clarified that the widow’s prime purpose is not aimed towards vengeance but justice. In having Jesus confirming the character of the judge as “unjust” (v. 6), Luke affirms and reinforces this difficult yet important role assigned to the widow to address this injustice. Luke brings this widow’s place to the forefront indicating her dominant role. It is to this place of prominence Jesus commissions his disciples to take leadership in continuing the apostolate mission. In our exegesis of the parable’s final verses the elect are given assurance that God will not delay in their prayerful supplications and appeals for justice. God will vindicate his chosen ones and justice will be effected quickly (ἐν τάχει).

A particular analytical feature within our narrative observations directed attention on Luke’s characterization of the widow and the judge. Each character, conventionally taken as stock or one-dimensional, undergoes change. A more developed multifaceted or round characterization evolves with each. Luke redesigns the widow’s literary motif so that she becomes uncharacteristically unpredictable. In this way she meets the challenge needed to combat the unjust judge who characteristically intends to rule as he pleases. Yet the judge yields. What we discover is that the widow’s revised characterization thus causes an inverse of characterization with the judge. In this way the widow achieves her objective. We find in this passage, and other related stories, that the Lukan literary device for character change not only is meant to surprise and astonish, but enables a story to complete its intended purpose. We therefore can conclude that Luke’s character conditioning of the parable widow enables her to confront resistance from an unjust judge and thus eventually bring resolution. Accordingly, we affirm our reading of the widow’s role and the purpose of the parable in identifying the widow as an exemplar of what discipleship means.
Notwithstanding the systemic corruption within the judiciary, compounded with the socio-cultural influences and restrictions that would normally have impeded widows attempting unconventional initiatives, theological observations clarified that the parable widow provides the example as to how the disciples need to focus on their future apostolate. The widow initiates a course of action that defies convention and culture-critical sensitivities. Our research determines that the widow stands as a model of discipleship exemplifying a triune synthesis of self-initiative, persistent prayer, and faith in the active pursuit of justice, attributes Jesus knew his disciples would need to acquire for their future mission.

Finally, given that women’s identities took shape in settings that were in many respects inimical to their interests, this widow’s role is truly significant considering her assigned place in a male-dominated society. I have demonstrated that Luke’s counter-cultural characterization of the widow challenges convention and stands in contrast to interpretations from feminist scholars who claim that Luke’s portrayal of women is conventional, passive, and servile. In this parable the widow steps outside of her culturally determined role and demonstrates her capacity for perseverance and resistance against an unjust judge and injustice. In this Luke reinforces his reversal leitmotif, the elevation of the lowly, for the purpose of inspiring the disciples to continue with Jesus’ Gospel mission.

In this parable the widow accomplishes her role. Her instructive initiative provides the way ahead for the disciples now prayerfully advanced for their mission. Understanding faithfulness in persistent prayer and trust in God enable an expectation that prayer will certainly be answered, in God’s good time, so that at the end time, the Son of Man will expect
his disciples to be found at prayer, the eschatological implication being, in reality, our readiness in the closing phase of our individual life’s journey.

*The Research Question:* This research study has demonstrated that a detailed exegesis of Luke 18:1-8 in the context of Luke’s social world, the Gospel narrative, and in relation to some central features of Lukan characterization and theology, supports the view that Luke’s purpose in endowing the importunate widow with those attributes this study has described, including other women characters, is an undertaking to clearly identify women’s dynamic agency role regarding capacity and ability in discipleship.
Appendix

Reception-Historical Observations

While not intended to be of major importance as contributing to the argument in the research question, the reception-historical observations of the parable provide interesting material and take their place here as an appendix. Here we view briefly the way the parable has been interpreted over time by the Church Fathers, noting points of coherence with the essay’s analysis and points of tension and contrast. The interpretations from the patristic fathers sometimes align with the thesis’ exegesis especially with references to persistence in prayer. Their perceptions may be commendable and offer contrasting enrichment to the parable. Yet, a key area, an element of important significance and relevant to the argument in the research study, is missing.

Around the beginning of the third century CE, Greek theologian and Father of the Church, Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150-215 CE), interprets Luke 18:1-8 with an added dimension emphasizing “the compassion of God” on those who come to him, and that quickly and suddenly his will shall be accomplished.335 Clement argues that it is through parables and metaphors that we can discern spiritual realities that are revealed in Scripture,336 but, as already argued in the thesis, this view is in tension when applied to the judge in that he is

335 Snodgrass, Stories, 452.

hardly a metaphor for a compassionate God as he fails to stand in God’s place and does not act from justice.

At the time of Clement, the Christian “school” in Alexandria is known for using typology or allegory to interpret Scripture.337 Like Origen (c. 185-c. 254 CE) and others, Christian theologian and philosopher, Augustine of Hippo (c. 354-430 CE), uses allegorical interpretations of the Bible to explain and affirm “troublesome” passages.338 For instance, Augustine allegorizes “the [widow] as the church, and the vengeance as either the death or conversion of the evil or the devil’s final defeat”; he interprets the Pharisee and tax collector as representing Jews and Gentiles.339 Gowler observes that “allegory is the patristic way of dealing with inexhaustible hermeneutic potential.”340 Augustine concurs that the unjust judge certainly does not furnish an allegorical representation of God.341

Ephrem the Syrian (ca. 306-373 CE), in his mystical poetry, claims that one meaning does not exhaust a parable’s potential, nor exclude another meaning.342 Irenaeus (ca. 140-ca. 200 CE)


338 Gowler, *The Parables After Jesus*, 43-44.

339 Snodgrass, *Stories*, 454, 468; much later, Franciscan theologian Bonaventure (1217-1274), not only claims that the allegorical meaning yields deeper “mystical” understandings, but strives to creatively combine literal and allegorical interpretations of the biblical text (Gowler, *The Parables After Jesus*, 98).


accepts that “parables admit of many interpretations.” Some of Ephrem’s interpretations of the parables give attention exclusively to their literal, non-allegorical meaning. However, his interpretation on “Tatian’s Diatessaron” that “the persistent prayer of the widow transforms the iniquity and wickedness of the judge into mercy” is in contrast with what our research study claims that what seems like mercy by the judge is derived from a very different motive and a negative one. His concepts recording the dynamics of the widow’s “stubborn” persistence against injustice do align comfortably with the thesis analysis in this following extract:

The unjust judge … in his iniquity was not willing to vindicate the widow, and in his wickedness, he was not willing to put her mind at rest. But the justice of God knows how to vindicate …. The iniquity of this wicked judge was contrary to the justice of God …. His wickedness therefore was [stubbornness], for it dared to go against the fear of God. His impudence was [stubborn], for it spurned the shame of humankind.

But persistent prayer was even more [stubborn] …. The persistence of the widow humiliated [both the iniquity and the impudence] and subjected them to her will, so that they might provide her with a vindication over her adversary.

This emphasis on persistence is central to further examples of the parable’s reception. Augustine confirms that it is not the length of prayer that Jesus is recommending, as if we are more likely to be heard the more words we use, an addiction Jesus cautions against (Mt 6:7), but persistence in prayer. There are points of coherence with the thesis in Augustine

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343 Irenaeus also suggests that “hard-to-understand parables must be harmonized with biblical passages that are easier to understand, advice that many early Christian interpreters followed” (Gowler, The Parables After Jesus, Ebook, 19).

344 Gowler, The Parables After Jesus, 7.

345 Tatian was an Assyrian and a pupil of Justin Martyr in Rome. He took the Syriac Gospel texts and composited these into his Diatessaron.


counselling that the Lord knows what is needful for us before we ask him (v. 8), but pray we must, and “not faint,” just as the widow made the judge listen “not through any motive of justice or compassion, but through weariness of her insistence.” Augustine confirms our comment that as much as it may seem to the judge and his society that he does not fear God or respect people, when pushed by a shameless widow, he does care about his reputation.

Cyril of Alexandria (c. 376-444 CE) offers a variation in claiming that the persistent widow “will be blessed” seeking out her objective “with persistence” causing the judge to show her mercy, implying, via the *qal v’homar* argument, how “more blessed” we will be in expectation “from our merciful God.” East Syriac Christian bishop, Isaac the Syrian (c. 640-700 CE) encourages perseverance which draws us nearer to God who is “the brimming fount of succour.” In response to Christ’s question in Lk 18:8b, Cyril’s concern is “when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith upon the earth” amid all the false teachings implied in our exegesis of that verse?

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Martyrius (late 5th c. CE) draws attention to the widow’s insistence that wearied the “cruel and wicked judge.” He speaks on God eventually vindicating those who cry to him day and night, emphasizing the need for perseverance as God has promised salvation to his elect. Origen affirms that prayerful endurance will ensure salvation. Martin Luther (c. 1483-1546 CE) counsels “regular” prayer and that “it is our duty to pray because of God’s command,” encouraging the faithful “to praise [God’s] holy name and to pray or call upon it in every need” (cf. 11:1-4).

Commenting on the parallel parable Lk 11:9-13, Bede the Venerable (c. 673-735 CE) testifies that the kingdom of heaven is to be sought after and achieved only through prayer, by living properly and persevering. He emphasizes the action component, the need to “strive to bring the matters which one has begun well to a firm conclusion,” and not cease from praying as if there is “no need of the mercy of the righteous Judge.” Bede offers no correlation to the allegorical example of persistence set by the widow in 18:1-8 in her objective to achieve justice against the unrighteous judge.

A comment from Just Jr. and Oden suggests that in their obligation and ministry to the faithful, the Church Fathers’ interpretive variances appear to be directed not so much towards


academic issues, rather towards concern for pastoral care and the strengthening of faith. Studying the reception of biblical texts is helpful for understanding how various Church Fathers understood and applied the Scriptures. Riches adds that reception history has “shaped contemporary readers’ consciousness, and it is out of that conversation that renewed understandings and embodiments of the text arise.”

With the above accounts the emphasis on persistence in prayer is consistent. However, these and other comments we read are primarily focused on God, and therefore by implication the judge, not the widow. For the early patristic writers, God’s compassion and bounteous love are central. Their need to enhance God’s goodness and allegorize can be in tension with the essay’s account. What is of note with further commentaries on the parable not only is that the character of the widow starts to disappear from view, but also it seems that the issue of justice drops away so that the social realities of the text are forgotten in the history of its reception. As to any such reference to the widow’s agency role exemplifying discipleship characteristics in her encounter with the unjust judge, reception history appears not to be specifically focused with this concept in mind.


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