The Widow's Mites: Praise or Lament?—A Matter of Context

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THE STORY OF the widow's gift to the Temple of her last two coins, a passage appearing in the same context in Mark 12:41-44 and Luke 21:1-4, is on occasion described by commentators as "a beautiful story" or as "a beautiful act in the desert of official devotion," and almost universally is seen as some kind of observation on the measuring of gifts, or as an exhortation to "give till it hurts," or as an example of some virtue to be acquired.

And yet, apart from the text, if any one of us were actually to see in real life a poor widow giving the very last of her money to religion, would we not judge the act to be repulsive and to be based on misguided piety because she would be neglecting her own needs? Do we really think that Jesus would have reacted otherwise? Do we really think that he would have enthused over such a donation? This is a very curious story, or more precisely what is curious is the lack of any discussion in the exegetical literature of that substantial problem.

The passage has received little detailed study. Only a few articles have been written on it, and all but one[1] deal with some aspect of the coins mentioned in the story[2] or with the extra-biblical parallels.[3] Consequently,

[1] L Simon, "Le sou de la veuve Marc 12/41-44," *ETR* 44 (1969) 115-26, an idiosyncratic study that will be mentioned below

[2] F Blass, "On Mark xii 42 and xv 16," *ExpTim* 10 (1898-99) 185-87, 286-87, W M Ramsay, "On Mark xii 42," *ExpTim* 10 (1898-99) 232, 336, E Nestle, "'The Widow's Mites,'" *ExpTim* 13 (1901-2) 562, D Sperber, "Mk xii 42 and Its Metrological Background A Study in Ancient Syriac Versions," *NovT* 9 (1967) 178-90, J Jeremias, "Zwei Miszellen I Antik-Judische Munzdeutungen, 2 Zur Geschichtlichkeit der Tempelreinigung," *NTS* 23 (1976-77) 177-80

[3] G M Lee, "The Story of the Widow's Mite," *ExpTim* 82 (1971) 344

the only exegesis available is in the commentary-literature, and there one finds critical evaluation once again of the coins, of the geography of the scenario, and of the problem of how Jesus knew the economic status of the widow. At that point there are suggestions that Jesus possessed special knowledge, or that the last words ("all which she had, her whole living") are a later addition to Jesus' saying, or that the words are hyperbolic, or that originally the story was a parable and does not narrate a real event. Frequently, parallel stories and sayings from Jewish, Greek, Indian, and Buddhist literature are cited, as well as a remark of Paul.[4] However, when it finally comes to the essential task of setting forth the point of the whole story, the commentary-discussions become most uncritical. Everyone offers one or more ideas, and there is no attempt to refine these ideas one against another for precision, or to refine any of them against the text. Each commentator simply affirms that this or that is the message of the story, and occasionally it is said that further comment is not necessary, that the text calls for little explanation, that the story speaks for itself.

And yet, for a story that calls for little explanation, the range of exegetical opinion is amazing, for one finds the following categories of comment:[5]

1. The point of Jesus' commendation is that the true measure of gifts is not how much is given but how much remains behind (Farrar, Marshall, Miller) or that the measure of gifts is the percentage of one's means which the gift represents (Caird, Hunter, Plummer, Swete, Taylor), and/or that the true measure of gifts is the self-denial involved, the cost for the giver (Farrar, Geldenhuys, Gilmour, Hunter, Johnson, Mally, Rawlinson, Rengstorf, Schmid [Mark], Thompson, Wilson).

2. The point of Jesus' commendation is that it is not the amount which one gives that matters but the *spirit* in which the gift is given (Gould, Haenchen, Hunter, Johnson, Lagrange [Mark], Minear, Plummer [Mark], Schniewind). When specified, that spirit is variously seen as self-offering (Cranfield, Lohmeyer, Mally, Wansbrough), self-forgetfulness (Caird, Lohmeyer), unquestioning surrender (Lohmeyer), total commitment (Danker, Lane), loyalty and devotion to God's call (Anderson), gratitude (Moule), generosity (F. Keck,[6] Ragg), humility and unobtrusiveness (Lohmeyer, Ragg, Schweizer), trust in God to provide for one's needs (Anderson, Cran-

[4] 2 Cor 8:12: "For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a man has, not according to what he has not." From the wording, the line may well be judged to be independent of the tradition underlying this story.

[5] Unless otherwise indicated the opinions of those named are to be found in their commentaries on Mark and Luke, *ad loc.*

[6] F. Keck, *Die öffentliche Abschiedsrede Jesu in Lk 20,45-21,36* (Forschung zur Bibel 25; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1976) 94-95.

field, Danker, Ernst, Geldenhuys, Grundmann, Lane, Marshall, Rengstorf, Schweizer), detachment from possessions (Branscomb, Danker, Grundmann, Marshall, Rengstorf, Tinsley).

3. The point of the story is that the true gift is to give everything we have (Nineham).

4. The moral of the story is that alms and other pious gifts should correspond with one's means (Schmid [Mark]).

5. Perhaps the story was used to indicate the duty of almsgiving (Fuller).[7]

By way of evaluation, the text explicitly says that a gift is measured by what is left, or that a gift is measured by one's means. All that Jesus says by way of comment is: "She gave more . . . for they all contributed out of their abundance but she out of her want has put in everything she had, her whole living." Presumably the point of the story is to be found in Jesus' saying. It may be that Jesus also implies that the widow gave more because her gift was a sacrifice, because it cost, but the progression to that thought begins to be problematic, and any ideas beyond category #1 above are not explicitly in the text nor do they really have any basis in the text.

It is gratuitous, given the details of the text, to say that it is not the amount but the spirit accompanying the gift which makes the difference. Jesus' saying mentions nothing of the dispositions of the widow nor does the narrative. Her outward bearing is no more or less ostentatious than that of any of the multitude (Mark) or of the rich (Mark and Luke), and the inner attitude of the widow is not available to the reader; nor does the story say that it was available to Jesus. She could have acted out of despair, out of guilt, out of a desire to be seen contributing, for all that the story says, and Jesus could have made his remark notwithstanding. He simply says that she gave more. Moreover, the significance of her giving two coins rather than one depends in the final analysis on her inner attitude. The two coins cannot be used (as they often are) to deduce that attitude because the possibilities are multiple. Any statement, therefore, about the inner disposition or outward bearing of the widow is achieved only by reading into the text.

Nineham's suggestion (the true gift is to give all) is not at all the point of the story. Jesus' statement is built on the diagram "more/less" and not on the diagram "the true gift/the non-authentic gift."

Schmid's suggestion (one should give according to one's means) is not what the text says either. The widow is giving beyond her means. Perhaps what Schmid intends to say is that not so much is expected of the poor as is expected of the rich, and therefore the poor can feel dignity in their small

[7] R. H. Fuller, *Preaching the New Lectionary* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1974) 446.

gifts. If so, that is simply the practical conclusion to be drawn from the interpretations in category #1.

Fuller's opinion that the story may have been used to indicate the duty of almsgiving is quite valid. The story may indeed have been so *used* and certainly has been so used subsequently and will continue to be so used by readers of his lectionary guide, but the story itself is not about the duty of almsgiving. Rather the story presumes such a duty and is concerned solely with the degree of response to that duty. In fact, any type of "example-interpretation" of the passage runs into the difficulty that there is no invitation in the text to imitate the widow, no statement that Jesus looked on her and loved her, no command to go and do in like manner, no remark that she is not far from the kingdom. That her action is to be imitated may be implied, but it equally well may not be implied. Jesus simply says that she gave more, and he gives his reason for making that statement.

So only category #1 above contains proper paraphrases of the meaning of Jesus' saying and all other interpretations lack validity. Of course, it is readily understandable why commentators go beyond the text to the extent that they do. A few actually remark, what undoubtedly many others leave unstated, that Jesus' observation is a commonplace, and that indeed it is not a specifically Christian idea but a universal and human one. Thus they conclude that there must be some further depth to the saying and they supply that further depth by relating Jesus' remark to some element from the larger context of his preaching (blessed are the poor, a cup of cold water in his name, do not be anxious about what you shall eat or wear, you cannot serve God and Mammon, you shall love the Lord your God, etc.). This procedure of attempting to read in context is laudable, but the writer would maintain that the proper context has not been rightly identified in any of the commentaries mentioned above.

A Search for Context

Accepting the story as it now stands (regardless of its earlier forms or its possible origin as a parable), let us take as a point of departure the fact that Jesus' statement seems to be rather ordinary. To be sure, some have understood the saying as a revelatory announcement that the smallest gift of the poor has value before God whereas human beings judge by quantity. The text, however, does not contrast human evaluation with divine, and Jesus' saying is not clearly presented as a revelation.[8] Human beings have been

[8] The presence of "Amen" notwithstanding. "Amen, I say to you" precedes the saying in Mark (Luke has "Truly [*alēthōs*], I say to you"). "Amen" elsewhere (12x) in Mark is used to

known to value the gifts of the poor, as the parallels adduced indicate and as one would suspect anyway. Of course, one would not wish to go to the opposite extreme and say that Jesus' saying is a trite remark, but it is not overly profound either. (Aristotle is one of the parallels and his remark is not regarded as one of his great insights.) The statement is simply one of those observations on life that needs to be said from time to time, and when it is said one would expect that virtually all would agree with it. The text, moreover, does not make a point of remarking that the disciples had any difficulty comprehending it. So everything indicates that it probably should be seen as an ordinary remark. This should be openly admitted as a problem or at least as a curiosity in the passage and should not be glossed over with a hasty importing into the text of other ideas at random.

Another problem is that this kind of saying is atypical for Jesus. He is not a philosopher who goes about commenting on how to measure gifts and the like, but he is a religious reformer, and the saying coheres poorly with the larger context of his ministry as the Gospels present that ministry. He could, of course, have engaged in that kind of thing on a secondary level, but the secondary nature of such discourse should also be openly admitted and not be remedied by superimposing other ideas.

However, the most serious problem is that, while the story can be made to relate to a number of other sayings of Jesus on trusting, detachment, poverty, etc., it is not consistent at all with Jesus' Corban statement. He proclaims in Mark (7:10-13):

> Moses said, "Honor your father and your mother"; and "He who speaks evil of father or mother, let him surely die"; but you say, "If a man tells his father and mother, 'What you would have gained from me is Corban' (that is, given to God)"—then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, thus making void the word of God through your traditions which you hand on.

Not only today do we find the widow's action painful and also suspect on those grounds that Jesus would have found it painful too, but he is, in fact, remembered for having said that those who withdraw support from their parents and (in some way and for whatever motive[9]) dedicate it to God are

preface warnings or promises in a future time frame. Only here does it preface a statement about a past action. The usage here, then, is atypical, and it is probably best not to draw any conclusion from it. The word "Amen" is not necessarily an indication that the meaning of the saying is not obvious (Klostermann) or that the saying will surprise the disciples (Plummer); it may well simply indicate the earnestness with which Jesus speaks (Taylor).

[9] For a discussion of the various aspects of Corban, see K. H. Rengstorf, "*Korban*," *TDNT* 3. 860-66; J. A. Fitzmyer, "The Aramaic Qorbān Inscription from Jebel Ḫallet eṭ-Ṭuri and Mk 7:11/Mt 15:5," *Essays on the Semitic Background of the New Testament* (London: Chapman, 1971) 93-100 and the bibliography there.

wrongheaded. Furthermore, scribes and others who allow or promote or declare that kind of religious activity to be binding are also wrongheaded. In other words, he is remembered for having said that human needs take precedence over religious values when they conflict, that God gave the law not for itself but for people, and that religious values are human values. The same idea is expressed in his healings on the Sabbath and perhaps in the parable of the good Samaritan,[10] but the Corban-statement provides a perfect parallel to the situation of the widow in this story. It would be irrelevant to argue that the widow was elderly and had no dependents (something that is not in the text either), because regardless of her status she had her own personal needs which were just as important as any dependents' needs. Is it likely then that the Marcan Jesus who was offended by such abuses of Corban would enthuse over the widow's contribution? Could he enthuse without contradicting himself? Of all the sayings of Jesus that one might seek to relate to this passage, the Corban-text above all must be brought forward—precisely because it seems to contradict, and precisely because it sets limits to the understanding of any of Jesus' sayings on trusting, detachment, poverty, almsgiving, the love of God, etc.

So much for the wider context of the saying and the problems and ambiguities therein. Let us examine the immediate context. In the case of other passages, exegetes commonly refer to the context in which a narrative or saying is set. It is our contention that the commentators whose views we examined above have failed to call attention to the immediate context of this passage. The story of the widow's mites is immediately preceded in Mark and Luke by a unit that warns: "Beware of the scribes who like to go about in long robes and have salutations in the market place and the best seats in the synagogues and the place of honor at feasts, *who devour widows' houses* and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation" (Mark 12:38-40; Luke 20:46-47). Virtually every commentator notes the linkage of the two units by the catchword "widow," but it is more than a catchword—the previous unit is the immediate context of the story of the widow's mites in both Gospels. There is no need to reach back for context to the saying about the two great commandments of Mark 12:28-34// Luke 10:25-28, or elsewhere, as many do. The context is immediately at hand. In both Gospels, Jesus condemns those scribes who devour the houses of widows, and then follows immediately the story of a widow whose house has beyond doubt just been devoured. What other words would be more appropriate to describe it? "She put in everything that she had, her whole

[10] The parable would contain the idea if the priest and the levite were understood as valuing ritual purity over neighborliness.

living." Her religious thinking has accomplished the very thing that the scribes were accused of doing (unless we presume that religious thinking can do no wrong or that religion cannot devour). If, indeed, Jesus is opposed to the devouring of widows' houses, how could he possibly be pleased with what he sees here? The story, if viewed as an approbation, does not cohere any better with the immediately preceding widow-saying than it does with the Corban-statement.

It would seem that the only way out of these acute difficulties is quite simply to see Jesus' attitude to the widow's gift as a downright disapproval and not as an approbation. The story does not provide a pious contrast to the conduct of the scribes in the preceding section (as is the customary view); rather it provides a further illustration of the ills of official devotion.[11] Jesus' saying is not a penetrating insight on the measuring of gifts; it is a lament, "Amen, I tell you, she gave more than all the others." Or, as we would say: "One could easily fail to notice it, but there is the tragedy of the day—she put in her whole living." She had been taught and encouraged by religious leaders to donate as she does,[12] and Jesus condemns the value system that motivates her action, and he condemns the people who conditioned her to do it.

When the story is read that way, the problems and ambiguities which were encountered above disappear. The saying of Jesus is, indeed, an ordinary observation that anyone would agree to upon reflection; the deeper significance which makes it worth remembering is that it is a lament on one aspect of the passing religious scene. Jesus is now seen not as a philosopher but once again in his usual role as a religious reformer. His statement in the story is in perfect agreement with his Corban-saying and with his saying about the devouring of widows' houses. The inner disposition and outward bearing of the widow are not described or hinted at in the text, and nothing is said about divine vs. human measuring of gifts, because those are not the point of the story. And finally there is no praise of the widow in the passage

[11] Whatever the "devouring of houses" may mean specifically, it clearly means financial loss for widows, cf J D M Derrett, "'Eating Up The Houses of Widows' Jesus's Comment on Lawyers?," *NovT* 14 (1972) 1-9 The story of the widow's mites is an illustration of it either in the same specification or in another way

[12] The inner disposition of the specific widow that Jesus saw at the temple (if he saw any) is no more available now than ever But the widows mentioned in the saying about the devouring of widows' houses and in this story have a typical and literary profile they are the disadvantaged and the vulnerable In the saying about the devouring of widows' houses the obvious meaning is that they are in some way relieved of their money by scribes In this story the widow is relieved of her money (clearly), by scribes (implied by context) and by their teaching (the most plausible kind of influence, given the terms of the story)

and no invitation to imitate her, precisely because she ought not be imitated.[13]

If one seeks further context, the lines that follow the story should not be neglected. Instead of reaching ahead one chapter to connect the story with Jesus' self-offering in the passion narrative, as a few commentators do, let us simply be content with the lines that immediately follow both in Mark and in Luke. One of the disciples remarks of the Temple: "Look teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!" And Jesus said to him: "Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another, that will not be thrown down" (Mark 13:1-2; and substantially the same is in Luke 21:5-6). It is hard to see how anyone at that point could feel happy about the widow. Her contribution was totally misguided, thanks to the encouragement of official religion, but the final irony of it all was that it was also a waste.

Comments

The remarks made above are seen as valid for the story both in Mark and in Luke. The context in both Gospels is identical, and the difference in wording between the two versions of the narrative is minor. Mark's Corban-statement is absent in Luke, but, while that text aids in the exegesis of the story in Mark, the immediate context in both Gospels is clear enough: devouring the houses of widows . . ., not one stone left upon another.

As was stated above, the present study is concerned simply with the passage in its present context in the Gospels. It is not concerned with earlier forms of the story (as parable or narrative of event) or with the possible meanings which the unit may have had in other forms or contexts with or without the final words ("all which she had, her whole living"). Those are probably problems which cannot be solved given the data now available to us.[14] In any event those issues are not addressed here.

It is amazing to the present writer that the observations made in this article have not been widely made elsewhere, and that they have hardly been made at all. The writer is aware of only two commentators who have dis-

[13] Even the "Amen, I say to you" looks less peculiar (see n 8 above) to the extent that the saying is seen to approximate a warning on such practice —The complete saying would not be peculiar in form at all It would be similar to such regretful (and sapiential?) observations as "a prophet is not without honor, except in his own country" (Mark 6 4) or "you blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel" (Matt 23 24)

[14] One thing, however, can be said If the story traveled alone as a self-contained unit in circles that were in one way or another anti-Temple, it would of course have been immediately understood there as a story of disapproval It would need no further context To the extent that we bring a pro-Temple bias to the passage it complicates our understanding of the story no end

sented in any way from the traditional interpretation. Quentin Quesnell, while extensively concerned with other more substantial issues in *The Mind of Mark*, nevertheless makes a brief and perceptive comment on this passage: "Widow's Mite. The point is probably an elaboration of the way the Scribes 'devour the houses of widows' (12,40) so that rebuke and rejection of the wrongdoers is central. If it is appended to inculcate positive moral teaching, it lacks at least the form of the rest of the teaching material gathered here."[15]

L. Simon, in an article on the passage, frankly admits that the widow's gift, generous as it was, was too small to be of help to the Temple, that it was ultimately a waste, and that she died in absurdity. However, he sees the story originally as a parable, and in Mark as an image of the scandal of the cross. It is less about a poor widow than about Jesus himself; it is a study in the art of giving and dying. He theorizes that the unit may also have been seen as a parallel to the story of the barren fig tree,[16] and therefore as a judgment on the Temple and on the religion which were basically enterprises of justification for those with an abundance of goods. Thus seen, the widow is a little piece of fruit lost in the suffocating mass of leaves on the tree of religion and Temple, both of which are about to perish. Be that as it may, it is to Simon's credit that he is ambivalent about the widow, and that he also sees the connection of the story with "not one stone upon another." He does not, however, connect the story with the devouring of widows' houses or develop his insights to their full implications.[17]

[15] Q Quesnell, *The Mind of Mark Interpretation and Method through the Exegesis of Mark 6,52* (AnBib 38, Rome Biblical Institute, 1969) 151

[16] In Mark the episode of the barren fig tree introduces a series of controversies in the Temple between Jesus and the Jerusalem authorities (11 27-12 44) The widow's gift concludes the section and may, indeed, be intended as the climax, the last straw

[17] L Simon ("Le sou ," n 1 above) Simon views Luke's version of the story as inaugurating the traditional ecclesiastical interpretation, "which was destined to make a fortune " He notes that Luke uses *penichra* for "poor" (instead of Mark's *ptōchē*), a term which, Simon assures us, expresses a less radical, less absolute type of poverty, Luke thus dedramatizes the situation of the widow Luke then uses the word "gifts" (*ta dōra*) twice in the narrative (vv 1 and 4) to describe the money being offered Thus, says Simon, the widow in Luke becomes the image of the Christians of Luke's church who, while moderately poor, make their gifts to the community in dignity, thanks to Jesus' saying —Unfortunately the adjective *penichra* is generally seen as designating the same kind of poverty as *ptōchē* if not an even more acute state, but in any event such an understanding of the story in Luke is a large amount of meaning to get from some very small features Those verbal subtleties, whatever they may signify, are hardly enough to override the massive context of the story devouring the houses of widows not one stone upon another For a more credible discussion of *ta dōra ta dōra*, see P Benoit and M -E Boismard, *Synopse des quatre évangiles en français, II* (Paris Cerf, 1972) 359-60

Critical exegesis is supposed to inform preaching, piety, and church thinking; but one wonders to what extent preaching, piety, and church interests have affected critical exegesis in the history of the interpretation of this text.

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