
Reflections on Mark 12:38–44 for the Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost

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And sitting opposite the treasury, he was observing how the crowd cast money into the treasury. And many of the rich cast in much. And one poor widow, coming, cast in two *lepta*, which is [in value] a *quadrans*. And calling his disciples, he said to them, “Amen, I say to you, the poor widow herself cast in more than all of those casting into the treasury. For all [of them] cast in from their surplus, but she from her need cast in all of whatever she had, her whole life.”

—Mark 12:41–44 (author’s rather literal translation).

How should we read and understand this little story in Mark’s Gospel? Does the story make sense on its own, without reference to its immediate context, or its larger context, in Mark’s narrative? To understand the story at the most basic level, we have to know that the “he” of this passage refers to Jesus. We also have to know that the treasury is in the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. And both of these realizations depend on this story’s context in Mark. But let’s try reading the story from the inside out, from a close reading of the story itself, to its immediate Markan context, to its wider Markan contexts.

It is good to remember that the Gospel of Mark not only *contains* stories, like this one about the poor widow’s gift, but it *is* a story. In fact, “story” or narrative is the dominant (but not only) genre of the whole Christian Bible. Overall, the Bible is the story of the people of God struggling to be the people of God. Certainly, many of the stories of the Bible bear a relationship—sometimes a complicated relationship—to history, but they are still stories. A story has characters, setting, plot, and rhetoric.¹ We will look at each of these narrative elements in turn.

The story of the Poor Widow’s Gift

First, characters. Not too surprisingly, the story of the poor widow’s gift begins with the main character of Mark’s Gospel, Jesus. Jesus is observing “the crowd” casting money into the treasury in the

1. David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999).

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Jewish temple in Jerusalem. The crowd includes “many of the rich who cast in much,” but Jesus does not focus on these rich givers. Instead, he focuses on one person from “the crowd” who was apparently not attracting notice, a poor widow. In our world, a widow might not be recognizable by her appearance, but in the ancient Mediterranean world a widow would be identifiable by her distinctive dress. Was the fact that she was “poor” also recognizable by her dress? The narrator seems to assume so. What Jesus observes about her is her behavior: her contribution of two coins, small in value, to the temple treasury. Jesus calls his disciples to draw their attention to her behavior. Then he points to a contrast between characters, between the one poor widow who casts in two coins “from her need [NRSV: poverty]” and the many rich who cast in much “from their surplus [NRSV: abundance].” Jesus concludes that the poor widow cast in more than the many rich. This little story ends there, letting Jesus’ words sink in for the audience.

The elements of story—characters, setting, plot, and rhetoric—are intertwined.² We have already had to assume the setting—the treasury of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem—in our look at the characters. The word translated “treasury” likely refers to one of the series of collection boxes, although the term can also be used

2. Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, *Hearing Mark: A Listener’s Guide* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002; currently available from Bloomsbury Publishing).

to refer to the rooms where the temple valuables or deposits were kept. The spaces in the temple were hierarchically arranged, with some being more “holy” and more restricted than others. Because a woman is reported to be in this space, it is clear that it is not one of the more holy spaces of the temple, one reserved for Jewish men or for priests only. The setting is not simply a neutral background but influences the story. This is no ordinary setting, but the one temple for the one God. Without looking more thoroughly at the context of the poor widow’s story, the natural assumption would be that casting coins into the temple treasury—whether many or few—was a good thing, a generous deed, a religious obligation.

The plot of a story often turns on suspense or surprise or conflict. This little story has several surprises. First, Jesus is sitting opposite the treasury in the temple. This is striking because, in the ancient world, sitting was the authoritative position of a rabbi while teaching. (Even today, we say that a university professor holds a certain “chair.”) Moreover, Jesus is sitting in the temple, which is the place for the authoritative teaching of the chief priests, scribes, and elders—not for an untrained and itinerate teacher from Nazareth. There is an implied tension here. Second, although there are crowds of people contributing to the treasury, including many people who are rich, Jesus focuses on one poor widow, who seems to go unnoticed by everyone else. Certainly, in the social world of first-century Jewish Palestine (under Roman domination), a poor widow would have a low social standing in contrast with the many rich, and thus a high degree of invisibility. Jesus has to call his disciples to draw their attention to her. Third, the big surprise, which suggests a further conflict with ordinary views, comes in Jesus’ words at the end of the story: he proclaims that the poor widow, in giving her two small coins, has given more than the many rich who gave much. Thus, Jesus not only notices the one no one else had noticed but praises her actions. Obviously, Jesus is not calculating the monetary value of the various gifts, but something else. What many Christian interpreters have taken away from this story is an illustration for a stewardship sermon on “proportional giving.” Maybe you have heard—or delivered—such a sermon! We will have to evaluate this interpretation as we move further into understanding this story in its Markan context.

Rhetoric is a term not used—or understood—as frequently as it once was. Basically, rhetoric refers to “the art of persuasion.” In the ancient world, rhetoric was an important discipline and skill essential to daily life in an oral culture, where citizens depended on their speaking ability to persuade others in assemblies, law courts, market places, and elsewhere. Rhetoric can also refer to the literary choices an author makes: vocabulary, order of phrases and sentences, verbal contrasts, metaphorical or symbolic language, etc. Here the narrator paints an initial contrast between “many of the rich [who] cast in much” and “one poor widow [who] cast in two *lepta*.” Then the narrator draws more attention to the gift of the poor widow not only by specifying the amount (two *lepta*), which is not done for the gifts of the many rich, but also by giving the equivalent of the two Greek *lepta* in the currency presumably more well-known to the audience, one Roman *quadrans*. The

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NRSV translators have done the same for twenty-first century audiences in the Western world: “Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny” (Mark 12:41b–42, NRSV). Thus, the Markan narrator has prepared the way for the Markan Jesus to draw attention to the poor widow and her gift. Jesus does this by calling his disciples and by commenting on the contrast between her gift and those of the many rich—and reversing the expected value of the gifts, valuing the two *lepta* of the poor widow over the “large sums” of the many rich. Rhetorically, this moves the story to a metaphorical or symbolic level of meaning. Jesus is not simply poor at arithmetic; he is saying something different.

In addition, the final phrase has what appears to be a redundancy, one idea repeated in slightly different words, which is typical of Mark’s Gospel: she “cast in all of whatever she had, her whole life.” The NRSV translation hides something significant about the Greek wording here: she “put in everything she had, all she had to live on” (12:44b). The Greek word that I have translated literally as “life” is *bios*, whose root meaning is “life.” We derive our words “biology” and “biosphere” from this Greek root. By extension, *bios*, “life,” can be taken to signify one’s means of living, but the word is at least ambiguous if not polyvalent (having more than one meaning). In Mark’s Gospel, the second item in a “duplicate expression” is somewhat different from the first item; the NRSV translation erases this difference and shuts down the ambiguity—or double meaning. In addition, “her whole life (*bios*)” are the last words of this story, the words the audience is left with. If the Markan Jesus is saying she gave her “whole life,” just what does he mean by that? That is what the hearer or reader is left wondering at the end of this rich little story of the poor widow.

This wonderment is a good cue that we need to enlarge our look and to consider the poor widow’s story in its Markan context. We will begin with its immediate context, what happens in Mark’s story right before and right after this episode. (Interestingly enough, the Revised Common Lectionary includes the immediately

preceding story but not the immediately succeeding story in the assigned reading for the Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost.)

Moving outward from the story's immediate context: Scribes and temple³

Just before the story of the poor widow's gift, Mark's Gospel relates this incident about Jesus teaching (in the temple):

As he taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

—Mark 12:38–40 (NRSV)

Although these three verses purport to describe the typical behavior of scribes, we must remember that all the Gospels show signs of the "competition" that existed among first-century Jewish groups, including the minority group of Jesus-followers. Mark's Gospel is a proclamation of one of those groups, not an "objective" historical source on ancient social interaction, much less a blueprint for how today's Christians and Jews should interact! But Mark's placement of this teaching of Jesus immediately before the story of the poor widow's gift certainly influences our reading or hearing of her story. The poor widow who gives all, her whole means of living, is in striking contrast to the scribes who take all, who "devour widows' houses" (12:40), that is, their means of living. The scribes who seek to call attention to themselves by means of wearing their long robes about and soliciting salutations in the market places as well as claiming the best seats in the synagogues and at feasts are in striking contrast with the poor widow who is so unobtrusive that only Jesus notices her; it is he who calls her action to the attention of the disciples. Not just here, but throughout the Markan narrative, Jesus' ministry is portrayed in striking contrast to the scribes' activities and attitudes. Many citations could be given, of which the first, 1:22, is perhaps emblematic: "They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes" (NRSV). Thus, the Markan Jesus is unlike the self-centered scribes and like the self-giving widow in being one who gives.

Occasionally interpreters have argued that the poor widow has been victimized by the scribes who devour widows' houses and by the influence of the temple authorities to give in this unreasonable way and, thus, that the story of the poor widow's gift is presented as a lamentable model of what NOT to do.⁴ This interpretation (based on only the immediate context) seems to me to be an

3. From this point on, this essay draws on my scholarly article, "The Poor Widow in Mark and her Poor Rich Readers," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 53 (1991) 589–604, which could be consulted for further academic references.

4. Addison G. Wright, S.S., "The Widow's Mites: Praise or Lament?—A Matter of Context," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 44 (1982) 256–265.

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unfortunate, if not unusual, case of "blaming the victim" (not an infrequent occurrence with women characters—or persons). Of course, the widow's gift of "her whole life" is not reasonable, but that is the same complaint that Peter makes (in 8:31–33) of Jesus' willingness "to give his life as a ransom for many" (10:45, NRSV). Perhaps we *are* to assume that the poor widow has been victimized by scribes who devour widows' houses and by the influence of the temple authorities. Surely the Markan Jesus is victimized by the chief priests, scribes, and elders, those who traditionally hold authority in the temple and in the broader religious tradition. At an important transitional point in the Markan narrative, Jesus calls attention to the poor widow's action; the focus seems to be on giving, but not just of money. The *last* words of the passage are those left echoing in our ears: "her whole life."

Immediately after the story of the poor widow's gift, the Markan scene changes as Jesus leaves the temple:

As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

—Mark 13:1–2 (NRSV)

Some of those who argue that the immediately preceding reference to scribes who "devour widows' houses" shows that the poor widow was foolish to give "all she had to live on" also argue that the immediately succeeding reference to Jesus' prediction of the destruction of the temple indicates the absurdity of the poor widow's gift. I would argue, rather, that the *overall* temple context of the poor widow's story adds to the impressive *irony* of the Markan passion narrative. Jesus' summoning his disciples to observe the poor widow's action and to consider its significance is his final act in the temple. The Markan Jesus' initial act in the temple was the driving out of those who bought and sold there (11:15–19). This passage, as many scholars have argued, is to be understood as a symbolic closing down of the temple, not a cleansing of it. The account of Jesus' conflict with the buyers and sellers in the temple is intercalated, or sandwiched, with the account of the cursing and withering of the fig tree (11:12–14, 20–25). And the fig tree incident is generally recognized as a parabolic pointing to the destruction of the unfruitful temple whose time or moment (*kairos*, 11:13) has passed. The episode of the poor widow's gift of her "all" might well be understood as an enacted parable parallel to

the fig tree incident or parallel to the intercalated fig tree/temple incident as a whole. The fig tree episode introduces a series of controversies between Jesus and Jewish religious authorities in the temple; the account of the poor widow's action closes the series.

Just as the withering of the fig tree alludes to the destruction of the temple itself, which is made explicit in Jesus' prediction in 13:2, so also the widow's gift of "her whole life" alludes to Jesus' gift of his life, which is enacted in chapters 14–15. Furthermore, Jesus' death is related to the temple's downfall—not in the sense in which the false witnesses accuse Jesus of claiming to be the agent of the temple's destruction (14:57–59; see also 15:29–30), but in the sense in which the *kairos* of the temple (alias fig tree) is surpassed by the *kairos* of the kingdom and of the messiah who proclaims that "The time (*kairos*) is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near" (1:15a, NRSV). Thus, Jesus' first action in the temple, the driving out of the buyers and sellers, points to the temple's end; and Jesus' final action in the temple, or rather his reaction to the poor widow's action, points to his own end. And, most importantly, the temple's end and Jesus' end are carefully interrelated in the Markan Gospel. We see this interrelating in the juxtaposition of Jesus' death on the cross (15:37) and the splitting of the temple curtain (15:38). But we also see this interrelating of the temple's end and Jesus' end in the intercalation (admittedly in the broadest sense) of the accounts of the passion of Jesus (chapters 11–12 and 14–15) and the passion of the community (chapter 13). The crises the community of Jesus' future followers will face—being delivered up to councils, being beaten in synagogues, and standing before governors and kings (13:9), for example—are to be interpreted, and coped with, in the light of the crises Jesus faces in Jerusalem. How can the community of Jesus' followers understand and face its own struggles (chapter 13)? By seeing them in the context of Jesus' struggles in his passion (chapters 11–12 and 14–15).

Thus, it is possible, when looking only at the immediate context of the story of the poor widow's gift (scribes who devour widows' houses and a temple that will be destroyed), to interpret the poor widow as a victim to be lamented. It is not, however, a reasonable interpretation, because the Markan Jesus does seem to praise her, not blame her, and the Markan narrator suggests parallels between her self-giving action and that of Jesus. What other clues can we pick up from Mark's narrative about how to understand this powerful little story of a seemingly powerless woman?

The story in its broader Markan context: Giving one's whole life

The story of the poor widow's gift itself may be framed by a teaching about scribes who devour widows' houses and a prediction of the temple's destruction, but it also serves with the story of the unnamed woman's anointing of Jesus as a frame around chapter 13. Chapter 13, the eschatological discourse, or end-time speech, of the Markan Jesus, is intrusive within the larger story of Jesus' passion in Jerusalem. The passion story begins in chapters 11–12 and culminates in chapters 14–15. Even though the framing stories

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about women do help interpret chapter 13, one can skip from the end of chapter 12 to the beginning of chapter 14 with no noticeable gap in the story line (try it!). The central discourse is framed by two stories about exemplary women in contrast with villainous men. The Markan Jesus' condemnation of the scribes' typical actions and his commendation of the poor widow's exceptional action immediately precede chapter 13. The accounts of the chief priests' and scribes' plot against Jesus and the woman's anointing of Jesus immediately succeed chapter 13. One woman gives what little she has, two copper coins; the other gives a great deal, ointment of pure nard worth 300 denarii. But each gift represents self-giving.

It is, of course, ironic that the poor widow's gift occurs in the doomed temple; and it is ironic that the anointing of Jesus Christ, Jesus Messiah, Jesus the anointed one, takes place not in the temple but in a leper's house (14:3), and not at the hands of the high priest but at the hands of an unnamed woman. A further irony is manifest in the juxtaposition of an unnamed woman, who gives up money for Jesus and enters the house to honor him (14:3–9), and Judas, a man, and one of the Twelve, who gives up Jesus for money and leaves the house to betray him (14:10–11). Appreciating the story of the poor widow's gift as part of this frame gives us a richer understanding of its meaning in the Gospel of Mark. Within this larger context, it begins to seem silly—and insulting—to find in the poor widow's action an example for a church stewardship campaign. Being put on the wrong pedestal is no honor.

An even broader Markan context is opened up when we look at the poor widow—the character, her action, and its significance—in relation to all the women characters of Mark's Gospel. This is not the place to elaborate,⁵ but I will simply point out that the poor widow—along with three other important women characters: the hemorrhaging woman, the Syrophenician woman, and the anointing woman—takes decisive action to which Jesus makes a significant reaction. The hemorrhaging woman touches Jesus' garment and is immediately healed; Jesus reacts in admiration of her faith (5:24–34). The Syrophenician woman argues with Jesus in his own metaphorical terms about bread for children and for dogs; Jesus reacts to her "word" (*logos*; NRSV "saying") by healing her daughter at a distance, in spite of his initial refusal

5. Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, *In the Company of Jesus: Characters in Mark's Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), especially the chapter "Fallible Followers: Women and Men in the Gospel of Mark."

to do so (7:24–30). The poor widow gives for others what are perhaps her last two coins, “her whole life”; Jesus summons his disciples to attend to her action. The anointing woman anoints Jesus’ head with expensive ointment; Jesus reacts by proclaiming that the story of her anointing him beforehand for burying will be told in memory of her wherever the gospel is preached (14:3–9). Perhaps the historical reality of women’s lower status and the historical reality of women’s discipleship together support in Mark’s Gospel the surprising narrative reality of women characters who exemplify the demands of followership—from bold faith in Jesus’ life-giving power to self-giving in parallel to, or in recognition of, his self-giving death. Perhaps women characters are especially appropriate for the role of illuminating followership because, in the Markan community, women were in a position to bear most poignantly the message that among followers the “first will be last, and the last will be first” (10:31, NRSV). Perhaps today’s world is not so different.

And, of course, the story of the poor widow may be seen in relation to the overall pattern of Markan characterization. As I have suggested elsewhere, the author of Mark wishes to show who Jesus is and who Jesus’ followers are. To do this the evangelist schematizes the characters of his story; he paints extreme cases of enemies and exemplars as the background against which the trials and joys of followers may stand out more boldly.⁶ The enemies and exemplars are similar in their “flat” or one-sided characterization; they differ in their “negative” or “positive” value as models for the audience. The unclean spirits and demons, as well as most—but, importantly, not all—the Jewish leaders, are portrayed as “flat” and “negative.” The minor characters tend to be portrayed as “flat” and “positive.” The twelve disciples, however, are “round” or multi-sided in their characterization, and they are also multi-valent as models: they present both positive *and* negative models for the audience to follow or avoid. It would be inappropriate to focus on the “goodness” of the poor widow in opposition to the “badness” of the twelve disciples without also observing her “flatness” in contrast to their “roundness.” All the Markan characters work together for the sake of the Markan story, its teller, and its audience. Thus, the little story of the poor widow who gives “her whole life” is thoroughly integrated into the larger Markan story of who Jesus is and what it means to be his follower.

Since the Markan story of the poor widow’s gift closes with the words of Jesus, it is appropriate to look again at the portrayal of Jesus as teacher in this small story and in the larger context of Mark’s Gospel. Several verbal clues in Mark 12:41–44 underline Jesus’ words about the poor widow as a significant teaching. The passage opens by noting that Jesus was “sitting.” As mentioned above, sitting was the authoritative position of the rabbis while teaching. The Markan Jesus is *sitting* in the boat on the sea (4:1) as he speaks to the crowd in parables in chapter 4. Chapter 4 is an extended teaching discourse with interesting parallels to chapter 13,

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where Jesus is sitting on the Mount of Olives (13:3) as he speaks to four of the disciples about the eschaton, or fulfilment of the reign of God. Jesus *called* his disciples to himself in the temple treasury as he had earlier called them from the Sea of Galilee (1:16–20), on the mountain where he appointed twelve (3:13–19), in preparation for sending them out (6:7), and for feeding the 5,000 (8:1). The three references to Jesus’ calling his disciples immediately prior to the reference at 12:43 are especially revealing in their juxtaposition of calling, saying to them, on one occasion sitting, and teaching about self-giving service. According to 8:34, Jesus “called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them take up their cross and follow me’” (NRSV). According to 9:35, Jesus “sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, ‘Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all’” (NRSV). And according to 10:42–45 (NRSV), Jesus

called them and said to them, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

Finally, Jesus prefaces his statement about the widow’s gift of her all with “Amen” (NRSV, “Truly”), as he does also on a dozen other significant occasions, including:

Amen, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water . . . will by no means lose his reward (9:41, author’s translation).

Amen, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters . . . who will not receive a hundredfold . . . (10:29–30, author’s translation).

The Jesus who sits and calls and says “Amen, I say to you”

6. Malbon, *In the Company of Jesus*, especially the chapter “The Jewish Leaders in the Gospel of Mark.”

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is Jesus the teacher, and the moment so portrayed is a solemn proclamation about the reign of God—it’s coming now and in the future, it’s messiah, and the demands and rewards that fall to the followers of such a messiah of such a reign. Giving one’s “whole life” is required of this messiah, and it may also be required of some of his followers. A pattern of life based on self-giving is definitely required. Sometimes unexpected characters—in Mark’s Gospel or in our lives—can manifest self-giving action and teach others as Jesus did.

Opening up the story of the Poor Widow’s Gift

Although I have stressed the importance of interpreting the story in its narrative contexts, it is clear there are multiple narrative

contexts—as well as historical contexts, canonical contexts, ecclesial contexts, personal contexts, etc. There are also multiple interpreters. I am seeking neither *the* proper context nor *the* final interpretation. The critical question is how to interrelate the multiple interpretations of a single text that result from multiple interpreters focusing on multiple contexts. It is important to realize that one can, in fact, argue *against* the text’s single determinant meaning (that is, one interpretation, usually “mine,” is right!) without arguing *for* the text’s indeterminacy. To many of us, these are false alternatives. We are not free to assume that the text can mean anything just because it can mean many things.

I am willing to defend my reading of the poor widow’s story in multiple narrative contexts as more revealing of the text’s depth and power than readings of it only in its most immediate narrative context of devouring scribes and a doomed temple. But I am also willing to appreciate how such a reading challenges other readings that have turned the story of the poor widow into an exemplum for a stewardship campaign. I agree that such readings need to be questioned. Yet I find an interpretation that argues that Jesus laments the poor widow’s gift equally unconvincing. It sometimes seems to me that the poor widow of Mark’s story has been as much victimized by latter-day interpreters as the poor widows of Mark’s narrative are reported to be victimized by the scribes who devour widows’ houses! Challenging such readings can open up the question of the variety of modes of self-giving (not just money), as well as the variety of individuals who can teach us about such self-giving by their actions. Jesus, for example, pointed to a poor widow.