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# The Poor Widow's Mites. A Contextual Reading of Mark 12:41-44

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**SUMMARY:** An intriguing point of disagreement is evident among recent commentators on Mark 12:41-44 as to how we should understand the poor widow's offering, whether as a positive or negative image. The crucial issue, raised for the first time by Addison G. Wright, is a proper grasp of the immediate narrative context of the poor widow's story, which in his case produced the lamentable reading of the widow's "deed." Nevertheless, by widening the immediate narrative context and reading the account within the larger Markan framework, the interpretative ambiguity disappears. The widow is presented to Jesus' disciples, and to the readers of the Markan story, as a positive example of self-denial motivated by faith, love and devotion toward God. Thus, she not only stands as a symbol of the faithful remnant of Israel, but, most importantly, presents a picture of Jesus' own self-offering on the cross.

**KEYWORDS:** Gospel of Mark, the poor widow, widow's mite, offering, discipleship, scribes

**SŁOWA KLUCZE:** Ewangelia św. Marka, uboga wdowa, wdowi grosz, ofiara, uczeń, uczeni w Piśmie

## Introduction

The act of the poor widow described in Mark 12:41-42 is sometimes regarded as an event of a secondary nature, played out on a secondary stage, serving as little more than a bridge passage detached from its immediate context and the global scheme of the larger Markan narrative.<sup>1</sup> In the same vein, Jesus' commentary upon this act (Mark 12:43-44) is regarded as simply one of those random and commonplace observations on life that is voiced from time to time and, when it is said, one would expect that virtually all

<sup>1</sup> For instance, Standaert (2010, 889) argues that the episode functions in the narrative as a pause and a digression, which "s'isole de son context immediate." Consequently, he (109-173, esp. 149-152) qualifies this story as one of the eight Markan "récits de transition."

would agree with it. Similar sayings or stories, in fact, are likewise attested within other philosophical and religious traditions.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, a number of authors have pointed out certain close links between this episode and its immediate context (cf. Bayer 2008, 437-443), as well as the fact that the widow's act of total sacrifice appears at one of the most solemn moments in the Gospel of Mark, just before the climactic scenes of the passion and death of Jesus. Consequently, this story ought to be seen not as a randomly inserted pious vignette, but, indeed, as the hinge narrative of the entire Gospel, linking together the two halves of the story: Jesus' public ministry (chapters 1–12) and Jesus' Passover (chapters 13–16).<sup>3</sup>

The biggest bone of contention, however, is the very sense of the widow's act and of Jesus' comment on it. For many readers of the Markan narrative, the figure of the poor widow is *praised* by Jesus as an exemplary model of generosity and true piety. This reading can be regarded as the usual, or traditional, interpretation of the story.<sup>4</sup> Some commentators, however, wish to see in the widow's offering of her last penny a tragic and painful example of an exploited woman. The widow's act would be nothing but a misguided expression of false piety inspired and encouraged by the religious leaders, and consequently Jesus' comment ought to be read as a *lament*. This interpretation was suggested by Wright (1982) and won a substantial number of adherents.<sup>5</sup> Eventually, recent authors have started to suggest a deliberate

2 Cf. Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, 1.3.3 (about Socrates); Aristotle, *Ethica nichomachea*, 4.1.19; Horace, *Carmina*, 3.23; Josephus Flavius, *A.J.* 6,149; *Leviticus Rabbah* 3:5 (107a; on Lev 1:17); *Midrash Tēhillim* on Ps 22 §31; *b. Men.* 104b. There is a similar story dated to AD 100 in Buddhist writings by Aśvaghōṣa (*Sūtrāmkāra*, 4.22). Lee (1971, 344) also made note of a parallel in Euripides, *Danae*, fragment 329.

3 Cf. Kermodé 1979, 127-128; Brooks 1991, 204; Swartley 1997, 20; Edwards 2002, 382. For instance, Malbon (1991, 597-598; cf. 1983, 38) states: "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, not only in the juxtaposition of Jesus' death on the cross (15:37) and the tearing of the temple curtain (15:38), but also in the intercalation (admittedly in the broadest sense) of the accounts of the passion of Jesus (chaps. 11–12 and 14–15) and the passion of the community (chap. 13)."

4 For the patristic interpretations see Oden and Hall 1998, 168-171. Among the many modern authors following this line of interpretation are: Malbon 1991, 589-604; Hooker 1991, 296-297; Gnilkā 1991, 2:178; Gundry 1993, 730-731; Williams 1994, 176-178; Lamarche 1996, 291-292; Painter 1997, 162-163; Lentzen-Deis 1998, 282-285; Witherington 2001, 335-336; Moloney 2002, 247; Edwards 2002, 378-382; France 2002, 491-493; Boring 2006, 351-353; Dschulnigg 2007a, 330-332; Stein 2008, 577-581; Delorme 2008, 2:344-347; Bayer 2008, 440-443; Marcus 2009, 861; Standaert 2010, 890-895; Hartman 2010, 511-512.

5 See Wright 1982, 256-265; Mann 1986, 494-495; Myers 1988, 320-322; Sugirtharajah 1991, 43-43; Légasse 1997, 2:770-775; Evans 2001, 281-285; Broadhead 2001, 99; Horsley 2001, 216-217; Culpepper 2007, 427. See also Fitzmyer 1985, 1321; Hare 1996, 165.

*ambiguity* within the story which leaves it open to both interpretations (Donahue and Harrington, 2002, 365; Focant 2004, 475).

Virtually all the commentators draw on the perfect agreement between the alleged meaning of the widow episode and the purport of its literary context. What is indeed striking is that their recourse to the very same exegetical principle, i.e. the story's harmony with its literary or narrative context(s), produces the contradictory interpretations! Indeed, as noted by Malbon (1991, 602), "a contextual reading in itself provides no guarantee of the adequacy of a textual interpretation. *The* context does not exist, and a text's multiple contexts seem to raise as many interpretative questions as they answer. Yet, to understand the text we must have contextual readings, and multiple contextual readings, and, in most cases, multiple contextual readers. The critical question is how to interrelate the multiple readings of a single text that result from multiple interpreters focusing on multiple contexts." While a text itself allows a multiplicity of different, and often *complementary*, readings, the existence of two *contradictory* interpretations resulting from the same methodological principle raises a question about either the correctness of such a methodological approach or, more plausibly, the accuracy of both the delimitation of these "contexts" and the reading and interpretation of them. Therefore, instead of questioning the methodology which relies on synchronic and multi-contextual readings of a single pericope, let us rediscuss the meaning of the poor widow's story, first by means of an exegetical analysis of the pericope and, subsequently, by the contextual reading of this pericope within its *immediate* narrative context (the approach adopted by Wright), as well as in the *broader* context of the whole Markan narrative. In the course of our analysis we will also refer to the arguments advanced by the authors of two contradictory interpretations.

A similar study has already been undertaken by Malbon (1991, 595-601), who countered Wright's interpretation by discussing the poor widow story not only within the *immediate* literary context, the verses immediately preceding and following (12:38-40; 13:1-2), but also within four *other* narrative contexts: the story of the unnamed woman's anointing of Jesus (14:3-9); all of the other female characters within Mark's Gospel (the hemorrhaging woman, the Syrophenician woman, and the anointing woman); the Markan theme of Jesus as teacher; and, finally, the overall pattern of Markan characterization.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The last of the six narrative contexts, and at first glance perhaps the most enigmatic, is thoroughly discussed by Malbon elsewhere (1989, 275-281). It refers to a schematization of the characters in the Markan story: the "flat", one-dimensional characterization of both enemies (e.g. unclean spirits, demons, most of the Jewish leaders) and exemplars (e.g. Bartimeus and

The results of Malbon's analysis were truly enlightening, and proved that the widow's action is to be seen as commendable. At the same time, Malbon herself encouraged the search for any additional relevant literary contexts which could contribute to our understanding of the story of the poor widow in Mark's Gospel. Thus, the present study will, to some extent, deal with the same relevant narrative contexts treated by Malbon, while also opening up other contextual vistas.

The Lukan parallel account (21:1-4), which some might regard as the paramount interpretative background and a test text of sorts, must be left aside, since it is likewise susceptible to the same divergent interpretations, depending on the reading of its narrative context(s). Nevertheless, some passing references to the Lukan version of the episode will be given in the course of our analysis.

Since there is little to quibble over regarding the delimitation of the pericope, its textual form, its self-evident two-part structure, as well as its *Gattung*,<sup>7</sup> one may dive directly into the exegetical and contextual analyses which constitute the two main parts of this study.

## I. Exegesis of the Text

Following the two-part structure of the text, the exegetical analysis will first deal with the protagonists of the story and their actions (vv. 41-42), and subsequently with Jesus' comment on their actions (vv. 43-44).

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the unnamed woman anointing Jesus) provides the reader with negative *or* positive models. By contrast, the "round", multi-faceted characterization of the twelve disciples results in their greater complexity, since these figures can serve as both positive *and* negative models for the reader to either follow or avoid. Consequently, as Malbon (1991, 601) observes: "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 hearers. 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."

- <sup>7</sup> Taylor (1966, 496) classified this episode as a *pronouncement story*, which means that "the story is told, not for its own sake, but because it leads to a significant saying of Jesus about almsgiving." Cf. also Evans 2001, 281; Stein 2008, 577. Others speak of a *biographical apothegm* (Bultmann 1931, 32-33) or an *apothegm story* (Dschulnigg 2007a, 330); of a *paradigm* or a *parable* constructed by Mark on the basis of a saying of Jesus (Loisy 1912, 364; Lohmeyer 1963, 267); the *Spruchgeschichte* (Pesch 1980, 2:261); the *ideale Szene* (Gnilka 1991, 2:176); and a *chreia* (e.g. Beavis 1988, 3-9; Witherington 2001, 334; Bayer 2008, 438).

**1.1. Jesus Observing People Casting Offerings to the Treasury (12:41-42)**

The passage 12:41-42 first describes the figure of Jesus, followed by the action of three figures in succession throwing their offerings into the treasury: the crowd, the rich, and the poor widow. The narrator points out that Jesus (cf. 12:35) was sitting (καθίσας) and watching (ἐθεώρει). The use of the aorist participle καθίσας does not in itself express any temporal relation (Zerwick 1963, § 263). However, if one connects it with following ἐθεώρει, it could express either anteriority (*he having sat... was watching* or *he sat... [and] was watching*) or simultaneity (*he was sitting... and he was watching*) in the past. Jesus' act of sitting interrupts the rapid pace of the previous narration. Starting at 11:27, where Jesus was walking (περιπατοῦντος), almost waiting for his adversaries, the discussions quickly follow one another until 12:40. This episode, therefore, inserts a pause into the narrative flow: Jesus' adversaries having been vanquished, he is now sitting and observing. The imperfect tense of ἐθεώρει, the imperfect of frequency or iterative imperfect, expresses a repeated or, in this context, constant action and emphasizes the duration of this act (BDF, § 325, 2). It can therefore be assumed that Jesus' action of watching and consequently sitting took place over some period of time. At first glance, in contrast to the preceding context, Jesus is passive in 12:41-42, i.e. he is outside of the action played out by the crowd, the rich and the widow. The protagonists would seem to be those who cast the offerings. In fact, however, Jesus' observing them (v. 41-42) and commenting on their actions (v. 43-44) depict him as the one who controls the whole situation. A reader of this passage looks at the event through his eyes: we see what he sees. Mark does not provide any additional information which would create either reader-elevating or character-elevating perspectives; thus, the reader and the characters possess the same level of knowledge. This should facilitate (or constrain) agreement with Jesus' comment in v. 43-44, but instead it surprises the reader: Jesus' comment is not what the reader might have anticipated. Jesus and the reader look at the same thing and observe the same figures and their actions, but Jesus' comment is beyond the reader's scope.

The image of Jesus sitting is quite rare in Mark. Apart from 12:41, the narrator pictures Jesus in this position only in 9:35 and 11:7 (when he rides a colt), and with the use of κάθημαι in 4:1 and 13:3.<sup>8</sup> In three of the aforementioned cases (4:1; 9:35; 13:3) Jesus not only sits, but also *teaches*. In our focal passage, even if there is no connection between Jesus' posture and his

<sup>8</sup> We do not count the dialogic passages where Jesus pictures himself as sitting in the sense of *glorified* (cf. 12:36; 14:62).

teaching until verse 43 (indeed, at first glance, Jesus' sitting is rather connected with the action of seeing), it seems that Jesus is still sitting when he directs his comments to the disciples in vv. 43-44. The didactic dimension of this episode is also confirmed by the previous context, where Jesus likewise teaches (12:35.38). There is a remarkable affinity between 12:41 and both 9:35 and 13:3. In the case of 9:35, the two verses employ the same grammatical form (ptc. aor. act.), the same introductory *καί*, the same character and the same action, i.e. teaching directed to the disciples. The content of the teaching in 9:35 is paradoxical and difficult to grasp: *If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all, and servant of all*. Looking, then, at 13:3 in relation to 12:41, these are the only two instances in the Markan narrative where the phrase *sitting in front of* occurs (12:41 – *καὶ καθίσας κατέναντι* and 13:3 – *καὶ καθημένου... κατέναντι*).<sup>9</sup> In 13:3, Jesus is likewise engaged in a dialogue with his disciples, this time, however, a circle limited to four, mentioned by name (Peter, James, John and Andrew). The theme of their exchange here is the future destruction of the temple and the persecution and martyrdom of Jesus' followers. The further similarity between 9:35 and 13:3 themselves provides an engaging hint regarding the spirit in which one should interpret 12:41-44, namely a teaching by Jesus delivered within a confidential, narrow circle of his disciples about a very essential issue, one difficult both to understand and to carry out.

The very fact that Jesus is sitting *in the temple* is unusual and, as such, curious. In light of the rabbinic debate over the issue whether David and his royal descendants are, or are not, allowed to sit in the temple (cf. 2 Sm 7:18) – as a general rule sitting in the temple was strictly forbidden – Jesus' posture might allude to his Davidic royal claims.<sup>10</sup> The act of sitting might also carry a connotation of judgment.<sup>11</sup> Both dimensions perfectly match the narrative context, where Jesus is described as the Davidic descendant (10:47-48; 11:10; 12:35-37) and the one who pronounced the coming judgment over the scribes (12:40) and the temple (13:1-37). Moreover, the sitting posture of Jesus might allude not only to a Davidide, but also to God himself, whose throne was in the temple (cf. Jer 17:12).<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> As noted by Standaert (2010, 891, note 1), the preposition *κατέναντι* does not occur in Mark's Gospel except in those two instances and 11:2. This fact points out the affinity of 12:41 to 13:3, especially since Mark 15:39 employs another, synonymous expression, *ἐξ ἐναντίας*, to convey the idea of being *in front of*.

<sup>10</sup> Indeed some mss, although very late (the earliest dating from the seventh century), made Jesus standing (*ἑστώς*). For a list of rabbinic texts, see Marcus 2009, 857.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Dan 7:9-10; Matt 19:28; 25:31; 27:19; Mark 14:62; *t. Šeqal.* 3:27. See Marcus 2009, 860.

<sup>12</sup> Looking at Jer 3:16-17 (with its targumic version) and verses 14:21 and 17:12, there is evidence that the terms *temple* – *Jerusalem* – *Ark of the Covenant* – *throne* functioned as synonyms at one time.

At the beginning of the story, Mark not only introduces the figure of the sitting Jesus, but he also specifies the place of action, indicating a precise spot: *in front of the treasury* (κατέναντι τοῦ γαζοφυλακίου). Nowhere else in his Gospel does Mark refer to γαζοφυλάκιον; however, here the writer uses the noun three times within this one pericope which makes for a more awkward style. Translators sometimes obscure this example of the repetitive style of Mark by using different words to translate the one Greek word (the *treasury* as a *storeroom* versus the *treasury* as a *contribution box, receptacle*), or by simply omitting its second and/or third occurrence. The most straightforward solution, to be faithful to the uniformity of the Greek text, would be to translate the noun in all cases in the same way. To our modern mindset it seems easy to imagine Jesus' sitting in front of a *contribution chest* and observing the crowd giving offerings. Strack and Billerbeck (1961, 2:43), however, question whether it was really possible for Jesus to sit next to a contribution box during the great influx of crowds. More to the point perhaps, the understanding of γαζοφυλάκιον as a contribution box poses a certain difficulty in light of the use of this term in John 8:20, where it is said that Jesus is teaching ἐν τῷ γαζοφυλακίῳ, i.e. *in the treasury*.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, it seems more reasonable to render γαζοφυλάκιον in all three Markan occurrences as *storeroom* or *treasury-chamber*. Such a choice is corroborated by a survey of all occurrences of γαζοφυλάκιον in both the Greek Bible and the works of Josephus Flavius, where γαζοφυλάκιον never refers to a receptacle or a contribution box.<sup>14</sup> The immense quantity of goods stored in τὰ γαζοφυλάκια at the time of

<sup>13</sup> Unconvincingly, France (2002, 492) argued that Jn 8:20 also speaks of the collection chest since "Jesus and the crowd to whom he was speaking could hardly have been inside the 'strong room.'"

<sup>14</sup> In the Greek Bible γαζοφυλάκιον (25 instances) designates *the treasury of the temple* (1 Esd 5:44; 1 Macc 14:49; 2 Macc 3:6.24.28.40; 4:42; 5:18; 4 Macc 4:3.6); *the chamber or storeroom connected with the temple* (i.e., located in the precincts of the temple, and usually belonging to, and inhabited by, some individuals, also in the sense of a private house) (4 Kgdms 23:11; Ezr 10:6; Neh 10:38.39.44; 13:4.5.7.8.9); *the chamber, hall not connected with the temple* (Neh 3:30); and *the royal treasury* (1 Esd 8:18.44; Esth 3:9; 1 Macc 3:28). In twelve cases γαζοφυλάκιον has its Hebrew counterpart either נשכח/לשכה (8/3 instances) or זג (only Esth 3:9). The terms נשכח and לשכה in the Hebrew Bible (47 and 3 occurrences respectively), and also in instances of לשכה not translated in the Greek Bible by γαζοφυλάκιον, never means a *receptacle*, but always a *room, chamber, cell, hall* connected with the temple in Jerusalem or, in three cases of לשכה (Jer 36:12.20.21), a scribe's room in a royal palace. HALOT (s.v.) defines נשכח as a *hall* generally in a religious building, with stone benches on three sides for those who share the sacrificial meal, and with the fourth side opening out onto the courtyard. When used with the name of a person, it designates a *cella*, belonging to an individual, in the courts of the temple. In the works by Josephus Flavius γαζοφυλάκιον (7 occurrences) means *the royal treasury* (A.J. 11,119.126; 13,429), or *the treasury chambers (or buildings) connected*



the Roman pillage of the temple in AD 70, as described in *B.J.* 6,282, unequivocally points toward the understanding of this term as something bigger than mere boxes.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, rabbinic sources speak of the treasury chamber in the temple.<sup>16</sup> In addition, the singular number of this noun and the arthroueness of its form might also indicate such a semantic choice (Gundry 1993, 731). It is indeed difficult to imagine the *crowd* in the Markan text literally putting all their offerings into *one* box, as might be inferred from the singular γαζοφυλάκιον when understood as a receptacle. Furthermore, the way in which the offerings were deposited – its description is found in *t. Šeqal.* 3:1-8 (cf. *m. Šeqal.* 6:6) – tend to confirm the understanding of γαζοφυλάκιον as a treasury chamber. The purpose of each gift was communicated aloud by a donor to an attending priest, and it was then deposited by the donor into the appropriate *shofar*-chest.<sup>17</sup> If the donor brought less than what was specified for a certain kind of offering, the gift was not accepted. If there was more money than was required, the priest was obliged to place only the prescribed amount into the *shofar*-chest. There was no limit to the amount for freewill offerings. Reading *t. Šeqal.* 3:1, which mentions the *Sheqel-chamber*, along with the following description of depositing the offerings (3:1-8), one might gain the impression that all these activities were taking place in this one chamber.

Mark states that Jesus *was watching* the people giving their donations. The verb θεωρέω, used here, refers to “l’action d’examiner attentivement un objet, par la vue ou par la réflexion sur la perception visuelle de l’objet” (Mugler 1964, 200).<sup>18</sup> The emphasis then is on the object of Jesus’ watching, namely the act of throwing the offerings. Interestingly, in Mark 5:38 the object

with the temple (*A.J.* 19,294; *B.J.* 5,200; 6,282), and in one case it refers to a scribe and a priest responsible for the treasures (τῶν γαζοφυλακίων) (*A.J.* 9,164).

- <sup>15</sup> They further burnt the treasury-chambers (τὰ γαζοφυλάκια), in which lay vast sums of money, vast piles of raiment, and other valuables; for this, in short, was the general repository of Jewish wealth, to which the rich had consigned the contents of their dismantled houses. After Thackeray 1969, 458-459.
- <sup>16</sup> *m. Šeqal.* 3:2 and 4:1-3.9 as well as *t. Šeqal.* 3:1 speak of the *Sheqel-chamber*. There is also mention of a *Chamber of Utensils* (*m. Šeqal.* 5:6; cf. *m. Tamid* 3:4) as a place for depositing various gifts in the temple.
- <sup>17</sup> Following the data given by *m. Šeqal.* 6:1.5 and *t. Šeqal.* 3:1, there were thirteen trumpet-shaped receptacles. According to *m. Šeqal.* 6:5 and *t. Šeqal.* 3:1 six receptacles were designed for *freewill-offerings* and each of the remaining seven for other precisely indicated purposes, namely: *New Shekels, Old Shekels, Bird-Offerings, Young Birds for a Burnt-Offering, Wood, Frankincense, Gold for the Mercy-Seat.*
- <sup>18</sup> As noted by Rico (2002, 197, note 4) while “βλέπω souligne, plutôt que l’objet vu, le point de vue du sujet voyant ou regardant [...]” θεωρέω with ὁρῶ, ὄψομαι, εἶδον, ἐώρακα “met l’accent sur le caractère objectif de ce qui est vu ou regardé.”

of Jesus' seeing extends to the givers' emotional reactions which would be perceptible through the sense of hearing as well: *and he saw* (θεωρεῖ) *a commotion, and much weeping and wailing*. Therefore, in Mark 12:41 the use of the verb θεωρέω does not rule out the hearing of words spoken between the one who offered and the priest, words that indicated the amount of the gifts.<sup>19</sup> If, however, the widow's gift was a freewill offering and interaction with a priest was not required, perhaps, as noted by Edwards (2002, 381; cf. also Donahue and Harrington 2002, 364), "the sound of the coin in the treasure chest tolled the size of her gift." Indeed, the semantics of the term θεωρέω does not exclude the hearing of the sound of the coins deposited in one of the six treasure chests designated for the freewill offerings.

The narrator gradually narrows the focus of this section to the figure of the poor widow. The first sentence deals with *the crowd*; in the second, interest is confined to the character of the *rich*. Only in the final sentence is *the poor widow* spotlighted. The presence of two καί at the beginning of the second and the third sentences – καί πολλοὶ πλούσιοι ἔβαλλον πολλὰ (12:41) and καί ἔλθοῦσα μία χήρα... (12:42) – function as markers in the development of this gradually narrowing focalization. The former one is καί *consecutivum*, as it expresses a continuity between the actions of the crowd and those of the rich, while the latter might be called the *introductory καί*, which ushers in the new figure of the poor widow (cf. BDF, § 442, 2b and 5a).<sup>20</sup>

The growing focus on the figure of the poor widow is also achieved by an exceptional play on the tenses of the verb βάλλω, which creates a very particular rhythm. Mann (1986, 496) judges it only as a somewhat "unusual grammatical care in Mark." The act of the crowd casting its offerings is expressed by the *present tense* (βάλλει).<sup>21</sup> To describe the action of the rich, Mark used the *imperfect tense* (ἔβαλλον), specifically the *distributive imperfect* denoting individual acts of multiple agents: *the rich were casting* (Wallace 1996, 547.502-503). The imperfect is used here because the scene is in progress – it is unfolding, as one views the action from the inside. Finally, the act of the widow is rendered in the *aorist tense* (ἔβαλεν). It denotes a punctiliar, completed, once-and-for-all kind of action. This aorist makes an obvious and intentional contrast with the present and imperfect tenses

<sup>19</sup> See Strack and Billerbeck 1961, 2:37-45. See also Gundry 1993, 732; Lentzen-Deis 1998, 283; Edwards 2002, 380-381; Stein 2008, 577. Some commentators (e.g. Haenchen 1966, 432-433; Lane 1974, 442, note 83) are skeptical about this idea.

<sup>20</sup> The latter καί functions as וַיְהִי in Hebrew narratives, which introduces a new personage (cf. καὶ ἰδοὺ).

<sup>21</sup> According to Zerwick (1963, § 346), it is an example of the retention of the direct speech tense within indirect discourse. Such a retained present is not technically a syntactical category, but rather a translational one, hence one should translate it as a past tense.

in the preceding sentences. Those two tenses establish the temporal stage of the widow's action expressed in the aorist. Presumably, Mark used the imperfect tense for the rich to denote a continuous action, a kind of ongoing behavior, since they always had plenty more to give. For the widow's action, however, Mark uses the punctual tense, perhaps to indicate that the widow would not be making any more contributions, since she had already given everything. She did it once and she is not able to give again. Therefore, this difference in tenses suggests, perhaps, a deliberate contrast in the donations that were made (cf. DiCicco 1998, 445, note 9).

The wording of the whole section (vv. 41-42) seems intended to make two contrasts evident: first, between the large number of wealthy donors and the solitary poor widow, and secondly, between the great amount of gifts given by the rich and the smallness of the widow's offering.

#### The First Contrast: The Many Rich Versus the One Poor Widow

Mark underlines the large number of rich (πολλοὶ πλούσιοι), who presumably constituted a significant part of the aforementioned crowd. The attentive reader will note that the crowd itself (ὄχλος) has been depicted up to this point in the narrative to be favorably disposed toward Jesus (the situation changes in 14:43; 15:8.11.15), yet here they do not interact with Jesus as they have always done before.<sup>22</sup> The crowd instead assumes the role of the background to both the rich and the widow. The focus is on the presence of the rich and their number. The adjective πολλοί (*many, numerous*) characterizes the number of rich people and stands in clear contrast with μία (*one*) referring to the widow. This contrast is also underscored by the forward (emphatic) position of πολλοί in the sentence.

Mark speaks about the "rich" by name only in this episode and in 10:25. In the latter instance, πλούσιος occurs as part of a provocative statement which serves as a general commentary upon the story immediately preceding about a rich man (10:17-22). This text underscores the natural incapacity of man to attain salvation (cf. 10:24b.26-27), especially someone attached to wealth. In order to imitate and follow Jesus one must sometimes leave personal property behind (cf. 10:28-30), which can be difficult in the case of a rich person. Wealth itself creates deceptive bonds which can make fruitless the word of the Good News already accepted (4:19). Against this background,

<sup>22</sup> It creates the impression that the whole episode, removed from the context of ongoing debates in the temple and the crowd's interest thus far in *gladly listening to* Jesus (12:37), is pointing toward a different reality characterized by another temporal and spatial setting.

the presence of the rich people who were offering their money *in much* might be surprising. Undoubtedly, they could be doing it because of their religiosity. At the same time, however, the motivation for their behavior could be totally different: to show off before others. The immediate context may well point to this latter interpretation (12:39-40; cf. Matt 6:1-2; Luke 6:24).

Against the background of the numerous rich appears the figure of the lone poor widow (μία χήρα πτωχή). Both terms used by Mark, χήρα and πτωχή, underscore the contrast with the aforementioned wealthy. Already, from the syntactical point of view, the delayed introduction of πτωχή, producing *one widow, a poor [one]*, emphasizes the poverty (cf. also 12:43). There is, then, a conscious intent of contrast: *one – (woman)<sup>23</sup> – widow – poor* versus *many – (men) – rich*. This contrast might even be perceptible at the level of the rhythm of the sentences: the rhythmic alliterations in π and λ in καὶ πολλοὶ πλούσιοι ἔβαλλον πολλὰ create a sharp contrast with the following abrupt καὶ ἔλθοῦσα μία χήρα πτωχή ἔβαλεν λεπτὰ δύο (cf. Standaert 2010, 892).

Does the noun χήρα in itself imply the notion of poverty? Tosato (1983, 193-214) argued that the semantic background of the noun *widow* (אלמנה) in Biblical Hebrew conveys *only* a general meaning familiar also to the modern reader, to wit *a woman whose husband has died*, and not, as argued by the authors of the most popular biblical dictionaries, a woman whose husband has died *and* who is deprived of any social-economic support (Kühlewein 1971, 169; Hoffner 1973, 309; cf. Cohen 2007, 40). It must be noted, however, that a woman whose husband had died had no inheritance rights in ancient Israel (cf. Num 27:8-11).<sup>24</sup> With the notable exceptions of the rich and powerful Judith (Jdt 8:1-8), and certain juridical and institutional passages (e.g. Exod 22:22-23; Lev 21:14; Num 30:10; cf. 1 Tim 5:3-16), both the Hebrew Bible and the NT provide many descriptions of widows who contend with economic problems and are deprived of social care (e.g. Exod 22:21; Deut 24:17.19-21; 26:12; Zech 7:10; Mal 3:5; Isa 1:17; Luke 18:2-5; Jas 1:27; Acts 6:1; 9:36; 1 Tim 5:16). The Markan data are insufficient to shed a definitive light on the aforementioned question, although the sole Markan instance of χήρα outside our pericope occurs in a rather obvious context of economic disadvantage (12:40), the same picture that is so evident in our own pericope (she gives everything that she has). Even if the economic status of widows

23 Codex  $\aleph$  adds γυνή (*woman*) before χήρα πτωχή. The presence of γυνή would be a good contextual hook linking our pericope to the other women figures in the Markan narrative. Moreover, Miller (2004, 115) argues that the female gender of the widow contrasts with the use of the masculine plural terms to describe the rich. Consequently, she states that “it is possible that one poor widow is intended to contrast with the many rich men.”

24 Cf. note no. 57.

remains questionable, the lack of normal protection and care ensuing from a husbandless status is obvious. Hence, the woman in 12:41-44 turns out to be doubly disadvantaged: she is a *widow* (χήρα), as she does not have a husband, and she is *poor* (πτωχή).<sup>25</sup> In fact, Mark, adding the adjective πτωχή (twice, in emphatic juxtaposition, vv. 42.43) removes any ambiguity regarding the economic status of this widow. The term πτωχή designates a person wholly without possessions who must acquire the necessities of life through petition, hence those as *poor as beggars*. In the Gospel of Mark πτωχός occurs only five times (10:21; 12:42.43; 14:5.7), always referring to people who need material support (Merklein 1983, 470).<sup>26</sup>

Returning to the term χήρα, one could deal with one more question: does the narration of Mark 12:42 presuppose that the χήρα was recognizable by her attire (the first possibility)<sup>27</sup> – which is purely a historical-cultural question? Or, alternatively, should one think in terms of Jesus' supernatural knowledge (the second possibility)<sup>28</sup> – thus touching upon both a theological and a narrative issue? According to the Old Testament data, it might be assumed that Israelite widows, presumably also in Jesus' times, dressed in a particular way, i.e., so as to be recognizable to others. Tamar, Judah's daughter-in-law, after the death of her second husband, returns to her father's house and is dressed in *her widow's garments* (Gen 38:14.19). Moreover, Judith, after her husband's unexpected death, was wearing *her clothing of widowhood* (Jdt 8:5; cf. 10:3), and a woman from Tekoa, pretending to be in mourning, put on *mourning garments* (2 Sam 14:2). Hence, if the Markan episode can be explained in a natural way, there is no need to imply that Mark wanted to point out the supernatural knowledge of Jesus. From a narrative viewpoint, however, this kind of question is pointless and reflects a misunderstanding of the purpose of this narrative.<sup>29</sup> Mark, writing from the narrator-elevating position, informs the reader about facts which cannot be questioned. The reader *has to* know these circumstances to properly appreciate Jesus' surprising estimation in the following verse. In short, Mark strives to provide the reader with the same level of knowledge as he, Jesus and his disciples had.

<sup>25</sup> Dewey (1993, 499) stressed that she is “triplely oppressed”, to wit as a woman, a widow and poor.

<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, in light of the multiple references to the OT found in the previous context (11:17; 12:1-11.29.30.33.36), one should not exclude here an implicit reference to the OT theological idea of *the poor*, evident elsewhere in the NT (cf. Matt 5:3; 11:5 and Luke 4:18; 7:22), as one who stands under the special protection of God (לַדָּל, אֲבִיִן), who is humble and pious, and to whom is given God's saving promise (עֲנִיִּים).

<sup>27</sup> E.g. Pesch 1980, 2:262; Gundry 1993, 732; Lentzen-Deis 1998, 283; Bayer 2008, 440.

<sup>28</sup> E.g. Grasso 2003, 309.

<sup>29</sup> Stein (2008, 580) notes: “the narrative betrays no interest in the source of Jesus' knowledge.”

## The Second Contrast: Great Amounts of Money Versus the Widow's Mite

There is a general understanding that the crowd was depositing χαλκός (the lack of an article beside concrete nouns highlights their nature and quality). Therefore, the offering of the rich, who belong to the crowd and whose offering is specified only by πολλά, ought to be of the same nature. The term χαλκός actually refers to the metal itself, i.e. *copper, brass or bronze* (cf. Rev 18:12). In other NT occurrences, χαλκός means anything made from such metal (cf. 1 Cor 13:1), also money made of copper and, finally, any kind of money (Matt 10:9; Mark 6:8). The narrative, therefore, suggests that both the rich and the poor widow, who also belongs to the crowd, cast *money*.<sup>30</sup> The focus of Mark's interest then is the difference in the sums of money offered by the rich and the widow.

The extent to which the rich throw coins into the treasury is designated by an adverbial accusative πολλά, derived from the adjective πολύς. One can translate it as *much; in much; in a great deal*. It is not an accusative of the direct object (*many = large sums*), since the neuter gender does not agree with the masculine gender of χαλκός. With a little effort, one can also notice the wordplay between πολλοί (*many*) and πολλά (*much*), as well as the assonance (the likeness of sound; perhaps an example of the Greek rhetorical device called *paronomasia*) of πολλοί πλούσιοι.

Whereas the gift of the wealthy is described by an adverb, the poor widow's offering is rendered in a very detailed way: she threw λεπτά δύο, ὃ ἐστιν κοδράντης. The main conclusion of a very meticulous study by Sperber (1967, 178-190), who examined the Syriac, Greek and Latin versions of Mark 12:42, as well as the ancient monetary systems, is that *lepton* (λεπτόν) had several meanings and many synonyms, but its primary connotation is always the same, namely, it was the smallest denomination in any system or series of currency.<sup>31</sup> It has also been said that with two lepta one could buy a handful of flour or the equivalent of one meager meal, e.g. 100 grams of bread (cf. Evans 2001, 283).<sup>32</sup> The widow's offering could therefore denote her daily

- <sup>30</sup> The evidence that the half-shekels for the temple tax had to be paid in Tyrian *silver* coins also points to the semantics of *money* (in general) for χαλκός in Mark 12:41. France (2002, 492) suggested that the crowd and the rich would presumably donate large sums in silver (or gold) coins, and the poor widow's two coins would be of copper. Interestingly, Luke (21:1.4) notes that the rich were depositing *gifts, offerings* (τά δῶρα). The choice of this term underlines the cultic background of the whole episode. Indeed, κτν translates it as *the offerings of God* (21:4).
- <sup>31</sup> Considering the Roman monetary system, one can estimate (approximately) that 1 *lepton* = 1/2 *quadrans* = 1/8 *as* = 1/128 *denarius*. It means that the widow's two λεπτά together had a value of 1/64 of a *denarius* after Nero's devaluation (a *denarius* itself had the worth of a day's wage for a manual laborer in Matt 20:1-16).
- <sup>32</sup> How infinitesimally small the sum must have been in the eyes of ancient readers was demonstrated by Hartman (2010, 491) who gave the following example from contemporary ancient

cost of living or maintenance, i.e. the amount of money which could ensure her existence that day.

Why did Mark point out there were just *two* coins? Simply, by throwing two coins and not just one, the widow's generosity is underscored. The widow could have kept one λεπτόν for herself, but she did not. She really did give *everything*.<sup>33</sup>

Outside our pericope, λεπτόν and κοδράντης occur only once each in the NT, in two parallel passages dealing with Jesus' imperative of reconciliation with one's opponent. If someone did not make an effort to settle his case with his opponent, he would be thrown into prison and would have to pay the last κοδράντης (Matt 5:26) or λεπτόν (Luke 12:59) before he would be released. In these two cases the terms have a synonymic meaning: κοδράντην = λεπτόν = *the last penny*, the smallest available coin. Mark, by using both of the terms in the same sentence (12:42), showed, firstly, his knowledge of the reciprocal relationship between contemporary monetary systems, specifically the truly small value of both coins. Secondly, thanks to his exceptional attention to such details, he demonstrates the main message of this sentence: the two smallest coins that are mentioned (both quite common and thus well-known in the first century AD) underscore reciprocally the insignificance of the widow's gift. Together, these two terms create a striking emphasis. This sentence, thanks to the use of the two coin names, sounds like an exclamation, and for the first century reader or audience it must have been a very striking message indeed.<sup>34</sup> The widow's sum of money seems to be completely insignificant compared with the offerings given "*in much*" by the *many* rich.

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life: "A housewife in Pompeii paid between two and eight asses for the daily bread for a family of three persons, one slave included. For example, one day she bought cheese for one ass, bread for eight, oil for three, and wine for three." As a reference point, we may keep in mind that one ass was the equivalent of four quadrans or eight lepta.

- 33 Some older commentaries assume the existence of a rabbinic dictate which would have prescribed that the offering could not be less than λεπτά δύο. Yet, according to Strack and Billerbeck (1961, 2:45), this hypothesis does not seem to be true.
- 34 Some commentators point out that the coins called κοδράντης were circulating in the western part of the Roman Empire, but were unknown in its eastern part, which proves that the Markan audience must originate in the West (cf. Blass 1898-99a, 185-187; 1898-1899b, 286-287; Ramsay 1898-1899, 232 and 336; Lane 1974, 442; Standaert 2010, 892; Witherington 2001, 335). As noted by Gundry (1993, 729), it might be a sign of particular care in the Markan text that "his Roman audience does not miss the seeming smallness of the gift, which will make Jesus' comment all the more startling in its power to upset popularly held opinion." It might be corroborated by the presence of the technical expression ὃ ἐστίν (*which is*), which Mark uses to introduce his translational notes (3:17; 5:41; 7:11.34; 15:22.34). On the other hand, the expression ὃ ἐστίν can also serve to introduce some additional explanation which is not a translation (cf. 7:2; 15:16.42). In fact, the use of κοδράντης is not necessarily due to Roman origin (or redaction) of the gospel, since (1) the same term κοδράντης is also used in Matt 5:26 without regarding it as a proof of Matt's Roman origin and (2) the "Roman designations of coins

## I.2. Jesus' Assessment of the Offerings (12:43-44)

The narrator's introduction to Jesus' comment in 12:43-44 displays a scheme recognizably based on the previous Markan narrative: *Jesus is summoning* (1) *some group of people* (2); next *the verb of utterance* occurs (3); and then *a paradox* follows, revealed in Jesus' teaching or acting (4). Let us consider together the first three components of this scheme.<sup>35</sup>

1	2	3	
καὶ προσκαλεσάμενος	αὐτοὺς ἐν παραβολαῖς	ἔλεγεν αὐτοῖς	(3:23)
καὶ προσκαλεσάμενος πάλιν	τὸν ὄχλον.	ἔλεγεν αὐτοῖς	(7:14)
προσκαλεσάμενος	τοὺς μαθητὰς [αὐτοῦ] <sup>1</sup>	λέγει αὐτοῖς	(8:1)
καὶ προσκαλεσάμενος	τὸν ὄχλον σὺν τοῖς μαθηταῖς αὐτοῦ	εἶπεν αὐτοῖς	(8:34)
καὶ προσκαλεσάμενος	αὐτοὺς ὁ Ἰησοῦς	λέγει αὐτοῖς	(10:42)
καὶ προσκαλεσάμενος	τοὺς μαθητὰς αὐτοῦ	εἶπεν αὐτοῖς	(12:43)

This scheme is always introduced by καί (except in 8:1), which marks the change of action in the narration. Jesus, as a subject, is not explicitly pointed out in any case. His name is mentioned only in 10:42, but most probably it should be connected with the verb λέγω.<sup>36</sup> The summoned groups of people are the scribes (3:23), the crowd (7:14), the disciples (8:1; 10:42; 12:43), or the crowd with the disciples (8:34). However, in both cases where the disciples are not explicitly mentioned (3:23; 7:14) one should assume their presence (cf. 3:16-20; 7:1-2). Jesus, in summoning the disciples, demonstrates his

were already in the first century A.D. more common in Palestine than the Greek and Hebrew designations still also in use" (Schürer 1979, 2:64). At the same time, Schürer (2:66, note 208) notes that the name *quadrans* appears first in the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmud, therefore in relatively late sources. The reasoning of Yarbrow Collins (2007, 589) that the mention of two λεπτά, the Greek coin denomination also attested in the papyri from Naḥal Ḥever, "makes it more likely that Mark was written in one of the eastern provinces" is flawed. It might simply be an indication of the eastern provenance of the story itself (indeed the geographical setting of the account is the Jerusalem temple) and/or the care of the author in faithfully reporting its cultural setting.

<sup>35</sup> Regarding the reading τοὺς μαθητὰς αὐτοῦ in 8:1 we follow, e.g. B A W Θ 33 69 <sup>f</sup>3 Byz sy<sup>sp</sup> sa bo<sup>ms</sup>.

<sup>36</sup> However, some mss read Ἰησοῦς προσκαλεσάμενος (e.g. <sup>f</sup>1) or προσκαλεσάμενος ὁ Ἰησοῦς (e.g. 579) in 10:42. Actually, there are textual witnesses with the name *Jesus* as the subject of the sentence in 3:23 (e.g. D Θ <sup>ff</sup>2 1425 565 1071), 8:1 (e.g. 13 <sup>f</sup>3 124) and 12:43 (1424).



exercising authority over them.<sup>37</sup> The next element, the verb of saying, is always the same: λέγω.

Regarding the fourth and final component, one can easily observe that in all six cases Jesus speaks about some new reality, or gives a new interpretation of a fact or a new and surprising solution to a problematic situation. This situation can be described as a paradox.

- (1) Starting in 3:23 Jesus speaks about his identity, i.e. about the credibility of his mission. There is a clear *paradox* here: Jesus, accused of being Satan's collaborator (3:23-27), turns out to be the One anointed by the Spirit (3:28-30). Jesus' opponents accuse him of having an unclean spirit (3:30), while in reality they called the Holy Spirit the emissary of Satan.
- (2) What can truly defile a person? In 7:14-23 Jesus explains to a shocked Jewish audience – passionately attached to their strict rules of ritual purity, according to which defilement can originate only from outside (7:1-13) – that only that which comes *out* of a person is able to defile him: a *paradox*.
- (3) Beginning in 8:1, Jesus offers a surprising solution by miraculously satisfying the crowds who were famished (8:1-9). The *paradox*: seven loaves provide super-abundant sustenance for four thousand people, who leave over seven large baskets full of broken pieces.
- (4) One of the most astonishing teachings begins at verse 8:34. Jesus speaks about following him, which involves denying oneself, taking up one's cross, and losing one's life because of him (8:34-38). Again, a *paradox*: what seems to be a loss turns out, in reality, to be unimaginable gain.
- (5) In 10:41-45 we find one more *paradox*: whoever wants to be great must be a servant (v. 43), and whoever wants to be first must be the slave (v. 44).

To these five examples one should add the teaching found in 9:35. There, the same scheme is evident: an introduction by καί, the *calling* (φωνέω) of the twelve, and the pronouncing (λέγει) of the same paradoxical teaching: to be the first means to be the *servant* (διάκονος) of all. It echoes the more emphatic statement found in our fifth example above, 10:44, where to be the first means to be the *slave* (δοῦλος) of all. Although the verb for summoning the disciples is different, the use of the same verbal form καθίσας to express

<sup>37</sup> Three remaining occurrences of προσκαλέομαι (3:13; 6:7; 15:44) very clearly reflect this dimension of its meaning.

Jesus' sitting position in both 9:35 and 12:41 forms a perfect parallel between this teaching and the poor widow's story.

In fact, after encountering six instances where this same construction is found, the careful reader of 12:43 might already be warned that something important, unusual, paradoxical and revolutionary will be said in a moment. And that indeed is the case here: ἡ χήρα αὕτη ἡ πτωχὴ πλεῖον πάντων ἔβαλεν τῶν βαλλόντων εἰς τὸ γαζοφυλάκιον. The widow puts in a minimal sum of money, practically nothing, but according to Jesus she gave the largest amount. What seemed to be the smallest, most insignificant, offering, in reality turns out to be the greatest.

Jesus' paradoxical appraisal is introduced by the expression ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν. Does this, however, add any interpretative element? In Mark, this expression (13 instances, including ἀμὴν λέγω σοι in 14:30) is always pronounced by Jesus and is used elsewhere to preface either warnings (10:15, 14:18; 14:30) or promises (3:28; 8:12; 9:1.41; 10:29; 11:23; 13:30; 14:9.25), always in a future time frame. In view of this, the use of ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν in 12:43, as referring to a past action, is atypical. Often the one who acts, carrying out a promise, is God (3:28; 8:12; 9:1.41; 10:29-30; 11:23); often the passive voice is used (3:28; 8:12; 11:23; 14:9); and the reality of God's Kingdom (9:1; 10:15; 14:25) or Gospel (10:29-30; 14:9) is in view. The commentators present a whole range of various interpretations as to the meaning of this technical expression.<sup>38</sup> In general terms, its use in 12:43 suggests that the poor widow's act might somehow presage the new, paradoxical logic of the Kingdom of God and its Gospel.

Just as in vv. 41-42, the same two contrasts operate in Jesus' comment in vv. 43-44, namely between the widow and the rest of the givers of offerings, and also between the true value of their respective gifts. The paradoxical contrast between the *widow* and *all* (πάντων) in v. 43 is underscored by some stylistic details: first, the forward placement of ἡ χήρα αὕτη ἡ πτωχὴ in relation to the distant verb ἔβαλεν; secondly, the advanced position of πλεῖον πάντων before ἔβαλεν and at a certain distance from τῶν βαλλόντων (which

<sup>38</sup> Thus ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν is an indication that the meaning of the saying is not obvious, contrary to received opinion (Klostermann, Marcus) and that the saying will surprise the disciples (Plummer). It conveys the earnestness with which Jesus speaks (Taylor), the accuracy of Jesus' assessment which follows (Gundry, Gniska), a guarantee of the truthfulness of his words (Grasso; Witherington), and Jesus' authority (Edwards, Focant). It heightens the importance of the pronouncement (Hendriksen, France, Donahue and Harrington, Evans), both the importance and difficulty of it (Swete), or the solemnity of the following proclamation (DiCiccio, Lane, Légasse, Standaert). It indicates an eschatological (Klostermann), prophetic and eschatological-sapiential teaching on the present significance of human actions (Berger, Pesch, Dschulnigg). Finally, it introduces an important, emphatic statement, either a prophetic saying or a saying about discipleship (Yarbro Collins).

is grammatically in relation with πάντων). The alliteration of π in 12:41 and 12:43 increases the emphatic contrast even more: πολλοὶ πλούσιοι... πολλὰ (v. 41) - πτωχὴ πλεῖον πάντων (v. 43). The concrete person of the widow is highlighted both by the double use of the article (in contrast with μία in 12:42 which semantically also functions as τίς), and by the demonstrative pronoun (αὕτη). It produces an emphatic sentence: *this very widow, this one, this poor one!* Once again (cf. 12:42), the delay in introducing ἡ πτωχὴ (this time with the article) emphasizes poverty. In terms of content, πάντων emphasizes that the extent of the widow's giving surpasses not only the average giving of the crowd, but also the heavy giving of the rich, even the heaviest of their giving (cf. 12:41), or, conversely, her giving surpasses not only the gifts of the rich, but of the entire crowd, meaning that her gift surpasses the offerings of *everybody*, of *all*.<sup>39</sup>

Verse 44 is an answer to the question which would arise in the reader, and certainly arose in the disciples' minds: if the poor widow gave the minimal amount of money, what is the basis of Jesus' statement that she in fact gave the largest sum? The reason (γάρ) given by Jesus is that she gave *everything* that she had! It is not the *quantity* that matters, but the *totality* of her offering – not how much someone gives in its absolute value, but what it amounts to in relation to the means and goods which the person possesses.

The point of Jesus' answer is reinforced by the use of a well-arranged comparison:

πάντες	γάρ	ἐκ τοῦ περισσεύοντος αὐτοῖς	---	ἔβαλον	---
αὕτη	δὲ	ἐκ τῆς ὑστερήσεως αὐτῆς	πάντα ὅσα εἶχεν	ἔβαλεν	ὅλον τὸν βίον αὐτῆς

Once again, Jesus' argumentation (γάρ acquiring here an explicative and explanatory meaning; cf. Zerwick 1963, § 472) plays on the contrast (note the

<sup>39</sup> Mark very clearly points out the presence of the crowd *and* the rich among those who throw in their offerings, whereas Luke's parallel account limits itself to mentioning only the rich. In this way, Luke is more faithful to one of his leading ideas which we encounter through his Gospel: the striking comparison between the rich and the poor with the primary emphasis on the poor (εὐαγγελίσασθαι πτωχοῖς – 4:18; cf. 7:22; μακάριοι οἱ πτωχοί – 6:20). Luke chooses not to introduce the figure of the crowd, so as to not obscure the contrast. Mark, however, by adding the figure of the crowd, enlarged the group of people contrasted with the widow and enforced this contrast. Mentioning the multitude of the rich (πολλοὶ πλούσιοι), and next introducing the numeral μία (which, by the way, can grammatically function in the same way as the Lukan τίς), have the same purpose. At this point, Luke was not as pointed and spoke about *some* (τίνα) *widow* and some *rich* without any specification of how many they were.

adversative δέ) between πάντες and the widow (αὕτη). The forward placement of πάντες within the verse stresses the contrast with the widow's singularity (αὕτη). The use of a simple ἡ (*she*) would have sufficed, but instead there is the demonstrative αὕτη, *this [widow]*, which is a continuous emphasis on her person. The main elements of the comparison are two genitive constructions: ἐκ τοῦ περισσεύοντος αὐτοῖς and ἐκ τῆς ὑστερήσεως αὐτῆς. They should be translated in parallel, as each indicates the source of the gift, whether from surplus or from want. A partitive sense adheres to the first genitive and indicates that the rich contributed *some* of their surplus, not all. The same genitive could not adhere to the widow's action because she did not give a part of her poverty; she gave *everything*. In fact, looking at the usage of the verb περισσεύω in the NT (93 instances in total; it does not occur elsewhere in Mark), in reference to things it can mean (a) *something that is in excess, that is left over, that remains* – cf. such a use in Matt 14:20; 15:37; Luke 9:17; John 6:12.13, or (b) *something that is in abundance; wealth, affluence* – cf. Matt 5:20; Luke 12:15; Rom 5:15; 2 Cor 1:5. Probably both meanings are implied in Mark 12:44. Looking at the participial forms of this verb in the Gospels (Matt 14:20; 15:37; Luke 9:17; John 6:12), they are always used in the description of the feeding of the multitude, and indicate pieces of bread and fish, i.e. leftovers. The second element of the comparison consists of the rare noun ὑστέρησις (in Luke's parallel, the more familiar ὑστέρημα). The NT usage of ὑστέρησις and ὑστέρημα indicates that, in the context of Mark 12:44, this term does not denote the lack of something or something needed for completion, but rather *a want, need* in general (cf. other, unique instances of ὑστέρησις in Phlm 4:11), or *poverty*. Hence, the rich and the crowd gave from their *superfluity* or *remains*, from what they could not consume, whereas the widow gave from her *poverty*, from her sole means allowing her to survive.

The quality of the widow's gift is pointed out by Mark by the use of two appositive expressions, πάντα ὅσα εἶχεν, which is then reinforced by ὅλον τὸν βίον αὐτῆς. Only at this point does the reader realize that those two lepta from 12:42 were everything that the woman had, and that those two mites were her only means of sustenance (12:44). She really did give everything. This idea of renouncing the whole of one's proper assets is already present in the Gospel of Mark (1:18; 10:17-22.28-31), and in these previous instances the renouncement is seen positively, as one of the requirements of the Gospel and part of the logic of the new Kingdom.

The use of the noun βίος, which has a double meaning, might suggest that the expression to give ὅλον τὸν βίον means not only to offer all *livelihood*, but indeed one's whole *life*. The other NT occurrences of this term have

the meaning either of *life* (Luke 8:14; 1 Tim 2:2) or of *assets, possessions, maintenance* (Luke 8:43; 15:12.30; 21:4; 1 Tim 2:4; 1 John 2:16; 3:17). The economic, or specifically monetary, context of 12:41-42 might point to the latter meaning of βίος here, in its sole Markan occurrence.<sup>40</sup> Yet there is also a religious context of loving God with one's *whole* heart, soul, mind and strength (12:28-34), which challenges such a strictly economic interpretation and suggests the meaning "to give God one's whole *life*."<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, even accepting the first semantic option, e.g. *whole life savings* (so Donahue and Harrington 2002, 364), a donation of *all possessions* (πάντα ὅσα εἶχεν) implies being deprived of any means of sustenance, to risk the loss of life. Hence, by this act the widow unconditionally gave her whole life. She demonstrated her total detachment not only from her money (two lepta), but also from her life itself. The meaning of *life* is then justified, although both semantics of βίος might be intertwined and intended.<sup>42</sup>

## 2. The Text in its Context

No isolated section of a larger literary work really exists except in relation to its narrative context, thus any such piece, like our focal passage, must always be interpreted in view of its literary context. Viewing the poor widow's story in 12:41-44 in its proper narrative context, then, allows us to discover its fuller and proper meaning. First, let us consider the relationship of the pericope to its immediate literary context and, successively, its relationship to the message of the whole Gospel of Mark.

### 2.1. Mark 12:41-44 in its Immediate Literary Context

The immediate literary context of our pericope is usually limited to the three preceding verses (12:38-40) and the two following it (13:1-2). The most obvious link between our pericope and the preceding verse 12:40 is the term χήρα,

<sup>40</sup> The motif of money appears in the preceding context, e.g. the driving out of the temple sellers, buyers and money-changers (11:15) and the question about paying the tax to Caesar (12:13-17).

<sup>41</sup> Surprisingly, codex Ψ provides an interesting lesson by putting καί before ὅλον τὸν βίον αὐτῆς. The early medieval copyist of this ms (IX/X sec.) could be giving us a clue as to his understanding of this sentence, namely that ὅλον τὸν βίον could mean something different from πάντα ὅσα εἶχεν. The former could indicate *life*, and the latter *money, livelihood*.

<sup>42</sup> See Moloney 2002, 247 ("The double meaning is intended, for in doing one she has done the other").

referring to widows being exploited by scribes.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, the whole section 12:38-40 seems like a blanket attack on scribes as a class. Jesus criticizes their predilection for walking around in long robes, for receiving elaborate greetings in the marketplaces, for taking the first seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets, and for devouring widows' property. This latter criticism, in essence, is that they feign piety, simply to acquire a public reputation as respectable trustees who exercise the right to take care of widows and to accrue personal benefits through this office, i.e. depredating the very ones they are charged with helping (Derrett 1972, 1-9).<sup>44</sup>

The succeeding two verses (13:1-2) contain Jesus' prediction of the destruction of the temple. While Jesus was making his way out of the temple he foretold its end in a very dramatic way: *Not one stone will be left on another. All will be torn down!* (13:2). He was still inside the temple (participle ἐκπορευομένου) and he was leaving it for the last time (in the narrative he never returns there). Its beauty and greatness, noticed by his disciples (13:1), stand in striking contrast to Jesus' prediction (13:2), which points to the totality of destruction (*not one stone* = nothing).

In his article, "The Widow's Mites: Praise or Lament? – A Matter of Context", Wright (1982, 256-265) presented a very useful way of reading the poor widow's story within its immediate narrative context. According to Wright, the two pericopes 12:38-40 and 13:1-2 provide the frame necessary for a full understanding of the widow's action. He assumes that undoubtedly the house of the widow from 12:42 *just* got "devoured" by the very scribes who were *just* condemned by Jesus in 12:40.<sup>45</sup> Then he asks how Jesus, op-

43 In terms of historical-critical analysis, many authors argue that the occurrence of the term *widow* in 12:40 was an impulse for introducing the episode with the poor *widow* in the following narrative (a technique called "mots-crochets"). Interestingly enough, Lagrange (1947, 330) argued the opposite direction: "on ne peut guère croire que la mention des veuves au v. 40 ait amené Marc à placer ici cet incident, dont l'ordre paraît tout à fait historique. Ce serait plutôt la pauvreté de cette veuve qui aurait pu suggérer le reproche fait au scribe!"

44 For Schwarz (1997, 45-46) the phrase "devouring widow's houses" is a Greek mistranslation of an Aramaic saying which was an euphemism for "sleeping with widows" and denoted scribes' sexual immorality. For a critique of this view see Edwards (2002, 378-379, note 63) who also cites the story, reported by Josephus Flavius (*A.J.* 18,81-84), about a high-standing Roman woman named Fulvia whose substantial gifts for the temple in Jerusalem were embezzled by a Jewish "scribe" and his three companions. Emperor Tiberius, outraged at the whole affair, ordered the banishment of all Jews from Rome. Edwards (379) notes that "the reference to 'devour[ing] widows houses' would have given Mark's Roman readers, to whom the Fluvia scandal was a recent memory, a special frame of reference for the rapacity of scribes."

45 See also Fleddermann 1982, 67; Gundry 1993, 729 ("The poverty of the widow will naturally be taken as due to a scribal devouring of her estate [v.40]."); LaVerdiere 1999, 2:194; Horsley 2001, 216. As noted by Smith (1997, 30), even if the poor widow is not an actual, literal victim of the scribes' rapacity (indeed "widows are frequently depicted as poor with no such reason adduced" – France 2002, 293, note 112), she is representative of such victims by virtue of her

posed to the devouring of widows' houses, could possibly be pleased with the poor widow's gift. The answer for Wright is to see Jesus' attitude toward the widow's gift as clear disapproval and not approbation. He states (262):

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 the official devotion. Jesus' saying is not a penetrating insight on the measuring of gifts; it is a lament [...]. She had been taught and encouraged by religious leaders to donate as she does, and Jesus condemns the value system that motivates her action, and he condemns the people who conditioned her to do it.<sup>46</sup>

The context which follows (13:1-2) might also support the interpretation of a totally misguided offering encouraged by the religious officials. In light of the imminent destruction of the temple, the widow's contribution was a waste.<sup>47</sup> Such an interpretation of Jesus' statement would be in perfect agreement with the Corban saying (setting human needs above religious obligations – 7:10-13), and, perhaps, with the negative portrayal of the temple described as a *den of robbers* (11:17). The same principle of human needs taking precedence over religiosity can also be seen in 3:1-5 (healing on the Sabbath), and in 12:33 (loving God and neighbor being worth more than burnt-offerings and sacrifices). According to Wright (260), it would also correspond to Jesus' attitude in general as "a religious reformer". In support of his interpretation, Wright advanced yet other arguments which were summarized (and eventually countered) by Gundry (1993, 730): "(1) Jesus' saying nothing commendatory about the widow's action; (2) his not issuing an exhortation to imitate it; (3) the commonness of his observation that how little you have left counts more than how much you give [...]; (4) the absence from the observation of any contrast between human and divine evaluations; (5) the absence of any indication that the disciples had difficulty comprehending Jesus' observation."

Countering the first difficulty advanced by Wright (no. 1 above), it might be repeated after Gundry (1993, 730) that Jesus' observation in itself is "no

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severe poverty (cf. the semantics of *κατεσθίω* in 12:40) and of Mark's juxtaposition of the episodes, one after another.

<sup>46</sup> The same conclusions, however, reached through a purely historical-sociological analysis, are found in Sugirtharajah 1991, 42-43.

<sup>47</sup> Wright's interpretation of the Markan poor widow as the victim of the cultic system dovetails with Fleddermann's (1982, 67) interpretation of the immediately preceding verse 12:40. In his opinion, the devouring of widows' houses under the pretext of making long prayers should be understood as exploitation by the sacrificial temple system. The term "prayers" is the equivalent to "worship", and the reference to "long" prayers describes "the constantly repeated, never-ending sacrifices of temple-worship" (66). Nevertheless, Fleddermann (66) still sees the poor widow as a positive exemplar of generosity, contrasted with the rapaciousness of the scribes.

more lamentful than commendatory.” As noted by Marcus (2009, 861-862), the graphic contrast between the poor widow who gives all and the rich who donate only out of their surplus, sealed with the statement that she has given more than all of them put together, undoubtedly sounds like praise rather than a lament (cf. also Witherington 2001, 335, note 160). Stein (2008, 578) rightly noted that “the contrast between the rich people and their giving and the poor widow and her giving is meaningless unless the action of the poor widow is being commended.” Countering Wright’s second argument, Gundry (1993, 730-731) states that “the absence of an exhortation to imitate the widow’s action proves only that the story is not parenetic.” As pointed out by Marcus (2009, 861-862), the very principle that the sacrificial gift of the poor carries a greater value than the offerings of the rich is commonplace, and attested in other philosophic and religious traditions around the world, and as such is always seen in terms of praise, not as a lament (cf. Wright’s argument no. 3).<sup>48</sup> To Wright’s next caveat (no. 4 above) Gundry (1993, 731) responded by saying that “the absence of a contrast between human and divine evaluations is irrelevant; for Jesus is giving his own evaluation to an audience whom it might surprise. ‘Truly I say to you’ assures them of its truth despite popular opinion to the contrary.” Wright’s next observation (no. 5) is also challenged pertinently by Gundry (1993, 731), who argues: “Their [the disciples’] expressing no difficulty of understanding is neutral with respect to whether Jesus laments or commends the widow’s action or does neither, for his evaluation of her gift remains the same in any case.” Wright’s argument that the imminent destruction of the temple means that the widow’s gift was misguided and a total waste is rejected by Williams (1994, 177, note 3) because “it assumes that permanence is a necessary characteristic for a worthy recipient of charity. However, a different set of values is operating in 14.7: ‘For you always have the poor with you, and you are able to do good to them whenever you wish, but you do not always have me.’” Williams (178) also rhetorically asks: “Why would it be exemplary for the rich man to give away all that he has (10.21) but lamentable for the poor widow to do the same (12.44)?” Finally, Dowd (2000, 134) noted: “The reading of A.G. Wright ignores the widow’s point of view and makes her a naïve, if not a stupid, victim of the temple establishment. [...] from her

<sup>48</sup> For the references to the works from other religious and philosophical traditions see note no. 2. In general, Marcus (2009, 861) judges Wright’s reading “to be catalyzed less by the logic of the text than by a political agenda, namely, encouraging the poor to stick up for themselves against the rich. Laudable as this goal is, it does not seem to be *Mark’s* objective.” A similar remark is made by Boring (2006, 352), who points to liberation theology and postcolonial hermeneutics as causing Wright’s reading.



own point of view, the widow is giving, not to the scribes, the priests, or the temple, but to God.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, Gnilka (1979, 2:178) pointed out the fact that the offerings given in the temple are approved without qualification in the poor widow episode.

To evaluate Wright's main argument, namely the allegedly perfect correlation of the purport of Jesus' lamentful estimation in 12:43-44 with its literary context, let us first examine its immediate narrative context. As already pointed out in our exegetical section, the episode with the poor widow, by means of Jesus' *paradoxical appraisal* found in 12:43, illustrates the point that *things are not always what they appear to be*, a principle which might connect the poor widow episode with the preceding pericope (12:38-40), and also carry over into the following context (13:1-2). In 12:38-40 the scribes turn out to be merely selfish, haughty, and even godless, men. Jesus' statement reveals that they are, indeed, not as pious as they appear to be. Then, verses 13:1-2 contain the interchange about the deceptive and transitory greatness of the temple. The beautiful massive buildings would soon crumble into total ruin. The immediate context then, through the element of surprise in the evaluation of things (*things are not always what they appear to be*), highlights the greatness of the widow's offering: what seemed to be the smallest offering – and, economically, it was – turned out to be the greatest. Therefore, it is not only the idea of consummation and destruction (assuming that it is actually present in 12:41-44) that binds all three pieces of the narrative together, but more the self-evident principle of Jesus' judgment embedded in each of his paradoxical assessments.<sup>50</sup>

The crucial question is whether this judgment has a negative or positive character. Logically, the rich might somehow be identified with the figure of the scribes condemned in the preceding narrative (12:38-40). The link-words are περισσός, with reference to the scribes (12:40), and περισσεύω describing the rich (12:44). Donahue and Harrington (2002, 363) also noted that “Given the public character of the contributions and the noise made by the trumpet-shaped receptacles, there is a link suggested between the self-promotion of the scribes and the actions of the rich donating to the Temple treasury.” The same principle of continuity with the preceding narrative

<sup>49</sup> Hartman (2010, 496) rightly draws attention in his exposition of the story to an important, but not explicitly mentioned character, namely God.

<sup>50</sup> Jesus' estimation expressed in v. 12:43 is indeed a judgment over the crowd and the rich. In the same vein, Standaert (2010, 890) notes: “La manière de Jésus de distinguer l'offrande de la veuve par rapport à celles de tous les autres, équivaut en définitive à un jugement porté sur la pratique de tous. En cela, cette parole reprend certains énoncés antérieurs, comme celui du verset précédent (v. 40 : « ils recevront un jugement plus sévère »).”

encourages the reader to see the poor widow as connected with those previously mentioned, to wit, the widows who were exploited and disadvantaged. Jesus, however, judges the “devoured” widows in 12:40 neither negatively nor positively. The only figures explicitly condemned are the scribes. One might assume that the negative figures in both narratives are the scribes and the rich, while the positive characters, by contrast, are the widows. There is in our pericope, however, neither a clearly negative estimation of the rich, nor a clearly positive evaluation of widows. Jesus’ comment on the widow’s gift and the purport of the whole episode can then seem to be ambiguous and open to diverse interpretations. Focant (2004, 475) noted:

la sentence de Jésus n’a la forme claire ni d’une lamentation, ni d’une louange. Jésus n’invite pas à imiter la veuve ; il n’est pas dit qu’il la regarde et qu’il l’aime, ni qu’il recommande d’aller et d’agir de la même manière, ni qu’elle serait proche du Règne de Dieu. Sa parole retentit plutôt comme un constat que le lecteur peut interpréter de diverses manières. L’erreur de Wright est d’imposer au constat de Jésus le sens d’une lamentation en excluant tout autre sens. En fait, la forme du constat garde à la phrase une ambiguïté fort utile: elle peut être interprétée à la fois comme louange et comme lamentation. Et effectivement, les deux aspects peuvent être présents suivant le type de lien qu’opère le lecteur avec contexte.<sup>51</sup>

Focant argues, then, that both interpretations are justified. They do not exclude each other, but emerge together from the narrative context. Is that however really the case?

Close examination of the immediate narrative context results in the following observations. First, the poor widow who *gives* all, her whole means of living, stands in striking contrast to the scribes who *take* all, who devour widows’ houses (12:40), that is, their means of living.<sup>52</sup> Secondly, the scribes seem to be the people who seek *to call attention to themselves* (see their attire, the salutations in the marketplaces, the best places in the synagogues and at feasts), while the widow is so *unobtrusive*, hidden in the crowd, that only Jesus notices her. It is he who calls her action to the attention of the disciples (see Malbon 1991, 595). Thirdly, the scribes *use God* and the religious legal system for their own purposes and benefit, whereas the poor widow *uses* her own property *for God’s* glory. To sum up, the widow demonstrates her freedom from worldly goods, with regard to herself and her own position. By contrast, the scribes try to use everything for themselves and refer everything

<sup>51</sup> In a similar way, Donahue and Harrington (2002, 365) say: “attention to the Markan context leaves open whether the widow is presented as a model to be imitated for sincerity and generosity or as someone to be pitied as a victim of religious exploitation.”

<sup>52</sup> See the semantics of the verb κατασθίω – *eat, devour* (12:40) which also denotes utter destruction, complete consummation.

to themselves; they are self-absorbed. The reason for such a difference lies in the attitude of each towards God: the scribes appear to be turned away from God (they are self-centered), whereas the widow is completely turned towards God. Hence, both of these pericopes describe two totally different approaches to God and to property. In one, God is found to be in the center and everything is referred to him; in the second one, the central place is occupied by man himself and God is almost used as a means for one's own benefit. Undoubtedly, such a graphic contrast is intended to point out the exemplary – not deprecatory or lamentable – character of the poor widow's act.

Perhaps the narrator continues the pattern here, noted already in the previous narrative, of placing a *positive example* after a *negative paraenesis* (e.g. 10:23-25 and 10:28; 10:35-43 and 10:45), since the example of the pious widow immediately follows Jesus' warnings against the hypocrisy of the scribes (12:38-40). Moreover, Malbon (1994, 78-80) notices that the story about the poor widow (12:41-44) functions in the same way as the scene with Jesus' mother and brothers in 3:31-35, namely it is both an *exclamation point* (!), in relation to the preceding narrative, and a narrative *colon* (:), in relation to the material which follows. As she noted (1994, 78), "the nature of the surrounding narrative material" is also the same in both cases. The overarching pattern goes as follows: controversy (2:1-3:6; 11:27-12:27), cooperation (3:7-19; 12:28-34), example (negative *and* positive) (3:20-35; 12:35-44), and implications (4:1-34; 13:1-37). The episode with the poor widow would then function as the *positive example* which follows the *negative one* (12:35-40).

By widening the immediately preceding context of the poor widow's story to include 12:28-40<sup>53</sup>, a logical sequence of reasoning emerges which also points toward the laudatory nature of Jesus' comment in 12:43-44. First, Jesus explains that the most important commandment is the two-fold commandment of love of God and love of one's neighbor (12:28-34). Second, what follows is an example of scribes who claim to love God, but who, in fact, do not love God unconditionally. They only pretend to love God in order to gain human favor. They also do not implement the second part of the commandment: they do not love their neighbor, since they devour widows (12:38-40). Finally, we have the example of a poor widow who unconditionally loves God, giving her *whole* life to God as is required by the commandment. The widow's act of total detachment from her possessions takes place in the temple and, undoubtedly, was caused by her complete abandon to God, expressed by her

<sup>53</sup> Malbon (1991, 595) rightly asks: "But why should we be content to consider only the preceding three verses and the succeeding two verses as *the* context of the poor widow's story?" (original emphasis).

faith and love for him. Her action is then a good illustration of one fulfilling the first commandment: one should love God ἐξ ὅλης τῆς καρδίας σου καὶ ἐξ ὅλης τῆς ψυχῆς σου καὶ ἐξ ὅλης τῆς διανοίας σου καὶ ἐξ ὅλης τῆς ἰσχύος σου (12:30; in 12:33 a shorter sequence: ἐξ ὅλης τῆς καρδίας καὶ ἐξ ὅλης τῆς συνέσεως καὶ ἐξ ὅλης τῆς ἰσχύος). The term ὅλος, repeated seven times in 12:30-33, is echoed exactly in the totality of the widow's gift: ὅλον τὸν βίον.<sup>54</sup> To love God with *all* one's heart, soul, mind and strength means to love with everything that one possesses, with one's *whole* life. Perhaps we can notice here a link between βίος, meaning *life* (12:44), and ψυχή, which means *soul* but can likewise mean *life* (12:30).<sup>55</sup> Interestingly, and perhaps not accidentally, when the scribe restates the greatest commandment in 12:33 he omits the term ψυχή (see Yarbrow Collins 2007, 589). Moreover, both Jesus and the scribe refer to the formulation of the commandment which includes *with all the strength* (ἐξ ὅλης τῆς ἰσχύος). This phrase reflects the expression כֹּחַ יְמֵיךָ (*with all your strength*) found in the Hebrew text of this commandment in Deut 6:5. Interestingly, in the Dead Sea Scrolls, Targums and the rabbinic literature, the word כֹּחַ also denotes *wealth* and *possessions*, and the phrase from Deut 6:5 was in fact understood as referring to property.<sup>56</sup> Assuming that the interpretation of the commandment attested in early Jewish sources was current in Jesus' time, and was thus presupposed by the author of the Gospel, then the contrast between the scribes and the widow becomes even more pronounced. The scribes know the requirements of the commandment, but they do not fulfill them, while the poor widow, with no special scriptural schooling (idealistically described in Sir 38:24–39:11), does fulfill it. There is, then, a clear scheme to this broader narrative context: a teaching on the greatest commandment is followed by two examples, first a negative one (the scribes) and then a positive one (the widow). The scribes, then, are the uniting character of the whole immediate context. There is also a bitter irony: the scribe who inquires about the greatest commandment, who knows this commandment and acknowledges its importance and, consequently, is *not far from the Kingdom of God* (12:34), at the same time belongs to the same

<sup>54</sup> Less pertinent is another verbal correspondence, namely between πάντων (*all*) of the burnt-offerings and sacrifices, which cannot match the fulfillment of the commandment of love (12:33), and πάντα (*all*) of the widow's offering (12:44).

<sup>55</sup> See *b. Ber.* 61b where a dying Rabbi Akiva recites the *Shema* and interprets *with all your soul* as giving life. In the parallel rabbinic story, found in *Lev. Rab.* 3:5, a woman offered a handful of fine flour and the priest who despised her was rebuked in a dream for despising her, since her gift is regarded as if she had sacrificed her own life (נִפְשָׁהּ).

<sup>56</sup> For a whole list of DSS passages where כֹּחַ denotes *property* see Clines 2001, 5:107. For the interpretation of Deut 6:5 in DSS see CD 9:10-12; IQS 1:11-15; 3:2-3. See Yarbrow Collins 2007, 589 and the literature cited therein. For the rabbinic literature see *Tg. Onq.*, *Tg. Neof.*, *Tg. Ps.-J.* Deut 6:5; *m. Ber.* 9:5; *b. Ber.* 61b; *b. Pesah.* 25a, *Sifre* Deut 6:5 (55). See Menken 2004, 218.

group of characters, the scribes who, in the praxis of their lives, demonstrate their total disregard for this commandment.

The devouring of the widow's estate also contradicts the teaching of the Torah and the prophets, which explicitly demands special care for widows. In Exod 22:21-23 an Israelite was forbidden to afflict a widow. The penalty for this crime, after the widow's direct appeal to YHWH for justice, was death executed by YHWH himself. Ironically, this would result in the widowhood of the wife of the offender. The same idea of YHWH executing justice for the widow is found in Deut 10:18, Ps 146:9 and Prov 15:25. YHWH, indeed, is called *the judge of the widows* (Ps 68:6). According to Deut 27:19, the one who perverts justice for the widow is to be cursed. It comes as no surprise, then, that Eliphaz mentions *sending widows away empty-handed* as a possible sin of Job (22:9; cf. 24:21), while Job defends himself by saying that *he caused the widow's heart to sing* (29:13), and he did not allow *the eyes of the widow to fail* (31:16). The laws concerning taking the garment of a widow in pledge (Deut 24:17), the triennial tithe (Deut 14:29; 26:12-13), the harvesting of corn (the forgotten sheaf), olives and grapes (Deut 24:19-21), as well as the provision for gleaning (Lev 19:9-10; 23:22; cf. Ruth 2) – all were designed to ensure that a widow would not become destitute and starve. The prophets regularly defended the rights of the widows (Isa 1:17; Jer 22:3; Ez 22:7; cf. also Ps 94:6), whose treatment was an unmistakable sign of the spiritual condition of the nation. Eventually, prophets came to declare judgment upon Judah and Israel, brought about by the unjust treatment of widows (Isa 1:23-28; 10:1-2; Jer 7:6; Ezek 22:7; Zech 7:10). YHWH's words in Jer 49:11 resound very tellingly in the context of our pericope: *Leave your orphans behind, I will keep them alive! And let your widows trust in Me!* The poor widow's act of offering her whole sustenance might be seen as the expression of her trust in YHWH, her vindicator and protector.<sup>57</sup>

Three prophetic passages are especially resonant with the purport of the Markan episode of the poor widow and its immediate context. First, Zech 7:9-10 calls for love (חסד / ἔλεος) and compassion (רחמים / οἰκτιρμός) towards one's neighbor, and instructs the people not to oppress the widow (χήρα)

<sup>57</sup> In light of 2 Macc 3:10, which mentions deposits laid up in the temple for the relief of widows and orphans, the poor widow's gift for the temple could resound as bitter irony. In fact, the temple kept the dowries and the property bequeathed to the widows by their husbands. This practice was an innovation for Judea in the Hellenistic period. See Jdt 8:7; Sir 22:4. Cf. Goldstein 1983, 207; Schwartz 2008, 197. In the case of the Markan widow, however, the reader is assured that she did not have any deposits in the temple, as her only financial resources were two lepta.

and the poor (πένης – the Lukan version of the poor widow's story used the cognate term πενυχρός). Then, in Jer 7:5-6 there is a call to practice justice between a man and his neighbor, as well as to not oppress the widow. The following literary context there (7:10-11) is also relevant: those who commit all sorts of crimes and abominations (including the oppression of widows) come to the temple and feel safe and delivered, but they still are about to do all these detestable things (MT), or they deny doing them (LXX). In effect, they make the temple a *den of robbers* and provoke God's judgment. Significantly, Jer 7:11 is quoted by Mark 11:17, when Jesus is cleansing the temple. Finally, Mal 3:1-5 describes the moment of YHWH's judgment, which has many points of contact with the context of the Markan poor widow story. First, the Lord is coming to his temple (ἔξει εἰς τὸν ναὸν ἑαυτοῦ κύριος – Mal 3:1), just as Jesus is coming (Mark 11:9-11.15.27). Second, he is sitting (καθίζω) in the temple (cf. Mark 12:41). Third, he is restoring the just order of things in the temple (cf. Mark 11:15-18). Fourth, he is coming in judgment (κρίσις – Mal 3:5; κρίμα – Mark 12:40). Fifth, his judgment is addressed against those who oppressed the widows (Mal 3:5).

Evans (2001, 284) provided a set of evidence, though rather sparse, which would demonstrate that widows in Jesus' times did not enjoy the full economic and legal protection commanded in the Law of Moses. The Damascus Document attests that the sons of the covenant separated themselves from the Jerusalem priesthood who were accused of robbing the widows (CD VI 16). Fragments of the Damascus Document from Cave 4 speak of the widows who prostitute themselves after their husbands died (4Q270; 4Q271), perhaps out of economic desperation.

In a nutshell, the poor widow in our focal passage acts in perfect accord with the spirit of the Scriptures, while the scribes, who are supposed to guard the statutes of the Mosaic Law, instead blatantly overturn the scriptural requirements. The poor widow then becomes the model of a *pious Jewish believer* and a symbol of *the faithful remnant of Israel*, obedient to the Torah. The scribes, on the other hand, might be seen as the figurative embodiment of Israel's apostasy, destined for severe divine judgment. Boring (2006, 353) noted: "Mark's point here is that the *robbed* widows, in contrast to the *robber* scribes, are those who truly serve God."<sup>58</sup> The widow's act of

<sup>58</sup> In the same vein, Beutler (1997, 136) states that against the background of Jesus' conflict with all kinds of religious authorities (*chief priests, scribes, elders, Pharisees, Herodians and Sadducees*), which represent a cross-section of the politically influential Jewish upper-class, the poor widow is the only entirely positive character in the section describing Jesus' teachings in the temple (11:27-12:40). Consequently, she becomes not only the ideal disciple, but also the sole truly authentic *representative of Israel*. Beutler's view should be qualified, since in

giving might be seen as her direct appeal to YHWH, the judge of the widows in Israel, whereas Jesus should be seen as YHWH suddenly entering Israel's temple and exercising judgment (cf. Smith 1997, 32-36).<sup>59</sup>

The idea of imminent *judgment* is indeed at the heart of the Markan context of the poor widow's story. This judgment will be exercised on the teachers of the Torah (12:40), but also on the whole temple (ch. 13). Smith (1997, 32) argued:

The pericope looks back to the denunciation of the scribes but also anticipates the prophetic discourse on the destruction of the temple. On this understanding, the widow herself stands as a symbol. Her impoverished condition alone is a scandal in Israel in the light of Torah. But the circumstances of her poverty make the scandal far more grievous, for it has come at the hands of those who are teachers in Israel: the guardians of Torah and the true religion of Yahweh. Therefore the only thing left, given Israel's flagrant apostasy [...], is judgment. On this view Mark has included the account of the poor widow as an important piece of evidence to make God's case against Israel complete.

In such a reading of the immediate context of the poor widow episode, her act is to be seen as one of the final, decisive exhibits offered in evidence against Israel, epitomized by the ravenous scribes and the corrupted temple.

The theme of *judgment* against the temple is indeed present in the whole section describing Jesus' activity in its precincts (11:11–13:2). Looking at this literary context, Swartley (1997, 20) argues for a positive estimation of the character of the widow. He states:

[T]his incident [...] comes at a crucial place in the narrative. It ends the long complex of controversy-encounters with the religious leaders. (...) Jesus' own counter-question in 12:35-37 climaxes the controversy segment itself. Then follow two narratives, each with explicit commentary. The one denounces the immorality of the scribes' piety: they devour widows' houses. The other highlights the true godly piety of the widow. Because of their immoral management of the temple, the religious leaders are under judgment (11:11–12:40) and the temple will be destroyed (13; 14:58; 15:38). The act of the widow is the only redeeming feature of this segment (chapters 11–13), which otherwise is oriented to judgment upon the temple and its tenants, culminating in the temple's prophesied doom. The widow exemplifies the kind of piety, which if it had been more widely present, could have averted Jesus' judgment on the temple. Again in this section, a woman emerges as the exemplar, a model

12:28-34 Jesus, in fact, commends one of the scribes saying *You are not far from the kingdom of God* (12:34). As noted by Williams (1994, 178): "Together these two individuals represent what might have been, if the religious leaders had not turned the temple into a den of thieves." Beutler's intuition of seeing the poor widow as the representative of *Israel* is corroborated by Boring (2006, 352), who argues that the widow's gift is "for all Israel in supporting the temple where offerings are made in behalf of the people as a whole."

<sup>59</sup> Referring to Wright's interpretation, Smith (1997, 35, note 27) rightly noted: "A large part of Wright's problem is his assumption that Jesus is (only?) a religious reformer."

*The Poor Widow's Mites. A Contextual Reading of Mark 12:41-44*

for true piety; she functions crucially in relation to Mark's sectional theme: the temple's rightful use, abuse, and doom. Of the people portrayed in this segment, the ideal reader identifies only with this woman.

The whole of Jesus' teaching activity after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem (11:1-11) is marked by an indirect conflict between him and the religious leaders (11:15-12:40). Moreover, the basic institution of Judaism, the temple, and Israel itself, are under God's judgment. Two episodes, that of the withered fig tree, followed by the cleansing of the temple (11:12-20), together serve as a telling introduction to this idea. The temple, as the fig tree, is bereft of any fruit. In light of Mark 4:19, this unfruitfulness (ἄκαρπος) might be due to the deceitfulness of riches. The parable which follows, that of the wicked tenants of the vineyard (12:1-11), continues the theme of judgment toward the temple.<sup>60</sup> The saying that love means more than all the burnt-offerings and sacrifices (12:33) also points out the relative value of the temple cult. The climax is the explicit affirmation by Jesus that the temple is doomed to complete destruction (13:2).<sup>61</sup> Against such a literary context, the act of the widow giving an offering for the doomed temple might give the impression of a misguided action, but this is not sufficient reason to deem Jesus' comment on her act as a lament. It is true that a reader might praise the widow's piety and, at the same time, feel sorry for her giving money for a temple fated for destruction.<sup>62</sup> Yet a reader acquainted with the many passages of the OT concerning widows may sense that her oblation for the temple would be the expression of her appeal to God. In other words: according to the logic of faith, the widow's total gift can be, in her circumstances, the *best*

<sup>60</sup> On the understanding of the parable as prophetic criticism leveled against the temple and the temple establishment, but not against Israel, see the interpretation of Isa 5:1-7 in Targum and 4Q500. See Brooke 1995, 268-294.

<sup>61</sup> Moloney (2011, 108-109) speaks of a series of *endings* during the first days of Jesus' sojourn in Jerusalem in 11:1-13:37, namely: "Framed by the cursing of the fig tree, he *brings to an end* all temple practices and replaces them with faith, prayer, and forgiveness (11:12-25). Still in the temple, he encounters and *brings to an end* Israel's religious authority. He condemns their lack of care for the Lord's vineyard and systematically reduces to silence the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the scribes (11:27-12:40). [...] Finally, he tells of *the end* of Jerusalem (13:1-23) and *the end* of the world (13:24-37)."

<sup>62</sup> See the apt comment of Marcus (2009, 863): "[I]t may also be that he [Mark] uses the story's uneasy relation to its context to express his own mixed attitude toward the Temple. Such ambivalence is not unusual in early Christianity; Luke-Acts, for example, idealized Zachariah, Elizabeth, Simeon, and Anna, who frequent the Temple as an expression of their piety (Luke 1-2), but it also glorifies Stephen, who excoriates the Temple and predicts its destruction by God (Acts 6:13-7:60) [...]. It is possible, moreover, to recognize the corruption of an institution and the venality of its officers and at the same time to admire the piety of the simple souls who devote themselves to it in innocence and faith."



investment of her money. She provokes God, as it were, the judge of the widows, to act on her behalf, the destitute widow.

Limiting the focus of our inquiry to the third day of Jesus' activity in Jerusalem (11:20–13:1-2), the *disciples* emerge as an important element in the poor widow's story. Before Jesus arrived in Jerusalem, his teaching was focused exclusively on his disciples (8:27–10:52), whereas once present in Jerusalem, he begins teaching in public. On the third day of his sojourn in the temple, he was engaged in a dialogue with the crowd (12:37.38) and with religious and political authorities (11:27; 12:13.18.28). Nevertheless, even if he was addressing the crowd or other groups, the disciples accompanied him (11:11.12.15.19.20.27). Within this context, it is striking that Jesus' comment in 12:43-44 is addressed exclusively to his disciples.<sup>63</sup> Apart from 13:1-37, the only other Markan example of Jesus' teaching addressed exclusively to his disciples during the third day of his stay in Jerusalem is found in 11:20-25. These two pericopes create, therefore, a conceptual frame for his public activity on that third day of his teachings in the temple (11:27–12:40). Both frame-texts might indeed be seen as *instructions* directed to the disciples, and in both cases it is a call to *positive* attitudes.<sup>64</sup> In 11:22-25 it is faith, manifested in the prayer full of trust in God, and in 12:41-44 it is the total love, trust and faith in God expressed through the widow's offering of the whole of her possessions. This interpretative frame of *discipleship* is reinforced by the mention of Jesus' position of sitting (not found in the Lukan parallel), which points to his authority as a teacher (9:35; 12:41a; cf. also 4:1; 13:3).

In view of the above, the immediate context invites the interpretation of the poor widow's act as being praiseworthy. In order to further advance this conclusion, however, one is obliged to consider the story within its global narrative context, namely the Gospel of Mark as a whole.

## 2.2. Mark 12:41-44 and the Broader Context of the Whole Markan Narrative

The episode of the poor widow's offering might be linked with certain other individual episodes and characters, as well as with a group of figures who share the same characteristics. Moreover, the story might be read along the lines of some major themes running throughout the whole Markan narrative.

<sup>63</sup> The Lukan context mentions the presence of the crowd (20:45), which Mark clearly avoids.

<sup>64</sup> Focant (2004, 474) argues: "Leur [disciples] soudain retour en scène laisse entendre que, aux yeux du narrateur, l'attitude de la pauvre veuve les concerne et qu'ils peuvent en tirer une leçon."

### Links with Other Specific Episodes and Figures

Beutler (1997, 133) argued that the poor widow's story should be connected with the episode with Bartimaeus (10:46-52). When this blind beggar is called by Jesus, he cast away his cloak, supposedly his most precious belonging (see Exod 22:25) and, after being healed, followed Jesus on his way to Jerusalem. Both Bartimaeus and the poor widow demonstrate to the disciples that in order to follow Jesus one must leave everything.

Another meaningful parallel to the widow's attitude toward her possessions might be the pericope about the woman with an alabaster vial (14:3-9) (cf. Malbon 1994, 76-78). In both episodes the same principle is in view: the totality (the poor widow) or exceptional greatness (the anointing woman)<sup>65</sup> of the offering of material means expresses a personal devotion toward God and Jesus (the Son of God) respectively. Taking into account the many parallels between the two stories,<sup>66</sup> the difference between them, as described by Gray (2008, 101), becomes even more salient:

The widow's gift is for the temple, whereas the other woman's gift is for Jesus. The beneficiary of each gift is doomed – the temple for destruction, Jesus for death. Within this parallel there is a sharp contrast. The reader knows that the end of the temple is to have the finality of the fig tree withered down to its roots and the mountain cast into the sea, whereas Jesus' death will end in victory, as foretold in the three passion predictions of Jesus' death and resurrection (8:31; 9:31; 10:34) and the parable of the rejected stone that would become the cornerstone (12:10). The object of both gifts is the temple – one old, the other new.

In Gray's opinion the parallels between these two women mirror the deeper parallel between Jesus and the temple.

It should also be noted that both episodes are depicted as positive examples for Jesus' disciples. The exemplary character of the story with the anointing woman is visible in Jesus' comment on her act: *she has done a good / beautiful (καλός) thing* (14:6) and *wherever the gospel shall be preached*

<sup>65</sup> In fact, the phrase ὃ ἔσχεν ἐποίησεν (14:8) might be understood as giving (doing) all she had (could).

<sup>66</sup> First, the gift of each woman is precisely specified in financial terms (2 lepta and 300 denarii). Second, each of these gifts is a costly sacrifice for each woman (300 denarii were the equivalent of three hundred days salary, or a yearly wage taking into account Sabbaths and feast days when no work was done!). Third, each woman stands in contrast with negatively depicted male figures (scribes and Judas). Fourth, in both stories there is a double occurrence of the term πτωχός. Fifth, the offering of each woman foreshadows Jesus' death (terms βίος and ἐνταφιασμός as well as Jesus' words ἐμὲ δὲ οὐ πάντοτε ἔχετε). Sixth, there is irony in both stories: although both women give much, the actual value of their offerings is misunderstood. Seventh, the two stories are the only occurrences in the Markan narrative where Jesus points out specific human actions as exemplary (though 10:28-29 might also be considered). Eighth, in both stories there is the solemn introduction ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν.

*in the whole world, that also which this woman has done shall be spoken of in memory of her* (14:9). Taken together, the two stories form a set of parentheses or brackets that frame Jesus' eschatological discourse in ch. 13. This farewell discourse of Jesus, introducing the passion of Christ, speaks of the passion of the disciples. The story of the poor widow placed in this context shows that "willingness to give oneself is called for *and possible*" (Malbon 1994, 78). Consequently, the poor widow is not only the opposite of the religious leaders in ch. 12, but also the model for the disciples in ch. 13. In the same way, the anointing woman stands in marked contrast to one of the disciples in particular, Judas. Malbon (1994, 77; cf. Malbon 1983, 40; 1991, 599) states: "an unnamed woman gives up money for Jesus; a named man, even 'one of the twelve', gives up Jesus for money."

#### Links with the Other Female Characters in Mark

In view of the foregoing, perhaps one should appreciate the suggestion of reading the poor widow's story in the narrative context of all the women characters appearing in Mark's Gospel.<sup>67</sup> Beavis (1988, 3-9) discerns in the Markan narrative the existence of the Greco-Roman literary form, well-known in ancient literature theory, called *chreia*, i.e., attributed saying. Mark might have used this literary form to present four women characters: the hemorrhaging woman (5:24-34), the Syrophenecian (7:24-30), the poor widow (12:41-44) and the anointing woman (14:3-9). All these *chreiai* are connected by one idea: they provide *models* of faith and discipleship. According to Beavis, in contrast to Mark's generally *negative* portrayal of the disciples, presented with all their failures, lack of faith and fear (cf. 4:40; 6:50; 7:18; 8:14-21.31-33; 9:14-29.33-41; 10:13-16.35-45), these four women are shown as *positive* characters.<sup>68</sup>

Grassi (1988, 10-15; 1989, *passim*) goes a bit further, arguing that Mark presents an *ideal disciple* disclosed in some key women characters. The central character of the narrative is Jesus, especially in his hero's death. He is the obvious model. However, his direct counterparts are women, some

<sup>67</sup> Malbon 1983, 37-40; 1991, 599-600; Fander 1989, 111-117; 1992, 413-432; Graham 1992, 145-158; Miller 2004, 112-127; Dschulnigg 2007b, 79.

<sup>68</sup> The same pointed contrast is noted by Horsley (2001, 203-218) who speaks of the juxtaposition of two subplots, one focused on the positive paradigms of women characters who faithfully respond to and "follow" Jesus, and the other focused on the twelve disciples, the negative examples of "following" Jesus, who not only misunderstand and resist Jesus' agenda, but eventually betray, abandon and deny him. The older works by Schierling (1980, 250-256) and Schmitt (1981, 228-233) operate on the same principle of contrast between the *positive* female figures and *negative* models presented by the twelve male disciples.

of whom follow him as far as the cross. The anointing woman at Bethany, a parallel to the poor widow, is the full representation of the ideal disciple, since she recognized the true identity of Jesus and responded with her costly offering. In such a reading, the poor widow, another epitome of the ideal disciple, serves as the icon of Jesus himself, because they both offer their whole *lives* to God.

These proposals, while very attractive by virtue of their simple two-part distinction, seem, at the same time, to offer too great a simplification. For one thing, the male disciples are also depicted in *positive* ways (e.g., 1:18.20; 2:14; 10:28), and even their “negative sides” glimpsed throughout the whole narrative can also be understood as steps in a natural and gradual process of growing into a mature, integral faith. The disciples, indeed, left their possessions (1:18; 10:28) and radically followed Jesus (cf. also 1:20; 2:14), although these bold acts do not mean that they also instantly acquired perfect faith in Jesus and his Father (cf. 11:22-24). As was rightly pointed out by Sonnet (2007, 366), the disciples’ faith must have been the response to the complete messianic revelation of Jesus, while the faith of the secondary figures in Mark (including the four women characters) was punctual, i.e. focused on only one aspect, e.g. faith in Jesus as a healer (cf. 5:21-34; 7:24-30), or limited to a single scene in the narration, reflecting a short period of time when an actual encounter with Jesus took place.<sup>69</sup> Nevertheless, from a narrative viewpoint, the proposed connection between the four minor female figures is valid, and cannot be seriously questioned. Indeed, all of them epitomize a type of exemplary faith in God which should permeate every action of Jesus’ followers.

Malbon’s (1983, 36-40; 1991, 599-600; 1994) reflections on the role of the aforementioned four female characters seem well-balanced. In general, the minor characters around Jesus respond to him in one of three ways: as enemies (e.g. the majority of religious leaders), as fallible followers (e.g. the twelve, the women at the cross and tomb), or as exemplars (e.g. Jairus, Joseph of Arimathea, and the four female figures).<sup>70</sup> Of the female characters, the first

<sup>69</sup> Sonnet (2007, 366) argues : “l’intelligence de la foi doit répondre chez eux de l’ensemble de la trajectoire messianique de Jésus, alors que l’acte de foi des personnages secondaires est, d’une certaine manière, ponctuel.”). See also the very apt and helpful distinction between the “flat” (one-sided) – either “good” or “bad” – characterizations of secondary figures, versus the “round” (multisided) – both “good” and “bad” – characterizations of the twelve by Malbon 1989, 275-281 and 1991, 601. On the general function of the secondary figures in the narrative see also Tannehill 1977, 392-393; Malbon 1983, 30-33 and 45-46; Williams 1994; Focant 2003; Rhoads 2012, 133-134.

<sup>70</sup> Malbon (1994, 64) states: “As the religious leaders are *generally* depicted as enemies of Jesus in Mark, and the disciples are *generally* portrayed as fallible followers, so the minor characters are *most often* presented as exemplars.” Interestingly, in each category there are exceptions,

two (the hemorrhaging woman, the Syrophenician woman) can be labeled as “bold and faithful women”, whereas the last two (the poor widow, the anointing woman) are “self-denying serving women” (1994, 69, note 3). In Malbon’s view (1994, 69), this differentiation dovetails with the overall function of the secondary characters within the Markan narrative, who fall into three sequential sets: (1) in Mark 1:1–8:21 “the minor characters are generally suppliants who exemplify faith in Jesus’ healing power and authority as proclaimer of the kingdom of God”; (2) in Mark 8:22–10:52 “three suppliants appear – all with rich connotative and symbolic significance for understanding the nature of followership, especially fallible followership – as well as the rich man who is a negative exemplar of followership”; (3) in Mark 11:1–16:8 “the minor characters are generally exemplars of suffering and service as paradoxical aspects of the messiahship of Jesus and the kingdom of God.” Malbon (1983, 43; 1991, 599) further speculates that the surprising Markan presentation of the women figures as exemplifying the demands of discipleship might reflect the historical realities not only of actual female discipleship among Jesus’ followers (cf. Munro 1982, 225-241), but also of women’s lower status in that day. In Malbon’s opinion (1991, 599; cf. 1983, 43), “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 last first’ (10:31).”

**Links with Two Major Themes:  
The Renunciation of Possessions and the Giving Up of One’s Life**

The poor widow gave everything. Looking at the entire Gospel of Mark, this idea of renouncing the whole (cf. πάντα, ὅλον) of one’s proper assets is already strongly attested before the poor widow episode (1:18; 10:17-23.28-31). The narrative preceding 12:41-44 already demonstrates twice the danger of being the slave to one’s own wealth. In 4:19 Jesus, teaching in parables, pointed out that *the lure of riches* (ἡ ἀπάτη τοῦ πλούτου) chokes out the word of God, which becomes unfruitful in the end. In 10:17-22 there is a vivid illustration of this truth: the rich man was not able to respond to Jesus’ call to follow him (10:21) because of his attachment to his own wealth (*he looked sad and went away sorrowful, for he had many possessions* – 10:22). After this indeed sad event, Jesus then addresses his disciples, expressing a bitter truth: *how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!* (10:23).

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for instance the exceptional scribe in 12:28-34, Judas among the twelve, and the rich man in 10:17-22 who is a negative exemplar of followership.

The rich man was asked to give up *everything* (10:21) and Peter declares that he and the other disciples of Jesus have left *everything* to follow him (10:28). Interestingly, in both cases, there are some verbal correspondences with the poor widow's story.<sup>71</sup> Most importantly, however, in 10:17-23 and 10:28-31, and 1:18 as well, this renouncement is seen positively. It is part of the requirements of the Gospel and the logic of the new Kingdom.

Considering the Markan narrative as a whole, the idea of giving up all one's possessions was also embraced by Jesus himself. He appears to have chosen a life of poverty. He wanders to and fro without a settled home (1:39), his disciples are hungry (2:23; 8:14), and women provide for his needs (15:41). Thus, the principle of renouncing all possessions, which is seen in the life of the disciples, has first been embraced by their master. It might be yet another clue connecting the figure of the widow with Jesus.

The idea of giving one's life is, likewise, not an alien notion in the Gospel of Mark, hence this interpretative dimension of the poor widow's action must also be taken into consideration. The widow not *only* gave *everything* to God, she also gave her whole *life*. In the larger narrative it is Jesus who is freely giving his life (cf. 8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34). And, not surprisingly, the disciples are invited to follow the lead of Jesus and also lose their lives (8:35). Malbon (2002, 83-84), in a very personal and emotional comment, argues:

Jesus says to his disciples, "Look at her. She's giving more than everybody else. What she's giving is her whole life." The translations tend to lead you astray here, they usually say she gives "her whole living", keeping you on the literal economic level. Mark's Gospel opens up another dimension in her giving of "her whole life", her whole *bios*. She is not an example for a stewardship campaign. (I hate it when she is cast in that role.) She is more than that; she is a model for what Jesus is in the process of doing – giving his whole life – and for what disciples must be prepared to do. For that reason Jesus calls his disciples' attention to her, and then departs the temple.

The widow's offering takes place right before the most sacred of Jewish feasts, the Passover (14:1). Significantly, the gift of the widow, her *total* self-giving, speaks to the heart of the feast: the sacrifice of one's entire self

<sup>71</sup> Note the following verbal links between the two stories: ὑπαγε, ὅσα ἔχεις πώλησον (10:21) and πάντα ὅσα εἶχεν (12:44) as well as ἰδοὺ ἡμεῖς ἀφήκαμεν πάντα καὶ ἠκολουθήκαμεν σοι (10:28) and πάντα ὅσα εἶχεν (12:44). Moreover, the rich man *lacks* only one thing - ἐν σε ὑστερεῖ (10:21), while the widow gives *out of her lack* - ἐκ τῆς ὑστερήσεως αὐτῆς (12:44). Both episodes deal with the rich (πλούσιον - 10:25; πλούσιοι - 12:41) and the poor (πτωχοῖς - 10:21; πτωχή - 12:42.43). Interestingly, πλούσιος is used in Mark only in 10:25 and 12:41. The term πτωχός is used only in the stories of the rich man (10:21), the poor widow (12:42.43) and the anointing woman (14:5.7); the latter is connected with our text by means of other features. The connection between the purport of the poor widow's story and the episode with the rich man is emphasized by Williams 1994, 178 and Dschulnigg 2007b, 79.

to YHWH (all first-born sons were consecrated to God) and a renewal of the ancient covenant expressed by Deut 6, which Jesus quotes in the immediate context (12:29-31).<sup>72</sup> The position of the episode within Mark, as a transition to the Passion Narrative, also serves as a poignant summary of Jesus' mission. The widow's act of self-giving foreshadows the gift of Jesus' life in the Passion Narrative. The very fact that the widow is only *one* and that she gave more than *all* the others (who in fact are described as the crowd) points out that the life-offering of *one* individual might have a greater value than the offerings of *all* (all other people). This contrast again foreshadows the incomparable and expiatory value of Jesus' self-offering (10:45).<sup>73</sup> To sum up, the theme of self-giving running through the whole Gospel might be one more indication of the complimentary, praising character of Jesus' comment in 12:43-44.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to analyze the meaning of the story about the poor widow's offering in Mark 12:41-44 following a synchronic method of contextual reading. The connections of the story with its immediate narrative context, beginning with 12:38-40; 13:1-2 and leading in turn to the entire temple section 11:11-13:37, demonstrate the laudatory tone of Jesus' comment and the exemplary character of the episode as a whole. The results of this analysis differ with Wright's interpretation, widely popular among exegetes, that Jesus' comment constitutes a lament over the widow's totally misguided deed. In reality, as we have shown, the widow is an example of a person who, in giving the entirety of her own livelihood, expresses total trust in God. Her act is driven by her love for God – as she perfectly implements the requirements of *Shema* – and by her faith and confident trust in him who is the judge and protector of widows in Israel. In this sense, the destitute widow also stands as an accusation against the corruption of faith in Israel, as evinced by a disregard for God's law concerning widows. The specific placement of the episode within its immediate narrative context

<sup>72</sup> Miller (2004, 114) noted that “the timing of Passover was particularly associated with almsgiving (*m. Pes.* 10:1), but the crowds of rich people in our account are blind to the presence of this poor widow in their midst.” Again, in the context of the most important commandment of love for God and neighbor (12:28-34), the contrast between the true piety of the widow and the show-off piety of the rich might be noted.

<sup>73</sup> Focant (2004, 475) argues that the widow's gift “sert de prolepse symbolique au don total de lui-même opéré par Jésus sur la croix.” Simon (1969, 123) noted: “C'est moins une pauvre veuve que Jésus regarderait que lui-même.”

makes good sense, since the widow's case can be linked with the divine judgment expressed in the coming destruction of the temple. Reading the episode within this context, the widow becomes a telling exemplar of a pious Jewish believer and thus a symbol of the faithful remnant of Israel.

Jesus' assessment of the poor widow's action is addressed to his disciples. Thus, 12:41-44 ties into one of the principle thematic lines of the second Gospel, namely discipleship. In contrast to the scribes from the preceding literary context, who are condemned and become anti-models (non-disciples), the poor widow should be seen as a model of true biblical piety, one which the disciples were expected to follow. Indeed, Jesus' disciples, having left their own property (1:18; 10:28), had already realized, to a large extent, this ideal epitomized by the widow. However, in order to gain total freedom with regard to their possessions and themselves – indispensable requirement of Jesus' call – they still had to free themselves from their own ambitions (9:33-34; 10:35-41). Following Jesus, in its totality, should finally carry the disciples not only to renounce material property, but also to deny their own selves. In the end, the freedom which they gain by their denying of self will allow them to follow the example of their master more perfectly (10:45), even going so far as giving their very lives (8:35).

Ultimately, the widow becomes an icon of Jesus himself: They both offer their *whole lives* to God. For this very reason there is no interaction between her and Jesus – and the Good News need not be announced to her.

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