Widow As the Altar of God: Retrieving Ancient Sources for Contemporary Discussions on Christian Discipleship

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WIDOW AS THE ALTAR OF GOD: RETRIEVING ANCIENT SOURCES FOR CONTEMPORARY DISCUSSIONS ON CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP

by

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ABSTRACT
WIDOW AS THE ALTAR OF GOD: RETRIEVING ANCIENT SOURCES FOR CONTEMPORARY DISCUSSIONS ON CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP

Lisa M. M. Moore, B.A., M.A.

Marquette University, 2019

Recent accounts of the history of Christian theology tend to neglect material concerning widows in antiquity and their contribution to Christian discipleship. In this dissertation I would like to offer a corrective along the lines of studying the contribution of widows in Jewish and Christian antiquity to the Catholic tradition. In particular, I contend that the Jewish roots of the widows’ contribution to Christian theology is also overlooked. The idea of the widow as an “altar of God,” which emerges in early Church literature, requires an understanding of the history of widows and the altar in Jewish and Christian antiquity.

What can be gleaned from mentions of widows, especially the enrolled widows, in the early Church? Firstly, enrolled widows in the early Church had historical precedents in the Old Testament that are sometimes overlooked by scholars, particularly in the omission of the Old Testament widow Judith. Secondly, the altar in Jewish and early Christian antiquity is significant; the altar has many functions and nuances of meaning, which are essential to understand the motif of the widow as the altar of God. Thirdly, these widows in the early Church offer a challenging Christian ethos, which derives from their good works and from a rootedness in ascetic practices that comprise a whole way of life for Christian discipleship.

By and large, extant material on the order of widows dwindles after the fourth century A.D. The history of widows in Jewish and Christian antiquity can inform recent endeavors in the Church to revitalize the ancient vocation of widowhood, and that of belonging to an order of widows. This dissertation proposes to trace the trajectory of the contribution of widows in antiquity to Catholic theology. Moreover, by exploring what the early Church meant when it referred to the widow as the “altar of God,” especially in light of the altar’s many functions, I hope to shed light on an ancient and little studied practice in the Church. I will then show how this study of ancient Christian widows can inform two recent endeavors in the United States to renew the order of widows.
DEDICATION AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Lisa M. M. Moore

This dissertation is dedicated to
Our Lady of Good Help,
who is the Theotokos,
the Immaculate Conception,
and the Abbess of Mount Athos,
amongst her beloved titles.

First thanks must be to God, in whom I live and move and have my being (Cf. Acts 17:28), our blessed Mother Mary, and all of the holy men and women whom I called upon for intercession along the way.

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INTRODUCTION

Recent accounts of the history of Christian theology tend to neglect material concerning widows in antiquity and their contribution to Christian discipleship.¹ In this dissertation I would like to offer a corrective along the lines of studying the contribution of widows in Jewish and Christian antiquity to the Catholic tradition. In particular, I contend that the Jewish roots of the widows’ contribution to Christian theology is overlooked. The idea of the widow as an “altar of God,” which emerges in the early Church, requires not just an understanding of the history of widows and widowhood, but also an understanding of the history of the altar in Jewish and Christian antiquity.

What can be gleaned from mentions of the widows, some of whom were enrolled in an order of widows, in the early Church? Firstly, enrolled widows in the early Church had historical precedents in the Old Testament that are sometimes overlooked by scholars, particularly in the widow Judith. The early Church saw herself as the continuation of the people of Israel. When texts on widows in the early Church are read in isolation from the earlier Jewish material relating to widows and Jewish spirituality, the assessments made about widows are deficient. Secondly, earlier Jewish material as it relates to the altar in Jewish and early Christian antiquity is important; the

¹ For examples, see Hubert Cunliffe-Jones, A History of Christian Doctrine (London: T & T Clark, 2006), which does not mention widows at all; Justo L. González, A History of Christian Thought (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), which only notes that in Montanism, a widow was not allowed to re-marry her husband died, and cites a Quaker document that mentions caring for the widow; John McManners, The Oxford History of Christianity (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), mentions widows in several places, but does not note their contribution to Christian theology; and Servais Pinckaers, The Sources of Christian Ethics (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), which mentions widows once, as an object of St. Augustine’s concern.
altar in Jewish antiquity has many functions and nuances of meaning, which are essential if one is to explore the motif of the widow as the altar of God that appears in early Church literature. Thirdly, these widows in the early Church offer a challenging Christian ethos, which derives not just from their good works, but equally from a rootedness in ascetic practices that comprise a whole way of life for Christian discipleship. The grounding in ascetical practices such as prayer, fasting, and continence, which underpins her relationship with the Lord, is what gives the holy widow in antiquity her authority, and this grounding can be overlooked by modern scholarship. Modern-day conceptions of power and authority, when applied anachronistically to the early Church literature, misrepresent the early Church literature on holy widows.

By and large, extant material on widows who belonged to the order of widows dwindles after the fourth century A.D. The history of widows and widowhood in Jewish and Christian antiquity can inform recent endeavors in the Church to revitalize the ancient vocation of widowhood, and that of belonging to an order of widows. Looking at the contemporary groups that are seeking to revive the order of widows can help illuminate some of the gaps that exist in the extant literature in antiquity as well.

Thus, this dissertation project proposes to trace the trajectory of the contribution to Christian life of widows who were honored in the early Church. Moreover, by exploring what the early Church meant when it referred to the widow as the altar of God, especially in light of the altar’s Jewish context and connotations, I hope to shed light on an ancient and little studied practice in the Church. I will then show how this
study of ancient Christian widows can inform two recent endeavors in the United States to renew the order of widows. I will conclude with suggestions for further research.

Present Status of the Problem

There is a dearth of material relating to widows in the early Church. The material that is available tends to undercut the place of widows in ancient Christianity in three main ways: by ignoring or glossing over the Jewish roots of widow traditions, by omitting the book of Judith from research on widows and the order of widows, and by oversimplifying or ignoring the ascetical aspects of the widow’s vocation. G. Clark states that membership in the orders of women in the early Church was offered back-handedly to women, insisting that the Church “accepted the cultural assumption that women were not suited to positions of authority, or capable of giving instruction except to other women.” Clark’s presupposition seems to be fairly prevalent in scholarship, and scholars such as Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza and Charlotte Methuen by and large argue from the same perspective. Such scholarship helpfully points out the equivocal position that women, and particularly widows, found themselves in, as well as provides hypothetical explanations for Church regulations on the widows’ actions. However, such scholarship often misapplies modern views of power to antiquity, resulting in deficient conclusions to questions posed about widows in antiquity.

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Roger Gryson provides a different perspective on material on widows in the early Church, and focuses part of his research on the order of widows in the *Didascalia apostolorum* and the *Apostolic Constitutions*. He notes that widows are often mentioned with the stranger and the orphan in Scripture, but as time goes on the widow is numbered with clerics and virgins. Gryson notes the elevation in the status of widows in the *Didascalia*, and he observes the primacy of place that is eventually given to virgins over widows in the *Apostolic Constitutions*: “the systematic association of virgins and widows, and the priority granted to the former, prove that the Constitutions manifest a special view of the ascetic aspect of the ideal of widowhood and that they see in it an imperfect realization of the ideal of continence realized in a perfect way in virginity.”

Gryson remarks that the author of the *Didascalia* chooses “an image already used by Polycarp” and “declares that widows and orphans have a right to be considered a symbol of the altar….Just as the altar is immovable and solidly fixed in one spot, the widow must stay at home and not waste her time running from one house to another.” There apparently was a problem with widows who scandalized others with their gossip and idleness, and these “are not widows but wallets…in an untranslatable play on words (*me cheras, alla peras—non viduae, sed viduli*).” Gryson also notes the special intercessory authority that the widow had; indeed the prayers of the widow at the bedside of a sick person “were granted a particular power; these petitions were regularly linked to a propitiatory fast and accompanied by an

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2 Ibid., 59.
3 Ibid., 37.
4 Ibid.
imposition of the hand.” The widows’ ascetic discipline in continence and prayer led them to be heard by God with special favor, something that is also demonstrated in the Old Testament.

Others fill in gaps in modern scholarship relating to widows in antiquity by incorporating the important motif of the widow as the altar of God in their works. Susanna Elm asserts that the term widow (χήρα) had a technical meaning by the turn of the first century A.D., one that signified than a woman who had lost her husband: “it designated one having a specific role within the community: a woman who, as an ‘altar of God,’ led an exemplary life of continence, and whose prayers were therefore of a particular significance for the entire congregation.” 8 Bonnie Thurston recognizes that “the importance of ‘the altar of God’…was its focal point in public worship.” 9 Thurston argues that the widow was called an “altar of God” because she received alms, and also because she interceded for the Church community.10

While these scholars all touch upon the use of the “altar of God” motif, none offer a full explication of this powerful and provocative image by taking into account the complexity of the functions of the altar in Jewish antiquity. It is my goal, in this dissertation, to present a more complete explication of the history of widows and widowhood in Jewish and Christian antiquity, especially as the history relates to the order of widows that develops in the early Church; to show that the book of Judith is a hinge between the Old and New Testament eras in the history of widowhood; and to explore what is meant by the motif of the widow as an altar of God that is introduced in

the early Church and which is cited by several patristic sources. The widow evolves from someone who is pitied in the Old Testament into an authoritative figure who is to be emulated in the early Church.

The Path This Study Will Take

In many ways, the status of widows we see in the New Testament is a logical continuation of the status of widows reflected in the Old Testament. For example, both Testaments contain admonitions to take care of the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the stranger, indicating that these classes were vulnerable. In the Old Testament, the widow is encouraged to remarry. By the time widows are mentioned in the New Testament, however, and into the third century A.D., the widow is listed with God’s saints and chosen ones (in both Luke 18:7 and Acts 9:41), she is considered an “altar of God” (Didascalia apostolorum 15), and some widows are encouraged not to remarry if possible. Having established background on the status of widows in the Old Testament and examined prophetic admonitions as evidence for the vulnerable status of widows, and shown that the book of Judith shows a change in how widows were viewed, I will demonstrate the continuities and discontinuities of widows’ status between the Old and New Testaments.

In Chapter One, I study widows in the Ancient Near East and in the Old Testament, as well as present the different functions and nuances of the altar in Jewish antiquity. Looking at the history of the altar in Jewish antiquity will assist in investigating the motif of the widow as an altar of God in early Christianity.
In Chapter Two, I study the widow Judith in the Old Testament, who differs from most of the widows presented in Scripture to that point; Judith is young, beautiful, prays and fasts regularly, chooses permanent continence after the death of her husband, and serves as a heroine in the narrative. Judith serves as a hinge between the widows presented in the Old Testament era and those who become part of an order in the New Testament era, and who are called there for the first time in early Church literature an altar of God. Bruce Winter asserts that “the extant evidence, whether epigraphic or literary, indicates that, compared with their sisters in Classical Greek and Hellenistic times, some first-century women did enjoy an important measure of social interaction denied to Greek women in a previous era”; however, Jan Bremmer states, “[I]n the first century of our era women were in many ways not highly regarded by the Jewish males of Palestine, and widows least of all.” For example, when Jesus raises the widow’s son in the story of the Widow of Nain (Luke 7:11-17), he restores the woman’s hope for survival and status in the community. This passage suggests that the widow was still vulnerable, and that the widow’s son was still guarantor of her protection and status when Christianity was beginning.

Thus, in Chapter Three, I will study widows in the New Testament, and I will focus on the Gospel of Luke as opposed to other gospels because, as Barbara Reid notes, “Luke has more episodes about widows than any other evangelist.” Reid further notes that although one reason for numerous mentions of widows in the Lukan

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documents might be a re-iteration of Christ’s teaching to take care of the poor and oppressed, many Lukan stories do not portray the widows as recipients of charity; rather, they minister in the community. Furthermore, Reid suggests that the number of times that Luke mentions widows may reflect the increasing number of widows in Christian communities and their increasing importance in Church ministry.

The common threads between widows in the Old Testament and the book of Judith, on one hand, and the New Testament widows, on the other hand, show that the widow is an important link in connecting Christian ascetic practices to ancient Judaism. Tabitha and her widows (Acts 9:36-43), in particular, help us to see that the widow may have been a hinge between Jewish tradition and the newly forming Church. I will next explore 1 Timothy 5, which contains a list of prerequisites for entrance into an order of widows, the first of its kind mentioned in the New Testament. I will also look at what happens to the altar in the New Testament era, so that we can see the impact of this development on the motif of the widow as an altar of God that develops in early Christianity.

In Chapter Four, I will move to the admonitions and directions to widows in the second-century and third-century Church literature. A key text in my treatment of the patristic Church will be the two chapters devoted to the order of widows in the Didascalia apostolorum, which contains references to both the order of widows, and the motif of the widow as an “altar of God.” I will also examine texts by St. Ignatius of Antioch, St. Polycarp of Smyrna, Tertullian, St. Methodius of Olympus, and from the Apostolic Constitutions that mention either the order of widows or the widows as an altar of God. Other patristic texts discuss widows, but to my knowledge they do not
contain references to either the order of widows or the motif of the widow as the altar of God. The widow, previously pitied and scorned, does indeed occupy a special place in the Church as an altar of God by the third century of Christianity; but the order of widows dwindles after the fourth century, which I will discuss also.

Chapter Five will discuss two endeavors to revive the order of widows in the United States today. I will use an article by M. Therese Lysaught as a springboard for this treatment, and use the findings of my first four chapters to illuminate this contemporary phenomenon of reviving the ancient order of widows.

CHAPTER 1—WIDOWS IN ANTIQUITY

INTRODUCTION

In many ways, the status of widows in the New Testament is a logical continuation of their status in the Old Testament. For example, both Testaments contain admonitions to God’s people to take care of the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the stranger, indicating that these particular people were vulnerable. The Old Testament encourages the Jewish widow to enter into a Levirate marriage if she can. It is curious to note that by the time the widow is mentioned in the New Testament, however, she is listed with God’s saints and chosen ones (in both Luke 18:7 and Acts 9:41), she is considered an “altar of God” by the third century A.D. (Didascalia apostolorum, 9, 15), and she is advised not to remarry.1 In this chapter I seek to establish the foundation of the status of widows in the Ancient Near East and Jewish antiquity, and I study injunctions and prophetic admonitions as evidence for the vulnerable status of widows in the Ancient Near East and ancient Israel. I will then investigate what the altar was used for in the Old Testament, to build a foundation upon which to explain the motif of the widow as the altar of God in subsequent chapters of this dissertation.

That the widow is grouped with the poor and the orphan implies that the widow, in addition to needing assistance, was also in danger of being despised (along with the poor and the orphan). Karel van der Toorn states: “It is true that her underprivileged position elicited commiseration and pity; yet she was also slightly ridiculous. By some

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people she was not merely mocked at but even abused.”

Pnina Galpaz-Feller corroborates van der Toorn’s idea that the laws that mandated care of the widow instruct us about the vulnerable plight of the widow and highlight that the “widow was subject to oppression by strongmen who seized power and stole their property because they usually did not have a male patron in their household to protect them”; thus, the widow’s situation was entrusted to God because he was her last and only hope for justice (Deut. 10:18: “He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow”; Ps. 146:9: “The Lord watches over the sojourners, he upholds the widow and the fatherless”). According to van der Toorn, “His care for her is frequently couched in legal metaphors,” for example Deut. 10:18, Ps. 146:9, and Ps. 68:5 (“Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation”); furthermore, “comparable metaphors are known from Mesopotamia,” in which the gods are supposed to care for and protect the widow.

Turid Seim discusses the etymology of χήρα (“widow”), noting that it connotes “‘a wife who survives her husband’” but also “‘a woman who lives without a man’”; ‘almanah is the Hebrew equivalent, thought to derive from ’lm which means literally “to be dumb.” Thus the widow was one without a voice, and one who had no one to speak on her behalf.

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4 Van der Toorn, “Public Image,” 19.
THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

Mesopotamia

To support his thesis that the widow was vulnerable and that she was despised in her vulnerability, van der Toorn cites Ancient Near Eastern documents in addition to Old Testament texts. For example, one Sumerian proverb depicts the widow as a pauper who “‘scavenges evenings on the road for something to eat.’” Yet another Sumerian proverb mocks the dilapidated state of the widow’s transportation: “‘the ass of the widow is fit (only) for breaking wind.’”

A Sumerian hymn (c. 2100 B.C.) proclaims that a goddess named Nanshe is “the guardian of the widow” and that Marduk (Babylon’s god) “provides justice to the orphaned girl, the widow, the anguished and the sleepless one.” Public treatment of the widow was sometimes very harsh and abusive, which was probably part of the reason why divine favor was petitioned. The predominant image of the widow was one of the poor and virtuous, although there were ambiguities as to how she was viewed (for example, a symbol of goodness and virtue vs. potential seductress and enchantress, prayerful vs. cursing, praised for wisdom vs. feared for her slyness).

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12 Ibid.
A Neo-Babylonian text during the reign of Nabonidus (556-538 B.C.) includes a record of a widow who gave her sons to the temple as oblates so that they would not starve.\textsuperscript{13} A substantial number of widows did not have means of subsistence, as evidenced by institutions like the millhouse in Mesopotamia, where flour was ground. The millhouse was “staffed with women slaves and their children, and served also as a poorhouse for widows.”\textsuperscript{14} The millhouse was also a place of detention where life was hard and unpleasant.\textsuperscript{15} The temple allotted portions to widows and former female slaves who were joined to widows’ groups.\textsuperscript{16}

**Widows in Egypt and Maat: The Care of the Widow as the Duty of the King**

In Egypt, a woman could own and lease property, of which she remained the proprietor even during her marriage.\textsuperscript{17} An Egyptian woman retained a third of the common property upon the death of her husband, or in the case of a divorce, in which the husband retained two-thirds of the property.\textsuperscript{18} Sometimes there was another contract indicating the transfer of property away from the wife, in which case one wonders what became of the woman then. Galpaz-Feller does not go into detail about what happened in such cases, but states that in other situations the husband willed all of the accumulated property and possessions to the wife alone.\textsuperscript{19} Galpaz-Feller notes that if a widow was left

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 20-21.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 21.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18} Galpaz-Feller, “The Widow,” 243, notes that “marriage contracts in Egypt have been preserved since the eighteenth dynasty.”
\end{flushleft}
with insufficient money or property to support her and her children, then she either went back home to live with her parents or was left to the mercy of friends to support her and her children.\textsuperscript{20}

There is no collection of laws that has survived from ancient Egypt. However, we do glean information about the social and economic status of widows from “civil contracts, injunctions, private letters, autobiographical literature, didactic literature, the literature of the dead, and the like”; some of this information dates all the way back to the Old Kingdom (2686–2181 B.C.).\textsuperscript{21} According to Galpaz-Feller, ancient Egyptian didactic literature instructs people not to harm widows, in part because the person who harms the widow is likely to harm himself as well.\textsuperscript{22} These instructions are reminiscent of the biblical injunctions against harming widows that include warnings against the oppressor, who stands to bring the judgment of God upon himself for harming one under God’s special protection.\textsuperscript{23}

Ancient Near Eastern literature, specifically from Egypt, groups the poor, the widow, and the orphan together “in an almost constant literary pattern,” much in the same way Scripture groups these classes of people, which will be examined in the next section.\textsuperscript{24} Protecting the orphan and the widow was important to an Egyptian ruler who

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{20} Galpaz-Feller, “The Widow,” 244. I am indebted to Dr. Deirdre Dempsey for her suggestion that widows may have turned to prostitution for sustaining themselves. See also Karel van der Toorn, “Female Prostitution in Payment of Vows in Ancient Israel,” \textit{Journal of Biblical Studies} 108, no. 2 (1989): 193-205. This article discusses the issue of female prostitution in ancient Israel and its Near Eastern context.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Galpaz-Feller, “The Widow,” 241.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{23} For example, “you shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry; my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children orphans” (Exod. 22:22); God does not tolerate injustice against the widow or orphan: “cursed be anyone who deprives the alien, the orphan, and the widow of justice” (Deut. 27:19).
\item \textsuperscript{24} Galpaz-Feller, “The Widow,” 240.
\end{itemize}
wanted to be a good ruler to his people and who wanted to honor Maat. Christopher Faraone and Emily Teeter assert that Maat in ancient Egypt was “the abstract concept of truth and correctness in the cosmic and social spheres,” which was embodied by the goddess Maat. According to Galpaz-Feller, Maat was “the goddess of justice, who represented the concept of morality, truth, order, and cosmic equilibrium which was produced in the world since the days of creation.” Maat was portrayed as a young woman goddess “most easily distinguished by her single-ostrich feather headdress,” which stood for truth. There is textual reference to the goddess Maat as early as the Fifth Dynasty (c. 2500 B.C.).

Care of the widow fell under the provenance of the gods, and the ruler was the physical representative of a god on earth; therefore, it was the ruler’s duty to see to it that the widow was cared for in the tradition of maintaining Maat. By the time of the Middle Kingdom (c. 2055-1650 B.C.), biographies of rulers and high officials include “assistance to widows…as part of the ‘negative confession’ of sins that the deceased has not committed.” How one behaved in this life indicated how successful one would be living in the afterlife; that is, if one did not live in a moral way in this life, one could not

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25 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
29 Ibid., 186.
expect to be successful in the next life. The concept of Maat was connected intrinsically with the idea of just and moral Egyptian kingship, so much so that from the Fourth Dynasty onward (2630 B.C.), the king incorporated Maat’s name into his own, for example: “Maat-ke-Re (‘The Spirit of Re is Maat’, prenomen of Hatshepsut), Neb-Maat-Re (‘Re is the Possessor of Maat’, prenomen of Amunhotep III), and Wser-Maat-Re (‘Powerful are Maat and Re (?)’; prenomen of Ramesses II and III”).

THE OLD TESTAMENT

In the Old Testament, God’s special concern for the widow, the poor, and the orphan is demonstrated through the biblical commands that support these groups. By and large the widow and the orphan are paired together. Many times the sojourner is included in this list also. Instances of the explicit pairing of the widow and the orphan can be found in Exodus and Deuteronomy. For example, the Lord proclaims in Exod. 22:22-24: “You shall not afflict any widow or orphan. If you do afflict them, and they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry; and my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless.” In Deut. 10:17-18, the Lord is the arbiter of justice for the widow and the orphan: “For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the terrible God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing.” Deut. 14:28-29 says that

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32 Galpaz-Feller, “The Widow,” 241. In both Ancient Near Eastern and (later) Christian teaching, how one lived the present life mattered in determining where, and how, one lived in the afterlife (Ancient Near Eastern) and eternity (Christian).

33 Faraone and Teeter, “Egyptian Maat,” 188. “Prenomen” is used as a variant of “praenomen.”


35 RSV.
widows and orphans (and the stranger or alien) are to be provided for through tithing: “At the end of every three years you shall bring forth all the tithe of your produce from the same year, and lay it up within your towns; and the Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance with you, and the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, who are within your towns, shall come and eat and be filled; that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands that you do.”

In Deut. 16:11,14, the widows and orphans are included in those who should keep festivals: “Rejoice before the Lord your God—you and your sons and your daughters, your male and female slaves, the Levites resident in your towns, as well as the strangers, the orphans, and the widows who are among you—at the place that the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his name,” and “Rejoice during your festival, you and your sons and your daughters, your male and female slaves, as well as the Levites, the strangers, the orphans, and the widows resident in your towns.” Justice for the widow and the orphan is addressed in Deut. 24:17 and Deut. 24:19-21: “You shall not pervert the justice due to the sojourner or to the fatherless, or take a widow’s garment in pledge”; and “When you reap your harvest in your field, and have forgotten a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow; that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat your olive trees, you shall not go over the boughs again; it shall be for the sojourner, the

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36 Tithing towards the orphans and widows is part of keeping the Lord’s commandments: “When you have finished paying all the tithe of your produce in the third year, which is the year of tithing, giving it to the Levite, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, that they may eat within your towns and be filled, then you shall before the Lord your God, ‘I have removed the sacred portion out of my house, and moreover I have given it to the Levite, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, according to all thy commandment which thou hast commanded me; I have not transgressed any of thy commandments, neither have I forgotten them’” (Deut. 26:12-13).
fatherless, and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not glean it afterward; it shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow.”

Deuteronomy mentions the widow many times in passages that make it evident that the widow is legally and socially vulnerable. In 2 Kings 4:1, a widow implores Elisha, “‘Your servant my husband is dead; and you know that your servant feared the Lord, but the creditor has come to take my two children to be his slaves.’” As we have seen in Deut. 24:17, prohibitions of creditors taking a widow’s garment or ox for a pledge alert the audience to this problem in Jewish antiquity. Job 31:16 proclaims that if Job had “caused the eyes of the widow to fail” he “could not have faced his [God’s] majesty.” Van der Toorn views Job 31:16 as evidence that some widows were beggars because of their poverty; it is not clear that this verse directly refers to a begging widow, unless the reference to the widow’s failing eyes mean that it would be more difficult for a blind widow to beg or glean from the fields.

There are numerous warnings against those who deprive the widow of justice, and admonitions to landowners to let the widows glean from the fields. The one who acts unjustly towards the widow and the orphan is cursed: “‘Cursed be he who perverts the justice due to the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow.’ And all the people shall say

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37 While I do not agree with Harold V. Bennet’s thesis that Deuteronomy essentially “exacerbated the plight of widows, strangers, and orphans,” I found his book useful in reporting scholarly debate on the issue, as well as historical information on the legal status of widows and other vulnerable classes in Ancient Israel. See H. Bennett, Injustice Made Legal (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002).

38 See also Job 24:3: “They drive away the ass of the fatherless; they take the widow’s ox for a pledge.” See van der Toorn, “Public Image,” 20.


40 The Lord commands justice for the widow in: Deut. 10:17-18; Deut. 24:17; Deut. 27:19; and Sir. 35:17-22. The Lord commands gleaning rights be recognized for the widow in Deut. 24:19-21, Lev. 19:9-10, Lev. 23:22. Ruth 2:2-3 is an example of such gleaning. Gleaning was important because aliens, orphans, and widows typically did not own land; thus, they depended upon others for food and the necessities of life. See Walter Brueggemann, Deuteronomy (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2001), 162.
‘Amen’” (Deut. 27:19). Galpaz-Feller notes that the poor could eat by gleaning the remnants of the fields, or by harvesting the corners of the fields that the farmers had been instructed to leave unharvested, according to Deut. 24:21.41 Tithing was another way in which Scripture instructed care of the poor, as seen in Deut. 14:28-29 and Deut. 26:12-15. Those who kept these and other commandments would have their work blessed by the Lord (Deut. 14: 28), and the Lord would also set them “high above all nations that he has made, in praise and in fame and in honor” (Deut. 26:19).42

The authors of the Old Testament cite many examples of God’s concern for the widow. For example, God commands people not to oppress the widow or orphan: “thus says the Lord of hosts: Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy each to his brother, do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor” (Zech. 7:9-10). God is the “father of the fatherless and protector of widows” (Ps. 68:5). Along with God’s concern for justice towards the widow, he hears the prayers of the widow with special consideration, notably in Sir. 35:17-22, in which God recognizes the petition of the widow and promises justice for the humble suppliant: “He will not ignore the supplication of the fatherless, nor the widow when she pours out her story. Do not the tears of the widow run down her cheek as she cries out against him who has caused them to fall? He whose service is pleasing to the Lord will be accepted, and his prayer will reach to the clouds. The prayer of the humble pierces the clouds, and he will not be consoled until it reaches the Lord; he will not desist until the Most High visits him, and does justice for the righteous, and executes judgment.”

42 Ibid.
The Old Testament implies not only God’s favor for the widow and her prayers, but also God’s favor for those who care for the widow: “Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool” (Isa. 1:16-18). 43 Caring for the widow and the orphan, then, is necessary for a pure practice of one’s religion. Pleading on behalf of the widow is a way to be made blameless in God’s sight.

The various Scriptural illustrations of God’s concern for justice towards the widow, his consideration of the prayers of the widow, and his promises to those who care for the widow reflect the concern for and importance placed on the widow and the widowed state. 44 It is not only the widow who benefits from the outreach of compassion, however. Sins become like snow and wool for the one who assists the widow, and as the

43 This verse is echoed in the New Testament: “religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (James 1:27).

44 More biblical illustrations of the Lord’s concern for justice for the widow include: Ps. 94:6, 23 (the wicked slay the widow, the Lord will avenge all the righteous who are wronged); Ps. 146:9 (the Lord upholds the widow and the fatherless); Prov. 15: 25 (the Lord maintains the widow’s boundaries); Isa. 1:17 (exhortation to “plead for the widow”); Isa. 1:23 (criticism of princes—“they do not defend the fatherless, and the widow’s cause does not reach them”); Jer. 22:3-5 (the Lord says “do no wrong or violence to the alien, the fatherless, and the widow…But if you will not heed these words, I swear by myself, says the Lord, that this house shall become a desolation”); Mal. 3:5 (the Lord “will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hireling in his wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the sojourner”). Another scriptural illustration of the Lord’s consideration of the prayers of the widow is found in Jer. 49:11 (the Lord says, “Leave your fatherless children, I will keep them alive; and let your widows trust in me”). More illustrations of God’s promises to those who care for the widow include: Jer. 7:6 (if the men of Judah do not “oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow” they will be allowed to dwell in the land of their fathers); Jer. 22:3-5 (the Lord says “do no wrong or violence to the alien, the fatherless, and the widow…for if you indeed obey this word, then there shall enter the gates of this house kings who sit on the throne of David, riding in chariots and horses, they and their servants, and their people”); Ezek. 22:6-7 (the princes are rebuked because “…the fatherless and the widow are wronged in you”).
widow trajectory continues into early Christianity, it becomes more clearly the privilege of the Church members to serve the widow.

The Childless Widow

Distinctions were made between the widow with offspring and a childless widow. The childless widow was even more vulnerable than one with children. Marriage in Israel was taken very seriously and was “a vital occasion in a group’s history.” Indeed, “the marital alliances formed by individuals determine the makeup of the community’s future. Any group concerned about its future has to give serious thought to whom its members will marry.” If marriage and progeny were a central concern, the widow could be marginalized (in part) because she was not viewed as contributing anymore to that crucial aspect of community survival; she was vulnerable in her lack of fecundity.

Dvora Weisberg notes the sorrow and shame that came with childlessness, both for men and for women, citing Gen. 15:2-3, Gen. 30:1-2, and 1 Sam. 1:1-11 as examples. Among the responses to this state were “prayer (Gen. 25:21; 1 Sam. 1:10-11) and surrogacy (Gen. 16:1-2; 30:3-8).” Barren widows in particular were pitied and suffered emotional and spiritual anguish. Progeny was a way of assuring protection for the widow because “in ancient Israel, women did not normally own land, which made them economically dependent on men, first on their fathers, then on their husbands, and ultimately on their sons.” To be childless was an extra burden to the widow, as in the widow of Zarephath, because the child is “her future, the one who will take care of her in

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45 Tikva Frymer-Kensky, Reading the Women of the Bible (New York: Routledge, 1999), xx.
46 Ibid.
her old age, since she has no husband, no ties to the community that are bound in blood. Without her child she could die or be put outside the confines of the town to beg. The child is her hope for daily life. To save the child’s life is to save hers as well.” A widow with small children was differentiated from a widow with grown children; a widow with small children was expected to support herself and her family, whereas a widow with grown children would be expected to be supported by her children. The loss of a son, then, would be a particular grief to a widow because she would have lost the male protection of both spouse and son.

**Options for the Widow, Including Levirate Marriage**

A childless widow might return to her father’s house, as is seen in Judah’s suggestion to Tamar in Gen. 38:11. Galpaz-Feller notes that Lev. 22:13 supports this idea as well, and she underscores the importance of the childless state of the priest’s widow who may return to her father’s house; if the widow had children, the children would belong to her late spouse’s household, and the widow’s parents would not have needed to support her and her children. Van der Toorn asserts that a widow may also have been supported by the Temple, as tithes were distributed through the Temple, but it is not clear to what extent she would have received aid (Deut. 14:28-9, Deut. 26:12-14). Furthermore, it is not clear how reliable Temple aid was; that is, tithes depended upon the

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49 Megan McKenna, *Not Counting Women and Children* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994), 152-3. The widow of Zarephath in 1 Kings 17:1-24 shares what little food she has with Elijah; when her son dies, Elijah cries out to the Lord to return the boy’s life back to him, and the Lord restores the widow’s son back to her.


51 Ibid.

52 Van der Toorn, “Public Image,” 21.
honesty of the giver, and also on unpredictable variables such as crop yield for a given year.

According to Galpaz-Feller, a widow was not supposed to be considered inferior in her community, but as the biblical texts indicate, she was socially and economically vulnerable.\(^{53}\) The widow is grouped with the orphan and the stranger, but Galpaz-Feller notes that “the stranger was foreign to the household he had joined, whereas the widow has been accepted in a household.” \(^{54}\) Galpaz-Feller speculates that a widow’s perceived inferiority may have originated in the fact that she had been an outsider marrying into the paternal household, and when her husband died, she had no one to protect her. Thus, the widow and her child(ren) may have become “strangers” when they lost their previously held rights in the paternal household and became, along with the stranger, dependent upon the mercy of non-familial people.\(^{55}\)

Galpaz-Feller maintains that the widow lived out her life in one of several ways upon her husband’s death. One option the widow had was to live by herself, as far as she had means to do so. There is biblical evidence that a widow could remain in control of property and inheritance upon her husband’s death.\(^{56}\) However, the biblical record does not indicate how a widow with property was able to keep the property, whether it was passed down from husband to wife, whether the property came with her from her parents’

\(^{54}\) Ibid.
\(^{55}\) Ibid.
\(^{56}\) Galpaz-Feller, “The Widow,” 233, citing Judg. 17:1-6 (Micah’s mother has money and lives with her son), 1 Sam. 25:42 (Abigail travels with her maidservants), 2 Kings 8:1-3 (the Shunammite petitions the king to get her field and home back), Ruth 4:3-9 (Naomi controls her late husband’s property and field), Prov. 15:25 (which describes a widow whose field was seized illicitly, indicating that the widow had one in the first place), and Job 24:3 (a widow cultivates her field with an ox).
home, or was “left to their use as a brideprice.” The widow Judith remained in control of her husband’s property after his death, according to the author of the book of Judith, which I will examine in the next chapter.

The word dowry as such does not appear in the Bible, but there are several references to this practice. The dowry was property given to a daughter by her father when she married, instead of being inherited when her parents died. Such property typically consisted of “movables such as money, clothing, furniture, or jewelry, and it rarely included a field….One of the functions of the dowry was to assure the woman’s livelihood in case she should be widowed or divorced.” However, there was a stigma of some kind attached to widowhood, as evidenced by Lev. 21:14, which states that the High Priest could not marry a widow, a divorced woman, a woman who had been defiled, or a harlot—he could only marry a virgin from his own people. Ezek. 44:22 asserts that this law applies to all priests, with the addition that a priest could also marry the widow of another priest.

Another option the widow had was to “engage in a levirate marriage (yibbûm) and in that way remain in her late husband’s household.” Levir means “the brother of a husband.” Levirate marriage was invoked when a man died with no male progeny, in which case his widow was allowed to marry her husband’s brother, in the hope that the family name could be continued. Yibbûm protected the male line and kept the property

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57 Galpaz-Feller, “The Widow,” 234-35. The brideprice, notes Galpaz-Feller here, “was paid by the husband to the bride’s father in money or kind, and the latter was supposed to place part of that sum at his daughter’s disposal.”
60 Ibid.
61 Ibid., 236.
62 Ibid. See Deut. 25:5-10. For a more detailed discussion of the levirate laws, see Tikva Frymer-Kensky, Reading, 266-71.
in the paternal family line, but it also protected the widow by supporting her with her late husband’s property. A son born to her second husband (previously her brother-in-law) was considered to be a son of the deceased spouse and stood to inherit the property of his mother’s first husband.\(^{63}\) Weisberg notes that a childless widow was in an awkward position in her husband’s home because, as one scholar argues, “it was the bearing of children that truly made a woman part of her husband’s family”; thus, a levirate marriage could assure her standing and protection within her husband’s family.\(^{64}\)

Galpaz-Feller asserts that most of the biblical accounts of widows indicate that they had an adult relative or kinsman to whom they could turn for protection or advocacy; others had no one.\(^{65}\) In the cases of those who had kinsmen, however, it is notable that the widow’s family did not always provide for her, whether because they did not want to assume the economic burden of another person (possibly with children), because the widow was not on good terms with her husband’s family, or because the widow’s relative(s) did not want to associate with someone who had an inferior social status.\(^{66}\)

Judith Antonelli discusses the difference between contemporaneous levirate practices in pagan cultures and the Torah prescriptions.\(^{67}\) Antonelli reports that the Torah

\(^{63}\) Galpaz-Feller, “The Widow,” 236. Dvora Weisberg highlights the following biblical examples in “The Widow of Our Discontent,” at 404. Deut. 25:5-11 is the law spelling out levirate marriage. Gen. 38:1-11 tells the story of Tamar, her deceased spouse Er, and her brother in-law Onan, who “did not perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her” “lest he should give offspring to his brother,” and who was subsequently slain by the Lord for failing in his duty. Ruth 4:1-17 relates the story of the widow Ruth, who is taken in marriage by Boaz, a kinsman of her dead husband. Boaz states that he takes Ruth in marriage “to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance, that the name of the dead may not be cut off from among his brethren and from the gate of his native place” (Ruth 4:10).


\(^{66}\) Ibid., 233.

limited levirate practice in key ways. For example, “the Torah limited the custom to the brother’s wife. A man could no longer marry the childless widow of his father, his son, or his uncle,” which was allowed in pagan cultures. The Torah also provided a way for the brother-in-law to avoid levirate marriage through a *halizah* (“removal”), a ceremony which “released the widow from her dead husband’s brothers,” as is described in Deut. 25:7-10. According to Weisberg, “the surviving brother may not want to marry his brother’s widow. While the leaders of the community can intervene, there is apparently no way to force a man to ‘perform his duty.’ The most a scorned widow can hope for is to humiliate her brother-in-law” through the *halizah* ceremony. Scripture does not indicate what the options for the rejected widow were. It could be that the widow was free to marry someone from outside the family, but that is one speculation based upon a contemporary interpretation and application of Deut. 25:5-10. Because the widow had the right to publicly humiliate her unwilling brother-in-law, we can surmise that the widow may not have been free to marry outside of her deceased spouse’s family, or that there may have been a stigma attached to either remarrying outside of the family or

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68 Antonelli, *Image*, 106-107. Deut. 25:5-10 states “If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the dead shall not be married outside the family to a stranger; her husband’s brother shall go in to her, and take her as his wife, and perform the duty of a husband’s brother to her. And the first son whom she bears shall succeed to the name of his brother who is dead, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel. And if the man does not wish to take his brother’s wife, then his brother’s wife shall go up to the gate to the elders, and say, ‘My husband’s brother refuses to perpetuate his brother’s name in Israel; he will not perform the duty of a husband’s brother to me.’ Then the elders of his city shall call him, and speak to him: and if he persists, saying, ‘I do not wish to take her,’ then his brother’s wife shall go up to him in the presence of the elders, and pull his sandal off his foot, and spit in his face; and she shall answer and say, ‘So shall it be done to the man who does not build up his brother’s house.’ And the name of his house shall be called in Israel, The house of him that had his sandal pulled off.”


70 Ibid.

71 “Rabbinic law, however, requires the surviving brother to exercise his ‘right of refusal’ and to release his brother’s widow to marry someone else,” says Rabbi Hayim Donin, *To Be a Jew—A Guide to Jewish Observance in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1972), 295.
remarriage as a widow. Otherwise, why was there a dramatic ceremony that acknowledged the rejection of the widow and the subsequent humiliation of the brother-in-law? Although the widow’s status was still vulnerable, the widow’s lot improved in written and oral Torah:

Biblical law (written Torah) represents the first stage of lifting the widow out of her slave status in the pagan world. Rabbinic law (oral Torah), which has historically remained flexible in order to retain its relevance in the face of changing social conditions, continued that process. As a widow’s social status improved, chalitzah was given an increasing priority over yibum, until eventually (among Ashkenazi Jews and in Israel), yibum was, in effect, legally cancelled out of existence.\(^\text{72}\)

Bonnie Thurston asserts that a widow could return to her family after her husband’s death, but only after paying back her purchase price to her husband’s heirs; if she could not, the widow remained in a low position in his family.\(^\text{73}\) Furthermore, the widow could be sold into slavery for debt.\(^\text{74}\) The widow was expected to wait for the levirate marriage, and only after a public refusal by her brother-in-law to marry her could the widow remarry outside of her husband’s family. Thurston notes that the Old Testament cites remarriage only four times and mentions only two instances of remarriage “outside of the levirate tradition.”\(^\text{75}\)

Weisberg highlights an important point about levirate marriage, the potential for the levir of the deceased to decline marrying his sister-in-law.\(^\text{76}\) A levir might refuse on

\(^{72}\) Antonelli, Image, 107-108. Antonelli does not state that progressive replacement of levirate marriage by halizah elevates the status of a widow per se, but rather asserts that levirate marriage became less common as the widow’s social status improved.

\(^{73}\) Thurston, Widows, 13.

\(^{74}\) Ibid.

\(^{75}\) Thurston, Widows, 13, and 120 fn. 28 and 29. Thurston cites Lev. 21:14, Ruth 1:9, 13; and Ezek. 44:22 as instances of remarriage in the Old Testament, and 1 Sam. 25 and 2 Sam. 11 as instances of remarriage outside levirate tradition. Thurston notes that it was common for Jewish widows to remarry by the Roman period, however.

the basis of the inheritance laws. For example, if his brother died childless, the inheritance would have been divided up between the remaining living siblings (instead of given to the widow), and having to marry the sister-in-law would result in the loss of the inheritance for the decedent’s siblings. If the brother-in-law united with his brother’s widow in a levirate marriage, the first child that was born (even if it was the second husband’s) was “credited” as the deceased husband’s child; thus, that child would receive the deceased man’s name and inheritance.77 In short, Deut. 25 “both mandates (25.5-6) and provides an exemption (25.7-10) from levirate marriage,” highlighting the discomfort or ambivalence about the practice of levirate marriage.78 Scriptural evidence suggests that the discomfort was on the part of the surviving male heirs, and not on the part of the widow, who needed protection.

Weisberg notes that the biblical text addresses the problem of a man not wishing to enter into a levirate marriage, without addressing the problem of a widow rejecting a levir, presumably because a widow was vulnerable and did not have many other options for her own protection and that of her children.79 Moreover, according to Weisberg, one cannot assume that brotherly affection and charitable reciprocity were to be expected from brothers, not only in light of the biblical injunctions regarding levirate marriage that suggest otherwise, but also in light of biblical stories that highlight the tension and competition between brothers.80 The stories of Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, and Joseph and his brothers remind one of the problems that could exist between brothers; these problems could be further exacerbated by a brother’s widow.

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77 Ibid., 408.
78 Ibid., 411.
79 Ibid., 412.
80 Ibid., 412-413.
Finally, Weisberg cites Gen. 38 as an example of the complications that could come from an undesired levirate marriage. In Gen. 38, Judah tried to marry his daughter-in-law Tamar to his son Onan after Er’s death (Judah’s son and Tamar’s first husband). Onan did not wish to provide an heir for his dead brother, so “he spilled the semen on the ground, lest he should give offspring to his brother. And what he did was displeasing in the sight of the Lord, and he slew him also” (Gen. 38:9-10). Upon Onan’s death, Judah did not wish his son Shelah to wed Tamar for fear that he would die like Onan. Judah, recently widowed, believed that Tamar was a prostitute because she had wrapped herself up and covered her face. Tamar then became pregnant with Judah’s children and Judah acknowledged “her claim on him.” Tamar gave birth to twin sons, and was presumably under Judah’s protection henceforth. Tamar was “judged ‘more righteous’ than Judah, a character whose prominence increases after his encounter with Tamar.”

**Woman as Metaphor for Suffering Israel**

Woman has a metaphorical similarity to Israel herself. Amos 5:2 and Jer. 18:13, 31:4, and 31:21 use “Maiden Israel” in reference to Israel’s suffering. Lamentations compares Jerusalem to a widow: “How lonely sits the city that was full of people! How like a widow she has become, she that was great among nations!” (Lam. 1:1). Megan McKenna remarks that the ‘änāwîm—including the poor, “widows, orphans, strangers, aliens, prisoners—were seen, at least theologically, as the criterion for faithfulness to the covenant that God Yahweh had made with the people; the way these particular people

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81 Ibid., 413.
82 Ibid., 414.
83 Tikva Frymer-Kensky also cites Hosea as using “maiden” metaphorical language to describe Israel’s suffering, but I found “harlot” instead of “maiden” in reference to Israel in Hosea; Reading, xxi. Frymer-Kensky does not note which translation of the Hebrew Bible she uses. The Hebrew reads “virgin of Israel” instead of “maiden Israel,” and the RSV uses “virgin” instead of “maiden” as well.
were treated was the level and degree of faithfulness in the land.”

When the ‘ānāwîm were “ignored and forgotten, or…misused” by the Israelites, prophets confronted the people. Thurston also corroborates that the grouping of the widow with the orphan and the stranger is indicative of the widow’s low status, and the fact that the prophets consistently advocate for the widow indicates that the widow was vulnerable and marginalized, as does prophesy that God will deal harshly with those who mistreat the widow.

Tikva Frymer-Kensky notes that Israel is identified “with vulnerable and marginal women”; she further posits that “this metaphor of Israel as a woman is made possible by its unique gender ideology.…[T]he Bible’s view that women were socially disadvantaged without being essentially inferior provided a paradigm through which biblical Israel did not have to equate its own powerlessness with inferiority.” Frymer-Kensky notes that Israel’s “understanding of its own history” in the context of “national subordination and ultimate captivity” was illuminated by a profusion of stories about vulnerable women.

Galpaz-Feller notes that the widow is compared in metaphor with Israel. The widow represents Zion’s misery “in her abandonment” (Lam. 1:1; 5:2-3), and in Isa. 54:4 Zion is reassured that “the reproach of your widowhood you will remember no more.” Isaiah 54 reassures Israel regarding its relationship with God, and at the same time the

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84 McKenna, Not Counting, 35-36.
85 Ibid., 36. Thurston, Widows, 121, fn. 35, cites Isa. 1:17; Jer. 7:5, 22:3, 49:11; Zech. 7:10; Mal. 3:5 as examples of prophets confronting people about their mistreatment of widows.
86 Thurston, Widows, 14-15.
87 Frymer-Kensky, Reading, xx-xxi.
88 Ibid. According to Frymer-Kensky, Reading, 334, examples of vulnerable women as metaphors for Israel’s “slavery and emancipation” include (these citations are from the RSV—Frymer-Kensky uses the Hebrew Bible verse citations, which cites Hagar’s story at Gen. 15:1-6); Hagar’s plight (Gen. 16:1-16); Sarah’s time in pharaoh’s palace and Gerar (Gen. 12:10-16; 20:1-20); Rikva’s (Rebecca’s) time in Gerar (Gen. 26:1-22); and Dinah’s story (Gen. 34:1-31).
chapter reflects a theological meaning applicable to the widow herself. Isa. 54:4-5 tells the widow, “Fear not, for you will not be ashamed; be not confounded, for you will not be put to shame; for you will forget the shame of your youth, and the reproach of your widowhood you will remember no more. For your Maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is his name; and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called.” Widowhood was not just a sorrowful part of a woman’s existence, but also a shameful one. Thurston asserts, “A husband’s death before old age was considered retribution for his sins, and this retribution was apparently incurred also by the wife.”

Through the imagery of the widow, Israel is consoled that her Bridegroom, “the Lord of Hosts,” has not forgotten her, and that she is destined for honor rather than disgrace.

In both the Ancient Near East and ancient Israel, the widow was vulnerable and in need of protection. The injunctions in both cultures to protect the widow highlight the precarious situation of the widow in these ancient cultures. The widow in Jewish antiquity, however, was in a better position than widows in the other Ancient Near Eastern Cultures. The abundance of Scriptural admonitions to care for the widow, as well as the identification of Israel with the widow, highlight the vulnerability of the widow in Jewish antiquity without undermining her inherent dignity. Ancient Israel, by identifying as a widow, stood in solidarity with the widow in a manner not seen in other Ancient Near Eastern extant literature.

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Thurston, *Widows*, 13. Thurston refers to Ruth 1:20-21 as support for her conclusion that it was disgraceful to be left a widow: “She said to them, ‘Call me no longer Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty; why call me Naomi when the Lord has dealt harshly with me, and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?’” It is logical to assume that sorrow and fear could be produced by the Lord’s dealing harshly with someone. It is also worth noting that after her two sons die, Naomi counsels her daughters-in-law to leave her, as Naomi retains no hope for marrying again, on account of her age; Naomi hopes that the younger widows may marry again (Ruth 1:11-13).
With background on the history of widows in Jewish and Ancient Near Eastern antiquity established, I now turn to the importance of the altar in the Old Testament, to lay groundwork for understanding how the widow may have come to be called the “altar of God” in the early Church.

**JEWISH ALTAR IMAGERY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT**

The Temple and its furnishings were important for Jews in antiquity not just as physical objects that facilitated worship of the Lord, but also as a way of understanding the creation of the world. Citing Fretheim, who says that there is a pattern of creation, fall and re-creation in Exod. 25-40, Balentine notes that “the tabernacle not only completes the cosmic design, it also reclaims creational intentions from the mire of sin and disobedience. With the tabernacle the community does more than just sustain God’s primordial hopes for humankind, it re-creates them.”  

Moreover, “the first act in the re-creation of the relationship between God and humankind is the construction of the sanctuary.” The Temple and Temple imagery are part of reclaiming Eden.

Balentine illustrates this point in his description of the tabernacle as a sacred place that has “zones” of holiness. Only the High Priest may enter the Holy of Holies, and he would do so “by passing through the outer courtyard, then into the Holy Place, and finally into the Holy of Holies.” Ordinary priests could enter the Holy Place, and non-priests could enter into only the outer courtyard. There was a graduation of ritual objects, materials, craftsmanship, and colors used as one progressed from the outer courtyard into

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92 Ibid., 141.
93 Ibid., 139.
the Holy of Holies. God’s instructions for constructing the buildings and vehicles of worship mirrors the creation of the world.\(^{94}\)

Balentine notes the parallels between the creation of the world and the construction of the sanctuary:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CREATION OF THE WORLD</th>
<th>CONSTRUCTION OF THE SANCTUARY</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good</td>
<td>- And Moses saw all the work and behold, they had done it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Gen. 1:31)</td>
<td>(Exod. 39:43)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Thus the heavens and the earth were finished (Gen. 2:1)</td>
<td>- Thus all the work of the tabernacle of the tent of</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>meeting was finished (Exod. 39:32)</td>
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<tr>
<td>- On the seventh day God finished his work which he had done (Gen. 2:2)</td>
<td>- So Moses finished the work</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>(Exod. 40:33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- So God blessed the seventh day (Gen. 2:3)</td>
<td>- And Moses blessed them (Exod. 39:43)(^{95})</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Haran discusses the Old Testament concept of “contagious holiness,” the idea that “any person or object coming into contact with the altar (Exod. 29:37) or any of the articles of the tabernacle furniture (30:29) becomes ‘holy,’ that is, contracts holiness and, like the tabernacle appurtenances themselves, becomes consecrated.”\(^{96}\) On the other hand, there was a “contagious defilement,” in which one could be defiled by coming into contact with something or someone who was considered unclean. This “contagious holiness” comes with serious consequences for those who are unauthorized or unworthy to come into contact with the holy object—“anyone who contracts it [contagious

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\(^{94}\) Ibid.


holiness] is likely to meet immediate death at the hands of heaven. “97 The priests and the tabernacle furniture were anointed with the same holy oil, so the priests were “immune” from the danger of holy contagion that would elicit death from heaven for anyone else.98 Korah and his men are told not to touch the furniture under penalty of death, and when they do, they are swallowed up by the earth (Num. 16:31-35). The idea of contagious holiness, and likewise contagious defilement, will be useful in understanding the prohibitions against accepting tainted money in the Didascalia apostolorum, in which the prayers of the widows are pure or tainted according to the disposition of their hearts, and the purity or impurity of the alms the widows receive.

The altar was an important part of communicating with God and worshipping God, even before there was a Temple. After the floodwaters receded, Noah “built an altar to the Lord, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar” (Gen. 8:20).99 In this scene, the altar is clearly a physical object upon which sacrifices are made. In the book of Joshua, however, the altar appears to have a different function. “We thought, if this should be said to us or to our descendants in time to come, we could say, ‘Look at this copy of the altar of the Lord, which our ancestors made, not for burnt offerings, not for sacrifice, but to be a witness between us and you” (Josh. 22:28). How is the altar tradition developing?100 What are the different functions of the altar in the Old Testament?

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97 Haran, Temples, 176.
98 Ibid., 177.
100 Dr. Deirdre Dempsey is inclined to date the Genesis text as older than the Joshua text, noting that the Joshua author seems to have a sense of what the older altar looked like. Bernhard Anderson writes, “It is likely that the narratives of Genesis reflect to some degree the life and times of Palestine in the early
Scripture often describes the altar in meticulous detail, alluding to the significance of altar symbolism and the supernatural reality the altar represented and mediated. The altar was in the most prominent place in the Temple, which was in the tabernacle court. Exod. 20:24-26 lists God’s requirements for the altar:

An altar of earth you shall make for me, and upon it you shall sacrifice your holocausts and peace offerings, your sheep and your oxen. In whatever place I choose for the remembrance of my name I come to you and bless you. If you make an altar of stone for me, do not build it of cut stone, for by putting a tool to it you desecrate it. You shall not go up by steps to my altar, on which you must not be indecently covered.

It is clear that God appears where and when he chooses, but it is also evident that the altar is a special place to which “God ‘comes’ to receive the worship of the community and to bestow in special ways the divine blessing.” There is no confusing God’s presence with the sacred location which he visits, but it is a sacred place nonetheless, and God expresses his desire there to be worshipped there, to have his name honored, and to give his blessings. This section seeks to explore how altars function in the Old Testament.


102 Balentine, Torah’s Vision, 134.
Altar as Object: Place of Sacrifice, Meeting, Refuge, Celebration

Both the Temple and the altar were associated with encounters with God. As Corrine Carvalho notes, the Temple “was the address God gave for divine encounters.” Temple imagery is important to bear in mind when considering ancient Israel, because “the predominant metaphor used to convey notions of God’s real presence with the Israelites was that of domestic architecture, what today we call the temple.” Furthermore, as Richard J. Clifford asserts, “the similarity of form between the earthly dwelling of the god and its heavenly prototype brings about the presence of the deity….The Tent of Meeting was the chief mode of Yahweh’s presence in the midst of his people. It is seen primarily as the dwelling of God.”

Before there was even a Temple, however, the altar held primacy of place in terms of sacred space. Generally speaking, when temples were established, all temples had altars (an incense altar in the sanctuary and an additional altar in an adjoining courtyard), but not all altars were associated with a temple, as is seen in the Genesis examples. The altar was the primary sacred space in nomadic and semi-nomadic societies; the Temple functioned in the sedentary societies of Canaan. The Temple was a building with walls and a roof, whereas a solitary altar stood out in the open. The incense altar featured in a Temple differed from the solitary altar that stood in the open

104 Carvalho, “Finding a Treasure Map,” 127.
107 Haran, Temples, 17-18.
(and which was not connected with a temple), which will be discussed later on in this chapter.

In Exod. 40:1-11, God tells Moses how he should set up the tabernacle of the tent of meeting. After giving directions on how to set up and to consecrate the tabernacle so that it should become holy, God instructs Moses to “also anoint the altar of burnt offering and all its utensils, and consecrate the altar, so that the altar shall be most holy” (Exod. 40:9-10). The altar in the tabernacle tent of meeting was plated with gold, and only incense was offered upon it. Moses “put the golden altar in the tent of meeting before the veil, and burnt fragrant incense upon it; as the Lord had commanded” (Exod. 40:26-27). According to Gary Anderson, the altar is the most holy place in the tent of meeting. In Exod. 27:1-8 and Exod. 38:1-8, descriptions of the altar of holocausts, which differed from the golden altar of incense, tell us that the holocaust altar was carefully made to specific directions, too, and that it was moveable. The holocaust altar was placed “before the door of the tabernacle of the tent of meeting,” and between the door of the tent of meeting and the holocaust altar was a laver with water in it (Exod. 40:6-7). The holocaust altar was plated with bronze, which must have made for a prominent display.

Horns were another design feature of Israelite altars, and they are also found in non-Israelite altars throughout the Ancient Near East. Theories as to their significance in an Israelite context include the possibility of the horns acting as an “aid in binding the

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victim to the altar,” possibly corroborated by Ps. 118:27: “The Lord is God, and he has
given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar.”\footnote{111}
No certain evidence as to the purpose and significance of the horns is given in
Scripture,\footnote{112} however Jacob Milgrom notes that “in the ancient Near East, the horns on
the altar are the emblems of the gods. They are found on top of shrines and on the
headdresses of the gods. They signify the horns of a powerful animal (e.g., a bull or ram)
and are symbols of strength and force.”\footnote{113} Milgrom thinks that “horns in the Bible are
invested with the same symbolism.”\footnote{114}

The golden incense altar was in the tent in Exod. 40:5. The altar was
presumably in the tent in the time of Joshua (Josh. 18:1). In Judges there does not appear
to be a tent of meeting/tabernacle but rather an open, solitary altar (Jdg. 6:24) upon which
animal sacrifices were made; animal sacrifices were not made upon the incense altar
inside the tent of meeting. In the time of Saul, there is a clear reference to the incense
altar in 1 Sam. 2:27-28, in which the Lord says through a “man of God” to Eli: “I
revealed myself to the house of your father when they were in Egypt subject to the house
of Pharaoh. And I chose him out of all the tribes of Israel to be my priest, to go up to my
altar, to burn incense, to wear an ephod before me; and I gave to the house of your father
all my offerings by fire from the people of Israel.” The tent of meeting is referenced in 1
Sam. 2:22. In the time of David, the ark of the Lord dwells in the tent, so there would
probably have been an incense altar there, in light of the proscriptions of Exodus 40.

\footnote{111} Haak, “Altar,” 163.
\footnote{112} Robert A. Briggs, \textit{Jewish Temple Imagery in the Book of Revelation} (New York: Peter Lang
\footnote{113} Milgrom, “Leviticus,” 43.
\footnote{114} Ibid. Milgrom cites Amos 3:14, noting that the altar was desecrated if the horns were cut off.
Kings 8:4 talks about the tent of meeting. David’s son Solomon builds a Temple for the Lord, and 1 Kings 6:22 notes that “The whole altar that belonged to the inner sanctuary he overlaid with gold.” The Temple succeeded the tent, and the golden altar of incense was both in the tent and in the successor Temple. Any altar besides the incense altar was not in the Temple proper, but rather in a courtyard adjoining the Temple.115

The Temple was “a house of God,” a building that was furnished with things that symbolized God’s presence. An altar was part of the Temple layout, but the altar could stand alone without a temple.116 An altar joined to a temple was served by someone from a priestly family,117 while single altars (not connected with a temple) could be served by an Israelite from a non-priestly family (for example Manoah’s altar in Judg. 13:15-20). The Temple altar held prominence over the solitary altar, and only certain special offerings were reserved for the Temple altar, for example, the first-born of cattle and sheep, the first fruits and first harvests of crops, and thanksgiving sacrifices, among other offerings.118

While the altar was the place upon which sacrifices were made, the altar was also a memorial of an encounter with God; thus, not all altars necessarily had sacrifices offered on them, according to Robert Briggs.119 Early altars marked locations that signified an encounter with God or some such event of spiritual importance. Sometimes the location of the altar was exactly the place where one encountered God, as in the case of Jacob, who “built an altar, and called the place El-Bethel, because there God had

116 Ibid., 15-16.
117 Eventually Christian widows could only accept alms through the bishop.
118 Haran, *Temples*, 16-17; 64. See Exod. 23:19; Exod. 34:26; Deut. 26:1-11.
revealed himself to him when he fled from his brother” (Gen. 35:7). This altar is not recorded as having a sacrifice made upon it. A bit later, Jacob “set up a pillar in the place where he had spoken with him, a pillar of stone; and he poured out a drink offering on it, and poured oil on it” (Gen. 35:14).

The altar was also a place of refuge for someone who was accused of murder or other serious transgression:

And Adonijah feared Solomon; and he arose, and went and caught hold of the horns of the altar. And it was told Solomon, “Behold, Adonijah fears King Solomon; for lo, he has laid hold of horns of the altar, saying, ‘Let King Solomon swear to me first that he will not slay his servant with the sword.’” And Solomon said, “If he prove to be a worthy man, not one of his hairs shall fall to the earth; but if wickedness is found in him, he shall die.” So King Solomon sent, and they brought him down from the altar (1 Kings 1:50-53).

When the news came to Joab—for Joab had supported Adonijah although he had not supported Absalom—Joab fled to the tent of the Lord and caught hold of the horns of the altar. And when it was told King Solomon, “Joab has fled to the tent of the Lord, and behold, he is beside the altar,” Solomon sent Benaiah the son of Jehoiada, saying, “Go, strike him down” (1 Kings 2:28-29).

Proscriptions in Exod. 21:12-14 state that “whoever strikes a person mortally shall be put to death. If it was not premeditated, but came about by an act of God, then I will appoint for you a place to which the killer may flee. But if someone willfully attacks and kills another by treachery, you shall take the killer from my altar for execution.” Benaiah may have forcibly removed Joab from the altar before he killed him, but the text is not explicit.  

120 Paul Heger, The Three Biblical Altar Laws (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1999), 227. Heger, Biblical, 125 fn. 92, posits that “the high priority bestowed upon the protection of a guest in one’s dwelling in the early Israelite period” (for example Gen. 19:8, Judg. 19:23) may be related to the idea of the altar as asylum; that is, a person was not supposed to harm someone, even his enemy, in his own home. Heger, Biblical, 222, further postulates that the altar was a place of refuge because “grasping the corner of the altar was considered equivalent to being in God’s dwelling”; thus, one could not harm an enemy in God’s house either. Num. 35:5-15 and Exod. 19:1-11 detail plans for cities of asylum for those charged with manslaughter, so it would not be too much of a stretch to imagine places within cities (for example, the altar) for asylum.
The altar was also a central place for a celebration. G. Anderson notes the centrality of the altar in feasts when he discusses Ps. 22, in which the psalmist promises God a sacrifice in return for God’s intervention. The psalmist promises God that he will praise God in the presence of all the worshippers if God delivers him, and the psalm ends with the psalmist fulfilling his vow in gratitude for having been delivered by God. The hungry are fed around the altar, and praising God takes place in the context of a lavish feast. G. Anderson notes that in the context of Ps. 22:26-27, “the natural fulfillment of the vow took place around the altar amid a great festive celebration. A large crowd was appropriate because the slaughter of a sheep or goat (or even a cow) provided a tremendous amount of meat,” which would have been too much food for any one person or family.\textsuperscript{121} The altar, as we have seen so far, functions as a place of memorial, sacrifice, meeting, refuge, and celebration for the ancient Israelites.

**Altar for Covenant Ratification**

The first thing that Noah does upon leaving the ark is to build an altar, upon which he offers sacrifices of clean animals (Gen. 8:20). The context of the sacrifice is one of celebration and thanksgiving for having survived the flood. On this occasion God makes with Noah a covenant that “will secure the possibility that God’s creational designs may yet be realized in a fragile world….\textsuperscript{122} And the context most suited for enacting and restoring the cosmic covenant will be worship.” Noah’s actions of building the altar and offering praise to God have “an enormous effect on God”; God promises never to curse earth because of human sin, and He also promises never to flood

\textsuperscript{121} G. Anderson, *Sin*, 51.
\textsuperscript{122} Balentine, *Torah’s Vision*, 102.
the whole earth.\textsuperscript{123} Noah’s building of the altar and offering of sacrifice upon it make the altar into a place of reconciliation and renewal in the context of covenant ratification.

Samuel Balentine suggests that Noah communicates with God not through words, but through Noah’s obedience and the ritual of sacrifice; thus, the ritual involving the altar enables communication with God, even when words are not exchanged.\textsuperscript{124} The reader is left to conclude to the importance of Noah’s non-verbal communication in his building of the altar. The altar serves as a kind of conduit for communication between Noah and God. Noah is said to be “a good man and blameless in the age” (Gen. 6:9) and is the only one mentioned as offering sacrifice in this account.\textsuperscript{125}

The altar is a focal point of spiritual activity in Scripture. Balentine notes that the Hebrew word for “covenant” (בְּרִית) first occurs in Gen. 6:18: “But I will establish my covenant with you; and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons’ wives with you.”\textsuperscript{126} God makes a covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15, in which God promises Abraham land and prolific descendants. Balentine notes that like the “cosmic covenant” announced in Genesis 9, God’s covenant with Abraham is one in which “God is the initiator of the covenant and is solely responsible for its implementation.”\textsuperscript{127} Like Noah, Abraham builds altars (Gen. 12:7-8; 13:4, 18; 22:9) and calls on the Lord’s name, but unlike Noah, who is speechless before God, Abraham engages in dialogue with God.\textsuperscript{128} Moreover, as Balentine points out, in the ancient world,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{123} Ibid., 101.
\item \textsuperscript{124} Ibid., 115.
\item \textsuperscript{125} As we will see in subsequent chapters, moral and ethical purity are exhorted and are requisite virtues for the early Christian widow who is to be likened to the “altar of God.” Christian widows are also admonished not to accept any impure offerings in the form of charitable alms from illicit sources, and to not offer any prayers with moral and ethical impurity.
\item \textsuperscript{126} Balentine, Torah’s Vision, 99.
\item \textsuperscript{127} Ibid., 105.
\item \textsuperscript{128} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
one contractual rite involved the two contracting parties passing “through the halves of sacrificial animals….By passing through the animals, they [the Israelites] invoke upon themselves the fate of the slain animals should they fail to abide by their agreement.”\(^{129}\)

The altar was the place and reminder of contracts between men, and the place and reminder of covenants between men and God. The penalty for failing to honor the contract was represented by the slain animal on the altar.

**Altar as a Means of Reconciliation**

Balentine notes that with Noah’s first act of prediluvian worship and Abraham’s first words of worship, “the Torah begins to unfold its vision of the indispensability of worship for the realization of God’s creational and covenantal designs for humankind.”\(^{130}\) However people are portrayed as worshipping God in the Old Testament, Scripture affirms that “God remains ever desirous of and receptive to the acts and words of worship that bind together heaven and earth.”\(^{131}\) The Old Testament clearly depicts a God who wishes to bless his people, and who is reaching out to, and desiring reconciliation with, human beings through their worship of God. Thus, the altar was also used to reconcile God and his people. Examples include Lev. 8:15, which says, “And Moses killed it [the bull of the sin offering], and took the blood, and with his finger put it on the horns of the altar round about, and purified the altar, and poured out the blood at the base of the altar, and consecrated it, to make atonement for it,” and Lev. 8:34, which states “As has been done today, the Lord has commanded to be done to make atonement for you.”

\(^{129}\) Ibid.

\(^{130}\) Ibid., 115.

\(^{131}\) Ibid., 114.
Leviticus 1-7 shows that the altar of holocausts provided the forum for people to reconcile with God. This reconciliation happened when priests sprinkled “the blood of the atoning victims” on the altar because “the death of the victim signified that the offerer deserved to die for his transgressions, and that its life was substituted for his [the offerer].”\(^{132}\) The blood atoned for the people’s sins, averted God’s wrath (for example, plagues, judgments), and secured Israel’s blessings.\(^{133}\) The atoning victim of sacrifice was not guilty of the sins committed by the people.

**Altar as Witness and the Naming of the Altar**

One function of the altar was to serve as a place upon which to sacrifice, but the altar in Josh. 22:34 is not meant for sacrifices. In this passage, “the Reubenites and the Gadites called the altar Witness; ‘For,’ said they, ‘it is a witness between us that the Lord is God.’”\(^{134}\) This altar called Witness was “intended as a witness to the true altar in the tabernacle at Shiloh” on “the premise that there would only be one true place of worship for Israel after the occupation.”\(^{135}\) There is an even earlier use of an altar-like object as a

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\(^{133}\) Ibid.

\(^{134}\) The Hebrew phrase is *lammizbēah ki ēd hû*, whereas the word for altar is *mizbēah*. Tom Wayne Willett, “Altar of Witness,” *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 6, 945; Haak, “Altar,” 162. Willett writes that “most mss and versions supply ‘witness’ as the name of the altar, compare the LXX (*martyrion*), Syriac, and Targums. The name was probably inferred from the context (Josh 22:27-34) or perhaps influenced by Isa 19:19-20. Rashi also said to supply ‘witness’ as the name of the altar.” Rashi (1040-1105 A.D.) is the acronym for a French medieval rabbi and commentator on the Talmud and the Tanakh. Willett mentions A. Soggin, *Introduction to the Old Testament: From its Origins to the Closing of the Alexandrian Canon* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 213, who suggests the altar “could have been a defensive structure to help control access to Gilgal” in addition to possibly concealing a “pact or alliance” between the tribes on either side of the Jordan.” See also Alberto J. Soggin, *Joshua—A Commentary*, trans. R. A. Wilson (London: S.C.M. Press, 1972); Elie Assis, “For it Shall be a Witness Between Us,” *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 18, no. 2 (2004): 208-231; Innocent Himbaza’s chapter “The Rite of Blood on the Altar and the Hierarchy of Sacrifices: Qumran Texts, Septuagint and Mishnah as Witnesses to a Law in Evolution” in *Qumran Legal Texts between the Hebrew Bible and Its Interpretation*, eds. Kristin DeTroyer and Armin Lange (Leuven: Peeters, 2011), 17-26.

witness, however. Gen. 31: 44—54 alludes to the altar as a witness. In this passage, Laban and Jacob set up a stone as a pillar, heap stones around the pillar, name the pillar and say that the pillar is a “witness” between them and between them and God, and they offer a sacrifice “on the height” (presumably on or near the pillar). A physical altar as a “witness” between man and man, and man and God, might be likened to a contract in modern times; the physical reminder of the altar as a witness was publicly visible, in the same way that a contract is visible to anyone who sees it.

Naming the altar was important. When Jacob settles in a new place, one of the first things that he does is to build an altar and to name it. For example, in Gen. 33:20, Jacob builds an altar and calls it “El-Elohe-Israel” (“God, the God of Israel”). When Jacob travels to Luz (that is, Bethel) in the land of Canaan, he builds an altar and calls the place “El-bethel” (“God of Bethel”) because “there God revealed himself to him when he fled from his brother” (Gen. 35:7). In Exodus Moses “built an altar and called it, The Lord is my banner” (Exod. 17:15). At Judg. 6:24, Gideon “built an altar there to the Lord, and called it, The Lord is peace. To this day it still stands at Ophrah, which belongs to the Abiez'rites.” The idea that the altar was not a mere object but represented God to the people is reinforced by incorporating God’s name into the names of the altars.

137 The altar is associated with a person, God; the altar will be associated with another person, the widow, in the early Church.

136 Gen. 31:44-54: ‘‘Come now, let us make a covenant, you and I; and let it be a witness between you and me.’’ So Jacob took a stone, and set it up as a pillar. And Jacob said to his kinsmen, ‘‘Gather stones,’’ and they took stones, and made a heap; and they ate there by the heap. La’ban called it Je’gar-sahadu’tha: but Jacob called it Gale’ed. La’ban said, ‘‘This heap is a witness between you and me today.’’ Therefore he named it Gale’ed, and the pillar Mizpah, for he said, ‘‘The Lord watch between you and me, when we are absent one from the other. If you ill-treat my daughters, if you take wives besides my daughters, although no man is with us, remember, God is witness between you and me.’’ Then La’ban said to Jacob, ‘‘See this heap and the pillar, which I have set between you and me. This heap is a witness, and the pillar is a witness, that I will not pass over this heap to you, and you will not pass over this heap and this pillar to me, for harm. The God of Abraham and the God of Na’hor, the God of their father, judge between us.’’ So Jacob swore by the Fear of his father Isaac, and Jacob offered a sacrifice on the mountain and called his kinsmen to eat bread; and they ate bread and tarried all night on the mountain.’’
Purity of the Altar

The purity of the altar, like the purity of the one making an offering upon it, is of utmost concern to God and his people, which is not surprising, if one considers the purpose of the altar as a means of communication with God. Indeed, as Columba Stewart, O.S.B., asserts, ritual purity “is a near universal element of human religious systems, as evident in purification washings or baths, restraint from sexual activity before performing religious duties, etc.” Ritual purity also includes using only clean animals for sacrifice on the altar (Gen. 8:20, Lev. 12:6). Mary Douglas understands clean in Leviticus to mean “proper to its class, suitable, fitting.” Douglas notes that differentiating between clean and unclean animals and adhering to dietary rules are not ends in themselves. Scripture makes these distinctions to reflect the holiness and wholeness of God (Lev. 20:25-26). According to Douglas, “to be holy is to be whole, to be one; holiness is unity, integrity, perfection of the individual and of the kind. The dietary rules merely develop the metaphor of holiness on the same lines.” In Leviticus, “underlying the rituals” is “an intricate web of values that purports to model how we should relate to God and one another.” Douglas also states that “holiness and impurity are at opposite poles,” suggesting that holiness and purity go together. Milgrom

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140 Douglas, Purity, 66-67. At p. 71, Douglas states that “The dietary laws would have been like signs which at every turn inspired meditation on the oneness, purity, and completeness of God. By rules of avoidance, holiness was given a physical expression in every encounter with the animal kingdom and at every meal. Observance of the dietary rules would thus have been a meaningful part of the great liturgical act of recognition and worship which culminated in the sacrifice in the Temple.”  
141 Milgrom, Leviticus, 1.  
142 Douglas, Purity, 9.
corroborates Douglas’s statement on purity, noting that “impurity and holiness are antonyms.”

Examples of the altar being purified and sanctified include Exod. 29:43-46 (God will sanctify it by his glory, when his people do their part regarding sacrifice), Exod. 30:22-33 (God commands Moses as to how altar purification should be done) and Lev. 8:10-15 (Moses purifies the altar). God does not want impure intentions or offerings, or the defilement of holy things. When an altar is used for a wrongful purpose, for example, God’s retribution is swift, as in the case of Jeroboam—the altar was “torn down, and the ashes poured out from the altar, according to the sign that the man of God had given by the word of the Lord” (1 Kings 13:5). The sign was the altar being torn down and ashes pouring forth from it.

To be a member of the order of widows that is discussed in the Didascalia apostolorum, which we will look at in subsequent chapters of this dissertation, the purity of the widow is of utmost concern. The widow is admonished to be morally and ethically pure, because she is an “altar of God” and so that the offerings she makes upon it, the petitions of others, are kept pure as they ascend to heaven.

The Golden Altar of Incense

Exodus describes the altar of incense, which was “most holy to the Lord” (Exod. 30:10). This altar was made for burning incense and resembled the altar of holocausts in

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143 Milgrom, Leviticus, 12, 120.
144 Jeroboam was leading the people into apostasy, by using two golden calves to represent the Lord.
that it was made of acacia wood and had “horns that sprang directly from it” (Exod. 30:1-2). The altar of incense was noticeably smaller than the altar of holocaust. The altar of incense was also plated with pure gold instead of bronze as was the holocaust altar, and this difference, along with the fact that the incense altar was located in the Holy of Holies, indicated that the incense altar was more important than the holocaust altar.\textsuperscript{146}

The incense altar was placed at God’s command “in front of the veil that hangs before the ark of the commandments where I will meet you” (Exod. 30:6). The incense was to burn constantly, and the Israelites were ordered to “not offer up any profane incense, or any holocaust or cereal offering” and to not pour out any libation upon it (Exod. 30:9). The priest who offered up incense was acting as the intercessor between God and his people.\textsuperscript{147} Once a year Aaron would “perform the atonement rite on its horns” with “the blood of the atoning sin offering,” but apart from that rite, the altar was kept for the burning incense (Exod. 30:10).

Why is the altar for burning incense given a more important place than that attributed to the holocaust altar? Both incense and holocaust offerings were “sweet-smelling” oblations to the Lord.\textsuperscript{148} Both incense and holocaust offerings symbolized prayer. However, the holocaust offerings did not burn constantly and were located further away from the Holy of Holies.\textsuperscript{149} The incense altar was closer to the Holy of

\textsuperscript{146} Haran, Temples, 159, 163-64, 169. Haran notes that gold was also woven into the High Priest’s garments. Haran, Temples, 169. See also Heger, Biblical, 402-404.


\textsuperscript{148} Haran, Temples, 230-31, suggests that “the pleasing odor” that describes the burning of animal sacrifices “is a further indication that the smoke was not merely burnt flesh, but was sometimes blended with a more fragrant odor of spices.”

\textsuperscript{149} I am indebted to Rev. Joseph G. Mueller, S.J., for this insight. For examples of how holocausts symbolized prayer, see Gen. 8:9; Exod. 20:24; 1 Sam. 7:9.
Holies. The incense offering, as stated in Ps. 141:2 (“Let my prayer be incense before you”) and in Rev. 5:8 (“Each one of the elders held a harp and gold bowls filled with incense, which are the prayers of the holy ones”), was a steady ascension of fragrant incense that was like the steady ascension of praise, petition, contrition, thanksgiving, and supplication to God from his people, the constant communication with him that he desires.

Haran makes a distinction between the two kinds of incense prescribed by the law of Moses for use in worship: the ordinary incense used in the censers, and the extraordinary incense called the incense of *sammîm*, which appears to be made from *sammîm* (either spices or other substances that improve the spices upon addition to them), frankincense, and salt. Ordinary incense was burnt in censers and in the court and could be offered by any priest. The *sammîm*, on the other hand, was only burnt “inside the tabernacle and on a special altar,” and only Aaron the High Priest was mentioned as handling the *sammîm*. The *sammîm* was used only on the golden altar in front of the tabernacle. Ritual purity was essential in the handling and usage of the *sammîm*. *Sammîm* is carefully prepared by a perfumer and is the only incense allowed on the golden altar, as evidenced by Exod. 30:9, which specifically prohibits the use of “any profane incense,” which Haran takes to mean “strange” in the sense that it is ritually unfit, not that the incense was necessarily idolatrous or unholy. Furthermore, there appear to be no regulations governing the circumstances of the use of the ordinary incense, and no particular ritual or act was associated with its use. *Sammîm*, on the other

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151 Ibid., 244.
152 Ibid., 243.
hand, was a regular part of ritual, needing to be placed on the altar twice a day, and was inseparable from the ṭāmīd rites.\textsuperscript{153} The only time Aaron offers the sammîm in another manner is on the Day of Atonement, when he offers it in his own censer, so that the cloud completely covers the ark, lest Aaron die from the sight.\textsuperscript{154}

**CONCLUSIONS**

The widow was vulnerable in the Ancient Near Eastern cultures, including that of Ancient Israel and Judah. Even if a Jewish widow had the possibility of a levirate marriage, her brother-in-law could refuse to marry her. Weisberg also points out that a man may have been uncomfortable with a levirate marriage because the marriage sanctioned what otherwise was prohibited by incest laws—lying with one’s sister-in-law.\textsuperscript{155} That concern, in conjunction with concerns about paternity and continuance of the family name along with reversion of inherited property to the living brother if the deceased brother’s widow did not remarry within her husband’s family, may have made for contentious feelings about levirate marriage on the part of the man. While a man might incur shame for avoiding a levirate marriage, he did not suffer physical injury or financial repercussions for not marrying his dead brother’s wife (Deut. 25:5-10).\textsuperscript{156} The different laws in the Old Testament regarding marriage and remarriage may offer conflicting descriptions of the institution, but that may be in part because the laws were responding to different situations.

\textsuperscript{153} The term ṭāmīd refers to a “permanent ritual” that “does not necessarily mean ‘non-stopping, unceasing, continual’, but rather that the ritual acts in question are to be repeated at regular intervals and at fixed times.” Haran, *Temples*, 207.

\textsuperscript{154} Haran, *Temples*, 244-45.

\textsuperscript{155} Weisberg, “The Widow of Our Discontent,” 421.

\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., 428.
What is clear from the varied accounts of widowhood in the Ancient Near East and the Old Testament in particular is that the widow was in a very precarious and vulnerable position within her family and in society, and that the prescriptions to take care of the widow were necessary for her well-being and survival. A widow depended upon others for her financial and physical support and protection, and as demonstrated by the Deuteronomy texts, she might not receive either if the levir refused a levirate marriage. The widow was also held in low esteem, as evidenced by Ancient Near Eastern texts, and particularly by Scripture. The widow had very little authority and standing in Ancient Near Eastern and Israelite culture, and her constant grouping with the poor, the orphan, and the stranger attests to her vulnerable position in society.

The widow was a visible figure who depended utterly on the charity of others, and her survival required the king’s protection in the Ancient Near East and particularly ancient Israel. Prophetic admonitions to the Israelites and Egyptian didactic literature instruct their respective audiences to care for the widow and to be aware of the consequences for those who harm the widow. As van der Toorn observes, Israel’s literary tradition upholds the widow as God’s special concern: God loves the widow, is the Father of widows and orphans, and executes justice for the orphan and the widow.\(^{157}\)

The multiple layers of the understanding of the altar will be important to bear in mind when it comes to discussing what is meant by calling the widow the altar of God in the early Church. The significance of the altar evolves over time in ancient Israel, and the altar has layers of meaning that are integral to the relationship between God and his people. First, the altar is a place for encountering God, particularly as a locus of

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\(^{157}\) Van der Toorn, “Public Image,” 19.
reconciliation between God and His people. Secondly, the altar serves as a physical sign of a contract made between two parties, and a “witness” of a covenant between God and a person or people. Thirdly, the physical sign of the altar is also a place of sacrifice to God. Animals were offered on the bronze altar of the Jerusalem Temple, and they were described as being “sweet-smelling” oblations to the Lord (Exod. 29:18, 25, 41). Prayer was also offered as sacrifice, which was symbolized by fragrant incense, which was offered on the golden altar in front of the veil that covered the Ark of the Covenant. Fourthly, the altar area was also a location for a covenant meal, in which it was believed that God was present, which meant that both parties invited God, so to speak, to witness their agreement. If either party, therefore, broke his promise to the other, the offending party also offended God—and no one would have wanted to break a pact with God as a witness. Finally, “altar as witness” might mean that the altar represented God himself; the ancient Israelites did not think that God was the altar in an idolatrous sense. This representation makes sense of the altars’ names, for example “God, the God of Israel” (Gen. 33:20), and “God of Bethel” (Gen. 35: 7). One would think that the altars would have been named something less bold if “God as witness” was not what the “altar-as-witness” motif represented.

Thus, the altar is clearly not just used as a sacred table for sacrifices, but is very nuanced in its functions in relations between God and men. The ancient Jewish people had an evolving sense of that in which sacred space consisted. The altar, sanctuary, and the Temple were built to specifications that God himself prescribed, and exquisite care was taken to honor their ritual purity. The sacred objects, vessels, and buildings themselves were wrought of the finest materials and anointed with the same oil that was
used to anoint the priests. The Jewish people understood these external objects of worship as vehicles for communication and union with the Divine. Moreover, we see an evolving understanding of the human person as sacred space in which God can dwell. People are themselves temples for God’s indwelling in the New Testament era, and people also personify furnishings within the Temple, like the widow, who is likened to an altar of God in early Christianity. The widow functioning as the altar of God is not the only time that a rational creature is cited as acting as furniture for God; another tradition has the cherubim acting as the throne of God.158 Haran notes that “the term merkāḇāh implies a throne which may be in motion, for Yahweh’s throne in the heavens (as described in Ezekiel’s vision) is not confined to one place.”159

As we will see in the early Christian literature, the widow occupied an honored place in the Church as an intercessor for the Church, and her special role as an intercessor has its roots in the great holy women of ancient Judaism, particularly in the figure of Judith, to whom we now turn. I will look at the book of Judith as a bridge between ancient Judaism and early Christianity, and we will thus be able to see the continuities and discontinuities of the status of widows between the Old and New Testaments. Unlike Old Testament widows, Judith and New Testament widows engage in the ascetic

158 Haran, Temples, 251-259. Haran cites 1 Sam. 4:4; 2 Sam. 6:2; 2 Kings 19:15; Isa. 37:16; Ps. 80:1-2, 99:1 for examples of the Lord entitled as one “who sits/is enthroned upon the cherubim,” and he cites the fact that “God used to meet Moses from between the two cherubim and from above the ark cover” (as seen in Exod. 25:22, 30:6; Lev. 16:2; and Num. 7:89) as evidence that “the cherubim were conceived as the supports of God’s seat, and hence that the ark was his throne” (Haran, Temples, 247). In the inner sanctuary of Solomon’s temple, huge cherubim made of olivewood and overlaid with gold cover “the whole width of the Holy of Holies” with their outstretched wings (1 Kings 6:22-23; 8:1-9). Haran, Temples, 248-49. See also Ezek. 9:3, 10:1-20 (especially Ezek. 10:15, 20), all mentioned at Haran, Temples, 250 fn. 4.

159 Haran, Temples, 253.
practices of prayer, fasting, and continence for God’s people. These ascetic practices gave Judith a special intercessory and authoritative position among her people.
CHAPTER 2—JUDITH, EXEMPLARY WIDOW

INTRODUCTION

St. Clement of Rome writes of “the blessed Judith” who, “handed herself over to
danger, going out because she loved her homeland and the people under siege. And the
Lord handed Holofernes over to the hand of a female.” ¹ Tertullian refers to “Judith,
daughter of Merari” as an example of one of the saints in his work “On Monogamy.” ²
The Apostolic Constitutions includes the book of Judith in its list of books to “be
esteemed venerable and holy by you, both of the clergy and laity.” ³ St. Ambrose exhorts
his audience to “Think of Judith, and the amazing example she gives you,” and praises
Judith’s beauty, chastity, courage, and faith. ⁴ Additionally, St. Athanasius, St. Clement
of Alexandria, Origen, and St. Jerome regard Judith as a model of virtue and ascetic

¹ 1 Clement 55.3.4-5, Epistle to the Corinthians, trans. Bart D. Ehrman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard
University Press, 2003), 133. Schüssler Fiorenza notes regarding Judith, “The first Christian writer to
mention [her] is Clement of Rome, who points to the example of the ‘blessed Judith’ in order to show that
‘many women, empowered by God’s grace, have performed deeds worthy of men’ (1 Clem 55.3.4). It
seems greatly misleading, therefore, to picture Jewish women of the first century in particular, and Jewish
theology in general, in predominantly negative terms. The book of Judith—whether written by a woman or
by a man—gives us a clue to a quite different tradition and situation in first-century Judaism.” In Memory
of Her, 118.

² Tertullian, “On Monogamy,” in Tertullian—Treatises on Marriage and Remarriage: To His
Newman Press, 1951), 107; Tertullian, De monogamia (Le Mariage Unique) 17.1.1, trans. Paul Mattei,

James Donaldson, LL.D. (Edinburgh: T&T CLARK; Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing
Company, 1885), 505. Les Constitutions Apostoliques 8.47.85, trans. Marcel Metzger, Sources chrétiennes

⁴ Ambrose, De officiis 3.13.82, trans. Ivor J. Davidson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001),
Company, 1955), 81.
heroism. Judith is featured on medieval baptismal fonts, in stained glass, and is depicted in many Renaissance paintings. Who was Judith, and why was her victory celebrated to the extent that she was embodied in literature, music, paint, glass, and stone that has endured to the present day? This chapter seeks to explore the book of Judith and suggest that her virtuous life and example of prayer, fasting, and permanent continence upon the death of her husband were important to the history of widows and widowhood, and to the order of widows that forms in the first centuries of the Church.

In the first chapter we looked at the poor widow in the Old Testament and other ancient Near East sources. However, there are exceptions to the poor widow motif in the

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6 Nira Stone writes that Judith “was a prefigurement of the victory over Satan”; moreover, “it is said that until man is baptized, Satan tries to put the baptism off and to steal the baptism water, since baptism is a victory over Satan.” Since baptism was seen as a victory over Satan, Judith is figured on these baptismal fonts. See Stone, “Judith and Holofernes: Some Observations on the Development of the Scene in Art,” in *‘No One Spoke Ill of Her’*: Essays on Judith, ed. James C. VanderKam (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1992): 80-81. Stone’s essay includes photos of artistic renditions of Judith in Jewish and Christian art between the ninth and twentieth centuries A.D.


Old Testament. The most notable exception is Judith. The historical inconsistencies of the book of Judith have provided much food for scholarly speculation as to the historicity of the book. However, the Fathers of the Church accepted and praised Judith as worthy of emulation, and the ecclesiastical writer Sulpicius Severus (360-420/25 A.D.) recounts the story of Judith in his Sacred History, narrating Judith’s heroic acts. Amy-Jill Levine notes that “Judith the character is usually identified as a representation of or as a metaphor for the community of faith.” What Sebastian Brock and Susan Harvey write regarding Syrian holy women Pelagia and Febronia is relevant to the discussion of historicity in any book included in the canon of Scripture:

Even the romantic figures of Pelagia or Febronia cannot be dismissed as historically worthless. We may or may not be able to identify the actual persons and events behind the stories. But the stories themselves are pieces of history. To be meaningful to the society for which they were written, the stories had to share the values and assumptions of that society. They had to be true to the thought world of their time, as well as to the ordinary manner of people’s lives, their way of doing things and seeing things. So these stories reveal to us not the individuals

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10 For a summary of these works, see Carey A. Moore, Judith: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1985); see also Craven, “Judith,” in The New Jerome Biblical Commentary, 572-575.


of their day but rather something of the world in which they lived and moved. From this view these stories offer us a rich harvest of historical depth.\(^\text{13}\)

In what follows, I will look at elements of Judith’s beauty, chastity, piety, and ascetical practices that are highlighted in the second half of the Judith story. We turn now to the text itself.

**Précis of the Judith Narrative**

Judith was wealthy, unlike the majority of widows we observed in the Old Testament, who were poor. However, it is Judith’s widowhood (Jth. 8:4; 8:5; 8:6; 9:4; 9:9; 10:3; 16:8; 16:22) and not her wealth (Jth. 8:7; 16:21) that is emphasized in the story. With the idea of the vulnerable, marginalized widow in mind, it is intriguing that the heroine of the book of Judith is a widow and was likely a childless one.\(^\text{14}\) Judith’s childlessness may be inferred because Judith is never mentioned as having a child, and because when she died, at the age of one hundred and five, Judith “distributed her property to all those who were next of kin to her husband Manasseh, and to her own nearest kindred” (Jth. 16:24). If Judith had had children, they likely would have stood to inherit. Judith’s presumed lack of progeny is significant because in addition to the social stigma that childlessness could incur, a childless widow did not have the security of immediate family to care for her in her widowhood. Judith’s wealth would have insulated her against some of the problems that went with widowhood. However, she would still have been considered vulnerable in light of her widowed status and her likely

\(^\text{13}\) *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient*, trans. Sebastian P. Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 3. Thus, while the historical inconsistencies in the book of Judith are intriguing points for further research, most germane to my thesis is Judith’s contribution to the history of widows and widowhood.

\(^\text{14}\) Toni Craven, “Tradition and Convention in the Book of Judith,” *Semeia* 28 (1983): 60, 60 fn. 24, notes that the maternal language Judith uses in Jth. 16:5 “makes this childless woman a mother to Israel and a model of true freedom.”
childless status, because she did not have the protection of a male relative. Judith also needed to be concerned about the possibility of rape when she entered the enemy’s camp (Jth. 12:12; 12:16; 13:16). Judith herself says “For your power depends not upon numbers, nor your might upon men of strength; for you are God of the lowly, helper of the oppressed, upholder of the weak, protector of the forlorn, savior of those without hope” (Jth. 9:11), signifying that she is among the weak, forlorn, and those without hope. There are several references to the Lord working through the “hand of a woman,” suggesting that it was extraordinary for a woman to play this role (Jth. 9:10; 13:15; 16:6). After Judith beheads Holofernes, Bagoas (one of Holofernes’ officials) exclaims in dismay, “The slaves have tricked us! One Hebrew woman has brought disgrace upon the house of King Nebuchadnezzar! For look, here is Holofernes lying on the ground, and his head is not on him!” (Jth. 14:18), indicating their surprise that a Hebrew woman could defeat the great general Holofernes. Thus, while financially secure, Judith is still considered particularly vulnerable in Israelite society, and in the larger Ancient Near Eastern context, as a Hebrew woman who was also a widow.15

It is beneficial to look at the main narrative points of the book of Judith before engaging the text in more depth. The book of Judith is comprised of two main parts (Jth. 1-7, and Jth. 8-16). The first seven chapters narrate the threat of an invading army that is closing in on the people of Israel, and the last nine chapters deal with how God delivers Israel through the widow Judith. In the first part of Judith, the audience learns of the terror that Nebuchadnezzar spread as his army defeated cities and territories (Jth. 1:1-16). Nebuchadnezzar’s general, Holofernes, draws closer to the Israelites in the city of

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15 Regarding the vulnerability of women and widows in particular in Ancient Near Eastern and ancient Jewish societies, see pp. 10-32 in the first chapter of this dissertation.
Bethulia, who “cried out to God with great fervor” and “humbled themselves with great fasting” because they were no match for the military strength of Holofernes’ army (Jth. 2-3, 3:8). Achior, leader of the Ammonites, warns Holofernes that the God of the Israelites is powerful, and begs Holofernes to “pass them by; for their Lord will defend them, and their God will protect them, and we shall be put to shame before the whole world” (Jth. 5:5-22; Jth. 5:21). Holofernes, enraged by Achior’s counsel, orders Achior to be delivered to the Israelites at Bethulia, so that Achior may share the same fate as the Israelites (Jth. 10-15). Holofernes lays siege to Bethulia, and after thirty-four days the siege is so damaging that the Israelites are running out of water (Jth. 7:20-22) and pressure Uzziah, Bethulia’s leader, to surrender. Uzziah asks the Israelites to wait for five more days, stipulating that if God does not intervene, he will surrender (Jth. 7:30-31). The Israelites have lapsed in their trust in God, and it is at this point in the narrative that Judith herself is introduced (Jth. 8:1). After her husband Manasseh died, Judith had lived at home as a widow for three years and four months. She set up a tent for herself on the roof of her house, and girded sackcloth about her loins and wore the garments of her widowhood. She fasted all the days of her widowhood, except the day before the sabbath and the sabbath itself, the day before the new moon and the day of the new moon, and the feasts and days of rejoicing of the house of Israel. She was beautiful in appearance, and had a very lovely face; and her husband Manasseh had left her gold and silver, and men and women slaves, and cattle and fields and she maintained this estate. No one spoke ill of her, for she feared God with great devotion (Jth. 8:4-8).

The narrative is clear about Judith’s protagonist role in Israel’s struggle to maintain religious integrity and survival with the impending onslaught of the Assyrian army.

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17 Uzziah’s surrender would come at about the fortieth day of the siege.
Hearing of Uzziah’s diminishing resolve to resist the Assyrians, Judith hastens to Uzziah and begs him not to surrender, to “set an example to our brethren, for their lives depend on us, and the sanctuary and the temple and the altar rest upon us” (Jth. 8:24).

With so much at stake, Judith’s priority is to instruct the Israelites how to pray, namely, with humility, and without the intention of manipulating God: “Do not try to bind the purposes of the Lord our God; for God is not like man, to be threatened, nor like a human being, to be won over by pleading. Therefore, while we wait for his deliverance, let us call upon him to help us, and he will hear our voice, if it pleases him” (Jth. 8:16-17). Judith admonished the Israelites that whatever outcome of their petitions would be God’s will. Then Judith “fell upon her face, and put ashes on her head, and uncovered the sackcloth she was wearing; and at the very time when that evening’s incense was being offered in the house of God in Jerusalem, Judith cried out to the Lord with a loud voice” (Jth. 9:1). She begged the Lord, “Hear me also, a widow” (Jth. 9:4) as she prepared to carry out a bold plan to save Israel from the invading Assyrian army.

Judith takes a maidservant with her to the Assyrians’ camp, where she affects a posture of surrender to Holofernes. Holofernes is taken with Judith’s beauty and wisdom; he lusts after her, but Judith is determined to protect her chastity. Judith later says, “As the Lord lives, who has protected me in the way I went, it was my face that tricked him to his destruction, and yet he committed no act of sin with me, to defile and shame me” (Jth. 13:16). After Holofernes is overcome with inebriation, Judith beheads him, escapes with her maidservant, and returns to her people. The Israelites praise God, and honor Judith, proclaiming, “May God grant this to be a perpetual honor to you, and may he visit you with blessings, because you did not spare your own life when your
nation was brought low, but have avenged our ruin, walking in the straight path before our God” (Jth. 13:20). Upon discovering that their leader has been killed, the Assyrians panic and flee before the pursuing Israelite army (Jth. 15).

Judith’s actions save Israel, and also result in the Ammonite leader Achior’s conversion to Judaism. Achior, who had known the brutal Holofernes, “was so overcome with the evidence of the Lord’s power exerted through a woman that he believed in the God of Israel.”18 After Israel is spared, Judith returns to her home, and “many wished to marry her, but she gave herself to no man all the days of her life from the time of the death and burial of her husband, Manasseh” (Jth. 16:22).


Judith’s virtues, ascetic practices, and the fruits of these practices comprise a substantive part of the theology of the book of Judith.19 Judith’s words and actions highlight the most important theological point of the book of Judith, which celebrates the fact of the “the Lord Almighty” saving Israel from a mighty enemy “by the hand of a woman” (Jth. 16:6).20 This section seeks to explore the theology of the book of Judith and to suggest its possible influence on the subsequent depiction of widows like Anna in

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19 For a discussion on the idea of ἐγκράτεια in the book of Judith, see Wills, “Greek Philosophical Discourse,” 753-73.
20 “The Church’s liturgy is aware of this when it applies to the Blessed Virgin the praise that Uzziah heaps on Judith: ‘The Lord has blessed you with his power because through you he has overcome our enemies. The Lord has blessed you, my daughter, more than any other woman in the world’ (Divine Office, 15 August, shorter reading; cf. 13:18); ‘You are the glory of Jerusalem! The joy of Israel! The pride of our race!’ (Common of the Blessed Virgin Mary; Ad Laudes, second antiphon; cf. 15:9)”; Universidad de Navarra, Chronicles-Maccabees (Dublin, Ireland: Four Courts Press, 2003), 373.
Luke 2:36-38, and on the order of widows that forms in the New Testament era and develops in the early Church.

**Truth and Integrity**

Judith insists upon integrity and simplicity in petitioning the Lord for deliverance; the Israelites must not put conditions on God’s actions. Judith chastises the elders of the city, who have sworn to the Israelites to surrender to the Assyrians if God does not deliver them within five days. She accuses the elders of setting themselves “up in the place of God among the sons of men” and putting the Lord to the test (Jth. 8:12-13). To usurp God’s place is to set themselves up as idols, something that has not happened in Judith’s generation. Judith reminds Israel that their ancestors were punished for worshiping “gods made with hands” and that they must not revert to worshiping idols, even if it means losing their lives (Jth. 8:18-20).

Survival is not as important as faithfulness, according to Judith. To maintain one’s life and one’s earthly freedom are not necessarily mutually exclusive, however. Judith is a “sign of the ancient truth that by vocation they [the Israelites] are a freed people, that they can choose life and freedom if they rely wholly upon God.” Judith even challenges the Israelites to give thanks for the present problems because “the Lord scourges those who draw near to him, in order to admonish them,” citing Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as exemplars in the faith who were loved and tested by God (Jth. 8:25-27). When Judith is in the Assyrian camp, she maintains strict observance of Israelite law, only eating proper foods and maintaining ritual purity (Judith 12).

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Despite Judith’s insistence upon integrity and truth, she has been critiqued for her seemingly duplicitous conversations with Holofernes. But does Judith really lie to Holofernes, or does she employ irony that is lost on the self-important Holofernes? For example, Judith tells Holofernes that her nation cannot be punished while they are right with God. Previously within the Judith narrative, the Israelites had lapsed in trusting God. If they do not trust God, they will be handed over to the enemy, Judith tells them (Jth. 11:9-15). As the narrative progresses, however, the Israelites take Judith’s admonitions to heart and spend their time praying and fasting while Judith and her maidservant are in the Assyrian camp. It is clear to the audience that the Israelites have already repented of their lapse in trust in God; while they might hypothetically still regress, for the time being they are putting their faith in God who is working through Judith. Thus, I will explore deception and irony more closely in an evaluation of Judith’s use of beauty and in a scholarly assessment of Judith’s character.

**Goodness, Wisdom, and a “True Heart”**

Judith’s authority with Uzziah, the leader of the city, is the fruit of her piety, which incorporates the ascetic practices of prayer, fasting, and continence. Uzziah implores Judith to intercede with the Lord on the city’s behalf because she is a devout woman; he sees Judith’s good standing with the Lord as stemming from her devotion (Jth. 8:31). Uzziah listens to Judith and agrees to her conditions, emphasizing that Judith has always shown wisdom and a “true heart,” asserting that her “heart’s disposition is

right” (Jth. 8:28-29). Judith does not try to usurp Uzziah’s power, but she asks him to put his trust in the Lord and in her plan until she returns to Bethulia.

Judith’s authority also comes from her courage, when which is shown when she enters the camp of the enemy with only a maidservant for company and ultimately kills Holofernes (Jth. 10:9-13; Jth. 13:4-11). Judith’s courageous actions, stemming from her virtue, inspired virtue and courage in others (the Israelites praise and worship God in Jth. 13:17; the Israelites attack and drive out the Assyrians in Jth. 15:3-7; Achior is converted to faith in Israel’s God in Jth. 14:10). Ultimately, Judith’s authority and wisdom come from her relationship with the Lord (Jth. 8:8; Jth. 8:28-31). Judith conquered herself and the enemy through prayer (Jth. 9:2-12, 12:8), fasting (Jth. 8:6), and chastity (Jth. 13:16) which makes a “true heart” possible.

**Strength, Power, and Authority**

Strength is a motif in the book of Judith and refers to the strength of the Assyrian army (Jth. 2:5; 9:7; 9:8; 11:22); men of strength, broadly speaking (Jth. 9:11); the lack of the Israelites’ military strength (Jth. 5:3; 5:23); the besieged Israelites’ flagging strength (Jth. 7:22); the strength that comes from God but is wielded by the widow Judith (Jth. 9:9; 13:7); and the strength of God (Jth. 13:11; 16:13). Power is another motif, and refers to the power of Nebuchadnezzar and his kingdom (Jth. 2:12; 11:7); the Israelites’ lack of military power (Jth. 5:3; 5:23); the power of Holofernes (Jth. 11:7; 13:19); and the power of God (Jth. 8:15; 9:11; 9:14; 13:11).

According to the text, Judith has virtually no power in the worldly or political sense. Judith is most likely a childless widow (Jth. 16:24), as was established earlier in this chapter, and the text does not say that Judith leads her community in an official
Several scholars argue that Judith has moral and religious authority within the Israelite community (implicit in texts like Jth. 8:8; 8:35; 9:10-11), and that this authority comes from the Lord through her piety, her wisdom, her adherence to the Lord’s precepts, and her trust in His providence (Jth. 8:28-29; 8:31; 9:5-6; 9:11-14; 13:18-20; 15:8-10, 12). We will look at their arguments over the next few pages. It befits us first to look at the passages in the Judith narrative in which Judith’s influence, strength, or implicit authority is cited, as well as when she cites God as the source of her strength and victory.

In contrast to Holofernes, who uses brutality and fear to conquer, Judith utilizes beauty, wisdom, piety, and subterfuge to conquer Holofernes and the Assyrian army. Toni Craven notes that in the book of Judith, “ironically, power turns on all who exercise it.”23 Judith’s moral authority, which comes from her piety and not from aggression, is apparent when the Israelite elders confer with her on her housetop (Jth. 8:8-11, 35-36). Rev. Joseph G. Mueller, S.J., notes that in Jth. 8:8, “in this verse we see her piety as the source of her good reputation.”24 She is an authoritative figure even as she is vulnerable. Most importantly, though, Judith acknowledges that her strength and victory come from God. Early in the narrative, Holofernes poses the question, “In what does their [the Israelites] power or strength consist? Who rules over them as King, leading their army?” (Jth. 5:3). Judith answers this question upon her triumphant return to Bethulia, exclaiming “God, our God, is still with us, to show his power in Israel, and his strength against our enemies, even as he has done this day!” (Jth. 13:11). Judith’s strength to defeat Holofernes comes from the Lord, and the Lord is the strength behind Israel and her

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23 Craven, “Artistry,” 84.
victory. Judith herself says, “The Lord will deliver Israel by my hand” (Jth. 8:33).

Judith’s source of strength is the Lord:

Behold their pride, and send your wrath upon their heads; give to me, a widow, the strength to do what I plan. By the deceit of my lips strike down the slave with the prince and the prince with his servant; crush their arrogance by the hand of a woman. For your power depends not upon numbers, nor your might upon men of strength; for thou art God of the lowly, helper of the oppressed, upholder of the weak, protector of the forlorn, savior of those without hope. Hear, O hear me, God of my father, God of the inheritance of Israel, Lord of heaven and earth, Creator of the waters, King of all your creation, hear my prayer! (Jth. 9:9-12).

Judith’s strength comes from God himself. Moreover, Judith influences Holofernes to do as she bids without the use of force; and in light of his esteem and respect for her, she may be said to have influence over her enemy (Jth. 11:23; 12:5-7). Judith tells Holofernes, “As your soul lives, my lord, your servant will not use up the things I have with me before the Lord carries out by my hand what he has determined to do” (Jth. 12:4). Before Judith decapitates Holofernes, she says in her heart, “O Lord God of all might, look in this hour upon the work of my hands for the exaltation of Jerusalem. For now is the time to help thy inheritance, and to carry out my undertaking for the destruction of the enemies who have risen up against us” (Jth. 13:4-5). After killing Holofernes and returning to Bethulia unharmed, Judith proclaims, “Praise God, O praise him! Praise God, who has not withdrawn his mercy from the house of Israel, but has destroyed our enemies by my hand this very night!” (Jth. 13:14). Judith gives God the credit for the success of her mission, saying, “See, here is the head of Holofernes, the commander of the Assyrian army, and here is the canopy beneath which he lay in his drunken stupor. The Lord has struck him down by the hand of a woman” (Jth. 13:15).25

25 Jan Willem van Henten, “Judith as Alternative Reader: A Rereading of Judith 7-13,” in A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 246, notes that the phrase “by the hand of a woman” appears three times in the
The Israelites’ victory is made possible by Judith’s conquering of Holofernes, and then by the Israelites following Judith’s strategic advice in Jth. 14:1-4. E. Christiansen asserts that Judith’s “effort at saving the temple and defending Israel has brought an end to the Assyrians’ threat. In answer to her prayer the God of Israel has demonstrated his power through Judith.”

Near the end of the narrative, Bagoas exclaimed, “One Hebrew woman has brought disgrace upon the house of King Nebuchadnezzar!” (Jth. 14:18), which led to the Assyrians fleeing in panic. Judith’s actions intimidated and frightened an army that was superior in strength to the Israelite army. After Holofernes was killed, the Israelites went from being besieged by the Assyrians to moving on the offensive to drive out the Assyrians (Jth. 15:3-7). In Judith’s final song, she exults in the Lord’s work, singing, “But the Lord Almighty has foiled them by the hand of a woman. For their mighty one did not fall by the hands of the young men, nor did the sons of the Titans smite him, nor did tall giants set upon him” (Jth. 16:6-7), calling attention to the fact that more likely candidates for killing Holofernes would have been men or even giants. Because of Judith’s actions, “the Persians trembled at her boldness” and “the Medes were daunted at her daring” (Jth. 16:10). Israel was left in peace from invading armies “in the days of Judith” and “for a long time after her death” (Jth. 16:25).

Some scholars are not convinced that Judith has authority, however. Pamela Milne notes that Judith is the only female character who is named, and seeks to determine


whether Judith’s role in the narrative is “a thoroughly patriarchal idea and/or ideal of
woman.”27 In her analysis of the Judith narrative, Milne voices her concern that “through
the propaganda of the femme fatale/female warrior character, men are taught, above all,
to fear woman.” According to Milne, the “otherness of women is thereby emphasized,”
and women thereby become objects to be mistrusted.28

Fear is another motif in the book of Judith, referring to fear of Holofernes (Jth.
2:28); regarding fear of the Lord, which is regarded as a positive quality (Jth. 8:8; 14:3;
16:15; 16:16); and the fear of the Assyrians when they realized that Holofernes was dead
(Jth. 15:2). The Assyrians “did not wait for one another, but with one impulse all rushed
out and fled by every path across the plain and through the hill country,” while the
Israelite soldiers “rushed out upon them” (Jth. 15:2-3). The text says that “the Persians
trembled at her boldness, the Medes were daunted at her daring” (Jth. 16:10) and that “no
one ever again spread terror among the people of Israel in the days of Judith, or for a long
time after her death” (Jth. 16:25). The text does not say that the Israelites were afraid of
Judith, even after she returned victorious. The narrative says only that the enemies of
Israel were afraid of Judith because she killed their general, and the narrative does not
relate any more of the Assyrians’ story, regarding whether the Assyrians were taught to
fear women in general or taught to fear the Israelites and/or the God of the Israelites.

Achior, the Ammonite who converted, did so not out of fear of Judith, but because he
“saw all that the God of Israel had done, he believed firmly in God, and was circumcised,
and joined the house of Israel, remaining to this day” (Jth. 14:10). Because Judith gives
the credit to God for her victory, it follows that people were taught to fear the God of

28 Ibid., 47.
Israel rather than Judith herself (Jth. 16:3-17). The book of Judith does not reinforce a secondary or inferior idea of women with respect to men, because of inculcating fear of Judith. The book of Judith teaches its audience to fear God and not any earthly power, stating that those who fear the Lord will receive mercy from the Lord and will “be great forever” (Jth. 16:15-16).

Milne also thinks that Judith’s heroine status is diminished “by repeated claims that it is the deity, not Judith, who is primarily responsible for killing Holofernes.”29 Because the people worship the deity, and Judith ascribes her success to the deity as well, Milne believes that “there is no suitable role left for Judith.”30 However, Milne does not admit the possibility that both God and Judith are the heroes of the story; that God is the hero for delivering Israel through the hand of a widowed woman (Jth. 13:17; 16:6) and that Judith is also heroic for her trust in the Lord and for her courageous actions (Jth. 13:18-20). Judith offered praise to the Lord upon her return to Bethulia (Jth. 13:14) and after the Israelites plundered the Assyrian camp (Jth. 16:1-17), and Israel honored Judith (Jth. 13:18; 14:6-8; 15:8-10, 12; 16:21), gave glory to God who worked through her (Jth. 13:17-18), and worshiped the Lord (Jth. 16:18). Despite Milne’s assertion that God is given the honor rather than Judith, the text is clear that both God and Judith are praised. However, one is the “Lord Almighty” (Jth. 16:6) who “created the heavens and the earth” (Jth. 13:18), and the other is a woman, however well beloved and endowed, who “feared God with great devotion” (Jth. 8:8). Thus, God is worshiped (Jth. 16:18), while Judith is praised and honored but not worshiped (Jth. 13:18; 14:6-8; 15:8-10, 12; 16:21). When Judith gives glory to God for the works He has done through her, she stands in the line of

29 Ibid., 50.
30 Ibid., 51.
heroes and heroines of Scripture who do likewise. Judith’s humility is not discussed or mentioned by Milne. Someone’s humility may be misconstrued as lacking an important role, and worldly power may be erroneously equated with the moral authority that comes through piety or holiness. Geoffrey Miller goes so far as to assert that Judith “is depicted in the same manner as Israel’s Divine Warrior, rescuing her people on the fortieth day in their distress” and “personifies God in word and deed.” But he notes that “she is also too modest to acknowledge such a close affinity between herself and the Lord, deflecting all acclaim she receives by crediting God with Israel’s triumph.”

In her conclusion about Judith, Milne asserts that while “Judith may act in some atypical ways, she is not a counter-cultural character.” Judith “effectively reinforces the patriarchal ideology that women are inferior and secondary by repeatedly making self-effacing, even self-denigrating, statements.” According to Milne, Judith does so by attributing “all her success to the deity” and by drawing “attention to the added ignominy of being defeated by a woman.” However, the male biblical heroes of the Old Testament also attributed their successes to God, so in this respect Judith resembles her Israelite male heroic counterparts; thus Milne’s argument does not, in itself, reinforce an inferior or secondary status for women. The emphasis on Holofernes’ defeat by a woman (Jth. 9:10; 13:15; 14:18; 16:6) could suggest that the Judith narrative reinforces

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31 Judith’s Song (Jth. 16:2-17) is a beautiful poetic piece that echoes the Psalms in its praise of, and thanksgiving to, God. The holy men and women of the Old Testament have in common their praise and thanksgiving to the Lord. See Gen. 40:8, 41:16, and 41:25-39 (Joseph); Exod. 15:1-18 (Moses) and 15:20-21 (Miriam); Judg. 5:2-31 (Deborah); and Tob. 13 (Tobit).


33 Milne, “Judith,” 54.

34 Ibid.

35 For example, see Gen. 40:8, 41:16, and 41:25-39 (Joseph); Exod. 15:1-18 (Moses); Judg. 6-8 (Gideon); and Tob. 13 (Tobit).
an inferior or secondary status for women. However, Judith’s actions are in the context of battle, in which Israelite women did not typically serve in a soldier’s role. The narrator might have been emphasizing the unusual militaristic role that Judith played in killing a military general, or the narrator could have been merely highlighting Judith’s vulnerable status as a woman and as a widow, which status does not necessarily imply inferiority. If Judith was considered inferior, it would have been on the basis of her womanhood and/or widowhood, but not on the basis of attributing her success to God. Moreover, as a woman, Judith subverts any idea that men are superior to women by her actions.

By drawing attention to the enemy’s defeat by a woman, the author of Judith does not portray Judith as engaging in self-denigrating behavior. The author of Judith rather establishes Judith as an authority figure in the first chapter in which she is mentioned (Jth. 8:4-11; 8:28-29). Christensen asserts that her “social and religious status in the community was of such importance that she could summon the leaders of Bethulia, including Uzziah, and rebuke them, addressing them as their superior.”

Deborah Levine Gera notes that “Judith’s first words in the book (8:11-27) are addressed to the leaders of her city, Bethulia, and she speaks to them from a position of moral authority over men. She summons the men to chastise them and instruct them in God’s ways, explaining what one should—and should not—expect from God.” Gera notes that “such ‘sending’ by women to men is a mark of their authority, pointing to their importance,” and cites examples such as Deborah in Judg. 4:6, Rebecca in Gen. 27:42, Tamar in Gen. 38:25, Rahab in Josh. 2:21, Delilah in Judg. 16:18, Bathsheba in 2 Sam.

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36 Christensen, “Judith,” 77.
37 Deborah Levine Gera, Judith (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 105.
11:5, the wise woman of Abel Beth-Maacah in 2 Sam. 20:16, and Jezebel in 1 Kings 19:2 and 1 Kings 21:8 to support her point. Gera draws further comparisons between Judith and Deborah: “Judith has the wisdom, authority, and moral stature of Deborah, and both women behave authoritatively towards Israelite men, exhorting, reprimanding, and speeding them off to war. Both Judith and Deborah bring years of peace and quiet to their country after performing their courageous deeds.” Therefore, Judith’s self-effacing words of Judith do not denigrate her or show her to be in an inferior or secondary position with respect to men.

Milne notes that Judith was vulnerable as a woman and as a widow in the Ancient Near East, but then overlooks one of the main points that the narrator communicates to the audience: that the Lord works through unlikely characters, both men and women, to redeem his people and bring about his will. Milne asserts that Judith “liberates neither herself nor her countrywomen from the status quo of the biblical gender ideology.” However, as correct as Milne’s assertion is regarding Judith’s vulnerability as a woman and as a widow, Judith does liberate an entire nation from the threat of a pagan invader and so becomes a heroic figure for both the men and the women of the Israel; the liberation that Judith achieves for Israel is the liberty to worship their God, and the liberty to remain on their land. Judith’s unlikely heroine status both highlights the perceived inferior status of women in the Old Testament, while at the same time subverting it.

Thus, Judith does indeed liberate herself and her countrywomen “from the status quo of

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38 Ibid., 273. Gera cites Frymer-Kensky, *Reading*, 149 and 397, fn. 149 for this insight.
biblical gender ideology” precisely because she is presented as a heroine and a model for Israelite living.

Margarita Stocker argues that Judith is not a legitimate hero (for feminists) because the narrative stresses that Judith is an instrument through whom God works. Stocker thinks that Judith is therefore not free to act, that Judith is a kind of captive within God’s power. However, the text does not indicate that Judith is coerced or forced to do anything; rather, Judith takes the initiative of meeting with the city officials (Jth. 8:9-11) and suggests to the officials that she has a plan in mind (Jth. 8:32-34) before she takes the initiative of communicating with God and praying to him (in addition to her daily prayer) and prepares herself to confront Holofernes (Jth. 9:10-5). The book of Judith states explicitly Judith’s strength, which is really hers, comes from God.

Other scholarship affirms that Judith was indeed an authoritative person, whose moral authority stems from her holiness; through her holiness Judith becomes an exemplar for both men and women. Monica Miller asserts that Judith has moral authority, and M. Miller notes that Judith’s efficacy as mediator and victor are directly related to her vocation of widowhood, which Judith lives out by spending the greater part of her life in ascetic practices. M. Miller notes that Judith is not a leader by “election of the people or by ritual consecration,” but Judith nonetheless becomes the “teacher of the nation” by virtue of her piety and “intense life of prayer, penance, and fasting.” Craven also asserts that “the bold trust of an Israelite woman preserves the life of the people: a

42 Stocker, Judith, 8-9.
43 Monica Migliorino Miller, Sexuality and Authority in the Catholic Church (Scranton: University of Scranton Press, 2006), 196-197.
44 Ibid., 197.
widow is the mother of faith” who “transforms the arrogance, cowardice, or tendency to concession of all who would bind the purposes of the Lord God.”

Sidnie White Crawford asserts that Judith is “a model for successful Jewish resistance to foreign rule.” Judith’s song of praise summarizes the drama of the book of Judith and the actions of the Lord through her, and it ends with a warning to those who would rise up against Israel in the future: “Woe to the nations that rise up against my people! The Lord Almighty will take vengeance on them in the day of judgment; fire and worms he will give to their flesh; they shall weep in pain forever” (Jth. 16:17). God is the final authority, and Judith voices what God will do to the enemies of Israel. Judith’s success is highlighted at the end of the narrative, which concludes by saying that “no one ever again spread terror among the people of Israel in the days of Judith, or for a long time after her death” (Jth. 16:25). Judith’s victory is possible because her strength is from God.

Gera also argues that Judith has moral and religious authority. Gera asserts that the prayer Judith voices before leaving Bethulia for the Assyrian camp on her “independently conceived mission of rescue underlines her moral and religious authority and points to the likelihood that she will succeed: it is precisely because she is so faithful to God and relies upon him that she is able to intervene for her people.” Gera compares Judith to the wise woman of Abel Beth-Maacah (2 Sam. 20: 15-22) and the wise woman of Tekoa (2 Sam. 14:1-20), both of whom are “incisive, faithful, and authoritative.

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45 Craven, “Artistry,” 94, 75.
47 Gera, Judith, 297.
‘mothers of Israel’”; all three of these women share a common concern of protecting “God’s heritage” (Jth. 13:5). Gera notes Achior acknowledges Judith’s authority in Jth. 14:6-7: “the physical gesture of lowering oneself to the ground or simply bowing—whether to a more powerful person or to God—conveys obedience and submission to the higher authority.”

Achior “bows down willingly and deliberately, perhaps in recognition of Judith as an instrument of divine will, a representative of God.”

Some scholarship insists that Judith is not a legitimate heroine because Judith attributes her strength and victory to the Lord. According to Milne, Judith is “a pious helpmate to the male deity who uses her as a female instrument to defeat the enemy forces.” By attributing her strength and success to God, however, Judith stands in line with other biblical heroes and heroines who also attribute their successes to God. The narrator of Judith portrays her as an ideal Israelite whose wisdom and piety inspires a nation, and who can be a role model for men and women alike. Gera writes that “Judith’s role as a religious authority demands wisdom, piety, and punctilious religious observance, and the author takes pains to present her as an authoritative and moral figure.” Gera also asserts that “Judith’s substance as a heroine is linked to her theological wisdom in circular fashion: her piety and moral stature lend her theological statements truth and significance, even while her words on divine matters add to her worth and import.” Barbara Schmitz states that through her speeches and prayers, Judith is presented as “a learned woman” who is “well-versed in the Scriptures and the

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48 Ibid., 230.  
49 Ibid., 417.  
50 Milne, “Judith,” 55.  
51 Gera, Judith, 109.  
52 Ibid., 107.
traditions of her people (chs. 8; 9; 16),” “Torah observant (10.5; 12:2-3, 6-8, 15, 19; 16.21-24) and competent in the theology of wisdom.”

God is the ultimate authority in the book of Judith, and “the author uses Judith’s song to stress God’s authority both over the forces of nature and over sinners. In this fashion, God is incorporated, as it were, into the action of the battle.” Judith does not wield power in a worldly or political sense, but according to the narrator of Judith, she is a woman of strength whose strength comes from the Lord, in the tradition of other heroes and heroines in Scripture. With her beauty, wisdom, chastity, her steadfast faith in God’s providence, and the strength that comes from God, Judith saves Israel. She is praiseworthy for her trust in the Lord and for attributing her victory to the Lord.

Scholarly Assessment of Judith’s Character

Judith’s piety leads her own people the Israelites to respect her and to turn to her for counsel. Before outsiders, however, Judith must find a creative way of establishing her authority and of bringing to fruition the Lord’s plan to save Israel. Judith relies upon her feminine acumen and her beauty to gain entrance into the enemy’s camp. Impressed by her wisdom and eloquence, Holofernes is distracted by her beauty and becomes inebriated, enabling Judith to strike him down. Her beauty does not result in her defilement, however; Judith insists that “he [Holofernes] committed no act of sin with me, to defile and shame me” (Jth. 13:16). Beauty, used in the service of God, is a good and justifiable thing.


54 Gera, Judith, 465.
Beauty is mentioned so often in Judith that it merits a closer look. That the author of Judith wants to highlight Judith’s beauty is clear. Craven notes that the thematic repetitions of fear or its denial in the first half of Judith (chapters 1-7) contrast with the thematic repetitions of her beauty and trust in the Lord in the second half of the story. In the second half of Judith (chapters 8-16), there are many references to Judith’s beauty and loveliness (Jth. 8:7; 10:4; 10:7; 10:14; 10:19; 10:23; 11:21; 11:23; 12:13; 16:7).

Repetition is an important feature in narrative, as Sharon Pace states:

Repetitions of dialogue, of particular words, or of descriptions are devices that can reveal much about the veracity of the speaker’s words, the integrity of his or her motives, the purpose of God’s designs, or the development of the narrative itself….It demonstrates the crucial aspects of events or scenes that remain the same and the significant variations of the narrative elements.

The repetition of the motif of beauty in Judith alerts the audience to variations of the narrative that follow Judith’s transformation from a widow in mourner’s clothing to a widow who dresses as when her husband was alive, when she leaves the safety of Bethulia. Judith is beautiful both as an unadorned widow who is in extended mourning, as well as when she resumes the clothing and accoutrements of her married life. Gera notes that “here it is plain that Judith’s extended fasting has not affected her beauty. In the Testament of Joseph we learn that Joseph’s fasting while resisting Potiphar’s wife lends him beauty ‘for those who fast for God’s sake are granted beauty of countenance.’ In similar fashion, Daniel’s restricted vegetarian diet leaves him as attractive as ever (Dan 1:4-5).” The emphasis on Judith’s beauty “is along biblical lines, closely echoing that

57 Gera, Judith, 267.
of Rachel (Gen 29:17) and Joseph (Gen 39:6). Judith’s good character is attested to by the fact that when she dresses up, it is as when she is a modest married woman. Judith’s good character is also attested to by the fact that her beauty is intact even after fasting.

M. Miller notes that Ambrose viewed Judith’s preparation to encounter Holofernes in terms of a bride adorning herself for her spouse. Furthermore, the narrative is clear that when Judith shed her widow’s garments, she did not dress immodestly; rather she dressed as she had when her husband was alive (Jth. 10:3).

Moreover, after Judith conquers Holofernes and returns triumphantly to Bethulia, “many desired to marry her, but she remained a widow all the days of her life after Manasseh her husband died and was gathered to his people” (Jth. 16:22). Thus, while it was acceptable and perhaps preferable to remarry in Israelite culture, Judith chooses not to remarry and remains celibate for the rest of her life. Judith’s celibacy in her widowhood is seen clearly in the text of the Latin Vulgate.

Not all scholarship finds Judith to be a commendable character, however, particularly with regard to her use of beauty. Linda Day, for instance, questions Judith’s actions, comparing Judith’s ingenuity with the cunning of Simeon and his brothers against Shechem and his people. Day acknowledges that Judith’s widowhood “causes us to feel sorry that the premature death of Manasseh has left her childless.”

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58 Ibid.
60 In the Latin Vulgate, Jth. 16:26 reads: “And chastity was joined to her virtue, so that she knew no man all the days of her life, after the death of Manasses her husband” (*erat etiam virtuti castitas adiuncta ita ut non cognosceret virum omnibus diebus vitae suae ex quo defunctus est Manasses vir eius*). See Gera, *Judith*, 473.
61 Day, “Faith,” 80. Christiansen, “Judith,” 76, on the other hand, asserts that “The identity and honour of Simeon and Jacob are here extended to Judith, as is their wisdom, cunning, and zeal. Thereby the author accounts for her being a woman of courage and cunning.”
mentions Judith’s vulnerability as a childless widow in her discussion about Judith’s use of beauty as a strategy for accomplishing her mission. Judith does not have much in the way of weaponry when it comes to confronting Holofernes, and she has to wait until he has passed out from inebriation to kill him. Moreover, Judith was in very real danger of suffering rape (Jth. 12:11-12; 16), like her kinswoman Dinah, whose story Judith recounts (Jth. 9:2-4). Nonetheless, Day concedes that “though the beauty with which she is portrayed is not itself a moral attribute, hearing of her comeliness within the larger story of important Israelite ancestors who are likewise beautiful (Rebekah, Rachel, Joseph, Tamar, David, Bathsheba, Absalom) suggests that this observation regarding her physical appearance is complimentary.” Disagreeing with the idea that Judith should be read as a commendable figure because Judith uses cunning and violence in her interactions with Holofernes, Day nonetheless acknowledges that the narrator of the book of Judith “suggests, through this description, that Judith should be viewed as an admirable figure.”

Day also questions Judith’s relationship to God, wondering whether Judith was really acting on a command, or at least a blessing, from above, or by Judith’s own initiative. The biblical text asserts that Judith “feared God with great devotion” (Jth. 8:8) and admonished the Bethulian leaders, “Do not try to bind the purposes of the Lord our God; for God is not like man, to be threatened, nor like a human being, to be won over by pleading” (Jth. 8:16). These verses suggest that Judith would have been attentive to what God wanted in the situation. Moreover, the text cites three instances of Judith

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63 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid., 76, 83.
praying before she acts; just before she leaves the safety of Bethulia (Jth. 9:14); in Holofernes’ camp, where she “prayed the Lord God of Israel to direct her way for the raising up of her people” (Jth. 12:8); and just before she beheads Holofernes with his own sword, “Give me strength this day, O Lord God of Israel!” (Jth. 13:4-5, 7-8). Her praying for God’s direction suggests that Judith is working under God’s authority. Judith takes the initiative in sending for the Bethulian authorities, to relate to them what God will do through her (Jth. 8:9-11).

Day believes that the deceit and violence Judith exhibits in her encounters with Holofernes are “intrinsic to her values and character,” and that ultimately Judith “deceives not only the enemy but also her own people and even God.”66 Day thinks that Judith “should not be viewed as a model of piety” even though the narrator portrays Judith as a pious woman.67 Judith employs cunning and violence to save the people she loves, with implicit consent from the Lord to do so; thus, while cunning and violence are used by Judith, it does not follow that cunning and violence are inherent to her character. At the very least, if one argues that these qualities are inherent to her character, it must be noted that Judith does not resort to cunning or violence at any other part in the biblical narrative outside of her encounter with Holofernes. The biblical text emphasizes Judith’s piety before Bethulia was besieged, her piety during the siege, her piety during her time in the Assyrian camp (which admittedly also serves the dual purpose of setting up the time and space to escape from the Assyrian camp), and Judith’s return to her chaste widowed reclusive life after her success. Furthermore, the cunning and violent act that

66 Ibid., 91.
67 Ibid., 93.
Judith exhibits is not without precedent in Scripture.\textsuperscript{68} The examples of cunning and violence that are held up for admiration in Scripture, furthermore, are within the context of war and threat to the Israelites; that is, cunning and violence are not condoned in Scripture for their own sakes but rather held up for admiration in the context of pious (and many times vulnerable) people who use cunning and violence as weapons of war and national defense.

Craven observes that Judith prays to God, and she claims that Judith’s mission “although never explicitly ordered, is dignified by the assumed authority of serving the true God.”\textsuperscript{69} Her use of beauty is justified from the beginning by her mission to save Israel. Judith’s beauty should have been a liability when she left the safety of her city with her maid because “totally defenseless, they depart at a time of day when Judith’s great beauty invites assault.”\textsuperscript{70} Holofernes states that Judith is beautiful and “wise in speech” (Jth. 11:21, 23), with the result that “ultimately, the fragile beauty of this one woman proves more powerful than the massive military strength of Assyria” when Judith uses her beauty and wisdom to gain close access to the general and kill him.\textsuperscript{71} Judith’s virtue in her beauty is key to the success of her mission to save Israel from the enemy. Her beauty distracts and excites those who are vain and weak (Holofernes and the Assyrian army) but throughout all of her “enticement,” Judith never capitulates to the immoral advances of the enemy.

\textsuperscript{68} I am indebted to Rev. Joseph G. Mueller, S.J., for pointing out that “cunning and violence are held up for admiration in the Bible” and citing biblical narrative examples who use cunning and/or violence to achieve good ends such as Rahab (Joshua); Samson (Judges); and David and Goliath (1 Samuel).
\textsuperscript{69} Craven, “Artistry,” 75.
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 86.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 91.
Just prior to her discussion of Judith, Frymer-Kensky discusses the character of Yael that appears in Judges 4 and 5. Frymer-Kensky observes that “women in their tents may not go out into the battlefield, but they can still be the saviors of Israel.” Yael, like Judith, kills the enemy general. Unlike Judith, however, Yael’s appearance is not mentioned, whereas the author of Judith “describes both her beauty and the male attraction to it. There is no doubt that her beauty is the weapon by which Judith saves Israel.” Frymer-Kensky notes:

The difference between Yael and Judith is precisely the difference between biblical ideas and the ideas that come to Israel from the Greek world. In classical biblical works, the beauty of women is never their weapon. It can make them vulnerable to male desires, as with Sarah and Bathsheba, but it does not help them to manipulate such desires. It is not until Esther, one of the latest biblical books, that the beauty of women is any use to them.

Regarding the vulnerability of women, Frymer-Kensky observes that Esther and Judith, both presented as beautiful and virtuous by their respective narrators, “demonstrate the ability of the small and marginal to win by their will and the power of God.” Crawford also notes in her comparison of the characters of Esther and Judith that both are beautiful; furthermore, as Esther is an orphan and Judith is a widow, “both [Esther and Judith] are protected groups in Jewish society, but they are also marginalized members of that society.” Frymer-Kensky acknowledges the limited and more creative “weaponry” that a woman had to work with. Beauty is not a vice or a virtue in itself, and it can be used in God’s service as in the case of Judith. Judith’s mission is to save Israel, and the defenses available to a vulnerable widow include her God-given gifts of beauty, both interiorly

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72 Frymer-Kensky, Reading, 52.
73 Ibid., 55.
74 Ibid., 56.
75 Ibid., 335.
76 Crawford, “Esther,” 63.
(her piety and right relationship with the Lord) and exteriorly (her physical loveliness), and also her wisdom and eloquence (Jth. 11:21-23).  

In addition to the explicit and implicit layers of significance of Judith’s beauty, the narrator in Judith also calls attention to Judith’s use of rhetoric, perhaps to curtail the charge that she was deceitful, but more likely to emphasize her intelligence, wisdom, and her ability to remain truthful even in her cunning. In this way, Judith stands in the line of “other ‘wise women’ in the biblical tradition, who use speech as a means to accomplish their goals with male antagonists” like the “‘wise woman in Tekoa’ in 2 Sam 14:4-17.”

Rose Kam remarks that “everything said in the Assyrian camp has a double meaning—the meaning the Assyrians understand, and the meaning Judith understands.” For example, when Judith assures Holofernes that “I will gladly drink, my Lord, because today is the greatest day of my whole life” (Jth. 12:18), “Holofernes assumes that she is referring to the prospect of sexual intercourse with him; the reader knows that she is actually referring to his imminent demise at her own hands.” It is the irony that the narrator employs and that the audience understands that preserves Judith’s integrity in her cunning. This irony also provides a measure of comic relief in a tense and pivotal scene, allowing the audience to sympathize more with Judith’s use of her beauty to deceive Holofernes, and to better appreciate the Lord’s triumph through the actions of a vulnerable widow.

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77 Irene Nowell, *Jonah, Tobit, Judith—Collegeville Bible Commentary Old Testament*, vol. 25 (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1986), 74, notes that “Judith understands the goodness of her body. She knows that her physical beauty is good and that it comes from God. She also knows that the power of her beauty comes from within her, from her holiness, from her faithfulness to God. Since both her exterior and interior beauty come from God, her beauty must be devoted to the service of God. God intends to use her beauty as a weapon to liberate the people.”

78 Crawford, “Esther,” 64.

79 Rose Sallberg Kam, *Their Stories, Our Stories* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 158, fn. 5.

The narrator of the book of Judith employs repetition, irony, and rhetoric, amongst other narrative elements, to highlight the salvation from God’s enemies that can be found in beauty used in the service of God when that beauty is combined with truth and goodness. The author of Judith lauds her beauty and her actions (Jth. 10:1-8; 15:9-10, 12-13; 16:6-10) and commends her chastity (Jth. 13:16; 16:22), which supports the assertions that Judith acted heroically and virtuously and that her use of beauty not only was justified in light of her status as a widowed, childless woman trying to save an endangered Israel, but also complements her other good qualities that align her with the other great matriarchs of Israel.  

**Theology of the Book of Judith: Ascetic Practices**

The idea of the importance and efficacy of ascetic practices is well attested in Scripture and is central to the Judith narrative. When Israel is threatened by the Assyrians, the people respond with fasting and prayer, and they don sackcloth and ashes. They even put sackcloth around the altar (Jth. 4:12). While the people prayed and fasted, Joakim and the other priests wore sackcloth and “offered the continual burnt

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81 Benedikt Otzen, *Tobit and Judith* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 68, states that “the conspicuous thing about the Judith story is the circumstance that the principle figure is a woman. But, actually, this trait develops a strong biblical tradition of the heroine: Moses’ mother and sister risk their lives to secure the survival of Moses, so that he can accomplish his deed. Deborah, along with Barak, leads the Israelites in the successful fight against the Canaanites, and Jael, the wife of Heber, crowns the achievement by driving the peg into the skull of Sisera, the sleeping Canaanite general. Queen Esther puts her life at stake when she unmask[s] the evil Haman and saves the Jews in Persia; she applies feminine cunning, as do other biblical females: Sarai and Rebekah, Tamar and Bathsheba, Ruth and Abigail.”

82 Examples of fasting include 1 Ezra 8:23; Exod. 34:27-28; 2 Sam. 12:16; 1 Kings 19:7-8; 2 Chron. 20:2-3; Esther 4:16; Tob. 12:8; Bar. 1:5-6; 1 Macc. 7:26-47. Examples of prayer and supplication include Gen. 18:1; Num. 12:4-16; Wisd. Of Sol. 7:7; 2 Sam. 24:25; 1 Kings 18:30-46; Luke 11:1-13. Examples of continence include Exod. 19:14-15; 1 Sam. 21:4-6; 2 Sam. 11:11; and Jer. 16:2.

83 Sackcloth in Scripture is used to cover the bodies of humans (for example Gen. 37:34; 2 Sam. 3:31; Jth. 4:10, 11, and 14; 9:1; 10:3), to cover animals (Jon. 3:8) and it is used in a figurative/symbolic sense (Bar. 4:20: “I have taken off the robe of peace and put on the sackcloth of my supplication”; and Jer. 50:3: “I clothe the heavens with blackness, and make sackcloth their covering”). According to Gera, *Judith*, 184-85, “the practice of spreading sackcloths and the draping of the altar in sackcloth” in Jth. 4:12 “are unique to Judith and not attested to anywhere.”
offerings and the vows and freewill offerings of the people” for the deliverance of Israel from Nebuchadnezzar and his second in command, the general Holofernes (Jth. 4:14). Judith’s ascetic practice of continence as a widow before the siege of Bethulia and her ascetic preparations of prayer and fasting (in addition to her celibate widowhood) for the encounter with Holofernes echo ascetic preparations of continence for battle encounters in other biblical narratives. Anne-Mareike Wetter asserts that “through her ascetic lifestyle, she [Judith] removes herself from the mundane concerns occupying the rest of the people, and instead maintains close contact with a more spiritual reality. Consequently, she can speak with more authority about YHWH’s purposes with Israel.”

In addition to relating the ascetical practices that Israel employs in hoping for deliverance, the Judith narrative highlights the fact that Israel has not worshiped any idols in Judith’s generation (Jth. 8:18-20). It is noted early on in the narrative that Israel “had only recently returned from captivity” and had reconsecrated the Temple, altar, and sacred vessels that had been profaned (Jth. 4:3). Achiö, leader of the Ammonites who is summoned before Holofernes, recounts for Holofernes Israel’s history of enslavement and deliverance, warning the general that:

If there is any unwitting error in this people and they sin against their God and we find out their offence, then we will go up and defeat them. But if there is no transgression in their nation, then let my lord pass them by; for their Lord will defend them, and their God will protect them, and we shall be put to shame before the whole world (Jth. 5:20-21).

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84 See Jth. 8:5-6; 9:1, 10:1-2. Other examples include 2 Sam. 11:11, in which Uriah refuses to lay with Bathsheba before battle; ascetic preparation for encounters with the Lord in Scripture include Exod. 19:14-15, Moses’s preparation before the Great Theophany; see also 1 Sam. 21:4-6, in which Abimelech could give David holy bread in 1 Sam. 21: 4-6, provided the young men had not lain with women.
Israel’s deliverance is possible during this time if the Israelites have returned to God. The Israelites had recently returned from captivity, and their altar and Temple were consecrated “after their profanation” (Jth. 4:3). The struggle of the Israelites to maintain their religious identity is at the heart of the book of Judith (Jth. 4:1-3, 8-15; 8:18).

Judith prays, fasts, and is continent (Jth. 8:5-6; 9:1-14; 12:8; 16:22). Judith also eats only ritually pure food and bathes daily (Jth. 12:1-2, 7). These ascetic and pious practices enable and support Judith’s mission, which corresponds to earlier widow traditions regarding the efficacy of the widow’s prayer that we observed in the first chapter of this dissertation. Sabine van den Eynde asserts that in the book of Judith, “the prayers of the people are an important part” of the “line of thought that with God strength is not based upon military power but on the God of the powerless.”

Gera states that “Judith’s words are neither penitent nor fearful and her self-control even while beseeching God underscores her moral and religious authority, as well as her emotional strength. Here, too, Judith is a mouthpiece for the author’s theological concerns, and hers is a dignified and authoritative voice….” According to Craven, Judith lived “like a good Essene,” by praying and fasting on her rooftop and remaining continent. Craven wonders whether the book of Judith might have been “a proto-Essene document setting out a case for those, who like Judith, would choose to live apart from their communities, to observe the Sabbath with rigor, and to reject marriage.” Craven concludes that the book of Judith probably does not have sectarian authorship, but she asserts that the themes in Judith resonate with elements of Sadducean, Zealot, and Pharisean

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87 Gera, Judith, 108.
88 Craven, Artistry, 120.
sectarianism as well as with Essene motifs. Lawrence Wills argues convincingly that in Judith “there is evidence of Greek philosophical influences” including “the depiction of her self-mastery,” or ἐγκράτεια.\(^{89}\)

**Prayer and Fasting**

Prayer is an important feature in Judith. Gera writes that three different groups of Israelites in three different locations (all those in Israel, Jth. 4:9-10; the Israelites in Jerusalem, Jth. 4:11-12; and the priests and the Temple at Jerusalem’s center, Jth. 4:14-15) unite in “collectively beseeching God with all the means at their disposal: cries, prayers, prostration, sacrifices, fasting, sackcloth, and ashes. The prayers and cries…are a verbal articulation of distress and an appeal to divine mercy….”\(^{91}\) Moreover, prayer is effective; according to Gera, “we are often told that God sends a judge or savior to rescue the Israelites after hearing their cries” (cf. Jth. 4:13; 5:12).\(^{92}\) Uzziah believes in the power of Judith’s intercessory prayer when he ask Judith, “So pray for us, since you are a devout woman, and the Lord will send us rain to fill our cisterns and we will no longer be faint” (Jth. 8:31). Judith tells Holofernes that she will go out to pray to God, who “will tell me when they have committed their sins” (Jth. 11:17). In prayer, Judith asks God to “direct her way for the raising up of her people” (Jth. 12:8), and God’s action to save Israel through her abundantly answers this prayer.

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\(^{89}\) Ibid., 120-1.

\(^{90}\) Wills, “Greek Philosophical Discourse,” 773. Wills here “sees evidence of Greek philosophical influences in four aspects: (1) the depiction of her self-mastery; (2) the contrast with others’ lack of self-mastery; (3) her division of time into past, present, and future; and (4) her critique of the Bethulians’ prayer in restricting the freedom of God.”

\(^{91}\) Gera, Judith, 179-180.

\(^{92}\) Ibid., 188. Gera cites Judg. 2:18; Judg. 3:9, 15; Judg. 6:6-8; 1 Sam. 9:16; Neh. 9:27; Ps. 34:18; and Isa. 19:20 for examples of this phenomenon.
Fasting is another ascetical element that is featured in the Judith narrative. Gera comments that the fast of the Israelites in Judith “is essentially pre-emptive, and is intended to avert a looming crisis; compare 2 Sam 12:16; Judg 20:26; Esth 4:16.” She notes that Judith has fasted for all the days of her widowhood (for forty months) while the other Israelites have only fasted “in the wake of Holofernes’ military threat.” Judith’s extended fasting “seems to stem from a combination of mourning, piety, and asceticism which is meant to bring her closer to God,” and the duration of Judith’s fasting “has no real parallel in the Bible.” As a preemptive measure against the encroaching Assyrians, Judith’s fasting plays a role in her heroic accomplishments in the salvation of Israel, while her extensive fasting suggests a permanent aspect of an ascetic lifestyle, which differs from the limited periods of fasting that were portrayed in the Old Testament previously. In addition to prayer and fasting, Judith’s continence is another key factor in her victory. We now turn to key points regarding ascetic continence and its efficacy.

**Continence in Ancient Judaism**

God’s people in the Old Testament saw fertility as a sign of God’s favor, as a way of ensuring the continuance of their nation, and as assurance for care in old age; barren widows were especially pitiable in this last respect. Karel van der Toorn asserts that

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93 Ibid., 182.
94 Ibid., 264-65. Gera notes that fasting in the Bible lasts a day, a week, or forty days, and is practiced during periods of mourning or times of distress. Gera also notes the similarities of Judith’s extended fasting with Anna’s extended fasting in the New Testament (Luke 2:36-37). Gera observes, on p. 235, that forty days pass between Holofernes’ launching his campaign to the time of his death, that Judith has been a widow for forty months when she is introduced in the narrative, and that the Israelites spent forty years in the desert; Gen. 7:4 and 1 Sam. 17:16 also show “instances of danger which last forty days,” citing Jan Van Henten, “Judith as a Female Moses: Judith 7-13 in Light of Exodus 17, Numbers 20 and Deuteronomy 33:8-11” in Reflections on Theology and Gender, eds. Fokkelien van DijkHemmes and Athlaya Brenner (Kampen, Holland: Peeters Publishers, 1994): 33-48.
95 Thurston, The Widows, 85.
during Judith’s time, “the fact that she is put forward as a heroine and an example betrays the increasingly ambivalent attitude towards sexuality in Hellenistic Judaism. Judaism has not had a cult of virginity; yet the celebration of the devout and chaste widow in the figure of Judith might be understood as the Jewish version of a religiousness that was basically inimical to the flesh.” Van der Toorn further asserts that the celebration of chastity in Judith is similar to the “antagonism to the flesh that transpires at various places in the New Testament,” citing Matt. 19:12, 1 Cor. 7:32-40, and 1 Tim. 5:1-16 in support of his argument. While I agree with Van der Toorn that a shift appears to occur in the attitude towards sexuality, in that celibacy is viewed by the Israelites in Judith perhaps more positively than in the past, I do not think that the text of the book of Judith supports the idea of a religiousness that is negative towards the flesh. The text does not say explicitly that marriage or even re-marriage was a negative thing, but implies that Judith’s choice to remain unmarried was at the very least not a negative thing, because the text states that even though Judith “remained a widow all the days of her life” even though many wished to marry her, she nonetheless “became more and more famous, and grew old in her husband’s house” (Jth. 16:22-23). The fact that the narrator of Judith does not criticize her for not re-marrying does not, in itself, suggest something as severe an anti-flesh approach. If the text had been anti-flesh, one would expect some passage in Judith supporting that assertion.

However, it is merely stated that Judith remained a widow the rest of her days, and the text does not critique her on that point. Jeremiah’s unmarried state was considered a positive thing: “The Lord commanded Jeremiah to become symbolically the

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96 Van der Toorn, “The Public Image,” 27.
97 Ibid., 27, fn. 36.
victim of the punishments that awaited Judah. By remaining celibate, Jeremiah spared
his would-be wife and children from the coming tribulations.” In Jer. 16:1-4, God tells
Jeremiah not to get married; thus it is good for Jeremiah to remain celibate. Judith’s case
is slightly different; the text of Judith does not say that God commanded her to remain
celibate after she was widowed, but Judith chose to remain unmarried nonetheless.
Judith could have remarried and had children presumably, because the threat of war was
averted when she killed Holofernes, and peace remained in Israel long after her death
(whereas the fate of Israel looks bleak in Jeremiah). Judith appears to be one of the first
persons cited in Scripture who chooses celibacy of her own volition, without the threat of
war guiding her decision to remain unmarried. Thus, I would soften van der Toorn’s
assessment by saying that the book of Judith portrays a celibate widow in a positive light,
a light in which neither re-marriage nor celibacy is portrayed in pejorative terms by the
narrator.

Some members of the Essene and the Qumran communities practiced celibacy
and were therefore exceptions to the Jewish idea that marriage was the ideal. In
general, God’s people in the Old Testament did not promote permanent celibacy, but they
did espouse temporary periods of continence prior to significant events such as an
encounter with God or a battle. For example, before the Great Theophany, Moses “came

99 For further reading on the Essene and Qumran communities, see Jodi Magness, “The Dead Sea
Scrolls and the Community at Qumran,” in The Archaeology of Qumran and the Dead Sea Scrolls (Grand
Beyond the Qumran Community: The Sectarian Movement of the Dead Sea Scrolls (Grand Rapids, MI:
Dead Sea Scrolls,” in The Oxford Handbook of the Dead Sea Scrolls, eds. Timothy H. Lim and John J.
Collins (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 151-72; and Joan E. Taylor, “The Classical
Sources on the Essenes and the Scrolls Communities,” in The Oxford Handbook of the Dead Sea Scrolls,
173-99.
down from the mountain to the people and had them sanctify themselves and wash their
garments. He warned them, ‘Be ready for the third day. Have no intercourse with any woman’” (Exod. 19:14-15). An example of the importance of continence before an
encounter with something associated with the divine is found in 1 Sam. 21:4-6, according
to which Abimelech could give David holy bread, provided that the young men had not
lain with women. Continence before battle was also important. When David
impregnates Bathsheba and tries to get her husband Uriah to lie with her so as to make it
appear that Bathsheba was impregnated by Uriah, Uriah refuses because continence was
required of soldiers consecrated for war (2 Sam. 11:11).

Thus, prior to Judith, continence in Scripture is an element in preparing for an
encounter with the Lord (which Judith does in her prayer to God) and in preparing for
battle (Judith kills Holofernes, enabling the Israelites to engage the Assyrians in battle,
even though she does not fight with the Israelites after she kills Holofernes; Judith
proclaims that the enemy “perished before the army of my Lord” in Jth. 16:12). Judith
may not fight in the end battle, but she knows “how to wield a dagger.” Moreover,
Judith instructs the Israelites in how to prepare for battle (Jth. 14:1-5). David deSilva
notes that Judith “replaces Joakim as the military strategist and commander, giving the
orders for the counterattack” in Jth. 14:1-5. Judith’s chastity is given special emphasis
in the story and is integral to her mission as a widow faced with Holofernes and the
Assyrian army (Jth. 13:16).

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101 Gera, Judith, 71.
102 Ibid., 413.
103 David A. deSilva, Introducing the Apocrypha (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002),
105.
Pious practices are means, not ends, for Judith. She accords, then, with the trajectory in Judaism that emphasizes that prayer, fasting, and continence are not ends in themselves, but means of purification and preparation for battle and encounters with God. The story of Judith reassures the reader that God’s power is sufficient to deliver his people from whatever threatens them, no matter how dire the circumstances appear, and no matter how improbable the hero or heroine seems to be. Judith, the childless widow, delivers her people and is held up as an example of holiness and fidelity for the Israelites. The name Judith means “Jewess,” and Judith thus represents her entire people. The narrator includes a meticulous genealogy whose ancestry goes back to the “son of Israel” (that is, of Jacob) (Jth. 8:1), which establishes Judith’s pedigree as a daughter and representative of Israel. The narrator of the book of Judith points to a change in the status of widows, and this change is shown in part through the positive portrayal of Judith’s ascetic practices of prayer, extended fasting, and permanent continence (that includes not remarrying), and through Judith’s moral authority. Judith’s childlessness is not portrayed pejoratively or as a particular grief to her. One of the implicit lessons in Judith is that prayer and fasting are means available to anyone and, when combined with continence (appropriate to one’s social position), are powerful weapons in battle. Rich or poor, everyone is able to pray and fast according to their means and circumstances. The widow Judith demonstrates that true holiness is possible with God’s grace, regardless of one’s circumstances or vulnerabilities. Judith teaches us that “all faithful members of the

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106 Judith’s childlessness could have allowed her additional freedom of movement and freedom from the care of a child.
community have access to everything that made Judith great.”

The childless widow, previously pitiable, is presented in the book of Judith as praiseworthy and to be emulated by all.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE TEMPLE AND THE ALTAR IN THE BOOK OF JUDITH

As Gera notes on Jth. 4:10 (as the altar is covered with sackcloth, which is not attested to anywhere else in Scripture), “covering the altar…stresses the danger and immediate threat to the holy places. It is almost as if the altar is no less alive and vulnerable than the men, women, children and animals who are in sackcloth, and the praying Israelites are no less concerned for its fate.”

Indeed, the importance of the Temple is woven throughout the Judith narrative. If the Temple was destroyed, “there would be no place for the worship of the true God, nor a place of God’s presence.”

As the narrative progresses, we learn that as important as national survival is to the plot, the story of Judith is really a “contest” about who the true God is: the Lord, or Nebuchadnezzar (who wanted to be worshiped as a god), and the gods of Nebuchadnezzar.

Concern for the freedom to worship the true God flows from this concern (Jth. 4:1-5; 8:18-23). As Christiansen asserts, “by conquering Jerusalem and its temple he [Nebuchadnezzar] would have the power to prevent Israel from worshiping her God.”

Nebuchadnezzar demands worship from the people he conquers and poses the question, “Who is God except Nebuchadnezzar?” (Jth. 6:2). Holofernes destroyed the shrines and sacred groves of the peoples he conquered, “so that all nations should

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107 Craven, *Artistry*, 122.
109 Christensen, “Judith,” 77.
110 Craven, *Artistry*, 47. See also van den Eynde, “Crying to God,” 231.
111 Christiansen, “Judith,” 75.
worship Nebuchadnezzar alone, and that all their dialects and tribes should call upon him as a god” (Jth. 3:8). The Israelites had just returned from captivity, and “the sacred vessels and the altar and the temple had been consecrated after their profanation” (Jth. 4:3). Judith pleads with Uzziah not to surrender to Holofernes, asserting that the lives of the Israelites, and the “defense of the sanctuary, the temple, and the altar” rest with the decisions of Judith and Uzziah (Jth. 8:24). If the Israelites are captured by Assyrians because they capitulate to Holofernes’ demand that they worship Nebuchadnezzar, God will punish their distrust:

Our sanctuary will be plundered; and he will make us pay for its desecration with our blood. The slaughter of our kindred and the captivity of the land and the desolation of our inheritance—all this he will bring on our heads among the Gentiles, wherever we serve as slaves; and we shall be an offence and a disgrace in the eyes of those who acquire us. For our slavery will not bring us into favor, but the Lord our God will turn it to dishonor (Jth. 8:21-23).

Through Judith, the author conveys the significance of worshiping with integrity. The importance of the Temple is emphasized by the attention the narrator gives to Judith’s insistence upon not giving in to the Assyrians, because that would mean the desecration of the Temple again.

Christiansen believes that “the centrality of the temple for Judith is underscored when she chooses a particular time for her prayer, ‘the very time when the evening incense was being offered in the house of God in Jerusalem’” (Jth. 9:1). Christiansen argues that this detail of time is more than just an indicator of the time of Judith’s prayer; “as the ninth hour is time for the incense offering in the Jerusalem temple, it is also a time for a vision or divine revelation, as e.g. in Dan 9:21 when Gabriel appears to Daniel.

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112 Craven, Artistry, 48.
113 Christensen, “Judith,” 78.
affirming to him that his prayers have been heard.” Christiansen notes two visions in the New Testament occur “at the time of the evening sacrifice,” namely Zechariah’s vision in Luke 1:1-11 and Cornelius’ vision in Acts 10:9-30. Christiansen states that the theological point that the author of Judith is trying to make is that “the presence of God is not confined to the temple, inasmuch as prayers can be addressed to God in any place,” even though the Temple remains “the place par excellence for the presence of God in Israel, for sacrifices and worship.” Even though Judith is not cited as receiving a vision, nonetheless “the symbolic importance of the time is likely to have played a role in the theology of the author.”

Incense serves as an additional signpost to the importance of the Temple in the Judith narrative. As soon as Uzziah returned to his post, Judith “fell upon her face, and put ashes on her head, and uncovered the sackcloth she was wearing; and at the very time when that evening’s incense was being offered in the house of God in Jerusalem, Judith cried out to the Lord with a loud voice” (Jth. 9:1). Wetter comments on the significance of the timing of Judith’s prayer, noting that

The timing of Judith’s prayer functions to place her words in the context of the ritual routine of Israel; more specifically, it suggests that Judith’s words are not just a spur-of-the-moment expression of her own individual thoughts and feelings, but must be interpreted within the framework of official worship. What may not have counted as official or even appropriate worship by itself…is legitimized and ritualized by means of the crucial side remark about its timing.

Wetter furthermore asserts that because Judith was not a man, nor in the Temple, “conventional sacrifice…was not an option available to her. However, metaphorized or

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114 Ibid.  
115 Ibid.  
116 Ibid.  
117 Ibid. Judith prays that all nations might know God (Jth. 9:14).  
interior sacrifice was. Through this process, Judith as the sacrificial actor and her prayer as the offered object are legitimized, while, simultaneously, the legitimacy of the official sacrificial cult is affirmed.” Wetter also notes that Ps. 141:2 (“Let my prayer be counted as incense before thee, and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice!”) is an instance of “one whose prayer is to be counted as an incense offering.” Gera notes that “at times, prayer was equated, metaphorically, with incense” (for example, Ps. 141:2) and that “Aaron uses incense as a means of protection, in order to save lives (Lev. 16:12-13; Num. 17:11-13) and perhaps we are meant to associate these functions of incense with Judith as well.” Thus, there is an association between Judith and incense.

Incense, as noted in the first chapter, was a sweet oblation that symbolized prayer (Ps. 141:2; Rev. 5:8). The incense altar was the place where prayers were offered to the Lord, as was observed in the first chapter of this dissertation. Judith could have been assaulted or killed, as Uzziah proclaims when Judith returns victorious: “You did not spare your own [Judith’s] life when our nation was brought low” (Jth. 13:20). As seen earlier, the altar, the sanctuary, and the Temple were threatened with defilement and destruction in the book of Judith (Jth. 4:3; 4:12; 8:24; 9:8). Judith was threatened by Holofernes’ attack both as an Israelite and as a woman in his camp. In this way, Judith can also be viewed as a symbolic sacrifice upon a holocaust altar. André LaCocque views Judith as a sacrificial victim, who “consciously leaves behind any kind of protection.” LaCocque writes: “Judith adorns herself as a sacrificial victim. From now

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119 Ibid., 174.
120 Ibid.
121 Gera, Judith, 302-3.
on the enemy’s attention will be forced upon her instead of on the whole of Bethulia. She
makes of herself a substitutive offering.”

As the purity of the altar makes possible its mediation between God and his people in the Old Testament, Judith’s life of righteousness and virtue makes possible her mediation between the Lord and her people. Purity is one of the preconditions for being an effective mediator, whether it be a person (Judith’s piety and ritual purity are emphasized) or it be the Temple and its furnishings (“the sacred vessels and the altar and the temple had been reconsecrated after their profanation” in Jth. 4:3). Judith’s life resembles some of the ways in which altars functioned in the Old Testament, most notably as a place in which communication with God happens and as a place where the prayers of the community are offered up. Judith’s widowhood affords her God’s protection and lends itself to God hearing her prayers with special favor, as was seen with other widows in the Old Testament (Exod. 22:22-24; Deut. 10:17-18; Ps. 68:5; Sir. 35:14-22; Jer. 49:11). Moreover, there is an association between Judith and the altar in that both were covered in sackcloth (Jth. 9:1; 10:3; 4:12). The other Israelites and even their animals wore sackcloth, but both the altar and Judith are locations where intercessions are made: the altar in virtue of its function as an altar, and Judith in virtue of her piety and her widowhood, and in light of the city officials asking for and trusting in

123 For the purposes of this dissertation, I will stay focused on the similarities between how Judith functions in the book of Judith and the functions of the altar in the Old Testament. For a reading of Judith likening her to a priest, see Wetter, “On Her Account,” 174-176. For a likening of Judith to God himself, see G. Miller, “A Femme Fatale,” 223-45.
124 For the different functions of the altar in the Old Testament, see pp. 32-50 in the first chapter of this dissertation.
125 Sackcloth is also placed on animals in Jon. 3:7-8, when the city of Nineveh was threatened with destruction. The placing of sackcloth around the altar could signal the personification of the altar that we saw in the first chapter of this dissertation.
her intercessory influence with God. As altars were pure sites for the offering of incense, associated prayers and sacrifices, so was Judith.

The Judith narrative concludes with Judith returning victorious, by which the narrator “makes Judith stand out as preserver of the temple,” “the appropriate place for triumph.” Moreover, Christiansen asserts, “the only way to end the story is to highlight that the sanctuary, as the place for the presence of God, as the centre of the universe, and as entrance to heaven, is and should remain of fundamental importance to Israel’s identity.”

CONCLUSIONS

Literary, archeological, and artistic sources show that Judith was held up for emulation by Jews and Christians from Antiquity through the Renaissance period. Perhaps in part because of the reduction of the biblical canon for many Christians after the Reformation, the story of Judith has been obscured in recent centuries. However, scholarship is recognizing the gap in its work on the book of Judith and is beginning to look to Judith for theological insight and inspiration, and I hope that this chapter will contribute in some way to filling in this gap in scholarship on Judith, especially as she contributes to the history of widows and widowhood in Jewish and Christian antiquity. Thus, I propose the following conclusions to this chapter on the book of Judith.

Firstly, Judith’s efficacy as a salvific figure is intrinsically related to her relationship with the Lord. This relationship entails complete surrender to the Lord’s

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126 Christiansen, “Judith,” 83.
127 Ibid.
will, and it entails the ascetic practices of prayer, fasting, and continence. For the faithful
Israelite, prayer, ascetic practices, and action formed a whole way of life; right actions
were the fruit of being in a right relationship with the Lord and of the ascetic practices
that facilitated that relationship. The author of Judith makes it clear that Judith’s works
are rooted in her piety and in ascetic practices that facilitate this piety. The piety that is
championed in the book of Judith is not limited to, or by, gender or the status of
widowhood. The extended fasting and permanent continence that feature positively in
the narrative and which are unique to Judith might hint at contemporaneous practices of
fasting and continence that would be a change in Judaism, or the extended fasting and
permanent continence might signal the shifts that will be espoused by later groups like
the Essenes.

Secondly and correlatively, Judith shows that Israelites should rely upon the Lord
to save Israel. In Judith we see a woman who is completely vulnerable in the physical
sense and who relies upon the Lord in her use of her feminine acumen to save Israel. She
gives glory to the Lord for what he accomplishes through her hands, in the tradition of
other holy men and women in the Old Testament (Gen. 40:8, 41:16, and 41:25-39
[Joseph]; Exod. 15:1-18 [Moses]; Exod. 15:20-21 [Miriam]; Judg. 5:2-31 [Deborah]; and
Tob. 13 [Tobit]). Judith does not insist upon glory for herself; rather, “Judith’s defeat of
the Assyrians constitutes the handiwork of God. Yahweh has not abandoned Bethulia or
the Jews of the Maccabean period but remains ‘the God of the lowly’ and ‘savior of those
without hope.’”129

Thirdly, Judith’s strength and moral authority come from the Lord, and not from insisting on power for herself or by herself. The city elders looked to Judith as an authoritative figure because she was a righteous woman, in virtue of her piety (Jth. 8:8, 28-31; 13:18-20). Judith attributes her success to the Lord (Jth. 13:15; Jth. 16:1-17). As a widow Judith was among the most vulnerable people in Israel and the Ancient Near East, and she begged the Lord to hear her in light of her status. In Judith, the Lord demonstrates that he does great works through the ‘ânāwîm. Her moral authority, which comes from her piety and not from aggression, is apparent from the beginning of the story, when elders confer with her. She is an authority figure even as she is the most vulnerable.

Fourthly, the author of the book of Judith provides the reader with an idea of what was considered the ideal conduct of widows and the book also alerts the reader to a possible shift in ideas about widowhood. Judith was courageous and pious, and she submitted to the will of God with humility. For this reason, God was able to do great things with her offering for the people of Israel. The ideal widow Judith practiced askesis, led the Israelites to renewed hope in the power of Lord with her actions (Jth. 13:19), and converted the Gentile Achior who, having seen “all that the God of Israel had done...believed firmly in God, and was circumcised, and joined the house of Israel, remaining so to this day” (Jth. 14:10). The Temple and the altar figure prominently in the Judith narrative, and Judith shares the function of the altar in the sense that the altar is a locus for prayers, and Judith is also a locus for prayers and intercession between God and the Israelites.
Judith, the vulnerable widow now becomes “the mother of faith”\textsuperscript{130} and “a model for successful Jewish resistance to foreign rule.”\textsuperscript{131} Referring to Judith, Craven notes, “An observant widow is a mother giving birth to a new vocation for all faithful followers of Yahweh—Jew and foreigner alike.”\textsuperscript{132} Judith’s life is a pivotal point in the trajectory of holy women in the Old Testament. Judith is portrayed as pious, morally authoritative, and her choice to remain single and celibate is viewed as a good thing, rather than as a failure to remarry, as was the case in how widowhood was viewed previous to Judith.

Ascetical elements in Judith alert the reader to a shift in how celibacy was viewed. If not strictly anti-flesh, the celebration of the wealthy, celibate, childless widow Judith, who chooses not to remarry, is a change from the pity that was previously shown to widows who did not remarry and who did not have children.\textsuperscript{133} Judith’s life implicitly demonstrates what the fruits of continence can be: blessings not only for the widow who decides not to marry again, but even greater blessings for God’s people. Childlessness was not cited as a particular stigma or sorrow in the book of Judith, which is different from how barren widows were viewed previously in the Old Testament. Michael Wojciechowski asserts that Judith:

Manifests a system of values considerably different from the general stance of the Old Testament, which puts procreation before the personal relation in a marriage and associates asceticism only with the periods of mourning and prayer. In the

\textsuperscript{130} Craven, \textit{Artistry}, 94.
\textsuperscript{131} Crawford “Esther,” 63.
\textsuperscript{132} Craven, \textit{Artistry}, 122.
\textsuperscript{133} Wojciechowski, “Moral,” 89, concludes that by not remarrying, “Judith remained faithful to the love of her youth, even if was not obliged to it. Marital love extends beyond death.” I find this conclusion intriguing in light of St. Macrina’s story, which I cite in the fourth chapter of this dissertation. Macrina’s story is similar to Judith’s in that both women remain faithful to their first premarital and spousal attachments (respectively), even though it would have been licit and permissible to wed someone else after her fiancé died (in Macrina’s case) or to remarry (in the widowed Judith’s case). For more on the motif of Judith’s “exemplification of celibacy and the ideal of the ‘wife of one man,’” see deSilva, “Apocrypha,” 109.
book of Judith the lonely life is no more considered worse; on the contrary, in some circumstances it appears to be a better choice for a woman.\textsuperscript{134} Wojciechowski suggests that there is a shift in Judith in the way widowhood is viewed; remarriage is no longer necessary or necessarily the ideal, and the stigma of childlessness is absent in Judith. I agree with Wojciechowski’s assessment of Judith, and would add that ascetic practices also preceded battles. The \textit{ἐγκράτεια} that Judith displays, as well as the lack of self-mastery in the other characters, reflect Hellenistic motifs that may indicate “the changing conditions of the interrelations of Israelite and Greek discourse in Judea.”\textsuperscript{135} Narrative elements in Judith alert the reader to look closely at how Judith utilized her unique status to seek and accomplish the Lord’s will to save Israel from destruction. Holiness emerges as the great equalizer among the Israelites, for holiness is possible for anyone regardless of gender or social standing. With a widow serving as a protagonist in the book of Judith, we see a shift in how widows are viewed. Judith serves as a hinge between the Old and New Testaments’ perspective outlooks on widows and widowhood. Wojciechowski connects Judith with Luke 2:36-38 and 1 Tim. 5:3-16, asserting that in Judith “we find here the first trace of the consecrated religious life of widows.”\textsuperscript{136} We now turn to widows of the New Testament to see what shifts occur in how widows are viewed in the newly forming Church.

\textsuperscript{134} Wojciechowski, “Moral,” 89.
\textsuperscript{135} For evidence for Hellenistic influence on the book of Judith, see Wills, “Greek Philosophical Discourse,” 753-773. See also Gera, \textit{Judith}, 298, for her comments on elements of Hellenistic Judaism in Judith’s prayer.
\textsuperscript{136} Wojciechowski, “Moral,” 89.
CHAPTER 3—WIDOWS AND THE ORDER OF WIDOWS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

INTRODUCTION

The Old Testament depicts the widow as under God’s protection, and it admonishes God’s people to care for the widow, which is indicative of the widow’s vulnerable status in ancient Israel and early Judaism. In the book of Judith, we see a widow who is vulnerable as she confronts the enemy Holofernes, but who exhibits moral and religious authority within her community and also demonstrates strength that she attributes to the Lord. The Judith narrative is indicative of a possible change in the perception of widows and widowhood, but the status of widows in the New Testament era did not lose all of its negative attributes. There was still a stigma associated with being a widow in Judaism, and this stigma carried over into the first century of our era, when as Jan Bremmer notes, “women were in many ways not highly regarded by the Jewish males of Palestine, and widows least of all.”¹ Bremmer affirms that widows were still objects of care in the New Testament, as evidenced by admonitions there to care for the widow.² James 1:27 states, “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world,” which is reminiscent of Isa. 1:16-18, which implies God’s favor for those who care for the widow, stating that sins become “like wool” for one who

¹ Bremmer, “Pauper,” 32.
cares for the widow. Boris Repschinski, S.J., comments on the connection between pure worship and charity towards widows in the Epistle of James:

He puts this kind of behavior into the context of worship. James now contrasts the worthless worship of the hearers with the pure and unblemished worship of the doers. Thus what the whole chapter has been leading up to is now made explicit. At the heart of the metaphors used in Jas 1 is the exhortation to a worship what is pure and undefiled and that renders a person undefiled as well.

The astonishing feature of James is, however, that the idea of pure worship is not a mere cultic procedure of ablutions, or even faithfulness to the Law. Purity of worship is achieved in acts of charity to widows and orphans. Charity is circumscribed with the word ἐπισκέπτεσθαι. In LXX usage this word refers almost exclusively to God visiting or saving his people. Widows and orphans are the “classic recipients”3 of God’s and Israel’s care and take up the theme of the reversal of rich and poor alluded to in Jas 1:9–11. Thus the assistance of the needy becomes the singular way of achieving a worship that fulfills the demands of purity. James replaces rites of purification with ethical demands and puts them into the context of ritual purity.4

However, the Epistle of James does not introduce an innovation regarding the relationship between purification rites and ethical demands, as Repschinski suggests. In fact, as Milgrom asserts, “the bonding of ethics and ritual is not unique to Israel,” and cites ancient Near Eastern inscriptions as evidence.5 Ritual purity and ethical demands went hand in hand in ancient Israel. Isa. 1:12-18, for example, emphasizes the connection between worship of God and expressing that worship through charity towards the widow and other oppressed peoples. Lev. 19:18-19 commands the people to love

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5 Milgrom, Leviticus, 215. “It abounds in Mesopotamia—for example, Šurpu tablet II; the Bilingual Hymn to Nanurta, II.3-7; the Nanshe Hymn, 136-71—and is exemplified in Egypt’s sacral sphere by an inscription on a door of the temple of Edfu. Unique to Israel…is the subsumption of rituals and ethics under the rubric of holiness.”
their neighbor as themselves and to keep the Lord’s statutes. Lev. 19:34-37 commands the people to love the stranger as they love themselves, and to observe all of the Lord’s statutes and ordinances. Loving one’s neighbor and loving the stranger are linked with keeping the Lord’s laws, and are commanded in the context of ritual purity. Thus, ritual purity and keeping God’s laws were only part of what it meant to keep God’s commands. God also commands one to extend charity towards one’s neighbor and to strangers, encompassing all people one encounters. Lev. 19:2 summarizes its contents saying, “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.” Milgrom writes about the dietary laws in Leviticus, that these laws are “the Torah’s prerequisite for the ethical life. Only through a daily regimen of disciplines that reminds humans that life is sacred can humans aspire to a way of life fully informed by other ethical virtues. The dietary laws are rungs on the ladder of holiness, leading to a life of pure thought and deed, characteristic of the nature of God.”

Even though Leviticus contains many legal prescriptions, it is primarily about God’s holiness, his people’s access to him through rituals and sacrifice, and about his desire for his people to become holy like him.

Bremmer also observes that Greco-Roman culture more generally did not embrace Christianity’s evolving elevation and veneration of the widow, citing the satirist Lucian as an example of how many still looked down upon the widow. Lucian writes (c. A.D. 165) about the Cynic philosopher Peregrinus, who while he was in prison as a Christian was “visited by ‘old crones, widows, and orphans,’ categories typical of the most vulnerable in ancient society. Lucian clearly satirizes their prominent position

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among the Christians, but he did not realize that he was witnessing a slow revolution in the ancient value system, which would soon develop into a tidal wave.”

I start this chapter with a review of widows in Greco-Roman antiquity, followed by a brief survey of Lukan widows, and then I will focus particularly on Anna the prophetess in Luke 2:36-38, on Tabitha and the widows in Acts 9:36-43, and on 1 Tim. 5. I will concentrate on Luke’s gospel because “Luke has more episodes about widows than any other evangelist”; in addition to the Anna and Tabitha narratives, these episodes include, among others, Luke 2: 36-38 (Anna the prophetess), Luke 4:25-26 (the widow at Zarephath), Luke 7:11-17 (the resuscitation of the widow’s son at Nain), Luke 18:1-8 (the widow and the unrighteous judge), Luke 20:47 (admonition to the scribes who “devour widows’ houses”), Luke 21:1-4 (the widow’s mite), and Acts 6:1-6 (the Hellenists complained that their widows were being neglected in the daily food distribution).

**WIDOWS IN GRECO-ROMAN ANTIQUITY**

This section provides a foundation for the status of widows that we see developing in the New Testament era. Modern scholarship supports the thesis that by and large the widow, especially the poor widow, was vulnerable in ancient Greco-Roman

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8 For another mention of widows in the New Testament, see 1 Cor. 7:8-9: “To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain single as I do. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion.” The preference for widows to refrain from marrying is in 1 Tim. 5:9. See also Rev. 18:7.

9 Reid, *Choosing*, 92. See also Thurston, *Widows*, 23.
Most of the literary and legal evidence regarding widows in ancient Greece and Rome deals with members of the economic elite; it is difficult to ascertain what poor widows did in antiquity because the primary sources “are far less interested in them, as in the poor in general.” In contemporaneous early Christian literature, however, poor widows were of great concern to the newly developing Church, as evidenced by the scriptural and early patristic literature that insists on the care of the widow, which I will explore in the next section of this dissertation.

A typical Athenian widow in antiquity was subject to the guardianship of another male relative after her husband died. In general, “widows did not enjoy a special status in law.” Some widows went to live with their adult children, “but remarriage is what rescued the Athenian widow, at least those of the elite, from social isolation and worse.” However, even remarriage posed difficulties for the widow. If the widow married a widower with children, for example, she bore the weight of the stereotype that stepmothers were cruel and scheming. According to McGinn, “widowers with children were cautioned against remarriage because of the difficulties associated with introducing a stepmother.” There was a stigma attached to being a stepmother in the ancient world, as evidenced by ancient writers like Seneca the Younger (4 B.C.—A.D. 65) and Propertius (c. 50/45 B.C.—15 B.C.) whose works portray stepmothers as cruel usurpers

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12 Ibid., 21.

13 Ibid., 25.

14 Ibid., 26.

15 Ibid., 172 fn. 84.
and the stepchildren as innocent victims.\textsuperscript{16} According to Patricia Watson, only one source in antiquity shows concern for the potential stepmother, that of a letter from the Christian author Jerome (A.D. 347-420, in his \textit{Epistle} 54.15.4), who cautions against remarriage for a widow, citing the inherent difficulties that come with her children having a stepfather.\textsuperscript{17} Not all remarried widows became stepmothers, and not all stepmothers were widows, but the fact that the image of the stepmother was portrayed negatively added another layer of difficulty for the widow (and potential stepmother) who already found herself in a precarious position economically and socially.

Roman widows were allotted the return of their dowry upon their husbands’ deaths.\textsuperscript{18} Widows could also “use and enjoy” property, with the ownership remaining with the decedent’s heir, usually a son or other kinsman. The practice of allowing someone to “use and enjoy the fruits” of something is called \textit{usufruct} (which originates from the Latin words \textit{usus} and \textit{fructus}, and literally means to “enjoy the fruits of”), which McGinn states “is thought to have been developed in the first place as a support for widows.”\textsuperscript{19} However, just because a Roman widow could inherit property, one cannot conclude that a Roman widow usually did. A Roman widow’s situation depended upon whether she was wealthy or poor, and upon whether her children were willing and able to take care of her; a poor woman without children would have been the most vulnerable, with neither economic means nor the hope of living with an adult child for support.\textsuperscript{20}

Moreover, older women were looked down upon and mocked in ancient Roman

\textsuperscript{17} Watson, \textit{Ancient Stepmothers}, 10-11.
\textsuperscript{18} Mc\text{\textsuperscript{\textbf{g}}}\text{\textsuperscript{\textbf{n}}}, \textit{Widows and Patriarchy}, 27-28.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 28.
\textsuperscript{20} Parkin, \textit{Old Age}, 212-13.
Young widows did not fare much better than their aged counterparts in Roman satires. Caricatures of the young widow were promoted in Petronius’ (A.D. 26-66) *Satyricon* and a fable by Phaedrus (early to mid-first century A.D.), both of whom portray a certain young widow of Ephesus as being faithless to her first husband and promiscuous. The widow, whether young or old, was at a disadvantage economically and was presented negatively in literary works in Greco-Roman antiquity.

Even though the widowed state was a vulnerable one, there remained the Roman ideal of the *univira*, the woman who married only one man in her lifetime. The word *univira* retained “its basic meaning” from the fourth century B.C. through the fourth century A.D. Both ancient Romans and early Christians utilized this basic meaning of *univira*, although the Christians also used the term to include a celibate widow rather than the Romans’ prescriptive use to mean once-married “living women who had living husbands” and their descriptive use to mean once-married “women who predeceased their husbands.” Thus, the understanding of the *univira* for Romans did not necessarily include widows as part of that ideal. And while the *univira* was held up as an ideal in textual and funerary evidence, McGinn notes that the widow who could have remarried probably did so because of the practical necessity of needing to be cared for (by a second husband) to avoid being at the mercy of relatives for survival if she did not remarry.
Moreover, the ideal of the *univira* would have been a hard one to achieve with the Augustan marriage legislation that was passed in 18 B.C. and A.D. 9, respectively. The marriage legislation passed in 18 B.C. required widows between the ages of twenty and fifty to remarry a year after their spouses’ deaths, and legislation passed in A.D. 9 required widows in that age group to remarry after two years. Bruce Winter asserts that “the *lex Julia* penalized unmarried women as well as those who were divorced or widowed between the ages of twenty and fifty years who failed to marry or remarry.” The penalties against those who did not remarry and those who remained childless were not abolished until Constantine’s reign in the early-to-mid-fourth century A.D.

Roman children “were legally required to support their needy parents from the mid-second century AD. The state did not provide a system of welfare for its elderly citizens in general….Widows demonstrably relied—and expected to rely—on the support of their sons.” McGinn notes that considering the limited job opportunities for women in general and the dearth of public or private charitable recourse for widows in Greco-Roman antiquity, “it is clear why widows in antiquity were a by-word for vulnerability and misery.”

Jewish and Christian widows also remained in vulnerable positions in the New Testament era, but the ancient Jews and the early Christians were under moral obligation to care for the widow who had no family to care for her or who had a family unwilling or

26 Ibid., 35.
30 Ibid., 30. Rev. Joseph G. Mueller, S.J., notes, in personal correspondence that “It is also clear why they were obliged to remarry until an emperor arrived who became acquainted with the Christian welfare system for widows and could abolish the requirement to remarry as a way of encouraging widows to join the Christian Church.”
unable to care for her. Christians were also called upon to honor the widow, an innovative prescription that appears in the New Testament era, which I will examine in the next section. Early Christian society was similar to Greco-Roman society in that both societies tasked the families of widows to take care of their own widows; however, the Greco-Roman widow could not turn to the state for support if her family did not help her, whereas the Christian widow could turn to the newly forming Church for aid.\textsuperscript{31} Early Christians were charged with taking care of the widow, which was a continuation of similar Old Testament admonitions. Indeed, as Winter affirms, “[t]hat widows should be supported by an institution was unprecedented in the Roman world, except for those who were Jewish.”\textsuperscript{32}

Thus, in the early Christian era, the widow in Greco-Roman society was in a vulnerable position, socially and economically. The state did not have any laws that required the family to take care of their own widows before the mid-second century A.D., and there were no laws that required the state to take care of widows if their families could not or would not, nor did institutions outside of Judaism or Christianity do so. The early Christians differed from their Greco-Roman counterparts by taking care of the widow, and by honoring her as well, as we will see in the next sections of this dissertation on widows in the New Testament and in the early Church.


\textsuperscript{32} Winter, \textit{Roman Wives}, 127.
LUKAN WIDOWS

Luke is concerned about the poor and oppressed, which is demonstrated in part by the amount of material he presents on women and widows.\textsuperscript{33} Jan Bremmer asserts that Luke pays the most attention to widows, and to women in general, of any of the Gospel writers.\textsuperscript{34} Turid Seim agrees that the Gospel of Luke contains more information about women than any of the other gospels or epistles in the New Testament: “forty-two passages in Luke are concerned with women or with female motifs.”\textsuperscript{35} Bremmer also notes that Luke is the only evangelist who writes about Anna the prophetess (Acts 2:36-38), tells of Jesus recounting the story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath (Luke 4:26) “to illustrate the universality of his message,” and relates “the parable of the widow and the unjust judge to demonstrate the effects of continuous prayer” (Luke 18:1-8).\textsuperscript{36} Luke recounts Jesus’ resurrection of the widow’s son at Nain and highlights the important role of women during Jesus’ crucifixion and at his resurrection.\textsuperscript{37} Reid notes that while one reason for numerous passages about women might be a re-iteration of Christ’s teaching to take care of the poor and oppressed, some Lukan stories do not portray the widows as merely the recipients of charity; rather, the widows minister in the community.\textsuperscript{38} The profusion of Lukan stories about widows suggests that the number of widows may have been increasing during Luke’s time, and also points to their increasing importance in Church ministry.\textsuperscript{39}

\textsuperscript{33} Thurston, \textit{Widows}, 23.
\textsuperscript{34} Bremmer, “Pauper,” 32.
\textsuperscript{35} Seim, \textit{Double}, 3.
\textsuperscript{36} Bremmer, “Pauper,” 32.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 32.
\textsuperscript{38} Reid, \textit{Choosing}, 93. See Luke 2:36-38 (Anna the widow and prophetess).
\textsuperscript{39} Reid, \textit{Choosing}, 93.
In Luke’s gospel, even the unnamed widows are held up as examples of charity and trust in God. For example, the poor widow in Luke 21:1-4 not only gives generously of everything that she has, but she “lives a life with a radical eschatological orientation” because “her action of abandonment shows that she courageously and drastically trusts in God alone.”

Luke is the only evangelist to include the narrative of the Widow of Nain (Luke 7:11-17). In this narrative, Jesus resurrects a widow’s son from the dead, effectively restoring the man’s life and his widowed mother’s life as well; the widow is now secure. If the son had died, the widow would have been without provision. The story of the Widow of Nain echoes the story of Elijah raising the only son of the widow of Zarephath.

Why not choose a child or a poor person, instead of a widow, to represent the vulnerability of the struggling Church? Citing G. Stählin, who “notes how ancient cities or states took on women as their emblems,” Thurston asserts that Christians did the same. “Jerusalem the ‘woman,’ the ‘daughter’ of Zion, and ‘Mother’ Israel” and “the widow” serve as personifications “of the church in its time of struggle.”

Stählin writes that “when the people is unfaithful to God, its marriage with God breaks up and it becomes a χήρα. In this context χήρα obviously does not mean a widow but ‘a desolate woman abandoned by her husband’”; furthermore, “this is how the prophets of the exile describe the self-incurred plight of Israel, Jer 51:5; Lam 1:1; Is 49:21.”

The parable of the persistent widow and the unjust judge (Luke 18:1-8) highlights several Lukan motifs involving widows. One motif is the call to prayer. The prayers of

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40 Seim, Double, 246.
the widow are heard by God, which is an Old Testament motif. Jesus exhorts his audience to “always pray and not lose heart” (Luke 18:1) like the widow, who resembles the elect who “cry to him [God] day and night” (Luke 18:7). The widow who cried to God “day and night” and Anna the prophetess who worshiped God “with fasting and prayer night and day” exhibit the ascetical practice of prayer that characterize the widows cited in 1 Tim. 5:3-16. Yet another widow motif in Luke 18:7 is that of the deliverance of an unlikely person (see also 1 Kings 17:7-16; Luke 4:26). The persistent-widow narrative exemplifies how even those considered the least in the eyes of the community can partake in the Kingdom of God. The widow stories in Luke showcase how “the entreaties of the powerless effect deliverance.” The Anna and Tabitha narratives fit into a larger widow tradition that has roots in the Old Testament, and the Anna and Tabitha narratives foreshadow the order of widows in 1 Timothy 5.

**Anna the Widow and Prophetess**


And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher; she was of great age, having lived with her husband seven years from her virginity, and as a widow till she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. And coming up at that very hour she gave thanks to God, and spoke of him [the Christ child who is the Messiah] to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

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44 See Sir. 35:14-17; Exod. 22:22-24; Jth. 9:9-12.
45 Thurston, *Widows*, 27.
46 Ibid., 28.
Andrés García Serrano asserts that the description of Anna, “understood as a conceptual allusion to the Deutero-Isaian prophesy, bears in itself the history and spiritual experience of Israel…. Anna embodies worship in the temple, the tribes of Israel, the prophetic ministry, and the prayer and praise of Israel”; Anna also “represents those ἀναώμοι who, as the remnant of Israel, trust only in God.” Moreover, Serrano states that the three periods of Anna’s life (virginity, marriage, widowhood) correspond to the three periods of Israel’s history (“before the covenant, under the covenant, and during the exile, the representation of the broken covenant”), respectively.

### Similarities between the Judith and Anna Narratives

Presumably, Anna is able to serve the Lord in the Temple constantly because she does not have a family to care for anymore. Like Judith, she is not recorded as having had any children. Anna is also comparable to Judith by her constant prayer, fasting, and possibly her age.

J. K. Elliott asserts that Luke’s audience would have been reminded of Judith in Luke’s account of Anna by the details about Anna’s “extended period of widowhood” and age, which were reminiscent of Judith’s extended widowhood and

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50 Reid, *Choosing*, 92, notes that if “Anna was married at fourteen, lived seven years with her husband, and eighty-four more years as a widow, she too had reached one hundred and five years,” exactly the age of Judith in Judith 16:23. See also Thurston, “Who was Anna? Luke 2:36-38,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 28:1 (Spring 2001): 49. Andrés García Serrano, “Anna’s Characterization,” 470-471, notes that Anna’s age “is a very controverted question.” Serrano (p. 471) asserts that “Anna’s characterization is significant because she represents, right at the beginning of the Lucan work, the remnant of Israel, which accepts Jesus.” J. K. Elliott, “Anna’s Age,” *Novum Testamentum* 30, no. 2 (1988): 100-101, supports a reading of Anna as having lived as a widow for eighty-four years, which would make Anna about 105 years old at the time of her prophesy, according to the same assumption as that of Reid above. The Greek text states of Anna, “καὶ αὐτῇ ἔφρα ὡς ἔποι ὀγδοηκοντα τεσσάρων,” which scholars argue could be read in one of two ways: that Anna was eighty-four at the time of her prophecy, or that Anna had been a widow for eighty-four years. Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 151, asserts that even if Anna were only eight-four years old, “her similarity to Judith remains, for Judith is presented as a woman whose long widowhood was valued as an emblem of her piety…and whose piety found expression in fasting and prayer.”
Elliott admits that while “a lady’s age may be an indelicate subject for enquiry,” Luke nonetheless wants to communicate that the “female counterpart to Simeon in the Temple was no ingénue but a centenarian προφήτις of stature and experience who invited comparison with Judith, a character famed for her thanksgiving, and for her nationalistic fervour.” Geir Otto Holmås also notes the similarities in the biblical descriptions of Judith’s and Anna’s piety. Holmås notes the comparable descriptions of Judith’s and Anna’s widowhoods (Jth. 8:1-8; Jth. 16:21-5; Luke 2:36), their prayer to God “night and day” (Jth. 11:17, Luke 2:37), and lives characterized by prayer and fasting (Jth. 8:6, 8:7, 8:31, 9.1-10.1, 11.17, 12.6, 12:8, 13.7, 15:14-16:17; and Luke 2:37). Holmås asserts that Anna “stands out as an emblematic example of the lowly pious in Israel.”

In this respect Anna is in good company with widows of the Old Testament, including Judith.

The Judith and Anna narratives both contain elements of prophesying. Seim notes that Anna is the only woman in the New Testament to be “explicitly called προφήτις,” even though there are other instances of women who prophesy in Scripture, and “the outbreak of the Spirit in the messianic time” was “characterised by the fact that both men and women prophesy.” In Acts 2:17 Peter states that “this is what was

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52 Elliott, “Anna’s Age,” 102.
53 Judith and Anna’s genealogies are both cited in their respective texts, neither has remarried after her spouse’s death, and both pray and fast constantly; Anna is of great age in the Lukan narrative and Judith lives to age 105 in the Judith narrative.
54 Holmås, *Prayer*, 75.
55 Ibid.
56 Seim, *Double*, 179, 177. The woman in Rev. 2:20, Jezebel, “calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and beguiling my [the Lord’s] servants to practice immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols”; the narrator in Revelation does not call the woman a prophetess, rather the narrator says that she calls herself a prophetess, and the text is clear that the woman in Rev. 2:20 is leading the people to perdition. The narrator of Luke calls Anna a prophetess, Anna does not call herself that, and the text is clear that she is a good woman, who “gave thanks to God, and spoke of him [Jesus] to all who were looking for the
spoken by the prophet Joel: And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; yes, and on my menservants and my maidservants in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.”

Adolfo Roitman also asserts that Judith “presents herself as a prophetess” in Jth. 11:16-19, and that “this adduced ‘attribute’ of Judith,” along with the Judith’s elements of widowhood, piety, prayer, and fasting “recall in a very suggestive way Anna’s characteristics in Luke.”

Reid notes that “the root of the Hebrew word for widow, almanah, means ‘unable to speak’” and that Anna is different from widows who were “destitute recipients of charity” who had no voice, because Anna “speaks of the child who will bring the redemption of Jerusalem.” Judith speaks frequently and authoritatively in the Judith narrative and is wealthy, thus again breaking from the mold of poor widows who had no voice.

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57 Joel 2:28-32: “And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall see visions. Even upon the menservants and maidservants in those days, I will pour out my spirit.”

58 Adolfo D. Roitman, “Achior in the Book of Judith: His Role and Significance,” in “No One Spoke Ill of Her”: Essays on Judith, ed. James C. VanderKam, (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 1992), 43 fn. 33. Jth. 11:16-19: “Therefore, when I, your servant, learned all this, I fled from them; and God has sent me to accomplish with you things that will astonish the whole world, as many as shall hear about them. For your servant is religious, and serves the God of heaven day and night; therefore, my lord, I will remain with you, and every night your servant will go out into the valley, and I will pray to God and he will tell me when they have committed their sins. And I will come and tell you, and then you shall go out with your whole army, and not one of them will withstand you. Then I will lead you through the middle of Judea, till you come to Jerusalem; and I will set your throne in the midst of it; and you will lead them like sheep that have no shepherd, and not a dog will so much as open its mouth to growl at you. For this has been told me, by my foreknowledge; it was announced to me, and I was sent to tell you.”

59 Reid, Choosing, 93.
Ascetic Practices in Luke 2:36-38

With widows like Anna (and probably later with the daughters of Philip in Acts 21:8-9), a movement towards a permanent celibacy that did not have much precedent is starting to happen. Crispin Fletcher-Louis notes that “whilst widows would be expected to remarry, Luke, amidst numerous references to this social status, espouses an abstention from remarriage” that is seen “particularly in the characterization of Anna the prophetess.” Fletcher-Louis also notes that because Jesus resurrects the widow’s son at Nain, the widow does not have to remarry to be taken care of. The celibacy practiced in the Old Testament was predominantly of a temporary nature, a sort of “cultic prerequisite” that “was only a temporary abstinence in order to be cultically pure on certain days”; in ancient Israel this practice was seen in the example of Moses and in preparation before battle. Outside of ancient Israelite and Jewish culture, this sort of celibacy was seen in the Isis cult and among the Vestal virgins.

Seim asserts that Anna presents a model of widowhood “with roots in Jewish types of piety such as exemplified by Judith, and representative of the widows in the

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61 Ibid., 84 fn. 247.
62 Seim, *Double*, 189. See also Thurston, *Widows*, 25. Jeremiah is an exception in the Old Testament, as his celibacy was permanent. Peter Brown, *The Body and Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 8, is careful to highlight crucial differences between the Vestals and Christian virgins. The virginal status of pagan Vestals communicated its importance in virtue of its anomaly; Christian virginity, on the other hand, was thought to “stand for human nature at its peak” and “long-lost perfection” and represented the “primal state of humankind” and announced “the dawning light of the end of time.” The decision to become a Virgins virgin was usually not the woman’s decision, whereas the Christian woman’s decision to remain a virgin was considered a “heroic freedom of the individual will.” Many pagan Virgin priestesses were free to marry after their years of service; Christian consecrated women saw the vow as a life-long commitment in which they were espoused to Christ. Vestal virgins were chosen to serve between six and ten years of age, and were released from service after thirty years. Vestals had to have both parents living, could not have been a slave or come from a low-status occupation, and could not have any bodily, hearing, or speech defects. Christian women who professed permanent celibacy did not have socio-economic or physical prerequisites. See Ross Shepherd Kraemer, *Her Share of the Blessings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 82-84.
Christian community in a way that apparently harmonizes well with the criteria of the true widow set out in 1 Tim 5. 63 Anna and Judith exhibit pious practices of prayer and fasting, and both Judith and Anna are widowed young and do not remarry. The “true widow” shares ascetic practices with Anna and Judith such as continuous prayer and shares with Anna and Judith the fact of having been married only once, without remarriage upon her husband’s death. Thus it seems that Judith serves as an important lynchpin between the Jewish widows of the Old Testament and the early Christian widows of the New Testament and that Anna connects the widows of Jewish antiquity (including Judith) with the early Christian widows, many of whom were Jews.

Anna the widow in Luke 2:36 introduces the ascetic motifs of continence, prayer, and fasting. Thurston cites Luke 24:53 (“And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God”) and Acts 2:46 (“And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts”) to show how “Anna’s presence in the temple became a model for the first community of disciples.” Moreover, “the combination of prayer and fasting soon became crucial to the spiritual work of the early Christian community (cf. Acts 13:1-3).” 64 Anna is an ideal widow because of her continence, prayer, and fasting. Anna serves as a model for both older women and younger women, as she spent most of her life as a continent widow. Anna thus shows women of all ages that it is possible to embrace permanent celibacy upon the death of

63 Seim, Double, 246-47. Seim, Double, 248, suggests that “Luke voices ascetic preferences—and this also where women are concerned. The term ‘widow’ may be restricted to the poor and pious, but the ascetic ideal is applied more generally and has a vital theological significance as the proleptic sign of the resurrection to come.”

64 Thurston, Widows, 24-25. See also Acts 14:23 for the combination of prayer and fasting.
one’s husband, even if the period of widowhood is extended. The Scriptures do not cite Judith or Anna as having children. In any case, whether or not Judith or Anna had progeny, it is clear that widowhood and lack of progeny were would not have been considered disgraceful for them, for they were women who were honorable and honored, Judith for her piety and heroism and Anna as a prophetess who announced the advent of Jesus. Formerly considered shameful and sorrowful, widowhood is shifting into a condition that allows a woman to be honored for other traits. Reid asserts that “Anna is a prototype of what would later develop into a clerical order of consecrated widows whose duties included prayer, fasting, visiting and laying hands on the sick, making clothes, and doing good works,” based in part upon Anna’s constant prayer and fasting, which would be among the duties proscribed to the widows in the Didascalia apostolorum. Moreover, Anna’s advanced age and the fact of Anna having only one husband were among two of the requirements for enrolling in the order of widows in the early Church.

Widows in Acts

The message of Christianity was very successful among women and slaves, who were receptive to the promise of spiritual liberation in the Gospel. Women feature prominently in Acts as well as in the gospel of Luke. The Tabitha resurrection account fits Luke’s pattern “of balancing examples of men with those of women.” Acts mentions at least eleven women by name who “reflect the whole spectrum of ancient society” and include women who were “single, married, professionals (working outside

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65 Seim, Double, 247.
66 Reid, Choosing, 93.
67 Thurston, Widows, 28.
the home), homemakers, Jews, Greeks, goddesses, Romans, sisters, mothers, mothers-in-law, prophetesses, missionaries, teachers, queens, slaves, and martyrs.”

Presenting the care of widows, Acts 6:1-7 is the first passage in the New Testament that mentions a group of widows. In Acts 6:1-7, the Hellenists complain against the Hebrews that the Hellenists’ widows are neglected in the daily distribution. The twelve Apostles state that their preaching commitment precludes serving tables, so the twelve tell the disciples to choose seven men of good standing to whom the Apostles could assign the work. The widows in Acts 6 do not explicitly resemble Anna, in her continuous prayer, fasting, perpetual celibacy, and constant presence in the Temple. The widows in Acts 6, as recipients of charity, are like the widows in the Tabitha narrative who are also the recipients of charity.

The narrative of Tabitha and the widows is significant in Acts, not only with regard to Jewish and Gentile evangelization, but also with regard to the tradition of widows both prior to and subsequent to Tabitha’s time.

Now in Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha, which means Dorcas or Gazelle. She was full of good works and acts of charity. In those days she fell


70 Thurston, Widows, 29.

71 Thurston, Widows, 29-30, notes that Jewish widows who had been supported by the Temple were cut off when they became Christians; thus, with the increasing number of people becoming Christians, there were more poor to take care of in the Jerusalem community, and it became necessary to organize and accommodate the growing need in the Church that was answered in part with the help of the seven.

72 “Tabitha” and “Dorcas” mean “gazelle” in Aramaic and Greek, respectively. “Tabitha” is related to the Hebrew zebi (zebiah). The gazelle is used “as a metaphor for the beloved in the Song of Songs 2:9; 8:14,” according to Luke Timothy Johnson, The Acts of the Apostles (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992), 177, who notes that “the designation mathētria (‘woman disciple’) is used only here in the NT.”

73 Andy Reimer, Miracle and Magic (New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 156-7, notes, “One cannot be certain, of course, as to why certain individuals receive mention in Acts, but it is plausible to assume that they are mentioned because of the significant role they were to play within the Christian community.”
sick and died; and when they had washed her, they laid her in an upper room. Since Lydia was near Joppa, the disciples, hearing that Peter was there, sent two men to him entreating him, “Please come to us without delay.” So Peter rose and went with them. And when he had come, they took him to the upper room. All the widows stood beside him weeping, and showing coats and garments which Dorcas made while she was with them. But Peter put them all outside and knelt down and prayed; then turning to the body he said, “Tabitha, rise.” And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter she sat up. And he gave her his hand and lifted her up. Then calling the saints and widows he presented her alive. And it became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. And he stayed in Joppa for many days with one Simon, a tanner (Acts 9:36-43).

Thurston cites two reasons for the importance of the Tabitha narrative in the Luke-Acts widow context: “First, as in Acts 6:1-7, we see a group of widows who were apparently recipients of benevolence. Second, Tabitha acted in behalf of others. If Tabitha were a widow, as has been suggested, then she provides us with a link to the ‘order’ in 1 Tim. 5:3-16.” F. Scott Spencer argues that in the Tabitha narrative, “supporting widows has been upgraded from secondary to priority status, on a par with prayer, in Peter’s ministerial agenda.” Spencer comes to this conclusion after looking at Acts 6:1-7, noting that the Twelve delegate care of the widows to others in Acts 6:1-7, while Peter in Acts 9:36-43 “closely combines prayer and service in an exemplary support system for needy widows” by restoring Tabitha, the widows’ benefactress, to them.

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74 Thurston, Widows, 31. The biblical text does not cite Tabitha as having a husband or children, and the text does not state whether Tabitha was a widow herself. Some scholarship deduced that Tabitha herself was a widow. See William S. Kurz, S.J., Acts of the Apostles (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 165, who refers to Peter’s miracle as “the raising of this widow [Tabitha].” H. Kraft, “χήρα,” 466, states that Tabitha “was a virgin or widow.” G. Stählin, “χήρας,” 451 fn. 107, states that “it might be conjectured that Tabitha herself was a widow, since one would expect her husband to be mentioned in vv. 39-41 if she had been married.” The Orthodox Church honors Tabitha as a widow saint, and celebrates her feast day on October 25. Already St. Basil of Caesarea prescribes that “that a widow who enjoys sufficiently robust health should spend her life in works of zeal and solicitude, keeping in mind the words of the Apostle and the example of Dorcas.” See Basil, Ascetical Works—The Morals 74.1, trans. Sr. Monica Wagner (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1950), 191.


Ascetic Practices in Acts 9:38-43

Prayers and almsgiving are mentioned in the Tabitha narrative. The widows act as intermediaries between Tabitha and Peter when they show Peter the garments that Tabitha made for them, “or, more likely, to God as a way of interceding for Dorcas.” Whether they are part of an organized order of widows remains unclear, but “their mute weeping and show of garments serves as an impressive replacement for a direct request that Tabitha be restored to them.” Tabitha’s story shows the audience how Peter responds to requests made by intermediaries; in the case of Tabitha, disciples find Peter and bring him back to help Tabitha, and the widows mourn (an act of charity) and testify to Tabitha’s generosity (by showing the clothing Tabitha made for the widows).

The motif of widows as almsgivers is introduced in the New Testament, in the case of the widow’s mite in Luke 21:1-4. Almsgiving was very important in ancient Judaism (see Tob. 2:14, 3:2), and that importance was emphasized in the New Testament (for example, Luke 11:41, 12:33; Acts 3:2; Titus 3:14). Tabitha was generous with alms (Acts 9:36). It is clear from the Tabitha narrative that she was responsible, at least in the way of providing clothing, for a group of widows. Providing clothing for widows could be viewed as one way of fulfilling Jesus’ prescription to clothe the naked in Matt. 25:36-43. Tabitha fulfills several biblical prescriptions involving the practice of religion and charity as she practices “religion that is pure and undefiled” (James 1:27), includes as

79 Ibid.
80 Ibid., 177-78.
81 Thurston, Widows, 32.
“family” those who are not one’s blood relatives (Matt. 12:46-50), and takes care of widows (as prescribed by 1 Tim. 5:16).83 The widows surrounding Tabitha are associated with her in doing good works; mourning the dead and showing Tabitha’s good works are good works themselves. Gary Anderson notes that almogifts in the Tabitha narrative exemplify Prov. 10:2, namely “the power of almsgiving…to deliver one from death.”84 At the very least, Acts 9:36-43 is evidence that there was a community besides that of Jerusalem that included widows around A.D. 43.85

**Significance of Tabitha’s Resurrection**

The Tabitha narrative in Acts 9:36-43 recounts the first time that an apostle resurrects someone from the dead. Tabitha’s restoration is important to the widows, who rely on Tabitha’s benefactions—Tabitha’s death “was not the unfortunate end of a single life, but a disaster for ‘the widows,’ introduced here. This is a moment of pathos—distraught widows exhibiting the fruit of Dorcas’s…labors” in Acts 9:39.86 Peter’s raising of Tabitha is reminiscent of Jesus’ raising of Jairus’ daughter (Luke 8:51), and of Elijah’s and Elisha’s acts of raising people from the dead (1 Kings 17:19-23, 2 Kings 4:32-37). In all these cases, these men turn out people from the room, or they perform the miracle with few witnesses.87 The similarities between Peter’s raising of Tabitha and Jesus’ raising of the little girl include “the use of messengers, the weeping bystanders, the

83 Thurston, Widows, 34.
84 Gary A. Anderson, Charity: The Place of the Poor in the Biblical Tradition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 170, states “that almsgifts could intercede on one’s behalf was well known in contemporary Judaism and confirmed just a few verses later when in a different episode an angel tells the centurion Cornelius that both ‘your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God’ (Acts10:4).”
85 Thurston, Widows, 34.
87 Kurz, Reading, 87.
exclusion of outsiders from the room, the call to rise (“Little girl, rise up,” Luke 8:54),
the taking by the hand.” Tabitha’s body was washed after she died, which was a normal
funerary process, although the text does not mention that she was anointed. Tabitha was
placed in the upper room, which echoes the widow of Zarephath placing the body of her
son in the upper room before Elijah brings him back to life in 1 Kings 17:19. Just like
Jesus, Peter simply commands the dead woman to rise, after which Tabitha is presented
to the community without further commentary by the narrator of Acts. L. T. Johnson
asserts that “‘belief in the Lord (Jesus)’ is an implicit recognition that the power at work
through Peter is not his own” but comes from the Lord Jesus. Luke uses the verb
anistēmi both to describe the resurrection of Tabitha and to describe Jesus’ resurrection
account and Tabitha’s resurrection account share the common thread of having women as
witnesses to the resurrections, and in the case of Tabitha, the widows are among the
privileged to witness the miracle. The widows’ status is elevated by the honor of being
among the first to witness this dramatic miracle.

Peter calls the “saints and widows” to witness Tabitha’s restoration. This
expression is a development in how widows are listed in Scripture. In the Old Testament
the widow is listed with the orphan and the stranger, but in Acts 9:41 the widow is listed
with the saints. Richard I. Pervo asserts that “the text does not identify” the widows “as

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89 Ibid. The upper room (Acts 9:37) could have served many functions, including that of housing a
widow. Craig S. Keener, Acts: An Exegetical Commentary v. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic,
2012), 1717, notes that upper rooms were built for “new family members, guests, tenants,” for “meetings of
the sages,” “for a new son’s marriage,” and “for daughters (especially childless ones) returning home after
being widowed.”
90 Kurz, Reading, 87.
92 Thurston, Widows, 32.
‘believers’ or the like because it assumes that they were an organized group at this point.”

The result of Tabitha’s resurrection was that “many believed in the Lord” (Acts 9:42), and like Aeneas’ healing, news of Tabitha’s resurrection is a catalyst for many conversions. Like Achior in the Judith story, who was brought to conversion by witnessing the power of God working through a widow, people are brought to conversion in part through the actions and the prayers of the widows, even if Peter is the main actor in the narrative.

**Conclusions on Widows in Luke-Acts**

Jesus and his message ran contrary to the existing cultural mores in his high valuation of women. In spite of positive developments for women, however, Bremmer maintains that in earliest Christianity women “remained unequal, none of the apostles being a woman.”

It is clear, however, that Anna and Tabitha were viewed positively and had important roles within their respective communities, even if they were not named as apostles. Women and widows were valued in Luke-Acts, but they appear to some to be “excluded from actual positions of leadership.” However, as in the examples of Anna the prophetess and Tabitha, who was responsible for providing clothing for a group of widows, we do see a widow (Anna) and a caretaker of widows (Tabitha) assume

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93 Pervo, *Acts*, 256 fn. 46. Keener, *Acts*, 1724, also thinks that “the designation of ‘saints and widows’ may suggest two groups (especially since both groups are prefaced with distinct definite articles rather than grammatically linked by a common article).” Gustav Stählin, “γυναῖκα,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* vol. 9, ed. Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 452, asserts also that the widows may have been “a special class” because of the grouping of saints and widows in the Tabitha passage.


96 Seim, *Double*, 252-253.
leadership positions just prior to Christianity (Anna) and subsequent to the establishment of Christianity (Tabitha); Anna is a faithful Jewess who proclaims the advent of Christ, and Tabitha is established as a believer in Christ. Moreover, Anna’s and Tabitha’s leadership roles were not without precedent; Judith was a moral and religious authority within her community. Leaders in Luke-Acts were called to be servants in a new role of imitation of Christ, which did not preclude formal leadership positions. Although we see the widow Anna as a prophetess in Luke, there is not a formal leadership position for widows as widows per se at this point in time.

Taking care of widows is exemplified in two Lukan resurrection stories, in the raising of the widow’s son by Jesus in Luke 7 and the raising of Tabitha by Peter in Acts 9. In the story of Jesus raising the widow’s son, Jesus gives the widow back her social standing and her livelihood (not to mention her beloved son). As evidenced by Acts 6 (a dispute regarding widows who felt neglected), too, widows were taken care of by the earliest Christians. In the story of Peter raising Tabitha, Peter restores the woman who cared for widows in the community, so that Tabitha can continue to take care of those widows. Thus, in these New Testament narratives concerning widows, it is clear that the widowed state is still a position of vulnerability and in many cases, dependent upon the charity of others for subsistence, comparable to the vulnerable status of most of the widows that are cited in the Old Testament.

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97 Other biblical women who were religious authorities in their respective communities include the queen mothers like the mother of King Lemuel (Prov. 31:1) and Bathsheba, mother of Solomon (1 Kings 2:19). Other biblical women authoritative figures include Deborah (Judges 4-5), Miriam (Exod. 15:20-21; Mic. 6:4), and Mary, the Mother of Jesus (Acts 1:14).
98 Seim, Double, 252.
99 Bremmer, “Pauper,” 33-34.
100 Seim, Double, 241.
But the widow in the New Testament is not just one to be taken care of. Already the narrative of Judith shows that the status of widows is being elevated. In the New Testament, through Jesus’ ministry and teaching, the widow’s status continues to be seen in a more positive light than in the Old Testament. She is a model of almsgiving and piety, as we see in the cases of the unnamed widows in Luke-Acts and Anna the prophetess. The Anna narrative highlights the ascetic practices of prayer, continence, and fasting. Luke also highlights Anna’s function as a prophetess, which function is not included in the proscriptions for widows in 1 Timothy 5, nor in later Church documents that seek to regulate the speech and actions of widows (which will be explored in chapter four of this dissertation). The stories of Anna and Tabitha and the widows have something in common with the passage on widows in 1 Timothy 5, for prayer and good works are two of the prerequisites for enrolling among the widows in 1 Timothy 5. We turn now to the first mention of organized widows in the Scripture, the order of widows that is cited in 1 Timothy 5.

**THE ORDER OF WIDOWS IN 1 TIMOTHY 5:3-16**

St. Paul mentions an order of widows in 1 Tim. 5:3-16. According to Philip Towner, “Paul’s teaching concerning widows in the church is the most extensive treatment of a group” in 1 Timothy.\(^{101}\) Paul Bradshaw asserts:

> The earliest firm evidence for the existence of a clearly recognizable order of widows in the Christian Church, as distinct from a more loosely defined group who were recipients of charity (e.g., as in Acts 6:1), occurs in 1 Tim 5:3-16, where rules are set forth concerning the ‘enrollment’ of those who are ‘real’ widows, that is, who have no family to provide financial support for them.\(^{102}\)

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Raymond Collins notes that three kinds of widows are spoken of in 1 Tim. 5: the "real widow," who is married only once and meets the other qualifications listed (1 Tim. 5:3, 5-10), younger widows (1 Tim. 5:11-15), and other widows who have children and grandchildren to take care of them (1 Tim. 5:4, 16).\(^\text{103}\) Scholarship is largely in consensus that 1 Timothy 5 regulates an order of widows, with differing views as to whether the order is a completely newly formed group, or Paul seeks to systematize an existing group of widows.\(^\text{104}\) R. Collins observes that Paul’s “use of the technical term ‘enrolled’ suggests that there was a well-defined group of real widows in the community.”\(^\text{105}\) 1 Tim. 5:3-16 is the first mention of such a group of widows in Scripture, and this passage lists the prerequisites for being enrolled in it:

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Honor widows who are real widows. If a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn their religious duty to their own family and make some return to their parents; for this is acceptable in the sight of God.

She who is a real widow, and is left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day; whereas she who is self-indulgent is dead even while she lives. Command this, so that they may be without reproach. If any one does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his own family, he has disowned the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband; and she must be well attested for her good deeds, as one who has brought up children, shown hospitality, washed the feet of the saints, relieved the afflicted, and devoted herself to doing good in every way.

But refuse to enroll younger widows; for when they grow wanton against Christ they desire to marry, and so they incur condemnation for having violated their first pledge. Besides that, they learn to be idlers, gadding about from house to house, and not only idlers but gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not.
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\(^{104}\) Seim, *Double*, 237.

So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, rule their households, and give the enemy no occasion to revile us. For some have already strayed after Satan. If any believing woman has relatives who are widows, let her assist them; let the church not be burdened, so that it may assist those who are real widows.

The next section of chapter three will look at what is meant by the “real” widow in 1 Timothy 5, and what the prescriptions and proscriptions regarding the widows discussed in this passage mean.

**Real Widows, and Prescriptions and Proscriptions in 1 Timothy 5:3-16**

This passage attests a development in the status of widows between the Old and the New Testaments. Thomas McGinn affirms, “[T]he complex classifications set forth by this text find no precedent in the tradition of the Hebrew Bible.”

Notably, there is a prescription to honor widows who are “real” widows. In 1 Timothy 5, real widows are “left all alone” and are differentiated from widows who have children, grandchildren, or female relatives to care for them (1 Tim. 5:3-5). Real widows are also differentiated from younger widows, who may want to remarry (1 Tim. 5:11). Such distinctions between widows were not made in the Old Testament. The real widow “has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day” (1 Tim. 5:5). In the Old Testament we learned that God heard with particular favor the prayers of the widow, but the widow in the Old Testament was not expected to pray night and day continuously. Jewish widows like Judith in the Old Testament and Anna in the New Testament exhibited constant prayer, but there was not a description of a group of widows doing so.

1 Timothy 5 outlines the ascetical and charitable prerequisites that the widow was expected to have fulfilled before she was enrolled in the order. Within this group, with

which Tabitha and her widows may have been associated, we see the beginnings of an organized group of women given over to constant prayer in addition to being on a list for assistance. The prototype of their constant prayer is Anna the prophetess, according to Benjamin Fiore, S.J. Korinna Zamfir asserts that “the modelling of the ideal widow after the same pattern” of Judith and Hanna, widows who “both minister to God night and day and…are univirae (Jth. 8, 4-8; 11, 17; 16, 22; Luke 2, 36-37),” “shows that the widows addressed in 1 Tim. 5, 5-10 are not simply the object of church charity” but are rather “women dedicated to prayer.” Furthermore, the women who were selected to be enrolled in the order of widows had been dedicated to “community service.” The real widow eligible for enrollment was expected to have demonstrated practical acts of charity (“must be well attested for her good deeds”), including having “brought up children, shown hospitality, washed the feet of the saints, relieved the afflicted, and devoted herself to doing good in every way” (1 Tim. 5:10). Both prayer and charitable works were expected of the widow who would be enrolled.

The widow who wasted her life, on the other hand, was not even to be considered, for “the one who is self-indulgent is dead while she lives” (1 Tim. 5:6). R. Collins writes, “real life is eternal life ([1 Tim.] 6:19). Pleasure-seeking widows do not share eternal life.” I Timothy 5 takes issue with those who would enroll younger women in the order of widows, and it sets the minimum age of sixty for enrollment. Winter understands the term “young” as applied to widows to mean “those who had not reached

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109 R. Collins, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, 138.
menopause and were therefore capable of bearing children; this was one of the stated purposes for remarriage.” With this definition, “young” could have included women in their fifties (which is the onset of menopause for some women), which would explain in part the minimum age requirement of sixty years. Barring a miracle, a woman was safely past childbearing age when she reached sixty years of age. Younger widows were more likely to remarry because their children needed a father’s economic and social protection, and his role in their education; thus the enrolled widow must have already “brought up children” (1 Tim. 5:10). If the Church was not overly wealthy at the time, the priority was to take care of older women who were “real” widows, rather than younger widows with children who could have husbands to support them. It would have been less of a drain on the Church to assist an older woman who was nearing the end of her life, than it would have been to support a younger woman and her children for a longer period of time. Women over the age of sixty could have been old enough to have suffered the deaths of both children and grandchildren, leaving the women as “real widows” with no one to care for them and so in need of assistance from the community.

Another reason for the age requirement for enrollment is stated in 1 Tim. 5:11-15, namely, that younger women are more likely to “grow wanton” and violate “their first pledge.” Jouette Bassler asserts that “the way the author links alienation from Christ, a desire to marry, and violation of ‘their first pledge’ suggests that the vow of celibacy was part of a spiritual union with Christ that was construed on the analogy of marriage.” Thurston also thinks it is possible that the widow had to “take a vow of enrollment by

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which she pledged fidelity to Christ and his Church” in light of the concern for younger widows who “violate their first pledge” by seeking to remarry after they said they would not (1 Tim. 5:12).\footnote{Thurston, Widow, 54.} Fiore writes that “Paul encouraged not remarrying for eschatological reasons at 1 Cor. 7:40, and at 2 Cor. 11:2 he reminds the Corinthians that he espoused them to Christ.”\footnote{Fiore, Pastoral, 106.} Fiore connects these passages to those that show Christ as the bridegroom in Mark 2:19, Matt. 22:1-14, Matt. 25:1-13, and Rev. 19:7. He then asserts that 1 Timothy 5 shows that “the ministry of the widow is related to fidelity to Christ. The pledge indicates a formal association of registered widows.”\footnote{Ibid.} Quinn and Wacker interpret the pledge to mean an actual public pledge made upon admittance into the order of widows, a pledge that had a theological meaning that concerned the “faith—the troth—that one person pledges to another, the agreement…to which one is expected to be loyal, in this case the agreement to remain unmarried which has been publicly given to Christ, through the Church.”\footnote{Jerome D. Quinn and William C. Wacker, The First and Second Letters to Timothy: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), 442.} Gryson asserts that in 1 Timothy 5 the “portrait of the ‘real widow’…implied a profession of continence” made by someone who “was granted official recognition by the community, which took charge of these older women deprived of all natural help.”\footnote{Gryson, Ministry, 9.}

The New Testament refers positively to celibacy and virginity, which points to a growing importance placed on continence in Christianity (Matt. 19:11, 12, 29; 1 Cor. 7:7-9, 32-34). Continence would have been part of life for the Christian who did not remarry after the death of his or her spouse. Augustan law prohibited celibacy for men and

\begin{itemize}
\item \footnote{Thurston, Widow, 54.} \footnote{Fiore, Pastoral, 106.} \footnote{Ibid.} \footnote{Jerome D. Quinn and William C. Wacker, The First and Second Letters to Timothy: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), 442.} \footnote{Gryson, Ministry, 9.}
\end{itemize}
women, and even prescribed a lapse of time during which widows had to remarry, and these penalizing laws were maintained until Constantine retracted them in the fourth century.\textsuperscript{118} Thus, the first Christians were out of step with the rest of the culture in view of the value they put on celibacy and continence.

The preference for certain women to be married only once, and for that to be explicitly stated in the Scriptures, is a change from the Old Testament expectation that widows would remarry, with the notable exception of the exemplary widow Judith who did not remarry. Moreover, the requirement of being married only once applies to bishops and deacons in 1 Tim. 3:1-13, a common thread that unites the widows to these developing roles. Quinn and Wacker point out that second marriages were advised in some situations (1 Tim. 5:11-14), but they assert that second marriages were “not to be countenanced in candidates for public ministries,” for widows, presbyters, bishops, and deacons.\textsuperscript{119}

Zamfir argues that enrollment is not necessarily about financial need, because the qualification of “being destitute” is not found in 1 Tim. 5:9-10, which instead outlines what one must be or have done in order to be enrolled in the order of widows.\textsuperscript{120} However, 1 Tim. 5:5 describes the “real” widow as one who is “left all alone,” implying that she has no one to care for her, and 1 Tim. 5:8, 16 commands believers to care for relatives who are widows, so that the Church can assist those who are “real” widows, implying that the widows needed help and that a widow left alone would be without that

\textsuperscript{118} Thurston, \textit{Widows}, 85.  
\textsuperscript{120} Zamfir, \textit{Men and Women}, 356.
help, even if destitution was not mentioned as a prerequisite in 1 Timothy 5. R. Collins notes that “women have important responsibilities in the house of God” as caretakers of widows (1 Tim. 5:16).121 Gryson asserts that the honor to be given to widows was “understood as giving material assistance as well as respect,” thus the precondition of destitution is implied in 1 Tim. 5:3 with the command to “honor widows who are real widows.”122

Jouette Bassler also supports the reading of the text as describing more than one kind of widow. Bassler makes the important point that enrollment was not “a precondition for financial support” because that precondition would imply that the Church would refuse to help a widow who did not meet certain requirements, for example, the age requirement; this understanding would also imply that “a young widow who followed the advice of v 14 (I would have young widows marry) would by this very act of obedience exclude herself from any future assistance should she become widowed again.”123

The requirements for enrollment of widows in 1 Timothy 5 hoped to relieve the extra burden placed on the charitable obligations of the Church by excluding assistance to widows who did not need it, to prevent embarrassment to the Church if a young widow broke her pledge of celibacy, and to disassociate the Church from the widows who gossiped.124

121 R. Collins, I & 2 Timothy and Titus, 143.
122 Gryson, Ministry, 9. See also George T. Montague, S.M., First and Second Timothy, Titus (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic Press, 2008), 108-109, who corroborates Gryson’s assertion that honor implied financial support.
123 Bassler, “Widow’s Tale,” 34.
124 Thurston, Widows, 54.
In light of the statement that young widows who behave wantonly toward Christ and want to remarry “learn to be idlers, gadding about from house to house, and not only idlers but gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not” (1 Tim. 5:13), Thurston surmises that the widows visited homes for purposes of a charitable and pastoral nature. Titus 2:2-5 is an example of how older women performed charitable acts for younger women. Thurston connects 1 Timothy 5 with Titus 2:2-5, which instructs older women to “be reverent in behavior, not to be slanderers or slaves to drink; they are to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be sensible, chaste, domestic, kind, and submissive, to their husbands, that the word of God may not be discredited.”

Fiore asserts that “house-to-house circulation is not the problem,” as evidenced by Titus 2:4-5, which exhorts older women to train younger women in “domestic virtue”; the problem comes from women who gossip and idle away their time and spread that poison to other households. Fiore thinks that the younger widows might also have been spreading false doctrine, in light of Paul’s warnings (1 Tim. 1:20; 6:3-5; 2 Tim. 4:14-15; and Titus 3:8-11) concerning false teachers, and in light of the lament that “some have already strayed after Satan” (1 Tim. 5:15), which could cover a lot of other things the younger widows might have been doing wrong. Dillon Thornton also concludes that verses 13 and 15 show that young widows “had been deceived by the opponents in Ephesus”; the young widows said things they should not have, which could mean gossip or wrong doctrine, and the association of the widows with Satan in verse 14 “points to their involvement with the opponents and their teaching, which Paul has

125 Ibid., 53.
126 Fiore, Pastoral, 107.
already classified as Satanic/demonic (4:1).” Thus the statement that certain widows gossip might have come from witnessing widows whose home visits resulted in spreading gossip or wrong teaching about the Church; either scenario would have been an occasion of scandal. Fiore asserts, “The fact that the letter finds only some (tines) to be guilty of this suggests a paraenetic warning. The widows might be tending toward, but have not yet reached this point; still, they have to beware.”

Peter Brown comments that the widow “was no demure creature, who would sink back into her parents’ house. ‘Passing around the houses,’ continent adult women, as widows, enjoyed some of the enviable mobility associated with the apostolic calling.” Brown cites 1 Tim. 5:13 for his proof of widows circulating freely. As we have seen, this passage expresses concern about widows travelling and scandalizing others. It is not clear to what extent an enrolled widow was involved with apostolic works, but the enrolled widow was most likely involved with both prayer and charitable works, albeit ones that were sanctioned by the Christian community so as to avoid the scandal that 1 Timothy 5 highlights. Fiore notes that hospitality might have been “one of the widows’ official functions, along with service to the community,” since practicing hospitality was one of the prerequisites for enrollment in 1 Timothy 5. It is also possible that widows who lived alone were going from house to house to beg for sustenance.

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128 Fiore, Pastoral, 107.
129 P. Brown, Body, 150.
130 Fiore, Pastoral, 105.
131 I am indebted to Rev. Joseph G. Mueller, S.J., for this suggestion. Curiously, the secondary sources I looked at did not mention widows begging as a reason for house-to-house circulation, probably because the sources were focused on the concerns that Paul had for widows circulating, namely gossip and saying things that they should not.
Fiore understands the order of widows to be a preexisting group whose “registry seems to have grown without careful scrutiny” and whose problems have to do with both appropriate support for widows and also moderating the problematic behavior of some of the widows.\(^{132}\) Quinn and Wacker assert that 1 Timothy 5 presupposes an existing order of widows, which provides “a base on which later organizations for widows were founded.”\(^{133}\) “Order,” as used in relationship to the enrolled widows in 1 Timothy 5, refers to the group on the list of enrolled widows, that was distinct from other widows who were merely the recipients of charity and who were not enrolled.

Many scholars think that the enrolled widows had as a special function to continue in prayer. According to Thurston, “the Church’s prayers are at the top of the widow’s tasks because, since she is totally dependent upon God, God will be most likely to hear prayers from her lips.”\(^{134}\) In return for support, enrolled widows were expected to constantly pray for the Church.\(^{135}\) Thurston does not provide argument for her assertion that enrolled widows were expected to pray for the Church. Thurston’s conclusion is reasonable, however, based upon Paul’s exhortations in his other letters to Christians to “be constant in prayer” (Rom. 12:12) and “pray constantly” (1 Thess. 5:17). Paul exhorts the Christians at Corinth to “help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us in answer to many prayers” (2 Cor. 1:11); Paul also exhorts the Church in Ephesus to “pray at all times in the Spirit, with all prayers and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me, that utterance may be given me in opening my mouth boldly to

\(^{132}\) Fiore, *Pastoral*, 106.
\(^{133}\) Quinn and Wacker, *Letters*, 436.
\(^{134}\) Thurston, *Widows*, 51.
\(^{135}\) Ibid., 54.
proclaim the mystery of the gospel” (Eph. 6:18-19). Paul exhorts those in Colossae to “continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving; and pray for us also” (Col. 4:2-3). Thus, while the text of 1 Timothy 5 does not exhort enrolled widows to pray specifically for the Church, it is reasonable that the widows would have, in light of Paul’s exhortations for all Christians to pray constantly.

Towner notes that “while specific requests might refer to her reliance on God, for basic provisions, the second more general term for prayer suggests a wider intercessory scope for this prayer”; moreover, the “real” widow’s description “recalls such models of prayer in the tradition of piety as Hannah (1 Samuel 1) and Anna the widow (Luke 2:37; cf. 4 Ezra 9:44).” According to George T. Montague, S.M., the widows in 1 Timothy 5 were assigned a particular ministry, that of praying; in giving the widows the specific task of praying, “the Church believed that she was receiving from these widows as well as giving” (see 1 Tim. 5:5).137

Fiore asserts that 1 Tim. 5:9 describes “widowhood as a service ministry in the church” whose qualifications are based upon “the good works by which they gave witness to their faith.” According to Fiore, the list that is put forth in 1 Timothy 5 regarding the enrollment of widows “describes the qualifications, not the duties, of the widows.” Thus, while we may speculate upon the duties of the enrolled widows, Fiore concludes that the qualifications in themselves do not provide evidence to affirm with surety that the widows’ duties upon enrollment included carrying out the actions mentioned as prerequisite qualifications.

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136 Towner, Letters, 341.
137 Montague, First and Second Timothy, 111.
138 Fiore, Pastoral, 108.
139 Ibid., 105.
Gryson acknowledges scholarship on both sides of the debate, before asserting that the text does not indicate explicitly that these widows were “invested with a specific function,” including a clerical function that was “a later evolution of the status of widows in the Church.” However, Gryson acknowledges that his assessment does “not imply that widows did not play a significant role in the life of the community and that their influence was not a tremendous blessing.” I think it likely that widows who were enrolled in the order of widows continued praying and performing good works. As Gryson asserts, if the enrolled widows had already done good works, “there is no reason why they should stop doing so.” However, since constant prayer and good works were asked of all Christians, one could disagree with Thurston, Quinn and Wacker, and Montague that the widows were invested with a particular function (as distinct from other Christians) at that point in time, unless the widows were asked to pray more than other Christians did. I think widows were asked to pray more, in return for the charity shown them and in light of their ethical qualifications upon enrollment, and because they may have had more time and opportunity to do so in their older years. The strongest case for asserting that the enrolled widow continued in constant prayer after her enrollment is found in 1 Tim. 5:5, which describes the real widow as one who “continues in supplications and prayers day and night.” The present tense qualification “continues in supplications and prayers night and day” (1 Tim. 5:5) contrasts with the past tense qualifications of having “brought up children, shown hospitality, washed the feet of the saints, relieved the afflicted, and devoted herself to doing good in every way” (1 Tim.

140 Gryson, Ministry, 8-9.
141 Ibid., 9-10.
142 Ibid.
5:9-10), suggesting that the enrolled widow continued in constant prayer upon enrollment. This is a reasonable conclusion, based upon Paul’s exhortations to Christians in general to continue in prayer and specific instructions for the widow to pray constantly.

**Prescriptions and Proscriptions for Bishops and Deacons in 1 Timothy 3:1-13**

The widows’ prescriptions in 1 Tim. 5:3-16 are similar to those for the bishops and deacons, about whom we are told the following in 1 Tim. 3:1-13:

The saying is sure: If any one aspires to the office of bishop, he desires a noble task. Now a bishop must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, sensible, dignified, hospitable, an apt teacher, no drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and no lover of money. He must manage his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way; for if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how can he care for God’s church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may be puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil; moreover he must be well thought of by outsiders, or he may fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.

Deacons likewise must be serious, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for gain; they must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And let them also be tested first; then if they prove themselves blameless let them serve as deacons. The women likewise must be serious, no slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things. Let deacons be the husband of one wife, and let them manage their children and their households well; for those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith which is in Jesus Christ.

The similarities between this list of prescriptions for bishops and deacons and the list of prescriptions for widows suggests that the order of widows is transitioning from a group that merely accepts charity to one that administers charity. Quinn and Wacker assert that the clerical order of widows that forms after 1 Timothy 5 was written has its foundations in the order of widows described in 1 Timothy 5. Quinn and Wacker note that the requirement that only a widow who has had just one husband can be enrolled is a “variant on the qualification for the (presbyter-) bishop of Titus and the *episkopos* as well as the
diakonos of 1 Tim. 3. This fact would imply that the widows are in an ‘order’ and a ministry.\textsuperscript{143} Fiore asserts that “the age and marriage requirements suggest that this is an ‘office’ with institutional requirements and not a personal charism or condition brought about by circumstance.”\textsuperscript{144} Fiore also notes that the enrolled widows were expected to “have been married and reared children, a qualification similar to that of the overseers, elders, and assistants.”\textsuperscript{145} However, the biblical text does not indicate explicitly that the widows were public ministers yet; it indicates only that enrolled widows were similar to presbyters (Titus 1:5-6), bishops (1 Tim. 3:2), and deacons (1 Tim. 3:12) in that none of the people in these respective groups could remarry after their first spouse died. Thus, it seems more prudent to say that during the time in which 1 Timothy 5 was written, both the enrolled widows and public ministers were required not to remarry and that at this point in time the groundwork was being laid for what would develop into a public ministry soon thereafter.\textsuperscript{146}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[143] Quinn and Wacker, \textit{Letters}, 437.
\item[144] Fiore, \textit{Pastoral}, 104, notes that “the age limit reflects the average age of the ‘elderly’ in antiquity (see v. 14). Plato, \textit{Leg.}, VI 759c-d establishes sixty years as the minimum age for sacral duties (see also Plutarch, \textit{Comp. Lyc. Num.} 26, 1-2; Pol II 11 and specifically for women, Demosthenes, \textit{Or.}, 43, 62. See also \textit{Abot. R. Nat.} 5, 21. At Titus 2:3 older women are given the task of educating younger women and of setting an example of upright behavior. A single marriage indicates their fidelity (see also 3:2) even after the death of the spouse (\textit{Anth. Graec.} VII 324; Propertius, IV 11, 33-37.41-42.67-69; Livy, X 23.5.9; Valerius Maximus, II 1, 3, and see Josephus, \textit{Ant.} XV 65-66; XVII 352; Pausanias, II 21, 7; VII 25, 13 as a requirement for priestly service).”
\item[145] Fiore, \textit{Pastoral}, 104-5.
\item[146] Quinn and Wacker, \textit{Letters}, 437, think that one theological reason for the insistence upon one marriage would have been “the witness to the permanent union of Christ and the church by their one Christian marriage.” See also Aimé Georges Martimort, \textit{Deaconesses: An Historical Study} (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 23, on the condition of one marriage for widows: “this condition fulfilled an important demand of ecclesial symbolism: those in the Church who occupied a place that distinguished them from the simple faithful were obliged to embody a sign of the Covenant in their own lives; they were obliged to live the nuptial mystery of the Church united to Christ, her unique Spouse.” Martimort cites I. de la Potterie for this insight, “Mari d’une seule femme”, \textit{le sens théologique d’une formule paulinienne}, in \textit{Paul de Tarse, apôtre de notre temps}, ed. Lorenzo de Lorenzi (Rome: Abbaye de Saint Paul, 1979), 619-38. De la Potterie asserts that “our study Mari d’une seule femme, (at supra), p. 635, n. 64,” shows “that the formula \textit{unius uxoris vir} (1 Tim 3:2) expresses the marriage relationship of the covenant between God and his people, between Christ the bridegroom and his bride the Church. Furthermore, the similarity of the formula in 1 Tim 3:2 with the one nearly in 1 Tim 2:5: \textit{unus Deus, unus... homo Christus Jesus} permits the
\end{footnotes}
The Order of Widows: Old Repression or New Freedom?

Some scholars insist that the requirements for enrollment in 1 Timothy 5 were meant to repress the freedom of an existing group of early Christian women. Turid Seim thinks that initially women were excited about emerging vocations within the newly forming Church that were open to women of all castes and that appealed to the “ascetic enthusiasm” that new Christians exhibited. Jouette Bassler asserts that “part of this attractiveness was probably linked to the fact that it permitted a life free from the restrictions of patriarchal marriage and closer to the ideal that Paul had expressed (1 Cor. 7:8; see also Gal. 3:28).” Seim thinks that Paul viewed the many widows not only as an extra financial burden to the Church, but also as “a theological threat” due to their “ascetic fervor”; thus Seim thinks that 1 Timothy 5 is meant to “decimate” the order with its prohibitions by using terminology like “genuine” and “true.” Seim states that Paul “opposes their ascetic fervour, accuses them of faithlessness and maintains that their weakness encourages easy access by heretics who advocated a similar ascetic lifestyle,” and also asserts that “there is also the fear expressed that the surrounding society will react negatively to such a lack of conformity to the domesticity expected of women.”


147 Seim, Double, 238.
148 Bassler, 1 Timothy, 94.
149 Seim, Double, 238.
150 Ibid., 238.
A careful reading of the 1 Timothy 5 passage, however, shows Paul’s concern is for only certain widows who were causing scandal saying things that they should not say, and for younger widows who would violate their first pledge by remarrying. Paul expresses concern about widows who violate their pledge, but does not discourage older widows from making the pledge. In fact, Paul’s insistence that enrolled widows be widows who continue in supplications night and day, be the spouse of only one man, and continue in chastity, refutes Seim’s argument that Paul opposed the widows’ ascetic fervor. On the contrary, he supported their ascetic fervor and wanted to avoid scandal in the Church that would undermine the Church’s credibility.

With any number of widows in the early Church, it is not surprising that some kind of organizing had to occur to deal with the most pressing cases of need, as well as to deal with the scandal that young widows were causing that reflected negatively upon the Church. Thurston also approaches the question of restrictions on the widows’ order pragmatically, asserting that the group of widows who needed assistance was growing too quickly for some early communities and that the practical concerns of scandal due to gossip and violation of pledges by younger widows led to codifying the order of widows.151

The status of the widow develops from that of someone whom God protects and commands others to protect because of her vulnerability into that of someone who still needs that protection, but who is now allowed to enroll in an order of widows that is an honored group. Scripture first attests an order of widows in 1 Tim. 5:3-16. Three kinds of widows are discussed in this passage: widows who should be taken care of by their

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families, younger widows who should not be enrolled in the order, and “real” widows who must have been truly alone in the world and who must have exhibited good character to qualify for enrollment into the order of widows. The enrolled widow in 1 Timothy 5 must have prayed constantly (1 Tim. 5:5), and she is enrolled according to requirements that resemble those for the early Church offices of bishops and deacons. The widow was still considered vulnerable and prone to poverty even as her status increased in the New Testament.

THE ALTAR IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

This dissertation has thus far traced the status of widows in the Old and New Testaments. The significance of the altar was explored in the Old Testament, and the importance of the altar was cited in the chapter on the Old Testament widow Judith. Since the widow is called an altar of God in the early Church, it is fitting to look at the altar in the New Testament to see if the “widow as the altar of God” motif might have roots there. As demonstrated in the first chapter of this dissertation, the significance of the altar evolved over time in ancient Israel, and the altar exhibited layers of meaning that were integral to the relationship between God and his people. Firstly, the altar was a place for encountering God, as a place for reconciliation between God and his people. Secondly, the altar served as a physical sign of a contract made between two parties, and as a “witness” of a covenant between God and a person or people. Thirdly, the physical sign of the altar was a place of sacrifice and offering to God. Animals were offered on the brazen altar. Prayer offered to God was symbolized by fragrant incense offered on the golden altar in front of the veil that covered the Ark of the Covenant. Fourthly, the altar area was also a location for a covenant meal, in which it was believed that God was
present, which meant that both parties to a covenant invited God, so to speak, to witness their agreement. The altar was nuanced in its functions in the relations between God and people. The purity of the altar was of utmost importance.

When the word “altar” is used in the New Testament, it usually refers to the physical altar in relationship to the Temple. For example, in Matt. 23:16-22, the altar figures in Jesus’ critique of the scribes and Pharisees:

Woe to you, blind guides....And you say, “If any one swears by the altar, it is nothing; but if any one swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.” You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? So he who swears by the altar, swears by it and by everything on it; and he who swears by the temple, swears by it and by him who dwells in it; and he who swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it.

The altar figures prominently in this passage as something that makes gifts sacred.

Thurston notes that “altar” in Matt. 23:19 includes a reference to implied activity on the part of the altar: “You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred?” Here the altar “‘purifies the offering.’” Akiva Cohen corroborates Thurston’s insight, stating:

Matthew’s hierarchical understanding of sacrality in this passage may be simply stated as follows: the gold of the temple receives its sacrality from the temple’s sacrality (vv. 16-17); gifts offered up upon the altar receive their sacrality from the altar’s sacrality (vv. 18-20); the temple’s sacrality is imparted by the One who dwells in it (v. 21); the sacrality of heaven, as God’s cosmic temple, receives its sacrality from the One who sits upon its cosmic throne (v. 22).

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152 Mieczysław Mikołajczak, “The Origin, Symbolism, and Meaning of Altar in the Biblical History of Salvation,” The Polish Journal of Biblical Research 3, no. 1 (2003): 26-27, notes that “in the history of Israel the process of centralising worship in the Jerusalem temple took a long time,” and that “only one element remained steady in the Jerusalem temple” during this process; namely, the “altar on which sacrifices were offered.”


154 Thurston, Widows, 111.

Similarly, Herbert W. Basser and Marsha B. Cohen assert that “if you assign sanctity to items not in fixed contact with the divine, like sacrifices that go on the altar, then you must assign even more sanctity to the altar (for it is God’s very table).”\textsuperscript{156} Daniel M. Gurtner likewise asserts that “Matthew presumes the presence of God in the temple, thereby making it sacred (23:21), while the temple itself makes sacred its gold (23:17).”\textsuperscript{157}

The incense altar, the place where prayers were offered up to God in the Jerusalem Temple, is cited in Luke 1:11. Zechariah is going to burn incense, and an angel appears to him on the right side of the incense altar.\textsuperscript{158} According to these passages, the Jewish understanding of altar as a place upon which to put gifts and to burn incense was still in use in the New Testament era. The altar “was a direct conduit of sacrifices to the heavenly realm.”\textsuperscript{159} However, after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in A.D. 70, Jews started to “view charitable deeds as a replacement for the sacrifices they had once offered in the temple.”\textsuperscript{160} G. Anderson cites the tractate \textit{Peah} of

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\item \textsuperscript{156} Herbert W. Basser and Marsha B. Cohen, \textit{The Gospel of Matthew and Judaic Traditions} (Boston: Brill, 2015), 587.
\item \textsuperscript{157} Daniel M. Gurtner, \textit{The Torn Veil: Matthew’s Exposition of the Death of Jesus} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 99.
\item \textsuperscript{158} The only reference to a Christian altar in the New Testament is found in Heb. 13:10, “We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat”; the meaning of “altar” here is indeterminate; theories suggest that the altar refers to the cross of Christ, to the communion table, or to something else altogether. See Haak, “Altar,” 166. Mikolajczak, “Origin,” 34, asserts that the altar in Heb. 13:10 “signifies an offering” which is “the sacrifice of Christ.”
\item \textsuperscript{159} G. Anderson, \textit{Sin}, 140.
\item \textsuperscript{160} Ibid., 151. G. Anderson asserts that “the biblical triad of sacrifice, prayer, and fasting was gradually replaced in the Second Temple period by alms, prayer, and fasting.” See G. Anderson, \textit{Charity: The Place of the Poor in Biblical Tradition} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 147. G. Anderson cites Jer, 14:11-12 and Judg. 20:26-28 as examples of the biblical triad of sacrifice, prayer, and fasting; he cites Tob. 12:8-9 as an example of the triad of alms, prayer, and fasting. He also notes that Sir. 35:2 states that “he who gives alms sacrifices a thank offering.” Peter Richardson also asserts that “in post-destruction Judaism almsgiving became a substitute for the sacrifices of the Temple destroyed in 70 CE, so that redemption could continue to be offered.” See P. Richardson, “Temples, Altars, and Living from the Gospel (1 Cor 9:12b-18)” in \textit{Gospel in Paul: Studies on Corinthians, Galatians, and Romans for Richard N. Longenecker}, eds. L. Ann Jervis and Peter Richardson (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 110
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the Mishnah to support this claim: “These are matters that have no specified amount: peah, first fruits, the festival offering, charitable deeds, and Torah-study. Regarding the following matters, a man may enjoy their fruit in this world and his principal will remain for him in the next: honoring father and mother, charitable deeds, establishing peace between a man and his friend, [but] Torah study is equal to all of them.”

G. Anderson states that the Tosephta goes even further in its emphasis on almsgiving, noting that the Tosephta states that “the giving of alms and works of charity are equal in value to all of the commandments in the Torah’ (4.19).”

Passages in Revelation highlight the importance of the altar during the second half of the first century A.D. Most scholarship dates Revelation c. 95-96 A.D. at the end of Domitian’s reign, with a few scholars holding out for an earlier date under Nero, c. 54-68 A.D. The book of Revelation demonstrates that by the latter part of the first century A.D., Temple imagery, including that of the altar, was in use by Christians and that the notion of mingling of prayers and incense carried over from Judaism into early Christianity. Rev. 8:3-4 states that “another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer; and he was given much incense to mingle with the prayers of all the saints

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fn. 87. See also Roman Garrison, Redemptive Almsgiving in Early Christianity (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 56-59, on the motif of almsgiving becoming a substitute for temple sacrifices after the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70.

161 G. Anderson, Charity, 155, 210 fn. 13. Peah is a tractate of the Mishna that includes “a discussion of the various biblical laws that have to do with donations to the poor. It is titled Peah because one way of making a donation to the poor in biblical times was to leave a corner—that is, a peah—unharvested: ‘When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges [peah] of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest’ (Lev 19:9).” See G. Anderson, Charity, 155. Widows were allowed to glean from the fields (for examples of gleaning by widows, orphans, and sojourners, see Deut. 24:19-21; and Ruth 2:2).


upon the golden altar before the throne; and the smoke of the incense rose with the
prayers of the saints from the hand of the angel before God.” Wilfrid J. Harrington, O.P.,
notes that “while Revelation never directly refers to the worship of the earthly Church,
Christians would surely recognize their prayers in this incense rising before the heavenly
throne. The martyrs had prayed: ‘How long must it be before you vindicate us?’ (6:10);
now their prayer, which had gone up to God (8:4), returns to the earth, causing things to
happen on earth.” W. Harrington connects the language of this passage to Luke 18:1-8, the parable of the widow and the judge, in which Jesus asks, “And will not God
vindicate his elect, who cry to him day and night?” Jesus answers his own question with
“I tell you, he will vindicate them speedily” (18:7-8).165

A golden altar is mentioned in Rev. 9:13: “then the sixth angel blew his trumpet,
and I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar before God.” It was “probably
for incense” and was located in “the heavenly temple.” W. Harrington asserts that the
‘voice’ is the voice of the prayers of the saints.” Rev. 16:7 states that the altar itself
cried out: “And I heard the altar cry, “Yea, Lord God the Almighty, true and just are thy
judgments!” This is an example of an altar doing something that only a rational being
would do, crying out. Even if it is only a metaphor, it is the only example of an altar
crying out in Scripture. Harrington asserts that the cry coming from the altar is that of

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165 Ibid., Revelation, 104.
166 Haak, “Altar,” 166.
168 I am indebted to Dr. Joshua Burns for confirming this point. Dr. Burns also pointed me to the Songs of Sabbath Sacrifice, a liturgical cycle found in the Dead Sea Scrolls, as an example of (otherwise inanimate) temple furnishings coming to life to praise God. Although the altar is not mentioned
Craig Koester also concludes that the cry coming from the altar is probably the voice of the martyrs, whose prayers for justice have been answered by God. This conclusion is notable because the “widow as the altar of God” motif in the patristic era contains the prescription for the widow to pray, which I will examine in the next chapter.

The understanding of temple itself evolves in the New Testament. In 1 Cor. 3:16-17 Paul refers to the Church as a temple: “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him. For God’s temple is holy, and that temple you are.” Paul refers to the Church as a temple again in 1 Cor. 6:19-20, when he asks, “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.” In 2 Cor. 6:16, Paul again talks about the group of Christians as the temple of God: “What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, I will live in them and move among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”

Paul also makes a parallel between priestly service at the altar and evangelizing in 1 Cor. 9:13-14: “Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get

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specifically as coming to life to praise God in the Songs of Sabbath Sacrifice, other temple objects are. See Florentino Garcia Martinez and Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar, eds., The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 824-837. See also Dale C. Allison, Jr., “4 Q 403, Fragm. 1, Col. I, 38-46 and the Revelation to John,” Revue de Qumrân 12, no. 3 (December 1986): 410-11. I am also indebted to Dr. Andrei Orlov for his insight that in Hekhalot literature, there is a common motif of the Throne of God praising God; moreover, the Throne of God is the altar. On this motif, see Orlov, Heavenly Priesthood in the Apocalypse of Abraham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 57. Angels are the altar in the Apocalypse of Abraham 12:8-13:1; Orlov, Heavenly Priesthood, 69. The idea of heavenly temple furnishings acting as rational beings would have been well known in the Jewish and early Christian imagination at the time of the New Testament. Allison, “4 Q 403 and Revelation,” 411, asserts that Revelation “seems to take for granted the animate nature of the heavenly altar and pillars.”

169 W. Harrington, Revelation, 164.
170 C. Koester, Revelation, 648.
their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings? In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.” Montague asserts that those who proclaimed the gospel should have been able to depend upon “the hospitality of the hearers for food and lodging.”

Peter Richardson notes that “Paul believes that the community is a metaphorical temple, and that the temple must be characterized by holiness and purity similar to that in the Temple in Jerusalem with its notions of priestly support.”

The widow shared several functions with that of the altar in the New Testament, which may be in the background of the widow being called an altar of God in patristic texts, which I will look at in the next chapter. 1 Tim. 5:8 states that: “If any one does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his own family, he has disowned the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.” R. Collins states that in this passage, Paul “has clearly expressed that the faith, fully understood and accepted, bears with it moral responsibilities, in this instance, moral responsibilities toward the disadvantaged members of the community.” Montague asserts that in this passage, “the believer is not simply one who recites a creed but one who has made a baptismal commitment to the whole of Christian life, an oath of fidelity, as it were, a vow to live the life of love. To refuse such an elemental duty of love as to care for one’s own would add a guilt to which the pagan, who never made such a pledge, would be immune.”

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Conzelmann state that the failure to care for one’s own family in this passage that is likened to denying the faith “means not apostasy, but practical disavowal. The unity of belief and action are presupposed.”\textsuperscript{175} Benjamin Fiore and Daniel Harrington assert that “the seriousness of denying the faith has a negative impact on salvation (2 Tim. 2:12-13),” and “the apostates show the emptiness of their faith claims by their deeds (Titus 1:16, and see 2 Tim. 3:13).”\textsuperscript{176} In summary, a Christian is breaking his baptismal commitment to God if he does not care for his family, including the widow (see 1 Tim. 5:8). It is worse to go back on God’s law than it is to never to have known it in the first place (see 2 Peter 2:21). The widow resembled one function of the altar, in that she stood as a kind of “witness” between God and a Christian. The Christian who cared for the widow was in good standing with God, whereas the Christian who neglected his duty towards the widow violated his baptismal pledge. This pledge can be seen as comparable to a covenant with God.

Those who serve at the altar were fed from the gifts placed on the altar by the people they served; the altar “received” offerings, including food offerings, that were meant for God, and the altar had to be pure. Similarly, according to patristic texts to be explored in the next chapter, widows received food offered to God on the occasion of the Eucharist and are referred to as the altar of God in early Christian literature. Moreover, the widow had to be continent (1 Tim. 5:5, 9, 11), which was linked to the notion of purity; in this way the widow resembled the function of the altar, in that both the widow

\textsuperscript{175} Dibelius and Conzelmann,\textit{ The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary} (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 74, state “This presupposition illuminates the style of the heresy polemic: dogmatic and moral reproaches are combined.” George Knight,\textit{ The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text} (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1992), 220-21, thinks that the denial of the faith amounts to “apostasy from the Christian faith.”

and the altar received offerings meant for God, and both the widow and the altar were expected to be kept pure.

These passages compare the Temple and the altar to things that are not the Temple or the altar respectively, and we see the use of the Temple imagery to represent the Christian community and evangelization. The Temple was identified with people; the idea of identifying people with the central part of the Temple, the altar, was not that far off, as we shall see in the next chapter of this dissertation.

There is also a parallel made between the table of the Lord and the table of demons in 1 Cor. 10:20-21: “No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be partners with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons.” According to R. Collins, in 1 Cor. 10:20 “Christians, who are called to fellowship (koinōnia) with the Lord Jesus Christ (1:9), should not be associated with demons. Eating food offered to idols makes them partners with demons,” and 1 Cor. 10:21 “expresses a radical incompatibility between fellowship with the Lord and fellowship with demons.” Thus, the sacrifice that is placed on the table must be pure and not tainted with demonic associations. Furthermore, Paul emphasizes here the notion of purity on the part of the person partaking of the Eucharist from the table of the Lord. Paul utilizes strong language for in 1 Cor. 11:27 for those who receive the Eucharist unworthily: “Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord.”

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177 R. Collins, *First Corinthians*, 381.
178 Ibid., 438. Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, 202. The importance of purity of heart was seen earlier in Matt. 5:8: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God”; moreover, “the prophets and sages of Israel reminded their people that ritual purity is really about intention and disposition, and thus inseparable
point is emphasized that Christians cannot eat food from false altars nor receive the Eucharist unworthily, and the Eucharist is celebrated on an altar.

1 Pet. 2:4-5 states: “Come to him, to that living stone, rejected by men but in God’s sight chosen and precious; and like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” The Temple is no longer a material edifice, but rather “a living community or ‘household.’” In the New Testament, the understanding of temple evolves to understand Christ himself as the cornerstone of the Temple, and Christians as living stones of the Temple (see also Eph. 2:21-22). It would not be a stretch to conclude that if the Temple is no longer exclusively a material edifice, then perhaps Temple furnishings like altars could also be other than physical objects in material edifices.

CONCLUSIONS

The status of the widow develops from that of someone whom God protects and commands others to protect because of her vulnerability into that of someone who still needs that protection, but who is now allowed to enroll in an order of widows that is an honored group. Scripture first attests an order of widows in 1 Tim. 5:3-16. Three kinds of widows are discussed in this passage: widows who should be taken care of by their families, younger widows who should not be enrolled in the order, and “real” widows from moral purity.” See Columba Stewart, O.S.B. in Purity of Heart in Early Ascetic and Monastic Literature: Essays in Honor of Juana Raasch, O.S.B. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 5-6. I explore the motif of purity, and how it relates to the widow as an “altar of God,” in the next chapter of this dissertation.

181 See fn. 168 of this chapter (three) for support for this conclusion.
who must have been truly alone in the world and who must have exhibited good character to qualify for enrollment into the order of widows. The enrolled widow in 1 Timothy 5 has to have prayed constantly (1 Tim. 5:5), and she is enrolled according to requirements that resemble those for the early Church offices of bishops and deacons. The widow was still considered vulnerable and prone to poverty even as her status improved in the New Testament. The altar was cited throughout the New Testament and was a familiar object of importance to early Christians. The altar was seen as a place upon which people placed offerings to God, including incense representing prayers. However, as the Temple motif evolved from referring to a material edifice in the New Testament into a way of speaking of the Christian community, there is a hint that the idea of altar evolved, too, evidenced by the altar that cries out to God in Revelation 16:7—the only time in the Bible that an altar displays the anthropomorphic quality of crying out. In the next chapter of this dissertation we will see how the status of the widow continues to evolve as Polycarp, Tertullian, and the Didascalia apostolorum refer to the widow as an altar of God.

INTRODUCTION

In the Old Testament and other Ancient Near Eastern literature, the widow was portrayed as in a very vulnerable position within her family and in society, and biblical prescriptions to care for the widow were necessary for her survival. Moreover, the widow by and large was not considered an authoritative person. The notable exception to the vulnerable, unauthoritative widow in the Old Testament was Judith, a wealthy widow of great authority within the Israelite community.

In the New Testament, the widow is still vulnerable and in need of the care and protection of the newly forming Church. But the widow in the New Testament is not just one to be taken care of. Her status improves from the one widows had in the Old Testament. In addition to still needing care and protection, widows (from both the Old and New Testament eras) are seen in the New Testament as models of almsgiving and piety, as seen in the cases of the generous, unnamed widows in Luke (Luke 4:25-26, the widow at Zarephath; Luke 21:1-4, the widow’s mite) and in the example of Anna the prophetess, who was a widow (Luke 2:36-38). The Anna narrative highlights the ascetic practices of constant prayer and fasting. The stories of Anna and of Tabitha and the widows associated with her (Acts 9:36-43) highlight the relationship between widowhood and prayer, and between widowhood and charitable acts, respectively. In 1 Tim. 5:3-16, we see the first mention of an order of widows. Prayer, charitable works, and having been the wife of one husband are prerequisites in that passage for enrolling in the order of honored widows.
The widow was still considered vulnerable and prone to poverty, however, even as her status improved in the New Testament. With the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70, almsgiving became a replacement for sacrifices offered in the Temple. In the New Testament era, almsgiving was an important feature of worship for both Jews and Christians. Widows and orphans were the foremost recipients of alms in Jewish and Christian antiquity. In the New Testament era, the widow had functions like that of the altar, in that both the widow and the altar received sacrificial offerings dedicated to God, both the widow and the altar were expected to be kept pure, and both the widow and the altar functioned as a kind of “witness” between God and his people. In the post-New Testament Church, the widow was still in an equivocal position, in which she was still vulnerable even as her status improved. Chapter four traces the development of the status of widows in the early Church. The first section examines second century patristic literature, looking at Ignatius of Antioch, whose Epistle to Polycarp (Ign. Polyc.) contains an exhortation to care for the widow and whose Epistle to the Smyrnaeans (Ign. Smyrn.) contains the curious phrase “virgins called widows,” and Polycarp, whose Epistle to the Philippians (Polyc. Phil.) refers to widows as an “altar of God.” The second section treats widows in Tertullian’s Ad uxorem (Ad. ux.), De Monogamia (De mon.), De exhortatione castitatis (De exh. cast.), and De virginibus velandis (De virg. vel). The third section treats widows in the Didascalia apostolorum (DA), and the fourth section treats widows in Methodius of Olympus’s Symposium and the Apostolic Constitutions (AC).
IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH’S EPISTLE TO POLYCARP AND EPISTLE TO THE SMYRNAEANS

In his *Epistle to Polycarp* 4.1, Ignatius of Antioch exhorts the bishop, “Let the widows be not neglected; after the Lord, you shall be their guardian. Let nothing take place without your approval; nor do you anything without God, which indeed you do not; stand firm.” This exhortation alerts the reader to the still vulnerable position in which widows found themselves, regardless of how much their status had improved in the early Church.

Ignatius also alerts the church at Smyrna that those who have erroneous beliefs about Jesus Christ can be identified by these criteria:

For love they have no concern, none for the widow, none for the orphan, none for the distressed, none for the imprisoned or released, none for one hungry or thirsty; they remain aloof from eucharist or prayers because they do not confess that the

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3 On the necessity of the early Church to care for the widows in light of legislation regarding male guardianship of women in the early Roman Empire, see Esther Yue L. Ng, “Mirror Reading and Guardians of Women in the Early Roman Empire,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 59, no. 2 (2008): 679-95.
eucharist is the flesh of our savior Jesus Christ which suffered for our sins, which the Father raised for our goodness. They, then, who speak against the gift of God die in their disputing; it would profit them to love that they may also rise.\(^4\)

Thus, those who do not care for the widow also do not accept the teaching of Jesus regarding the Eucharist. Schoedel asserts that “the ancient love-feast (which must have often included the Eucharist) served as an important agency for taking care of the needs of the poor including especially widows and orphans”; thus, to “remain aloof from eucharist” enabled one to avoid caring for the widow and the orphan.\(^5\) Ignatius thus asserts that one must confess that the Eucharist is the flesh of Jesus Christ, must not be aloof from prayer, and must “love” (that is, care for the widow, the orphan, etc.) in order to have the right beliefs about Jesus and in order to rise. Ignatius’ prescriptions for a true Christianity that assists the needy echoes James 1:27, which states that “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.” R. Garrison notes that Polycarp, with whom Ignatius corresponded, “endorses the doctrine of redemptive almsgiving,” citing Polycarp’s *Epistle to the Philippians* 10.1-2 to support his point.\(^6\) Isaiah also emphasizes that true worship of God is accompanied by acts of mercy towards those in need, including the widow, and that one’s sins become “white as snow” and “like wool” when one obeys his commands (Isa. 1:13, 17-19).

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\(^6\) Garrison, *Redemptive Almsgiving*, 118. Polycarp writes in his *Epistle to the Philippians* 10.2, “When you are able to do good, refuse to delay, because almsgiving frees from death. Let all of you be mutually subject to one another, having your conduct irreproachable among the Gentiles, in order that you may receive praise for your good works and the Lord may not be blasphemed in you.” In *Polycarp’s Epistle to the Philippians and the Martyrdom of Polycarp: Introduction, Text, and Commentary*, ed. Paul Hartog (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 91.
There is, however, an innovation regarding widows put forth in Ignatius’s *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans* 13.1. Ignatius here includes the following in the closing of this letter:

“I greet the households of my brothers with their wives and children, and the virgins called widows. Farewell, I say in the power of the Father.”7 William Schoedel points out that there are two groups of people addressed in this part of Ignatius’s closing and farewell: families and “virgins called widows.”8 Thomas Robinson states that the novel note is introduced here with the phrase “virgins called widows,” observing that the phrase “seems unnecessary if the inclusion of virgins in the group of widows had been a longstanding practice.”9 Thus, the implication in Ign. *Smyrn.* 13.1 is that the inclusion is a recent practice in the churches with which Ignatius was familiar. While Ignatius might have simply been discovering for himself long-standing practices in Smyrnaean churches of virgins being called widows, there is no earlier primary text to my knowledge that mentions virgins who are called widows.10

The phrase “virgins called widows” has produced diverse speculation as to its meaning. Thurston thinks that Ignatius is most likely greeting young widows who are not yet enrolled, reasoning that young widows “are virgins in the sense of being chaste but also in the sense of being marriageable young widows.”11 However, Thurston’s conclusion is not supportable by the text. Ignatius uses παρθένους when speaking of virgins in Ign. *Smyrn.* 13.1, χήρας for widows, and ἐν ἀγνείᾳ μένειν to exhort people to remain continent in Ign. *Polyc.* 5.2. Nowhere does Ignatius suggest that young widows

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8 Schoedel, *Ignatius*, 252.
are also virgins (which would be an unlikely scenario, unless the young widows’ husbands had died before their wedding nights). In the case of his exhortation ἐν ἁγνείᾳ μένειν in Ign. Polyc. 5.2, Ignatius could be telling virgins to continue in celibacy, he could be encouraging widows or widowers to persevere in continence and not remarry, or he could be encouraging both virgins, widows, and widowers to persevere in celibacy.

One of the most prevalent theories in older scholarship was that the phrase “virgins called widows” referred to widows who were regarded as virgins. Schoedel dismisses the conclusion that the widows were regarded as virgins because “the order in which the terms occur and because the expression τὰς λεγομένας ("called") indicates that the term widow is used of the virgins in an unusual or improper sense.” Schoedel concludes that the order of widows “was opened up also to virgins (especially older women) who had no other means of support.” Schoedel also asserts that the Church in Smyrna exhibited “a special enthusiasm for virginity,” supporting his assertion by citing Ign. Polyc. 5.1-2, which states: “Tell my sisters to love the Lord and to be satisfied with their mates in flesh and spirit. Likewise command also my brothers in the name of Jesus Christ to love their mates as the Lord loves the church. If anyone is able to remain continent to the honor of the Lord’s flesh, let him remain (so) without boasting; if he boasts, he is lost; and if it is known beyond the bishop, he is destroyed.” Schoedel explains that “pagans converted in Paul’s time wondered whether they could still enjoy

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12 Schoedel, Ignatius, 252.
13 Ibid. 
15 Schoedel, Ignatius, 252.
16 Trans. Schoedel, 272.
their marriages ‘because they had believed in the holy flesh of Christ.’”

Schoedel maintains that factors such as “the idea that physical union adulterates the purity of the relation with Christ (cf. 1 Cor 6:12-20) or that the virgin is wedded to Christ (cf. Tertullian Virg. Vel. 16.4)” may have been in the background of Ignatius’s exhortation in Ign. Polyc. 5.2. Schoedel states that “the theological reason for celibacy in Smyrna was given in terms of showing honor to ‘the flesh of the Lord.’ The expression may refer to the imitation of the Lord’s own celibacy.”

Gryson suggests that the “virgins called widows” were “Christian virgins who resolved to remain chaste ‘for the honor of the Lord’s flesh’” and were subsequently called “widows.”

Gryson notes that both virgins and widows would be living in continence; it would then have made sense for the virgins who had no one to care for them to identify with the widows and to be assisted by the community. These virgins who had no one to care for them might have outlived their fathers, brothers, or other guardians, or these virgins might have been converts to Christianity whose families had disowned them upon their conversion. If the virgins did identify with the widows, “continence most probably went hand in hand with asceticism, prayer, and acts of charity” that were associated with widows in 1 Timothy 5. Gryson does not see in Ignatius’s writings textual evidence for his claim, qualifying his theory with “probably.” Gryson bases his conclusion regarding continence for virgins on Ign. Polyc. 5.1-2 and on the widows’ pledge in 1 Tim. 5:12 that younger widows violate. Gryson assumes that

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virgins made professions of continence as enrolled widows did. The problem with that assumption, however, is that there is no mention of virgins who explicitly profess continence in 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, or in Ignatius’s epistles. The closest thing to promoting continence in Ignatius’s epistles is found in Ign. Polyc. 5.2, which exhorts those who can to remain continent. Thus, it is safer to say that according to Ign. Smyrn. virgins and widows shared a similar lifestyle since both groups remained continent within their respective states of life. The continent lifestyle of widows and virgins (two unmarried groups of people) would be in keeping with Paul’s exhortation to all Christians to live without change in their respective states in chastity. In the cases of the virgins and widows, they would be celibate, as only married Christians would not be bound to permanent celibacy. Virgins may have made pledges to celibacy during Ignatius’s time, but Ignatius’s epistles do not provide firm textual evidence for that claim.

Christine Trevett contends that “‘virgins who are called widows’ existed already as a group” in Smyrna, according to Ignatius’s valediction to the “virgins called widows” in Ign. Smyrn. 13.1. Trevett thinks that this group of virgins and widows demonstrated a Christian lifestyle alternative to “conventional marriage or to concubinage.” Margaret MacDonald affirms that the phrase “‘virgins called widows’….probably points to the admission of virgins to the group or ‘order’ of widows (cf. 1 Tim. 5.3-16) which we know existed at the time” and which “probably had no means of support apart from the Church.”

22 Trevett, Christian Women, 184-85. Trevett asserts on p. 149 that “celibacy was not just counter-cultural…it signalled an autonomy and a control over one’s body which could not be part of slavery.”
23 M. MacDonald, Early Christian Women, 225. On pp. 220-24, M. MacDonald discusses more thoroughly the plight of a prostitute in the early Christian era, and how a Christian woman may have come to be a concubine; for example, a Christian slave or concubine might have a pagan master, a destitute widow might sell herself or her daughter into concubinage, etc.
becoming a concubine or entering into prostitution. The possibility of being supported by
the Church without having to sell herself to survive would have been a very attractive
option for a woman who did not want to become a concubine or a prostitute. Margaret
MacDonald does not address the question as to whether the order of widows existed per
se in Smyrna during Ignatius’s time, but that widows in need of care existed in Smyrna at
the time is evident by prescriptions to care for the widow in Ign. Polyc. 4.1. Ben
Witherington III suggests that “χήρας is a terminus technicus for all [currently] unmarried
women dedicated to chastity and the Lord’s work, including those who have never been
married.”24 Witherington states that if the phrase had been reversed, that is, if the phrase
had said “widows called virgins,” then “we might deduce that he [Ignatius] was referring
to real widows who had committed themselves to a life of chastity and church service
henceforth.”25 As no known orders of virgins existed in the Church during Ignatius of
Antioch’s time, it would make sense for virgins who wanted to remain unmarried to align
themselves with the people who were most closely living the lives they themselves were
leading, or were hoping to lead. Thus, such virgins could be grouped with widows who
were living in continence and who were supported by the Church (1 Tim. 5:3, 5, 9, 16;
Ign. Polyc. 4.1; Ign. Smyrn. 6.2).

24 Ben Witherington III, Women in the Earliest Churches (Cambridge: Cambridge University
Press, 1988), 201. See also Stählin, “χήρας,” 452. Stählin translates χήρα to mean a “woman left without
husband,” and concludes that χήρα can mean both a “widow” and a “woman living without a husband” in
common Greek usage. However, Stählin bases his argument in this article on etymology only and does not
cite any ancient texts that support the idea of a widow being simply a woman without a husband. For the
purposes of this dissertation, then, χήρα will be used to mean a widow, unless otherwise noted. In early
Christianity, moreover, the terms “widow” and “virgin” are different words. Stevan Davies, The Revolt of
the Widows (London: Feffer and Simons, 1980), 72, notes that “twice in the Acts of Peter (A. Pt. 7:21-22,
8:29) the words ‘widow’ and ‘virgin’ are used to designate the same women.” However, the Acts of Peter
are dated after Ignatius’s and Polycarp’s epistles.
One reason why virgins would align themselves with widows can be seen in Deborah F. Sawyer’s assertion that the order of widows was a means by which women could “opt out of the domestic sphere and enter the public world; they could exist apart from their fathers, husbands, or children.” Dennis R. MacDonald and Margaret MacDonald suggest that women were attracted to early Christianity in part because of “the freedoms offered in celibacy.” D. MacDonald suggests that the freedom offered to women in celibacy was a “rebellion…against male domination.” Margaret MacDonald, on the other hand, has a more positive view of the freedom offered to women who chose celibacy, asserting that “the goal of acquiring personal or individual benefits through one’s course of actions may be far more important to the modern personality than it was to women who entered the early church,” citing a woman’s “devotion to God” as a reason for rejecting marriage in favor of voluntary celibacy in early Christianity. She also argues that the “early Christian widows who have been described as a counter-cultural force in a patriarchal society…engaged in a manner of living which was still fundamentally connected to the lives of women outside the church,” which could include ministering to women who were married to unbelievers.

The fact that virgins are associated with widows to the extent that they are called widows allows the reader of Ignatius’s works to deduce that the status of widows continued to be positive during Ignatius’s time, for continence was held in high esteem in the New Testament (1 Cor. 7:5-9, 25-40) and in the churches Ignatius knew. In Ign.

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In early Church literature, we see the first instance of a group of virgins identified as widows, suggesting that a new way of life opened up for Christian virgins who did not desire marriage, for whom marriage was not a possibility, or for whom the protection of a family was not feasible. For a woman who had no parents and family, or was considered too old to be marriageable, to live as a widow and be supported by the Church would have been a viable option. Such women otherwise might have turned to slavery, concubinage, or prostitution for survival. The innovation of the phrase “virgins called widows” points to a new lifestyle that was opening up for women in Ignatius’s time, at least in the church at Smyrna. The fact that they are saluted separately from other households suggests that they were a distinct group, whether they were each living under the protection of a family or whether they were living in a communal situation with other virgins and widows.

**POLYCARP’S EPISTLE TO THE PHILIPPIANS**

Polycarp wrote to the Philippians concerning widows, insisting:

> The widows [are to be] serious about the faith of the Lord, unceasingly interceding on behalf of all, [to be] far from all slander, calumny, false witness, avarice, and all evil, knowing that they are an altar of God, and that he examines all things. And nothing escapes him, neither thoughts, nor intentions, nor any secrets of the heart.

Two significant developments in Polyc. Phil. 4.3 regarding widows’ duties and their status have not come to expression in Scripture or early Church literature up to this point.

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30 Tertullian has sharp words to say about a young virgin who is enrolled in the order of widows (*De virg. vel. 9.2-9.3*). I will explore Tertullian’s work on widows later in this chapter.

31 Polycarp, *To the Philippians* 4:3, in *Polycarp’s Epistle to the Philippians and the Martyrdom of Polycarp: Introduction, Text, and Commentary*, ed. Paul Hartog (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 85. Polycarp of Smyrna wrote his *Epistle to the Philippians* c. A.D. 100-117. On p. 44, Hartog writes that “a date of around 100-117 is supported by the available external evidence, which consistently focuses upon a Trajanic date.” Polycarp is thought to have lived c. A.D. 69-155.
Firstly, widows are charged with the duty of “unceasingly interceding on behalf of all,” which is an explicit duty compared with the general duty of the “real widow” in 1 Tim. 5:5 to continue “in supplications and prayers night and day.” Polycarp gives a similar charge of prayer to the Philippians in 7.2 of “being vigilant in prayer and persisting in fasting, with supplications entreating the all-seeing God not to lead us into temptation,” although apparently not with the same focus on interceding unceasingly on behalf of all others that he gives to the widows in 4.3. The general reference to supplications and prayers in 1 Tim. 5:5 may very well have encompassed the duty of intercessory prayer for others, but the biblical text is not explicit on that point. Secondly, the widows are, for the first time in surviving Church literature, called an “altar of God” in Polyc. Phil. 4.3.32 As Carolyn Osiek observes, in Polyc. Phil., “several categories of people are being exhorted to their Christian duties in a traditional manner, but only widows are compared to a sacred object.”33

Before calling the widows altar of God, Polyc. Phil. 4.3 says that they are to exhibit various ethical qualities; the widows must be “serious about the faith of the Lord, unceasingly interceding on behalf of all, [to be] far from all slander, calumny, false witness, avarice, and all evil.” As we saw earlier in this dissertation, according to Scripture the purity of the altar, like the purity of the one making an offering upon it, is of utmost concern to God and his people. This concern is not surprising, if one considers the purpose of the altar as a means of communication with God. Old Testament references to the altar being purified and sanctified include Exod. 29:43-46 (God will

32 Hartog, Polycarp’s Epistle, 118, notes that Ignatius “repeatedly referred to the θυσιαστηρίον [altar] of God (Ign. Eph. 5.2; Ign. Magn. 7.2; Ign. Trall. 7.2; Ign. Rom. 2.2; Ign. Phld. 4).”
sanctify it by his glory, when his people do their part regarding sacrifice), Exod. 30:22-33 (God commands Moses to anoint and consecrate the altar) and Lev. 8:10-15 (Moses purifies the altar). When an altar is used for a wrongful purpose, God’s retribution is swift, as in the case of Jeroboam; the altar was “torn down, and the ashes poured out from the altar, according to the sign that the man of God had given by the word of the Lord” (1 Kings 13:5).

What Polycarp says about widows is related to the Old Testament prescriptions for maintaining altar holiness or purity in three ways. First, both the altar and the widow are a means to communicate with God, and so both must be pure. Second, the widows addressed in Polycarp need to be ethically and religiously pure, as the altars in the Old Testament needed to be ritually pure and religiously pure (which excludes use for a wrongful purpose, as in the case of Jeroboam). Third, the widows offer prayers unceasingly on behalf of others, and in order for those prayers to be pure, the widows must be religiously and ethically pure, because God “examines all things. And nothing escapes him, neither thoughts, nor intentions, nor any secrets of the heart” (Poly. Phil. 4.3). The prayer is an offering, and the prayer offering must be pure, for one cannot place an impure offering on the altar. 34 The prayer offerings of the widows in Polycarp

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34 See Didache 14.1-3: “Assembling on every Sunday of the Lord, break bread and give thanks, confessing your faults beforehand, so that your sacrifice may be pure. Let no one engaged in a dispute with his comrade join you until they have been reconciled, lest your sacrifice be profaned. This is [the meaning] of what was said by the Lord: ‘to offer me a pure sacrifice in every place and time, because I am a great king,’ says the Lord, ‘and my name is held in wonder among the nations’”; Didache 14.1-3 is related to John 20:1, 19, 26, and 1 Cor. 16:2 regarding the Lord’s Day; Luke 24:30, Acts 2:46, 1 Cor. 10:16, 1 Cor. 11:24 regarding the Eucharistic meal; Matt. 5:23-24 regarding reconciliation amongst each other before approaching the altar; and Mal. 1:11, 14 regarding the necessity for the sacrifice to be pure. See Kurt Niederwimmer’s The Didache: A Commentary, ed. Harold W. Attridge, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 194-98.
must be pure, as must be the offerings of incense and animals on Old Testament altars (see Exod. 30:9 regarding pure incense, Lev. 27:11 regarding pure animals).

Polycarp says that the widows are supposed to be interceding for all as God’s altar, and the altar is related to prayer in Scripture (Rev. 5.8, 8.3-4, 11.1). As noted in chapters one and two of this dissertation, both incense and holocaust offerings symbolized prayer, and both incense and holocaust offerings were offered upon altars (golden and bronze altars, respectively). However, the holocaust offerings did not burn constantly and were located further away from the Holy of Holies than were the incense offerings. The incense offering, as stated in Ps. 141:2—“Let my prayer be incense before you”—and in Rev. 5:8—“Each one of the elders held a harp and gold bowls filled with incense, which are the prayers of the holy ones”—was a steady ascension of fragrant incense that was like the steady ascension of prayer to God from his people. Helen Rhee affirms that “the symbolism of the widow as altar….underlines prayer as the special ministry of widows; prayer was a form of spiritual sacrifice (Rev. 5:8), and the widows who were to devote themselves to prayers were the altar where sacrifice was made to God.” The widows offer prayer, and that offering of prayer must also be pure, which I will examine in depth when I discuss the section in the Didascalia apostolorum that deals with the order of widows, the widow as an altar of God, and the necessity of purity in prayer. Polycarp handles the matter by asserting that the widows themselves must be pure. The text says explicitly that the widows are an “altar of God,” and as the altar must be pure so must the widows be ethically pure. Polyc. Phil. 4.3 does not use the word

35 Hartog, Polycarp’s Epistle, 118.
36 I am indebted to Rev. Joseph G. Mueller, S.J. for this idea. For examples of how holocausts symbolized prayer, see Gen. 8:9; Exod. 20:24; 1 Sam. 7:9.
37 Helen Rhee, Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 132.
“pure,” but I will address this issue by exploring a Greek verb used by Polycarp in this passage.

What is the relationship between the Greek word for “examines” and the “altar of God”? According to Gryson, “the verb mōmoskopeō, translated above by ‘examine,’ is a technical term for the examination of the victims destined to be sacrificed to make sure they are free from all impurity.”  

Kenneth Howell corroborates Gryson’s insight, noting that the word “momoskopeitai (‘inspected for defects’)” is a word “used for inspecting defects in a sacrificial offering.”

Paul Hartog confirms that “the verb μωμοσκοπέομαι is somewhat rare, but refers to the examination of a victim before sacrifice (cf. I Clem 41.2).” The fact that God examines sacrificial offerings for defects suggests that since the widows are an altar of God, it follows that God would examine for defects the sacrificial offerings associated with widow-altars as well; in the case of the widows, the offerings are prayers inspected by God, which is why Polyc. Phil. 4.3 states that God “examines all things. And nothing escapes him, neither thoughts, nor intentions, nor any secrets of the heart.” The victim associated with the widow who is an altar is the prayer that she offers. Such a victim would be unblemished if the widow herself is “serious about the faith of the Lord, unceasingly interceding on behalf of all” and is “far from all slander, calumny, false witness, avarice, and all evil” (Polyc. Phil. 4.3). The widows are to intercede on behalf of others, and both the widow and the prayer must be pure, just as the altar and the offering must be pure.

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38 Gryson, Ministry, 130 fn. 13.
40 Hartog, Polycarp’s Epistle, 118.
Hartog states that in Polyc. Phil. 4.3, “the placement of widows within the Gemeindetafeln (‘congregational duty codes’) may suggest a specific ‘order’ of widows. Church leaders were to act as guardians of widows, even as Ignatius had admonished (Ign. Smyrn. 13.1; Ign. Polyc. 4.1)."\(^{41}\) I think that Hartog’s conclusion is likely, given that an order of widows was already attested by 1 Tim. 5:3-16 and that the expectation that real widows pray unceasingly is expressed in 1 Tim. 5:5, with a more focused prescription to pray unceasingly on behalf of others in Polyc. Phil. 4.3. As Rev. Joseph G. Mueller, S.J., notes, there is “another reason to think that widows are a recognized group in the Church known to Polycarp: he says that widows, in the plural, are together one single thing, namely, an altar of God”; thus, “numerous individuals who are all one thing must be a recognizable group.”\(^{42}\) All Christians are asked to be “vigilant in prayer…with supplications entreating the all-seeing God not to lead us into temptation” (Polyc. Phil. 7.2), but the generality of this prescription highlights the particularity of the prayer prescription for the widows, who are an altar of God and who are called to pray specifically on behalf of all people.

Chapters 1-3 of this dissertation have shown that the altar and altar imagery were important elements in both the Old and New Testaments. As Margaret Barker asserts, “the world of the temple was the world of the first Christians, and they expressed their faith in terms almost exclusively from the temple.”\(^{43}\) Kenneth Berding notes that “the temple imagery of a widow as θυσιαστήριον θεοῦ (‘God’s altar’)” is reminiscent of the widow Anna in Luke 2:37, who “did not depart from the temple” and who worshipped

\(^{41}\) Ibid., 117-18.
\(^{42}\) Rev. Joseph G. Mueller, S.J., in correspondence regarding this chapter.
“with fasting and prayer night and day”; furthermore, the imagery of the widow as God’s altar is also reminiscent of 1 Tim. 5:5, whose widow “has set her hope on God and continues in prayers and supplications night and day.” Berding concedes that while it cannot be said with certainty that Polycarp is drawing directly from the scriptural sources of Luke 2:37 and 1 Timothy 5, there are common threads regarding widows and constant prayer in Luke 2:36-38, 1 Tim. 5:3-16, and Polyc. Phil. 4.3. Berding also notes that the widows in Polyc. Phil. 4.3 are “exhorted to stay far from whatever is malicious (διαβολής).” I agree with Berding’s conclusion that Polycarp’s admonitions to widows in Polyc. Phil. 4.3 are consistent with (and likely drawn from) 1 Timothy 5, because of the similarity of prescriptions and admonitions for widows in 1 Timothy 5 (see also prescriptions and admonitions for older women in Titus 2:3) and Polycarp’s epistle. The Anna tradition in Luke 2:37 may also be in the background of Polycarp’s thoughts regarding widows. In addition, because the prescriptions to pray and to refrain from malicious behavior are not innovations in themselves, and because Polycarp shows familiarity with ancient Jewish and early Christian material in other places in his writings (for example, Polyc. Phil. 6.1 and its allusions to Prov 3:4; Polyc. Phil. 7.1 and its paraphrasing of 1 John 4:2-3), it is reasonable to deduce that Polycarp is familiar with older Jewish and early Christian widow traditions when he writes his Epistle to the Philippians.

44 Kenneth Berding, Polycarp and Paul: An Analysis of Their Literary and Theological Relationship in Light of Polycarp’s Use of Biblical and Extra-Biblical Literature (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 71. As Rev. Joseph G. Mueller, S.J., notes, however, Polycarp says that widows (in the plural) are an altar; Polycarp does not say that a widow (in the singular) is an altar.
45 Berding, Polycarp and Paul, 71.
46 Ibid., 88-91.
Berding asserts that “there is no direct biblical parallel to Polycarp’s figurative use of θυσιαστήριον (‘altar’)” in Polyc. Phil. 4.3. There is no mention of the widow as an altar of God in Scripture, although Christians are said to be a Temple (for example, 1 Cor. 3:16-17, 1 Cor. 6:19-20, 2 Cor. 6:14-18, Eph. 2:19-22, 1 Pet. 2:5). Berding notes, however, that Ignatius of Antioch uses the term “altar” figuratively in several instances (Ign. Eph. 5.2; Magn. 7.2; Trall. 7.2; and Rom. 2.2), and that “Ignatius’ figurative use of the word may have influenced Polycarp to also use it figuratively.” Berding cites here their relationship as a reason for the possibility of the altar being used figuratively by both Ignatius and Polycarp. Berding also observes that “the idea of a person’s actions being a sacrifice to God” is found in Phil. 2:17 and Phil. 4:18; thus, “in light of the numerous subtle allusions to Paul’s Philippians in Polycarp’s letter, this may provide at least part of the conceptual background.” Finally, the end of Polyc. Phil. 4.3 states “he examines all things. And nothing escapes him, neither thoughts, nor intentions, nor any secrets of the heart,” which resembles loosely 1 Clem. 21.3 (“and that nothing escapes him, either of our thoughts or the plans which we make”); the “secrets of the heart” motif is found in 1 Cor. 14:25. Berding notes that “it should be remembered that the concept that God knows what is secret and hidden in people is a common idea in Jewish and Christian literature.” Polycarp’s prescriptions for, and admonitions to, widows in Polyc. Phil. 4.3 are grounded in Old and New Testament traditions regarding widows and

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47 Ibid., 71.
48 Ibid., 71-72.
49 Ibid., 72.
also present a new motif in the widow trajectory by combining widow and altar traditions into the phrase “knowing that they [the widows] are God’s altar” (Polyc. Phil. 4.3).

Hartog observes that the order of the treatment of roles in the newly forming Church in Polyc. Phil. 4.2-6.1 differs from the order of treatment in 1 Timothy and Titus. In 1 Timothy, the order of treatment of roles is as follows: bishops (1 Tim. 3:1-7), deacons (1 Tim. 3:8-12), widows (1 Tim. 5:3-16), and elders (1 Tim. 5:17-25). In Titus, the roles are treated in the following order: elders (Titus 1:5-9), older men (Titus 2:2), older women (Titus 2:3), younger women (2:4-5), younger men (Titus 2:6), and slaves (Titus 2:9-10). Polycarp, on the other hand, exhorts his audience beginning with “us” (“let us arm ourselves with weapons of righteousness and let us teach ourselves first to follow in the commandment of the Lord,” Polyc. Phil. 4.1), then proceeds to address wives (Polyc. Phil. 4.2), widows (Polyc. Phil. 4.3), deacons (Polyc. Phil. 5.2), young men (Polyc. Phil. 5.3), virgins (Polyc. Phil. 5.3), and elders (Polyc. Phil. 6.1). Hartog posits that Polycarp may have ended his list of exhortations with presbyters to serve as a bridge to bring up the problem of Valens in Polyc. Phil. 11.1; in this clause Polycarp laments the straying of Valens, “who at one time was made an elder among you” and who disregarded “the position which was given to him.”

Polycarp then admonishes the Philippians to “keep yourselves from avarice and to be pure [and] truthful. Keep yourselves from every evil” (Polyc. Phil. 11.1). Hartog notes that “unlike other Haustafeln lists, the condemnation of ‘love of money’ is found in Phil’s admonitions to three groups: widows [4.3], deacons [5.2], and elders [6.1].” Hartog asserts that the

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52 Trans. Hartog, 91.
repetition of the admonition to refrain from “love of money” highlights the importance of
the concern about avarice in the context of the Valens problem.\textsuperscript{54}

The fact that widows share with the deacons and elders the specific prescription to
refrain from the “love of money” indicates that the widows, deacons, and elders were in
positions or situations that would warrant this kind of admonition from Polycarp. The
presbyters and deacons “had well-defined economic functions within the Church,” whose
duties included distributing the Church community’s resources to the poor and needy,
including widows.\textsuperscript{55} The widows were receiving support from the Church (1 Tim. 5:3-16; Ign. Polyc. 4.1), which would warrant a warning against the love of money, even
though Polyc. Phil. does not explicitly state that widows specifically were succumbing to
avarice. However, since there is a general warning to all Christians regarding avarice
(Christians should abstain from avarice, 2.2; and “Avarice is the beginning of all
difficulties,” 4.1), and if Valens had succumbed to avarice, it follows that widows would
be included in the general warning regarding avarice and could succumb to avarice, too.
H. Maier asserts that “the paraenesis concerning avarice and righteousness” is “part of a
larger concern to preserve community purity now dangerously defiled by Valens’
greed.”\textsuperscript{56} Polycarp warns that “if anyone has not kept himself free from avarice, he will

\textsuperscript{54} Polycarp implies that Valens succumbed in some way to avarice. How Valens succumbed to
avarice is not explained by the text, but citing Hans Lohmann and Peter Oakes, respectively, in \textit{Polycarp’s Epistle}, 141. Hartog suggests that Valens could have stolen from the “congregational common fund” or
“compromised his Christianity to escape economic suffering.” See H. Lohmann, \textit{Drohung und Verheißung: Exegetische Untersuchungen zur Eschatologie bei den apostolischen Vätern} (Berlin: De
Gyter, 1989), 191; P. Oakes, “Leadership and Suffering in the Letters of Polycarp and Paul to the
Philippians” in \textit{Trajectories through the New Testament and the Apostolic Fathers}, eds. Andrew F. Gregory
and Christopher M. Tuckett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 369. For more on the problem
of Valens in Polyc. \textit{Phil.} 11.1, see Harry O. Maier, “Purity and Danger in Polycarp’s Epistle to the
229-47.

\textsuperscript{55} Alistair Stewart, \textit{The Original Bishops: Office and Order in the First Christian Communities}

\textsuperscript{56} H. Maier, “Purity and Danger,” 232.
be defiled by idolatry and will be judged as though among the Gentiles, who are ignorant of the judgement of the Lord. Or are we unaware that the saints will judge the world, as Paul teaches?” (Polyc. Phil 11.2). Hartog asserts that Polycarp “used the [Valens] incident to promote ‘purity’” in terms of “ethical or cultic purity” in addition to sexual purity. To support this view Hartog cites Kleist, who concludes that “avarice was, in effect, a sort of religious impurity” in Polyc. Phil. 11.1. The widow who was guilty of avarice would be “defiled” as an idolater, and as an altar of God, a defiled widow is not fit for offerings to the Lord. It is impossible to serve both God and money (see Luke 16:13; Matt. 6:24).

The church at Philippi is asked to be “submissive to the elders and deacons as to God and to Christ” (Polyc. Phil. 5.3). The widows are not included with deacons and elders here, which means that Christians are not subject to widows in the way they are asked to submit to elders and deacons, although widows are included with deacons and elders in the admonition not to succumb to love of money. However, the widows are referred to as the altar of God, something not accorded to any of the other roles listed in Polyc. Phil. To be an altar of God means that the widows receive offerings from the Church for their support, just as the altar receives offerings; as Rhee observes, “since the gifts offered for their support were regarded as a sacrifice, giving to widows was like

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57 Trans. Hartog, 142, citing Eph. 5:5 and Col. 3:5 regarding the connection between avarice and idolatry, and citing 1 Cor. 6:2 for the background of the saints judging the world. Berding, Polycarp and Paul, 109-10, also sees the connection between avarice and idolatry expressed in Matt 6:24 and Luke 16:13-14, as well as echoes of Jer. 5:4-5 in Polycarp Phil 11.2.
59 Hartog, Polycarp’s Epistle, 91.
60 Rhee, Loving the Poor, 168.
Isaiah (Old Testament), James (New Testament), and Ignatius (early Church) have in common the idea that true worship of God involves caring for the poor, including the widow. Furthermore, the widows are a means for communication with God (the widows offer prayers to God on behalf of others), as the altar is also a place for communication with God where prayers are offered. As an altar of God, the widow must also keep herself holy and ethically pure, as the altar itself must be kept pure. She must also make sure that her prayers are pure since they too are offered to God on the altar that she is.

The “virgins called widows” in Ign. Smyrn. 13.1 may have emulated the widows’ prayer for others that is cited in Polyc. Phil. 4.3. However, it is widows and not virgins who are likened to an altar of God by this latter epistle. On the other hand, if virgins are called widows at a later point in time, the association of virgins with widows might have led the virgins also to be likened to an altar at that later point in time as well. I shall investigate that question later in this chapter. A source of shame in the Old Testament era, widowhood assumed a new dignity and esteem in the New Testament and early Christian eras. Susanna Elm asserts that the term widow (χήρα) had a technical meaning by the turn of the first century A.D. and that a widow was more than a woman who had lost her husband; “it designated one having a specific role within the community: a woman who, as an ‘altar of God,’ led an exemplary life of continence, and whose prayers were therefore of a particular significance for the entire congregation.” In the next section I will continue to trace the development of the status of widows, by looking at

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61 Ibid., 132.
63 Ibid., 167-8.
widows in Tertullian’s *Ad uxorem*, *De monogamia*, *De exhortatione castitatis*, and *De virginibus velandis*.

**TERTULLIAN**

In this section I continue to trace the development of the status of widows in the early Church as demonstrated in Tertullian’s *Ad uxorem* (To His Wife), *De monogamia* (On Monogamy), *De exhortatione castitatis* (Exhortation to Chastity), and *De virginibus velandis* (On the Veiling of Virgins), noting the innovations that Tertullian introduces regarding widows and widow traditions.⁶⁴

*Ad uxorem and De monogamia*

In Tertullian’s letter *Ad uxorem*, he counsels his wife to “remain a widow” after he dies, because, among other reasons, people will not “be restored…to the married state” in heaven; rather, people will “be changed to the state of holy angels.”⁶⁵ Tertullian admits that while it might be early to think about his death, he reasons that since we pursue our purposes with such diligence when worldly issues are at stake, even drawing up legal instruments in our anxiety to secure each other’s interests, ought we not to be all the more solicitous in providing for the welfare of those we leave behind us when there is a question of securing their best advantage in matters concerning God and Heaven.⁶⁶

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Ad uxorem was written both for Tertullian’s wife and for Christian women generally. Tertullian advises all Christians, both men and women, not to remarry after their spouses die. Tertullian asserts that marriage is good, but he argues that abstinence is the greater good, citing the Apostle Paul (see 1 Cor. 7:9) to support his point. The unmarried woman can focus her mind completely on God, while the married woman is preoccupied about how she will please her husband. Tertullian praises the widows who choose not to remarry after their husbands die; these widows prefer chastity to the opportunities of marriage afforded them by youth and beauty. They choose to be wedded to God. They are God’s fair ones, God’s beloved. With Him they live, with Him they converse, with Him they treat on intimate terms day and night.

Prayers are the dowry they bring the Lord and for them [prayers] they [the widows] receive His favors as marriage gifts in return. Thus they have made their own a blessing for eternity, given them by the Lord; and, remaining unmarried, they are reckoned, even while still on earth, as belonging to the household of the angels.

Utilizing nuptial imagery, Tertullian compares widows who do not remarry to brides; these brides are wedded to God. Tertullian exhorts his wife to “train yourself to imitate

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67 Ibid., p. 11. See Dunn, Tertullian, 4.
68 Tertullian advises a widower to not remarry after his wife dies in De exhortatione castitatis 1, p. 42; all Christians are encouraged not to remarry after the death of a spouse (De exh. cast 13, p. 64). Tertullian advises a widower to take a widow as “a kind of spiritual wife” to help manage his “domestic duties,” with the understanding that the widower would not have marital relations with this “spiritual wife” (De exhortatione castitatis 13, p. 60). For an overview of “spiritual marriages” in the early Church see E. Clark, “John Chrysostom and the Subintroductae,” Church History 46, no. 2 (June 1977): 171-185. E. Clark asserts that the Shepherd of Hermas is the earliest allusion to such a “spiritual marriage” in the early Church; “Subintroductae,” 172. Greg Peters, “Spiritual Marriage in Early Christianity: 1 Cor 7:25-38 in Modern Exegesis and the Earliest Church,” Trinity Journal 23, no.2 (2002): 211-224, argues that Paul supports spiritual marriage (syneisaktism) in 1 Cor. 7:25-38. It is clear that Paul supports celibacy in 1 Cor. 7:25-38, but scholarship is not in consensus that he explicitly supports syneisaktism in this passage. For more on the subintroductae see P. Brown, Body, 267. LeSaint, Tertullian, 168-69 fn. 198, notes that while Tertullian saw nothing wrong with the idea of spiritual marriages, there are many objections to spiritual marriages “from the middle of the third century on, both in Church Councils and in the writings of such Fathers as Cyprian, Jerome, Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory Nazianzen, and Chrysostom.”

70 Tertullian, Ad ux. 1.4, p. 15.
the example of continence furnished by such women as these and, in your love for things of the spirit, you will bury concupiscence of the flesh. You will root out the fleeting, vagrant desires which come of beauty and youth, and make compensation for their loss with the blessing of Heaven, which last forever." The idea of a widow offering prayers to God is a common thread through Scripture and early Church literature, but an innovation is introduced by Tertullian when he compares the widow’s prayers to a marriage dowry, asserting that God gives his approval in return for the widow’s prayers. Tertullian’s idea of a widow having God as her husband is also an innovation, although Tertullian may have been influenced by Isa. 54:1, 4-6 when he introduced the motif of a widow being wedded to God.72

To the objection that a widow would remarry in order to have children, Tertullian writes that widows who are childless are free to bear whatever persecution against Christians that is coming, without the burden or worry of pregnancy and nursing infants.73 To the objection that a widow needs to remarry in order to be taken care of,
Tertullian argues that a widow should not marry for security because God knows what each person needs. The text of Ad ux. does not say how childless widows ought to support themselves, aside from trusting in God to take care of their needs.\(^7^4\) Tertullian asserts that while neither “a mass of jeweled pendants, nor a surfeit of clothing, nor mules bought from Gaul, nor porters from Germany” will “add lustre to a wedding,” a widow only needs perseverance if she is serving the Lord.\(^7^5\) By listing possessions such as jewelry, a surfeit of clothing, and luxury in the way of special mules and servants, Tertullian seems to be addressing widows who are well-off financially or who are in a position to remarry someone who is wealthy. A poor widow would not likely be in a position to look forward to receiving extra jewelry, clothing, mules, or servants. Carly Daniel-Hughes reasons that Tertullian had “well-to-do matrons in mind in much of his moralizing,” because he intimates that “these are women with a great deal of social mobility and leisure time.” Daniel-Hughes observes that Tertullian acknowledges that there are men “of lesser means than women in the community,” indicating that there were some well-to-do marriageable women in Tertullian’s locale.\(^7^6\)

David Wilhite speculates that Tertullian was concerned that “if the widows remarry, their ‘dowries’ will be paid to new husbands and not the Church.” Wilhite admits, however, that “the evidence for wealthy widows sponsoring the church is still

\(^{74}\) Tertullian, Ad ux. 1.4, p. 16.

\(^{75}\) Ibid.

\(^{76}\) Carly Daniel-Hughes, The Salvation of the Flesh in Tertullian of Carthage: Dressing for the Resurrection (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 90. Tertullian asks his audience, “Shall a Christian woman be ashamed to marry one of her own faith just because he is in moderate circumstances, when actually she would be enriched by a husband who is poor? For if the kingdom of heaven belongs to the poor, it does not belong to the rich; and thus a woman who is wealthy will be better off with a man who is not. She will receive a dowry ampler than her own from the goodness of one who is rich in God. Let her be on his level here below, since it may be that in Heaven she will not be his equal! Should she hesitate and investigate and speculate constantly whether a man will be a proper husband to receive her dowry, when God has entrusted him with His own treasures?” (Ad ux. 2.8, p. 34).
slim in Tertullian’s *Ad ux.* 1; after all, while the widows may desire wealth, there is little
evidence that they personally own wealth.”"77 Tertullian could be addressing any widow
of any economic standing that had a dowry; because no matter how small the dowry, if
the widow remarried, the dowry would belong to her new husband and not the Church.
Tertullian is also concerned about the widow who remarries a non-Christian; in this case,
the widow’s dowry could be used for the new husband’s indulgence, instead of being
used for alms for the poor.78 Furthermore, if the widow remarries a non-Christian, her
new spouse may prevent her from praying, fasting, giving alms, performing other works
of mercy and hospitality, and from attending the “Paschal solemnities” and “the Lord’s
Supper.”79 Observing Tertullian’s highlighting of the competing claims of the non-
Christian spouse and the Heavenly Spouse, Christ, on the widow, Wilhite asserts that
Tertullian thought that “they [the non-Christian spouse and Christ] are each a *patronus* at
odds with each other; they cannot be honored simultaneously.”80 A widow who marries a
non-Christian risks losing her faith.

The widows whom Tertullian addresses include younger widows of childbearing
age. Tertullian’s advice to younger widows not to remarry and to remain continent is a
departure from the prescription for young widows in 1 Tim. 5:11-15 to remarry; Paul
observed that when young women already enrolled as widows “grow wanton against
Christ they desire to marry, and so they incur condemnation for having violated their first
pledge.” Paul expresses his preference for young widows to remarry and to bear children

77 David E. Wilhite, “Tertullian on Widows: A North African Appropriation of Pauline Household
79 Tertullian, *Ad ux.* 2.4, p. 29.
in 1 Tim. 5:11-15, whereas Tertullian advises the young widows to remain single and continent.  

Why might Tertullian contradict the Pauline advice concerning young widows to remarry?  

Perhaps the widows Tertullian addresses were well-off financially, as Wilhite and Daniel-Hughes speculate. If the widows Tertullian addressed were well-off financially, they would not have needed to remarry in order to support themselves, nor would they have burdened the Church with their financial privation. Christians since the first letter to Timothy may have heeded Paul’s exhortation that they take care of the widows of their own families (1 Tim. 5:3-4, 8, 16), perhaps allowing young widows who did not want to remarry to remain so (and possibly be supported by the Church if their families could not or would not). As evidenced by 1 Corinthians 7 and Ignatius’s Epistle to Polycarp 5.1-2, celibacy in the early Church could be viewed positively, and those who could persevere in continence were at least sometimes encouraged to do so.

Tertullian’s writings witness to a continuation of the positive view of celibacy in the early Church, and it could be that there was support (both theological and financial) for those who embraced celibacy, alleviating concern that the young widow might “break her first pledge” cited in 1 Tim. 5:11-12. In De virg. vel. 9.2-9.3, Tertullian admonishes a bishop

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82 As noted in chapter three of this dissertation, Augustan marriage legislation was passed in 1 B.C. and A.D. 9. The marriage legislation passed in 1 B.C. required widows between the ages of twenty and fifty to remarry a year after their spouses’ deaths, and legislation passed in A.D. 9 required widows in that age group to remarry after two years. See McGinn, Widows, 35. The penalties against those who did not remarry and those who remained childless were not abolished until Constantine’s reign in the early-to-mid-fourth century A.D.; see Grubbs, Women and the Law, 220. Furthermore, “the penalties Augustan legislation imposed on childless widows and widowers virtually enforced remarriage, a practice frowned on in early Christianity,” according to The Oxford Handbook of Roman Law and Society, eds. Paul J. du Plessis, Clifford Ando, and Kaius Tuori (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 469.
who assists a virgin by enrolling her in the order of widows; Tertullian insists that the bishop could have found another way to help the virgin than by enrolling her in the order of widows, suggesting that support for virgins was in place during Tertullian’s time and in his locale.

To the argument that it is too hard for a widow to remain continent after her husband’s death, Tertullian responds that some Christians are even able to commit to virginity at their baptism, and that some wedded spouses do not find it too difficult to commit to continence when they are married. By contrast, remaining a widow looks easier than these options that people are already able to persevere in. Furthermore, some pagan women remain continent after the deaths of their husbands, offering their continence as a sacrifice in memory of their husbands. In addition, according to Tertullian, “the pagans use the priestly offices of virgins and widows in the service of their own Satan.”83 In this context, the continence of the virgin and the widow is the sacrifice. Some women who worship pagan gods serve them in continence, even before their husbands die; thus Satan challenges God’s servants with his own servants: “for Satan has discovered how to turn the cultivation of virtue itself to a man’s destruction, and it makes no difference to him whether he ruins souls by lust or chastity.”84 Tertullian reasons that if pagans can offer continence as a sacrifice, so can Christians. Pagan widows offer continence in memory of their deceased husbands, and Christian widows should be able to do the same, according to Tertullian. The sacrifices offered by the ancient Jews and early Christians up to Tertullian’s time were animals, vegetable food, libations, incense, prayers, meals, and alms. The sacrifice of Christ and the Eucharistic

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83 Tertullian, Ad ux. 1.6, pp. 18-19.
84 Ibid., p. 19.
sacrifice are also sacrifices that figure into Scripture and early Church literature, as well as the sacrifice of one’s own body cited in Rom. 12:1: “present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (see De ex. cast. 13).

Another argument against second marriages that Tertullian employs is that God put us into the world, and he takes us out of it, too; thus, when a spouse’s death ends a marriage, why should one try to “restore what God has put asunder”? Tertullian acknowledges that it is not sinful for a widow or a widower to remarry, but he counsels against it, supporting his position with Scripture (see 1 Cor. 7:27, 39-40). Tertullian exhorts Christians to “be grateful for the opportunity offered [them] of practicing continence” and to “embrace it immediately, once it is offered,” because what they “were unable to do in marriage [practice continence] [they] will be able to do in bereavement.” According to Tertullian, continence “is a means of attaining eternal life, a proof of the faith that is in us, a pledge of the glory of that body which will be ours when we put on the garb of immortality [cf. 1 Cor 15:53; Matthew 22:30; Luke 20:35-36], and finally, an obligation imposed on us by the will of God.”

Tertullian also argues against second marriages in De monogamia, and he lists the widow with the bishop, presbyters, and deacons: “but how will you dare request the kind of marriage which is not permitted to the ministers from whom you ask it, the bishop who is a monogamist, the presbyters and deacons who are bound by the same solemn

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85 Ibid., p. 20.
86 Ibid.
obligation, the widows whose way of life you repudiate in your person?”88 David Rankin notes that while Tertullian lists the widow along with the bishop, the presbyter, and the deacon, he does not indicate what “their specific ministry function” was.89 Very likely the widows’ duties included praying as prescribed in 1 Tim. 5:5 and Tertullian’s Ad ux. 1.3; it is not clear in Ad ux. 1.3 whether the prayers included intercessory prayers, as is prescribed in Polyc. Phil. 4.3.

Another way in which Tertullian continues the widow trajectory we have seen so far is the fact that he calls the widow an “altar of God”:

The law of the Church and the precept of the Apostle show clearly how prejudicial second marriages are to the faith and how great an obstacle to holiness. For men who have been married twice are not allowed to preside in the Church nor is it permissible that a widow be chosen unless she was the wife of but one man. The altar of God must be an altar of manifest purity and all the glory which surrounds the Church is the glory of sanctity.90

In this passage Tertullian alludes to a requirement for enrollment of widows in 1 Tim. 5:9. Tertullian interprets 1 Timothy 5 to be talking about an order of widows, in which the apostolic prescription does not allow a widow to be chosen unless she has had only one husband. In referring to the widow as an altar of God, Tertullian transmits a motif that is found in Polyc. Phil. 4.3 and which is present in the Didascalia apostolorum, which I will look at in the next section of this chapter.91 According to Ad ux. 1.7, a

88 Tertullian, De mon. 11, p. 93. See also Tertullian, Ad ux. 1.7. See Elizabeth Clark, “Status Feminae: Tertullian and the Uses of Paul” in Tertullian and Paul, 151-52.
89 David Rankin, Tertullian and the Church (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 177-78; Bremmer, “Pauper,” 41. Tertullian lists the widow with the presbyters in De pud. 13.7: “Why, do you yourself, when introducing into the church, for the purpose of melting the brotherhood by his prayers, the repentant adulterer, lead into the midst and prostrate him, all in haircloth and ashes, a compound of disgrace and horror, before the widows, before the elders, suing for the tears of all, licking the footprints of all, clasping the knees of all?” Tertullian, Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 4, eds. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (New York: Scribner’s, 1926), 86. In De pud. 13.7, widows are able to do what the adulterer did not do, namely, remain continent.
90 Tertullian, Ad ux. 1.7, p. 20. Cf. 1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6; 1 Tim. 5:9.
91 It is unclear from the grammar of the Latin text if the “altar of God” refers only to widows or to both widows and once-married ministers.
member of the order of widows must, as an altar of God, be pure in the sense of the holiness of someone remaining continent after having been married only once. In Polyc. Phil. 4.3, Polycarp insists that “the widows [are to be] serious about the faith of the Lord, unceasingly interceding on behalf of all, [to be] far from all slander, calumny, false witness, avarice, and all evil” because they are an “altar of God.” The text of Polyc. Phil. 4.3 highlights the ethical prescriptions a widow must embody to be considered a pure altar of God, but does not cite the holiness involved in refusing a second marriage. This approach does not preclude the holiness involved in refusing a second marriage, but it is not cited specifically in the text.

Tertullian employs two ideas in this text from Ad ux. 1.7 to justify the prohibition of second marriages. One is that the altar must be pure, and the second is that glory comes from sanctity. The widows must be married only once to be put forth as the altar of God. A second marriage could harm the Church because 1) a widow could not be a pure altar of God if she married again and 2) if second marriages are allowed, then it cannot be true that the Church’s glory will come from holiness. In effect, allowing them to remarry allows widows not to be holy. Second marriages would not allow the widows to be holy, according to Tertullian, while a single marriage followed by continence after the husband’s death enables a widow-altar to be pure.

Tertullian compares the virginal state and the widowed state in Ad ux. 1.8. Tertullian asserts that virgins “will look upon the face of God more closely” than widows because of the virgins’ “perfect integrity and inviolate purity,” but he maintains that the widow’s continence is more praiseworthy because “it is sensible of the right it has
sacrificed and knows what it has experienced."\textsuperscript{92} The widow’s continence is the harder path than that of the virgin’s because the widow has to cultivate continence after not having lived it, while the virgin does not know what she has sacrificed because she always “possessed the good” of continence.\textsuperscript{93} Tertullian exhorts widows to “cultivate the virtue of self-restraint, which ministers to chastity; cultivate industry, which prevents idleness; temperance, which spurns the world.”\textsuperscript{94} Tertullian warns that “chattering, idle, winebibbing, scandalmongering women [cf. 1 Tim. 5:13] do the greatest possible harm to a widow’s high resolve,” as he challenges widows to “keep company and converse worthy of God.” According to Tertullian, the women who scandalize widows with their bad behavior have nothing “good to say about monogamy” and deter the widow’s resolve to be modest, practice an austere life, and to refrain from the bad conduct that drinking and gossiping facilitate.\textsuperscript{95}

In summary, Tertullian’s \textit{Ad ux.} encourages widows to follow the prescriptions of 1 Tim. 5:3-16 that deal with their moral behavior, and he refers to the widow as an altar of God with special emphasis on the necessity for one to have been married only once to be considered pure. Polycarp refers to the widow as an “altar of God” in Polyc. \textit{Phil.} 4.3 and highlights the ethical prescriptions necessary for such purity, without specific mention of the necessity to have had only one spouse that is also highlighted in 1 Tim. 5:9. Both Tertullian and Polycarp warn the widow against sins of the tongue (Tertullian cites chattering, scandalmongering, loquaciousness, and gossip; Polycarp cites slander, \textsuperscript{92} Tertullian, \textit{Ad ux.} 1.8, p. 21.  
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid. Cf. Tertullian, \textit{Ad ux.} 1.4, pp. 14-15.  
\textsuperscript{94} One reason people married and remarried was for worldly desire, as distinguished from fleshly desires for children, wealth, or status; see \textit{Ad ux.} 1.4, pp. 14-15.  
\textsuperscript{95} Tertullian, \textit{Ad ux.} 1.8, p. 22.
calumny, and false witness); young widows in 1 Tim. 5:13 learn to be “gossips and busybodies” if they do not remarry. Tertullian expects the widows to be praying, and in this regard he resembles Polycarp and 1 Timothy 5. Tertullian differs from the widow traditions examined previously in this dissertation by exhorting young widows to remain unmarried, where 1 Timothy 5 exhorts young widows to remarry.

De exhortatione castitatis

This treatise exhorts an unnamed widower to remain continent now that his wife has died. Tertullian asserts that God wills our sanctification, which means that “we who are in His image should also become His likeness, in order that we may be holy as He Himself is holy.” According to Tertullian, God has arranged various species or degrees of how Christians can live in continence. The first degree is to live as a virgin from birth. The second degree is to live a life of virginity from the time of one’s baptism (in the case of married couples, that would be “a mutual agreement of husband and wife to practice continence in marriage” and in the case of widows and widowers, it would be “the determination not to remarry”). The third degree is that of monogamy, “which is practiced when, after the dissolution of a first marriage, one renounces all use of sex from that time on.” The second and third degrees overlap if one is baptized already and is a widow or widower, as the third degree is “not to rewed after the death of one’s spouse.”

W. Le Saint admits that “the second and third degrees of chastity or continence as described here are not distinguished so carefully as we might wish,” observing that “some persons practice continence from birth, some from the time of their baptism and some,

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96 Tertullian, De exh. cast. 1, p. 42. I will cite by chapter and page number.
97 Ibid.
though they continue to use marriage after baptism, do not remarry if they lose their consorts by death.”

Tertullian closes the first book of *De exh. cast.* by writing, “[H]ow many men and women there are whose chastity has obtained for them the honor of ecclesiastical orders!” Geoffrey Dunn asserts that in Tertullian’s Carthage, there were men and women who “each constituted an *ordo* of virgins” and cites *De exh. cast.* 13.4 to support his point. Dunn does not say in what consisted this *ordo*, however, nor whether the virgins received support from the Church. It could be that Tertullian is talking about another kind of virginity, that of not marrying after a spouse’s death, and is thus talking about once-married ministers and once-married widows, but Dunn does not discuss this possibility. LeSaint corroborates Dunn’s point, asserting that “*ordo* is frequently used in the sense of ecclesiastical ‘estate.’” Widows and virgins belonged to such an ‘order’ or ‘estate’ but they were not ordained in the sense in which we understand the word today.” Thurston, however, thinks that the *ordo* referred to in *De exh. cast.* 13.4 is made up of widows, not virgins. Since Tertullian refers to both virgins and widows as being wedded to God in his works, I think that Tertullian could be addressing both virgins and widows in *De exh. cast.* 13.4. Moreover, the mere fact that a virgin or a widow was admitted into an ecclesiastical *ordo* does not mean that the *ordo* was necessarily an *ordo* of virgins or widows per se. Tertullian discusses different types of chastity in this treatise, that of the virgin who remains a virgin from birth, that of the

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99 Tertullian, *De exh. cast.* 13, p. 64.
100 Dunn, *Tertullian*, 140.
102 Thurston, *Widows*, 84.
person who lives in continence after his or her baptism, and that of the person who does not remarry after the death of his or her spouse. Those who “have chosen to be wedded to God” do so through continence, which they can choose even if they have not lived the first degree of continence, which was to have remained virgins from birth.103

Thus it is safer to say that De exh. cast. is evidence that widows were in one or another order in the churches Tertullian knew, but the text does not elaborate on how the order of widows had developed by the time when Tertullian wrote De exh. cast. E. Clark observes that “Tertullian does not elaborate on the widows’ status,” that instead he reiterates what the Pauline author wrote about widows’ qualifications for entrance into the order of widows in 1 Tim. 5:9-10.104

De virginibus velandis

In De virg. vel. 9.2-3, Tertullian expresses his contempt for a virgin who has been placed in the order of widows:

In addition, I know of a virgin somewhere who was placed among the order of widows before she was twenty. If the bishop had owed something by way of assistance to her, he could have fulfilled [it] in some other way, especially with a healthy respect for [church] teaching, so that she would not now be branded such an oddity in the church, not to say a monstrosity—a virgin widow.

This indeed [is] the more unusual because as a widow she has not covered her head, denying herself both ways—both as a virgin who is considered a widow and as a widow who is called a virgin. But by that authority she sits there indeed as an uncovered virgin. To that [reserved] seat [in the church], not only those women who have had one husband—that is married women—and who are over sixty, but even mothers and nurturers of children too are selected.

No doubt [the widows sit there], having been prepared by the experiences of all moods, that they might know [how] to help others more easily both with counsel and solace, and notwithstanding [that this virgin and others sit with the widows, they sit there] in order that they might undergo those things by which a female

103 Tertullian, De exh. cast. 13, p. 64.
may be approved. To such an extent no honour is allowed to a virgin with regard to the position [which widows hold].

Tertullian identifies several problems with a virgin being placed among the order of widows. One problem is the virgin’s age; the virgin is twenty, while the age requirement for admittance into the order of widows is still sixty years of age, at least in Tertullian’s Carthage (1 Tim. 5:9). Secondly, the virgin does not cover her head as widows do, but she effectively denies her status as a virgin by coming into an order for women who are not virgins. Thirdly, the virgin does not have the experience that a widow had of marriage; the widow who has experience with a husband and who may have experience raising children is more easily able to help other widows “with counsel and solace.”

According to McGinn, the fact that widows have sexual experience and are prepared to sacrifice it by refusing remarriage is one reason that “Tertullian comes close to ranking widows above virgins” in Ad ux. 1.8.1-3. Tertullian’s contempt for a virgin-widow is a different attitude than Ignatius’s respectful valediction for the “virgins called widows” whom he salutes in Ign. Smyrn. 13.1.

De virg. vel. 9.2-3 indicates that Tertullian was aware that a young virgin could stand in need of the Church’s aid, and he is critical of the bishop for not finding a way to assist the virgin other than placing her in the order of widows, even though Tertullian does not say how the bishop should help the virgin without placing her in the order of widows. If Dunn’s opinion is correct that there “were women and men who were each constituted as an ordo of virgins” in De exh. cast. 13.4., then the order of women who

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106 E. Clark, “Status Feminae,” 136-140.
107 McGinn, Widows and Patriarchy, 175 n. 191.
were virgins (keeping in mind the different kinds of virginity that Tertullian discusses) may have been able to help the virgin who enrolled in the order of widows. If there was not an order of virgins in Tertullian’s Carthage, the young virgin might need financial help, and it would make sense for a young virgin to align herself with the widows who were living in continence and who were supported by the Church. Being supported by the Church would give the young virgin the opportunity to live in continence and not sell herself into prostitution or concubinage if she could not support herself, or if her family could not or would not support her. Tertullian’s critique of the bishop suggests that even though widows might have been “too young to qualify for the order, they were not to be excluded from aid if necessary.”

Finally, Tertullian asserts that “no honour is allowed to a virgin with regard to the position which widows hold,” which implies that the widows held an honored position that Tertullian thought the virgin had no right to. Honoring a widow is a motif that is seen in 1 Tim. 5:3 explicitly and continued in Tertullian’s insistence that virgins do not have the right to the honor that widows hold in De virg. vel. 9.2-3. The honor mentioned here likely included financial support. According to David Rankin, “it is not in question that they [the widows] were materially supported by the congregation and that consideration of financial strain on the church ‘budget’ may explain some of the reluctance to concede too easy an entry into the order.” Geoffrey Dunn asserts that

108 Thurston, Widows, 81.
109 Rankin, Tertullian and the Church, 178. To support his point Rankin cites 1 Tim. 5:3, Hermas Mand. 8.10, Sim. 1.8, 5.3.7; Ign. Smyrn 6.2; and Justin I Apol. 67.6, all of which mention provision for the widow.
giving a seat to a virgin amongst the widows “was inappropriate because the latter had proved themselves worthy of honour after many years of testing.”

Tertullian’s works attest that by the late second/early third century A.D., some widows were part of an order of widows who were honored in the Church. Ignatius referred to the “virgins who call themselves widows” in Ign. Smyrn. 13.1., and we know that at least one bishop was trying to place a virgin with the widows, to Tertullian’s contempt in De virg. vel. 9.2.-3. Tertullian admonishes a bishop for not taking care of the virgin in a way other than enrolling her in the order of widows, suggesting there was a protocol for assisting Christian virgins. Tertullian also refers to the widow as an altar of God in Ad ux. 1.7; Polycarp referred to widows as an altar of God in Polyc. Phil. 4.3, but Tertullian and Polycarp emphasize slightly different aspects of altar purity in their respective texts. Polycarp emphasizes the widows’ necessity for ethical purity because they are an altar of God, while Tertullian emphasizes the necessity of being once-married to be called an altar of God. Tertullian does not mention the widows’ prayer in connection with their being likened to an altar, while Polycarp does. Neither Polycarp’s emphasis nor Tertullian’s emphasis, however, precludes the prescriptions and emphases of the other. Tertullian differs from the Paul’s exhortations to young widows in that Tertullian encourages young widows to remain continent and to view themselves as espoused to Christ, whereas 1 Timothy 5 counsels young widows to remarry because when the young widows “grow wanton against Christ they desire to marry, and so they incur condemnation for having violated their first pledge” (5:11-12). Tertullian compares

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110 Dunn, Tertullian, 138.
the widow’s prayers to a marriage dowry, in which God is the bridegroom in the widow’s marriage. ¹¹¹

**THE DIDASCALIA APOSTOLORUM**

In the Old Testament the widow, particularly the barren widow, is by and large portrayed as a pitiable person. The exception is authoritative widows of means like Judith. By the time widows appear in the New Testament, they are listed with God’s elect and saints (Luke 18:7; Acts 9:41), they can enroll in an order of honored widows as described in 1 Tim. 5:3-16, and the widow is considered an “altar of God” by Polycarp (Phil. 4.3) and Tertullian (Ad uxor. 1.7). Chapters eight and nine of the Didascalia apostolorum include instructions to the bishops and the Christian faithful to care for the widow. The Didascalia devotes chapters fourteen and fifteen to widows. ¹¹² Chapters nine and fifteen of the Didascalia contain references to the widow as the altar of God. ¹¹³

**Care for the Widow by the Church**

That some widows still need and receive support from the Church is evidenced by several passages in the Didascalia that exhort the bishops and the Christian faithful to care for the widow and others in need. In chapter eight, bishops are asked to care for the

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¹¹² Vööbus, *Didascalia apostolorum* 14 and 15, pp. 143-155. I use Vööbus’ translation unless otherwise noted, and I will cite the passages in Vööbus’ translation by chapter and page number.
widow: “As good stewards of God, therefore, do well in dispensing those things that are
given and come into the church according to the commandment to orphans and widows
and those who are afflicted and to strangers, like men who know that you have God who
will require an account at your hands, who committed his stewardship unto you.”114 The
bishop receives food and clothing from those whom he serves, and the bishop is supposed
to take care of the “deacons and widows and orphans, and those who are in want, and
strangers” from the donations he receives.115

Chapter nine of the Didascalia exhorts the Christian people to care for the widow:
“And to those who invite widows to the agapes, let him frequently send her whom he
knows to be afflicted in particular. And again, if anyone gives gifts to widows, let him
send in particular her who is in want.”116 It is not clear from the text whether the bishops,
the laity, or both the bishops and the laity were sending widows to the agapes; it is clear
that the bishops, and not the laity, were responsible to distribute the alms to the widows.
Widows and other groups of people receive from the gifts given at the agapes: “But let
the portion of the shepherd be separated and be divided for him according to rule at the
agapes or the gifts, even though he be not present, in honor of Almighty God. But
however much is given to one of the widows, let the double be given to each of the
deacons in honor of Christ, (but) twice double to the leader for the glory of the

115 Vööbus, DA 8, p. 92.
116 Vööbus, DA 9, p. 101. Stewart-Sykes notes that “widows” is also translated as “old women” in the Apostolic Constitutions, and as “aged widows” in the Apostolic Tradition; see The Didascalia apostolorum, trans. Stewart-Sykes, 152 fn. 16.
As the prescriptions for bishops and other Christians in the Didascalia attest, some widows were still vulnerable and needed the support of the Church.

Chapter Fourteen: “On the Time for the Ordering of Widows”

This part of the document opens with the age requirement for entering the order of widows: “Appoint as a widow one who is not less than fifty years of age, who in some way, by reason of her years, is remote from the reflection of having a second husband.” Both the Didascalia and 1 Timothy 5 require the enrolled widow to have been married only once and to refrain from remarrying. The age prescription for being appointed a widow in the Didascalia differs from that in 1 Tim. 5:9, which requires the widow to be sixty years old before being appointed. Michael L. Penn thinks that the difference in age requirements for the enrollment of the widow between 1 Tim. 5:10 and the Didascalia “shows that the Didascalia community did not view 1 Timothy’s mandates as infallible, and it may reflect an early disagreement on canon.” However, adopting a requirement stricter than Scripture does not require that one believes Scripture is mistaken or can be mistaken; adopting a stricter requirement can simply reflect a different tradition with regards to the age requirement. Moreover, in Didascalia 4, the age requirement for a bishop is also fifty years old; the age for enrollment of the widow may have reflected the

117 Vööbus, DA 9, p. 101. According to William Schoedel, the “ancient love-feast (which must often have included the eucharist) served as an important agency for taking care of the needs of the poor including especially orphans and widows”; see Schoedel, Ignatius of Antioch, 241.
118 Vööbus, DA 14, p. 141.
119 Michael L. Penn, “‘Bold and Having No Shame’: Ambiguous Widows, Controlling Clergy, and Early Syrian Communities,” Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies 4, no. 2 (July 2001): 165. The age difference could also relate to Augustan marriage legislation passed in 1 B.C. that required widows between the ages of twenty and fifty to remarry a year after their spouses’ deaths, and legislation passed in A.D. 9 that required widows in that age group to remarry after two years; the penalties against those who did not remarry and those who remained childless were not abolished until Constantine’s reign in the early-to-mid-fourth century A.D.; see McGinn, Widows, 35, and Grubbs, Women and the Law, 220.
age of the bishop because both the widow and the bishop served in a special capacity in the Church. If a congregation cannot find a man fifty years of age to serve as bishop, the Didascalia allows a younger man who “through humility and quietness of conduct demonstrates maturity” to serve a congregation as bishop, reasoning that “Solomon also at the age of twelve years ruled over Israel.” The age difference between 1 Timothy 5 and the Didascalia for the enrollment of widows may reflect a different tradition already in place, or it may be that the Church saw that fifty-year-old widows could persevere in continence and refrain from the desire for worldly wealth as well as sixty-year-old women. Thus, the different age requirements for enrolled widows in 1 Timothy 5 and the Didascalia do not necessarily signal a disagreement between Paul and the author of the Didascalia, but may simply mirror the required age for candidates to the episcopacy in the time of the Didascalia.

The young widow may be supported by the Church and honored for her choice not to remarry, but she may not enroll until she is fifty years old. As Penn observes, the Church during the time of the Didascalia honors both enrolled and non-enrolled widows, and supports both enrolled and non-enrolled widows; enrolled widows may not remarry, and non-enrolled widows are encouraged not to remarry. The Didascalia, like 1 Timothy 5, warns against enrolling a young widow “to the office of a widow” because if the young widow does not persevere in widowhood and instead remarries, the young widow “will bring shame upon the glory of widowhood, (for which) she shall have to

120 Vööbus, DA 4, p. 43. See Penn, “Bold,” 163 fn. 11. In 1 Tim. 3, there is no age requirement for becoming a bishop, while the bishop is required to have been the husband of one wife.
121 Vööbus, DA 4, p. 44.
122 Stewart-Sykes, The Didascalia apostolorum, 182 fn. 3, notes that the Apostolic Constitutions also lists sixty as the age requirement for enrolling widows, and that Apostolic Constitutions “has corrected DA in order to return the text to the provisions of Scripture.”
123 Penn, “Bold,” 164.
give an account to God” first because she was the wife of two husbands and secondly “because she promised to be a widow unto God, and was receiving (alms) as a widow, but did not abide in widowhood.” 124 Young widows who do not remarry “shall be blessed by God” but should not “be appointed to the office of widows.” 125 The widow who remains alone “resembles the widow of Sarepta of Sidon” and “Annah, who praised the coming of Christ.” 126 Young widows who need help should be “taken care of and helped in order that they may not desire to become (a wife) to a man for a second time, which would be an act of damage. This, indeed, you know—she who has had one husband may lawfully become (wife) for a second (but) beyond this she is (to be accounted) a harlot.” 127 In this respect, the Didascalia prescriptions for young widows not to remarry more closely resemble Tertullian and deviate from Paul, who advises in 1 Timothy 5 that young widows remarry.

The bishop is charged with taking care of the young widows to keep them from being tempted to remarry: “On this account, support those who are young that they may continue in chastity unto God. And thus take care of them, O bishop.” 128 The bishop is charged with the care of all the poor, not just widows, and is responsible for distributing alms to all of the poor at his discretion: “those who give gifts do not themselves with their own hands give them to the widows, but bring them to you, that you who are well acquainted with those who are afflicted, like a good steward, may distribute to them of

124 Vööbus, DA 14, p. 141.
125 Ibid., pp. 141-42.
128 Vööbus, DA 14, p. 142.
those things which are given to you.” As Christopher Hays notes, “many alms were cast into the church treasure chest on a weekly or monthly basis to be distributed by the bishop.” Gryson notes that in the Didascalia 4, “widows appear along with orphans, the poor, and strangers” as those who are “entitled to special solicitude on the part of the bishops”; the bishop can take what he needs from alms given to him to “feed and clothe himself decently,” while distributing the rest of the alms among the poor, including the widow. The widows and other poor pray by name for those who give alms: “and when you distribute, tell them the name of him who gave, that they may pray for him by his name.” Praying for the benefactors of the Church is an important function of the widows, as we will see that chapter fifteen of the Didascalia expresses.

Widows in Chapters Nine, and Fifteen through Eighteen

These chapters expound on the desirable characteristics and ethical prescriptions and proscriptions regarding widows, as well as the tasks of the widow. We find references to the widow as the altar of God in chapters nine, fifteen, seventeen, and eighteen of the Didascalia, and, although it deals primarily with the roles of deacons and deaconesses, chapter sixteen includes a reference to widows.

129 Ibid.
131 Gryson, Ministry, 35; Vööbus, DA 4, p. 46. See also Rhee, Loving the Poor, 140-142.
132 Vööbus, DA 14, p. 142.
Prescriptions and Proscriptions for Widows

Chapter fourteen of the Didascalia deals primarily with the age qualifications for women to be enrolled in the order of widows. Chapters nine, fifteen, and sixteen deal largely with the proscriptions and prescriptions for the widows, particularly with regard to talkativeness, the reception of alms, and what widows can talk about regarding the faith. The widow is admonished to guard her tongue: “Let her [the widow] not be talkative and not glamorous,133 and not advanced in tongue and not a lover of strife.”134

Widows should receive alms only through the bishop or deacon.135 If the widow is “asked regarding an affair by anyone, let her not too quickly give an answer, except only about righteousness and about faith in God.”136 Widows should be “humble and quiet and gentle” and “without wickedness and without anger.”137

There is a problem with some widows who roam from “house to house” to beg and who “care for nothing else but making themselves ready to receive.” The widows who are “talkative and chattering and murmurers…incite strifes, and they are bold and have no shame. They that are such, indeed, are unworthy of Him who called them.”138 Moreover, these kinds of widows (and other Christians who stir up trouble with their talkativeness and gossip) disturb the “fellowship of the assembly of rest on Sunday…so

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133 Stewart-Sykes suggests that Vööbus’ translation “glamorous” is “perhaps a misprint for clamorous.” Stewart-Sykes translates the word as “loud”; see Stewart-Sykes, Didascalia apostolorum, 184 fn. 2. Vööbus adds “Nor lift up her voice when she speaks” in his footnote on “glamorous,” rendering Stewart-Sykes’ assertion plausible. See Vööbus, Didascalia apostolorum 15, p. 144 fn. 3.
134 Vööbus, DA 15, pp. 143-44.
135 Ibid., pp. 149-50.
137 Vööbus, DA 15, p. 143.
that through them others also are taken captive by the enemy Satan, who does not allow them, those who are such, to be watchful unto the Lord.”¹³⁹ Those Christians who come into the church empty “go out still more empty, since they hear nothing which is spoken or read that they might receive it with the ears of their hearts” (see Isa. 6:9; Matt. 13:14; Acts 28:26).¹⁴⁰ M. Penn remarks that 1 Tim. 5:13 also expresses early Christianity’s concern with widows’ talkativeness, and the widely held belief in early Christianity that the widows could have these problems.¹⁴¹ Neither the New Testament texts nor the *Didascalia* indicate how many problematic widows there were, nor how widespread the problems were that they charged widows with inciting.¹⁴² Moreover, according to M. Penn, “concerns of the widow’s mobility may also form part of the *Didascalia*’s larger polemic against ascetic groups it deems heretical.” The admonitions against widows wandering may have been “used to condemn the practices of these other groups.”¹⁴³

The Didascalist is concerned about widows receiving help greedily: “And instead of doing good and giving to the bishop for the reception of strangers and the relief of those afflicted, they lend out on bitter usury. And they care only for mammon, those ‘whose god is’ their purse and ‘their belly; indeed, where their treasure is, there is also

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¹³⁹ Vööbus, *DA* 15, p. 146. Compare Connolly, *DA* 15, p. 135; ...(detract)tatrices, litium commissatrices, inpudoratae, inpudicae: quaeque, si tales fuerint, non iudicabuntur dignae eius qui eas uocavit. Non enim ad commune syagogae refrigerium in dominica die conueniunt ut uigilent…ut et ali capitui ducantur per ipsos ad adversario maligno, qui non permittit sobrios esse in domino qui tale[n]s sunt. Sunday, or the Lord’s Day, was the day on which those assembled would “hear the word of life and be nourished with the divine food which abides forever” (Connolly, *DA* 13, p. 124; Stewart-Sykes, *Didascalia* 13, 178; see Stewart-Sykes, *Didascalia*, 77-81).


¹⁴² According to Eusebius, there were more than fifteen hundred widows and needy supported by the Church in Rome, c. A.D. 250; however, Eusebius does not say exactly how many of the fifteen hundred were widows and how many were other categories of needy people. See his *Ecclesiastical History* 6.43.11, trans. C. F. Cruse (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), 231.

¹⁴³ Penn, “Bold,” 168.
their heart.”

The bishop was in charge of distributing alms to the poor, including the widows:

Present therefore your offerings to the bishop, either you yourselves, or through the deacons. And from that which he has received he distributes justly. For the bishop is well acquainted with those who are afflicted and dispenses and gives to each one as it is right for him, so that one may not receive several times in the same day or the same week, whereas another would not receive even a little.

The Didascalist alerts the audience to one reason for insisting on the distribution of alms through the bishop or deacon. Some widows were accused of misusing the alms they received; some widows gave loans to people, and the loaning widows charged interest on these loans. The greedy, distracted widow who worries about receiving gifts does not please God:

And she cannot please God, nor is she obedient to His ministry, so as to be constantly praying and making intercession, because her mind is held captive too much by the diligence of (her) greed. And when she stands up to pray, she remembers where she ought to go to receive something, or that she has forgotten to relate some matter to her friends. And when she stands, her mind is not upon her prayer, but upon that thought which has come up in her mind. The prayer of such a one is not heard in anything. But she very quickly interrupts her prayer because of the disturbance of her mind. For she does not offer prayer to God with all her heart, but goes off with the thought of the operation by the Enemy, and

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146 Elm, *Virgins of God*, 172.
talks with her friends about something which has no profit. For she does not know how she has believed or of what position she has been esteemed worthy.\textsuperscript{147}

On the other hand, the widow who “wishes to please God”

sits at home and reflects on the Lord day and night, and without ceasing at all times offers intercession and praise purely before the Lord. And she receives whatever she asks because her whole mind is set upon this. Her mind, indeed, is not greedy to receive, and she also has not much desire to make many expenses. Nor does her eye wander, that she should see something and desire it, and her mind is not thus hindered. And she does not hear evil words to yield to them, because she does not go out and run about abroad. On this account her prayer is not impeded by anything. And in this way, her quietness and tranquility and chastity are acceptable before God, and whatsoever she asks of God, she quickly receives her request.\textsuperscript{148}

The widow who pleases God thinks of others more than of herself; she is not loving money or polluted lucre, and not avaricious or greedy, but constant in prayer, and humble and unperturbed and chaste and modest, sits at her house and works with wool, that she may provide somewhat for those who are afflicted, or again that she may make a return for others, so that she receive nothing from them. For she remembers that widow of whom our Lord gave testimony in the Gospel, who ‘came and cast into the treasury two mites, which is one dinar,’ whom when our Lord and teacher, the one who tests hearts, saw, He said to us: ‘O my disciples, this poor widow has cast in more alms than anyone; for everyone has cast in of that which was superfluous to him, but this one, of everything that she possessed she has laid up her treasure’ (see Luke 21:2-3; Mark 12: 42-43).\textsuperscript{149}

\textsuperscript{147} Vööbus, DA 15, p. 148. Compare Connolly, DA 15, p. 137:\textit{Deo uero placere non potest nec ministeris eius adhunde obaudire poterit, quoniam voluntas eius circum multa occupatur et ad lucrum magis festinat. Tamen etiam adstat interpellare, et rememorata fuerit ubi debeat ire pro propter accipiendum lucrum, aut quia amice suae oblieta est uerbum aliquid dicere; et cum stat, iam non orationi intendit, sed ei quae circumuenit eam cogitationi. Quae talis ergo fuerit non exauditur citius, quia dereliquit uerba malorum, quae cum audit, in uerba malorum adcommodauit aurem suam aut ipsa ministrauit, quoniam nescit qui ei locus creditus est uel quius gradus digna effecta est.}

\textsuperscript{148} Vööbus, DA 15, p. 148-49. Compare Connolly, DA 15, pp. 137-139: \textit{Quae autem placere uult uidua sedens intra tectum suum quae domini sunt sapit, noctu et die incessabli ore sincer(t)am praecem offerens: et inpetrat pro his quibus petit, cum sinceram praecem fundit, quoniam mens eius ad hoc solum uacat. Nec enim voluntas eius abara est ad accipiendum, nec desiderium eius ut multum expendat ad expensa sua; nec oculis aliquid potest desiderare, quia nec uidit aliquid tale, nec insedit menti eius, nec quae cum audit, in uerba malorum adcommodauit autem suam aut ipsa ministravit, quoniam nec curam habuit.}

\textsuperscript{149} Vööbus, DA 15, p. 149. Compare Connolly, DA 15, p. 139: \textit{non diligens pecuniam neque turpilucrum amans nec abara nec gluiterix, sed magis mansuetu, sine turbulentia agens omnia, religiosa et urecunda, [et] sedens in domo sua [et] lamam deforis accipit, ut magis praebat tribulantibus quam ipsa alciui sit molesta ut accipiat ab eis: rememorans eius uiduae cui in euangelio testimonium furtur a domino, quae ueniens misit in gazofylacio denarius minutos duos, quod est quadrantes; quam cum uidisset magister et dominus noster cordis scientiam habens, dixit nobis: O discipuli mei, ista uidua pauperrima ab omnibus
In these passages we see that the widow is expected to work with wool to “provide for those who are afflicted.” This expectation is reminiscent of Acts 9:39, which relates the resurrecting of Tabitha, who made coats and garments while she was with the widows. It is not clear that Tabitha was a widow, but she is associated with the widows through her charity. If Tabitha was also a widow, the coats and garments she made may have been a prototype of the work that the widows are expected to do in the Didascalia. The widow in the Didascalia can also do what the poor widow did in Luke 21:2 and Mark 12:42, that is, give what little she has such that it will be counted as great treasure by the Lord. J. G. Davies notes that the injunctions for widows to work with wool for the afflicted marks a change in the duties of enrolled widows; up to this point in extant early Church literature, widows were tasked just with praying.\footnote{J. G. Davies, “Deacons, Deaconesses, and the Minor Orders in the Patristic Period,” in Church, Ministry, and Organization in the Early Church Era, ed. Everett Ferguson (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993), 241.} Gryson notes the special intercessory authority that the widow has; indeed, the prayers of the widow at the bedside of a sick person “were granted a particular power; these petitions were regularly linked to a propitiatory fast and accompanied by an imposition of the hand.”\footnote{Gryson, Ministry, 40.} The widows’ ascetic discipline in continence and prayer lent itself to gaining an especially favorable divine hearing.

The widow is instructed not to teach. If someone asks a widow about the doctrine of Christ, she should “send those who desire to be instructed to the leader. And to those who ask them let them (namely the widows) give answer only about the destruction of

\[\text{plus misit elemosynam: quoniam omne populam de abundantia sua misit, haec autem omnem uitam suam uel substantiam, quam habeat, in caelo sibi thensaurizauit. See Gryson, Ministry, 37.}\]
idols and about this that there is only one God. It is not right for the widows to teach nor for a layman....Indeed, when they speak without the knowledge of doctrine, they bring blasphemy against the word."\textsuperscript{152} Both the widows and the laity are warned against teaching about advanced matters of the faith because Gentiles will “deride and mock” such doctrine instead of praising God, especially if such doctrine is taught “by a woman.”\textsuperscript{153}

The Didascalist gives a second reason for keeping women from teaching. If the Lord had wanted his women disciples to teach, he would have sent “Mary Magdalene and Mary the daughter of James, and the other Mary” to teach, which he did not do.\textsuperscript{154} In chapter sixteen, however, deaconesses are allowed to “teach and educate” Christian women neophytes, “in order that the unbreakable seal of baptism shall be kept in chastity and holiness.”\textsuperscript{155} According to Susanna Elm, “it is precisely at this time, in the \textit{Didascalia}, that the new, well-defined office of deaconesses appears for the first time.”\textsuperscript{156} Deaconesses also assist women during their baptism,\textsuperscript{157} and “a deaconess is required for the houses of the pagans where there are believing women, that they enter and visit those who are sick, and to minister to them in something that is required for them, and to wash

\textsuperscript{152} Vööbus, \textit{DA} 15, p. 144.  
\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., p. 145. Stewart-Sykes uses “old woman” instead of woman, but does not give a reason for his translation; Stewart-Sykes, \textit{Didascalia} 15, 185. Greco-Roman antiquity had little respect for older women (see the first chapter of this dissertation), which would explain the Didascalist’s warning for women, especially the widows (who must be fifty years old to be in the order, and who are the focus of the injunction), not to teach because the Gentiles would mock them, undermining the work of evangelization.  
\textsuperscript{155} Vööbus, \textit{DA} 16, p. 157.  
\textsuperscript{157} Vööbus, \textit{DA} 16, pp. 156-57. P. Bradshaw, “Women and Baptism,” 641-42, notes that the phrase “it is not right that women should be seen by men” (DA 16, p. 156) “strongly implies that what was in mind was an anointing of the whole body that would require the candidate to be completely naked.”
those who have begun to recover from sickness.” The Didascalist uses almost the same list of women from Scripture to justify the works of deaconesses as he does to assert that widows should not teach: “For our Lord and Savior also was ministered unto by deaconesses who were ‘Mary Magdalene, and Mary the daughter of James and mother of Jose, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee,’ with other women as well” (see Matt. 27:55-56, 61; Matt. 28:1). From this fact it is safe to infer that the Didascalist believed that the women he listed in Scripture had functions similar to those that deaconesses should fulfill. Deaconesses were allowed to teach while widows were not, indicating that certain women (deaconesses) were allowed to teach other women.

Widows are “to be chaste, and obedient to the bishops and deacons, and to revere and reverence and fear the bishops as God.” Widows are not to do anything without the permission of the bishop or the deacon; the widows’ tasks include receiving alms, praying, fasting, and laying on of hands to pray over a sick person. Davies notes that the call to “visit the sick, laying their hands upon them and praying for them,” is not noted in earlier extant patristic sources regarding the duties of widows. The

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159 Vööbus, DA 16, pp. 157-58.

160 G. Clark, Women in Late Antiquity, 54, states that membership in the orders of women in the early Church were offered back-handedly to women, insisting that the Church “accepted the cultural assumption that women were not suited to positions of authority, or capable of giving instruction except to other women.” However, G. Clark admits that women in antiquity could teach other women (and assist during baptisms of women) without causing scandal. As seen in fn. 153 of this chapter, the Church was concerned that the Gentiles would mock them (because Gentiles had little respect for older people), thus undermining the work of evangelization.


162 Vööbus, DA 15, pp. 149-50. Compare Connolly, DA 15, p. 139.

undisciplined widow does these tasks without the bishop’s permission, or she feigns illness or busyness to avoid ministering to those who are sick. The Didascalist denounces such an undisciplined widow: “you see widows, your companions, or your brethren in sickness, and you do not care to fast and to pray over your members, and to lay the hand upon them and to visit them, but you make yourself as one not in health, or not at leisure (so to do). But to others, those who are at fault or are gone out from the church, because they give much (to you), you are gladly ready to go and to visit them.”

The Didascalist warns Christians against praying or communicating “with one who is expelled from the church,” reasoning that if no one communicates with the excommunicated church member, “he [the expelled church member] will repent and weep, and will ask and beseech to be received, and he will repent of what he has done, and he will be saved.” Thus, the widow, or anyone else who works apart from the bishop in this respect, jeopardizes the salvation of the person separated from the Church, as well as her or his own salvation because the one who does not obey the bishop “does not obey God, and he is defiled with him (who is expelled).”

The Didascalist writes that envy, jealousy, slander, gainsaying, contention, mocking, foolish speech, and contentiousness “ought not to be in a Christian,” still less in widows. The Didascalist warns that “the author of evil has many stratagems and devices” and “enters into those who are now widows and glorifies himself in them”; these kinds of widows “do not do works worthy of their name.” Widows are “found worthy of

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166 Vööbus, DA 15, p. 151.
the kingdom of heaven” not merely because “of the name of widowhood,” but “because of faith and works.” Widows should not succumb to the envy of fellow widows who receive help: “for when an old woman, your companion, has been clothed, or has received something from someone, O widow, on seeing your sister relieved—if (indeed) you be a widow of God—you ought to say: ‘Blessed be God, who has relieved the old woman, my companion’, and you should praise God.” The widow should also pray for the minister who gave her companion aid.

The widow “who has received the alms of the Lord” should pray for her benefactor and conceal his name from others, according to prescriptions in Scripture (see Matt. 6:1, 3; 25:33-35), remembering that she is “the holy altar of God.” The widow who discloses the name of her benefactor to another not only disobeys God’s commandment, but may prompt her hearer to complain to the bishop or deacon for not giving her more from the alms collected. The Didascalist reminds the discontented widow that it is through God’s command that the alms are dispensed and that she should not blame the dispenser of the alms if she feels shortchanged. Thus, the prohibition against revealing the name of her benefactor protects the benefactor and the bishop and deacons, who might be harassed by other widows who seek patronage or an increased amount of alms, or by widows were not impecunious at all.

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167 Ibid.
168 Vööbus, DA 15, pp. 151-52.
169 Ibid., p. 152.
170 Vööbus, DA 15, p. 152. In the next section, I will discuss what the Didascalia means by calling a widow God’s altar.
Widow as the Altar of God

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, prayer in place of sacrifice became normative for post-Second Temple Judaism and early Christianity.\(^\text{172}\) The Didascalist asserts in chapter nine:

Instead of the sacrifices of that time [Jewish antiquity], offer now prayers and supplications and thanksgivings. At that time there were firstfruits and tithes and oblations and gifts, but today the offerings which are presented through the bishops to the Lord God, for they are your high priests. But the priests and Levites are now the presbyters and deacons, and the orphans and widows—but the Levite and high priest is the bishop.\(^\text{173}\)

The Didascalist notes differences between the people of Israel and the Catholic Church.\(^\text{174}\) Instead of offering sacrifices, the Christians should offer prayers; and instead of offering “firstfruits and tithes and oblations and gifts,” there are “offerings” that are made through the bishops to the Lord. According to the Didascalist, prayers take the place of sacrifices, alms take the place of the first fruits and tithes, and offerings to the bishops replace the offerings to the high priests.\(^\text{175}\) The widows are also called Levites in the Didascalia 9 (see Num. 3:31-32). Levites ministered at the tabernacle and tent of


\(^{174}\) Vööbus, *DA* 9, p. 99: “For the former people were also called a Church, but you are the catholic Church.”

\(^{175}\) According to Bryan Stewart, *Priests of My People: Levitical Paradigms for Early Christian Ministers* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2015), 85, the instruction of the Didascalist to “do nothing without the bishop” is “reminiscent of the letters of Ignatius of Antioch”; however, unlike Ignatius, “the *DA* grounds this command explicitly in the correlation between the bishop and the Israelite priests.”
meeting and cared for the altar in the Old Testament, and in the Didascalia the widow is likened to the altar of God.

According to chapter nine of the Didascalia, the “orphans and the widows shall be reckoned to you in the likeness of the altar. For as it was not lawful for a stranger, that is for one who was not a Levite, to approach the altar or to offer anything apart from the high priest, so you also shall do nothing apart from the bishop.”

According to Stewart-Sykes, the “language and typology here is Ignatian in origin (see e.g., Magn. 6), but DA has put a new twist on it by linking it less to the worship of heaven as to the offering of sacrifice.” Stewart-Sykes notes that Polycarp compares widows to the altar in Phil. 4 “in that the widows are to be as pure as the altar,” stating that “the basis for this typology, however, regardless of any other use to which is it put” (i.e. the immovability of the altar) “is the intercessory function of widows so that the gifts which they receive are so sanctified through their prayers...just as gifts placed on the altar are sanctified.”

A. Brent states that the widows and orphans in Didascalia 9 “can be the antitype of the altar in the tent of meeting too as they receive, like the altar, the offerings.” Carolyn Osiek asserts that “the original basis for associating the widow and altar...is the depositing of the gifts of the faithful upon the altar and their distribution to widows as the recipients of charity,” noting that the Didascalia “commands bishops and deacons to be

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178 Stewart-Sykes, Didascalia 9, 151 fn. 12.

careful about the service of the altar—that is, widows and orphans—by seeing to it that all money comes from respectable sources.\textsuperscript{180} Osiek also notes that the widows’ task to pray “may have further encouraged the association of widows with an altar.”\textsuperscript{181}

The lay faithful are reminded to present their offerings to the bishop because the bishop “is well acquainted with those who are afflicted and dispenses and gives to each one as it is right for him, so that one may not receive several times in the same day or in the same week, whereas another would not receive even a little.”\textsuperscript{182} We saw in Ign. Smyrn. 6.2-7.1 that true worship of Jesus Christ involved taking care of the orphan and the widow through alms, and that those who do not care for the widow and the orphan also do not accept the teaching of Jesus regarding the Eucharist.\textsuperscript{183} As noted earlier in this dissertation, Isa. 1:13, 17-19 (Old Testament), James 1:27 (New Testament), and Ign. Smyrn. 6.2-7.1 (early Church) have in common the idea that true worship of God involves caring for the poor, including the widow. Since the altar was used in worshipping God, it is understandable that the Didascalist also refers to the widow as an altar of God, just as Polyc. Phil. 4.3 did.

J. Bremmer asserts that the widow is compared to an altar in early Church literature “in order to stress that she is also in need of sacrifice (charity)” but also to highlight that the widow should not wander but remain in one place, as the Didascalia

\textsuperscript{180} Osiek, “Widow as Altar,” 166.
\textsuperscript{181} Ibid., 167.
\textsuperscript{182} Vööbus, DA 9, p. 100. Compare Connolly, DA 9, p. 89: \textit{Episcopus enim optime nouit eos qui tribulantur, et unicusque dat secundum dispensationem, ut non unus aut frequenter et in ipso die aut in ipsa ebdomada accipiat, alius autem nec semel.}
I would add to Bremmer’s conclusion that the widow-as-altar motif also has to do with the bishop and the priestly ministers regulating the charitable contributions given to the widow. Just as only a priest could put things on the altar to be sacrificed, only a bishop or his priestly ministers could give alms directly to the widow; the laymen could give alms to the widows only by giving the alms to the bishop or his ministers for redistribution to the widows.

Bremmer’s assertion that the widow-as-altar motif highlights widows’ immobility finds support when the Didascalist likens the widow to the altar of God again in chapter fifteen: “But let a widow know that she is the altar of God. And let her constantly sit at home, and let her not wander or run about among the houses of the faithful to receive. The altar of God, indeed, never wanders or runs about anywhere, but is fixed in one place.” As the Temple altar did not move physically, neither should the widow.

Gryson remarks that the author of the Didascalia chooses “an image already used by Polycarp” and “declares that widows and orphans have a right to be considered a symbol of the altar…[J]ust as the altar is immovable and solidly fixed in one spot, the widow

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185 Vööbus, DA 9, p. 100: “For as it was not lawful for a stranger, that is for one who was not a Levite, to approach the altar or to offer anything apart from the high priest, so you also shall do nothing apart from the bishop. But if any many should do something apart from the bishop, he does it in vain, for it shall not be accounted to him for a work, for it is not right that any man should do something apart from the high priest. Present therefore your offering to the bishop, either you yourselves, or through the deacons. And from that which he receives he receives justly. For the bishop is well acquainted with those who are afflicted and dispenses and gives to each one as it is right for him, so that one may not receive several times in the same day or in the same week.” Compare Connolly, DA 9, p. 89: Sicuti ergo non licebat eum qui non erat Leuita offerre aliquid aut accedere ad altarem sine sacerdote, ita et uos sine episcopo nolite aliquid facere. Si quis autem sine episcopo facit aliquid, in uano illud facit: non enim illi inputabitur in opus, quia non decet absque sacerdotem aliquid facere. Prosforas ergo uestras sacerdoti offerte, siue per uos ipsos siue per diacones; quique suscipiet et, ut decet, diuidet unicuique: episcopus enim optime nouit eos qui tribulantur, et unicuique dat secundum dispensationem, ut non unus aut frequenter et in ipso die aut in ipsa ebdomada accipiat, alius autem nec semel. See also Erik Tidner, Didascaliae apostolorum, Canonum ecclesiasticorum, Traditionis apostolicae versiones Latinae (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1963), p. 42.
186 Vööbus, DA 15, p. 146.
must stay at home and not waste her time running from one house to another.”

The widows who do not “sit beneath the roof of their houses and pray and entreat the Lord…effect the lusts of the Enemy,” and such a widow “does not conform to the altar of Christ.”

The interpretations of Stewart-Sykes, Brent, Osiek, Bremmer, and Gryson present different but complementary interpretations of the motif of the widow as an altar of God in the Didascalia, and each cites the Didascalia in support of their respective interpretations. Stewart-Sykes focuses on the typology of the altar, and how the Didascalist links the widow to the altar’s function as a place of sacrifice where offerings purified by prayer placed; Brent focuses on the widow as the antitype of the altar in the tent of meeting because both the widow and the altar receive offerings; Osiek focuses also on the widow and the altar being places where people put their gifts, and she also notes that the widow’s task of prayer could be correlated to the altar being a place where prayers were offered up.

The widow should not reveal the name of her benefactor: “But pray for him as you conceal his name, and so shall you fulfill something which is written, you and the widows, those who are such; for you are the holy altar of God (and of) Jesus Christ.”

Earlier in the passage the widow is asked to conceal the benefactor’s name “that his righteousness may be with God and not with men (Cf. Matt 6:1), as He said in the Gospel: ‘When you do alms, let not your left hand know what your right hand does’ (Cf.

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188 Vööbus, DA 15, p. 147. Compare Connolly, DA 15, p. 135: Simili ratione et earum uidianum, que tales sunt, cl(a)usi sunt oculi cordis, ut non sedentes intus in domos suas adloquantur dominum, sed discurrunt ad exiuntionem lucre, et per uerbositates quae aduersarii sunt desideria agunt. Quae talis ergo est uidia non est conlegata altario Christi.

189 Vööbus, DA 15, p. 152.
Matt 6:3)—lest, when you articulate and reveal his name in praying for him who gave, his name be revealed, and come to the ears of a pagan, and the pagan, being a man of the left hand (Cf. Matt 25:33), know it.”

In chapter seventeen, the altar of God motif includes not just widows, but incorporates a man who has received on account of youth due to orphanhood, or on account of the feebleness of old age, on account of the infirmity of sickness, or on account of the bringing up of children—this shall even be praised—indeed, he is to be reckoned as the altar of God. On this account he shall be honored by God. For he did not receive vainly because he was praying diligently, as indefatigable at all time, for those who give. Indeed, his prayer, which is his strength, he offered as his payment. Those then who are such shall receive a blessing from God in the life everlasting.

Widows and other needy people share the task of praying for those who give to them; but unlike others, widows are asked to stay put and are part of an order joined after baptism.

In chapter eighteen bishops and deacons are charged with caring for the widows and orphans:

Thus be you the bishops and deacons persevering in the service of the altar of Christ—we mean, however, (the service of) the widows and the orphans—so that you will endeavor with all care and with all diligence to investigate concerning those things that are given, what is the conduct of him, or of her, who gives for the nourishment—we say again—of the ‘altar.’ For when widows are nourished by the labor of righteousness, they will offer a holy and acceptable service before Almighty God through His beloved Son and His Holy Spirit—to whom be glory and honor forevermore.

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190 Ibid.
191 Vööbus, DA 17, p. 161. Compare Connolly, DA 17, p. 155: Si enim in orfanitate constitutus est aut in paupertate, aut per senectutis defectionem aut propter egritudinis infirmitatem aut propter filiorum, quae multi sunt, nutrimenta accipit: qui talis, inquit, est et laudabitur; altaris enim Dei deputatus est a Deo, et honorabitur, quoniam sine dubitatione pro his qui dant illi frequenter orat, et non otiose accipiebat, sed pro eo quod dabatur illi, merces, quantum uirtus illius admittebat, (dabat per orationem suam). Hii igitur in aeterna uita a Deo beatificabuntur.
192 Vööbus, DA 18, p. 163. Compare Conolly, DA 18, p. 157: Episcopi ergo et diacones, obseruare altario Christi, id est uiduis et orfanis, cum omni diligentia, curam facientes de his quae accipiuntur cum scrupulositate, qualis est ille qui dat, aut illa quae dat, ut adescentur. Iterum adque iterum dicimus, quoniam altare de laboribus iustitiae accipere debet....
In this text, widows are called an altar because they are served by priestly ministers giving them alms;\textsuperscript{193} the widows’ ministry consists in praying for Church members, fasting, working with wool for the poor, visiting the sick, and laying hands on the sick with the permission of the bishop or deacon.\textsuperscript{194} Just as priests served at the altar in the Old Testament, the bishop and deacons serve widows in the early Church; the widows’ likening to an altar directly corresponds to their relationship to the bishops, presbyters, and deacons. The message of this passage is consistent with the messages drawn from other passages in the Didascalia that charge the bishops and deacons with the responsibility of caring for the widows, and for collecting the alms from reputable sources to redistribute amongst the widows.

Bishops are advised to “thus take care and be diligent to serve the widows out of the ministry of a pure conscience, that something they ask and request may be given them quickly with their prayers.”\textsuperscript{195} Bishops are strongly admonished not to take money for widows and orphans from people who would give “polluted lucre,” including those who have treated their slaves badly, oppressed the poor, used their bodies wickedly, made idols, cheated others, collected taxes unjustly, murdered, spied, killed unjustly in wars, committed usury, extorted from others, etc.\textsuperscript{196} There are severe consequences for the bishop who accepts tainted money: “those who nourish widows from these (sources) shall be found guilty in judgement in the day of the Lord.”\textsuperscript{197} Bishops and deacons must verify

\textsuperscript{193} Osiek, “Widow as Altar,” 164.
\textsuperscript{194} Vööbus, DA 15, p. 149.
\textsuperscript{195} Vööbus, DA 18, p. 163.
\textsuperscript{196} Ibid., pp. 163-64.
\textsuperscript{197} Ibid., p. 164.
the purity of offerings placed on the widow-altars, just like the Old Testament priests verified the purity of offerings.

It is important for the widow to receive alms only from people who are in good standing with the Church:

But again, if she be nourished from (the sources) of iniquity, she cannot offer her service and her intercession with purity before God. Even if she is righteous and pray for the wicked, her intercession for them will not be heard, but that (only) for herself alone. For God tries the heart in judgement, and receives intercessions in discrimination. But if they pray for those who have sinned and repented, their prayer will be heard. Indeed, those who are in sin, and do not repent, not only are they assuredly not heard when they pray, but they even call their offenses to remembrance before God.198

Purity was essential in the Jewish Temple. Impure things, like the money of sinners or alms received from questionable sources, desecrated the altar. No unclean things can be placed on the altar (Gen. 8:20; Gen. 22: 1-9, Deut. 12:26-27, Deut. 26: 1-4). The Didascalist supports this notion by saying that “indeed, it is written: ‘There shall not go up upon the altar of the Lord of the price of a dog or the fee of a harlot’” (see Deut. 23:18).199 “Guilty” bishops “take alms from those who are blameworthy.” It is the bishops’ fault if the widows receive tainted alms since collecting and distributing alms is their responsibility. If widows “pray for fornicators and transgressors of the Law through your blindness, and be not heard, their requests not being received, you will force blasphemy to come upon the word through your evil management, as though God were not good and ready to give.”200 Bishops might reply thus to these prohibitions against accepting tainted money: “[T]hese are those who alone give alms, and if we do not accept

198 Ibid., p. 165.
199 Ibid.
200 Ibid.
then, from whence shall the orphans and widows and those afflicted be served?"201 The Didascalist reminds the bishop that “God has said to you: On this account have you received the gifts of the Levites, the first fruits and offerings of your people, that you might be nourished and even have more, so that you might not be compelled to take (gifts) from evil persons.”202 The Didascalist also responds, “[B]ut if the churches are so poor that those who are in want must be nourished by those who are such, it were better for you rather to be destroyed by famine than to take from evil persons.”203 If the bishops find themselves “in want,” they should “tell the brethren, and let them work amongst themselves and give”; thus, the bishops will be able to receive alms from reputable people.204

The widows in the Didascalia are asked to pray, which is a consistent task for widows in the New Testament and early Church literature. The task of prayer for widows is more focused in the Didascalia than in previous Church literature, however, because that document asks the widow to pray specifically for Church members and to not pray with an excommunicated Church member. The task of prayer can include laying hands on sick people, a task not cited in earlier sources about widows’ tasks. Another distinctive element in the Didascalia is that when a widow receives alms, she should give the alms to the bishop or the deacon to be redistributed. The Didascalist reports that some widows were begging and keeping the alms for themselves, and some widows were redistributing the alms themselves and charging interest (thus they were guilty of usury). Some widows were also receiving alms from ill-gotten gain, as the exhortations to the

201 Ibid.
202 Ibid., pp. 165-66.
204 Vööbus, DA 18, p. 166.
bishop and his deacons indicate. In Ignatius’s and Polycarp’s epistles, care of the widow is mentioned, but the system for their care is not specified explicitly in these epistles, nor do Ignatius and Polycarp suggest that there was a problem of widows making “inordinate demands on the ‘common chest’” that is suggested by the Didascalist. Ignatius does imply episcopal control of almsgiving, exhorting the faithful to do nothing without the bishop.

Charlotte Methuen asserts that chapters fourteen and fifteen of the *Didascalia* “probably seek to limit the functions of women in general and widows in particular.” Alistair Stewart suggests that the “significant issue may be less control of widows than control of those offering patronage as rivals to the *episkopos*.” I think it is likely both an issue of attempting to control the widows who were out of line, and at the same time trying to keep patrons in check, especially those patrons who were excommunicated and who wanted to salve their consciences by helping widows, even though they were funding the widows with “filthy lucre.” It is clear from the text that the Didascalist is concerned with both the widows’ functions (based on his admonitions against them) and the rogue patrons (who were giving alms directly to the widows instead of giving them to the bishops ordeacons for redistribution, or were pressuring Church leaders to accept as alms ill-gotten goods). The Didascalist asserts that the problematic widows are sources of distraction in Church and a scandal to the community because of the distracting gossip

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that they spread, the trouble they stir up when they seek patronage apart from the bishops’ distribution of alms, and the heretical teaching they spread.

The widow who wishes to please God shares with the altar the characteristics of immovability, silence, purity requirements, and the reception of sacrifices ministered exclusively by priestly officials, and both the widow and the altar facilitate communication between the Lord and his people by being loci of offerings of prayer. The incense or parts of the victim burned on the altar rose to the Lord, which symbolized prayers to the Lord, and the widow offered prayers to the Lord on behalf of herself and the Church.

Polyc. Phil. 4.3 compares only the widow to the altar, whereas in the Didascalia, “the allusion to widows is part of a whole series of such comparisons for all ranks of the clergy and special categories in the community,” with the orphan and other needy folk being added to the list as someone who is considered a type of the altar. As noted earlier in this chapter, however, the orphans are not tasked with anything as a group besides praying for their benefactors. The widows are tasked with praying for the whole Church that can include the laying on of hands for the sick, while orphans are only asked to pray for those who give alms; widows are part of an order, while orphans are not; and widows were asked to remain in one place, while orphans were not. While not a literal altar upon which the sacrifice of the Eucharist is offered, the widows and orphans nonetheless represent a type of the altar. In the early Church the care for this type of the altar serves as a kind of litmus test for those who worship Jesus Christ and who believe in

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208 Osiek, “Widow as Altar,” 167, notes that the idea of prayer as sacrifice is also seen in Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho 117.2; and Irenaeus, Against Heresies 4.18.6.

209 Osiek, “Widow as Altar,” 165.
his presence in the Eucharist, separating true Christians from those who are not (cf. Ign. Smyrn. 6.2-7.1). The widow as the altar of God in the early Church is a fulfillment of the Old Testament altar, and she is also invited to be nourished at the Christian *agapes*.211

**WIDOW AS THE ALTAR OF GOD IN METHODIUS OF OLYMPUS’S SYMPOSIUM AND THE APOSTOLIC CONSTITUTIONS**

The order of widows dwindled in the fourth century A.D., and we see clues to the reasons for the order’s demise in Methodius’s *Symposium* and the *Apostolic Constitutions*, even while these documents attest that widows still occupied a special place in the early Church. I will look at Methodius’s *Symposium* as it relates to the motif of the widow as the altar of God, and then I will look at the *Apostolic Constitutions*, which calls the widow an altar of God, as well.

**Methodius’s *Symposium***

Methodius of Olympus’s *Symposium*, sometimes referred to as the “Banquet of the Ten Virgins,” celebrates chastity “as the highest form of Christian life,” and describes “the life of chastity as foreshadowing the final perfection of soul and body as the ‘consummation of all things.’”212 Before Methodius links widows to the altar in his *Symposium*, he calls virgins God’s altar:

What is more, it has been a tradition that the community of those who are chaste is God’s unbloody altar: so great and glorious a thing is virginity. And therefore it should be kept absolutely pure and undefiled, removed from contact with the impurities of the flesh; it should be set up within, before the testimony, gilded with divine wisdom in the Holy of Holies, sending forth to the Lord the sweet odor of love. Indeed He says: After the altar of bronze before the holocausts and

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210 Hints of this idea are found in Vööbus, *DA* 9, pp. 104-5, and pp. 109-10.
212 Lloyd G. Patterson, *Methodius of Olympus: Divine Sovereignty, Human Freedom, and Life in Christ* (Washington, D.C: Catholic University of America Press, 1997), 64-65. The birth date of Methodius of Olympus is unknown, but it is surmised that he died c. A.D. 311. I will cite the works in this translation by title, book, chapter, and page number.
the offerings thou shalt make another altar of setim-wood…and thou shall overlay it with gold…and thou shall set it over against the veil that is over the ark of the testimony, before the propitiatory, that is, over the testimonies, wherein I shall make myself known to thee. And Aaron shall burn sweet-smelling incense upon it in the morning. When he shall dress the lamps, he shall burn an everlasting incense before the Lord throughout your generations. He shall not offer upon it incense of another composition, nor oblation nor victim; and he shall not offer a libation.213

Methodius seems to be the earliest surviving Christian witness for use of the phrase “unbloody altar.”214 Later in his text, as we will see, Methodius compares virgins to the golden altar and widows to the holocaust altar; in the Old Testament, animal sacrifices were placed on the bronze altar, and incense was placed on the golden altar. That latter fact could account for Methodius’s comparison of the virgins to the unbloody/golden altar, for the golden altar never had blood sacrifices on it.

The virgins in heaven will be very close to the Lord, much in the way that the golden altar was closest to the Lord in the Temple. Commenting on Symposium 5.6, Herbert Musurillo states that “the entire passage, containing reminiscences of Rom. 7.14, Heb. 10.1, and 2 Cor. 3.6, 16, is important for an understanding of Methodius’ fusion of Platonism and Alexandrian allegorism. The following scheme of relationships is suggested, although they are not always so clear in Methodius:

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<tr>
<td>The Tabernacle</td>
<td>the Church</td>
<td>Heaven</td>
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214 A search in the Thesaurus Linguae Graecae yielded only two additional, later uses of “unbloody altar”: the second homily of Pseudo-Chrysostom on the martyr Romanus (4th or 5th century, PG 50, 615) and the Questions and Answers of Pseudo-Caesarius, chapter 188 (6th century). As Rev. Joseph G. Mueller, S.J., pointed out in correspondence, “usually the word ‘unbloody’ modifies ‘worship’ or ‘sacrifice’ in Greek Christian parlance, at least for the texts in the Thesaurus Linguae Graecae. In both [of the other instances that ‘unbloody altar’ is cited], the expression refers to the altar in Christian churches used for the Mass. This idea is derived…from the frequent reference to unbloody worship and unbloody sacrifice applied to the Christian cult from pretty early on.”
Moses’ exemplar (of the Tabernacle) Our idea of Heaven Heaven

For Methodius the final revelation of the Reality will begin with the Millennium, after the resurrection of the body."  

Musurillo, it could be said that the shadow (the Old Testament type) is the altar (both the bronze and the golden), the image (of the bronze altar) is the group of holy widows who are the living altar of God, and the reality is in heaven. Later in the Symposium 5.8, Methodius compares the widows to the bronze altar and the virgins to the golden altar:

Just as the Jews foretold our present dispensation, so too we foreshadow the celestial: the Tabernacle was a symbol of the Church, as the Church is a symbol of heaven. And since this is so, and the Tabernacle, as I have said, is taken as a type of Church, the altars too must represent something within the Church.

Thus the brazen altar is to be compared with the enclosure and assembly of holy widows; for indeed they are a living altar of God, and to this we bring calves and tithes and free-will offerings as a sacrifice unto the Lord.

And so the golden altar within the Holy of Holies that is placed before the testimony, on which it is forbidden to offer sacrifices and libation, should be applied to those who live in the state of chastity and have fortified their bodies with unalloyed gold, uncorrupted by intercourse. Now people commonly speak in praise of gold for two reasons: first, because it does not rust, and secondly, because its color seems in a way to resemble the rays of the sun.

And thus it is a very appropriate symbol of virginity, which does not admit any stain or spot, but is ever brilliant with the light of the Word. For this reason it stands farther within the Holy of Holies, and before the veil, sending up prayers like incense to the Lord, with undefiled hands, acceptable for an odor of sweetness. So too did John teach us when he said that the incense in the vials of the twenty-four elders were the prayers of the saints.

In Symposium 5.7-8, Methodius makes “the distinction of shadow, image, and reality,” comparing people in the Church to Temple furnishings.  

L. G. Patterson notes that “the furnishings of the tabernacle are to be interpreted as describing the Christian virtues, with

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215 Musurillo, Symposium, 211 n 30.
216 Methodius, Symposium 5.8, pp. 89-90. Cf. 1 Tim. 5:9-13; Eph. 5:2; Rev. 5:8.
217 Musurillo, Symposium, 15.
chastity, chief among them, being represented by the golden altar that stands before the
veil of the tabernacle.”

I would nuance Patterson’s remarks to say that the text says that the golden altar applies not to the virtue of chastity but to people, that is, “those who live in the state of chastity.”

In previous early Christian texts we looked at that referred to the widow as an
“altar of God,” there was no distinction made as to which altar the widow was a type of;
that is, the widow was not said to represent either the bronze altar or the golden altar. It
could be that previous authors did not make a distinction in terms of whether the widow
represented the bronze altar or the golden altar because the widow was seen as
representing both altars; the widow represented the bronze altar because she received
offerings, and she represented the golden altar because she offered prayers. Moreover, in
Jewish antiquity and early Christianity, virginity is not given the primacy of place that it
is given in Methodius. Thus in the Symposium 5.8, the widow represents the bronze altar
because she receives offerings, and because she is of lower status than that of a virgin;
while the virgin is likened to the golden altar because of her role of offering prayers, and
because she is “uncorrupted by intercourse.”

The widows claimed the dominant
category of honor until the virgins appropriated their place.

In the New Testament, Paul advises those who are unmarried to remain so, those
who are already married to remain so, too, and those who find celibacy too difficult to
marry. Ignatius of Antioch did not mention a preference for virginity over widowhood,
although he salutes the “virgins called widows” in his Epistle to the Smyrnaeans.

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218 Patterson, Methodius, 87.
Polycarp of Smyrna does not indicate a preference for virgins over widows in his epistle to the Philippians; in fact, Polycarp refers to the widows as an altar of God and does not mention the virgins as representing the altar of God. In *Ad Uxorem* 1.8, Tertullian states that “although virgins, because of their perfect integrity and inviolate purity, will look upon the face of God more closely, yet the life a widow leads is the more difficult, since it is easy not to desire that of which you are ignorant and easy to turn your back upon what you have never desired.” Tertullian goes on to say that the widow’s sacrifice is more praiseworthy because she knows what she has sacrificed while the virgin has an easier time saying no to what she has not experienced.\(^{220}\) So, although the widows are more praiseworthy in Tertullian’s eyes, he nonetheless believes that the virgins will “look upon the face of God more closely,” suggesting that he believes virginity to hold a higher place than widowhood. The author of the *Didascalia* only mentions virgins twice; once to say that a virgin should be given in marriage to a Christian when she comes of age, and another time in reference to Jesus’ birth from the virgin Mary.\(^{221}\)

Previous patristic authors who called widows altars and who mentioned the giving of material offerings to the widows (the kinds of offerings that might go on the bronze altar) include the author of the *Didascalia* and Polycarp in his epistle to the Philippians.\(^{222}\) Both Polycarp and the author of the *Didascalia* refer to the widow as an altar in the context of her need for material offerings and her task to pray, but they do not specify whether the widow is the bronze altar, the golden altar, or both. Methodius also makes it clear that the widow receives offerings, but he specifies that the widow

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\(^{220}\) Tertullian, *Ad ux.* 1.8, p. 21.

\(^{221}\) Vööbus, *DA* 17, p. 161; *DA* 20, p. 182.

\(^{222}\) Vööbus, *DA* 8, p. 92; *DA* 9, p. 101; Polyc. *Phil.* 4.3.
represents the bronze altar while the virgin represents the golden altar. According to Methodius, the virgin has primacy over the widow because of her virginal state, as signified by the comparison of the virgin to the golden altar rather than to the bronze altar.\textsuperscript{223} Methodius and Tertullian appear to be in agreement that virginity held primacy of place over widowhood. F. Candido surmises that in Methodius’s community, there might have been an order of virgins forming “that was beginning to assume a higher dignity than that of widows.”\textsuperscript{224} If such a community of virgins existed in Methodius’s community, it would not be a stretch to suggest that such a community of virgins existed in Tertullian’s community also.

Methodius’s preference for virginity is based on his reading of how the advent of Christ improves the situation of the human race. H. Musurillo notes that “one of the greatest losses of the human race, in Methodius’s view, was its inability, until the time of Christ, to be perfectly chaste. By God’s providence, man evolved through a period when incest was allowed, through polygamy to monogamy. But only through Christ were men able to embrace virginity.”\textsuperscript{225} Methodius asserts that through Christ, the “Archvirgin,”\textsuperscript{226} people are able to exalt and to embrace the virginal state themselves.\textsuperscript{227} Thus, I think that the holy widow who represents the bronze altar constitutes a step in the evolution towards the realization of the ideal of virginity, with her vow of continence after the death of her

\textsuperscript{223} Cf. Methodius, \textit{Symposium} 5.8, pp. 89-90.
\textsuperscript{225} Musurillo, \textit{Symposium}, 18-19.
\textsuperscript{226} Methodius “inaugurates the term \textit{Archiparthenos} (Archvirgin),” according to Amy Brown Hughes, “The Legacy of the Feminine in the Christology of Origen of Alexandria, Methodius of Olympus, and Gregory of Nyssa,” \textit{Vigiliae Christianae} 70, no. 1 (2016): 60.
\textsuperscript{227} Methodius, \textit{Symposium} 1.1, p. 46. See also \textit{Symposium} 10.3, pp. 144-45 and \textit{Symposium} 10.5, pp. 146-47. See Brown, \textit{The Body and Society}, 184-85.
spouse. The committed virgin fully realizes the ideal of virginity and is thus likened to the golden incense altar, which is held in higher esteem than the bronze altar. Methodius does not say that there were no virgins prior to Christ’s advent, but that the virginal state was not praised or embraced by prophets and righteous men before Jesus came.²²⁸

According to Methodius, those who choose to remain virgins for their entire lives will be ranked higher in heaven than those who did not remain virgins. Citing 1 Cor. 15:41 and Matt. 5:3 to support his claim, Methodius interprets the former passage to mean that “the Lord does not promise to give the same rewards to everyone,” and the latter passage to mean that

in this case He reveals that the order and holy choir of virgins will be the first to follow in His train as it were into a bridal chamber, into the repose of the new ages. For they were martyrs, not by enduring brief corporal pains for a space of time, but because they had the courage all their lives not to shrink from the truly Olympic contest of chastity. And by resisting the fierce torments of pleasure and fear and grief and other evils that come from men’s wickedness, they carry off the first prize before all the rest, being ranked higher in the land of promise.²²⁹

Finally, F. Candido notes that the virgins in the Symposium “were encouraged to teach although the topics of their teaching were expressly forbidden for widows in the Didascalia Apostolorum.”²³⁰ Methodius, however, does not seem to exclude widows, or any other people, from teaching once they have been baptized and “become the Church.”²³¹ Thus, Unlike Methodius’s Symposium, the Didascalia forbids widows and

²²⁸ Methodius, Symposium 1.4, p. 46.
²³⁰ Candido, “Symposium,” 111.
²³¹ Methodius, Symposium 3.8, pp. 66-67: “Those who are more perfect and have embraced the truth with more perception, and thus, by their perfect faith and purification, have detached themselves from the absurdities of the flesh—these become the Church and the helpmate of Christ; they are the virgin, as the Apostle tells us, espoused and wedded to Him that by receiving from Him the pure and fertile seed of doctrine they might collaborate with him in the preaching of the Gospel for the salvation of all the rest. But those who are still imperfect and have only begun their lessons in the ways of salvation, are formed and brought forth as by mothers in labor by those who are more perfect, until they are born and reborn unto the
laypersons to teach about most things regarding the faith. However, like the Didascalia, Symposium states that it is okay for widows to remarry, as long as they are not enrolled as permanent widows in the order of widows, paraphrasing Paul who “judges that a second marriage is far better than ‘burning’ and impurity.”

The Apostolic Constitutions

Books one through six of the Apostolic Constitutions contains a reworking of the whole Didascalia. Widows, orphans, the poor, and the stranger are still objects of charity in the Apostolic Constitutions, and the Christian faithful are asked to pray for the widows. Christian widows are counted amongst those who have pleased the Lord “from the beginning of the world.”

greatness and beauty of virtue. And when by their progress these too have become the Church, they cooperate in their turn in the birth and rearing of other children, bringing to term in the receptive soul as in a mother’s womb, the spotless desire of the Word.”

232 Vööbus, DA 15, p. 144.
233 Methodius, Symposium 3.12, p. 71; cf. 1 Cor. 7:8-9., and Vööbus, DA 14, p. 142.
235 Apostolic Constitutions 7.29, p. 471, trans. Roberts and Donaldson. I will cite the works in this translation by title, book, chapter, and page number. The widows are listed with virgins and widows in the Apostolic Constitutions 8.30 as recipients of the tithe that is given to the bishops, and that tithe is also meant for “those under the trial of poverty.” The fact that widows are mentioned in two different places as recipients of tithes, but that the second mention of widows receiving tithes has the widows listed with virgins (and both widows and virgins grouped separately from the poor) seems indicative that the widows in the second instance are enrolled widows, whose role in the Church is not merely that of recipients of charity; see p. 494.
236 Apostolic Constitutions 8.10, p. 485; see also the Apostolic Constitutions 8.12, p. 490, where the bishop prays to God for “those that are in virginity; for the widows of the Church; for those in honourable marriage and childbearing; for the infants of Thy people” that God will “not permit any of us to ‘become castaways.’” The order intimates that widows are not as in positions considered as honorific as the virgins, but in positions considered more honorific than positions married women held.
237 Apostolic Constitutions 8.12, pp. 489-90; the list of those who have pleased the Lord “since the beginning of the world” includes “patriarchs, prophets, righteous men, apostles, martyrs, confessors, bishops, presbyters, deacons, sub-deacons, readers, singers, virgins, widows, and lay persons.” As Rev. Joseph G. Mueller, S.J., notes, the widows on this list come between subdeacons, readers, singers, virgins, on one hand, and lay people, on the other hand. These all seem to be roles in the early Church. It is hard to find subdeacons elsewhere in ancient Christian sources.
the order of those who receive the Eucharist. To be a bishop, presbyter, deacon, or “any one of the sacerdotal catalogue,” one may not marry a widow, a divorced woman, a harlot, a servant, or one belonging to the theater.

Many of the prescriptions regarding widows in the Constitutions are comparable to those in the Didascalia. For example, we learn that similarly to the Didascalia and 1 Timothy 5, members of the order of widows in the Constitutions should have been widowed long enough not to be tempted to remarry:

And I Lebbæus, surnamed Thadæus, make this constitution in regard to widows: A widow is not ordained; yet if she lost her husband a great while, and has lived soberly and unblameably, and has taken extraordinary care of her family, as Judith and Anna—those women of great reputation—let her be chosen into the order of widows. But if she has lately lost her yokefellow, let her not be believed, but let her youth be judged of by the time; for the affections do sometimes grow aged with men, if they be not restrained by a better bridle.

As in the Didascalia, comparisons are made in the Apostolic Constitutions between what was done in the Old Testament and what replaces it in the early Church, for example:

Those which were then the sacrifices now are prayers, and intercessions, and thanksgivings. Those which were then first-fruits, and tithes, and offerings, and gifts, now are oblations, which are presented by holy bishops to the Lord God, through Jesus Christ, who has died for them. For these are your high priests, as the presbyters are your priests, and your present deacons instead of your Levites; as are also your readers, your singers, your porters, your deaconesses, your widows, your virgins, and your orphans: but He who is above all is the High Priest.

The author of the Apostolic Constitutions holds up Judith and Anna, biblical widows from the Old and New Testaments respectively, as role models for those admitted to the

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238 Apostolic Constitutions 8.13, p. 490.
239 Apostolic Constitutions 8.47.18, p. 501. This proscription has its origins in Old Testament priestly legislation; cf. Lev. 21:14, Ezek. 44:22.
240 Apostolic Constitutions 8.25, p. 493. Cf. Vööbus, DA 14, pp. 141-43. Judith was also held up for emulation by St. Ambrose of Milan (A.D. 340-397), who was contemporaneous with the final redactor of the Apostolic Constitutions; see M. Miller, Sexuality and Authority, 196-200.
order of widows.\textsuperscript{242} The \textit{Didascalia} mentions Anna as a role model for widows but does not mention Judith.\textsuperscript{243} Finally, widows are not to be ordained; this tradition was in place in the \textit{Apostolic Tradition}, and the \textit{Didascalia} mentions only bishops, elders, and deacons as being ordained.\textsuperscript{244}

The widow is again compared to the altar in the \textit{Apostolic Constitutions} as she is in the \textit{Didascalia}, but there is a distinction in the \textit{Constitutions} that is not present in the \textit{Didascalia}. In the \textit{Constitutions}, the widow represents the bronze altar while the virgin represents the golden one, just as we saw in Methodius’s \textit{Symposium}: “Let the widows and the orphans be esteemed as representing the altar of burnt-offering; and let the virgins be honoured as representing the altar of incense, and the incense itself.”\textsuperscript{245} That the virgins are honored implies that the virgins received material support. The \textit{Apostolic Constitutions} seems to be familiar with the tradition that is first seen in Methodius, and incorporating it into its theology. The allocation of the burnt-offering altar to orphans and widows, along with allotting to the virgins the higher-ranking altar of incense indicates that the virgins were held in higher esteem than the widows by the final redaction of the \textit{Apostolic Constitutions}. While books one through six of the \textit{Apostolic Constitutions} are largely a rewriting of the \textit{Didascalia}, these nuances regarding the

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\item \textit{Apostolic Constitutions} 3.7, p. 428 (Judith); \textit{Apostolic Constitutions} 3.1, p. 426 (Anna). Paul F. Bradshaw, Maxwell E. Johnson, L. Edward Phillips, and Harold W. Attridge, \textit{Apostolic Constitutions} 8.25.1-3 in \textit{The Apostolic Tradition: A Commentary} (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), 73: “A widow is not ordained, but if a long time has passed since she lost her husband and she has lived chastely and above reproach and has taken excellent care of [her] family, as the respectable women, Judith and Anna, let her be appointed to the order of widows.”
\item Vööbus, \textit{DA} 14, p. 142.
\item \textit{Apostolic Constitutions} 2.26, p. 410.
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bronze altar and the golden altar are evidence of a later redactor who had either read Methodius or was familiar with a theology of the primacy of virginity.

**CONCLUSIONS: THE END OF AN ERA**

In this chapter, we have looked at widows in Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp of Smyrna, Tertullian, the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, Methodius of Olympus, and the *Apostolic Constitutions*. There are threads of continuity between all of these works, as well as a developing trajectory regarding the rise and demise of the order of widows in the first few centuries of the newly forming Church. The threads of continuity largely deal with the necessity to care for the widow, who remained in a vulnerable position economically, and whose position socially was developing from one of shame in antiquity to one of honor in the early Church.

Ignatius of Antioch salutes the “virgins called widows” in Ign. *Smyrn*. 13.1. The widows are likened to the altar of God in Polyc. *Phil*. 4.3, without distinction as to whether the widows represent the bronze altar, the golden altar, or both. Tertullian also refers to the widow as an altar of God in *Ad ux*. 1.7, but Tertullian emphasizes the necessity of only being once married in reference to being called an altar of God, while Polycarp emphasizes the need for ethical purity to be considered an altar of God; their emphasis of the one does not preclude the prescriptions and emphasis of the other, however. The Didascalist likens widows to the “altar of God” also, and does not say whether the widow represents the bronze altar or the golden altar. I think it likely that the widow represented both the bronze altar and the golden altar because she received offerings (as did the bronze altar) and was given the task of prayer (which relates to the function of the golden altar). The developing trajectory for widows in the sources we
have encountered in this chapter deals with the increasing esteem accorded the widow, culminating in certain widows being admitted into an order of widows, and likened to an altar of God with special tasks to pray (which could include the laying on of hands), and to intercede for the Church. By the time we get to Methodius, however, the widows represent the bronze altar while virgins represent the golden altar; this distinction is also made in the *Apostolic Constitutions*.

Enrolled widows still retained honorific positions in the early church at the time of the writing of the *Apostolic Constitutions*, quite literally: “Let those women which are married, and have children, be placed by themselves; but let the virgins, and the widows, and the elder women, stand or sit before all the rest; and let the deacon be the disposer of the places, that every one of those that comes in may go to his proper place, and may not sit at the entrance.” These dispositions apply to where Christians were gathering in the Eucharistic assembly. A widow is even allowed to serve as a deaconess, although a virgin is preferred: “Let the deaconess be a pure virgin; or, at the least, a widow who has been but once married, faithful, and well esteemed.” Paul Bradshaw notes that “the order of widows declined in the fourth century, being replaced to some extent by the order of deaconesses”, perhaps as widows were allowed to serve as deaconesses, the orders of widows and deaconesses blended together because the duties and lifestyles of the two orders overlapped. Susanna Elm thinks it likely that the “office’ of the enrolled widow gradually merged with the function of deaconess,” citing imperial legislation from

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246 *Apostolic Constitutions* 2.57, p. 421.
248 Bradshaw, *Apostolic Tradition*, 71. It could be that while the role of a Christian virgin in Methodius’s *Symposium* is not very clear, the *Symposium* nevertheless suggests that Methodius’s community was transitioning from the order of widows to the order of virgins; see Candido, “Symposium,” 117.
A.D. 390 in support of her thesis.\textsuperscript{249} The order of widows dwindled as virginity took primacy in the evolving Church, and widows were grouped with virgins and deaconesses. Where once there were “virgins who called themselves widows,” we now see the widows in a secondary position to virgins.\textsuperscript{250} As ascetic communities rose up that were open to both virgins and widows, the orders of widows and virgins may have phased out in favor of these evolving organized and inclusive communities.\textsuperscript{251} As we will see in the next section, however, orders of widows are reviving, at least in the United States.

\textsuperscript{249} Elm, \textit{Virgins of God}, 176-77, writes that “on 21 June 390 the emperors Theodosius, Valentinian, and Arcadius stipulated that ‘according to the precept of the Apostle, no woman shall be transferred to the society of deaconesses unless she is sixty years of age and has the desired offspring at home’”; even though the legislation (which also applied to widows) was partially revoked four months later, it shows overlap in prescriptions for widows and deaconesses at the time.

\textsuperscript{250} Basil of Caesarea (c. A.D. 329/30-379) commented on a grandmother, mother, and sister (of a fallen virgin) “who all adopted the ascetic life; in his comments, Basil asserts that, “despite their undeniable virtues, the fallen virgin’s sister had surpassed her mother and grandmother, since the latter were both widowed, and as such unable to achieve the same ascetic virtue as their physically intact offspring”\textsuperscript{;} Elm, \textit{Virgins of God}, 143. Basil’s comments show that “with increasing emphasis on celibacy, the prestige of the status of ‘widow’ diminished steadily in favor of the virgin…. By the end of the fourth century the role of the widow had dwindled into insignificance, its demise being accelerated by the rise of virginity as an ideal and the arrival of the deaconess”; see Elm, \textit{Virgins of God}, 172.

\textsuperscript{251} Gregory of Nyssa’s sister, the virgin Macrina, drew virgins, at least one widow (named Vetiana), and at least one deaconess to her in community life; see Gregory of Nyssa, \textit{Life of St. Macrina}, trans. Joan M. Petersen, in \textit{Handmaids of the Lord: Holy Women in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages} (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1996), 74.
CHAPTER 5—REVIVING THE ORDER OF WIDOWS

INTRODUCTION

In the first four chapters of this dissertation, I traced the development of the status of widows from the Old Testament through the first few centuries of the early Church. We saw that while the widow was seen as vulnerable and in need of care from the ancient Israelites and from the early Christians, there was nonetheless an important development in the widow’s status over the centuries. An object of pity and sometimes scorn and ridicule in the Old Testament era, the widow develops into a figure of honor in the first few centuries of the Church; she is allowed admittance into an order of widows, receives the honor of material support from the Church, and is also referred to as an altar of God. Widows’ activities were also regulated, however. Widows were prohibited from much (though not all) teaching, they were exhorted to stay at home (as immovable altars), and alms given to widows were regulated through the bishop. The order of widows diminished by the fourth century of our era, although in subsequent centuries widows continued to play important roles in establishing communities for Christian women, serving as abbesses of women’s communities in virtue “of their [the widows’] age, their wisdom, and their experience,” and founding religious orders and communities.¹

¹ Elizabeth Rees, “Christian Widowhood,” New Blackfriars 76, no. 896 (September 1995): 395-396. Rees notes that St. Jerome “directed several widows” including St. Marcella, who “established several communities for other Roman women,” St. Paula (d. 404), who established a monastery for men and one for women, and St. Melanie, who “became superior of a convent on the Mount of Olives.” Widows who became abbeses of monasteries include St. Elizabeth of Hungary (1207-31) and St. Bridget of Sweden (1303-73). The widow St. Frances of Rome (1384-1440) founded the Oblates of Mary, a group of laywomen who served the poor (eventually the widowed members lived in a communal house), and the widow St. Jane Frances de Chantal (1572-1641) founded the Visitation Order to care for the poor.
Christina Hip-Flores points out that in the final document of the Fourteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in 2015 (also known as the Synod on the Family), the synod fathers noted that “from the beginning and in the course of time, the Church has paid special attention to widows (cf. 1 Tim 5:3-16), even establishing the *ordo viduarum* which might even be reinstated in the present-day.” The possibility of the reinstatement of the order of widows in the near future leads to some questions. Who can be admitted to the order of widows? What are the qualifications needed to enter an order of widows? How does the order of widows relate to ecclesiastical authority? Hip-Flores asserts that “because a recent body of canonical legislation is utterly lacking, the answers to these questions must be sought in the writings of the early Church Fathers and in the life of the primitive Christian community.” I completely agree with this last statement, and I would add that while recent canonical legislation is absent, we can seek to answer the questions she poses by looking at two associations of women formed recently in the United States by widows, the Widows of Prayer (WP) and the Daughters of Divine Hope (DDH). In this chapter I will study these two groups who are currently looking to revive the ancient practice of the order of widows, and look at how the order of widows in antiquity and the recent attempts to revive the order of widows mutually illuminate each other. This is one of the first times that we see a group of widows attempt to emerge as an order of widows per se.

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5 Ibid.
since antiquity, and what we know of widows in antiquity can help provide some
framework for revitalizing an order of widows today.

In her article “Practicing the Order of Widows: A New Call for an Old Vocation,”
M. Therese Lysaught argues that “we find within the Roman Catholic tradition advocacy
for a renewed understanding of the vocation of the elderly within the Church.” She
argues further that a renewal of the ancient order of widows could address “health issues
of older women (devaluation, marginalization, loss of voice, impoverishment,
debilitation, loneliness, isolation, and euthanasia),” thereby providing “a powerful
witness to the very culture the Church seeks to transform.” In the Ancient Near East and
through the first few centuries of the Church, widows also faced devaluation,
marginalization, loss of voice, and isolation. Lysaught crafts her argument on the basis
of M. Kaveny’s article, “The Order of Widows: What the Early Church Can Teach Us
About Older Women and Healthcare,” as well as the statement of the Pontifical Council
for the Laity entitled “The Dignity of Older People and Their Mission in the Church and
in the World.” Lysaught notes that this latter “document refreshingly parts company
with most literature on ‘religion and aging,’ which tends to posit older people as
primarily recipients of the pastoral care of others. Instead, it importantly configures older
persons as agents, as those who continue to contribute to the mission of the Church.”

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6 Lysaught, “Practicing the Order of Widows,” 51.
7 John Paul II, Mulieris Dignitatem 19 (Boston: St. Paul Books and Media, 1998), 69, expresses
concern for the loneliness of widows.
8 Lysaught, “Practicing the Order of Widows,” 51.
9 Kaveny, “The Order of Widows: What the Early Church can Teach Us About Older Women and
Older People and their Mission in the Church and in the World (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1998).
10 Lysaught, “Practicing the Order of Widows,” 54. See also John Paul II, To the Elderly 13,
(Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2000), 28: “My thoughts turn in a special way to you, widows and
widowers, who find yourselves alone in the final part of your lives; to you, elderly men and women
Religious, who for long years have faithfully served the cause of the Kingdom of Heaven; and to you, dear
Moreover, in antiquity as now, the Church exhorts the faithful to care for the widow and the marginalized. While widows in today’s United States share with those in antiquity problems such as marginalization and poverty, American widows have recourse to government aid, as well as aid from religious and private charities to help alleviate their suffering. Christian widows in antiquity were assisted by the Church, but not by the state. American widows today have the same legal rights as men, whereas the legal standing of widows in antiquity was precarious, and more often than not the law deferred to the rights of males over females. In that sense, widows today can be said to be slightly better off than their sisters in antiquity, at least in terms of legal standing and rights in the United States.

In the next sections, I will study two contemporary groups of widows in the United States who currently contribute to the mission of the Church through their apostolates of offering spiritual support to clergy, namely the Widows of Prayer (WP) and the Daughters of the Divine Hope (DDH). The main material for my study of these groups comes in the form of interviews I have had with their foundresses. When

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Lysaught and Kaveny published their articles in 2005 calling for a renewal of orders of widows that had been known in the early Church, they thought that no orders of widows existed in the United States.\textsuperscript{13} Indeed, no orders that were comparable to the orders of widows in the ancient Church were known at that point, although one order of a different sort was in its infancy, the WP, which was founded in 1994 in Appleton, Wisconsin.\textsuperscript{14} The DDH, which currently has one hermitess who is a widow, began with several widows living in community and was founded in 2010 in Tyler, Texas, after the articles by Lysaught and Kaveny were published. Other widowed women, in different parts of the country, consecrate themselves to God with the permission of their local bishops and continue to live in the world or with their families while they practice corporal and spiritual works of mercy.\textsuperscript{15} Still other widows have made vows through their respective bishops in France and England.\textsuperscript{16}

The WP and the DDH share in common with the ancient order of widows a task of prayer, although in both the WP and the DDH, their apostolate of prayer is more focused than that of the ancient order of widows, for the WP and the DDH pray especially for the clergy and future clergy of the Church. The WP and DDH also both commit to continence as part of their vocation as consecrated widows, just as those

\textsuperscript{13} Lysaught, “Practicing the Order of Widows,” 53. Kaveny, “The Order of Widows,” 17; here Kaveny states “There is no Order of Widows in the contemporary Church. Historians tell us that it declined in importance after the beginning of the fourth century, as many of its functions were assumed by deaconesses and later, by monastic women.”
\textsuperscript{14} The first published article about the Widows of Prayer appeared on February 2, 2002, in the Appleton Post Crescent, a local Wisconsin newspaper, so it is not hard to understand why this group was not more widely known until recently.
\textsuperscript{15} For example, see the widows who consecrate themselves in the Society of our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity (SOLT); see http://www.solt.net/consecrated-widows/.
enrolled in the order of widows in antiquity were expected to live in continence after the
death of their spouse. Both the WP and DDH formed under the auspices of their
respective diocesan bishops, and both continue to work with their local bishops and
respect their bishops as their ecclesiastical authority; the enrolled widows in antiquity
were also under the auspices and protection of their bishops. Even though many
hundreds of years separate the order of widows in antiquity and the newly forming
associations of widows in the United States, they have in common their apostolate of
prayer, their commitment to continence after the death of their spouse, and their
accountability to their local bishops.

**THE WIDOWS OF PRAYER**

The WP was founded by Mary Reardon after the death of her husband of forty
years. As a married couple, Reardon and her husband prayed especially for priests.
Reardon continued to pray particularly for priests after the death of her husband, and the
task of praying for clergy became one of the constitutive elements of the Widows of
Prayer. The apostolate of the WP is “to serve Christ through His Church by praying for
priests and others in Church leadership, to be devoted to the Blessed Sacrament and to
promote the adoration of Christ in the Eucharist.” The WP has been established “with
Statues and Bylaws formed through Canonical Law as a Private Association of The
Faithful under the directive of the Bishop of the Diocese of Green Bay, Wisconsin.
[They] are also listed in the Official Catholic Directory (O.C.D.).” Reardon noted that

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17 https://widowsofprayer.org/.
18 https://widowsofprayer.org/about-us/.
19 Ibid. According to Canon 298.1, “In the Church there are associations distinct from institutes of
consecrated life and societies of apostolic life; in these associations the Christian faithful, whether clerics,
lay persons, or clerics and lay persons together, strive in a common endeavor to foster a more perfect life,
to promote public worship or Christian doctrine, or to exercise other works of the apostolate such as
the WP had to hire a canon lawyer in the process of establishing the group, which was one of the most difficult aspects of founding the group. In that respect, founding an order now is likely harder than it would have been in antiquity, considering the complexities of canon law to be navigated.

Reardon founded the order with the Capuchin Fr. John Guimond at the Monte Alverno Retreat Center in Appleton, where Reardon worked. Fr. Guimond said to Reardon that he had wanted to start an order for widows, speaking of the great need in the Church to pray for priests. Within three months after the death of her husband, Reardon had gathered six widows together, and the WP was born on September 29, 1994, when they had their first evening of recollection. Over one-hundred fifteen widows in Wisconsin, Indiana, and Michigan have made promises within the WP to dedicate their lives to God, to live a life of prayer (particularly for the Church, its priests, and religious leaders), and to live a chaste celibate life, but fifty-five have died. The rapid change in numbers due to the death of elderly members is one of the difficulties in sustaining groups of widows. Early Church sources do not mention whether it ran into this problem of diminishing numbers of widows enrolled; perhaps because charity for the widow was included in being enrolled in the order of widows, the Church might not have had trouble sustaining larger numbers in the group.

To enter the WP, the candidate goes through this process:

It takes three years of discernment. After the application is received and approved, the candidate begins the first year of discernment and works with a Formation initiatives of evangelization, works of piety or charity, and those which animate the temporal order with a Christian spirit.” Canon 298.3 states, “No private association of the Christian faithful is recognized in the Church unless competent authority reviews its statutes.”

20 Interview with Mary Reardon, WP, and Carlotta Stricker, WP, by the author, June 30, 2014, Appleton, WI.
21 Ibid.
Director to continue her spiritual growth. At the end of the first year, she is invited to make her first Promise, then again at the end of her second year of discernment. The third year the Widow of Prayer makes her third and final Promise which is permanent. The Widows of Prayer who have made their final Promise are able to make a Private Vow of Consecration which is Simplicity, Chasity and Obedience.\(^2^2\)

The widows have varying responsibilities to their respective families, so they live simplicity each in her own way, guided by the Rule of Life of the Third Order Regular Franciscans. The widows promise not to remarry and to be obedient to God. The widows make private vows of consecration, but because there is currently no canon law about the consecration of widows in the Latin Rite, the widows are not consecrated as widows, per se.

The ages and health situations of the members of the WP vary widely, so their commitments to prayer can vary as well, but most WP members incorporate the following spiritual practices into their apostolates: praying the Liturgy of the Hours (morning and evening prayer), daily Mass and Eucharist, adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, making a Holy Hour, recitation of the Rosary, Scripture reading, and contemplative or mental prayer.\(^2^3\) The members of WP do not live in community presently, but Reardon’s dream would be that there would be a home for the WP, where there would be a chapel, a meeting room, and living apartments for those who wished to live in community. Reardon believes there is strength in living in community and in praying in community (referencing Matt. 18:20). The WP members who did not want to live in community would not have to. According to Reardon, in dioceses where WP


\(^{2^3}\) https://widowsopfprayer.org/q-a/.
members have been established, there have been significant increases in the number of priestly vocations.24

**THE DAUGHTERS OF DIVINE HOPE**

The DDH began when Mother Susan Catherine made her first private vows to God, which were accepted by the Bishop of Tyler, Texas, Álvaro Corrada del Río, S.J., on November 21, 2010, the Feast of the Presentation of Mary. The DDH is a public association of the faithful.25 A significant difference between a private and a public association of the faithful is that a private association of the faithful exists in virtue of a private agreement amongst themselves, and the local Church authority may or may not recognize them; a public association is established by a competent Church authority.

Mother Susan Catherine Kennedy had been married for thirty-three years when her husband, Deacon Bill Kennedy, died in 2007. Eventually three widows came to live with Mother Susan Catherine, and two out of the three women persevered into the second year of discernment and formation. All the women followed a rule created and approved by the Bishop. All of the women tried to live that rule of life, but it was very difficult to live communal life that was structured for religious who entered community life as younger, previously unmarried people. This form of communal life was not sustainable, and three of the four women in the community went back to their former ways of life, and

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24 Interview with Mary Reardon and Carlotta Stricker by author, June 30, 2014, Appleton, WI.
25 Mother Susan Catherine states, in *Year of Grace Newsletter* (2011), available at https://daughtersofdivinehope.weebly.com/uploads/1/3/9/5/13959730/yearofgrace2011newsletter.pdf: “We are established in the Catholic Church as a Public Association of the Faithful, have gained the Internal Revenue Service recognition as a religious organization and are incorporated in the State of Texas, thus we have the solid legal standing within the Church and with the federal and state governments.” Canon 312.1-3 states, “The authority competent to erect public associations is...the diocesan bishop in his own territory, but not a diocesan administrator, for diocesan associations, except, however, for those associations whose right of erection has been reserved to others by apostolic privilege.”
one of these became a consecrated person. Mother Susan Catherine has made her solemn vows to God in a public ceremony with the Bishop as witness, and she is currently completing her first year living as a hermitess.\textsuperscript{26} Private vows formed the basis for the DDH community. The other women who joined this community made private vows of poverty, chastity, obedience, and fidelity with the Bishop as witness. Mother Susan Catherine states,

\begin{quote}
Obedience is given to the Blessed Trinity. Jesus Christ is our model. It is a response of love to the Father's will as that will is revealed to us in Sacred Scripture, Sacred Tradition, the Magisterium, and articulated in the rule, statutes and directives of DDH. It is an assent of faith lived out in the present moment by action of the will and intellect. It is a choice, aided by grace, to live the gospel. The superior of the community stands in the place of Christ as the one who receives this vow and guides the sister to live it fully. Fidelity is vowed to the Blessed Trinity, the Magisterium and the Local Ordinary. It is an essential element of living the charism of Hope and the mission to ‘Take Care of My Priests.’ It is a covenant vow, a pledge of the heart, a total giving of self for the other and a public proclamation of the love and faithfulness of God as He presents Himself through His Church in His bishops. Our love for the Blessed Trinity impels us to love the Magisterium and our Local Ordinary, and this love inspires us to care for their good in mercy and justice. This is most often lived out in defending those we have given our vowed love and providing counsel, support and encouragement. You might find it helpful to think of the fidelity due in the marriage bond and what it demands of us to give to our spouse with the fullness of love.\textsuperscript{27}
\end{quote}

Working with her local bishop, Mother Susan Catherine is in a period of discernment to see what the next direction for the DDH is. After the experience of living in community that was not ultimately sustainable, she thinks that before widows discern about choosing religious life and community life for themselves, they need a quiet place of discernment, with the help of good spiritual direction, in which they can ask themselves what God is asking of them. Helping older women discern a vocation is

\textsuperscript{26} Telephone interview with Mother Susan Catherine Kennedy by author, November 21, 2018.
\textsuperscript{27} Mother Susan Catherine Kennedy, e-mail message to the author, December 17, 2018.
difficult because diocesan offices do not know what to do with older women and because older women have difficulty getting away from worldly concerns and attachments.

Mother Susan Catherine did not say that younger widows have asked to be a part of the DDH, perhaps because younger widows have dependent children or other family members or hope to remarry. No matter in what direction the Lord takes the DDH, Mother Susan Catherine believes that the community is called to be a radical witness to hope in Jesus Christ. 28

To enter the DDH, a woman needs to be at least twenty-five years old and cannot have a living spouse, dependent children, dependent parents or dependent relatives. The woman need not be a widow. She must pay for her own healthcare until she professes her final vows, when the community assumes responsibility for her healthcare. Any money that a sister receives then goes into the community. Like that of the WP, the apostolate of the DDH is directed to the clergy. Mother Susan Catherine said the DDH sisters become alms themselves; they profess poverty, so they offer themselves as alms (in lieu of material contributions) to God for the souls of the clergy worldwide. The DDH have Masses offered for the clergy, they write letters of encouragement to the clergy, and they keep up with clergy members who fall ill. Theirs is a spiritual care of the clergy; they are not going to keep house for them. The patroness of DDH is Mary, Mother of Divine Hope. Mary is the mature woman patroness, who was a widow after St. Joseph died, and who watched her son Jesus die. 29

28 Telephone interview with Mother Susan Catherine Kennedy by author, November 21, 2018.
29 Ibid.
THE ORDER OF WIDOWS IN ANTIQUITY, AND CURRENT ATTEMPTS TO REVIVE THE ORDER OF WIDOWS: POINTS OF INTERSECTION AND DIGRESSION

There is a significant chronological gap between the order of widows in antiquity and its demise, and the attempts to revive the order of widows in our present day. What we know about the order of widows in antiquity can help inform current attempts to revive this ancient vocation, and the recent attempts of the WP and DDH to revive this vocation illuminate gaps in the history of enrolled widows in antiquity. Enrolled widows in antiquity had to demonstrate need of Church support, had to have been married only once, to have embraced permanent continence upon the death of their spouse, to have certain ethical prerequisites upon entering, and to be willing to persevere in prayer for the Church. Members of the WP and DDH do not have to demonstrate financial need, have no restrictions on the number of spouses one has had, have to embrace permanent continence upon final vows, do not have ethical prerequisites upon entrance (although both WP and the DDH go through a period of discernment before final profession), and have an apostolate of prayer. Below I will draw from this inventory of similarities and differences the mutual illumination that can help us to understand widows in antiquity and current attempts to revive the order of widows.

A prerequisite for enrollment in the order of widows in antiquity was financial need. Members of the WP and DDH did not demonstrate financial need to enter; however, both rely upon donations for their associations to grow. Enrollment in an order of widows today, at least in the United States, does not need to be limited to those demonstrating financial need; the widow Judith lived an ascetic lifestyle after her husband’s death, and it is arguable that her wealth facilitated her ability to live such a lifestyle independent of a second spouse. However, for widows who do demonstrate
financial need, the Church needs to evaluate how she is currently assisting widows. Even though widows in the United States are better off legally than their sisters in antiquity, they are still more likely to suffer from poverty than their male counterparts. Thus, research needs to be done to see how widows in the Church in the United States are faring and to see how the Church cares for the widows. In other countries, this same kind of research needs to be done to determine what widows need in terms of material and spiritual support, as well as how the Church is or is not caring for widows.

Another prerequisite for enrollment in the order of widows in antiquity was that a widow had to have been the wife of only one husband. Is that prerequisite still necessary for one who wants to be an enrolled widow now? What would be the rationale for such a requirement? Hip-Flores notes that Canon 570 from the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches does not suggest limiting enrollment in the order of widows to those who have had only one husband, although she asserts that “the spirituality of widowhood as the ascetic conclusion of the marital vows still suggests the rationale for this restriction.” Moreover, if the Church is concerned that a consecrated or enrolled widow would somehow violate “the symbolism of perfect nuptial fidelity extending even beyond death…by multiple (albeit valid) marriages,” the Church can look to the ancient sources related to widows and enrolled widowhood for assistance and inspiration. The Church can also look to current canons related to bishops, presbyters, and deacons, to see what the regulations and rationales for these offices are regarding continence, marriage, and

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30 See fn. 12 of this chapter (five).
second marriages. The early Church thought the restriction of having been married only once necessary for enrolled widows, and thought that more than two marriages were proof of incontinence. Moreover, bishops, presbyters, and deacons in antiquity also had the prescription of being married only once. In our era, if it is a matter of concern of remaining continent after more than one marriage and not concern for nuptial symbolism, the discernment periods in place for the WP and DDH should aid a candidate in discerning whether she is capable of such a vocation.

In her proposal for candidates for consecrated widowhood, Hip-Flores does not envision that widows will live in community:

As in the case of any other candidate to consecrated life, a minimum of formation, psychological aptitude, and depth of spiritual life should be fostered. In the case of consecrated widows, this would necessarily be tailored toward older or even elderly candidates who will never have to live in community with one another and who will perform a wide variety of (possibly non-public) apostolates. The formation could obviously be much less exacting than what would be required for a young person preparing to live common life. The formation of each widowed candidate could be based on the charism of widowhood and the individual plan of life adopted by her with the approval of her hierarch.

The WP do not have an option to live in community currently, although they would like to offer that option for those who wish to do so. The DDH attempted community life, which turned out not to be feasible at that point in time. 1 Timothy 5, the Didascalia, Tertullian, and the Apostolic Constitutions mention the order of widows but do not cite the widows as having lived in community, although we see evidence of at least one

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34 See 1Tim. 3:1-13 for the prescription for bishops and deacons to have been married only once, and Titus 1:5-6 for the prescription for presbyters to have been married only once. See also chapter three, fn. 146, of this dissertation for the idea that “Christian marriage is an icon of the marriage of Christ and his Church, with which the marrying of a second wife would conflict, for Christ never had any other spouse than his Church”; Montague, First and Second Timothy, Titus, 218. In this vein, the widow may have had the same prescription of being married only once as a symbol of the Church who is the bride of Christ.
widow living in St. Macrina’s community in the fourth century A.D., and widows were absorbed into other religious communities of women in subsequent centuries. The difficulties of community living for the DDH might point towards reasons why we do not see evidence for enrolled widows living in community in antiquity (1 Tim. 5:5; Didascalia 14). It is difficult for women who have been independent in the world for many years to come together to live a community rule that was made for younger, single women. There are many logistical, financial, and other practical considerations to be taken into account by the Church when considering whether or not an order of widows could live in community. These pragmatic considerations were likely concerns in antiquity as well. That being said, the difficulties inherent in making communal living available to consecrated widows in our era should not preclude the Church from investigating that possibility further, particularly in light of the possible benefits for widows living in community that Lysaught outlines.

There was an age requirement to be an enrolled widow in antiquity because of the fear that young widows would want to marry after they professed continence. The age requirement could be more flexible in our current era, because (for example) the WP and the DDH have periods of discernment spanning several years before a widow makes her final vows. Hip-Flores addresses another prudential reason for waiting to be consecrated as a widows, stating that “it would be highly prudent to require that a suitable length of time transpire before a widow be formally accepted as a candidate for consecration in order to help guarantee that the woman chooses her new state of life without the undue influence of grief or bewilderment after the death of her spouse.”

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36 See also Winter, Roman Wives, 140.
offers another potential reason why the early Church had an age requirement for entrance into the order of widows, even though the biblical text and the Didascalia set the age requirement to parry the risk of remarriage, a reason different from Hip-Flores’s.

The widow-as-altar motif highlights some of the theological functions that widows in antiquity share in common with the widows in recent times who are trying to revive the order of widows, and it suggests how an order of widows could function in the Church should that vocation be renewed. As we saw in the first four chapters of this dissertation, one of the functions of the altar was as place of sacrifice, where one encountered God. Prayers were offered on the incense altar, and widows were tasked with prayer for the Church. Both the WP and DDH have apostolates that include prayer, particularly for clergy and other Church leaders. The DDH sees its members as living sacrifices offered to God. Enrolled widows today could have a special ministry of prayer, which could include intercessory prayer for the Church and the world, as well as serving in different prayer ministries in the Church.

The widow in antiquity considered as an altar was also a place for depositing alms considered as sacrificial victims, and it is the duty and privilege of the Christian today to care for the widow. To what extent do bishops in the United States make a concerted effort to discern widows’ needs, and to what extent does the Church assist widows? These are questions that need to be addressed, in light of the widow’s altar function as a recipient of alms. Thus, viewing the widow today as recipient for sacrificial alms could spur action by Church hierarchy to ascertain how the Church is practically caring for widows, and to decide what needs to be done by the Christian faithful to honor the widow and to honor God. The Church’s recognition of the sacrificial character of alms given to
widows would benefit the widows and would benefit those who care for the widow. We meet God in the person of the widow, and true worship involves care for the widow (Isa. 1:17; James 1:27). As Mother Teresa notably said, “Only in heaven will we see how much we owe to the poor for helping us to love God better because of them.”\(^{38}\) Thus, if our love for the Lord is reflected by our care for those who are most vulnerable, then in allowing us to care for them, the widows are doing us a service that will echo into eternity.

An altar was also a location for a covenant meal. In Christian antiquity, the widow was provided for by offerings brought to the Eucharistic covenant meal, and the bishop was responsible for distributing the alms to the widows and to other needy people. The Church should take care of the widow, although it is not clear to what extent the Church does currently, and widows in our era serve in various liturgical functions at the Eucharist. The altar also served as a witness between God and his people for covenant ratification. In antiquity a person’s fidelity to God was measured in part by his or her care for the poor, including the widow, as revealed by Scripture and patristic sources that were examined in this dissertation. Today, too, the extent to which we carry out the charge of caring for the Christian widow, among other needy people, gives witness to our fidelity to Christ’s covenant with the Church. The functions of the altar in antiquity have correlatives to the widow in the Church today, and the ancient motif of the widow as an altar of God tells us the stance the Church needs to adopt with respect to widows today.

One widow-as-altar motif that would not transfer to our time, at least in the United States, is the claim that widows need to stay at home because they are altars. The widows’ activities in antiquity were restricted in this way. Currently, widows in the

United States work and volunteer in the Church in many capacities, including teaching, serving in various liturgical roles, assisting in catechesis, visiting the sick and homebound, and performing many other spiritual and corporal works of mercy.39

The apostolate of the WP and DDH is limited to praying for and supporting the clergy. The membership of the WP and DDH might expand if they broadened the range of spiritual and charitable ministries to activities like mentoring young families in the Church, assisting with adult catechesis and RCIA support (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults), and performing works of mercy like visiting the sick, bringing communion to the sick, and the like. That being said, the WP live in the world and are free to participate in Church life howsoever their lifestyle and health permits, so they are free to continue in, or to begin, these ministries as they are able. Another way the WP could expand its membership would be to visit Catholic widows in assisted-living facilities in order to invite them to participate in the apostolate of the WP, insofar as the widows were able. Widows in assisted-living facilities already have shelter and provisions for food and health care, so once initiated into the vocation of the WP they could live the life of a WP in their respective residences.

A Rite of Consecration for widows might be instituted, a comprehensive spirituality of widowhood developed, and an order of widows reinstated by Church hierarchy. We have learned that the history of the status of widows in the Judeo-Christian tradition was complex and evolved over time. The status of the widow evolved over time in antiquity, and there is much room in our current era, too, for the status of and care for the widow to evolve.

THE NEXT STEPS

Challenges remain for reviving an order of widows. The elderly in the United States can be marginalized and undervalued. The process of working with canon lawyers costs money and can be tedious. To live in community and offer security like health insurance, which the WP and DDH hope to do in the future, takes significant financial resources. It can be difficult for older, previously married women who have been living in the world for most of their lives to conform to community life that is largely structured for younger, single women, who enter comparatively easily into community life and have more time to grow accustomed to community life than do older people. Our culture is full of distractions that make it hard for people to discern what God is asking of them.

Community life could, however, offer benefits for older women, as well as for the Church. For the widows who experience problems such as isolation and temptations to feelings of uselessness, the fruit of joining a renewed community of widows could include spiritual support, shared financial collaboration, emotional support, and a renewed purpose in life. The Church could also benefit from a community life lived by widows who could support the Church with their intercessory authority (and possibly other works of mercy), and whose presence is correlative to an increase in priestly vocations in the dioceses in which they serve.

There are similarities and differences between these two women’s associations that have widows as the core of their respective groups. Both the WP and DDH were founded by widows and included only widows at their respectivefoundings. The WP

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40 Further mining of recent Church documents such as The Dignity of Older People and Their Mission in the Church and in the World and John Paul II’s Letter to the Elderly can assist in providing a framework for the inherent value and dignity that the elderly have as children of God, as well as the specific gifts that the elderly offer to the Church universal, which these documents highlight.
still is open only to widows, while the DDH is now open to single, never-married women as well. Both foundresses of the WP and the DDH were inspired to pray specially for priests and clergy within the Church, and both groups offer spiritual support to the clergy. The WP offers support to other grieving widows as well, whether or not they be in discernment to join the WP. After having attempted community life (which did not work at the time), the DDH is discerning how to proceed on this matter. Although neither the WP nor the DDH offer yet the kind of communal living support for widows that Lysaught proposes,41 both communities hope to be able to offer living in community for those who desire it.

The extant literature on the order of widows in the early Church does not say that the widows lived in community, although that fact does not preclude that they did so. Thus, we would not be able to draw upon ancient sources as inspiration for a communal living situation for widows, although we could look at how widows have been absorbed into other religious communities, and ascertain how that worked (or did not, as the case may be). The experience of DDH may shed light on why there is no known extant literature that supports the idea that the order of widows in antiquity lived in community as a group of widows. In light of the difficulties faced by the DDH when its members had lived in the world for a good part of their adult lives, both during and after their marriages, more work and discernment needs to be done in order to ensure a successful communal living situation for widows. Research needs to be done on how best to set up the communal living situation, looking at areas like housing possibilities, relationship to supporting parishes/congregations, insurance needs, canonical and legal issues in

41 Lysaught, “Practicing the Order of Widows,” 63-65.
establishing an order of widows, and interviewing people like Mother Susan Catherine, DDH, to see what can be gleaned from her practical experience of founding a religious association with older women in mind.42

In order to renew the order of widows, the Latin Rite could institute a rite of consecration for widows, perhaps along the lines of what is offered currently to widows in the Eastern Rite. Hip-Flores notes that Canon 570 of the Code of Canons of Eastern Churches has “no direct Latin analogue.” 43 Canon 570 mentions consecrated widows:

Iure particulari aliae species constitui possunt ascetarum, qui vitam eremiticam imitantur, sive ad instituta vitae consecratae pertinent sive non; item virgines et viduae consecratæ seorsum in saeculo castitatem professione publica profitentes constitui possunt.

Particular law can establish other kinds of ascetics who imitate eremitical life, belonging or not to an institute of consecrated life. Consecrated virgins and widows who live on their own in the world, having publicly professed chastity, can also come under norms of particular law. 44

Canon 570 is brief, and tells us a little about consecrated widows in the Eastern Rite Churches. It says that there are consecrated widows and that they live on their own in the world and not in community, and that these widows profess publicly a vow of chastity. Canon 570 does not specify that a widow need be impecunious to enter, nor that the Church must support her if she is needy. However, as Hip-Flores notes, the fact that Canon 570 does not talk about remuneration or support for the consecrated widow does not mean that the Church cannot support her; indeed, “the eparch is free to provide sustenance to the widow—even without her service—in charitable consideration of her

42 Mary Reardon, WP, founder of the WP, passed away on January 25, 2019. Further inquiries would now be directed to Carlotta Stricker, WP.
economic need. Indeed, this would seem most fitting considering the Lord’s predilection for widows and the Church’s consequent solicitude toward them in response to her fundamental vocation of charity.⁴⁵ Present-day Church sustenance of consecrated widows would be in keeping with what the Church did to honor enrolled widows in antiquity.

Although the WP, DDH, and some autonomous widows have already made private promises to God, a rite that is specifically for widows would establish “consecrated widowhood as a recognized form of consecrated life.”⁴⁶ A formal rite would help raise awareness of this vocational possibility for widows, and for other Church members, too. A rite could also help in codifying a spirituality of widowhood, which is much needed, and which a private vow to God does not necessarily elucidate.

As we saw in the previous chapter, the orders of widows, virgins, and deaconesses had overlapping duties, and widows were absorbed into groupings of virgins and deaconesses, and eventually lived alongside virgins in monasteries. As one widow attested,

Thus they [the widows] gradually became assimilated with consecrated virgins, which caused a regrettable confusion between the two groups and what they symbolize in the Church. When a widow asks for a blessing of her state, she reveals something of her personal journey under God’s grace through the trial of bereavement. In response to this new situation she offers herself to God; she promises to remain celibate. She seeks God’s blessing on a state of life which she neither sought nor wanted, and she now accepts a call to offer herself to God. Jesus blesses her self-gift as he blessed the widow in the gospel who gave “all she had to live on.” Through her gift to God, a widow celebrates her radical poverty, her experience of being humbled and stripped of everything.⁴⁷

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⁴⁶ Ibid.
As another widow explained, “we could consecrate ourselves secretly in our own hearts, but we prefer the support of a community.”48 Perhaps most significantly, as Hip-Flores states, there is “an eschatological significance of widowhood for the universal Church,” which is that “the Church on earth will always be a widow, her heart pierced with sorrow. The consecration of virgins, recently reinstated with honour by the Church, tells us that God’s kingdom is already here. Widows are called to live in hope, to show that the kingdom is not yet fully here. Like Mary on Holy Saturday, the widow lives in the belief that Christ has conquered death.”49 Thus, a renewal of an order of widows would serve as a signpost for the rest of the Christian faithful who “wait in joyful hope” for God’s kingdom.

According to St. John Paul II, “again being practiced today is the consecration of widows, known since apostolic times (cf. 1 Tim 5:5, 9-10; 1 Cor 7:8), as well as the consecration of widowers. These women and men, through a vow of perpetual chastity as a sign of the Kingdom of God, consecrate their state of life in order to devote themselves to prayers and the service of God.”50 John Paul II also notes that “consecrated virgins in the world live out their consecration in a special relationship of communion with the particular and universal Church. The same is true of consecrated widows and widowers.”51 In light of John Paul II’s words, and the possibility of reinstating the order of widows mentioned by the synod fathers, the next step could be asking groups such as the WP, and Mother Susan Catherine of the DDH, and perhaps the

individual widows who have made private consecrations to God through their bishops what they think should be done to facilitate their existing vocations and apostolates and to foster communal life among the Church’s widows. Since these people have already taken the first steps to formalize a vocation for widows as widows, the Church’s renewal of this ancient vocation can draw from their experiences of what has worked and what has not. Associations like the WP and DDH are the bridges between the ancient vocation of the order of widows and a possible reestablishment of the order of widows in the Church today.

The WP and DDH are familiar with 1 Tim. 5:3-16, which first mentions an order of widows, but were not familiar with the other texts related to orders of widows that I covered in this dissertation. As the order of widows evolved over the years, widows’ duties evolved, too. It could be beneficial for these modern groups to seek in the history of widows and of the order of widows in the Catholic tradition insights and inspirations that can guide these existing associations and prepare them for a possible reestablishment of the order of widows, as suggested by the synod fathers in 2015. Both the WP and some widows (who have made private vows to remain widows) in France refer to widows in Scripture (and women in Scripture who helped widows) for support and inspiration in their vocations.52

In her article, Lysaught suggests that each woman “commissioned into a renewed order” could be tasked, “according to her abilities,” with duties such as:

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52 Elizabeth Rees, “Christian Widowhood,” *The Furrow* 49, no. 4 (April 1998): 235-36, states that there is a rite for blessing widows in France, for the Sisterhood of Our Lady of the Resurrection. One of the prayers of the rite of blessing asks, “Empower them, as you empowered Judith, to serve their neighbor with courage and boldness. Show them, as you showed the widow in the temple, how to give even of their necessities. Empower them, as you did the women on Easter morning, to be messengers of the resurrection. Enable them, as you did Tabitha and Lydia, to put themselves at the service of the Church.”
• contemplative prayer for the community
• charitable activities, such as visiting the sick and homebound
• witness and catechesis, including assisting in Catholic schools and religious education programs for people of all ages
• participation in liturgical services and devotions and
• “witnessing to a culture of life, drawing particularly on their own experiences of trial, illness, and suffering.”

Both the WP and DDH engage in contemplative prayer, with an emphasis on praying for the priests, bishops, and clergy. The WP engage in charitable activities and participate in liturgical services as individuals, and both the WP and DDH facilitate retreats.

Lysaught’s suggestions provide foundational activities that correlate to a high degree with the widows’ duties in antiquity, especially prayer, visiting the sick, participating in liturgical services, and assisting women catechumens and Christian women neophytes. The motif of the widow as the altar of God was sometimes used to regulate the widows’ actions in antiquity, but approaching the renewal of an order of widows with the idea that the widow is an altar of God could alleviate the feelings of worthlessness that the elderly can experience, which Lysaught mentions. Once the idea of a widow as an altar of God is understood in the different nuances that the altar image integrates, and which we explored in the first four chapters of this dissertation, one can appreciate the motif of the widow as an altar of God as containing more positive connotations than otherwise.

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53 Lysaught, “Practicing the Order of Widows,” 59.
54 Ibid., 53.
CONCLUSION

This dissertation set out to discern continuities and discontinuities in the role and status of widows between the Old Testament and Christian sources until the end of the fourth century. In the Ancient Near East, ancient Israel, and the newly forming Church, the widow was vulnerable and in need of protection, as evidenced by Ancient Near Eastern texts and Scriptural and early Church writings that contained injunctions to care for her. According to the latter two sources, care for the widow was intimately bound up with one’s religious practice and worship of God. In the Old Testament, the widow places her hope in God for protection, and God commands his people to care for the widow. In the New Testament the command to care for the widow comes from Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and in the early Church literature, the Church officials admonish the Christian faithful to care for the widow, reminding the faithful that the pure practice of religion involves caring for the widow and other needy people.

The widow in the Ancient Near Eastern literature and the Old Testament was vulnerable and in need of assistance for her very survival, not to speak of her low status in antiquity. While the widow is portrayed as a pitiable figure in the Old Testament, an exception to that status is found in the widow Judith, who serves as a bridge between the Old Testament and the New in this matter. The book of Judith has largely been underutilized or omitted in studies on widows and widowhood in Jewish and Christian antiquity. In the book of Judith, a widow is the heroine of the narrative. Judith is wealthy, young, authoritative, and embraces permanent continence after her husband’s death, even though many sought to marry her. She also prays and fasts regularly. Judith shares with the Old Testament widows her vulnerability as a woman when she faces
Holofernes, but she differs from other Old Testament widows in that she is deemed an authoritative figure throughout the narrative. In choosing not to remarry after her husband’s death and by embracing ascetic practices such as prayer and fasting, Judith becomes a prototype for the kind of widow who is enrolled in 1 Tim. 5:3-16, who was married only once and performed pious works of prayer and fasting, in addition to works of mercy. In the Old Testament, continence was employed before a battle or before an encounter with God, but in Judith we see someone who, in a story that revolves around her battle, commits to permanent continence after the death of her spouse. Permanent continence after the death of one’s spouse is seen in the widow Anna in Luke 2:36-38 and in those enrolled in the order of widows in 1 Tim. 5:3-16. Judith’s efficacy as a mediator between God and Israel is intrinsically related to her relationship with God.

This dissertation also traced the history of the altar in Jewish and Christian antiquity, in the hope of shedding light on what patristic writers mean when they refer to the widow as an altar of God. The status of widows evolved over time, from a pitiable status to one of honor, in which the widow reflected the different functions of the altar. The altar is a place for encountering God, in all of its nuanced functions. It serves as a physical sign of a contract between two parties, it serves as a witness of a covenant between God and a person or people, it was a place of sacrifice (both holocaust offerings and prayers) to God, and it is the location for a covenant meal, in which God is present with his people. The widow, who was called an altar of God in early Christianity, had functions similar to these. The widow serves analogously as an altar in the Christian community in several ways.
The altar is a place of sacrifice, where one encounters God in the Old Testament. The widow is a locus for sacrificial alms to be given. The altar is also the location of a covenant meal in the Old Testament; in the early Church, the widow is invited to the *agapes* which could include the celebration of the Eucharist, the Christian covenant meal. Widows received alms at these *agapes*. The widow is a locus of prayer on behalf of the people of God, offering up prayers and interceding with God on behalf of his people. The altar is also a “witness” between God and his people, and is used for covenant ratification in the Old Testament era. The widow resembles this function of the altar in that she stands as a kind of witness between God and a Christian. The Christian who did his duty by the widow, and the widow who acted according to prescriptions of Church authorities (which included maintaining moral purity and carrying out tasks like praying for Church members), mutually helped each other live lives of Christian discipleship.

The Christian gave alms that were a part of pure worship, and the widow offered prayers for the Christian giver.

In the New Testament, honoring the widow was one attestation that one was fulfilling one’s baptismal commitment. In 1 Tim. 5:8 we read: “If any one does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his own family, he has disowned the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.” Scholarly consensus affirms that this passage means that a Christian is breaking his baptismal commitment to God if he does not care for his family, including the widow. It is worse to go back on God’s law than it is to never have known it in the first place (see 2 Pet. 2:21). The Christian who cared for the widow was in good standing with God, whereas the Christian who neglected his duty towards the widow violated his baptismal pledge, which is comparable to a covenant with God. Caring for
the widow was imperative to the practice of pure religion (James 1:27); care for the widow was connected to one’s belief in the Eucharist, and one’s faith in and love for Jesus Christ (Ign. Ep. Smyrn. 6.2-7.1).

The purity of the altar in the Old Testament was imperative, as was the ethical and moral purity of the ancient Christian enrolled widow. The purity of the widow included permanent continence after the death of her spouse. Only pure alms, that is, honest money given by Christians, were allowed to be given to the widow and accepted by her. The Didascalia reproves widows who accept alms from ill-gotten gain and who accept alms apart from the bishop’s distribution of alms for all of the needy in the Church. Just as only priests could put offerings on the Temple altars, so only the ordained ministers could distribute alms to enrolled widows. Thus, there is a priestly mediation between the widow-altar and the rest of the community in antiquity. In the cases of the WP and the DDH, these groups are under the directive of their respective bishops, and neither group has financial need as a prerequisite to join. If financial need does become a prerequisite for joining a newly forming order of widows, it seems prudent to have some kind of mediation involved in distributing offerings to the widows; whether that mediation be priestly or otherwise might depend upon the order, and the availability of priests who have the financial and legal background to distribute the alms, at least in the United States.

The materials from which the Old Testament altars were made evolved as well. Earliest altars were made of stone, and then were bronze plated (for the holocaust

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1 The altar in Jewish antiquity represented God to the people (see chapter one, pp. 44-45); in the New Testament, Jesus identifies with the poor and distressed, and it follows that the one who honors the poor widow also honors God (Matt. 25:31-46).
offerings), and then gold plated (for incense, which represented prayers to God). The altar in Rev. 16:7 cries out like a person would, the first time in Scripture that an altar is cited as doing something that a rational being would do. The idea of heavenly Temple furnishings would have been in the background of the Jewish and Christian imagination when the New Testament was written, and may been in the background of the widow as the “altar of God” motif that develops in early Church literature soon after Revelation was written. The material of the altar in the early Church is the human person herself, the widow, much as the Temple of the Holy Spirit is the Christian community, too (1 Cor. 6:19).

The vulnerability of the widow continued into the New Testament era, as seen in the narratives of the Lukan widows and the prescriptions to care for the widow. There is also a continuation of the pious widow trajectory that is seen in Judith, namely, the widow who prays and fasts and is continent after the death of her husband. The pious widow is exemplified by Anna in Luke 2:36; she prays and fasts constantly in the Temple and remains continent after the death of her husband. According to 1 Timothy 5 widows still need the protection and care of the Church, but certain widows are also allowed to enroll in an order of widows that is a position of honor. Widows had to fulfill certain prerequisites to enroll: they needed to be sixty years old, have been married only once, to have performed works of mercy, to have led an irreproachable moral life, and to be committed to permanent continence and unceasing prayer upon entering the order of widows. Care was given to widows whether they were enrolled or not, exemplifying the Church’s priority of caring for the poor as Christ had commanded, and saving otherwise
destitute widows from turning to slavery or prostitution to support themselves, or from perishing in the streets.

The prescriptions on entrance into the order of widows in the New Testament and early Church show that the widows were challenged to live a moral and ethical life, and the widow was held up for emulation by other Christians. Even though the actions of enrolled widows were limited, the widow’s status was nonetheless at its apex in antiquity, in terms of the honor that she received (and her status as espoused to Christ, as Tertullian stated) upon the death of her husband if she so chose.

Widows mentioned in Ignatius of Antioch’s and Polycarp of Smyrna’s epistles are still in need of the Church’s care and support. Ignatius of Antioch’s *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans* 13.1 includes the curious phrase “virgins called widows,” suggesting that virgins were associating themselves with widows, likely so that they could live lifestyles similar to that of the widows, which included permanent continence and the task of prayer. Polycarp refers to widows as an altar of God as does Tertullian, who reproves a bishop who allows a virgin to be enrolled in the order of widows. Ignatius’s phrase “virgins called widows,” as well as Tertullian’s critique of a bishop who enrolled a virgin in the order of widows, points to the higher status that the widow had over the virgin at the time. Tertullian discouraged remarriage for all widows in *De monogamia*, arguing that the widow would not be a pure altar if she remarried after the death of her first husband. Tertullian also compares the widow’s prayers to a marriage dowry, in which the Lord is the bridegroom in the widow’s “marriage,” signaling another elevation in status for the widow who now becomes the Lord’s spouse. The fact of being a widow involves its own marital relationship with the Lord (Isa. 54:4-5) that includes permanent
continence after the death of one’s spouse, a theme we saw echoed in the modern
ttempts at reviving the order of widows, the WP and the DDH. Both the WP and the
DDH vow continence to the Lord.

Widows in the Didascalia are also in need of the care of the Church, are called an
altar of God, face similar prerequisites for enrolling in the order of widows as those
widows in 1 Tim. 5:3-16, and are tasked with prayer. The widow’s task of prayer is more
focused in the Didascalia than in early Christian sources we previously studied. This
work asks the widow to pray specifically for Church members and not to pray with an
excommunicated Church member. The task of prayer can include laying hands on sick
people, a task not cited in earlier sources on widows, and one which overlaps later with
the tasks of the deaconesses; widows who fulfilled the prescriptions of an enrolled widow
in the Didascalia are cited in the Apostolic Constitutions as being allowed to serve as
deaconesses, as well.

In Methodius’s Symposium, widows are compared to the bronze altar, while
virgins are compared to the golden altar, which had primacy of place in the Temple.
Methodius accords virgins the honor of representing the golden altar because the virgins
are “uncorrupted by intercourse.” This fact signals a shift in the Church’s preference for
virginity over enrolled widowhood. Widows in the Symposium are ostensibly allowed to
teach Christian neophytes, whereas in the Didascalia teaching female neophytes is
allotted to the deaconesses. The Apostolic Constitutions also compares widows to the
bronze altar, and virgins to the golden altar. Continence is the deciding factor as to who
relates to which altar; a widow was continent after her husband’s death, while the virgin
was continent her whole life.
Polycarp likens widows to the altar of God in Polyc. Phil. 4.3, without distinction as to whether the widows represent the bronze altar or the golden altar. Tertullian also refers to the widow as an altar of God in Ad ux. 1.7, emphasizing the necessity of only being once married in his reference, while Polycarp stresses the need for ethical purity to be considered an altar of God. The Didascalist likens widows to the altar of God as well, without saying which altar the widow represents. The motif of the widow as the altar of God was also used to regulate the widows, keeping them home, and away from other houses. As I concluded in chapter four of this dissertation, I think it likely that the widow represented both the bronze altar and the golden altar in the Didascalia, because she received offerings (as did the bronze altar) and was given the task of prayer (which relates to the function of the golden altar). The widow as the altar of God motif was also used to try to correct the problematic behavior of some widows, who were causing scandal by spreading erroneous doctrine, gossiping, and accepting alms apart from the bishop and deacons.

The duties of the enrolled widows eventually overlapped with those of the deaconesses emerging in the early Church, and enrolled widows were probably subsumed into the orders of deaconesses and virgins that developed around the same time that the order of widows was dwindling. Where virgins once called themselves widows to embrace the lifestyle of enrolled widows, there was a reversal of sorts when the Church embraced and preferred the virginal state, and widows then associated themselves with virgins to embrace the lifestyle of virgins, who professed permanent celibacy. Widows were absorbed into groups of deaconesses and virgins from the third or fourth century and onward, leaving us with no canonical legislation after that period to help us see how
we might revive an order of widows now. Although the order of widows dwindled, widows still played significant roles throughout the subsequent centuries of the Church by founding, or sometimes serving as leaders of, monasteries, convents, and religious orders.

In recent decades, two attempts have been made in the United States to revive the ancient practice of the order of widows. How the order of widows evolved in antiquity differs notably from how the contemporary groups of widows originated. We can safely infer from the extant literature in Christian antiquity that the order of widows was initiated by the Church, in response to the needs of the widows at the time, but also to regulate the problematic widows who were causing scandal. In our era, however, the WP and the DDH were initiated by foundresses who were widows, and who felt called by God to found these associations. While the order of widows in antiquity shares with the WP and the DDH the task of prayer and permanent continence upon the death of one’s spouse, the widows in antiquity had to have been married only once, while the WP and DDH do not have such a prerequisite for entrance into their respective groups. Moreover, the enrolled widows in antiquity demonstrated financial need before admittance, while admittance into the WP and DDH is not based upon financial need. However, since both the WP and the DDH rely upon donations for subsistence, it could be said that members of the WP and the DDH demonstrate financial need, at least for maintenance of the respective groups and to promote growth in these groups.

Renewing the order of widows, and at the very least renewing the consecration of widows, would serve to help those who are still on the margins of society. The Old Testament, the New Testament, and early Church writings attest to the need for Church
members to support the widow, and these texts state unequivocally that one’s relationship with the Lord and one’s worship of the Lord are reflected by and judged by our love and care for the poor and vulnerable.

This dissertation has demonstrated that the widow was throughout the centuries a vulnerable person in need of the protection of the Church, but that she also evolved into an honored figure who could be considered for admittance into an order of widows, provided that she met the age and ethical prerequisites for entrance. Widows who did not meet these qualifications were still honored with assistance by the Church. The widow is the object of the Lord’s special concern in the Old Testament, is held up as a model of trust in the Lord by Jesus himself in the New Testament, and is honored by the newly forming Church. The motif of the widow as the altar of God illuminates this development, as the widows were compared to one of the most important furnishings in the Temple when their public honor was at its pinnacle, which was in the early Church era.

I hope that this dissertation can serve as a catalyst for more research on the subject of widows and care for the widows, especially as there is the possibility of reinstatement of the ancient vocation of the order of widows. Widows throughout the millennia in Judeo-Christian history have contributed to Catholic theology by means of their holy living, by their prayers for members of the Church, by giving other Church members the opportunity to practice pure worship by assisting the widow, and by serving as an eschatological signpost for those who anticipate the coming of Christ. The widow, who was once voiceless, evolved into one who worked alongside deaconesses in the early Church, and she has in the present-day United States the potential to be involved in
almost all areas of evangelization. If a renewal of the order of widows were to occur, looking at the widow as an altar of God would be worthwhile. The importance of altar imagery crosses cultures, which could help promote a renewal of the order of widows for the Church universal. A renewal of an order of widows and a definition of their mission, that might be possible and practical in some cultures might not be permissible in others, a subject which warrants further research and study.\(^2\) Such a study is needed to discern how to renew such an order in light of the challenges that the Church universal faces in both ministering to the elderly and assisting them to find their place in the Church.

Points for further study and reflection could also include the following: What do other writers in the Catholic tradition say about holy widows and widowhood, apart from comments on the order of widows and the imagery of the widow as the altar of God that we studied in this project?\(^3\) How would communal living be arranged for those widows who want to live in community, given the difficulties posed by canon law and logistics, and the lack of precedent for widows living in community in a religious context?\(^4\) Are there themes related to Mary’s widowhood in Church literature on widowhood, perhaps in late antiquity, the middle ages, or the Renaissance periods? How would these Marian themes relate to what we know of widows and widowhood in antiquity, and how would these themes inform the current endeavors to revive the order of widows in the Church?

\(^2\) For example, in the United States, it would be culturally acceptable for a widow to catechize men and women. In other cultures, it might not be acceptable or considered appropriate—or safe—for women to catechize men. Part of the Church’s challenge will be to give guidelines that are universal for a common spirituality amongst widows throughout the world, but that also allow for prudential judgment in the application of the guidelines in different cultures.

\(^3\) See Hip-Flores, “Consecrated Widows: Altars of God,” 114-25, who cites Origen, St. Augustine, and St. John Chrysostom as writers who discuss holy widows in their works.

\(^4\) These logistical challenges include the expenses involved in hiring a canon lawyer, finding and financing adequate living arrangements for community living, and financing health care for older widows as well.
Widows in different countries are working towards establishing a Latin Rite of consecration for widows, perhaps along the line of consecration for widows that exists in the Eastern Rite. The bishops at the 2015 Synod on the Family mentioned the possibility of renewing the order of widows, too. As we have seen, groups like the WP and DDH are working actively to renew either the order of widows (WP) or to renew an order that widows could be a part of (DDH). Along with a renewed scholarly interest in widows and their honored place in the Judeo-Christian tradition, these movements offer hope for a renewal of this ancient vocation, which could offer innumerable possibilities for the mutual edification and sanctification of widows themselves, and for the rest of the members of the Church universal. I hope that this dissertation serves to initiate conversation and reflection on Christian discipleship, in light of the contributions of widows to Catholic theology.
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