

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE WIDOW'S OFFERING:  
MARK 12:41–44

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The story of the widow's offering as found in Mark 12:41–44 has long provided the Church with an example of humble devotion to the Lord. Further, it speaks to the people of God about the true nature of giving. Calvin considered this account as providing "a highly useful doctrine, that whatever men offer to God ought to be estimated not by its apparent value, but only by the feeling of the heart, and that the holy affection of him who, according to his small means, offers to God the little that he has, is more worthy of esteem than that of him who offers a hundred times more out of his abundance."<sup>1</sup>

The careful observer, however, will note a second theme in this account of the widow that intersects with the standard interpretation of the text. The second theme is the coming judgment upon the nation of Israel. It is an underlying theme throughout Mark's gospel: The days of covenant-breaking Israel are numbered, and all that remains for what is left of the theocracy is covenant curse. As the gospel narrative moves forward, evidence for God's lawsuit against his people accumulates (culminating in Israel's leaders mocking and insulting the Messiah during his agony on the cross [15:31–32; cf. 12:1–12]). Simultaneously Mark has sprinkled a variety of hints (in the form of non-Israelites approaching Jesus with only their faith) that anticipate the saving reign of God transcending Israel's frontiers into the world of the Gentiles (culminating in the [Gentile] centurion's confession at the foot of the cross [15:39]).

Against this broader backdrop of redemptive-historical birth pangs it is appropriate to inquire as to why the account of the widow's "mite" appears where it does. After all, the preceding verse (12:40) concludes Jesus' public ministry in Mark's account.<sup>2</sup> Is this a simple postscript? Is it one final lesson concerning the nature of true faith and piety, added to reinforce lessons previously given to the disciples? Given the placement of the pericope, coming as it does between the record of Jesus' public ministry and the Olivet discourse, we should not hesitate to probe the account more deeply in order to see what riches it might yield.

In fact Mark's inclusion of the pericope in this context should be considered as intentional in light of the underlying end-of-Israel theme noted above.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Calvin, *Harmony of Matthew, Mark and Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989) 3.113.

<sup>2</sup> See W. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) 441.

The unmasking of the scribes' hypocrisy in 12:40, which exposes them as a ruling class who exploit Israel's religion as a means to sordid gain, stands in striking contrast to the devotion of the widow. While the scribes use the pretense of religion to gain money, the widow's piety is expressed through her willingness to give money—even if her giving exhausts all of her resources. She possesses what God loves: faith. She believes he will meet all of her needs.

Thus the brief account of the widow's offering is strategically inserted between the condemnation of the scribes and Jesus' announcement of the temple's destruction. We are able to see a thematic bridge between scribal avarice and the pronouncement of ultimate curse on the nation: Will God abandon Israel and destroy his dwelling place, the temple?<sup>3</sup>

Accordingly it is the intention of this study to examine the account of the widow's offering on two levels<sup>4</sup> in order to reveal the convergence of the two separate (but related) themes into one. Therefore we will attempt to understand both the meaning of the pericope itself (i.e. the lesson Jesus wanted his disciples to learn) as well as Mark's purpose for placing it where he has (i.e. why he selected this account in the arrangement of his material and what the significance of its location within the narrative is).

In order to understand the pericope itself we must first examine the preceding context (12:38–40) with special emphasis on v. 40, which provides the transitional point to 12:41–44. These are the final words of Jesus' public ministry that Mark records, spoken in the temple. They contain a harsh denunciation of the scribes in the form of a warning to the listening multitude (v. 37).

The condemnation of the scribes is primarily concerned with their preoccupation with the mere appearance of godliness. The extent of their faith runs no deeper than religious displays: flowing robes, respectful greetings, seats of honor in the synagogue and at banquets. But Jesus singles out one particular sinister activity of the scribes that reveals the horrendous nature of their hypocrisy: They devour widows' houses, covering up their crimes with still more superficial piety—their long prayers.<sup>5</sup>

It is not known exactly what the nature of "devouring widows' houses" was in Jesus' time. Neither are the details of this practice delineated in the Biblical text. Scholarly opinion is divided. Leon Morris suggests that some

<sup>3</sup> Lane does see this as a transitional passage, moving from the denunciation of the scribes to the Olivet discourse. His view of the transition, however, is spatial and temporal only, a "sequence of movement" from the court of the women to departure from the temple precincts. He does not address a potential theological motive in Mark's arrangement of his material (Lane, *Mark* 442).

<sup>4</sup> In using the language of two levels I do not wish to imply that there is a surface meaning and a deeper meaning in the text. I am saying that the pericope, as a unit, has its own meaning (i.e. the faith/trust of the widow as exemplary of Israel's true religion), which in turn condemns the superficial piety of the guardians of Torah, who actively subvert the true religion and invite God's curse on the nation. Thus the appearing of this faithful widow has redemptive historical significance.

<sup>5</sup> J. D. M. Derrett objects to the view that the long prayers serve only as a pretext to induce rich widows to offer presents to the scribes. Instead he sees the long prayers as the means to that end. He argues that a "public reputation for piety" was required for a property trustee. Once the office was secured the misappropriation of funds could begin ("'Eating Up the Houses of Widows': Jesus's Comment on Lawyers?", *NovT* 14 [1972] 1–9).

of the scribes “encouraged impressionable widows to make gifts beyond their means,” an explanation that fits into the context of gift-giving to teachers, who were forbidden to charge for their teaching.<sup>6</sup> T. W. Manson is more specific, believing that this practice referred to the mismanagement of the property of widows who had dedicated themselves to the service of the temple.<sup>7</sup> J. D. M. Derrett sees it as a practice of lawyers who were entrusted with the oversight of properties. Though a lawyer was entitled to remuneration for his service, some paid themselves their expenses “at a lavish rate” from the estates in their care.<sup>8</sup>

Joachim Jeremias disagrees with this explanation and suggests his own: The practice of devouring of houses “is much more likely to refer to the scribes’ habit of sponging on the hospitality of people of limited means.”<sup>9</sup> William Lane also adopts this view.<sup>10</sup> But though we do not have access to the details of the practice in the Marcan text (or its parallel in Luke), it seems that the sense of the passage is that the devouring of widows’ houses is a serious breach of trust and a terrible crime—much worse than merely “sponging on hospitality.”

This is supported by the force of the Greek word translated “devour” (κατεσθίω), which suggests an action of “consuming completely,” not simply sponging. This is true of its literal use in the NT (the birds eating the seed in Luke 8:5) as well as of its figurative use (cf. the description of the prodigal’s use of his father’s estate in Luke 15:30, which in turn leaves him destitute; also, this word describes the effect of fire in Rev 11:5; 20:9). The reader should expect that whoever or whatever is the object of the devouring, it will be completely consumed as a result. In financial matters, a devoured victim would be left penniless.

Further, within this context it is the single sin of the scribes (apart from their preoccupation with the appearances of piety) for which Jesus condemns them (Mark 12:40c). Of course this sin is aggravated by their office as the official teachers of Israel’s religion. Yet it is also the only sin that has a direct impact on the economic welfare of the people. In this sense it resembles the notorious Corban tradition, for which Jesus vilifies the Pharisees in the strongest terms (7:6–13). The effect of Corban was disobedience to the Torah, which in turn could result in destitution for the parents of anyone who would honor it.<sup>11</sup> The problem with both the scribes and the Pharisees is not simply their religious hypocrisy (though that was itself evil). They compounded their sin of hypocrisy by actually overturning the Law of Moses, thus robbing those in society who were the most needy and vulnerable.

<sup>6</sup> L. Morris, *The Gospel According to Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 274.

<sup>7</sup> I. H. Marshall, *The Gospel According to Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 750.

<sup>8</sup> Derrett, “Eating Up” 4.

<sup>9</sup> J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969) 114.

<sup>10</sup> Lane, *Mark* 441.

<sup>11</sup> A. G. Wright sees (correctly) the link between this passage and the Corban confrontation in Mark 7. As we shall see below, however, he draws the wrong conclusion (“The Widow’s Mites: Praise or Lament?—A Matter of Context,” *CBQ* 4 [1982] 256–265).

So by reading Mark 12:38–40 the reader is well prepared for the entrance of the impoverished widow carrying her meager offering. Because she follows so closely upon Jesus’ denunciation of the scribes’ practice of devouring the houses of widows, we are to assume that she represents the results of it—the wreckage left behind by the greediness of the scribes.<sup>12</sup> Mark, as we shall see, takes great care to emphasize the depth of this poor woman’s poverty.

This brings us to the account of the widow’s offering, a pronouncement story.<sup>13</sup> At the outset we may note that there are no text-critical problems of major importance.<sup>14</sup> Mark opens the pericope in a deliberate way,<sup>15</sup> creating a vivid scene of temple activity.<sup>16</sup>

Mark’s concern is to create a sense of contrast, within the pericope itself as well as between the widow and those who exploit widows (12:40). Within the pericope the contrast between the many rich people and the one poor widow is most easily seen in the structure of two sentences in the passage itself:

Verses 41c and 42a joined by *καί* (“but”)

|     | <i>adjective</i> | <i>subject</i> | <i>verb</i>     | <i>direct object</i>          |
|-----|------------------|----------------|-----------------|-------------------------------|
| 41c | Many             | rich people    | were putting in | large amounts                 |
| 42a | a <sup>17</sup>  | poor widow     | put in          | two small coins <sup>18</sup> |

<sup>12</sup> R. A. Cole picks up on this idea when he writes: “Here by contrast is one of the very group made a prey by the scribes, a widow” (*Mark: An Introduction and Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982] 196). H. B. Swete also speculates that “she may once have been one of [the rich widows], and reduced to destitution by Pharisaic rapacity” (*The Gospel According to Mark* [London: Macmillan, 1909] 293). Even if she were not an actual, literal victim, she is representative of victims of scribal exploitation by virtue of her severe poverty as well as of Mark’s placement of this account in this context.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1963) 385.

<sup>14</sup> The opening verse of the pericope (v. 41) has several variant readings, but the differences are mostly minor.

<sup>15</sup> This deliberate style is in contrast to Luke’s account of the widow’s offering, which he also includes between the denunciation of the scribes and the Olivet discourse (following Mark). There is no crisp break between the pericopes within Luke 20:45–21:5 ff. The action keeps on moving without stopping for a breath. Mark, however, records Jesus as sitting down to watch the busy activity surrounding the treasury, as if he were intentionally looking for something in particular. This deliberate style will show up again in Mark 12:43. There Mark records Jesus calling the disciples to himself before he instructs them. Luke simply records Jesus speaking out. Only by looking back at Luke 20:45 do we find that his audience is the disciples, though the crowd may have been listening (Mark’s account is for the ears of the disciples only). Finally, Mark is somewhat more descriptive and is concerned to emphasize the (relative) cost of the widow’s gift (cf. especially Mark’s πάντα ὅσα εἶχεν with the exegetical ὅλον τὸν βίον αὐτῆς in 12:44 with Luke’s abbreviated πάντα τὸν βίον ὃν εἶχεν in 21:4).

<sup>16</sup> The vividness of Mark’s description is brought out in the language. This conclusion is based on reading ἐθεώρει as an inceptive imperfect, βάλλει as an historic present and ἐβαλλον as an iterative imperfect. A better English translation would be: “And after he sat down opposite the collection box, he began watching how the crowd was putting money into the collection box, specifically, how (καὶ) many rich people were putting in a great deal.”

<sup>17</sup> The cardinal adjective μία functions as an indefinite article (so BAGD), perhaps in the same way as τις. This serves to strengthen the contrast: the many rich versus the one individual widow.

## Verses 44a and 44b joined by δε (“but”)

|     | <i>subject</i> | <i>εκ + genitive of source</i> | <i>possessive pronoun</i> | <i>aurist verb</i> |
|-----|----------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------|
| 44a | They all       | out of the riches              | to them <sup>19</sup>     | put in             |
| 44b | she            | out of the poverty             | of her                    | put in             |

Jesus is observing how the wealthy are making their contributions to the treasury,<sup>20</sup> when suddenly one lone and impoverished<sup>21</sup> widow enters the scene. She also makes her contribution, but by any normal standard it is an insignificant amount. In Jesus' eyes, however, it is an offering beyond ordinary measure. Solemnly he calls his disciples to himself in order to instruct them.

Jesus' words are filled with irony. The widow's offering is actually greater than all the offerings made by the rich. He then explains that the value of the offering is best measured against the financial worth of the offerer (we might say, somewhat crudely perhaps, that the quality of an offering is best measured as a percentage of total assets). Considered in this way, the poor widow's offering was far superior to the others, for it was all that she owned.<sup>22</sup>

At this point (and we can only speculate), the disciples may have recalled Jesus' teaching on cross-bearing (8:34–38) and self-denying service to others (10:42–45; note, too, that each of these teachings begins with Jesus calling either the multitude and his disciples [8:34] or the ten indignant disciples [10:42] to himself first). The poor widow has embodied that teaching in her own sacrificial giving. How different she is from the wealthy, who give only from their surplus (after their own needs are satisfied) and thus never feel the joyful pinch of self-denial in the cause of love (note 12:28–34)!

As noted above, there is a second contrast: that between the humble, sincere and (until Jesus) anonymous devotion of the widow and the arrogant, superficial and ostentatious displays of devotion on the part of the scribes (12:38–40). It is a matter of genuine faith, which the widow expresses by the generosity of her offering (she trusts that the God of Israel will meet her needs), versus unbelief, which the scribes express by exploiting their office for their own financial gain. Hers was a faith working through love, theirs

<sup>18</sup> Mark explains the worth of the two coins, presumably for his Roman audience. For the value of the *lepta* and the *quadrans* cf. L. A. Foster, “The Metrology of the New Testament,” *Expositor's Bible Commentary* (ed. F. E. Gaebelin; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979) 1.613.

<sup>19</sup> Here αὐτοῖς is a dative of possession.

<sup>20</sup> It is uncertain how to best translate γαζοφυλάκιον. In Mark 12:41–44 the context seems to call for the translation “collection box” (so BAGD), not “treasury” (but see Marshall, *Luke* 751). If so, it was probably one of the thirteen chests in the temple set up for the collection of the shekel tax. Six of the chests were marked (in Aramaic) “for freewill offerings” (cf. *Seqal.* 6:5). Presumably one of the six received the widow's offering.

<sup>21</sup> Mark, in a short space, stresses the widow's poverty, which must have been apparent to any observer. Twice he describes her as a “poor” widow. Her offering is obviously meager, but it is also “all that she has, her whole life.”

<sup>22</sup> Calvin thought one way in which this doctrine was useful was so that “the poor, who appear not to have the power of doing good, are encouraged by our Lord not to hesitate to express their affection cheerfully out of their slender means; for if they consecrate themselves, their offering, which appears to be mean and worthless, will not be less valuable than if they had presented all the treasures of Croesus” (*Harmony* 113).

was a hollow religion. The forms were present, but their religion had been emptied of its spiritual content.

To many readers this second contrast may provide all the explanation that is needed as to why Mark included this account in his gospel. It is not simply a teaching on self-denying service (though it is that). It also serves to set true faith (the widow's) over and against the unbelief of the religious leaders Jesus had just condemned. On this view no clear, thematic transition from the widow's offering to the Olivet discourse is necessary. The latter is simply new material.

A more careful look at the flow of thought from 12:38 through 13:5, however, reveals a deliberate structure in which the account of the widow's offering fits properly and logically. The 12:41–44 pericope not only looks back to the denunciation of the scribes but also anticipates the prophetic discourse on the destruction of the temple. On this understanding, the widow herself stands as a symbol. Her impoverished condition alone is a scandal in Israel in the light of Torah. But the circumstances of her poverty make the scandal far more grievous, for it has come at the hands of those who are teachers in Israel: the guardians of Torah and the true religion of Yahweh. Therefore the only thing left, given Israel's flagrant apostasy (which, as noted above, is alluded to throughout Mark's gospel), is judgment. On this view Mark has included the account of the poor widow as an important piece of evidence to make God's case against Israel complete.<sup>23</sup>

Broadly, then, the structure (with thematic connectors) looks like this:

- A. Destitute widows (devouring widows' houses, 12:40)
- B. Destitute widow in temple (destitute widow's offering, 12:41–44)
- C. Temple (prophecy of temple's destruction, chap. 13)

Yet the key to understanding the significance of the placement of 12:41–44 is the OT background. That is why it is proper to view the widow as an important redemptive-historical symbol. Her entrance into the court of the women with her offering (described so carefully by Mark) is also the entrance of a figure who carries with her some meaningful imagery right out of the Hebrew Scriptures.<sup>24</sup> Her presence carries an emotional punch, which is intended to call to the reader's mind just who and what a widow was in Israel among the people of God.

In the OT, widows, along with the fatherless and aliens, were the most vulnerable and dependent class of people in the land.<sup>25</sup> As such, widows were

<sup>23</sup> "If the leaders of the Jewish religion treated such pious people in a way criticised by Jesus in (Luke) 20:47, it follows that the system was ripe for judgment. *It is no accident* that the prophecy of the destruction of the temple follows: the priests were no better than the scribes in their attitude to wealth (20:45)" (Marshall, *Luke* 752; italics mine).

<sup>24</sup> Morris touched on this idea of "symbol" when he wrote: "A poor widow is thus almost proverbial for the poorest of people" (*Luke* 294). But he does not unearth the large amount of OT imagery Mark wishes us to recall when the widow appears. Of course labeling the widow as a "symbol" does not in any way deny her historical reality.

<sup>25</sup> Many OT passages dealing with widows include the fatherless and aliens as well.

entitled to unique protection under the Law of Moses. In Exod 22:22–24 an Israelite was forbidden to afflict a widow. If a widow was afflicted it was her privilege to appeal directly to Yahweh for justice. If she did so, her oppressor was liable to the death penalty, executed by Yahweh (“I will kill you with the sword”), which would result (ironically) in widowhood for the wife of the offender. Israel is reminded that the Sovereign and Almighty God, who does not show partiality or accept a bribe, will certainly execute justice for the widow (Deut 10:18).

An Israelite widow was particularly vulnerable and dependent because of her inability to provide for herself. In agrarian Israel it was necessary to own and work the land for one’s sustenance. A woman without a husband or sons (particularly if she were advanced in age) would be unable to support herself (e.g. Naomi in the book of Ruth). To remedy this, the Law of Moses included all sorts of safeguards—social nets—designed to ensure that a widow would not become destitute and starve. For example, there was the provision of the triennial tithe. Instead of the tithe being brought to the sanctuary, in the third year it was brought to and deposited in the local town so that the widows who lived there might “come and eat and be satisfied” (Deut 14:29).

It is important to note that obedience to this command would not deprive the Israelites of adequate food supplies for their own families. On the contrary, faithful obedience to Yahweh’s command would guarantee blessing to Israel. Generosity in the tithe would result in God blessing his people in all the works of their hands (14:29).

In spite of their hardships, widows were as much a part of the community of God’s people as anyone else (cf. the language describing the celebration at the Feasts of Weeks and Tabernacles in 16:11, 14). Instead of being overlooked they were to receive special and unique compensation. So at harvest time a landowner was not to return to his field for a forgotten sheaf, nor was he to go over his olive tree a second time once it had been beaten, nor was a vineyard to be picked twice. In each case whatever remained after the first act of harvesting was to be left for the widow (24:19–21; cf. also the gleaning law in Lev 19:9–10; 23:22, as well as Ruth 2, where gleaning is carried out).<sup>26</sup>

In a sense Israel was to look in two different directions to find incentive to obey these laws concerning the care of widows. By looking backward they were to remember their own bitterness as slaves under the cruelty of Egypt and recall God’s wonderful and gracious redemption (Deut 24:18, 22). Likewise they were to be gracious and compassionate in their dealings with the needy and vulnerable in their midst. By looking forward they were to see the promise of God’s blessing. Obedience to the law would bring ample provision from God to meet all their needs (“that the Lord your God may bless you in all the works of your hands”).

<sup>26</sup> Against this background we understand one of the sins laid against Job’s charge. Eliphaz accuses him of sending “widows away empty-handed” (Job 22:9). Job, on the other hand, describes himself as one who “made the widow’s heart sing” (29:13).

The point is this: God had committed himself to bless the land with full harvests, enough to meet everyone's needs. Presumably the majority of Israelites would be well fed as a result of their prosperity. But there would always be a minority in the land, including widows, who would be weak and reliant. This group was to be cared for by the larger community. God's promise of blessing was in part designed to ward off a stingy attitude in Israel's landowners. Because Yahweh would generously supply the land with an abundance of food, there was no need to be greedy in the harvest and exhaustively gather from every tree, field or vineyard. Trust in Yahweh, manifested by obedience to his Law, would only bring more blessing.

If the promise of blessing or the memories of captivity were not incentive enough, however, there was still the threat of covenant curse. In the covenant renewal of Deuteronomy 27 Yahweh promised curse for the man who withholds justice from the widow (v. 19). As we saw in Exodus 22, if justice was not carried out by the leaders of the community the offender was liable to receive judgment directly from Yahweh himself.

The prophets reveal to us that Israel and Judah were unmoved by either the promise of blessing or the threat of curse. The treatment of widows is a regular theme in the prophetic writings, so much so that it seems to be a sort of thermometer that measured the spiritual health of the nation. Isaiah calls on Judah to bring forth the fruit of justice, which includes "plead(ing) for the widow" (Isa 1:17)—this in the face of the sin of Judah's rulers, who are corrupt and self-serving, with the result that the widow's plea does not come before them (1:24).

The welfare of widows in the northern kingdom was no better. As a part of Samaria's wickedness, evil statutes are enacted that deprive the poor of justice and their rights. Instead of being the object of compassionate care, widows are described as the prey of Samaria's ruling class. For this Isaiah pronounces a woe upon them (10:1–2; see also, e.g., Jer 7:6; Ezek 22:7; Zech 7:10).

Against this backdrop of wickedness and unfaithfulness to the covenant, Yahweh is described as a "defender of widows" as he is seated in "his holy dwelling" (Ps 68:5; cf. again the law in Exodus 22 as well as Yahweh's self-description in Deut 10:18). In a climate of apostasy Yahweh "upholds the cause of the oppressed" and "sustains the fatherless and the widow, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked" (Ps 146:7, 9). The wicked, on the other hand, "slay the widow and the alien" (94:6). Thus the promise and certainty of judgment stand: "Yahweh will tear down the house of the proud, but he will establish the boundary of the widow" (Prov 15:25).

The OT backdrop brings into sharp relief the criminal nature of the scribes' activity while reminding the reader that, as a measure of Israel's spiritual condition, the treatment of widows in Jesus' day makes the nation as deserving of judgment as in times past. The fact that the widow of Mark 12:41–44 is destitute and neglected is a violation of the covenant by itself. What is worse, however, is that her indigence is linked to the evil practice of the scribes, those who were the interpreters and teachers of the

Law in Israel (we are reminded of Isa 10:1–2). When the spiritual health in the land sinks this low—so low that Yahweh's Law is completely disregarded by its appointed guardians—then only judgment remains. The nation is apostate.<sup>27</sup>

The presence of this widow is reminiscent of the widow of Zarephath (1 Kgs 17:7–24; cf. Luke 4:25–26). Both widows are living in poverty, each in a time of national apostasy for the people of God (though of course the widow of Zarephath is a Gentile who resides outside of the borders of Israel). Both widows are characterized by their faith. The widow of Zarephath, in obedience to the prophet, gives up all that she has to live on in order to meet the needs of Yahweh's servant Elijah, believing that Israel's God will in turn meet her needs according to his promise (1 Kgs 17:12–16). The widow in the temple also gives up all that she has to live on, believing that Yahweh will care for her according to his word (Exod 22:22–24; Pss 68:5; 146:9). In this way the widow bypasses human judges and makes her appeal directly to God. Finally, each of these widows serves as a rebuke to the apostate nation: the widow of Zarephath because Yahweh overlooks the widows of Israel and cares for her, even though she is a Gentile; the widow in the temple because her destitute condition proves Israel to be a covenant-breaker.

As a result, judgment is coming swiftly. The reader is brought from the impoverished widow to the description of the judgment of the temple in Mark 13. This widow (symbolically) is one of the last exhibits of evidence in God's court to seal his case against the nation of Israel. The Lord of the temple had suddenly come to the temple, but he came bringing judgment (Mal 3:1–3; cf. Mark 11:11). Among those who would fall before his righteous anger are those “who oppress the widows” (Mal 3:5). It is no coincidence, then, that Mark 13:1 records Jesus leaving the temple. He has found it to be thoroughly corrupted and apostate. It will be left desolate.

Therefore Mark 12:41–44 should be understood as the convergence of two themes. First, the theme of true piety (i.e. confident trust in God) char-

<sup>27</sup> Corban was also evidence of this apostasy. Wright (cf. n. 11 *supra*) correctly links the two contexts. But his conclusion regarding the pericope of 12:41–44 is off the mark. His view is that Jesus is not calling his disciples to learn from the widow's example. Jesus is simply lamenting the religious condition of the nation (12:40), which is illustrated by the pathetic condition of the widow herself. Wright thinks we should regard “Jesus' attitude to the widow's gift as a downright disapproval, and not as an approbation. The study does not provide a pious contrast to the conduct of the scribes in the preceding section . . . ; rather it provides a further illustration of the ills of official devotion” (“Widow's Mite” 262). Wright does full justice to reading the passage in its context (even hinting at its relationship to the Olivet discourse), but he misses the point of the contrast Mark is attempting to make. A large part of Wright's problem is his assumption that Jesus is (only?) a religious reformer. C. S. Mann, *Mark: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB; Garden City: Doubleday, 1986) follows Wright: “Jesus does not commend the widow at all for sacrificing *all she had*: rather, the story should be read as a lament for a system which could end in a *poor widow*” (p. 495). Like Wright, Mann does justice to the context but misses the internal point of the pericope itself. See also J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke* (AB; Garden City: Doubleday, 1983) 2.1320–1321.

acterizes the remnant in Israel. We are to observe the faith of the widow, who in her devotion to God makes her offering out of her poverty and yet puts “more into the treasury than all the others” (12:43). The quality of her faith stands in sharp contrast to the false piety of the hypocrites, who are more concerned with appearances than godliness. From her example believers are encouraged to live a life of similar faith, meeting the needs of others while trusting that their heavenly Father, “who sees what is done in secret,” will meet their own needs. Further, they should shun any temptation to pursue their religion in a way that sets a premium on the approval of men rather than the approval of God (cf. John 5:41–44).

Second, the widow is a symbol: She represents one of the last nails in the coffin of national Israel. The chronic disregard of God’s Law and the sham religion of the nation’s leaders were summed up in her. Mark has strategically included this account to link the denunciation of the scribes’ wicked activities with the prophecy of the destruction of the temple. As the Chronicler had written, “the wrath of Yahweh was aroused against his people and there was no remedy” (2 Chr 36:16). Once again, there was no other remedy for Israel’s apostasy except divine judgment.