

# THE WIDOW'S MITE AND THE CONTROVERSIES ASSOCIATED WITH ITS INTERPRETATION

## Mark 12: 41-44 and Luke 21: 1-4

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DOI:[https://doi.org/ 10.5281/zenodo.15494966](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15494966)

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**Abstract:** This paper examined the widow's mite and the controversies associated with its interpretation in Mark 12: 41-44 and Luke 21:1-4. The story generated lots of wrong interpretations which this paper tried to correct. The methodologies used were hermeneutical and exegetical analysis of the text without bias to Jesus' true meaning of this teaching. The truth of the matter in this lesson is not on the given amount of money but the spirit in which the gift is given. True giving is to give without reservation and the moral issue from the story is that alms and other pious gifts should correspond with ones means. The text never contrasted human evaluation with that of the divine. The story provided no comparism and there was no blame game. It is recommended that every giver should give willingly without any reference point. No one is levied what he or she should give to the temple treasurer. Although, this story generated unnecessary controversies, which are at variance with the teaching of Jesus, however, Jesus rather praised the widow for her ability to give despite her poor situation.

**Keywords:** Widow's Mite, Biblical Interpretation, Sacrificial Giving, Temple Treasury, Hermeneutics

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## INTRODUCTION

This story of the Widow's Mite is an interesting one that continuous to gain attention from one generation to another. Although it is as old as the New Testament Scriptures itself, but it continuous to be a point of serious emphasizes from different Christian Sects.

The Widow's offering was just an ordinary offering that usually was dropped into the temple treasury. This widow dropped hers in the Jerusalem Treasury, while Jesus was physically present. It's important to note that Jesus had to interrupt his original teaching with the crowd in other to accommodate this story. However, the two stories being narrated had certain things in common. The first is on the warning about the Scribes that have over popularized themselves with too many unfounded ideologies that made people fear them than they fear God. The second problem is that through their teachings they implanted lots of wrong ideologies into the people in which case this widow is at case in hand.

What is the understanding of treasury from the Jewish audience? This is the court in which Jesus and others were seated in a large open court of the temple area called the Court of the Women. There was an inner court where only the men could go, but in this particular court both men and women could mingle themselves, and it was in this court that Jesus taught on this occasion.<sup>1</sup> They had set up 13 shofar-trumpet shapes in which people dropped their money. And each of them had a sign on the bottom of it indicating exactly what that money was to be used for. The various types are: Old shekel

dues, new shekel dues, bird offerings, wood, incense, gold, free will, etc., and they all were labeled and people will go by and would in the very open courtyard, publicly put their offering.<sup>2</sup>

Prior to witnessing the widow's offering, Jesus had been teaching his disciples about some systems of social inequities, of imbalance in the religious, political, and social structures of his day. Jesus is here painting a much starker picture that is, in effect, more about the wealthy scribes than it is about the poor, destitute widow. These scribes about which Jesus warns the disciples to be wary use their social location, power, and wealth only for themselves<sup>3</sup>. Although they offer services in the temple, but their real concern is themselves, maintaining their wealth, and shoring up their hegemony at the expense of the poorest and most vulnerable of their time.<sup>4</sup>

However, this short story has giving rise to lots of controversies which indirectly aroused the interest of this researcher to embark on this research.

The Statement of the problem, following the controversies generated by this story, is of interest that these be adequately investigated so as to arrive at the ideal and acceptable interpretation. The issues being addressed are follows;

- 1) Are there controversies this story has generated?
- 2) Are there impacts these have made among the Body of Christ,
- 3) What was Jesus truly trying to teach through this story?

The methodology adopted for this study include a hermeneutical and exegetical analysis of the text, while other additional materials were sourced from Journals, Bibles, Books, the print media, internet and through personal interviews which of cause served as primary source. *Exegesis of the Texts*

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The texts under consideration are Mark 12: 41-44 and Luke 21: 1-4

**Mark 12:41** Καὶ καθίσας κατέναντι τοῦ γαζοφυλακίου ἐθεώρει πῶς ὁ ὄχλος βάλλει χαλκὸν εἰς τὸ γαζοφυλάκιον. καὶ πολλοὶ πλούσιοι ἔβαλλον πολλὰ.

And He sat down opposite the treasury, and *began* observing how the multitudes were putting money into the treasury; and many rich people were putting in large sums.

**Mark 12:42** καὶ ἐλθοῦσα μία χήρα πτωχὴ ἔβαλεν λεπτὰ δύο, ὃ ἐστὶν κοδράντης. And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which amount to a cent.

**Mark 12:43** καὶ προσκαλεσάμενος τοὺς μαθητὰς αὐτοῦ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς· ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι ἡ χήρα αὕτη ἡ πτωχὴ πλεῖον πάντων ἔβαλεν τῶν βαλλόντων εἰς τὸ γαζοφυλάκιον.<sup>5</sup>

And calling His disciples to Him, He said to them, "Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the contributors to the treasury; **Mark 12:44** πάντες γὰρ ἐκ τοῦ περισσεύοντος αὐτοῖς ἔβαλον, αὕτη δὲ ἐκ τῆς ὑστερήσεως αὐτῆς πάντα ὅσα εἶχεν ἔβαλεν ὅλον τὸν βίον αὐτῆς. for they all put in out of their surplus, but she, out of her poverty, put in all she owned, all she had to live on."

**Luke 21:1** Ἀναβλέψας δὲ εἶδεν τοὺς βάλλοντας εἰς τὸ γαζοφυλάκιον τὰ δῶρα αὐτῶν πλουσίους.

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And He looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the treasury.

**Luke 21:2** εἶδεν δέ τινα χήραν πενιχρὰν βάλλουσαν ἐκεῖ λεπτὰ δύο,

And He saw a certain poor widow putting in two small copper coins.

**Luke 21:3** καὶ εἶπεν· ἀληθῶς λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι ἡ χήρα αὕτη ἢ πτωχὴ πλεῖον πάντων ἔβαλεν· And He said, "Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all of them;

**Luke 21:4** πάντες γὰρ οὗτοι ἐκ τοῦ περισσεύοντος αὐτοῖς ἔβαλον εἰς τὰ δῶρα, αὕτη δὲ ἐκ τοῦ ὑστερήματος αὐτῆς πάντα τὸν βίον ὃν εἶχεν ἔβαλεν. for they all out of their surplus put into the offering; but she out of her poverty put in all that she had to live on." <sup>6</sup>

From the story the word mite came from the coins the Widow throw into the Temple Treasury at Jerusalem. The two Mites make a farthing or a "Quadrant." This was a fourth part of the Roman "assis" which is equivalent to the Jews "Pruta" which is also equal to an eighty part of the Italia farthing.<sup>7</sup> However, a Mite is also known as a "lepton" (meaning small) in Greek. The story's set-up involves the wealthy (*plousioi*), who already have a tainted reputation, giving a large offering to the temple treasury (v. 41). This sets the stage for the widow, who gives two *lepta*,<sup>8</sup> The side attraction this story generated was what led to Jesus' explanation of the event to the disciples. Based on Jesus' comments, there is a significant relationship between the offerings of the rich and that of this particular widow.

The passage presents an assessment to two categories of act of giving, the rich and the poor widow. What these giving meant to Jesus disciples and the widow in particular, the text did not address that?<sup>9</sup> The rational in the giving of the offerings is that the wealthy give "out of abundance" while the widow gives "her whole life" (*holon ton bionautês*, (Lk. 12:44). On the issue of which rendering is earlier, Mark or Luke? A critical look at the different rendering of the texts starting with the gospel Mark. Mark's work as a separate witness entirely, the account in Luke 21:1-4 bears some striking differences and bolsters our awareness of what the earliest understandings of this passage may have been. Firstly, the emphasis is placed on the contrast between the offerings of the wealthy and that of the widow, and later the emphasis changed in the narratives. The parallel grammatical structure of both the narrator's account and Jesus' explanation are the same in both accounts, but the word used for what the rich offer was "large amounts" in Mark which was changed to merely "offerings" in Luke.. Secondly, there is a disparity between how Mark and Luke report the magnitude of the widow's gift. In Mark there are two explicit descriptors, *pantahosaeichen* and *holon ton bionautês* separated by the main verb *ebalen*, whereas Luke conflates the two into *panta ton bionhoneichen*. Mark appears to say, "she gave everything she had, her whole life/livelihood," while Luke says, "she gave every possession/bit of livelihood that she had."<sup>10</sup>

Mark refused to elaborate but rather leaves his audience with "*holon ton bion*" creating an alarming and abrupt ending. Luke appears more interested in style and accuracy than the drama. Thirdly, Luke's impression of the story is that the entire action on the part of Jesus and his disciples is simply observational: *eiden* in Lk. 21:1, and *eiden...kaieipon* in vv. 2-3. Mark, on the other hand, has Jesus sitting down (*kathisas*) while he watched (*etheôrei*) in 12:41, and calling

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(*proskalesamenos*) his disciples in 12:43. Mark gives us a more detailed account of Jesus' immediate surroundings and better clues relating to his purpose in observing the widow.<sup>11</sup> Finally, the emphatic "truly, I say to you" differs: Luke gives a very cerebrally stoic "*alêthôs*" while for Mark it was Hebraic "*amên*".

According to Wright<sup>12</sup>, he is of the view that the texts speaks for themselves, that is to support the position that the widow received an additional praise by her gift and action. This is what has been endorsed by some church fathers like, Jerome and Augustine to encourage willful given.

Contemporary biblical scholarship has changed the message within the context by creating a dialogue around it. Firstly they examine the immediate context, both in terms of the story alleged and its location in the text of Mark's narrative. The second looks at multiple narrative contexts for the poor widow and their respective interpretations, as well as how they might discredit or illuminate each other. Both provide intriguing views and evaluations but have created a line that most interpreters who tackle this periscope find themselves well on one side or the other.<sup>13</sup> The only obvious clue from Jesus' exclamation itself is his emphasis (*amen...*, v. 43).

Furthermore, the word widow (Chera) occurs in Mark 12: 40 which is a coincidence to what Jesus was denouncing when He referred to the Scribes as those who devour widows' houses.. This is a possible reason why this widow's story followed as to give an example of one such widow whose house has been devoured because of wrong religious thinking.<sup>14</sup> The negative religious teaching against the poor and the widows' notwithstanding, it is against this that Wright argues that the Widow was not to be esteemed for her self-giving pity, but at the same time mourned because she felt victim to the improper teaching of the Scribes.

An additional interpretation was fine tone by Mallon;<sup>15</sup> she stated that the issue between the Widow and the Scribe was "good deeds verses wrong deeds"

The reason that the widow's story follows is to give an example of one such widow whose house has been devoured as a result of condemnable religious thinking. Another side of the story of giving is what Jesus was about to fulfill on Calvary.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, There was another type of giving involving another woman who smashed an alabaster jar of perfume for Jesus sake.<sup>17</sup>

However, in God's sight the widow's giving was the greatest because God measures not so much the size of the gift as of what remains to the owner after given had effect on her income.<sup>18</sup>

### **LIFE APPLICATION ON THE ILLS OF WEALTHIEST**

Contributing to the challenges of the evils of wealthiest the author of *New York*

*Times Magazine* writing on Today's Parable of the Widow's Mite noted that the super wealthy, the wealthy and ostentatious "scribes" of today, actually give *less than* those who have middle and lower incomes.<sup>19</sup> Most absurdly, what Jesus observed in his day remains true today; those with the least continue to give more, by percentage of their resources, than the wealthy Jesus by action isn't endorsing this behavior, but blatantly naming it for what it is (especially when we read the full text with vv. 38-40 included about the Scribes) and how challenging *us* to see the structures that allow this to continue. What can *be done* to make the society and the faith communities more equitable? Why do we let this

continue to happen such that the poor give until it hurts and the wealthy seem to so often benefit from this self-defeat of the impoverished?

### CONTEMPORARY INTERPRETATION

The traditional interpretation of this story tends to view it as contrasting the conduct of the scribes with that of the widow, and encouraging generous giving; often read with 2 Corinthians 9:7, "...for God loves a cheerful giver."<sup>20</sup>

So I think it's pretty clear what this text is not about. This passage has nothing to do with Jesus commending a widow for giving much, and exhorting us to do likewise. That is nowhere in the text.

The followings are the lessons and recommendation from this study; 1) The truth of the matter in this lesson is not on the given amount that matters but the spirit in which the gift is given.

2) True giving is to give without reservation. 3) The moral issue from the story is that alms and other pious gifts should correspond with ones means.

<sup>1</sup>Hall, Christopher A., gen. ed. *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. New Testament II: Mark*, by Thomas C. Oden. Downer's Grove, IL: IVP, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup>Swartley, Willard M. "The Role of Women in Mark's Gospel: A Narrative analysis." *BTB* 27 (1997): 16-22.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid, P22.

<sup>5</sup> Kurt, Aland et al, Nestle –Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, Stuttgart Germany, 1981, p133.

4) The text never contrasted human evaluation with that of the divine.

5) The story provides an illustration of the ills of Jewish officials of their time and a lesson for our today Christianity..

### CONCLUSION

The story of the Widow's Mite came with a clear message and without any controversy. In the story of Jesus, there was no time he used comparism. There was no case of blame game. Every giver gave willingly without any reference point where they could determine what everyone should donate toward the work of God. This is the academic contribution this work stands to make.

*Therefore, any statement about the inner disposition or an outward bearing of the widow is achieved only by reading into the text. The issue associated with the widow giving all that she had was not at all at any point in this story.*

### END-NOTE

<sup>6</sup>Aland, Barbara et al., ed. *The Greek New Testament*. 4<sup>th</sup> Ed. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1998.

<sup>7</sup>Gill's Exposition of entire Bible

<sup>8</sup>A bronze *mite*, also known as a *Lepton* (meaning *small*), minted by [Alexander Jannaeus](#), King of [Judaea](#), 103 - 76 B.C.. and still in circulation at the time of Jesus<sup>[1]</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, <https://aspjournals.org/ajahss/index.php/ajahss/index>

<sup>10</sup>Smith, Geoffrey. "A closer look at the Widow's Offering: Mark 12:41-44." *JETS* 40 (March 1997): 27-36.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, P33

<sup>12</sup>Wright, Addison G. "The Widow's Mite: Praise or Lament", *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 44, 1982, pp.256-265

<sup>13</sup>Ibid, Pp260-263

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, P 263

<sup>15</sup>Malbon, Elizabeth Struthers. "The Poor Widow in Mark and Her Poor Rich Readers." *CBQ* 53,1991: pp589-604.

<sup>16</sup> Carson, D. A, et al, New Bible Commentary 21<sup>st</sup> ed Inter Varsity Press, England, p970 <sup>17</sup> Ibid, p970.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p1993.

<sup>19</sup> Chinwokwo, E. N., A Critical Introduction to The Tradition of Jesus, Rd University of Nigeria Publishing LTD, 2015, p136. <sup>20</sup> Baroque fresco at Ottobeuren