Widows, Poverty, and Charity
The Response of God’s People to Those in Need
Introduction

Back in TX
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Why widows?

Dedications by Claudia Prepontis (CIL VI.15003)
Introduction

Why widows?

- Independent Woman
- Social Anomaly
- Legal Status
- Family Structures
- Ecclesiastical
Introduction

Why widows?

Acts 6
Acts 9
1 Ti 5
Why widows?

"LOVE one another as I have LOVED you..."

- John 15:12
SESSIONS

1. The Ideal
2. The Reality
3. The (ongoing) Renewal
Part 1: The Ideal

You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. (Ex 19:6)
Part 1: The Ideal

Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against each other.

(Zech. 7:10 NIV)
Types of OT Widows

A. a widow who has living male relatives who either are too poor or unwilling to help her;

B. a widow who can obtain her husband's property through a son;

C. a widow whose husband died before producing a male heir to inherit his property.
Part 1: The Ideal

Types of OT Widows

A. a widow who has living male relatives who either are too poor or unwilling to help her;

Tamar: Gen 38
Part 1: The Ideal

Modern Support for Widows

- Bank account
- Health insurance
- Personal credit history
- Home
- Family
- Ability to drive
- Ability to work?
- Phone
- Internet
- Retirement account
- Government programs
- Church
Part 1: The Ideal

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On that day seven women will seize one man, saying, "We will eat our own bread and provide our own clothing. Just let us bear your name. Take away our disgrace."

(Isa. 4:1 CSB17)
On that day seven women will seize one man, saying, "We will eat our own bread and provide our own clothing. Just let us bear your name. Take away our disgrace." (Isa. 4:1 CSB17)
"I did not deliver the orphan to the rich. I did not deliver the widow to the mighty."

Ur-Namma
King of Sumer-Akkad
(2112–2095 BC)
Part 1: The Ideal

- **Kingdoms of Mesopotamia** were somewhat progressive in their care for widows; even state-sponsored care for war widows.

- The widow’s vow of De 26 also indicates a certain amount of envisioned *independence*. 
Part 1: The Ideal

“They kill the widow and the resident alien and murder the fatherless.”

Ps. 94:6 (CSB17)
Part 1: The Ideal

He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the resident alien, giving him food and clothing. (Deut. 10:18 CSB17)

The Lord protects resident aliens and helps the fatherless and the widow, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked. (Ps. 146:9 CSB17)
Part 1: The Ideal

The Ideal Israelite 3 Year Tithing Cycle
Dt. 14, 26

At the end of every three years, bring all the tithes of that year's produce and store it in your towns, so that the Levites (who have no allotment or inheritance of their own) and the foreigners, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns may come and eat and be satisfied, and so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.

(Deut. 14:28-29 NIV)
Part 1: The Ideal

“Say... my father was a wandering Aramean.”

(De 26:5)
Part 1: The Ideal

Various Jewish Groups

- The Pharisees
  - *The Synagogue*
- The Scribes
- The Sadducees
- The Samaritans
- The Essenes
- Other Fringe Groups

Intertestamental Period
Part 1: The Ideal

“Gain righteousness through me!”

“The Poor Man” Sideby, Finland
Part 1: The Ideal

Prayer is good when accompanied by fasting, almsgiving, and righteousness. A little with righteousness is better than much with wrongdoing. It is better to give alms than to treasure up gold. *For almsgiving delivers from death, and it will purge away every sin.*

(Tobit 12:8-9)
Water will extinguish a blazing fire: and **almsgiving will atone for sin**.
Whoever requites favors gives thought to the future; at the moment of his falling he will find support.

(Wisdom 3:30-31)
Part 1: The Ideal

Part 1: Summary

• The lot of the ancient widow was challenging
• OT Israel was called to respect and care for the disadvantaged in their midst, motivated by God’s grace
• The ideal gave way to abuses:
  • Mistreatment
  • Self-interested spiritual ends
Part 2: The Reality

The poor you will always have among you... (Jn 12:8)
Part 2: The Reality

Ruth
Part 2: The Reality

Judith
Part 2: The Reality

Anna

- Father’s name?
- Income?
- Home?
Part 2: The Reality

The Widow at Nain
Part 2: The Reality

Communities of Judea
Part 2:
The Reality
Part 2: The Reality

They devour widows' houses and say long prayers just for show. These will receive harsher judgment." (Lk. 20:47 CSB17)
Part 2: The Reality

Do you see that poor widow?...
Part 2: The Reality

Option 1
- Return to father’s home; receive 200 zuz/yr for life from estate. (ca $1600)

Option 2
- Stay in husband’s home; received 200 zuz/yr for 25 yrs.
Part 2: 
The Reality 

Jewish Writings 

Midrash (Lev., Nu. De.) 
Targums (Aramaic) 

188 A.D.
Part 2: The Reality

Jewish Writings

- Haggadah (stories)
- Halachah (settled arguments)

Mishnah

188 A.D.

Gemara

Talmud

Jerusalem

Babylonian
Part 2: The Reality

Jewish Writings

Zera‘im (Seeds)
Mo‘ed (Season)
Nashim (Women)
Nezikin (Damages)
Kedoshim (Holy Things)
Tohoros (Purities)
Part 2: The Reality

Rabbinic Law

Charity

Quppah
“Community Chest” (short-term help)

Tamhui
“Soup Kitchen”
A poor man who wanders from place to place must not be given less than a loaf worth a dupondium when four seahs cost a selā; if he lodge overnight, he must be given the cost of lodging; if he stay over the Sabbath, he must be provided with food for three meals. Anyone who possesses the means for two meals must not accept anything from the poor soup-kitchen; means for fourteen meals, he must not accept help from the public poor-box. And the poor-box is taken round for collection by two persons and is shared by three.

(Mishnah Pe’ah)
Part 2: The Reality

Essenes Charity

“They bestow food on those that are in distress”

Josephus (Bell. Jud 2.134)
In those days, as the disciples were increasing in number, there arose a complaint by the Hellenistic Jews against the Hebraic Jews that their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution.  

2 The Twelve summoned the whole company of the disciples and said, "It would not be right for us to give up preaching the word of God to wait on tables.  

3 Brothers and sisters, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and wisdom, whom we can appoint to this duty.  

4 But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word."  

5 This proposal pleased the whole company. So they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a convert from Antioch.  

6 They had them stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. (Acts 6:1-6 CSB17)
Part 2: The Reality

How Much?

- Currency Conversion
- The denarius
- Population
- Demographics
- M/F Ratios
- Life Expectancy

Acts 6
Part 2: The Reality

A poor man who wanders from place to place must not be given less than a loaf worth a *dupondium* when four *seahs* cost a *sela*;

2 loaves (10-14 oz each) = 1/12 *denarius* = ca $6.00 US/day
A Plausible Reconstruction (ala Hopkins, Stark)

- **1500 women** in Jerusalem are Christian around 40 C.E.
- Of these, 15% die before their 25\(^{th}\) birthday, leaving **1275** women who, in all likelihood, were not widows yet.
- 40% of these remaining women would die by their 45\(^{th}\) birthday, leaving **510 women** who are 45 yrs and older.
- Those living past 45 could expect to be a widow at some point.
- Life expectancy for women in first century Judea was ????
Part 2: The Reality

A Plausible Reconstruction (ala Hopkins, Stark)

- The implications
  - Perhaps between 250-500 widows in the ‘daily distribution’
    - = 41-83 denarii (high) or 20-41 denarii (low)
  - This implies a daily financial commitment to the Acts 6 program of between $1500 - $3000.
    - Even just 50 widows/day = $312 /day
  - Other factors?
Pure and undefiled religion before our God and Father is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

James 1:27
Part 2: The Reality

In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (in Greek her name is Dorcas); she was always doing good and helping the poor. About that time she became sick and died, and her body was washed and placed in an upstairs room. Lydda was near Joppa; so when the disciples heard that Peter was in Lydda, they sent two men to him and urged him, "Please come at once!" Peter went with them, and when he arrived he was taken upstairs to the room. All the widows stood around him, crying and showing him the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was still with them.
Peter sent them all out of the room; then he got down on his knees and prayed. Turning toward the dead woman, he said, "Tabitha, get up." She opened her eyes, and seeing Peter she sat up. He took her by the hand and helped her to her feet. Then he called for the believers, especially the widows, and presented her to them alive. This became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord. Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon. (Acts 9:36-43 NIV)
Part 2: The Reality

Acts 9

Ketubah

50 zuz / yr ($400)

“one or two tunics and a cloak of modest quality, or tunics and undergarments.”
Part 2: The Reality

Ketubah

“tunic” “cloak”

χιτώνα και ἱματία

50 zuz = ca $400/yr

Tunic = ca $75
Overcoat = ca $300
Part 2: The Reality

Acts 9
Part 2: Summary

• Widows in the NT were frequently poor and vulnerable

• Judaism had venues for charity, but Jewish Christians had Jesus’ command to love.

• The implications:
  • The number of widows to be cared for presented a formidable financial challenge for the early Christians.
Part 3: The (Ongoing) Renewal

...for God is pleased with such sacrifices. (He 13:16)
The (Ongoing) Renewal?

- Roman views on older women... in general
- Roman views on charity... in general
- Paul’s instructions to Timothy
- The following years in Early Christianity
Part 3: The (Ongoing) Renewal

Cornelia, mother of the Gracchi
Part 3: The (Ongoing) Renewal

Augustus and “Victorian” Rome

• Curb the rising “new woman”

• Marriage laws to promote population and traditional Roman values
Part 3: The (Ongoing) Renewal

Roman Social Structure

Upper strata
These people enjoyed power and privilege

Emperor
Imperial family
Senators
Equestrian order
Rich freedmen

Lower strata
Great diversity among this group of people. Life was hard.

Poor free citizens
Freedmen
Slaves

50-60%
Persistent poverty counties are those where 20 percent or more of county residents were poor, measured by the 1980, 1990, 2000 censuses, and the 2007-11 American Community Survey. Note that county boundaries are drawn for the persistent poverty counties only. Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from U.S. Census Bureau.
Part 3: The (Ongoing) Renewal

UC Davis Center for Poverty Research (2016)

“While poverty thresholds vary by the size and household composition, for a single individual under 65 years old, deep poverty would be an income **below $6,243** in 2016. For a family of four with two children, it would be **$12,169.50**.”

https://poverty.ucdavis.edu/faq/what-deep-poverty
Part 3: The (Ongoing) Renewal

WORLD BANK GLOBAL POVERTY LINE

1990: $1.01 annually
2001: $1.08 annually
2009: $1.25 annually
2015: $1.90 annually

10% of world’s population

Source: worldbank.org
Part 3: The (Ongoing) Renewal

Generous faith: Giving to charity a priority for millennial Christians

Ruth Gledhill Wed 28 Oct 2015 16:03 GMT
Part 3: The (Ongoing) Renewal

Romans and charity
Part 3: The (Ongoing) Renewal

“A religion for the poor and women.” – Lucian the Satirist
1 Timothy 5

[Do not rebuke and elderly man but rather encourage him as a father, (encourage) the younger men as brothers, the elderly woman as mothers, the younger women as sisters with all purity.

[Honor widows, the (ones) truly widows. If someone has children or descendants, let them learn first how to act reverently toward one's own household and how to pay back to their parents for the benefits they have received. For this is a pleasing thing in God's sight. And the widow who is truly a widow, that is, having been left entirely alone, she has put her hope in God and continues in her prayers and petitions for nights and days. But the one who continues living for herself has already died, even though she lives.
Instruct also these things so that they may be without reproach. But if anyone does not have respect for his own and especially those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. Let a widow be enrolled not being less than sixty years old, the wife of one man, (her character) testified by good works, (namely), if she brought up children, if she showed hospitality, if she washed the feet of saints, if she assisted the ones who were in affliction, if she dedicated herself to every good work. But refuse younger widows; for at some future time when they have a strong desire that replaces Christ, they desire to marry, having judgment because they forsook the first pledge.
At the same time they are learning to be idle, going about from house to house. Not only are they idle but also gossipy and meddlesome, speaking about thing that are not necessary to speak about. Therefore, I wish that younger (widows) marry, bear children, manage a home, and give no opportunity for an adversary to revile them. For already, some have turned aside after Satan. If any believing woman has widows, let her assist them and let her the church not be burdened, so that it can assist the ones truly widows.
Part 3: The (Ongoing) Renewal

“Honor the widows who are truly widows..”

Pleasing to God

Repaying a debt of love

MOTIVE

1 Ti 5
Part 3: The (Ongoing) Renewal

"Honor the widows who are truly widows."

1 Ti 5

Why?

- Problem in churches?
- Increase of charity?
- Unmanageable increase?
- *Families of the widows?*
Part 3: The (Ongoing) Renewal

“Honor the widows who are truly widows.”
Part 3: The (Ongoing) Renewal

Demographic of the Roman World

- 30% women
- 30% men
- 40% children
### Part 3: The (Ongoing) Renewal

#### Demographic of the Roman World

**Harnack, Hopkins, and Stark**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>100 communities by 100 A.D.</strong></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ave community: 70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harnack’s ratio: $15/18 = 14$ women per church</td>
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*How many widowed and over 60?*
Part 3: The (Ongoing) Renewal

Developments of the Subsequent Centuries
Part 3: The (Ongoing) Renewal

An image from the Catacomb of Priscilla. This woman has her arms outstretched as if holding Mass. Image in the public domain, from Wikimedia.
Tertullian of Carthage

• Widows: special place in worship, and the “penitents” would pass before them in the front of church.
"Widows and dedicated women (sanctimoniales) who are chosen to assist at the baptism of women, should be so well instructed in their office as to be able to teach aptly and properly unskilled and rustic women how to answer at the time of their baptism to the questions put to them, and also how to live godly after they have been baptized." (Canon XII)
Part 3: The (Ongoing) Renewal

By mid-200’s: 1500 widows, virgins, and needy people

By late-300’s: 3000 widows
Part 3: The (Ongoing) Renewal

Bishops and the Distribution of Alms

*The Apostolic Constitutions (300’s A.D.)*
Part 3: Summary

• The Roman world generally viewed the poor and charity with disdain.

• Paul’s directives were counter-culture, and set the pattern for the future Christian church.

• While there are shining examples of Christian love, eventually the same pattern develops in the early church that happened in Judaism – a trend toward self-interested giving and receiving of charity.
Conclusion

What about us?
What about us?

• Does living in America heighten / diminish our sensitivity to the plight of the disadvantaged?

• What place does charity have in our congregational vision?

• Regarding women of faith, how can we best enable our sisters in Christ to use their gifts to serve their Lord and their neighbor with joy?