Feminist Criticism

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Among feminist interpreters, the Gospel of Luke is contested ground. The interpretations are not only diverse but marked by contradiction. Early feminist studies on Luke were almost programmatically positive, looking for and calling forth the unusually large number of women who are mentioned in the text. However, this was soon challenged by a far more critical evaluation maintaining that Luke represented a rhetorical strategy whereby women were restricted to silence and subservience.

It is therefore no coincidence that the introduction to the volume on the Gospel of Luke in the series “A Feminist Companion” begins with two paragraphs, each representing an established feminist position on Luke, and the one contradicting the other. Some hold that “the Gospel of Luke celebrates women’s discipleship, self-determination, 


and leadership even as it heralds a reversal of systemic inequities,” whereas others claim that “the Gospel of Luke threatens any attempt made by women, the poor or the disenfranchised to find a voice in either society or church. The narrative consistently depicts women in ancillary capacities. . . . Luke’s gospel is a menacing text that retains and reinforces kyriarchal structures.”

Interpreters do often disagree, but how are such extremely opposed positions, equally committed to the common cause of feminist criticism, possible in relation to the same source? Is a middle ground possible? Is a middle ground even desirable or required?

THE MULTIPLICITY OF FEMINIST CRITICISMS

Feminist criticism on Luke is a showcase for the observation that commitment to feminism does not lead to uniformity. The multiple and even contradictory readings of a single text may be taken to reflect the fact that feminism is itself a plurality of possible positions, “variously shaped by historical circumstances, political and theological allegiances, social identities, institutional locations, and intellectual interests.” Indeed, within feminist criticism we find an active interest in decentering the notion of a singular interpretation and, accordingly, in developing a strategy of multiple readings of the same passage, readings that calmly may be regarded as equally compelling.

Feminist criticism aims at uncovering power structures that keep women in place as “the other” and overcoming the marginalization of women and any cognition marked by androcentrism. It is born out of

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5 Despite postmodern complaints that terms such a patriarchy and androcentrism are naïve or at least imprecise, I still find the term androcentric (first coined by Kari Elisabeth Børresen, in *Subordination et equivalence: Nature et role de la femme d’apres Augustin et Thomas d’Aquain* [Oslo: Universitetsforlaget 1968], 8–9) useful.
the struggle to overcome the oppression of women and the subordina-
tion of women to men; it is nurtured by a vision of justice and equality;
and for many it is rooted in the faith that God redeems and trans-
forms. It entails a critical examination of ideologically infected claims,
inherited prejudices, established discourses, and other structures of
power that have maintained woman as the second sex.

Feminist criticism is not a singular, monolithic position but a label
that covers a variety of approaches or methodologies, entering into
alliances with historical–critical methods, social-scientific criticism,
literary or narrative criticism, reader-response criticism, and, more
recently, postcolonial criticism. Strictly speaking, feminist criticism is
not a particular method of interpretation so much as it is a critical
sensibility, the application of a perspective emerging out of liberation
hermeneutics and contextual readings.

Feminist criticism calls for a scrutiny of Scripture by means of
reading strategies that do not evade the more or less explicit misogyny
of biblical texts but also help overrule this misogyny in creative and
liberating ways. It continues to confront a mainstream scholarship
that hesitates to recognize its vested male-stream interest and remains
enshrined in historical and related criticisms that regard themselves
as scientifically objective. Therefore, feminist criticism tends often to
distrust objective truth claims and to regard interpretations that claim
completeness and supremacy over all other readings as themselves
enactments of dominion. However, the assertion that the multivalence
of a biblical text allows different performances, hearings, and readings
should not lead to the conclusion that all are of equal value. Especially
from a liberation perspective, the hermeneutical privilege lies with of
the oppressed.

At the same time, there is in feminist criticism a professional
wrestling with the text that also serves as a protection against ide-
ologically predictable results. Feminist criticism does not require that

and tend to prefer it to Luce Irigaray’s more graphic term phallogocentrism, even
if the latter is more focused on the absence of woman/presence of man and what
women do not/cannot have (Sexes and Genealogies [New York: Columbia University
Press, 1993]).
scientific rigor is left behind. While drawing from the well of women studies and critical theory, feminist criticism most often also includes the specialized tools of biblical scholarship. As Adele Reinhartz wrote some years ago, “I do not hesitate to draw on the range of historical–critical method while acknowledging that the basic facts of my identity, as well as many other factors that may or may not be visible to me, will shape the exegetical process and its results, just as they have for all readers of this text.”\(^6\) Others might choose narrative or rhetorical analysis – the point still being that feminist criticism is not a method in itself but a critical perspective applying a variety of methods. This further involves that feminist critics may work independently of otherwise mutually exclusive positions on how meaning is constituted – that is, whether the text has a particular voice or embedded meaning of its own, which can be heard only if the interpreter suppresses his or her own voice; or whether the text is itself mute, capable of meaning only when a reader or interpreter makes sense of it. Interpreting from different social locations may also bring to light different aspects of a text, particularly when a text is seen to harbor a surplus of meaning or rather the potential of multivalence.

Reinhartz also warns that a confrontational – in her language “apocalyptic” – model of feminist criticism is undermined by its own reductionism because it does not do justice to the complexity of the larger situation. Efforts to be correct about gender may inscribe mistakes such as anti-Judaism when patriarchal features of Christianity are assigned to Judaism, relegating Judaism to serve as the scapegoat or dark backdrop against which the light of Christianity is thrown into sharp relief.\(^7\) In the early phase of Christian feminist criticism, assumptions were often made about Judaism that might seem flattering to early Christianity but failed to recognize that early Judaism involved a similar variation of possible positions and, indeed, that


Jesus was himself a Jew, however radical or countercultural. In the particular case of Luke, there is good reason to believe that the Gospel was written in an environment deeply rooted in Hellenistic Judaism.

Feminist criticism comprises not only a methodological adaptability but also a plurality of theological positions. Women do not necessarily agree among themselves any more than men do, and today most feminists stand back from speaking of an overruling or essential “woman’s experience” in which women share independently of other differences. Increasingly, feminist criticism has sought to express itself contextually, not promoting or depending upon a particular understanding or stereotype of what it is to be female or of “female experience.” Rather, it should contribute to the liberation of women also from such stereotypes. A feminist approach is fundamentally a critical approach that unveils gender blindness and challenges traditions and positions that place “man” as a self-identical and ahistorical agent, who represents universality and normativity, and whose perspective consequentially is privileged and subsumes all others. All the more important is it that feminist criticism does not give in to the temptation to match this kind of universal discourse and speak oppositionally about “woman” in general.

**GENDER AS ANALYTICAL CATEGORY**

The introduction of gender as an analytical category has proven useful in exposing gender blindness. It has helped to demonstrate how gender has an almost all-embracing structural significance; gender seems to be omnipresent and deeply embedded in the formation of the way in which we look at most things. Gender is bodily inscribed but

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8 Joan W. Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” *American Historical Review* 91 (1986): 1053–75. In “The Evidence of Experience,” *Critical Inquiry* 17 (1991): 773–97, Scott develops this further to say that because the physical difference between men and women has no inherent meaning, one should explore how categories such as gender, class, race, and agency received their foundational status. Processes of signification stand prior to meaning and experience.

the significance attached to sexual attributes in determining gender may vary. Gender is not an unmarked category but articulated in forms of great variety in terms of culture and location in time and space. Poststructuralist gender studies have challenged the stability of the categories by which we characterize persons and strived to deconstruct the power structures that define “normality.” Without necessarily accepting “queer theory,” any investigation interested in gender has to take seriously that the terms “man” and “woman” cannot be used as if they were uniform and unified categories. Gender is not only a historically varied category; “it also does not affect all women in the same way or any women in the same way all the time.”

Studies focusing on the construction of masculinity have followed in the wake of feminist criticism and the heightened awareness about gender. Masculinity no longer retains “the invisibility of the norm” – which meant that women had to be mentioned to be present. It is obvious that constructions of femininity/ies and masculinity/ies somehow are mutually dependent, and that how the mutual dependence and interplay between men and women are conceived should be investigated. It may be that portrayals of women in ancient texts say more about the construction of masculinity than about the actual lives of women. However, within feminist criticism one should remain cautious and not accept too quickly a shift of focus from feminist criticism to studies of masculinity. Given the homosocial interest in the new male, the focus on masculinity may be another, more subtle way to marginalize women, another guise of seeing men as more important than women and paying attention to women primarily for how their presence in texts may contribute to the understanding of masculinity.

Anonymous, “Feminist and Womanist Criticism,” 237. See also in the following the section on “Intersectionality.”


D’Angelo, “The ANER Question.”

For these considerations, see Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, Gossip and Gender: Oth-er-ing of Speech in the Pastoral Epistles (Acta Theologica 19; Oslo, 2007), 198–202.
HERMENEUTICAL SIGNPOSTS

The polarity of feminist positions on the Gospel of Luke exemplifies a more comprehensive pattern in the feminist interpretation of biblical texts. This pattern is also determined by the fact that feminist criticism has developed through several distinctive phases, each of which has left traces in its methodological repertory, resulting in a complex and diverse multitude of interpretive advances becoming operative simultaneously but yielding different and also conflicting results. One may distinguish among three main phases/approaches.

The earliest studies that emerged during the resurgence of feminist biblical scholarship in the 1960s and 1970s tended to focus on the retrieval of unnoticed biblical texts about women. The aim was to uncover positive portrayals of women in the Bible and to focus upon feminine figures and symbols (images of women) in counterbalance to the masculine. This approach resulted in a multitude of often edifying compilations that helped affirm women in their femaleness by bringing forth biblical images of women as positive models of identification. It was and is multifaceted, but represents “a hermeneutics of recuperation.”

However, these early books on biblical women, still in vogue in some Christian circles, focus on the individual female figures subtracted from their wider context. The ideological force of discourse and the implications of a complex social matrix are not fully recognized. They rely on presuppositions of femininity as referential, assuming that somehow all women share in an essentially defined womanhood or women’s experience. This is, however, not to say that they are unaware of the power structures that render women to silence and invisibility.

14 Cf. the popular but well-informed presentation by Emily Cheney, She Can Read: Feminist Strategies for Biblical Narrative (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity, 1996), 11; and Barbara Reid, Choosing the Better Part? Women in the Gospel of Luke (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1996), 7–10. This presentation is not identical with either of these, but I have used them as a comprehensive starting point for further reflection. I also find the historical survey in Postmodern Bible, 244–87, informative, particularly its first part.

15 Postmodern Bible, 245.
both in textual production and interpretation. Their quest assumes consciously a selective reading, subject to the partial view they are proud to represent. However, their project of retrieval still suffers from a lack of critical scrutiny and correction. They sweep the house as they look for the silver coin, and at times something glimmers in the dust. But they do not dare say that the state of the house itself is faulty.

A far more critical approach will simply leave the house behind, deeming it beyond repair and ready for condemnation. Misogyny is seen as so pervasive that the Bible yields nothing but bitter fruit for women today. The biblical tradition is considered irredeemable for women even if some writings may be treated with more harshness than others. According to this view, the authority of Scripture in its traditional form is to be deconstructed and discounted and replaced by new, (re)constructed stories.

Also on a clearly critical note but less severe, some are not so much looking for images of women as for “golden rules” and a biblical message that continues to bring hope. In its outcome this quest is positive toward the biblical message, if not toward biblical texts. It employs a hermeneutics of liberation in that it discerns a certain strand or theme of biblical tradition, a prophetic-liberating message, and applies that as a criterion for evaluating particular texts. Taking struggle for justice as its point of departure it uses biblical authority toward its own justice-oriented ends.

Barbara Reid’s work on women in the Gospel of Luke is an illuminating example of this latter approach, methodologically consistent and clear. Hers is a critical reading that sees the women not as protagonists but as victims. In the Lukan context, women are restricted by a patriarchal role division to supportive, silent roles. However, this confinement violates what Reid upholds as the liberating praxis of Jesus and his message, which makes Christianity redeemable. It becomes a case of Jesus against Luke. The voice and practice of Jesus are discerned by applying a hermeneutics of suspicion extracted from Luke’s misleading contextualization and intent. Reid calls for a liberating recontextualization of the Lukan stories about women, negotiating
new meaning through a deconstruction that sets the stories free to be reconstructed and reclaimed in ways usable to the church today. According to this view, Luke overrules the (historical) subtext of women’s participation and leadership revealed by a hermeneutics of suspicion and comes close to a patriarchal reinforcement carried into prescriptive effect by the Pastoral Epistles.

The introduction of a hermeneutics of suspicion marks an important transition in feminist criticism.¹⁶ A hermeneutics of suspicion is contrasted to a hermeneutics of consent and affirmation and represents an interpretative strategy of resistance where the authority of a biblical text lies in whether it helps end relations of domination and exploitation. It is ethical and theological in its focus and commitment. It also represents a change of perspective or relocation of the center and opens up to rhetorical and literary methods in order to bring forth the shadows and the silences – the victims – so that it may not happen again. As Phyllis Trible once stated with exemplary clarity: “By feminism I do not mean a narrow focus upon women, but rather a critique of culture in light of misogyny.”¹⁷

By a radical shift of perspective, women are not just brought forth from the margins or depths of the often-forgotten stories. As they are moved to the center of the investigation, the understanding of the whole story is reconfigured. This lays bare the partialities and lacunae, all the cracks in the textual construction of early Christian history, and calls for a (feminist) reconstruction of Christian origins. A hermeneutics of suspicion is therefore only the first step in a further hermeneutical process leading to remembrance, reconstruction, and also proclamation whereby “the Scriptures offer paradigms for struggles and

¹⁶ This was introduced by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in several works in the 1980s – cf. Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation (Boston: Beacon, 1984), 15. In But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation (Boston: Beacon, 1992) this approach is further unfolded as a critical rhetorical process within the normative space of the ekklesia of women where biblical religions and cultures are being changed “in the interest of all women and marginalized people” (75–6).

visions that are open to their own transformations through the power of the Spirit in ever new socio-historical locations.”

In this approach, feminist interpretations are recontextualized readings where the context is defined by wider feminist reconstructions of the earliest Christian movement or communities. This may be achieved through a fairly conventional historical–critical analysis including a conscious shift of perspective, but also through historically informed imagination – that is, through playing with the possibilities of what might have been. In order to combat the massive process that has rendered women invisible and silent, the critical project of making women “heard and visible” should not be easily dismissed or deemed to be an impossible mission because the sources are too fragile or made impenetrable by their discursive confinement. It remains a challenging task indeed, but it is a matter of solidarity through the ages to recall the presence of women in the past and never cease to explore whether their voices can be heard and their lives appreciated.

By means of a hermeneutics of remembrance that uses imaginative intervention, women are written into history. This requires that traditional notions of historical significance are not only enlarged but redefined. It goes beyond writing a new history of women. Rather, it is instrumental in creating a new history – indeed, it changes history. As Amy-Jill Levine states at the conclusion of her introduction to A Feminist Companion to Luke: “What we recall when we look back may be an evil that requires rejection, a repository of values that can no longer be proclaimed, a tale of condemnation that masks another

18 Schüssler Fiorenza, But She Said, 76.

19 This is what Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza did in her groundbreaking book, In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins (New York: Crossroad, 1983). Recently Carolyn Osiek and Margaret Y. MacDonald with Janet M. Tulloch, A Woman’s Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 2006), have made a creative and knowledgeable attempt at exploring the social matrix and the material infrastructure in antiquity, and imagine how women’s life went on in a house that also served as church. They argue that “social invisibility is conceptual; it exists in the minds of those who articulate the ideal and may bear no resemblance to what is really going on.” There is a move from text to history as it may be socially reconstructed.
story . . . lost to recorded history. If we fail to remember, we too (like Lot’s wife) will turn to stone; if we remain mired in the past rather than use what we remember to shape the future, we shall have failed the next generation.”

SUBJECTIVITY AND AGENCY

In a patriarchal system and/or androcentric consciousness, the potential of women’s agency is regarded as threatening and uncontrollable. Hence, women are stripped of agency and displaced. The French post-structuralist Luce Irigaray goes as far as claiming that “woman has not yet taken place.” This means that women are characterized by absence and men by presence. Women exist only in relation to men as a mirror for male self-reflection in what she calls a phallogocentric construction of reality. In fact, in ancient Greek there was no generic term for woman; all terms applied to women were relational dependent on the various stages of life. Thus, according to Irigaray, the phallos and the logos collude or work symbolically together to maintain hegemonic male power. This is not a matter of blaming men; it is rather to describe a system where both men and women are made to regard maleness as the human norm. We do not know who woman is by herself, only who she is as “the other.” This is very much the case in ancient texts. Women’s presence is instrumental. They are not there on their own behalf but appear to illustrate a point or in reference to something else. The significance of women is secondary or referential. They are excluded from the power of defining the world. Women provide a tool with which male authors can “think” the values of their cultures. A woman in a text may simply stand for something else; she points to something else rather than herself serving as a symbol or an emblem.

20 Feminist Companion, 22.
21 Irigaray, Sexes and Genealogies, 66. Jorunn Økland’s work on 1 Cor 11 applies Irigaray’s perspective in an intriguing manner (Women in Their Place).
Poststructuralist/postmodern positions such as this are illuminating but have led to a broadly accepted deconstruction of both subjectivity and agency. However, the historian Joan Scott has emphasized that poststructuralist theory does not deny that people act or that they have some control over their actions. Rather, it criticizes the liberal theory that assumes individuals are fully autonomous, self-creating actors. The issue is not agency per se, but the limits of the liberal theory of agency. It is to my mind necessary to avoid a complete dispersal of identity and to hold on to some form of subjectivity and agency without affirming gender essentialism. Applying a hermeneutics of suspicion, the question could be why feminists should accept that “the decentering of the male subject eventually annihilated the female subject as well. Why were we told to abandon subjectivity just at the historical moment when women had begun to claim it?” “Why,” Nancy Miller asks, “was the ‘end of woman’ authorized without consulting her?” Instead, women should claim the right to name themselves, and not leave it to Adam. A basic assumption in many reconstructions where women are written into the history is therefore that women’s abilities for agency do not disappear completely, even in oppressive systems. For the interpretation of Luke 21:1–4 that follows, this is a crucial observation.

THE MULTIVALENCE OF NARRATIVE

The Gospel of Luke, whatever genre it may be said to represent, is a narrative. Narrative texts have an inbuilt polyphony in that they allow for, and even may include, several contradictory voices. Narratives therefore lend themselves to serving as a testing ground for shifts of perspective. In the case of prescriptive texts such as letters or speeches, an audience (or rather a narrative framework or situation) may be elicited or deduced so that the author’s voice is interpreted as part of a larger discussion. This kind of shadow-reading or looking for

counter-voices is nothing new in biblical scholarship. For most New Testament (NT) writings, a variety of possible adversaries or differing groups have been identified as lurking behind the text – holding other opinions or representing practices with which the author disagrees and which he seeks to correct. Traditionally, however, it has been the task of the interpreter to side with the author, and to bring the author’s voice to force. The authority of the text is taken to be attached to and dependent upon the authority of the author’s position.

For feminist criticism, as for other readings today, the issue of interpretative authority is more complex. Does it reside in the text, the reader, the community, or some combination of these? Brigitte Kahl has in her work on the Gospel of Luke developed a hermeneutics of conspiracy whereby a feminist counter-reading is inscribed right into the patriarchal text itself.25 Drawing on her experience of patterns of communication in the former German Democratic Republic, Kahl explores how a text produced under either internal or external censorship reveals a self-contradictory narrative: What the words manifestly say masks coded propositions and hidden agendas. Obedient and subversive readers, opposing forces and positions condensed and brought together in a compromise formation, in textual splits and inconsistencies – these are blueprints of counter-reading that are all to be found in the text itself. Hence Kahl forcefully asks whether “the divergent interpretations of Luke indicate that the text in fact is inconsistent in the sense that it comprises extreme polarities in a ‘compromise formation’ created by a countercultural setting.”26

This does not necessarily reflect a strategy conceived by a single author but may express real conflicts and struggles. In the case of Luke, the hermeneutics of conspiracy provides one lens by which to understand how Luke’s two-volume work gives rise to divergent perspectives.


Kahl assigns to Luke “a Janus-headedness” – which is to say that the stories Luke tells are “simultaneously a testimony to a liberating history of women and to its suppression by (love) patriarchalism.” Methodologically, Kahl states that rather than assuming too quickly or too simply a unity of the text – either negatively or positively – one should explore how this heterogeneity works. The question to be addressed is not only that the text is composed of diverse elements, but also upon which oppositions Luke’s positions are built, and what significance the narrative arrangement renders to these voices of self-contradiction.

My own feminist and narrative reading of Luke has an emphasis on ambiguity not dissimilar from the one identified by Brigitte Kahl. What I have labelled “the double message” involves a double connotation in that it refers partly to a compositional device in Luke-Acts whereby parallel gender structures emerge, and partly to a striking ambiguity in this Gospel’s positioning of women. Where we would prefer certitude and clarity about the role of women – whether prominent or marginal – the Lukan text seems to confuse the question by marginalizing women who have been given prominence in the story. The challenge is whether this can be explained in a meaningful way without distorting the textual evidence in one direction only or giving in to wishful thinking.

DIVERSITY, COMPLEXITY, AND INTERSECTIONALITY

When Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza suggested that the terms “kyriarchal” and “kyriocentric” should replace patriarchal and androcentric, her point was to underscore that domination is not simply a matter of patriarchal, gender-based dualism but of a more comprehensive, interlocking, hierarchically ordered structure of domination as evidenced in a variety of oppressions, such as racism, social deprivation, heterosexism, and colonialism.

29 Seim, Double Message, see the Concluding Summary, 249–60.
The concept of intersectionality has tentatively been introduced into gender studies to consider the interdependence of multiple aspects of identity and to help address how various structures involving power influence and constitute each other in complex and changeable patterns. Intersectionality represents an attempt not only to list the various factors but to consider systematically how categories such as gender, sexual orientation, class, race, ethnicity, nationality, age, religion, and social location intersect. These factors cannot be understood separately as they both modify and reinforce each other. The term “intersectionality” goes back to Kimberlé Crenshaw and was used to translate black feminist thought to express how various cultural and social patterns of oppression and inequality are bound together. As the theory was further developed, the applicability was extended to all women in order to understand how dichotomies or intersections of social inequality form a matrix of domination.

How do factors such as gender, class, race, ethnicity, nationality, age, and religious affiliation interact and mutually inform each other? Within feminist studies the development of different branches such as womanist theology shows that the category “woman” cannot be used to erroneously homogenize the experiences of women but should take into account other important sources of variation that cut across it in important and complex ways. Categories leak. Race is gendered and gender is racialized. Different from queer theory, which emphasizes the deconstruction or destabilization of analytical categories and


argues against fixed categories as simplifying social fictions, intersectionality motivates intra- and intercategorical approaches.

Sharon Ringe involves more explicitly a personal dimension when she describes how a feminist reading entails perspective, experience, and commitment all shaped by “the data of one’s existence” such as gender, race, class, ethnicity, physical condition, and relationships in which one is involved, as they are transformed into experience. The data of social location intersect with events of personal, local, and global history, shaping a “commitment to the physical, psychological, and social well-being of all women.”

Such awareness of how various power structures intermingle, that is, how they mutually influence and constitute each other, is important to feminist criticism. However, the interaction may make it difficult to discern the category that at any time is the decisive factor when a person or a group is mistreated or discriminated against. Is Luke’s interest in women, be it positive or negative, related to his broader concern for the poor and other marginalized groups? Or is it a sign of his emphasis on the success the Christian proclamation had in noble and well-off circles, because many of the women appear to be relatively wealthy? Does it ultimately matter which factor proves decisive in a particular situation because it never appears in splendid isolation?

READING LUKE

The Gospel of Luke features women in greater number than any other NT writing, including the Acts of the Apostles. As many as forty-two passages are concerned with women or with motifs that might be labeled as female – which is more than the other Gospels, even when taking into account their length. Most of these passages belong to the material special to Luke, which means that it is unique. Within this material, three-eighths of the total number of persons mentioned are women, whereas they comprise two-fifths of all named persons.

Many of these Lukan stories about women have been important to Christian women in their reading of the Bible as they show women in the company of Jesus. One may wonder whether the heat of the feminist argument over Luke may partly reflect the fact that there is enough material to nurture a fire.

Another factor that has been extremely influential is the rarity that the Gospel of Luke is followed by a second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, most probably written by the same author, even if a second volume may not have been projected when the Gospel was written. In the second volume, which presupposes the Gospel, material on women is relatively scarce – or rather the appearance of women rises only to a level that is average when compared with the other narrative writings of the NT. The difference between the two volumes corresponds to the divergence in the perception regarding the treatment of women by Luke as it was presented previously. Which is most Lukan? Some feminist commentators seem to think that Luke finally got his say in Acts, having struggled in the Gospel with damage limitation, because the available traditions about Jesus had a stronger profile favoring women than what Luke himself approved of. It has, in other words, to quite some degree been a discussion of Luke’s alleged fixed opinion or position. However, the project should not be to portray Luke’s view of women, or to see women or gender as one theme among others in the Lukan texture. Then gender loses its force as an analytical category, and it is still an extremely author-oriented reading, assembling the meaning of a text as first and foremost a reflection of the author’s mind and strategy. It is also an inadequate approach to the polyphony of a narrative and its potential for letting the reader in for accessing and assessing the story.

It is fair to say, providentially, that new and more complex ways of reading Luke with feminist eyes are now in place. In the introduction to The Feminist Companion quoted in the beginning to show contradictory approaches to women in the Gospel of Luke, we also read, “Rather than restrict explications of Luke’s narrative to the artificial and reified dichotomies of good or bad news concerning gender roles,
sexuality, emancipation, or any of the other categories that concern feminist analysis, commentators are increasingly recognizing the multiple messages as well as the partiality – in the dual sense of being both biased and incomplete – of each reading.”

Considering the fact that the Gospel of Luke is not a systematic treatise but a narrative opens up possibilities of polyphony and ambiguities. It tells a story, presents a sequence of events that form development or plot, in which the individual episodes take place at a particular stage in the larger, overarching narrative. The order is rarely arbitrary, and the location of various episodes in a narrative sequence can itself be an effective means of dealing with tensions and also with contradictions. A narrative is not a stable system; what we have is a complex movement. The narrative form invites polyphony and also discord. It allows for several and even contradicting voices to be heard in the course of the narrative. It may convey mixed or double messages, heterogeneity, without collapsing.

If the story moves from presence to absence, it may provide insight into mechanisms and structures of oppression and silencing. This balancing duality means that an analysis of the Gospel of Luke reveals conflict and debate, silencing structures and subversive survival.

**LUKE 21:1–4: THE STORY OF THE WIDOW’S MITES**

As Jesus looked up, he saw rich people throwing their gifts into the temple treasury; he also saw a certain poor widow throwing in two small copper coins, and he said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all these put in their gifts out of their abundance, but she has contributed out of her poverty everything she had to live on.” (Luke 21:1–4)

This story or brief episode is common to the Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of Mark, and the two agree with regard to its location both

topographically and narratively in that in both Gospels it follows upon a saying of Jesus in which he denounces the scribes:

“Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets. They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.” (Luke 20:46–47)

A Feminist Look at Current Interpretations

Most commentators pay little attention to the brief episode, and there are also remarkably few individual contributions elucidating it. This situation may be due to a convenient consensus as to the purpose and meaning of the story. In a much-read commentary, this consensus is briefly stated in the following manner:

These words of Jesus express the deepest convictions of the Christian community concerning its understanding of the kingdom of God. God owns all things and all things must be given back to God. This allegiance transcends every political expression.

The kingdom shaped by such a Lord is entirely new with the newness of God’s own life: it is neither the perpetuation of a national dream of sovereignty nor can it be portrayed in terms of earthly preoccupations about descent and property. This kingdom is symbolized by the widow, who though left alone in human terms, is not herself alive but capable of giving life by sharing all her living with others.34

This latter point may be further developed to serve as an image of the scandal of the cross, in that the widow who gives her whole life prefigures Jesus’ own submission of his very life on behalf of others.35

On the whole, in this interpretation the woman in the story serves a

35 Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, “The Poor Widow in Mark and Her Poor Rich Readers,” *CBQ* 53 (1991): 589–604. Even if the article deals with the Markan account, interpreters tend to treat the episode as a synoptic story without differentiating between the versions.
symbolic or emblematic purpose; she provides a tool with which the author and also interpreters can “think,” symbolizing the kingdom and/or prefiguring Jesus’ own sacrificial submission in death.

The remarkable reserve among commentators when it comes to dealing with this story is, however, not sufficiently explained either by a convenient consensus or by its meagre brevity. More likely, it is due to the fact that the story is felt to be, at best, ethically ambiguous and certainly not politically correct to socially conscientious minds today. Most commentators remain troubled by the idea that Jesus would (re)commend, not to say laud, a poor widow who gave up to the temple what little she had.

In 1982, Addison G. Wright offered another, radically different interpretation that has come to represent the attractive alternative to the established consensus, which with minor differences assumes that the poor widow should be revered as an exemplary character or symbol. According to Wright, the story serves as a lament and as an exemplification of the preceding verse where Jesus condemns the mighty scribes for their vain hypocrisy and exploitation of widows. Hence it does not praise the woman’s generosity. It is rather a complaint and an accusation against those who have led her astray by false pretensions of piety. Jesus first attacks the scribes for their economic encroachments upon widows. The narrative or rather the observation that follows in 21:1–4 is a condemnation of the temple authorities, who, like the scribes, deprive a widow of her living – although admittedly in a more subtle way. Jesus laments the system that takes advantage of widows such as her. The poor widow is a victim to the instruction by the religious leaders who have misdirected her to support her own oppression.

This recasting of the episode has for obvious reasons had a great following. It makes sense of the story’s textual location in that it establishes a narrative continuity both with what precedes it and with the apocalyptic discourse about the destruction of the temple that

follows. Even more importantly, it solves the ethical dilemma and puts right and wrong back in place: the poor should be protected and defended, not falsely encouraged to give up what little they have.\(^\text{38}\) The poor widow is no longer to be regarded as an illustrious example or symbol of great values. She should be bewailed as a victim of false and vain pretenders who dress up exploitation in the guise of piety. She is, according to Stephen Moore, “epitomizing the oppressed peasantry mercilessly bled dry by the indigenous, Rome-allied elites.” Indeed, it is because of “what has been done to the weakest of the weak in its name that the Jerusalem temple has been marked by God for demolition.”\(^\text{39}\) The two copper coins, which represented her livelihood, were far too small an amount to make a difference to the income of the temple. Furthermore, in the verses immediately following the poor widow’s action, the destruction of the temple is predicted – which is to say that her gift to a place where not one stone will be left upon another is simply wasted. The widow’s sacrifice is thus not only tragically misdirected; the pending destruction of the temple serves to intensify the futility of the widow’s sacrifice of her livelihood. It would indeed be absurd if not for the possibility that it is less about the poor widow than about Jesus himself, and his giving and dying.\(^\text{40}\)

The exegetical rescue operation on the poor widow’s behalf also happens at a cost – at her cost. She is consistently construed as an object, intersectionally accumulating in her person the double misery of poverty and widowhood. We are not even allowed to hear the victim’s scream in her, but rather are left to observe how oppressive power systems silently seduce by making people act against their own interests. Thus, in the story she is exposed to the exploitation of the rich and mighty Jerusalem elite, and in the interpretation she becomes the object of the compassionate and patronizing concern of the interpreter. Either way, the dignity of being regarded as an agent in her own

\(^{38}\) This is, of course, not a laughing matter, and if Barbara Reid is right in saying that contemporary Christian development campaigns often appeal to her as the model donor (Choosing the Better Part?, 195), this comes close to yet another form of exploitation.


\(^{40}\) Malbon, “Poor Widow.”
right is not acknowledged. She is denied any responsibility of her own as her identity and role are exhausted in the delusion imposed on her. She is simply another victim, subject only to pity and compassion—except, of course, for her emblematic value.

In her interpretation of the story of the widow’s mites, Barbara Reid ends up claiming the openness of a reader-response criticism and thus accumulating these various interpretations. The story has no particular true meaning. It is open-ended—conveying a different meaning depending on where one stands. For those who would align themselves with the voracious scribes, it offers a challenge to reject all ways of feeding off of the poorest, particularly under the guise of religion. For those who are oppressed and poor, it issues an invitation to reject giving support to those very systems that treat them unjustly. Finally, the action of the widow is a foretaste of Jesus, offering of his entire life, an offering made from his position of poverty and not of wealth. However, these three options return the feminist reader to the traditional options of either lamenting another case of a woman being the victim or praising the self-sacrifice that represents the ultimate virtue and brings redemption. Even if many readings are possible, does everything depend on the reader?

Stephen Moore is sensitive enough to see the problem of victimizing the widow and offers as a possibility a third reading that “piggy-backs on the traditional ecclesiastical reading” and moves in the direction of styling the widow as an exemplary figure, not because she anticipates Jesus’ own self-emptying in death, but rather because she exceeds it: “The woman’s voluntary self-divestment of ‘everything she had, all she had to live on’—at once an absolute and thankless gesture—may be read as an act of epiphanic extravagance whose immeasurable immoderation thrusts it outside every conventional circle of economic exchange.” In applying to the widow’s offering Jacques Derrida’s concept of a gift beyond reciprocity, her self-divestment becomes an expenditure without reserve and an absolute gift. It represents “the breaking through, or breaking out of something inconceivable, hardly

Reid, Choosing the Better Part?, 197.
Moore, Empire and Apocalypse, 42.
possible, *the* impossible, even.” Moore’s third way may be void of christological implications but apart from the Derridarian discourse, which softens the moral blow by its cushion of boundary-breaking claims to excessiveness and anomaly, it does indeed ride on the back of the old consensus interpretation.

*Moving the Woman to the Center*

The following is an attempt at moving the woman to the center of the Lukan story, focusing upon the characterization of her and the connotations this evokes in a contextual perspective. It accepts that in the story of the widow’s mites, as is often the case, we learn nothing about the feelings, reflections, and attitude on the part of the woman, and that it may be intrusive to claim what those might be. The silence and restrictions of the text should be respected. Even in its more imaginative versions, feminist criticism does not necessarily entail that the woman should come alive as a fully embodied person – even if some are tempted to fill in the silences of the text in order to make the widow meet the modern reader’s need for a full-fledged portrayal, presenting the reasons for her action and how she might possibly feel about it. What we are told is that this woman is a widow and that she is poor.

*The Woman Is a Widow*

It is important to read the Lukan version of the story in view of its specific features in relation to Mark as well as the wider Lukan context. Whereas a widow is a rarity in Mark, in Luke-Acts, widows appear more often than in any other NT writing. In the Lukan context, any passage where a widow appears becomes part of the wider discourse of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511845048.003
on widows involving four major narratives and examples unique to the Gospel of Luke in which widows are explicitly mentioned: the prophet-ess Anna (2:36–38), the widow at Sarephath (4:25–26), the widow at Nain (7:11–17), and the importunate widow (18:1–8). Moreover, it has been suggested that most of the other women who in this Gospel narrative appear independently and “without a husband” might be widows. This applies to Peter’s mother-in-law (4:38–39) and to Martha (10:38–42). However, apart from Anna, the term widow is not applied to any named women.

In ancient texts, widows appear to be ambiguous characters. On the one hand the widow – sometimes together with the orphan – may serve as the epitome of need – short of support and not able to fend for herself. Etymologically the term χήρα (chēra) means “someone left without a lord/man.” It is characteristic that the masculine form of the noun is much newer and was hardly ever used. On the other hand, a widowed woman had greater freedom than she ever had as a young girl or as a wife. She had the right to be consulted in questions that concerned her own life and was allowed to decide for herself in matrimonial matters. Especially in a Roman context, the univira was an ideal, that is, a young widow who remained chaste after her husband’s death, faithful to her deceased husband for the rest of her life. Judaism was also acquainted with a pietism for which widows served as models. Judith, who remained a widow after the death of her husband Mannaseh and lived a life marked by chastity and fasting (Jdt 8:6), was such an ideal figure in the pious imagination of the Maccabean period. The prophet Anna in Luke 2:36–38 is clearly designed in similar terms.

The figure of a widow therefore carries an ambivalent connotation of exceptional need and exceptional freedom of agency. Most of the

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45 One might also mention the widows of the Hellenists in Acts 6:1 and the widows in Tabitha’s house in Acts 9:36–42. These are both important when it comes to establishing a possible social framework within which the Lukan interest in widows might be situated.

46 In Acts, Mary the mother of John (12:12) and Lydia (Acts 16:14–40).

47 For this and the following, cf. Seim, Double Message, 229–48.

48 In Christian tradition, this may have contributed to a convergence between widows and virgins (Ign. Smyrn. 13.1).
Lukans narratives about widows exploit this ambivalence.\footnote{Cf. the suggestion that the women who have their own households might be widows, which is all the more remarkable because it is often assumed that Lukes interest in widows belongs to “his broader interest in the oppressed and despised, especially the poor and women” (G. Stählin, “χήρας,” TDNT 9: 440–65 [450]). See also Bonnie Bowman Thurston, The Widows: A Women’s Ministry in the Early Church (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1989), 25.} Apart from the miracle stories, widows are portrayed as vulnerable; however, they are not cast as recipients but as persons of perseverance.

The exposed, vulnerable position of the widow is combined with an emphasis on strength and piety. Luke 21:1–4 cannot be read without listening to the echo of this ambivalence.

\textit{The Widow Is Poor}

In this story about the widows mites, the Gospel of Luke follows Mark in accentuating that the widow is poor. It is not possible to make very much of the distinction between χήρα πτοχή (chēra ptōchē, “poor widow”) in Mark and χήρα πενίχρα (chēra penichra, “poor widow”) in Luke, because Luke immediately afterward calls her πτοχή (ptōchē, “poor”). Nevertheless, the repeated emphasis on the poverty of this widow increases the contrast with the rich and gives her example all the more strength.

The episode as told in the Gospel of Luke marks the difference between the widow and the rich with considerably greater sharpness than the Gospel of Mark. In the Lukans version, Marks crowd is conspicuous by its absence, and the focus is exclusively on the rich. Nor does the Gospel of Luke follow Mark in saying that the rich gave much. These variations between Luke and Mark are hardly ever taken to be of much significance, and the two versions are treated as if they say the same thing.\footnote{For example, in his influential article, Wright explicitly states that his “remarks are seen as valid for the story both in Mark and in Luke. The context in both gospels is identical and the difference in wording between the versions is minor” (“The Widow’s Mites,” 263).} However, the Lukans version establishes a sharper contrast by limiting the comparison within the episode itself to two clear-cut parties, one rich and the other poor. In Luke, as in Mark,
the poor widow constitutes also another contrast – to the snobbish
greed of the scribes against which Jesus warns in the previous saying
in 20:45–47. The scribes devour the houses of widows and pretend
to pray. If the two accusations are connected with each other, which
is likely, then the latter is far more than an accusation of hypocrisy.
The scribes are condemned because they extort from widows under
the pretext of performing long and well-paid prayers for them. Given
the fact that widows in other Lukane passages are portrayed as models
of persevering prayer, the accusation assumes a strong note of irony.
The irony is further reinforced as the poor widow, victim of their
mismanagement, is presented immediately afterward as the one who
displays true piety.

The contrast and the effect of irony are lost to those who follow
Wright’s argument and do not see beyond the widow’s misery as a
victim. They simply make the connection to the preceding verses
and limit the perspective so that the widow just becomes a further
exemplification of the scribes’ encroachment on widows. However, the
alleged victim is rather the protagonist whose act should be emulated
and not lamented. This is also made clear by Jesus’ words of praise.
However, it is significant that Jesus does not speak to the widow and
that her action precedes his words. The addressees are his disciples,
probably still “in the hearing of all the people” (20:45), as he comments
on what they have all seen her do at her own initiative.

**The Poor Widow’s Agency**

In relation to the disciples, the poor widow’s action is doubly paradig-
matic in that it states an example as well as issues a warning. Positively,
and to my mind there is no way around this in the context of Luke-
Acts, the poor widow’s deed is exemplary in that she gives the little
she has to support her life. Her action must be seen in light of the
ideal of giving up one’s property and even one’s life in passages such as

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51 This is one of the reasons why the episode of the widow’s mites by some interpreters
is taken to function almost as a parable.
12:22–34, which voice a general ideal of abandonment, of not investing in material future security. Even if this interpretation may seem to move in the direction of having the woman making sense primarily by what she signifies, she is not reduced to serving as an illustration of something else. She is still an agent, and her agency is recognized as praiseworthy.  

The widow’s action is also a caution: Jesus warns his followers to guard against acting like the scribes. The deficiency of those in power is exposed by the poor widow’s action. Hence, the passage of the poor widow’s mites serves in the Gospel of Luke as a severe instance of leadership criticism. Indeed, in this Gospel there are two stories where the current leadership is confronted by a critical corrective represented by a woman’s action. It first happens during the Galilean period in Luke 7:36–50, where a prostitute gatecrashes a party where Jesus is a guest, and the Pharisee host is – according to Jesus – critically exposed by a woman’s self-determined action. “Do you see this woman?” Jesus asks the Pharisee Simon in Luke 7:44.  

In Luke’s narrative the Pharisees appear as the main adversaries outside of Jerusalem. While Jesus is in Jerusalem, where the story about the widow’s mites is located, other groups are the predominant antagonists, namely, the scribes, the temple hierarchy, and the rich nonpriestly aristocracy. The story of the widow’s mites might

52 Even if the discourse is different and to my mind problematic, Bonnie Thurston probably intends something similar in her version of the former consensus interpretation: “in the ministry and teaching of Jesus, the widow appears as one of many examples of a new system of values breaking into the world. The widow’s position and piety are no more to be lamented; she becomes exemplary. She is elevated to a position of spiritual prominence in the Christian order of things” (Widows, 27). Even closer is Stephen Moore, who in the end acknowledges that the poor widow’s action of abandonment shows that she courageously and drastically trusts in God alone. Without a man to support her and without property, she lives a life with a radical eschatological orientation (Empire and Apocalypse, 43).

53 For further elaboration, cf. Seim, Double Message, 88–95.

54 Halvor Moxnes, The Economy of the Kingdom: Social Conflict and Economic Relations in Luke’s Gospel (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1988), 68–70. In Jerusalem, “Luke’s focus is again upon Jesus’ conflict with the elite, the leaders, while the people, here the ‘urban nonelite,’ stand at the side and are largely undifferentiated. . . . [I]ndividuals are only singled out when they are needed for the narrative of Jesus, as representatives of the ordinary, ‘small’ people of the city (19:33; 21:1–4;
therefore, despite all differences, be seen as a pendant to the story in Luke 7:36–50 in relation to the exposure of the Jerusalem elite that her action represents. In contrasting comparison with the rich – who, seen from the perspective of quantity, give more than her but, relatively speaking, actually offer less – the widow acts in an exemplary manner. Do you see this widow? By making such a radical act of abandonment, she exposes their act as hypocritical and as lacking the dimension of self-sacrificing generosity. They pretend to be what their acts betray.

Jesus’ words in 21:2–4 are probably still addressed to the direct and indirect audience constituted to hear his denouncement of the scribes in 20:45: “In the hearing of all the people he said to his disciples. . . .” The leadership it deprecates is named but not directly addressed. The leadership is blamed in the face of those whom they should serve, and portrayed as antitypes to the ideals of management represented by Jesus himself and his disciples. As the Gospel of Luke antitypically describes this, it renders an exemplary significance to the action of women – positively in relation to the people of God and its new leadership, and negatively in relation to its present leadership.

It is possible to discern in the Gospel of Luke a terminological transfer of diakon-terms (διακόν-, “to serve”) from being attached exclusively to women, then to servants, before being spelled out in ideal terms with Jesus himself as an example for the new leaders of the people of God. They are told, according to Luke 22:26–27, to

22:10–13, 56; 23:39–43)” (68). Moxnes further observes, “In the first part of the passion narrative there is a concentration of references to money and economic interaction. First comes the expulsion of vendors from the temple (19:45–46); next, the question about tribute to Caesar (20:20–26); and finally, the widow’s gift to the temple treasury (21:1–4). These instances are all related to the system of redistribution through a central authority. The authority that Jesus challenges in these narratives is the power to control the collection and redistribution of resources belonging to the Jewish people” (70).

act “as one who serves.”  

Rather the leaders are to enter into functions of service that would not normally be indicated by their status. It is rather a matter of charging the role of leadership with an odd role model. What takes place is a corrective blending of two interdependent yet opposite roles or functions. Thereby in the sequence of the narrative, the actions of women are by way of Jesus’ placing himself in the same role in 22:27, converted to an ideal to be followed by the new leadership of the people of God. This is, however, a leadership from which women are excluded, because maleness is stated as an explicit criterion for eligibility. The idealization may seem to exalt them as model agents but it happens at their cost. If women’s access to leadership positions is the litmus test by which their role and participation are judged, the Gospel of Luke ends up as a lost cause as the reader moves to Luke’s second volume, the book of Acts. This has also been the case of the poor widow at the temple treasury.

However, more recently, I have become critical of the almost single-minded – though often highly sophisticated – interest among many feminist interpreters, including myself, in exploring the access or lack of access of women to (public) positions of leadership in early Christian communities and seeing this as the litmus test for the status and role of women. This interest primarily mirrors a search

56 Luke 22:24–27 is one of the passages that is difficult to accommodate within the overall interpretation of John N. Collins, Diakonia: Reinterpreting the Ancient Sources (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); he claims that “deacon” did not designate primarily the menial task of serving at table, which has been the common view dependent on H.W. Beyer’s influential article, “διακονέω κτηλ,” TDNT 2: 81–93. It rather denotes a go-between in a range of activities. Whereas Collins helps us to understand better the usage of diakon-terms in the Pauline letters, the Gospels seem to reflect a further stage where a certain Christian usage has been established. I find Warren Carter’s embrace of Collins in “Getting Martha out of the Kitchen: Luke 10.38–42,” in A Feminist Companion to Luke, 214–31, unconvincing, especially because he exploits Collins further to eliminate “domestic or culinary activity” and claims that diakonia in Luke “indicates leadership and proclamation on behalf of God or the church and the gospel” (220–2).

for self-affirmation shaped by certain institutional constraints and for arguments supporting women’s ambitions and aspirations in today’s church and society. The search represents a legitimate struggle in which I wholeheartedly participate but when certain, and for feminists important, tasks (when we speak of equal opportunity) are not ascribed to women in the Gospel of Luke, this biblical text is deemed to fail us. Is this partly why Luke has become such contested ground? Do we not underestimate the hermeneutics of conspiracy or the dangerous remembrance subversibly hidden in texts such as this story in the Gospel of Luke? Even when the women have been overruled, they continue to speak as their agency is recognized.

In the story of the poor widow at the temple treasury her action is the praiseworthy example whereby the Jerusalem elite is exposed to shame and disgrace. By giving up her life, she practices as well as exemplifies the radical requirements of discipleship, because survival is ultimately achieved by giving up one’s present life in order to gain life immortal. This is the eschatological dimension retained also in the Gospel of Luke, converted into an ascetic ethos of abandonment and thereby both suspending and maintaining eschatological excitement.

Women in the Gospel of Luke are, like many men, not unexpectedly employed emblematically. Nevertheless, they are not entirely to be regarded or treated as stand-ins for virtues. There is an agency at work without which the exemplary significance would be void. Indeed, women’s abilities for agency do not disappear completely – even in oppressive systems.

In an intriguing reading of the use of slavery in the hymn in Phil 2:6–11, Sheila Briggs develops an approach that observes how

understanding has an intuitive component which can acknowledge but not describe dimensions of reality that cannot be empirically known. Therefore we must reformulate the uses of analogy in historiography to take into account the hermeneutic intuition and its respect for the integrity of the past. The analogy becomes the comparison between the

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unknown of the present and the unknown of the past, between that which eludes the deployment of knowledge as a means of social control in the present and that which in the past resisted the hegemony of the symbolic universe, prescribed by the social elites.\textsuperscript{59}

This analogy of the unknown of the present and the unknown of the past should heighten the contemporary reader’s awareness that possible meanings, given to the texts by the oppressed, may be improbable or impossible meanings \textit{in} the text. Applied to Phil 2:6–11, this means that the subjectivity that might have been the slaves as they subverted the text of Phil 2:6–11 is not historiographically recoverable. It is a past that can only be invented, a theological task proper to the narrative creativity of biblical proclamation within the communities of the oppressed today – assuming subjectivity by agency.

Althea Spencer Miller makes a similar move in her exposition of Luke 21:1–4 – including also the preceding verses in 20:46–47.\textsuperscript{60} To some extent she builds on the interpretation that casts the poor widow as a victim of exploitation by the temple authorities. However, her reading persona, Lucy Bailey, opens up a space of resistance, and the article is “a libation to this ancestress in faith.” Lucy Bailey was a Caribbean woman who died at the age of eighty, having earned her minimal livelihood as a household helper: “quite poor, quite under-educated, quite black, quite small in an age where each of these attributes was sub-status quo.” But she excelled in lived learning and had always something to give.\textsuperscript{61} Lucy Bailey firmly believed that she was counted among God’s righteous, and in her community she used the words of the powerful to subvert their very power. Independently of whether she understood this or not, she possessed and she used subversive knowledge.


\textsuperscript{61} Miller, “Lucy Bailey,” 209.
By learning from the experience of Lucy Bailey, and with Lucy Bailey as a lens for reading the story of the widow’s mites, the widow, however poor and exploited, appears not simply and sadly as victimized. She exercises the might that is a product of her mites. She provides the criterion for judgment against the scribes. She displays “the column on which the pretentious base their ostentation.” The point is that the emphasis is on her action and gift, not herself. Also Jesus had to look up to see her, but her might is her mites as the system would remain hidden without the widow and her offering – which is also her allegiance to the system that exploits her. Hers is the contrasting prism that clarifies the distortion, and with her very action she expresses the need of an ethic of prophetic justice. Indeed, a feminist counter-reading is found inscribed right into this patriarchal text itself.

The poor widow cannot be discounted; she is right there revealing the wisdom of subversive knowledge. This is no small change.