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Jesus tradition where Jesus appears very inclusive of women,\(^{69}\) not inclined to avoid acts of women which might be deemed sexual (such as the anointing), supportive of their presence among his disciples. Such an attitude may reflect the inclusivity which can be characteristic of marginalized groups – at the bottom of the heap all stand on the same ground. It also coheres with the evidence of his solidarity with other marginalized groups in society. It also helps explain the prominence of women in at least the earlier strands of the Christian tradition before it succumbed to what were seen as appropriate values for the good citizen of the household of faith.

In conclusion we have little explicit evidence.\(^ {70} \) I have suggested that some features of the early tradition are explicable on the assumption of attitudes of the historical Jesus which in turn make sense in the light of his predecessors. These include generally a strict attitude in relation to matters of sexuality, already evident in John, and especially in Jesus’ sayings about marriage and divorce. Assumptions about sexuality and holiness also most likely go back to Jesus, including his understanding of eschatology and of his own calling. They lead to the potential for the denial of sexuality, when Jesus’ affirmation of Genesis 1 and 2 is ignored. Nevertheless it was inevitable that some would use heavenly reality as a template for abiding values, and that raised a question over sexuality and holiness. It was also inevitable that those who switched Matthew’s with a view to read ‘with the result’ that men are sexually aroused combined such tendencies along with broader social values into a demand for the control and subordination of women.

As I have noted elsewhere,\(^ {71} \) the most important statements which Jesus made about sexuality are the ones which do not mention it but teach us to respect and honour difference in others and to seek always what is compassionate and healing for people. For faith, that provides a broader canonical context within which to engage the particularities and pecularities of the few likely historical statements which we have, and to honour their cultural indebtedness and if possible their intent.

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70. I have passed over more general statements reflecting rejection of sexual immorality such as Mk 7.21–23 and Mt 15.18–20; Mk 10.19; similarly Mt. 19.18; Lk. 18.11; Mk 8.38; Mt. 12.39; 16.4. The emphasis on attitude not just deed reflected in Mt. 5.28 and Mk 7.21–23 places sexuality in the context of a more holistic understanding of human relationships. See my discussion in Loader, *Sexuality* (2), pp. 38–43, 55–59.

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**How a Woman Who Fought Back and Demanded Her Rights Became an Importunate Widow: The Transformations of a Parable of Jesus**

Annette Merz

The parable of the widow and the judge (Lk. 18.1–8) seems to me an excellent test case for the investigation of the continuities and discontinuities in the transmission of Jesus’ teaching. F. Bovon rightly remarks: ‘Few passages in the Gospels bear such vivid testimony to the path that an instruction took from the time at which it was first formulated to its final expression.’\(^ {2} \) Scholars take wildly divergent views of the extent of the textual basis which may go back to Jesus himself, and of the early Christian interpretations which have clustered around this basis. Very different views are held about what Jesus originally intended to say by means of this parable. The reason for the latter divergence may perhaps lie in something noted by Bovon, namely that investigations into the historical Jesus have paid strikingly little attention to this parable.\(^ {3} \) This is reason enough to make the parable the centre of the present investigation; I am convinced that it is possible to apprehend Jesus as an historical figure only when we pay equal attention to his links to contemporary Judaism and to the way in which early Christianity took up and elaborated traditions which go back to him.

1. An Evolved Text and Controversial Interpretations: Highlights of Research and Methodological Presuppositions

I believe that the overwhelming majority of exegetes are right to see Lk. 18.1–8 as an ‘evolved’ text which displays clear traces of a series of

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1. Translated from the German original by B. McNeil.
reinterpretations.\(^4\) Widely divergent views are taken of whether and how the various strata of the interpretation can be perceived, and above all of whether the continuing process of 'writing' the parable is in agreement with Jesus' original intention. Without pretending to offer an exhaustive illustration of such disagreements, let us look briefly at a few important questions regarding the exposition of the parable.

While vv. 2–8a are mostly regarded as pre-Lukan, v. 8b\(^6\) and above all v. 1 are almost unanimously ascribed to the evangelist, who wished to give an unambiguous direction to the interpretation of the parable by means of the absolutely clear indication of its theme: πρὸς τὸ δεῖν πῶς τοι θαυμάσχετε, καὶ μὴ ἐγκεκρίε. Many scholars agree with A. Jülicher that these words of Luke stand in unbroken continuity with the intention of Jesus' original parable.\(^6\) For example, R. Bultmann claims that the parable 'in fact originally' intended 'to exhort the hearers to pray'.\(^7\) This involves a crucial decision which has far-reaching consequences for the evaluation of the tradition of this text as a whole, since as W. R. Herzog II well puts it – 'if the parable was about prayer and the widow was the petitioner, then the judge had to be a God figure.'\(^8\) In comparison, it is less important at what stage or stages of the tradition scholars locate the comments in vv. 6–8, and which new accents they believe are introduced at individual points. Some have located the

\(^4\) This consensus is not absolute. On the one hand, we find interpretations that regard the entire text as coming from Luke's hand (e.g. Edwin D. Freed, 'The Parable of the Judge and the Widow (Luke 18:1–8)', NTS 33 (1987), pp. 38–60); on the other hand, some scholars regard the entire text (perhaps with the exception of v. 1) as going back to Jesus (e.g. G. Delling, 'Das Gleichnis vom Gottlosen Richter', ZNW 53 (1962), pp. 1–25).

\(^5\) The addition of a concluding lesson in v. 8b, which may go back to a traditional lesson about the Son of Man, is mostly ascribed to the evangelist, who thereby brings to a close the larger complex of the eschatological remarks of Jesus, which begins at Lk. 17:20. Interpreters often see in the hesitating question τίνα ὤντος τοῦ ὁμοθεσίας ἡδονή ἢ πάθος τὴν πιστίν ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς a reservation on the evangelist's part vis-à-vis the intensity of eschatological expectation which dominates in vv. 6–8a. This was asserted as long ago as 1919 by A. Jülicher, Die Gleichniserede Jesu I (two parts in one volume; repr., Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1963), p. 289. G. Schneider, Paragnostik und Gleichnisse im Lukasevangelium (SSB, 74; Stuttgart: KBW Verlag, 1975), pp. 75–78, regards v. 8b as the work of Luke himself.

\(^6\) Jülicher, Gleichniserede II (5), pp. 283–84, 288–89. It is striking to note how many scholars find it necessary to emphasize that the continuity genuinely exists and that the indication of the theme of the parable is in fact accurate; see e.g. A. J. Hultgren, The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 254: 'but the parable is surely about prayer.'

\(^7\) R. Bultmann, Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition (FRLANT, 29; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 9th edn, 1979), p. 216. Unlike other scholars, however, Bultmann leaves open the question of what the 'special point' of the original parable was.


beginning of the secondary interpretations at the start of the interpretation of the parable in v. 6\(^9\), others have perceived the boundary separating the original version and the proto-Lukan interpretation within the interpretation itself\(^10\), and have attempted to show that vv. 2–8 as a whole form a unit which may go back to Jesus himself.\(^11\) Accordingly, we find several variants of this interpretative model. For example, Jülicher holds that the original parable of Jesus (vv. 2–5), just like the parable of the friend who presents his request at night (Lk. 11:5–8), merely intended to portray 'the certainty that unceasing prayer will finally be heard.'\(^12\) In vv. 6–8a, the oppressed early community applies the figure of the widow and her petition for justice by analogy to its own ceaseless cry for redemption and to its hope for retaliation at the final judgment.\(^13\) Other authors, who believe that at least vv. 6–7a go back to Jesus, see the widow's petition as expressing prayer for the coming of the rule of God or of the last judgment, and they interpret the parable in the framework of Jesus' expectation of the imminent eschaton.\(^14\)

However, all these interpretations prompt the question whether they are necessarily importing interpretative elements of the possibly secondary framework into the parable itself. Can we truly be certain that this is a parable about praying and having one's prayers answered, and that we are


\(^10\) Here I mention only three of the most important interpretative models, which are exemplified in the following reconstructions: (a) Lk. 18:2–6 original, vv. 7–8 secondary; J. A. Fitzmyer, The Gospel According to Luke X–XXIV (AB, 28A; Garden City: Doubleday, 1985), p. 1176; J. R. Donahue, The Gospel in Parable: Metaphor, Narrative and Theology in the Synoptic Gospels (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), p. 181; (b) Lk. 18:2–7a goes back to Jesus and vv. 7 (last four words)–8a are pre-Lukan: H. Wader, Die Gleichnisse Jesu als Metaphern: Traditions- und Redaktionsgeschichtliche Analyse und Interpretationen (FRLANT, 120; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978), p. 289; (c) Lk. 18:2–7 are a Jewish parable, vv. 1, 8 are Lukian redaction: W. Ott, Gebet und Heil: Die Bedeutung der Gebetsparabene in der lukanischen Theologie (SANT, 12; Munich: Kösel Verlag, 1965), pp. 32–72.


\(^12\) Jülicher, Gleichniserede II (5), pp. 288–89.

\(^13\) Jülicher, Gleichniserede II (5), pp. 284–85.

\(^14\) We find a relatively strong divergence on individual points among these interpreters. While Wader (Gleichnisse (10), p. 272) holds that the parable is 'an event of the closeness of the rule of God, since it assures the bearer of the certainty that his prayer for its coming will be heard', J. Jeremias (Die Gleichnisse Jesu [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 10th edn, 1984], p. 156) holds that Jesus wanted to comfort the disciples in face of the time of distress and of the consolamentos terrors which he has announced.
meant to see an analogy (on the basis of a conclusion a minore ad maius) between the judge and God? The obvious incoherences between the core of the parable (vv. 2–5) and the framing verses 1, 6–8 have led many to doubt both these claims. If, however, one’s analysis begins (like that of most of the authors who will be discussed here) with vv. 2–5 alone, it appears that the large number of competing interpretations indicates the basic problem: that the contextless parable on its own does not force the reader to interpret it in any one particular way.

Several scholars interpret it as a parable of the kingdom of God, which says something not about the certainty of its coming, but about the nature of the basileia. The starting point of this interpretation is the successful action of the widow, who induces the judge to yield to her demands: her petition for justice is ultimately heard (ἐκδικηθῇ σὺνίστ., v. 5, takes up ἐκδίκησον μ᾽ from v. 2). The concluding evaluation by J. R. Donahue is typical of this type of interpretation: ‘The hearers are confronted with a new vision of reality, inaugurated by God’s reign, where victims will claim their rights and seek justice – often in an unsettling manner.

B. B. Scott sees in the widow ‘the outsider’ who is ‘the bearer for the kingdom. A hearer of the parable discovers the kingdom under the guise not of a just judge but of a pesterer who exposes her own shamelessness in continually pressing her cause on a dishonest judge.

The expositions of W. Bindemann and W. R. Herzog II propose related interpretations. Both scholars explicitly refuse to see in the judge a metaphor for God, and identify the specific theme of the parable as the application of Torah in a manner consonant with God. On points of detail, however, they take a very different line, since Bindemann regards v. 6 as an appeal which belonged to the original parable and sees in the judge the protagonist of the parable, who invites the hearer to identify with him; Herzog, on the other hand, makes his evaluation on the basis of vv. 2–5 alone and sees the widow as the heroine of the parable.

According to Bindemann, this parable was addressed to the scribes who were hostile to Jesus. Their self-understanding was fundamentally different from that of the unjust judge; confronted by the change in the judge’s behaviour, they were meant to question their own interpretation of Torah in favour of the privileged. Verse 6 was an invitation to them to change their ways and adopt a legal praxis orientated to the liberation of the weak and the oppressed. I believe that one can make three main critical objections to this exposition. Naturally, the identification of the first persons to be addressed by the parable as enemies of Jesus remains hypothetical. The textual evidence adduced in support of this identification, v. 6 (‘hear what the unjust judge says!’), must be suspected of being a part of the secondary interpretation, since it seems to prepare the way for the conclusion a minore ad maius which begins in v. 7, and since ‘the reference to ἴππους cannot possibly be present in an authentic logion of Jesus.’ It is also doubtful whether the Pharisees and scribes would have found the act of identification and transference which Bindemann supposes an obvious reaction to the parable. If he is correct to hold that their self-understanding was diametrically opposed to that of the unjust judge, they would scarcely have had sufficient self-knowledge to grasp that their exposition of Torah was at the service of the privileged, and that this parable was challenging them to ‘give space to God’s righteousness rather than to their own legalism.

Taken as a whole, the interpretation by Herzog is more plausible. His starting point is an insight, derived from G. Lenski, into how the law functions in agrarian societies. The nominally independent judges, whose only obligation is in regard to the divine law, are de facto, as so-called ‘retainers’, dependent on the ruling elite, and tend therefore to assimilate their legal verdicts to the interests of this elite, thereby bestowing an appearance of legitimacy on structures which are in reality based on naked power. Such judges supply the fiction that the unjust structures are based on impartial law. This is why the situation of the widow in the parable is really hopeless:

In her appeal to the judge, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent’, the widow appeals to the Torah as an ideal code of justice. In his failure to respond to her, the judge acts out of the Torah used as a system of expediency designed to protect the wealthy and their interest and to reward him for doing his job. If everything proceeds according to schedule, the judge will do business as usual and strike a deal with the adversary.

20. Bindemann, ‘Ungerechte’ (18), p. 961. The plausibility of this interpretation depends entirely on a legalistic perception of the piety of the Pharisees. This does not correspond to the Pharisees’ own self-understanding, nor does it give an adequate account of the historical reality.
Despite this, the widow persists in publicly demanding justice, and succeeds in this one limited case in disturbing so profoundly a system which is based (and continually dependent) on the victims’ silence and acceptance of what is done to them, that for once in a way justice wins through. Herzog and some other recent interpreters\(^{22}\) see the widow not as a model of persistent humble prayer, but as the embodiment of successful action taken on behalf of the divine justice. But here we must point out that the figure of the judge in the parable is not strong enough to symbolize God as the guarantor of justice vis-à-vis the widow, as is presupposed in vv. 7–8a.

This brief overview of highlights in contemporary research indicates some consequences and guidelines for further work.

*First*, it cannot be presupposed that the assumed pre-Lukan unit Lk. 18.2–8a is a text originally conceived as a whole, nor that the interpretative logia which have been attached to the narrative of the parable appropriately communicate the intention of the parable itself, or are a thematic development of the parable. Methodological considerations make it therefore absolutely necessary to begin the interpretation with the core of the parable (Lk. 18.2–5), without rushing to apply to the parable the interpretative elements in the framing verses. In the evaluation of the parable proper, the following questions must be studied:

*Second*, is the judge a provocative image for God, in the sense that the conclusion *a minore ad maius* has a basis in the parable itself, and that the interpretation in v. 7a is therefore consistent with the parable? We are often told that ‘it was characteristic of the historical Jesus … to do something almost intolerable, namely to let an unjust judge be a metaphor for God’,\(^{23}\) but is this really true?

*Third*, is the widow a model of persevering prayer, so that the interpretation of the evangelist in v. 1 is consistent with the parable? Or are those interpreters correct who take their starting point in the context of the widow’s plea (ἐκθέσιον μὲ ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀντιδίκου μου), her active commitment, and the fact that ultimately, against all expectations, justice is done? This question obliges us to investigate thoroughly the societal reality reflected in the parable, and the culturally conditioned expectations and evaluations which contemporary hearers would necessarily have brought to their understanding of the situation described at the beginning of the parable.

*Fourth*, the coexistence of strongly divergent interpretations of the parable shows that the point of dispute in this case is not so much the

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24. Only a few scholars dispute that this parable goes back to Jesus. In addition to Freed, ‘Parable’ (4), whose attempt to use linguistic criteria to demonstrate that the entire parable is Lukian is scarcely convincing (since linguistic shaping by the evangelist does not preclude his adoption of tradition), cf. above all E. Linnemann, *Gleichnisse Jesu* (Göttingen: Vandenhoek & Ruprecht, 3rd edn, 1964), pp. 127–28, 185–86. Her arguments do not hold water, since they are based primarily on the (surely correct) judgment that vv. 6–8 are inauthentic. She argues that since the parable would remain incoherent without an application, the entire tradition of this parable must be secondary. This is not in the least convincing: it is possible that Jesus’ own interpretation or the insertion in a context which supplies an interpretation may have been lost. Curpatrik, ‘Dissonance’ (15), p. 121 (see also p. 108), asserts: ‘the parable (vv. 2–5) may have been produced in the same community as the Gospel’, but he does not specify any evidence that would make this supposition more plausible than that of the adoption of a parable with an older tradition (and in the latter case, the origin in Jesus himself is the most obvious starting hypothesis).


26. This criterion is sometimes also called ‘criterion of embarrassment’ or ‘preservation against the grain’.
co-text. Ideally, it is possible to combine our observations about source coherence and tendential opposition to form a total picture which is historically plausible.

In the case of Lk. 18.2–5, as my overview of contemporary research has indicated, scholars discuss intensively the question of the continuity between Jesus’ parable and early Christian interpretations, and offer extremely different answers. Much less attention has been paid to the evaluation of a question which is at least of equal importance for the evaluation of a tradition about the historical Jesus: how is this parable embedded in Jewish narrative and interpretative traditions; and what special emphasis does Jesus posit within these Jewish traditions? Accordingly, the following investigation will begin with this aspect.


If we are to interpret the parable in its historical context, we must pay heed to a number of dimensions which supplied its original hearers with clues to its interpretation. First of all, we have the narrative logic of the parable itself, which develops step by step; we can call this the co-textual dimension. The constellation of the persons and their characterization by the narrator awaken in the intended readers expectations which will be either confirmed or disappointed by the subsequent course of the action. The associations and expectations linked to the individual narrative elements depend on two overlapping interpretative contexts: the cultural environment, which structures the everyday experience of the hearers (the contextual dimension), and the traditional interpretation of this everyday experience by Scripture, which constitutes the omnipresent interpretative and legitimating background for Jesus and his contemporaries (the intertextual dimension). I hope to show in this chapter that an exact analysis of the interplay of co-, con- and intertextual dimensions definitively demonstrates the inadequacy of a number of interpretations of the parable which have been proposed by scholars.

The narrative of the parable has a simple structure: vv. 2–4a describe a conflict between a judge and a widow who for a long time asks him in vain for help. These verses build up a tension, while vv. 4b–5 relate how the problem is resolved. Clearly, this structure of the parable intends to involve the readers in the problem described, and thereby encourage them to imagine for themselves how the parable will end, before they are confronted with the outcome of the case which the narrator of the parable himself has invented. The parable itself therefore seems to demand that our interpretative approach begin by linking the narrative constellation in

the first half with the interpretative impulses which may be expected from everyday experience and from Scripture. In a second step, this reconstructed horizon of expectation on the part of the first readers will be confronted with the end of the narrative and with the contextual and intertextual interpretative impulses which are evoked by this end.

2.1. The Constellation of the Figures and the Development of the Conflict in the Light of Everyday Experience and of the Dominant Biblical Tradition about Widows (vv. 2–4a)

In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him27 and saying, 'Grant me justice — against my opponent.' For a while he refused.28

This is indisputably a parable with two antagonistic main characters, the judge and the widow. But the customary interpretations have not taken sufficient account of the presence of minor characters, and of the fact that God is a minor character in this parable (he is mentioned in the description of the judge in vv. 2 and 4, and he is implicitly present in the widow’s demand for justice).29 This poses a problem for the usual thesis that the judge is a provocative metaphor for God; but it seems that the proponents of this interpretation do not recognize the problem, still less discuss it. Both the judge and the widow are defined by means of their relationship to other persons who play (or could play) an actual or potential role in the conflict described. In addition to the judge and the widow, the tableau of characters whose action or conviction may be decisive for the outcome of the conflict comprises God, ‘people’ and the opponent, i.e. the potential adversary of the widow in a lawsuit.

Scholars recognize in principle that this parable has recourse in a large measure to everyday experience, and that knowledge of the biblical

27. As is generally recognized, ἐγένετο in v. 3 is an iterative imperfect.

28. ἐνδούνω has the double meaning of ‘winning justice’ (often with the accusative of the person, especially in the papyri which deal with legal matters) and ‘taking vengeance’ (especially in the LXX); cf. G. Schrenk, ἐνδούνω to LXX, TENT 2, pp. 440–44 (440–42). It is not acceptable to make the meaning in v. 3 depend on the expression προς τινα ἐνδούνω in vv. 7–8, which envisages retribution when God acts at the final judgment. Deling, ‘Glénchis’ (4), pp. 8–11, holds that the idea of satisfaction is in the foreground, but none of the texts from the LXX and Josephus which he adduces in evidence belongs to the context of earthly legal cases. This is why we must reverse his ranking on p. 11: naturally, the idea of the re-establishment of justice before a court can be linked with the idea of satisfaction, but the achieving of satisfaction is seldom the primary motivating force of a lawsuit.

29. Lk. 18.2–4a.

30. It is above all in Luke that we find God, or dwellers in the heavenly world as God’s representatives, as characters in parables: Lk. 12.20; 15.7, 10, 18, 21; 16.22–31; 18.11, 13.
traditions about widows and their position in Israel is necessary if one is to understand it; but they usually fail to draw the correct inferences from this. Let us then ask what evaluations and interpretations contemporary hearers brought to the conflict described in the parable. What did they think would happen next in the narrative, on the basis of their everyday experience and of the dominant interpretative traditions?

Although Jesus is describing a fictitious case, which need not be true to reality in every detail, his hearers could certainly recognize a familiar situation and fill in the considerable gaps in the picture which he briefly sketches. Since the widow appears on her own, the hearers or readers will have inferred that she was completely alone, without any male relatives to give her help and support, and that she was being wronged. The parable is not interested in giving a more detailed account of the lawsuit; and this shows that we have here a typical situation, something that frequently occurred in everyday life and is presupposed in the biblical tradition almost in a stereotypical manner. In the Old Testament, widows, along with orphans and foreigners, are the classic examples of persons in need of being protected. They are very often afflicted by poverty, and since they do not possess legal rights, they are continually at risk of being robbed of even the minimal rights they do possess. If the contemporary hearers did imagine a concrete case when they heard the description of the conflict, it would probably have been the situation where a widow is denied her share in the inheritance of her husband by one of those who benefit from his will. In the context of the narrative constellation and above all of the traditional associations with the idea of a 'widow', they must suppose that this is a life-threatening situation for her. Since the opponent disregards the widow's claims, the only way for her to obtain her rights is by going to law – but the judge steadily ignores her. Both daily experience and acquaintance with Scripture suggest that this is either because of manifest bribery, or because the judge hopes to profit in some unspecified way from the societal interplay between the propertied elite and the class of retainers who were dependent upon them. In her struggle against this alliance, whose only interest is to retain power and accumulate profits, the powerless and impoverished widow has only one ally: the God of Israel with his Torah, which aims at protecting the rights of widows. In her repeated cry, 'grant me justice against my opponent!', every hearer who had even a rudimentary knowledge of the biblical tradition would recognize the allusion to the biblical law which prohibits the oppression of foreigners, widows and orphans, and the appeal to the judge (who was placed in office in order to maintain this law) to behave in keeping with the demands made by Torah. These demands are formulated with especial clarity in the story of the appointment of judges by King Jehoshaphat in 2 Chron. 19.4–6:

He appointed judges in the land in all the fortified cities of Judah, city by city, and said to the judges, 'Consider what you are doing, for you judge not on behalf of human beings but on the Lord's behalf; he is with you in giving judgment. Now, let the fear of the Lord be upon you; take care what you do, for there is no perversion of justice with the Lord our God, or partiality, or taking of bribes.'

It is worth pausing to reflect on the character of this and the numerous other biblical texts about the rights of widows, orphans and foreigners, and the obligations of judges and all others who held privileged positions in regard to these persons. The sheer number of these texts shows that they were reacting to widespread abuses. When the judges fail to do their duty, appeal is made to God as 'judge of the widows' (Ps. 68.6, see also

31. Doubts about whether the parable is true to life have been prompted above all by the fact that only one judge seems to be responsible for the case. This is probably due, not so much to the assumed object of the lawsuit, as to an increasing discrepancy between the legal ideal and the number of men who were sufficiently educated to take on the position of a judge de facto. Cf. Herzog, Parables (8), pp. 222–24.

32. This is correctly observed inter alia by Herzog, Parables (8), p. 228. Cotter, 'Parable' (22), pp. 332–33, refers to a Roman literary polemic by Valerius Maximus against women who presented their own case or represented their clients before a court. For relevant rabbinic texts, cf. Bailey, Peasants Eyes (11), pp. 134–35.

146.9). When the Israelites forget what their experience of the Exodus demands of them, God threatens to intervene and to punish their injustice:

You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry; my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children orphans. 38

God's authority, the appeal to his particular concern for the widows and other underprivileged groups and the threat of divine retribution are actively proclaimed in view of what was clearly a regular failure on the part of those charged with responsibility for enforcing the law. W. Schottroff is right to say that, given the societal reality, these texts 'to a large extent have merely an ideological function': 39 the chronic misery of the widows and orphans reveals the weakness of a legal system based on patriarchal and feudalistic structures in which widows (and women as a whole) had only a limited ability to take legal action. The same weakness can be seen in the fact that in all these texts, widows and orphans, foreigners and poor persons are perceived exclusively as objects of other people's behaviour. They are either victims of the powerful and the rich (who act against their interests), or else objects of care on the part of the judges and prophets, or of God himself (who acts in support of their interests). When the parable is read against this interpretative background, it initially prompts a perception of reality which leads to despair, since it describes a world in which the ostentatiously godless judges are more clearly in evidence than the God in whose name they are supposed to pronounce judgment. The hearers know from their everyday experience and from Scripture that a widow may indeed have God's law on her side, but that she is helpless if a judge refuses to grant her rights. By means of his characterization of the judge, the narrator of the parable suggests to the hearers that they should feel antipathy towards him; but the description of the widow (read in the context of what the biblical tradition has to say about widows) prompts them to sympathize with her or even, if their own experiences have been similar, to identify with her hopeless situation. In view of the strongly typical character of this parable, we are certainly justified in asking whether a collective perception may also be intended. Traditionally, the widow embodies Israel, especially in situations of national crisis (Isa. 54.4; Lam. 1.1; 5.3-4). 40 The parable can be understood either individually or collectively. It offers an accurate description of the distress suffered by many widows in Israel; but thanks to the typical character of the persons in the story and to its system of reference, the parable can also be read as a general verdict on the crisis in Jewish society and in its theonomous legal system: in the day-to-day business of the courts, God's law is trampled under foot by judges who neither feel reverence for God nor take human considerations into account. The victims of this crisis are those without power and possessions. Their only hope is to appeal to God's law, but they are ignored—both by the judges and by the God to whom they make appeal. In view of this interpretative framework of Jesus' hearers, based on their daily experience and on Scripture, what would be their expectations about the outcome of the conflict which the parable describes? Is it important to ask this question, if we were to evaluate correctly the unexpected conclusion which Jesus chooses for his parable. First, we must ask: do they expect a happy or a sad ending? The hearers will be torn between the two possibilities, hoping for a happy ending despite their everyday experience, which saw the only plausible outcome as the defeat of the widow. B. B. Scott has drawn attention to a rabbinic parable which at first sight appears to display exactly this narrative structure:

There was once a poor woman who dwelt in the neighborhood of a landowner. Her two sons went out to gather gleanings, but the landowner did not let them take any. Their mother kept saying: 'When will my sons come back from the field; perhaps I shall find that they have brought something to eat.' And they kept saying: 'When shall we go back to our mother; perhaps we shall discover that she has found something to eat.' She found that they had nothing and they found that she had nothing to eat. So they laid their heads on their mother's lap and the three of them died in one day.

This, however, is not the last word in the parable. God, the 'judge of the widows', intervenes, in keeping with the biblical tradition, and announces the re-establishment of his legal order:

Said the Holy One, blessed be He: 'Their very existence you take away from them! By your life! I shall make you, too, pay for it with your very existence!' And so indeed it says, 'Rob not the weak, because he is weak, neither crush the poor in the gate; for the Lord will plead their cause, and despoil of life those that despoil them' (Prov. 22.22—23). 41

The tragic end of the rabbinic story is thus a shocking element which slows down the narrative. Initially, it agrees with everyday experience, but

38. Exod. 22.21—24.
41. Fathers according to Rabbi Nathan 8, cited from J. Goldin, The Fathers according to Rabbi Nathan (Yale Judaica Series; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), p. 158. This parable is cited by Scott, Parable (17), p. 182, to illustrate 'the potentially tragic undertow of the theme'.
not at the price of completely disavowing God as the guarantor of the legal order. There will be a ‘happy end’, thanks to the punishment of the hard-hearted rich; the narrative can leave open the question whether this happens here on earth or at the last judgment, since its aim is naturally to bring the hearers to a change of heart and to motivate them to practise merciful conduct, in keeping with Torah, in their daily lives. Such conduct brings to a happy ending the story of the widows and orphans, a story which is ancient but ever new.

Let us return to Jesus’ parable. The hearers expect that he will achieve a happy ending to his narrative, and there are two main obvious possibilities: either the punishment of the judge by divine retribution (just as God tells the rich fool in another parable that he will die; Lk. 12:20) or else the conversion of the judge to a conduct in keeping with Torah. Both these are morally satisfactory means of bringing the story to a happy conclusion, and the tradition could have led the hearers to expect them: but both would have the disadvantage of not being particularly true to life, and would therefore be out of place in the narrative, since the first part of the parable paints a pitiless picture of a godless reality in flagrant contradiction of the justice which God wants. The question which would have excited the contemporary hearers, in view of the conflict described here between the godless judge and the powerless widow, would therefore have been: Can Jesus succeed in discovering in his parable a genuinely plausible solution to the urgent problem of the widow (who is a figure with whom all those at a disadvantage under the status quo can identify)?

2.2. The Solution to the Conflict in the Light of Everyday Experience and of the Biblical Narrative Tradition about Widows who Secured their Rights (vv. 4b–5)

In his parable, Jesus the narrator has skilfully sharpened the conflict between a godless custodian of the law and a powerless victim of his legal practices. She appeals to the divine legal ordering which is indeed in force but de facto is denied, but her appeal goes unheard. In view of the acute and fundamental quality of this conflict, the solution presented in the soliloquy of the judge may at first sight seem trivial and disappointing. His reflections are egotistical and concern only this one case. The description presented earlier in the author’s voice is repeated in v. 4b as a statement made by the judge about himself; this shows that the judge has not changed his attitude in the slightest. And yet he will help the widow get her rights. An astonishing explanation is offered: she is making his life a misery, and he wants to prevent her from coming one day and striking him on the face (v. 5). We shall now examine the dynamics of the narrative in the light of daily experience and of the biblical tradition about widows.

First, we must note that the solution presented in the narrative, namely the inconsistent treatment by the judge of the individual case described in the parable, is true to life. Although some scholars disagree, we must maintain that in an analogous case it could certainly have been in accordance with the correctly calculated interest of the judge to satisfy one unfortunate petitioner. It can certainly lie in the interests of a corrupt legal system to preserve the outward appearances of the law in exceptional instances which attract a special degree of attention; this lends the system an added legitimacy. Besides this, it is clearly important for the narrator to emphasize that God and his legal order play no motivating role in the judge’s revision of his earlier decision. We cannot assume either a fresh insight or a fear of punishment. The judge is and remains an unrighteous judge, even when he resolves in this individual case to help right prevail. On his side, this is sheer opportunism – the judge is not an advocate of God’s legal order. This points the hearer all the more unambiguously to the widow, since it is in her de facto (τὸ παρῆκαν μοι κόσμον) and anticipated conduct (ἐν μῇ ἐγὼ ὁ τέλος ἐργομένη ὑποψιάζομαι) that we find the only reason for the judge’s change of attitude. As her words show, the widow is motivated by God’s legal ordering, and she behaves as if this ordering were not called into question by the conduct of the judge. She does not despair; nor does she have recourse to bribery or other potential means of influencing the judge. Her repeated request – ἔσκισαν με ἀπ’ τοῦ ἐνταξίου μου – is a permanent reminder to the judge of the task which he has received from God. From a formal point of view, she remains in the role of petitioner, but her words do not emphasize the relational aspect. Rather, her words concentrate exclusively on her legal claim, which the judge’s office obliges him to grant her. Finally, we must underline the destruction in vv. 4b–5 of the image of the powerful judge and the powerless widow. His words reveal the judge’s weakness. He simply lacks the nerve to keep up his godless conduct in this case. She is pestering him and he is afraid that her importunate activities might become even more intense. Because he wants to get rid of her and her
constant admonitions, he gives in. The text makes it perfectly plain that the widow has successfully understood how to employ a mode of conduct that makes her a visible and highly unpleasant part of the judge's life. The parable does not stop to tell us in detail how she did this, but she must at any rate have arranged meetings and sought out situations in which she could confront the judge. This implies many individual actions which go far beyond the rules of social conduct which were applied to a widow who lived on her own.

46 Many interpretations of the parable ignore this decisive point, which is drawn from an analysis of the dominant culture, and especially of the rules governing the relationship between the sexes and behaviour towards those of higher rank in society.

47 Nothing could be more wrong than to interpret the appearances of the widow with her annoying demands, which refused to be silenced, as the expression of her acceptance of her powerless situation, as the only thing left for her to do, as the absence of all activity. This widow does not lie down hopelessly in the dust to die. Nor does she weep in secret, in the hope of inducing God, the 'judge of the widows', to intervene (Ps. 68:6; Sir. 35:14–15). A widow who lived alone was meant to lead a life of great reserve; ideally, she ought to be silent and invisible in public, especially vis-à-vis men who were not her own relatives. Since she had not studied the law, her role was to submit without a protest to the decisions taken by the judge, who had studied the law and enjoyed official authority. But this widow continually transgresses all these restrictive codes of conduct. She makes herself permanently visible, and in a culture which was obsessed with honour and shame, this made her shameless, as a number of scholars have shown. But this is not all: her quasi-prophetic insistence on her right, which God has guaranteed, is also outrageous and presumptuous in the eyes of the legal elite, since it implies a massive criticism of the verdicts they have issued.

Nevertheless, as a 'defenceless woman' she is protected in public against physical violence on the part of the dominant men and their police. She can go much further in the vehemence of her public appearances than a male petitioner – she can even allow herself to launch a physical assault in public, as the judge fears. The widow exploits in a cool calculation the freedom of movement which she is permitted by the symbolic ordering of the sexes precisely at the point where it was intended to limit this freedom. Psychologically, it is very easy to understand the unease provoked in the judge by a woman who plays in this way with the traditional rules. When we see her in the original cultural context, the widow whom Jesus portrays is not in the least a model for those sufferers 'who must endure in powerlessness the lack of justice'. On the contrary, she is portrayed as a powerless person who does not accept her role. She is empowered by the knowledge that she has God's law on her side, and she pester a powerful man who is apparently inviolable and untouchable, until her shameless conduct brings him to his knees. Before we discuss the difficult question of the theological relevance of the parable, we must first evaluate it against the background of the biblical traditions about widows.

In his description of the conflict (vv. 2–4a), Jesus evokes very clearly the traditions about God's special care for the widows and the poor, and he presupposes both the validity of these traditions and the awareness that precisely this aspect of Torah is trampled underfoot by the violence meted out to widows every day. However, the solution which he relates shows that he does not share the optimism of the biblical authors, who hold that repeated appeals to those in positions of responsibility, and especially to the judges' independence and their particular obligation to take care of the weak, will ensure that the widows get their rights. Jesus' judge remains an incorrigible egotist, a partisan of the mighty, a man who despises both God and other people. Unlike the interpretation in vv. 7–8, the parable shows not the slightest trace of an attempt to defuse the dilemma by an appeal to God's avenging power (whether thought of as acting within history or as eschatological). And the absence of any such appeal must be seen as a conscious decision on the part of Jesus, precisely because the hearers could have expected it, given the Old Testament background sketched above. In the parable, the widow's existential problem is resolved only by the activity of the widow herself. The judge is induced to yield by the terrorsome presence of the woman, an activist in her own cause who extends the borders of propriety and of acceptable conduct. The petition which she so tirelessly presents necessarily implies that he has failed to act justly up to now, and this poses a threat to his authority. Quite unlike the widows in the Old Testament tradition whom we have seen, the widow in Jesus' parable is neither a defenceless victim nor a powerless recipient of care by God or by patrons who act in his name, since we are unambiguously told that the judge who acts on her behalf has been

46. This has often been pointed out. Cf. e.g. Herzog, Parables (8), pp. 229–31; L. Schottroff, Lysias: ungeduldige Schwestern: Feministische Sozialgeschichte des frühen Christentums (Gütersloh: Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1994), pp. 155–58, 176–79; Cotter, 'Parable' (22), pp. 338–43; Curkpatrick, 'Parable Frame-Up' (15), pp. 29–33.

47. Ignorance of the culturally conditioned regulations of acceptable behaviour sometimes leads to seriously wrong interpretations, e.g. the claim by Weder – the fruit of Protestant dogmatics rather than of an appropriate historical evaluation – that the parable is concerned with the contrast between an attitude which trusts in petition (i.e. the word) alone, and the endeavour to get what one wants by means of one's own works; the latter attitude is to be rejected. Cf. Weder, Glaubenskreise (10), pp. 271, 273.

48. Bailey, Peasant Eyes (11), p. 135, mentions a modern example from the civil war in Lebanon.

49. Harnisch, 'Ironie' (42), p. 434.
defeated by her. She takes her demand for justice into her own hands, and she knows that God authorizes her to act in this way. Scholars in general have not drawn attention to the fact that the solution chosen by Jesus contradicts the tradition which the beginning of his parable obviously echoes. We must however ask whether this kind of portrait of a widow can be legitimated in biblical terms. When Jesus tells a parable which so clearly deviates from the image of the widow that we find in the biblical majority tradition, could he still feel himself to be in continuity with the Scripture and the traditions of his people? I believe that he could do so, because his parable displays an obvious closeness to a narrative tradition that deviates from the main trend in the Bible. Here, widows play an active role in carrying out the will of God. Two primary narratives must be recalled here, in which we find shocking transgressions of boundaries in the name of God: the protagonist of the first story is Tamar, the protagonist of the second is Judith. In a wider sense, examples of this particular narrative tradition can be found in the book of Ruth, the episode of the wise widow of Tekoa who becomes David's counsellor (2 Samuel 14), and the heroic model provided by the mother of the seven sons in 4 Maccabees.

First, in its basic narrative constellations the story of the widow Tamar (Genesis 38) shows clear similarities to Lk. 18.2–5. After her husband's death, the widow Tamar is repeatedly cheated of her due (in this case, the Levirate marriage with the hope of giving birth to a son) by those very men who were obliged by law to grant her rights. First, Onan agrees to the Levirate marriage, but he refuses to beget a child with her; and after Onan's death, her father-in-law Judah refuses to give her his youngest son as her husband. Tamar is sent back to her father's house, and since her father clearly takes no steps to enforce her rights, she seems to have lost every possibility of influencing the further course of events. She is a typical powerless widow. In this hopeless situation, however, where no one – not even God – helps her, she works out an extremely risky plan. She disguises herself as a prostitute and has intercourse with her husband-in-law, thereby making him a partner in a Levirate marriage without his knowledge. As we know, her plan succeeds. When her pregnancy is discovered, she is able to present the tokens which identify Judah as the father of her child, and thus escapes being burnt alive (the penalty for adulteresses). Judah must publicly admit that she is in the right, not he. All the men involved in this story fail to do what is right, but Tamar's deliberate action enforces the law of God, and the story leaves no doubt that this end sanctifies every means, even very grave transgressions of the norms of sexual conduct which were laid down for women, in the form of shameless behaviour that actually deserved the death penalty. The two husbands of Tamar displease God, and he 'puts them to death' (Gen. 38.7, 10); but God clearly approves of what Tamar does. In intertestamental and rabbinic Judaism, the story of 'our mother Tamar' (Lamentations 9.5) was extremely popular.51

Second, in the book of Ruth we find another young widow who must employ a good deal of cunning and seductive skill in order to attain the goal of a Levirate marriage with Boaz in which she will be provided for; her mother-in-law Naomi supports her in the whole matter (Ruth 2–3). The individual legal details against which Ruth and Naomi fight are unclear and a matter of scholarly dispute, but the plot of the story makes it clear that it is only thanks to the initiative taken by the two widows that the men who bear responsibility find themselves compelled to fulfill their legal obligations (Ruth 4).52 Then, however, Boaz becomes a model Israelite who acts on behalf of widows (and foreigners). Thus, the book of Ruth shows the cooperation of active widows and their patrons against those who are led by economic considerations to reduce the rights of widows (Ruth 4.5–6).

Third, 2 Samuel 14 relates how a widow appeals dramatically to an authority superior to that of the local legal officers, namely the king, in order to prevent a manipulation of Torah (in this case, the law about those who commit murder and manslaughter; Deut.19.4–5, 11–13) which would deprive the widow of all material support. The woman from Tekoa wins over King David to her side by relating a story which is fictitious, but nevertheless true to life. She constructs a situation where the family of a dead man wish to get possession of his property by having the only male heir, the son of the deceased, executed for fratricide. This would deprive the woman – widow of the deceased man and mother of the two sons – of the one son who was still alive. And since as a woman she was unable to inherit, she would be left completely penniless (2 Sam. 14.6–7, 16). As a woman, she cannot take part in the trial of her son. Instead of waiting passively for the outcome of the court case, the widow takes resolute action and urges the king to intervene.53


53. Cf. W. Schottroff, Schweigern (46), pp. 155–56 has already pointed out some of the similarities between this narrative and the parable at Lk. 18.2–5.
Fourth, the action of Judith is very complex, and we cannot discuss every facet here. On the narrative level, Judith acts in the interest of her people, unlike these other widows, who are acting in their own interests. At the same time, as a widow, Judith embodies the oppressed people who must look to God for help.

Her name means Jewess and thus ‘surely contains a theological program, since her life is the embodiment and model of true Judaism.’

The people of Bethulia and the leaders who bear responsibility have lost their trust in God, in view of the overwhelming power of the Assyrians and of the shortage of water in the besieged city, and they put God to the test by demanding that he help them in the next five days—if nothing happens by then, they will surrender. Judith is horrified by this denial of God, and takes the initiative to save the people. Before she puts into action her plan to seduce Holofernes and murder him in his sleep, she asks God for help in a lengthy prayer, explicitly appealing to her status as a widow, since as such, she has the right to call on his special protection (ὁ βίος ὑμῶν ἡμῶν ἐμοί τῆς χήρας, Jdt. 9.4; δος ἐν χῆρι μου τῆς χήρας ὃ δυστούργημα κράτος, Jdt. 9.9).

The following verses show that the widow is the paradigm of all those weak persons whose strength is their trust in God. Her victory, which is impossible on human reckoning, demonstrates that ultimately God is behind what she does:

By guile of my lips strike down slave with master, and master with retainer. Break their pride by a woman's hand. Your strength does not lie in numbers, nor your might in strong men; since you are the God of the humble, the help of the oppressed, the support of the weak, the refuge of the forsaken, the Saviour of the despairing . . . And demonstrate to every nation, every tribe, that you are the Lord, God of all power, all might, and that the race of Israel has no protector but you.

This reflection shows that the story of Judith with its narrative plot understands itself as an elaboration of this central Old Testament principle (cf. also Ps. 147.10–11). The decisive point is that ‘this programmatic theological affirmation . . . is realized, not by a miraculous intervention by God in history, but by courageous and prudent action in the style of Judith.’

Fifth, we could also refer to the martyrdom of the mother of the seven sons in 4 Maccabees (14.11–17.6). She encourages her sons to oppose the tyrant, thereby proving her sound judgment and piety, and ultimately proving the superiority and invincibility of the God of Israel. 4 Macc. 16.5, 12, explicitly emphasize that with this combative attitude she shows a behaviour diametrically opposite to what would be expected of a weak widow: she does not join in the lament of resignation in the face of her fate, as might have been expected. The substance of such a lamentation is nevertheless quoted: ‘Alas, I who had so many and beautiful children am a widow and alone, with many sorrows. And when I die, I shall have none of my sons to bury me’ (4 Macc. 16.10–11). Thus, this story too fits the narrative pattern of a widow whose untypical conduct helps realize the will of God.

Despite all the differences in points of detail, these stories of Tamar and Judith, of Ruth, the prudent widow of Tekoa and the mother of the seven sons embody a narrative type in which a widow—traditionally the embodiment of a powerless woman who is dependent on help from others—becomes active and enforces God's will against opposition within Judaism or from external foes. In every instance, this demands that the strict societal norms of a withdrawn life for widows be infringed; it also demands that the woman value her own theological judgment of the conduct appropriate to the situation more highly than the (erroneous) judgment of her adversaries, even where these have a much higher status, power and religious education than she herself. In these stories, God functions as a helper more than as a saviour, namely, the success of the action performed must always be understood as proof of his power.

I believe that this narrative tradition can shed a decisive light on Jesus'
parable about the judge and the widow, since there is no reason to doubt that he was familiar with this biblical narrative concept of a widow (or of another weak person) who is victorious over adversaries within or outside Israel who oppose God or the divine commandment. And it is precisely this sequence of events and narrative logic that underlies the parable. In its apparently trivial ending, God’s power is displayed: despite every experience that might suggest the contrary, he is ‘the God of the humble, the help of the oppressed, the support of the weak, the refuge of the forsaken, the Saviour of the despairing’ (Jdt. 9.11). God works – not directly, however, but indirectly, through the widow who confronts the judge and pesters him with her words until he yields. Naturally, this interpretation has important consequences for the exposition of the parable: we must take the judge seriously as an adversary of God and of his justice, and the point of the story is that he is overcome by the widow who trusts that God’s justice will prevail and who therefore overcomes all obstacles. This is a story about how God’s will is enforced against powers which oppose it (precisely in the societal elite); it also tells us about the role that the individual believer is called to play in this process. It has been objected that an interpretation of the parable as an appeal to the disadvantaged to take action to obtain their rights fails to recognize the analogous character of the narrative, and degrades it in a sense to an exemplary tale. This objection cannot however be made to the variant of this interpretation which I have presented here. Nothing guaranteed in advance that the widow’s unceasing cries for justice would be crowned by success; in the same way, nothing guaranteed that the actions of Judith and Tamar would be successful. And it is likely that this strategy would not succeed a second time. Normal human criteria would surely suggest that Judith would be raped by Holofernes, and that the judge in the parable would have sent a band of thugs by night to reduce the widow to silence. The parable is a parable of the utterly sovereign and unrivalling of the kingdom of God, for which, however, the way can and should be prepared through human activity. Jesus does not intend to use this parable to consolidate an attitude of powerlessness waiting for God. Rather, he wishes to increase the capacity to take a calculated action that will create the conditions which can generate some anticipation of the eschatological realization of salvation.

2.3. Interim Summary: Jesus’ Parable as a Creative Reworking of Traditional Images of the ‘Widow’

The parable of the judge and widow must be plausibly interpreted in the context of Jesus’ public ministry in Judaism. Contextual appropriateness certainly exists, thanks to the link to the theme of justice for widows which was traditionally so important in Judaism, and we are entitled to assume that the daily experience of Jesus and of his hearers also made them receptive to this theme. Against the horizon of expectation which is created in this way, there is however also a considerable amount of contextual distinctiveness, since (as I have shown) the narrative logic of the parable does not function within the parameters of the dominant patriarchal model where widows are either victims or powerless recipients of the care of others: taking up a Jewish narrative tradition which diverges from the mainstream consensus, the parable relates how a widow herself, full of confidence in her God-given rights, finds a way to enforce this right – and ultimately, to enforce God. Second, it is only when these two trajectories of Jewish tradition coalesce that the parable becomes a convincing image of the kingdom of God, thereby taking its own distinctive place in the proclamation of Jesus. It is indeed true that the story – this narrative of a widow who gets on the nerves of a judge to such an extent that he finally reveals his weakness and caves in – could also function in a pagan context as a burlesque with subversive political contents. But in such a context, it could never plausibly unfold its double theological point, namely that God’s vision of a just social existence is realized in anticipation and paradigm in the limited event whereby one person on occasion gets her rights; and that this happens when those who are in particular need of this justice become acting subjects whose priority is their active involvement on behalf of the justice of God, and who thereby refuse to accept the hindrances posed by societal norms and values.

But may we see this interpretation of the parable as truly appropriate to the historical Jesus, especially when we consider the care taken by the proto-Lukan revision and the evangelist himself to counter precisely this affirmation of the parable by means of the interpretative framework within which they place it? We can answer this question only by drawing on other, related traditions about Jesus and by looking at the tendencies of the revision by the (proto-)Lukan redaction. We can regard this interpretation as plausible only when a sufficient source coherence exists, i.e. enough other traditions about Jesus support the essential aspects of the interpretation. In section 3 (below), we shall show that the parable in this reconstructed interpretation makes good sense as an authentic parable of Jesus in the total framework of his proclamation. On the other hand, we must also bear in mind the redactional tendencies in the new interpretation of the parable. It is obvious that if the above reconstruction

62. First and foremost, of course, one should recall here the victory of the little David over the giant Goliath (1 Samuel 17).
of the meaning of the parable is correct, the history of its exposition took on a new direction as soon as the commentary in Lk. 18.6–8a was added to it. The widow, who had exemplified successful prophetic intervention for justice in accordance with the demands of Torah, now exemplified one who prays for the realization of salvation in the last judgment and is certain that this prayer will be heard. The judge, who had exemplified the godless leader of the people, a foe of Torah whose opposition had to be overcome, now becomes a fallible human image of the God who wants us to pray to him day and night. The decisive transposition occurs when God changes sides: in the original parable, the widow knows that she has God on her side against the judge, but in the newly interpreted version, the judge in his refusal to grant her petition embodies God — not indeed in his arbitrary behaviour, which displays such contempt for other persons, but surely in his freedom to choose the point in time at which he will grant the widow her rights. Is this development plausible? Can the parable in its reconstructed meaning be interpreted as the rebarbate core of a scandalous authentic tradition of Jesus which was toned down in keeping with dominant early Christian tendencies? In that case, we would have to argue for its historicity in accordance with the criterion of the so-called resistance to the tendency (see section 4. below).

3. The Parable in the Context of Jesus’ Teaching

Let us begin by looking at the source coherence, which must be considered as an autonomous criterion, independently of other criteria of authenticity. Since Lk. 18.2–5 is a parable from the specifically Lukan material, this tradition is not attested more than once in mutually independent sources. Nevertheless, we may ask whether there are substantially comparable motifs and texts in the Jesus tradition. I concentrate here on the following closely linked aspects, which are important for the interpretation of the parable: the widows/poor/marginalized, who are the principal addressees of the reign of God, are also active subjects of the realization of this kingdom (see 3.1 below); the refusal to behave in conformity with expected gender patterns, when one acts to bring about the reign of God, and the accusation that the activists of the reign of God are employing violence (see 3.2 below); and the parable in the context of other textual evidence for the anticipatory realization of salvation through symbolic-political actions / speech-acts (see 3.3 below). We shall always attempt to find evidence from the various streams of tradition and in various forms and genres.

64. On this criterion, cf. G. Theissen, A. Merz, 'The Criterion of Coherence in Jesus Research Then and Now: The Delay of the Parousia as a Test Case', to be published in P. de Mey (ed.), Sourcing the Quest (Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs, 2006).

3.1. The Societally Marginalized Addressees of the Reign of God as Active Subjects of the Realization of this Kingdom

Jesus’ message about the reign of God was good news first and foremost for persons with a low societal status, something that promised them a full participation in God’s new world. This is supported by so many texts that it may count as certain, irrespective of the question of the authenticity of individual traditions. Similarly, there is in principle no doubt that this promise entailed a threat to the religious and societal elites, since their conduct contributed to the exploitation of the majority of the population and to the religious marginalization of particular groups. In view of the paradigmatic meaning of widows which was already established in the New Testament, it goes without saying that both the widows and the group who profited from their distress were appropriate vehicles to express this dimension of Jesus’ teaching. The warning against the scribes ‘who eat up the houses of widows’ (Mk 12.40) resembles the description of the situation in Lk. 18.2–4a: both texts are generated by the same perception of the societal and legal situation of widows, and the incompatibility between this situation and the will of God.65 Independently of whether or not it is historical, the miracle story at Lk. 7.11–18 confirms that Jesus’ compassion for a widow who had lost her only son and provider was admirably suited to illustrate his mission. There can therefore be no doubt that the widow, as the paradigm of an underprivileged person, functions appropriately in the parable as the recipient of the good things promised by Jesus. But what of our proposed interpretation of Lk. 18.2–5 as a parable of the interruption of the kingdom of God which creates justice for all — an interruption which is made possible (though not actually realized) by the active behaviour of the widow, who refuses to stay within the limits of the role imposed upon her as a victim of injustice?

This interpretation is based on a combination of three aspects of Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom of God which I believe to be indisputably historical. This proclamation is characterized first of all by the union of present and future elements (and the parable makes an affirmation about the dimension which is already accessible in the present). A second typical aspect is that the principal addressees of the good news — those who bear a societal and religious stigma — are included in the group of those who proclaim it. And third, God and these messengers whom he commissions work together in the realization of the kingdom.

65. This is true, irrespective of the details of the situation presupposed here, which are difficult to reconstruct; see for details A. Merz, 'Mammum als schärfster Konkurrent Gottes: Jesus Vision vom Reich Gottes und das Geld', in S. J. Lederhüser (ed.), Gott oder Mammon: Christliche Ehre und die Religion des Geldes (Linzner philosophisch-theologische Beiträge, 3; Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2001), pp. 34–50 (78–79).
The inclusion of both future and present elements in Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom of God remains the best explanation of the juxtaposition of traditions speaking of the future with traditions speaking of the present. One should hope and pray that the comprehensive establishing of the reign of God, which would annihilate every form of rule opposed to God, would take place in the future (Mt. 6.10), but at the same time, it was possible to experience the presence of the kingdom in the present time.66 One particularly impressive example, which could be felt in people’s bodies, was the expulsion of demons (Lk. 11.20 Q). But those with ears to hear and eyes to see could already perceive in Jesus’ preaching and his didactic conversations, and in the everyday table fellowship and pooled possessions of the Jesus movement, a seed which – as Jesus believed – guaranteed the subsequent harvest. We will reflect in more detail on the role played by the parables in allowing people to perceive the kingdom of God (see 3.3, below); here, we concentrate on a fact to which scholars have not always paid sufficient attention, namely that Jesus’ central message of salvation very deliberately made messengers of those groups to whom the promise was primarily addressed, thereby transforming them from victims to activists. The close circle of Jesus’ disciples included at least one former tax collector, and Mary Magdalene was probably not the only one to have been healed of demonic possession. These were members of two stigmatized groups who were in a very prominent manner the addresseses of Jesus’ message. Above all, however, we must take into account the fact that the Jesus movement was a movement of the lower classes, whose members had the bare minimum necessary for life and could at any moment slide further down into total, life-threatening poverty. It is surely not by chance that, alongside the stories of how Jesus successfully calls fisher and farmer to enter the circle of his disciples, we have only one story of an unsuccessful vocation – that of a rich young man (Mk 10.17–22). This is why the clearest example of the collaboration between God and the members of the Jesus movement in making the divine rule a present reality is the way they dealt with material goods.

In keeping with the beatitudes pronounced on the poor and the hungry, to whom the divine rule is to belong in the future and who are to be filled, the radical followers of Jesus, poor as beggars and wandering from place to place, are admonished in the present day not to be concerned about eating, drinking and clothing – i.e., the satisfaction of the elementary needs of the poor and of those who are accustomed to hunger and deprivation (Lk. 12.22–30 Q). Rather, they are to seek the kingdom of God, trusting that God will see to everything else (Lk. 12.31 Q) – although God does not do so directly; their needs are met through support from those to whom the preaching is addressed (Lk. 10.7–Mt. 10.10; Mk 6.8–10; 10.29–30). Jesus’ exhortations to lend and to practise mutual support often envisage persons who themselves have only just enough to survive (Lk. 6.30a, 35; cf. 3.11). The new material order of the kingdom of God, which God himself will set up in its fullness, is made visible, in the form of a parable, by the wandering preachers who are demonstratively free of possessions, and by those followers of Jesus who have homes and who support these wanderers in an almost aristocratically carefree generosity.67 It is surely not by chance that Jesus presents a widow as one of the positive models of the divinely willed way to deal with the unrighteous mammon (Mk 12.41–44). Traditionally, the widow is the classic recipient of alms: here, she is a model of generosity in the use of one’s possessions.68 In an analogous manner, in the parable at Lk. 18.2–5, the widow – traditionally the paradigm of persons whose legal claims can be ignored with impunity – becomes the model of successful action undertaken to re-establish justice. Another example from the parable tradition shows that this transformation of objects of care into models of a conduct that changes the world is not an isolated narrative pattern in Jesus’ teaching: the Samaritan is himself a foreigner in the country and therefore the object of special protection by Torah. Every Israelite is obliged to love him as he loves his own self (Lev. 19.34). And he is the only one of the passers-by who helps the traveller who had fallen among thieves, thereby ensuring that the requirement of Torah is met (Lk. 10.30–37).

3.2. Disregard of Gender Roles and the Accusation of Violence in the Context of the Proclamation of the Rule of God

In the historical and cultural context in which the parable is told, the widow’s conduct must be seen as a failure to conform to her (gender) role: instead of accepting her rejection and remaining at home, putting up with her distress in silence, she confronts the judge. Nor does she beg him for


justice, appealing for example to her weak position as a widow when she makes her request. She demands her rights, without any gestures of humility. The judge comments that her behaviour is ‘wearing him out’, and he fears that she might even take her recalcitrant conduct to the point of physical violence. From the perspective of source coherence, we must ask whether the Jesus tradition contains other examples where the proclamation of God’s rule is accompanied by the infringing of societally accepted gender roles and is linked to the use of force (or the accusation that force is being used). Both of these are well attested. Many traditions reflect the so-called ‘non-family ethos’ of the Jesus movement. 69 The radical wandering lifestyle of the close circle of disciples who accompanied Jesus entailed turning their back on the traditional structures of the extended family. Jesus demanded that one bid farewell to one’s closest relatives and prefer the new fellowship of the circle of disciples who devoted themselves to the proclamation of the kingdom of God, rather than carry out one’s traditional role in the family. When Jesus calls his (male) disciples ‘eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven’ (Mt 19.12), this is probably his reply to insults provoked by this conduct on the part of his disciples; and with reference to women, he explicitly affirms that it is more important to do the will of God than to carry out one’s role as mother (Lk 11.27; cf. Mk 3.34–35). Unfortunately, we know little about the roles and tasks which the women who accompanied Jesus undertook in the group of disciples, but the prosopographic data, as analysed by R. Kraemer, are striking: ‘Missing among the women portrayed as Jesus’ close disciples and supporters are married women with husbands and children … what the Jewish women in the Jesus movement have in common appears to lie … in their relative marginality within ancient systems of gender that are by no means unique to Judaism.’ 70 As they put themselves at the service of the proclamation of the kingdom of God, both the women and the men who accompanied Jesus into conflict with the traditional gender roles, as the logia explicitly tell us. Thus, the hearers of the parable will not have found it implausible that the exemplary character of this widow consists in her undeviating action on behalf of justice, even if the customary rules of conduct for a woman who lived alone may have made this scandalous. The same applies to the anticipated violence on the part of the widow. A relatively large number of traditions about Jesus associate his conduct and that of his disciples with violence.

The point at which we can most easily see how violent associations became attached to Jesus is his exorcisms, since the culturally accepted pattern here involved a physical testing of strength between the exorcist and the demon. This is why the metaphor of the ‘strong man’ depicts an exorcism as a violent burglary (Mk 3.27). Independently of this context, however, we also find logia employing an assault and a military campaign as images for the kingdom of God (Gospel of Thomas 98) and the costs of discipleship (Lk 14.31–33). Several logia speak explicitly of the vehement controversies which broke out between people who were close to one another, thanks to the message of Jesus (Mt. 10.34–36; Lk. 12.51–53; Mk 13.12; Gospel of Thomas 16), and this explains why the Jesus movement – despite its historically certain profession of non-violence and love of enemies – could be perceived by outsiders as a group of restless provocateurs. When Jesus calls the disciples ‘catchers of men’ (Mk 1.16), and he and his followers are called ‘men of violence’ who ‘seize the kingdom of God as their booty’. In the Q logion Mt. 11.12/Lk. 16.16, he is probably (as in the logion about eunuchs) taking up negative labels and giving them a positive twist: ‘The supposed men of violence and rebels are the true possessors of the rule of God.’ 71 Accordingly, when the judge at Lk. 16.5 believes that the widow is capable of losing all self-restraint and striking him in the face with her fist, this reaction chimes in with the experiences of Jesus’ followers: those who committed themselves unrestrainedly to the kingdom of God and thereby continually trampled upon social conventions were quick to be seen as potentially violent. This widow whose persistence makes the judge fear a physical assault illustrates Jesus’ demand that one strive for the rule of God, indeed that one take hold of it ‘violently’, and she is in perfect accordance with other metaphors and parables which make the same point.

3.3. The Parable in the Context of the Anticipatory Realization of Salvation by Means of Symbolic-Political Actions and Speech-Acts

In this section, we shall reflect on the relationship between the chance legal victory of the widow in the parable and Jesus’ hope of a comprehensive justice in the kingdom of God. J. R. Donahue and B. B. Scott see the widow’s victory as a symbol of the coming kingdom of God, but W. R. Herzog II has objected: ‘Both commentators fail to account for the flexibility and adaptability of systematic oppression and may confuse the

69. An updated overview and discussion of the thesis of the wandering charismatic characterized by homelessness, lack of family, possessions and protection, which was widely accepted but also fiercely disputed, can be found in Theissen, Jesusbewegung (67), pp. 55–79.


exception for a new rule. According to Herzg's convincing analysis of the legal and socio-historical background, one must consider the plausibly described case of the widow as the exception which confirms the rule; indeed, the cynical calculation of the judge and of like-minded persons would ultimately have seen his reaction as a contribution to the stabilization of the system. The conduct of the widow in the parable offers no patent recipe in the context of a political strategy for a fundamental reform of the legal system; it would be equally absurd to call Jesus' activity as an exorcist a successful strategy to introduce a lasting improvement in the health of the Jewish population in his days. Nevertheless, Jesus intends through both forms of action — the narration of parables about ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ and the expulsion of demons — to make the proximity, indeed the presence of the kingdom of God something people can experience. And this gives these actions a direct political relevance. They are part of a strategy which Jesus often employed, namely to work by means of symbolic-political actions in situations where the power-political situation made directly political actions impossible. This way of looking at Jesus' actions is indebted above all to the analysis of the political dimension of his activity by G. Theissen, who has shown that Jesus' symbolic actions (e.g. the appointment of the Twelve as alternative rulers, the cleansing of the temple, the entry to Jerusalem, and the reference to the coin in the question about paying tax; we should also mention the inclusive table fellowship) are a part of his active involvement on behalf of God's rule, aiming to make groups that are far removed from power into powerful subjects in the debates about how a society formed in accordance with the will of God ought to be. This approach points in the right direction, and I believe that it must be taken further by an investigation of the symbolic-political character of the performative aspects of Jesus' preaching. The proclamation of the kingdom of God is linked to a number of speech-acts through which the charismatic speaker performed mighty deeds of power, for example threats and exclamations of woe, beatitudes and other promises of salvation, prophetic predictions, the forgiveness of sins, prayer and parables. In the present study, I limit myself to two speech-acts which have an anticipatory character that changes reality, namely beatitudes and parables. Jesus' beatitudes are not intended to offer a cheap consolation by speaking of something still to come. Rather, they are 'a speech-act which makes the coming reign of God an event in the present'. The addressees are told that they enjoy a status which runs contrary to the actual facts of their situation, thus permitting them to see both themselves and the present day in a new light. The parables too are speech-acts which allow the hearers to experience the kingdom of God for one specific moment. They restructure the hearers' perception of the world, enabling them to meet their own reality as changed persons. In the case of the widow, this takes place through the identification of the hearers with the widow's joy at her victory over her adversary, which ensures that she will have enough to live on, and through their shared Schadenfreude at the weak judge, who arrogantly despised both God and other people, but who was brought to his knees by the 'threatening' presence of the widow alone. Why does Jesus see a parable of the kingdom of God in this unique instance of a weak widow who gets her rights? This is because he has learned in very general terms to perceive the irruption of the divine rule in limited, often symbolic, actions whereby human beings overcome evil in all its forms — in exorcisms, in the overcoming of social exclusion by means of table fellowship, and in the proclamation and symbolic enactment of the profoundly anti-imperialistic order of values proper to the familia Dei. The legal victory of the widow is therefore not 'the laughable image of eschatological salvation', but a complete anticipation of salvation under the conditions of the old covenant, something for the hearers of the parable to enjoy. The rulers of the old covenant must be brought to their knees by every conceivable means — including their reduction to laughing-stocks. Such a narrative bears a clearly political message, since it deprives of legitimacy the ruling class and its unjust forms of administering the law. It strips the magic from the myth that the rulers are invincible and the weak are powerless. It strengthens the self-awareness of those in the lower ranks of society and their willingness to act to get their rights and to look for effective forms of resistance, even when these involve infringing accepted codes of behaviour. Naturally, this beginning is no larger than a mustard seed. Jesus awaited the great

73. The description of the judge as τῶν θεοῦ μη φοβοῦντος καὶ ἐνθρώπου μὴ ἐντρεπόμενου is another indication that this parable goes back to Jesus. The judge is consciously portrayed as a man who refuses to accept the obligation to observe the double commandment of love, as Bovon, Lukas 3 (1980), p. 190, correctly remarks. G. Theissen, Das Doppelgebot der Liebe: Jüdische Ethik bei Jesus, in idem, Jesus als historische Gestalt. Beiträge zur Jesusforschung: Zum 60. Geburtstag von Gerd Theissen (ed. A. Meitz, FRILANT, 202; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003), pp. 57–72, has convincingly shown that the double commandment of love had a central place in the preaching of Jesus (and probably already in the teaching of John the Baptist).
redistribution of property and power, linked with the re-establishing of the legal order and the reversal of the political situation, from God alone – and he expected that this would happen soon. But this began wherever the new order of values which Jesus proclaimed gained a foothold in people’s daily lives; and this happened also where subversive parables like that about the widow were told.

We can therefore affirm that a comparison with units from various streams and genres and forms of the tradition which substantially make the same points permits us to offer a coherent interpretation of Jesus’ parable, in all the salient points of the reconstructed meaning set out in sections 2.1–2.3., as part of his proclamation of the present kingdom of God. But if this is true, why does the Gospel of Luke present the parable surrounded by pointers which invite the reader to a completely divergent interpretation of the parable as an exhortation to unwearied prayer? What dominant early Christian interpretative tendencies helped ‘defuse’ the parable about the widow?

4. New Interpretations of an Awkward Parable

If what we have said up to this point is correct, our task is to explain why Jesus’ parable was interpreted in early Christianity in the light of precisely that dominant biblical tradition about widows which Jesus himself wanted to question and undermine by means of his parable. The answer is obvious: this occurred because, in the absence of clear pointers to its interpretation, the parable was interpreted (probably already at the proto-Lukan stage) in the light of the Old Testament text which seemed to offer the greatest number of points of contact: Sir. 35.12–23. This text supports the traditional image of the widow in an unalloyed form. It also provided the opportunity to impose a futurist-eschatological interpretation of the parable.

4.1. The Parable is Reread by Scripture Scholars in the Light of Sirach 35 as Dominant Pre-text

The original parable of Jesus drew its legitimization from the Old Testament legislation about widows and the prophets’ social criticism, but Jesus linked this with the subversive narrative tradition of widows who fought successfully for their rights or for their people. It is however clear that the rereading is guided by a text which belongs to the traditional discourse about widows, namely Sir. 35.12–23. This text contains all the relevant main words in the same sequence as the parable. Like the parable and the interpretation in Lk. 18.2–5, 6–8, it also leads from a discourse about a judge and a widow to a discourse about the eschatological judgment of God in favour of the oppressed who pray to him:

[9] Give to the Most High as he has given to you, as generously as your means can afford; [10] for the Lord is a good rewarder, he will reward you seven times over. [11] Do not try to bribe him with presents, he will not accept them, do not put your faith in wrongly motivated sacrifices; [12] for the Lord is a judge (κρίτης) who is utterly impartial. [13] He never shows partiality to the detriment of the poor, he listens to the plea of the injured party. [14] He does not ignore the orphan’s supplication, nor the widow’s as she pours out her complaint (οὐ μὴ ῥητορίζῃ ἵκτην ὑπὲρ κειμένου καὶ χίλιαν ἵκτῃ λαίγαις). [15] Do the widow’s tears not run down her cheeks, as she accuses the man who is the cause of them (οὐκ ἐσῆς χίλιας ἵκτης ἐπὶ νομικός καταστρέφει καὶ καταστρέφει ἐπὶ τῷ καταστρέφειν αὐτοῦ)? [16] Whoever wholeheartedly serves God will be accepted, his petitions will carry to the clouds. [17] The prayer of the humble (προσήνητος ταπείνου) pierces the clouds: and until it does, he is not to be consoled, [18] nor will he be at rest until the Most High takes notice of him, acquires the upright and delivers judgment (κρίνει δικαίωμα καὶ ποιήσει κρίνην). [19] And the Lord will not be slow, nor will he be dilatory on their behalf (καὶ οὗτος οὐ μὴ βραδέως συνάγῃ μὴ ῥητορίζῃ ἐπ’ αὐτοῖς), [20] until he has crushed the loins of the merciless and exacted vengeance on the nations (τοῖς ἑπειδὴ οὐκ ἀνταποδόσεως ἐκθέτοντο), [21] until he has eliminated the hordes of the arrogant and broken the scepters of the wicked, [22] until he has repaid all people as their deeds deserve and human actions as their intentions merit, [23] until he has judged the case of his people (ὅς κρίνῃ τὴν κρίνην τοῦ λαοῦ αὐτοῦ) and made them rejoice in his mercy.

This text is the source of all the definitions and transpositions of meaning vis-à-vis the original parable. There can be no doubt that this is the code for the allegorical exposition of the parable. On the basis of v. 12, God is identified with the judge; in keeping with vv. 13–15, the widow becomes a helpless figure in relation to her oppressor, but her tears and prayers penetrate to God and move him to act. Nothing in the parable itself suggests an allegorical interpretation of the widow’s success in gaining her rights; this remains firmly within the dimension of the present world. The allegory in terms of an eschatological retribution that is still to come is made possible by the semantic breadth of the word ἔκδομαι, and this is clearly inspired by an interpretation of the parable in the light of Sir. 35.18–23; further evidence is the adoption of the theme of delay (cf. μὴ ἐκθέτῃ ἐπ’ αὐτοῖς with Lk. 18.7b). In Sirach 35, the chain of identification runs from the words and tears of the widow via the prayer of the humble (προσήνητος ταπείνου) to the judgment in favour of God’s
people, who are humiliated by the Gentiles (εἰς κρίνη τὴν κρίνου τοῦ λαοῦ αὐτοῦ). The early Christian scripture scholars who discovered that Sirach 35 could be used to interpret Jesus’ parable put ‘the chosen ones of God, who cry to him day and night’ in this position, which is traditionally that of Israel. The incompatibility of the narrative logic with the interpretative logic, which I have shown, makes it clear that all this is a secondary interpretation of the parable; one cannot maintain that Jesus himself constructed his narrative in the light of Sirach 35. The assurance that God’s retribution will come soon, and that those who experience oppression in the present world will gain their rights in the eschatological dimension, which we find both in Lk. 18.6–8a and in Sir. 25.12–23, is based on the traditional ‘script’ about the reality of widows in Israel: where all social laws and recommendations to practise mercy are disregarded and no one gives the oppressed their rights, God will intervene and punish. The parable, however, told a completely different story about a widow who unexpectedly proved not to be powerless, and who gained her rights in one specific instance. And this was a parable of the rule of God which is already coming into force in the present time.

4.2. The Lukan Development of the Interpretation

The evangelist probably found vv. 2–8a, the combination of parable and allegorical interpretation on the basis of a rereading by Scripture scholars, as an already existing unit, and he did not detach these elements from each other. He saw no need to do so, for (as we shall see) the parable with its allegorical interpretation admirably fitted other traditions involving Jesus and prayer which he adopted, as well as his own moderately conservative view of women and widows. At most, he may have attempted to tone down a little the imminent expectation of judgment which is expressed in v. 6–8a by means of the framing verses: in v. 8b, he refers to the danger of the loss of faith, and he expands the admonition to continuous prayer in v. 1 with the warning that one should not let oneself be discouraged.

Nevertheless, the total eschatological interpretation is clearly given prominence by the placing of the parable within the eschatological discourse which begins at Lk. 17.20. Furthermore, by placing the parable relatively far on in the Gospel, the evangelist has his readers perceive it in the light of the longer discourse about prayer which he has presented at Lk. 11.1–13. The traditions taken up in that passage include the parable (found only in Luke) of the importunate friend and the sequence of parables, derived from Q, about the father who naturally gives his son the good things for which he asks. Both these units have points of resemblance to the parable of the widow and her demands. In the parable of the importunate friend, as we find it in Luke, the attitude of the one who asks for help is likewise called κόπαν τοπέχεσον and here, too, the man who is asked for help yields because the petitioner is behaving in an exceptionally vexatious and pushy manner (Lk. 11.7–8). No application is offered; no explicit inference is made from the friend who grants the request to God, although such an inference is suggested to the reader retrospectively, by means of v. 13 which concludes the sequence of parables in vv. 11–12 with an inference a minori ad maius from the wicked earthly fathers to the heavenly Father. This inference already belonged to the Q sequence of parables (and I believe that there are good arguments for seeing it as going back to Jesus himself), but it is not possible to clarify with certainty the extent to which the parallels to Lk. 18.1–8 in the parable of the importunate friend already existed at the pre-Lukan stage, or whether these were created by Luke or at least given special emphasis in his work of redaction.

It is indisputable that all Lukan parables about the hearing of prayer form a coherent group of mutually interpreting texts. To recognize this does not however mean positing an unbroken continuity between the parable and the interpretation. Rather, we can see that the parables and logia in Luke 11 structure the interpretation in advance, so that the disturbing incoherencies between the parable and its framework in Lk. 18.2–8 are diminished. But they don’t become invisible. They show that at a secondary stage the parable was forced into the corset of a parable about the hearing of prayer; this was not easy, but the history of its interpretation shows that on the whole the work was successfully accomplished. However, the introduction to the parable shows that it does not belong there, since it is not by chance that the parables about the hearing of prayer (Lk. 11.5–8 and 11.11–13), which probably go back to Jesus, take the form of rhetorical questions: τί ἐς ἐμοί. These are parables which indicate at the very outset that they derive their plausibility from foreseeable sequences of events in daily life. One can foresee that earthly (‘wicked’) fathers and friends will grant a request, even if they may perhaps delay for a short time; but it is much more natural that God should hear the prayers of his children. This argument may succeed in

79. Bailey, Peasant Eyes (11), pp. 127–30, considers Sirach 35 as the literary background to the parable of Jesus. If Jesus had Sirach 35 in mind, which cannot be completely ruled out, we would have to conclude that he deliberately used the text in a subversive way, replacing the idea of future retaliation by God with the idea of present achievement of justice through the powerful action of the widow. The main reason why I don’t think this happened is the metaphorical description of God as a rewarer and judge in Sir. 35.10, 12, which is consistent with the application in Lk. 18.6–8a, but not with the original parable, as I pointed out in section 2 above.

attaining its rhetorical goal of strengthening the certainty that one’s prayers will be heard. But the parable of the judge and the widow describes the classic unusual individual case, for neither daily experience nor the biblical tradition leads us to expect that a widow would gain her rights against a judge who is unwilling to help her. On the contrary, the plausibility of the negative inference a mínori ad maior is very weak, when compared to the positive analogies in Lk. 11.11–13.

I have already pointed out that the new interpretation as a parable about prayer for eschatological retribution also involves a massive transposition of the image of the widow. In the parable, she overcomes the judge by her active conduct, which is motivated by the desire for justice. But the framework destroys these associations by its allegorical interpretation of the widow as an image of the chosen ones of God who cry out to him by day and night. This portrait of a woman was felt to be scandalous, and it was toned down even before Luke wrote his Gospel. He carried the process further by his interpretation of the widow’s behaviour as the model of προσεύχοντος τοῦ πατρὸς (Lk. 18.1) and by making the widow at 18.2–5 only one of a number of figures who are modelled on the traditional image of the widow. His account of the raising to life of the widow’s son (Lk. 7.11–17, a tradition found only in Luke) functions entirely within the patriarchal paradigm – Jesus restores to the widow the man in her life, who is capable of looking after her. He also recalls Elijah, who became the provider for the widow in Zarephath (Lk. 4.25–26). Likewise, all the widows who are mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles seem to be recipients of care on the part of others (Acts 6.1; 9.39, 41). 82 When we look for comparisons to Lk. 18.2–5, however, the most important widow is Anna (Lk. 2.36–38), who after only seven years of married life spent the rest of her long life in the temple, serving God by fasting and prayer day and night. Luke does indeed call her a prophetess, but she gives only an indirect account of her words – whereas Simeon’s are quoted directly. This widow stands at the beginning of the Gospel as a

82. The tradition about Tabitha in Joppa is particularly striking. The author may have deliberately left unclear her relationship to the widows. The text suggests that the widows mentioned in vv. 39 and 41 are recipients of Tabitha’s alms (mentioned in v. 36) and of the ‘tunics and other garments’ which she made (v. 39). In terms of social history and the history of piety, however, it is much more probable that all the women mentioned here were members of a fellowship in which women worked together and produced goods, and that Tabitha was their spiritual leader. Cf. J. Richter Reimer, ‘Die Apostelgeschichte’, in L. Schottroff, M.-T. Wacker (eds.), Kompendium Feministische Bibelübersetzung (Gütersloh: Christian Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1998), pp. 542–56 (549–50). In that case, the widows would have played an active role in earning the money which was given in alms (v. 36) and (in a manner analogous to the widow at Mk 12.41–44) would not have been recipients of alms, dependent on vertical solidarity. They would themselves have been givers in a system of horizontal solidarity which undermined the Roman patron-client system.

model of lifelong, incessant prayer, and her light shines out anew in Lk. 18.1 (προσεύχοντος τοῦ πατρὸς) and 18.6 (the allegorical interpretation of the widow as God’s chosen ones, who cry to him day and night). In the light of this trait, which agrees with the traditional image of widows, the widow in the original parable with her successful fight for justice now leads only a shadowy existence.

5. The Parable in Continuum: Results of Our Investigation

This essay has investigated whether the tradition at Lk. 18.1–8 is based on an historical core going back to the historical Jesus. What is the relationship of this Jesus tradition to the Jewish context in which it arose, and to the early Christian interpretations which can be perceived in the Gospel of Luke? The result is an extremely complex mixture of continuity and discontinuity in both perspectives. The parable of Jesus, transmitted without any interpretation, belongs best in the context of the parables of the kingdom of God, which employ subjects from everyday life to express the presence and the spreading of God’s rule. The earliest Christian interpretation of the parable to which we have access was the addition of vv. 6–8, and this can be plausibly explained as toning down its politically explosive message of present eschatology by an allegorizing interpretation guided by Scripture. This new interpretation agrees so closely with other (probably authentic) traditions about Jesus and prayer that the later interpreters, from Luke to the present day, have repeatedly held that Lk. 18.2–8 is a twin parable to the story of the important friend, and that it goes back to Jesus himself. Here, a stroke of genius created a new continuity in the discontinuity; a second parable was created, and its principal affirmation is certainly in accordance with the historical Jesus. This, however, meant the loss of the scandalous portrait of the widow in the original parable, with its politically subversive message, since the framing passages no longer permitted the reader to perceive the sharply drawn characters and the narrative dynamic which destroyed the hierarchies of everyday life as these had been conceived by Jesus when he told the parable. In the parable, the judge who seems all-powerful, and who inspires fear by his scorn for God and other people, unexpectedly proves to be a pathetic figure, while the widow, whose fate had seemed sealed, triumphs in the end. No higher power intervenes: it is exclusively because of her persistent behaviour – which is of course highly unfeminine – that right prevails, and God’s rule is enforced through the activity of the judge although he himself knows no fear of God. The (proto-)Lukan parable, on the other hand, smooths everything out: nothing is changed in the relationships between the genders, or between God and human beings, and the widow is the model of the oppressed community which
prays by day and night to the traditional God, who is imagined as masculine (on the analogy of the judge) and who will grant the petition in his own time. The qualitative antithesis between the present time, in which the chosen ones suffer powerless, and the future, in which God will avenge them, is likewise solidified. All this is done in accordance with Jewish and early Christian majority discourses about gender roles, images of God and eschatological salvation. In section 2.2., I have suggested that when Jesus speaks of a widow whose unconventional mode of conduct puts an end to her legal disadvantages, he is taking up a Jewish narrative tradition which diverges from the dominant Old Testament image of widows – here, God’s will is realized through boundary-breaking behaviour on the part of widows. It is time to rediscover this trajectory of continuity between Jesus and his Jewish environment and to make this the centre of the exposition of the parable of the widow. This figure in the parable deserves to be mentioned in the same breath as the great widows of the Old Testament: a Judith, a Tamar and a Ruth.

SON OF MAN AS KINGDOM IMAGERY: JESUS BETWEEN CORPORATE SYMBOL AND INDIVIDUAL REDEEMER FIGURE

Thomas Kazen

1. Introduction

In this chapter, I will suggest an originally collective or corporate understanding of the expression ‘Son of Man’ as the most plausible explanation for its use by Jesus, as well as for its development and transmutation within the early Christian movement. This is grounded in a conviction that any attempt to ‘reconstruct’ the historical figure of Jesus must take issues of both continuity and discontinuity into account. The criticisms launched against the classical criterion of dissimilarity during the last phase of historical Jesus research has made this more evident than ever.¹ In any historical investigation we must assume that historical figures were not lone islands, but interacted and communicated within their contemporaneous contexts. It is only reasonable to regard the historical figure of Jesus as having shared common concepts and convictions with his Jewish contemporaries, while at the same time providing some sort of impetus to the ensuing early Christian development. Without balancing issues of continuity and discontinuity, the historian will not be able to suggest historically plausible explanations.²

As I have discussed these general issues in detail elsewhere,³ it will suffice to emphasize that interpreting Jesus from a ‘continuum perspective’


². This is the intent of Theissen and Winter’s criterion of historical plausibility, which they divide into a criterion of Kontextplausibilität and a criterion of Wirkungspflausibilität. For an earlier important discussion, introducing the idea of historical constraints, see A. Harvey, Jesus and the Constraints of History: The Bampton Lectures, 1980 (London: Duckworth, 1982).