



BSFL: Luke 21:1-4

# Widowhood

IN JESUS' DAY



Marble sarcophagus of mourning women. This sarcophagus, found at the royal necropolis of Sidon, is thought to have belonged to King Straton of Sidon who died in 360 B.C.

## BY JERRY W. BATSON

**S**HE DID NOT GO UNNOTICED. Jesus observed as the widow put her gift into one of the temple's offering boxes. Luke's account of the incident (Luke 21:1-4) makes the point that the widow was poor. In fact, he highlights this detail three times in four verses. The narration describes the woman as "a certain poor widow" (v. 2, NKJV). Jesus called the disciples' attention to the woman and her offering, describing her as "this poor widow" (v. 3). He followed with His evaluation of her gift's significance by highlighting that she gave "out of her poverty" (v. 4). These three statements about the widow's poverty raises questions about the status of widows in the first century. How would a woman's status in first-century culture change after her husband passed away? How did widows survive financially? Was poverty typical? Did a widow continue to live in the same home? How did having children versus having no children affect her life after her husband's death? Did widows remarry?

What sources can help us understand widowhood in Jesus' day? The culture of Greece and the influence of Rome pervaded the first-century world. The world of Jesus and the early church

was not isolated from such cultural influences. Thus, drawing from secular writings, we can inquire about the general status of widows in the first-century Greco-Roman world. To understand the general attitude toward widowhood in Jewish tradition, we can look into the Old Testament's portrayal of widows and their status. Even more to the point, several New Testament passages shed light of the status of widows in Jesus' day.

### Ancient Traditions

*The Greco-Roman World*—The legal and cultural make-up of the world into which Jesus came was complex. Greek, Roman, and Jewish practices and laws were not the same. Thus, widows' legal and social status was not necessarily uniform in every place. We can form a general or typical answer to questions about widowhood in Jesus' day, but must always allow for significant variations.

In his book *Roman Wives, Roman Widows*, New Testament scholar Bruce Winter examines the literary and archaeological evidence to shed light on the status of women, including widows, in the first-century world. His research indicated that "The power of husbands over their wives can be paralleled

**Right: Outside of ancient Sidon, excavations of a wall at Zarephath, known as modern Sarafand.**

**Upper right: A Jewish widow's mite from the time of Tiberias. The obverse side shows a simpulum, a vessel for pouring libations. The Greek inscription reads: TIBERION KAICAROS LIS, which means "of Tiberius, year 16." This indicates the coin was struck the year that Julia Augusta died (A.D. 29). It was found at Herod's fortress palace, the Herodium, near Bethlehem. Reverse shows three ears of wheat.**

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/JERRY WARDAMAN COLLECTION (2/21/14)



COINS: ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/JAMES McLEMORE (12/28/2 & 5)

SARCOPHAGUS: ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BOB SCHATZ/ISTANBUL ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM (12/24/7)



Village of Nain, where Jesus raised the widow's son from the dead (Luke 7).

with that of the father over his children.”<sup>1</sup> This tells us that generally women had little legal clout. Jesus reflected this fact in a parable about a widow who sought redress from a judge and only secured it by uncommon persistence (Luke 18:1-8).

*Old Testament Teachings*—The Old Testament paints a picture of God’s special care for widows. For example, mistreatment of widows and orphans was a crime (Ex. 22:22-24). Deuteronomy 24:19 reads, “When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all your undertakings” (NRSV). Also, the Mosaic Law stipulated that every three years a tithe should be gathered for widows (Deut. 14:28-29).<sup>2</sup> All of this formed part of the religious heritage of first-century Jewish believers and of the early Jerusalem church, a heritage in which care for widows was ingrained.

### Widowhood in the New Testament

While generally the New Testament says relatively little about widowhood, Luke-Acts contains a number of references to widows. In addition to the aforementioned passage about the widow making her temple offering, the Book of Luke mentions that widows became victims of religious leaders’ greed (Luke 20:47), and records episodes about a widow at Zarephath (4:25-26) and at Nain (7:11-17). Acts mentions widows

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**Bust of Caesar Augustus. He brought sweeping changes to the Roman Empire. Although he was known for his military victories and his extensive building programs, he also tried to bring stability to the family. He established laws that punished adultery and required widows to remarry.**



in the Jerusalem church (Acts 6:1) and in connection with Tabitha (9:36-42). Some Bible exegetes allow that women mentioned independently and without husbands may have been widows. These include Peter’s mother-in-law (Luke 4:38-39); Martha (10:38-42); Mary, the mother of Jesus (John 19:26-27); Lydia (Acts 16:14-15); Mary, the mother of John Mark (12:12); and Tabitha herself (9:36). The Book of 1 Timothy has a major passage related to widows, in which a formal order of widows is said to have had specific guidelines for admission to the order (1 Tim. 5:3-16).

These scattered references suggest some widows were poor and without a family support system, while

others appear to have had financial independence. Those without family support became beneficiaries of the church's compassion and maintenance. Those who appear to have had resources apart from the church likely engaged in ministries to others.

## Financial Status

One might assume that widowhood and poverty went hand in hand. To assume that all first-century widows were poor and needed community care, though, would be an inaccurate generalization. Usually, the bride's father gave her a dowry. The groom's acceptance of the dowry meant he was taking responsibility of providing and caring for his bride.

The dowry provided a woman with a measure of security both while married and in the event of her husband's death. Dowry laws permitted the Jewish wife to "share in her own property during marriage."<sup>3</sup> In the event of a husband's death, the laws provided that the widow and her children could continue living in her deceased husband's house. She had the option, though, if she preferred, to return to her parents' home. As an additional measure of security, the widow could keep part of her dowry, although the amount was limited to about one year's livelihood.<sup>4</sup> Someone in the household became "the lord of the dowry" and assumed responsibility for a widow's support.<sup>5</sup>

Evidence indicates some women, especially those from wealthier families, managed the family's financial affairs in the husband's absence. In such cases, the wife would continue those responsibilities if her husband died. Some widows thus fared quite well.<sup>6</sup> Widows who enjoyed a degree of financial independence were able to provide for themselves, as well as make significant contributions to those who labored in the gospel.

Of course, one size did not fit all. Given various socio-economic levels in the first century, some widows were poor, especially those who had not borne children. Not all had the options of remarriage or care provided by adult children. Sadly, one option available to younger widows was prostitution. Given Old Testament teachings, Jewish heritage, and Jesus' example of showing compassion, the early church offered support for poor widows that lacked other options for their financial wellbeing (Acts 6:1; 1 Tim 5:16).

## Remarriage

Widowhood was often a temporary situation in the Greco-Roman world. Widows, especially those of a higher socio-economic status, tended to remarry.<sup>7</sup>

**Agrippina (circa 14 B.C.–A.D. 33) was banished in widowhood. Agrippina's daughter, Agrippina married Germanicus, who was the adopted grandson of Augustus, and bore nine of his children, one of which was the future emperor Caligula. After her husband died suddenly, perhaps of poisoning, Agrippina fell out of favor. Eventually, Emperor Tiberius banished her from Rome. She died of starvation in exile.**



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This general trend seems to have held true for Jewish widows as well. Long-term widowhood in Jewish culture appears to have been rare. Rabbis of the era had the task of confirming the husband was dead so the widow could marry again. Normally, two male Jewish witnesses had to attest the husband's death. In order facilitate remarriage, however, some rabbis relaxed the rules. Some acted on the strength of a single witness or even the testimony of women and Gentiles.<sup>8</sup>

Standing in the temple that day, Jesus noticed the widow and called attention to her generosity. He understood her situation and financial plight. Showing compassion for widows had its roots in the Old Testament and became the standard for early believers. In its best expressions, New Testament churches lived out a compassionate caring for needy widows, while seeking to be wise and practical in their ministry to widows. **B**

1. Bruce W. Winter, *Roman Wives, Roman Widows: The Appearance of New Women and the Pauline Communities* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 17.

2. The Deuteronomy passage also stipulated that the tithe gathered every three years was to be used for the benefit of the Levites, resident aliens, and orphans

3. Reta Halteman Finger, *Of Widows and Meals: Communal Meals in the Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 211.

4. Ibid

5. Winter, 126.

6. Finger, 212.

7. Thomas A. J. McGinn, "Widows, Orphans, and Social History" in *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 12 (1999): 617-32.

8. Finger, 212.

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