



The parable of the persistent widow and the unjust judge: A replica of the suffering of widows in Zimbabwe

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Dates:

Received: 23 Mar. 2021
Accepted: 22 Sept. 2021
Published: 20 Oct. 2021

How to cite this article:

Mundenda, D. & Van Eck, E., 2021, 'The parable of the persistent widow and the unjust judge: A replica of the suffering of widows in Zimbabwe', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 42(1), a2244. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v42i1.2244>

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This article proposes an alternate way of reading the parable of Jesus with special emphasis on Luke 18:1–8. The goal of this contextual reading is the search for the liberation of the violated and disenfranchised widows in independent Zimbabwe. In the reading of the parable, the sociocultural and historical context of Luke is used for an informed reading and analysis of the characters and the plot of the parable. This reading is then compared with the contemporary sociocultural and historical context of widows in the independent Zimbabwe. It is argued that the Lukan socio-cultural and historical contexts provided the source and reason for the persistence and courage for the persistent widow, and that the widows in independent Zimbabwe must follow the example of the persistent widow to curb disenfranchisement and violations in their own context.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The article indicates that the persistent widow in the parable can be seen as a model for courage and persistence for the suffering widows in Zimbabwe. This model can chart a new course for widows who daily suffer injustice in Zimbabwe because of its patriarchal cultural setting.

Keywords: widows; violations; parables; socio-historical context; patriarchy.

Introduction

Levine (2015) once said that if a:

[P]arable¹ cannot be domesticated it cannot be turned into something that neatly fits our preconceived notion of religion and morality, if it shakes up then we may be on the right track. (p. 124)

Levine clearly desired to put parables in a context which speak/relate to any contemporary setting. The term domestication suggests bringing the story home, defining domestication as 'an adaptation of something to meet the expectations or tastes of ordinary people' (Levine 2015:124). Lightfoot (1986:1) observed that when Jesus used parables,² he 'did not leave principles of the way of life in abstraction but brought them down into the reach of the humble doors'. In other words, when Jesus spoke in parables, he used his contemporary setting, life experience and emerging conflicts. The context allowed his parables to impact ordinary people. This is relevant because all writings carry cultural notions and preconceived ideas, hence the invitation to adaptation. Jesus' parabolic teachings are no exception. Unless we try to understand Jesus' parables, reorganise and restructure them, they stay irrelevant and remote. A shaking up removes its past clothing and thoughts.

Levine argued that Jesus spoke in parables to people for a particular purpose in each context. Jeremias (1972) amplified this view:

The parables of Jesus are not – at any rate primarily – literary productions, nor is it their object to lay down general maxims. He uttered each of them in an actual situation of the life of Jesus, at a particular and often unforeseen point. Moreover ... they were concerned with conflict – with justification, defence, attack, and even challenge. Though not exclusively, they are weapons of controversy. (p. 21)

1.Scholars such as Hunter, Dodd, Jülicher, Linnemann and Blomberg, amongst others have come up with definitions of a parable depending on their persuasion, period of operation and to whom they were responding. Most of the definitions were formed by the church's prevailing theology created to challenge the definitions of the forerunners in parable interpretation. Jülicher (1910:165) and Bultmann (1995:188–189), defined parables as 'similitudes' and 'example stories'. Bultmann also believed that the parables are 'figurative sayings'. For this article, the simple definition of the parable shall be 'to throw beside' or 'means to throw alongside or compare'.

2.Scholars have not agreed on one definition of the parables. This is because when each scholar gives a definition, the definition overemphasises one aspect and at the same time underemphasises other elements. Whilst Jesus gave reasons for the use of the parables, the approach allows contemporary scholarship to adopt a new understanding.

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What was the context of the parable in Luke 18:1–8? How is the context of this parable essential in understanding the plight of violated widows in Zimbabwe? Jeremias wanted to rediscover the original meaning of parables. He believed that Jesus spoke to rebut controversies, conflicts or understanding. Simkins (2014:20) concluded that biblical texts are a product of the elite and upper class of Ancient Judah and as such represent their interest and ethos. Suffice to say that the context chooses the words, the message and understanding of the intended meaning.

The original setting, conflicts and circumstances inform the purpose of this article in interpreting and applying the parable of the Persistent Widow and the Unjust Judge. Jeremias (1972) argued that the parables attributed to Jesus or Luke's Jesus had a context. The meaning of some biblical stories, like the parables, became detached from their original *Sitz im Leben* (setting in life) over time. The need for the parable of Luke 18:1–18 to speak to an ordinary reader³ in a contemporary setting is the thrust of this article. A contextual interpretation of Jesus parables allows people to relate to the story, considering life experiences and searching for solutions.

The parable of the Persistent Widow and the Unjust Judge in Luke 18:1–8 speaks to and about the experience of people in Zimbabwe. In the parable, we meet a tenacious widow who, without identity, reacted by following her needs in her predicament and suffering. The value of her inheritance propelled her to degrade herself in search of justice and equality. The worth of her inheritance was at stake and was the incentive for her to behave in an unusual manner.

The interpretation of the Parable of the Persistent Widow and the Unjust Judges (Lk 18:1–8) migrates the dynamics of the *Sitz im Leben* to the socio-historical context of the widow in Zimbabwe. What kind of a widow was she? Was she alone? What was the value of the estate at stake? Why would the judge ignore her for so long only to give in to avoid reputational damage?

The analysis of the characters, the social setting and the communal and patriarchal perspectives on widows embedded in the parable are fundamental to applying the story in the present context. For Levine (2015:124), the interpretation must allow to speak to the contemporary context. In that way, an interrogation of the *Sitz im Leben* of the parable is unavoidable. Several issues are to be considered here: (1) the widow and the judge staying in the same city, (2) the character of the widow who continuously pesters the judge against her adversary (3) who were these adversaries and (4) what weapon did the widow had to contend with her adversaries?

To appreciate the widow's brevity and courage, an understanding of the *Sitz im Leben* of the parable is a prerequisite. Furthermore,

3.The phrase, 'ordinary reader' is accredited to Gerald West based on his experience, relationship and interactions with the suffering Black majority during the apartheid era. West (1999:10, 37) and Mosala (1989) believed that ordinary readers who are poor and marginalised is a good starting point for hermeneutics. Whilst the two addressed their concerns in the South African context, African experience in general is the same. West argued that the voice of the ordinary reader, including women, should not be side-lined or silenced.

an analysis of the *Sitz im Leben* helps to dissect the character and behaviour of the widow. Is there any recommendation to offer the widow? Why would the Bible commend her actions? What substantiates the recommendations? Why did the adversaries' contented with the possession of the widow? Who were these adversaries? For what would be the value of the wealth adversaries were clamouring for?

The suffering of widows in Zimbabwe

To copiously interpret and contextualise the narrative of the Persistent Widow and the Unjust Judge (Lk 18:1–8) with lucidity, an understanding of the suffering of widows in Zimbabwe is a prerequisite. The contemporary socio-cultural, religious and patriarchal environment, which aggravates the suffering of widows in Zimbabwe informs the understanding of their plight in Zimbabwe. This understanding must take the following issues in consideration: (1) the implication of the death of a husband in the Zimbabwean setting, (2) the communal belief about widows and (3) the necessary reactions of widows in their suffering and their legal response to their suffering. These issues will be the focal points in this article informing the rereading of the parable.

In the Zimbabwean context, the death of a husband is the demise of livelihood, association and emotional companionship. Death strips the woman of her protection, simultaneously altering her socio-cultural, religious and political life. Death represents a disconnection from the emotional attachment the widow enjoyed. She now must reconfigure the daily decisions and responsibilities once shared by both spouses. The widow becomes lonely and vulnerable. She must face a new reality alone; worse if she had no children. According to Utz et al. (2004:684), the 'widow must then strive to redefine a social reality that reflects her new status as a widowed person'. Berger and Kellner (1964:22) said that '[w]hen the couple initially entered into a marital union, they redefined their identities and constructed a social reality that is shared by both marriage partners'. So, upon the death of the husband, widows become vulnerable and exposed. The need for the widows to redefine her life is unavoidable; a redefinition to a new status, which makes widows powerless, vulnerable and prone to abuse because the patriarchal system upholds men as the *de facto* family heads.

When the man pays the bride price (*lobola*), the woman is commodified. A United Nations report (Bezemer et al. 2013:x) defines a commodity as 'inputs in the production of other goods or services'. Marriage makes the woman an input expected to produce children, supply labour and all marginal benefits. When the husband dies, another man must inherit her to continue this production.⁴ Simultaneously, a widow becomes a perpetual minor, whose destiny is

4.The practice, called *kugara nhaka*, does not entail another payment of *lobola*. If one member of the family paid *lobola*, he got married to the family, if not for the clan. In some African cultures, specifically in Nigeria, it is preferable to call a married woman 'our wife'. The wife belongs to all and marries into the family; she belongs to the man who paid *lobola*. Thus, marriage is communal.

decided on by the patriarchal family.⁵ As such, the community, society and cultural practices regulate her behavioural pattern, relationships and associations.

Africans believe that death is many times caused by spiritual elements such as witchcraft. Because of this belief, the patriarchal family or the community often accuses a widow of murdering her husband.⁶ According to Eyetsemitan (2002), when a death occurs in Africa:

[D]ivination as to the cause of death is sought from dead ancestors, with death causes usually attributed to spiritual elements (witchcraft, offending ancestors or gods) rather than medical or physical reasons. (p. 6)

The deceased family members cannot bewitch their own. The only possible culprit is the foreigner (*mutorwa*) who joined the family through marriage. If an accusation is rife, the patriarchal family begins to eye the immovable and movable property on *kugovanhumbi* (dispensing of the property of the deceased) ceremony. If the couple was married customarily, customs do not entitle the widow to any property or inheritance, but she must be inherited. She can only save her life by accepting *kugara nhaka* or *kugara ilifa* like levirate marriages.

Depending on the family cultural practices, the family distributes the household property, either on the following day after burial or when there is to be memorial or *manyaradzo*.⁷ When the in-laws disburse property, the process is a private family affair. As it is a family affair, legal personnel, a chief or law enforcers find it difficult and even impossible to intervene. The *Human Rights Watch* (2017) quoted a widow whose brother-in-law said to her, in front of the family gathered at the homestead: 'You are rubbish, and you will get nothing, I am taking everything'. According to the story narrated by Chakanetsa, she recalled the women re-counting her ordeal saying:

I returned home to find my home stripped. Every piece of furniture that we had struggled to buy, the ornaments we lovingly collected, clothing, cooking utensils, even down to the brush for cleaning the toilet and pumice stone for scrubbing feet were all gone. The work of thieves? No. It is just a case of greedy brothers who gather like vultures after a person's death, ransacking the deceased home. The widow is left for destitute after helping him to accumulate it. (Sunday Mail, quoted by Chakanetsa 1992:88)

When property stripping occurs, the least the widow gets is *umai* or *maoko*⁸ property. These are normally household

5.The *Legal Age of Majority Act* of 1982 (LAMA) and the *Children's Protection and Adoption Act* (5:06) defines a minor as a person under the age of 18 years. Persons below this age have limited ability to act and can only act with parental consent. Culturally women fall into this category and tradition expects her to always have a representative to act or speak on her behalf.

6.Scholars such as Evans-Pritchard (1949) and Mbiti (1980) believed that there are reasons that cause deaths. The causes include witchcraft, sorcery, curses, evil magic, diseases, evil spirits, old age or the breaking of taboos/binding oaths. On the list, only one cause is natural, namely disease, which is normally considered as the last cause of death.

7.*Nyaradzo/mbuyiso* refers to the formal ceremony of consoling the family after the death of a relative and marks the closure of the mourning period. The ceremony is organised by the family. They invite friends and relatives to the occasion. The ceremony is presided over by the church if the family of the deceased were Christians. Family speeches precede the official church ceremony, reminding each other of the departed relative and his contributions. If not, traditional practices take over the event. Either way, the appeal to the traditional practices is always present on the day.

8.These properties do not have value of significant note. As a result, culture relegates the value of what a woman can get. She must take what is insignificantly valuable. This also suggests the traditional value of women and what she is entitled to.

effects, such as linen and utensils she came with or what she bought or got from clubs if she belonged to one. The in-laws and the family relatives assume themselves owners of the property acquired during the marriage.

In all of this, the widow is expected to remain *muroora akanaka* (a good daughter-in-law) to the family if she wants to retain *Unhu*, that is, dignity and honour. A good daughter-in-law does not argue with the matrimonial family but listens and accepts everything without questioning or challenging. Mukonoweshuro (1992) elaborated on this tradition:

A widow just watched whilst her deceased husband's relatives were packing the property and never said a word. In reply to the question of why she had not even protested, she answered that she had to be a good *muroora*, respectful daughter-in-law. She showed this respect by letting them do as they please. This behaviour follows the Shona custom/belief that the relationship between a married woman or widow and her in-laws is that of respect mixed with fear. (p. 91)

If a widow attempts ownership of her property, she becomes an outcast and is considered an outlaw. Widows who attempt ownership of property go through painful and traumatic experiences. They have no one to stand up for them and the deceased family often abandons her. Normally, the patriarchal family of the deceased also exposes her to the mercy of the community elders. As a result, the community's support becomes non-existent.

Several widowed women have died a 'silent death' because of cultural prejudices and succumbed to the demands of the in-laws. There are documented and undocumented stories of disenfranchised women everywhere. One amongst many is the story of Priscilla Misihairambwi Mushonga, a legislator who had a legal battle with her in-laws and stepchildren over a million-dollar worth estate in 2011 after the death of the husband, Christopher Mushonga. When she resigned in defeat, she remarked:

I would prefer to become a statistic of a victim of a society that unfortunately has failed not only to protect me but to provide the platform to a majority of widows that must face this abuse every day. (Mandizvidza 2010:2)

She is a victim of the 'honour-shame model' because she thwarted the hope of most widows who looked up to her as an activist, government official and a feminist who would have set the record for the rest of widows. The African notion states that the victims of harassment are uneducated but in the person of Priscilla Mushonga a prominent person succumbed by keeping 'honour' at the expense of her inheritance.

As far as a deceased estate settlement is concerned, African tradition acknowledges the patriarchal family who settles the matter as a private affair. The formal courts often require the patriarchy to authenticate the marriage, that is, to indicate who are the interested parties to the estate. In this regard, the woman is at the mercy of the family. In her suffering, the widow has nowhere to run, nowhere to hide and no

one to confide in. The laws of the land promote the welfare of the women through the patriarchal eye. According to Ruether (1996:173), '[p]atriarchal societies are those in which the rule of the father is the basic principle of the social organization of the family and society as a whole'. The laws are sympathetic to the patriarchy. Amid these violations, widows must create new avenues, a new culture and destiny for emancipation.

The socio-historical setting of the parable

This section aims to discuss the socio-historical context of the parable of the Persistent Widow and the Unjust Judge (Lk 18:1–8). The social setting helps to juxtapose the contemporary widows' societal experiences with the widow in Luke 18:1–8. As Levine (2015) alluded, if:

[T]he parable cannot be domesticated it cannot be turned into something that neatly fits our preconceived notion of religion and morality, if it shakes up then we may be on the right track. (p. 124)

How far can we use the parable to 'shake up' things?

According to Thuren (2014:86), the reader must seek a persuasive function of the parable. Herzog (1994) highlighted three factors that affect the interpretation of the parable: (1) The parable serves as the conclusion of the eschatological discourse (Lk 17:20–18:14), making the story an allegory of the social setting of the church during the time of Luke (Hedrick 1994:187), (2) Luke related this parable to two companion parables in Luke 11:5–8 and 18:9–4 equally interconnected to the necessity of prayer and (3) The collection of sayings attached to this parable. Herzog (1994:355) also highlighted three important aspects of parable: (1) The parable 'is a doublet on the importunate neighbour' (Lk 11:5–8), (2) The parable revealed the conflict between Torah as it exists ideally and in practice, prophetic and the New Testament writings in practice. The conflicts reflect the power of the existing laws and the signed protocols concerning to what is prevalent on the ground and (3) The widow is:

[A]n example of the oppressed woman whose voice breaks the culture of silence where she finds herself immersed in and forced to accommodate the Torah as practised by the judges of unrighteousness or injustice. (Herzog 1994:355)

According to Luke 18:1, the parable is about the praying of a widow without giving up. Jesus taught the disciples 'to show them that they should always pray and not give up'.⁹ Snodgrass (2008) asked if the purpose of the parable is like Luke 11:5–8, that is, of a neighbour who received a friend at night who continuously knocks begging for bread for his visitors. If that is so, the *Sitz im Leben* opens new dimensions on interpreting the parable. The theme of persistence sets the scene of troubled or persecuted Jesus' followers of Luke's

⁹The word used here is from the Greek lexicon is δεῖ, 'It is necessary'. Prayer became necessary considering the response of the judge. The word humbles people into praying. Would anyone compare God with an unjust judge, who only gives in when brow-beaten? (see <http://lectionarygreek.blogspot.com/>).

time. If so, Luke addressed a community under severe persecution (see also Hicks 1991:209).

The woman in the narrative is a widow. The death of her husband was the death of her protective shield, identity and status. She had to adjust to the new reality alone and when she needed a male representative, nobody was there for her. This is the reason she approached the courts all by herself for her cause. Despite the judge's ignoring her plea, she never tires of pleading her cause. She was at the mercy of the community, the authority, the patriarchal persuasion or her elder son, if available. The fact that she went alone suggests she had no representative. Did not the community feel for her? Was there no one who noticed how she toiled to regain her property? And what about the legal representations?

Society expected the widow to bow to the laws of the community. This expectation allowed injustice and violation against the widow. In all, there were expectations as far as her behaviour was concerned. The community expected widows to uphold the dignity and honour of the family, community and tribe. The opinion of the group of fellow widows and the community at large mattered in the response.

The value of her estate contributed to her persistence. What was her life going to be like if she gave up after the first-time court denied her cause? When she kept going, her conviction and fate were at stake. Would one persist in something that has no significant value? The estate was her only livelihood. She did not mind losing honour or dignity because of the value of the estate. It must have been abnormal from a cultural perspective, but not for a distressed person, as it was the only way to redeem the lost inheritance. What is strange in the parable that will help in arriving at the intended meaning? There are questions one cannot avoid asking: How valuable was the estate? Did she have no one to support for her before the courts? Why would the judge ignore her to that extent? Did the judge fear physical violence from the widow? Was she capable?

Jeremias (1972:153) argued that the widow had an inheritance left for her when her husband passed on. Members of the patriarchal family would not want her to inherit anything. The family would grab everything leaving her destitute and possibly sold to slavery. When she became conscious of the consequences, she resorted to persistence to expose the shortcomings of tradition.

Turning to the frequency of her visit, Luke 18:3 states that there was a widow in the town who kept coming to a judge with the plea 'grant me justice against my adversary'. She had adversaries who wanted what belonged to her. She faced the loss of her family honour. Culture and tradition could call her a shameless woman, a woman of loose morals. She knew how much was at stake because of her actions, but she had no options.

In this regard, Hylan (2021) argued that not all widows were poor (Ex 22:22, Dt 24:21, Is 1:7, Ac 6:1, Tm 1 5:16). Some were

wealthy and powerful whilst others moderately rich. It appears that her vulnerability is the cause of concern. From an Old Testament perspective, Yahweh upheld the cause of widows. The interpretation addresses widows in their vulnerable state. The Torah and the legal recourse were sufficient to protect widows. However, several stories show people taking advantage of the vulnerability of widows. Thus, Jesus rebuked the scribes when he said that they 'devour widows houses' (Mk 12:40, Lk 20:47).

Interpreting the parable

The parable reveals distinct personal characters: the widow and the judge. According to Blomberg (2004:170), the third character is God lurking in the background throughout the story. The text has the narrator, the one who is telling the story. From the narrator, one gets the character's presumed thoughts. To interpret the parable, it is necessary to pay attention to biblical women's social and economic status, the meaning of the monologue of the judge and the nature of the case brought before him.

The persistent widow

Who was widow? What role did the widow (χήρα) play in the text? How did the community perceive widows? Who were her adversaries?

The widow had no name. The parable does not mention her name or family. She is referred to simply as a widow. The widow lacked the historical connection to any family supposing that her position or influence in a patriarchal society was insignificant. In the Mediterranean honour-shame culture, she lacked ascribed or acquired honour. This made her a vulnerable, weak and powerless woman in society. As a woman, she did not have achieved honour. Achieved honour 'refers to the reputation and fame an individual earns by his or her own merits' (Neyrey 1998:15). The traditional avenues for achieving the honour in antiquity included civic benefaction, military exploits, athletic games, aesthetic competitions in drama and poetry. These stand for the conduct the ancient elites expected of freeborn and noble males and so rewarded (Neyrey 1998:16). The widow understood the dictates of society and bypassed them to gain her rights. She went without any reputation or family history, all by herself, although culture dictated that she needed male representation, that is, a son, or her husband's relatives. She shamelessly approached the judge, and by doing this, lost her dignity in the eyes of the society. For some, she may have been a predator.

The widow had adversaries: people who deprived her of her rights. She had one place where she could obtain justice against deprivation, a judge who neither feared people nor God. His soliloquy found in Luke 18:4b substantiates the claim: 'I don't fear God or care about men'. An analysis of the character of the judge informs the interpretations of the parable. The questions to ask are: What kind of a judge was he? Why would a judge exhibit the character portrayed in the Bible?

The widow subverted the oppressive culture. The widow could have respected the order of the culture of the day. Cultural conventions and the powerful elite dictated the behavioural pattern expected of a woman. According to Simkins (2014):

The laws protecting and helping the vulnerable are not compatible with the interests of the urban elite but were a means by which the urban elite sought to, 'convince the masses that relief was imminent if they fell on hard times'. The laws allowed the oppression of the masses while supplying a measure of hope that will never be realised. (p. 21)

She needed to keep honour according to tradition. The honourable thing for the widow was to invite the male relatives to speak for her. She needed her family to stand by her to achieve her goal. But she acted otherwise.

Luke 18:3 states that a 'widow of that city came to him repeatedly'. The widow thus kept coming. Her appearance was not a private affair, but public. The community waited and watched to see what the judge would do. She shamed the shameless person with her continuous coming. The widow found herself in a society that valued the behaviour of another. Honour has a direct implication on the holiness of God, which is his chief virtue (see Mt 5:48; 'Be holy therefore as your heavenly Father is holy'). This speaks of positive shame that acts considering what the society values. Shameless means acting contrary to the norms of accepted pattern and behaviour. According to De Silva (2000:23), in the Mediterranean world, the societal values of honour and shame governed any given individual's conduct. The societal values are either decided by the deity or our customs valued by society. She was supposed to have restrained herself by not approaching a male repeatedly for a case that the male person would not have considered worthy or necessary.

Culture subjected widows to local and cultural values to decide what is acceptable, honourable and shameless. A woman with honour must show and keep behavioural values, which are respectful. This included not challenging the authority of in-laws. In the ancient Mediterranean culture, and even today, people are fundamentally concerned about the approval they experience with their fellow citizens (De Silva 2000:35). This has resulted in many women ascribing to the view that 'as a woman, I am expected to do what I am told by my brothers-in-law. I cannot decide on my own'.¹⁰ According to Malina (2001:52), society decided the socially preferred sanctions or orientation for behaviour. A woman was culturally trained when she acted within the confines of the community or the group. These two institutions determined the behaviour pattern.

The widow went against male chauvinism. A male judge would have disregarded the presence of a woman in his court. Besides, the widow came unaccompanied to the judge.

¹⁰There is an African proverb from Uganda which says that a 'woman is a flower in a garden; her husband is the fence that surrounds it'. The woman alone is vulnerable and susceptible to abuse. At any stage in life, man must protect her beauty as a flower blooming or that which must continue to bloom does so under the tutelage of the patriarchy. As a result, all that men try to do for the woman is to protect that beauty.

No harm would befall the male judge from a woman. However, the widow took advantage of that male belief (that the presence of a nameless widow was of no consequence) and constantly appeared seeking a hearing. Persistence became her weapon against culture, bribery, corruption. She did not get tired in seeking justice.

The parable reveals hidden strength that widows must discover to protect their inheritance. In her vulnerability, the widow discovered the weakness in the male judge. Why did the widow pester the Judge? The widow's tenacity accounts for the value of the estate and the consequence of deprivation. The deprived person decides the value and not the community or family.

The unjust judge

The parable pictures an unrelenting judge who refused to yield to the demands of the widow. The widow is equally unrelenting, willing and ready to challenge the judge. The impasse created between the two originated an interesting scenario for the onlookers. Why did the judge give in? Luke 18 states:

For some time, he refused. But finally, he said to himself, 'Even though I do not fear God or care what people think, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually come and attack me!' (v. 4)

Was the judge an honest or a depraved man? Hedrick (1994:187) argued that the parable represents the judge as a thoroughly honest man who in the end compromises his integrity for his comfort, which should lead readers to reflect on the integrity of their compromise.

According to this view, the judge is impartial because in his execution he does not consider what people say, or 'what people think does not keep us in line' (Matters of interpretation 2018:1). Another point of view is that the judge gave in because the widow was a nagging woman.¹¹ If this is the case, the parable has a negative connotation on women.¹² At the same time, however, if the judge gave in for fear of nagging from the woman, it suggests the strength of the action of the women's character. The widow humbled the judge.

Jeremias (1972:153) is of the opinion that Luke 18:6 depicts the judge as 'corrupt' and brutal. According to Scott (1989:180), the judge is an 'outlaw judge', and Bailey (1980:130–132) sees the judge's problem as 'his inability to sense the evil of his actions in the presence of the one who should make him ashamed'. Is God so cold that he needs persistence from a believer? The judge is described by what he does not do, that is, 'the judge neither feared God nor man' (Lk 18:2). His statement confirms this in his soliloquy

11. The nagging woman suggests a teasing, irritating and annoying or obstinate woman. So, the Judge ignored the character. On the other hand, on a positive note, she applied the nagging tactic to get justice.

12. Some Bible version would rather entitle the parable, 'The Parable of the Nagging Woman'. This could be the masculine version downplaying the woman's act that challenged the emancipation of the other women. This connotation assumes the woman behaviour was negative whilst the judge was positive.

('even though I do not fear God nor care about men') (Lk 18:4). Would the lack of the fear of God amount to being an unjust judge? Some scholars think otherwise. The authorities do not need to be believers to exercise *ubuntu*, it is simply the uncouth heart of man. Proverbs 18:2–3 accord only such a personality as unwise but not immoral. The narrative of Abraham (Gn 20:11) suggests immorality. So, the judge could have been unwise but at the same time lacking the moral compass.

The response by the judge has several implications. For Buttrick (2000), the judge disregarded even those who came to the courts. The judge disregarded human rights, laws, conscience, *ubuntu* and the plight of the weak people in the society. The judge lacked the conscience advocated by the Zulu maxim, 'ubuntu, ngumuntu, ngabantu' ['a person is a person because of the other people']. Manson (1951:24) argued that the judge responded to bribes.¹³ However, the parable is silent about bribery.

The nature of the dispute

The widow came to the judge asking Ἐκδίκησόν με ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀντιδίκου¹⁴ μου ('Grant me justice over my adversary' [Lk 18:3b]). The words used by the widow suggest a fierce battle or the determination of opponents to get hold of the widow's estate. Thus, she looked for legal protection against her enemies. But what was the nature of the dispute? What information is available to give a clue to the nature of the dispute?

Several scholars have given their assumptions in this regard. Herzog (1994:369) quoted Jeremias (1972:153) saying the issue 'would appear to be a money matter: a debt, a pledge or a portion of an inheritance, is being withheld from her', because a single judge could decide such a case. Herzog further observed that the widow is in such a situation; her husband is dead and she is attempting either to claim her maintenance from his estate or to reclaim her *ketubah*, that is, the amount of money her husband pledged to her as an inheritance in case of his death. If that is the case, she had to defend her future. Otherwise, she was in danger of losing her independence.

Reuther (1983:18) argued that 'the critical principle of feminist theology is the promotion of the full humanity of woman' and her fight until she received her justice. According to Spencer (2012), the:

[W]idow of Luke 18:1–8 is reminiscent of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B Anthony and other women and men who fought so tirelessly for women's suffering for women's suffrage ... and they never stopped fighting for what was right. (p. 265)

Other feminists such as Ruether (1996), Ackermann (1988), Oduyoye (1995), Kanyoro (2000), Edet (1992) and Keane

13. The narrative in Acts 24:26 about Paul before Felix is a typical example of judges' character of that time. Felix delayed wanting to see Paul by saying 'When I find it convenient'. At the same time, he was hoping that Paul would offer him a bribe, so he sent him away repeatedly (Ac 24:25).

14. These are two Greek words *anti* for against or opponent and *dikē* for justice. This is the person in an opponent in the court of law. The person is seeking to compromise someone in the court of law.

(1998) called for societal transformation through typical widow's voices obtained from experiences.

Schottroff (1995:116) added by saying that 'what we see in the parable is not the victim to be pitied but a woman who fights tenaciously and whom the sexist judge denounces as the potentially violent'. The response of the judge, 'so that she won't wear me out with her coming'¹⁵ (Lk 18:5b) gives testimony. According to Ruether (1983:19), whatever denies, diminishes or distorts the full humanity of women is appraised as not redemptive. The uniqueness of feminist's theology is not the critical principle, full humanity, but 'the fact that the women claim this principle for themselves'. This becomes clear in the words of Schottroff (1995:116): 'It is it not worth considering whether the stubborn widow does not hold a better model of innocent non-violent Jesus'. As a result, the judge finally vindicated her to avoid trouble and the widow's stubbornness. The feminist interpretation of the passage is:

[T]o break the spell of powerlessness and oppression and act responsibly towards ourselves and others by beginning to assume, where feasible, full responsibility and power. That means defying the gender roles that collaborate to support the violent structures of our world. (Schottroff 1995:117)

According to Linnemann (1966:121), the parable serves to 'restore the confidence of faith ... to a Church that is suffering oppression and persecution, whose situation is like that of the widow'. Will the earth have widows with such an amazing conviction and faith?¹⁶ Thus, the text commends the actions of the widow. God approves the tenacity of the widow, as Luke 18 states:

And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you; he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth? (v. 7)

As proved by the commendation of the character of the widow, God is happy seeing people determined to protect their inheritance against those who persecute them. That is why God commends her action saying, 'when the Son of man comes will he find faith on the earth' (Lk 18:4b). If it were not for her tenacity, she would have lost her wealth and inheritance and she would live to regret all that life had given to her. The judge finally conceded to 'get the widow off his back' (Buttrick 2000:225). According to Buttrick (2000:225), we 'have an assertive woman who bugs the corrupt judge, despite interest in her or her case, he gives in and grants justice'.

15.The phrase 'she will not wear me out' must be considered more closely. The Westminster Theological dictionary defines the phrase to mean 'cause some to get tired'. Some scholars suggest the phrase as a boxing term: she will cause a black eye on the judge. The phrase is in the form of the present active subjunctive. So, based on what the judge perceived in the widow's persistence, he saw an ongoing pestering, annoyance, which can be translated as 'black eye' metaphorically. This thrust is seen in 1 Corinthians 1:27. This led the judge to give in to the demands of the widow. As such, the consenting can be self-centred, only to save face, not necessarily justice that will be part of the future of the society.

16.An interpretation proffered by Koplitz (2016) is that God's kingdom is present everywhere and constantly wearing down resistance. Those who resist the kingdom of God and the Messiah Yeshua will eventually be worn down and they will give in to an understanding that the Lord's Word is in control of all things.

Conclusion

Whilst Luke 18:1–8 parable has many lessons, it appears that persistence is the primary one. When someone wrongs you, you should be persistent in obtaining justice. In this case this is what the widow did. Her persistence eventually paid off and got the reprieve. A contextual reading of biblical text domesticates it and makes it speak to the 'ordinary reader'; any reading from the eyes of the ordinary reader enhances understanding of the text into any locale. As such we leave it to the reader to practice the same, not only in this text but in every text of the Bible.

The text draws from 'how much more' if the corrupt judge who could be swayed by a widow with God whom we are certain hears our prayers (Mandizvidza 2010:4). The passage uses the heartless judge to depict how much more God would respond to the needs of the elect if the unrighteous judge responded. This brings to light the other theme in the parable, namely perseverance during persecution.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

Both authors contributed equally to the writing of this article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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