



# Widows as Altar in Christian Texts of the Second and Third Centuries

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Widows as Altar in Christian Texts of the Second and Third Centuries

A dissertation presented

by

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the image of widows as an altar of God as employed in four early Christian texts commonly dated to the second and third centuries CE: Polycarp's letter *To the Philippians*, Tertullian's *Ad uxorem*, Methodius's *Symposium*, and the Didascalia apostolorum. Each of the four chapters provides an analysis of the rhetoric of one of the texts in order to contextualize its use of the image of widows as altar, which is then explored in more detail. These texts exhibit concerns with three matters in particular: widows' purity (particularly marital / sexual purity), their relationship to community offerings and finances, and their practices of prayer and speech. They employ the image of widows as an altar of God in order to shape understandings of widows, and their behavior, through the language and logic of sacrifice, and they do so in relation to one or more of the three core concerns. Although the texts generally deploy the image of widows as altar in attempts to control or subordinate widows, the very functioning of that rhetoric depends upon the presence of sociohistorical conditions regarding widows and their work that may run counter to those goals. I argue that these sociohistorical conditions included the presence of widows in some early Christian communities who were figures of sacerdotal importance. They received offerings from the community and prayed to God on their behalf, and formed a significant connecting link between humans and the divine.

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*Memoriae fratris sacrum*

## Abbreviations

ACW	Ancient Christian Writers
AGJU	Arbeiten zur Geschichte des antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums
ANRW	<i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt: Geschichte und Kultur Roms im Spiegel der neueren Forschung. Part 2, Principat.</i>
BEHER	Bibliothèque de l'École des hautes études: Sciences religieuses
BETL	Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium
BJS	Brown Judaic Studies
BTS	Biblical Tools and Studies
BZNW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft
CH	<i>Church History</i>
Const. ap.	Constitutiones apostolicae / Apostolic Constitutions
CSEL	Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum
CSPEST	Cambridge Studies in Population, Economy, and Society in Past Time
CurBR	<i>Currents in Biblical Research</i>
DA	Didascalia apostolorum
EJWS	<i>European Journal of Women's Studies</i>
ExpTim	<i>Expository Times</i>
HABES	Heidelberger althistorische Beiträge und epigraphische Studien
HDB	<i>Harvard Divinity Bulletin</i>
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
IDB	<i>The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible.</i> Edited by George A. Buttrick. 4 vols. New York: Abingdon, 1962.
IJWS	<i>International Journal of Women's Studies</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JECS	<i>Journal of Early Christian Studies</i>
JRA	<i>Journal of Roman Archaeology</i>
JSNT	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
JTS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
LLT-A	Library of Latin Texts-Series A
LSJ	Liddell, Henry George, Robert Scott, Henry Stuart Jones. <i>A Greek-English Lexicon.</i> 9 <sup>th</sup> ed. with revised supplement. Oxford: Clarendon, 1996.
MFC	Message of the Fathers of the Church
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NTS	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
NWP	Next Wave Provocations
OAF	Oxford Apostolic Fathers
OTS	Old Testament Studies
Phil.	Polycarp's <i>Epistle to the Philippians</i>
PG	Patrologia Graeca
PW	<i>Paulys Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft</i>
SBLSP	Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers
SC	Sources chrétiennes
SecCent	<i>Second Century</i>



SO	Symbolae Osloenses
STT	Studia Traditionis Theologiae: Explorations in Early and Medieval Theology
TDNT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
Symp.	Methodius's <i>Symposium</i>
Test. Dom.	Testamentum Domini
TLG	<i>Thesaurus Linguae Graecae</i> ® Digital Library
TSAJ	Texte und Studien zum antiken Judentum
TUGAL	Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur
Ux.	Tertullian's <i>Ad uxorem</i>
VC	<i>Vigiliae Christianae</i>
VCSup	Supplements to <i>Vigiliae Christianae</i>
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ZAC	<i>Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum / Journal of Ancient Christianity</i>

## Introduction

A small group of early Christian texts from the ancient Mediterranean talks about widows as an altar of God. What an odd image this is, to many modern eyes and ears. What does it mean? Why would it make sense to some early Christians to call widows “an altar?” What underlying assumptions and ways of thinking made that image intelligible and what understandings of widows might it allow us to see? What historical possibilities regarding widows in early Christian communities might an analysis of the image of widows as altar bring to light?

In this project I will seek answers to these questions—or at least progress toward possible answers. In order to do so I will engage in a detailed reading of what are likely the four earliest references to widows as an altar, contained in texts commonly dated to the second and third centuries CE. For many of these texts widows are not the primary focus of their interest. All, though, are texts with strong persuasive projects and each uses the image of widows as altar in particular ways and in order to do particular kinds of work.

### Outline of Approach

In the chapters that follow I consider the four earliest Christian texts that employ the image of widows as altar: Polycarp’s letter *To the Philippians* (*Phil.*), Tertullian’s *To His Wife* (*Ad uxorem; Ux.*), Methodius’s *Symposium* (*Symp.*), and the Didascalia apostolorum (DA). Each of the four chapters provides a rhetorical analysis of one of the texts in order to contextualize its use of the image of widows as altar, which I then explore in more detail. I situate the particular passages under consideration within the text as a whole, exploring the ways in which the

widows-as-altar image may both be used to support the text's persuasive project and provide glimpses of alternative understandings of widows and their work.<sup>1</sup> All of these texts also build their rhetorical worlds out of the building blocks of scripture, and so I pay careful attention to the obvious and subtle ways in which they draw upon both Hebrew Bible and New Testament scriptural resources in shaping their particular uses of the image of widows as an altar of God.

In the course of reading these texts I observe that the image of widows as an altar of God serves as a lightning rod of sorts for many concerns. It is a nodal point through which much can be said with few words. In particular, I see that these texts exhibit concerns with three matters: widows' purity (particularly marital / sexual purity), their relationship to community offerings and finances, and their practices of prayer and speech. I have designated these as three 'core concerns,' and one or more of them run through not only the texts that use the widows as altar image but also most early Christian texts that treat widows in any way. The three core concerns are not all that the texts share in their treatments of widows. I also see operating in all of the texts one or more of four interrelated discursive constructions of widows and widowhood: the ambiguous widow, the widow as object of charity, the blessed widow of 1 Cor 7, and the good widow / bad widow of 1 Tim 5.

I propose that the texts I consider employ the image of widows as an altar of God in order to shape understandings of widows and control their behavior through the language and logic of sacrifice. In so doing the texts assume and build upon one or more of the four interrelated discursive constructions of widows and widowhood, and they do so in relation to one or more of the three core concerns. Engaging in rhetorical analyses of these texts allows me to see that their

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<sup>1</sup> In this approach I am inspired by the work of feminist rhetorical scholars such as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, as discussed in for example her volume *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

deployment of the widows as altar image makes sense in certain sociohistorical contexts. Although the texts generally deploy the image of widows as altar in attempts to control or subordinate widows, the very functioning of that rhetoric depends upon the presence of sociohistorical conditions regarding widows and their work that may run counter to those goals of control and/or subordination. I argue that these sociohistorical conditions included the presence of widows in some early Christian communities who were figures of sacerdotal importance, women who received offerings from the community and who prayed to God on their behalf, women who formed a significant connecting link between humans and the divine.<sup>2</sup> These widows are sacred women doing holy work of great spiritual importance for a community. By understanding the texts' rhetorical deployments of the widow-as-altar image as predicated upon such sociohistorical conditions, I suggest that the texts open up for us very real historical possibilities that such sacred women, doing such holy work, existed in some early Christian communities.

### *Against Assumptions of Passivity*

Before continuing down the path to the altar, I add here a note of caution—or perhaps better an encouragement towards a sort of ontological naiveté. In this introduction I will note that the widows of antiquity do not necessarily conform to the modern definition of widowhood. I propose that in reading the following chapters, one suspend the notion that altars of antiquity

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this dissertation I use the term 'sacerdotal' to describe the understanding of widows that I see emerging through, underneath, and often in contradiction to, the intended rhetoric of the texts I consider. By 'sacerdotal' I mean being of ritual and/or spiritual significance for others due to one's role as some sort of mediating communicator between humanity and the divine. The term 'sacerdotal' derives from the Latin *sacerdos*, which is typically translated in English as 'priest,' and which is etymologically rooted in a notion of giving something sacred, viz. making offerings in a sacrificial system of worship (*sacer* + *dare*). I have deliberately chosen not to employ the word 'priestly' because, as a word used in contemporary English to denote particular ordained officials of some Christian denominations, it brings with it too many meanings and assumptions that I do not wish to attach to the early Christian understandings of widows that I explore in this project.

necessarily conform to common modern assumptions regarding their nature as objects. It is extremely easy to assume that the image of widows as an altar is at least in part an attempt to construct widows as passive, as thing-like, as an implement that is controlled by the activity of others. And yet, despite their attempts to control widows that understanding is *extremely* rare in the texts we will examine. It appears only once, in a somewhat fumbling attempt in the DA to get widows to sit still.<sup>3</sup> This suggests that perhaps we ought to think twice before assuming that the widows-as-altar image is employed to exclude women's agency.

The work of new materialists such as Jane Bennett suggests that there is much to be gained from understanding objects as actants, from seeing that “things, too, are vital players in the world.”<sup>4</sup> If we are able to keep our minds open to this possibility—if we are able to suspend an assumption that designating widows as an altar marks them as passive and denies them agency—then we will be better able to fully explore the richness of the image of widows as altar of God and the historical possibilities for widows that it suggests.

### The Road to the Altar

I began to consider these references to widows as an altar of God because I was driven by an interest in the lives of real, non-elite women in early Christian communities. As I engaged in exploratory research on such women widows repeatedly came to my attention. Although widows in early Christian communities had certainly not been ignored by scholars, it became clear to me that they were a fascinating and underexplored topic that deserved more consideration. The texts

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<sup>3</sup> See chapter four, reference two.

<sup>4</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 4.

that employ the image of widows as an altar of God provided a particularly rich way into this exploration.

Three basic and initially unexpected facts about widows in the Greco-Roman world brought them into sharper focus and stopped me in my tracks: first, the term ‘widow’ did not mean what I had thought it meant; second, there were likely a lot more widows than I had thought there would have been; and third, they lived in a greater variety of socioeconomic circumstances than I had imagined. The words translated as ‘widow’ (*χήρα* in Greek, *vidua* in Latin) have a more expansive definition than does the English, the first definition for which is given by the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* as “a woman whose husband is dead (and who has not married again).”<sup>5</sup> In both Greek and Latin, the terms refer to a woman who is without a husband for any number of reasons including death, divorce, abandonment, long absence at war, and more.<sup>6</sup> While generally used to refer to a woman who once had a husband but does no longer and occasionally used in the narrow sense of a woman whose husband has died, the terms could also include women who were without a husband because they had never married.<sup>7</sup>

In addition, the prevailing analysis of census records from Roman Egypt—one of the few sources for demographic information about non-elites available to us in the Roman Empire<sup>8</sup>—indicates that widows constituted as much as a third of the adult female population

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<sup>5</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “widow,” <http://www.oed.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/view/Entry/228912?>

<sup>6</sup> Gustav Stählin, “*χήρα*,” *TDNT* 9:440–65; T. Mayer-Maly, “*Vidua*,” *PW* 2.8.17:2098–107.

<sup>7</sup> Thus we see Ignatius’s reference to “virgins who are called widows” (*Smyrn.* 13.1). See Charlotte Methuen, “The ‘Virgin Widow’: A Problematic Social Role for the Early Church?” *HTR* 90 (1997): 285–98 for a consideration of the overlap between the terms ‘virgin’ and ‘widow’ in some early Christian texts.

<sup>8</sup> In the past, objections have been raised about generalizing from data derived from Roman Egypt to the rest of the Empire—Egypt was seen as peculiar in too many respects. However, scholars have since answered these objections and demonstrated that whatever peculiarities Egypt might have, they do not vitiate the usefulness and applicability of the data. In particular, Roger Bagnall and Bruce Frier, who have done detailed work in analyzing the demographic data of the census reports, affirm that the census records provide us with “not only by far the best and

and ranged across the entire spectrum of adult ages.<sup>9</sup> Roger Bagnall and Bruce Frier have shown that in the census returns the proportion of women who are still married reaches an apex of roughly 80% at around the age of thirty, at which point it begins to steadily decline so that less than 40% of women in their later forties were still married. Of complete or nearly complete census returns for women whose ages are recorded at fifty and over, about one third are recorded as still married. Approximately 30% of the total adult female population were widows.<sup>10</sup> Bagnall and Frier state it plainly: “the reasonable inference is that many women whose marriages ended prematurely through divorce or their husband’s death did not remarry.”<sup>11</sup> This was in contrast to apparently nearly universal remarriage for men, and was due at least in part to age differences at marriage (and to tendencies for older men, when remarrying, to continue to marry younger women). Widows were not solely elderly, and they were not few and far between.

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fullest demographic source for the Greco-Roman world, but also quite probably the best available source for any population prior to the Renaissance.” Roger S. Bagnall and Bruce W. Frier, *The Demography of Roman Egypt*, CSPESPT 23 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 50. See also Ann Ellis Hanson, “Widows Too Young in Their Widowhood,” in *I, Claudia II: Women in Roman Art and Society*, ed. Diana E.E. Kleiner and Susan B. Matheson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), 149–66, at 151.

<sup>9</sup> Hanson, “Widows Too Young,” 150–3; Bagnall and Frier, *Demography*, 111–34. See also Jens-Uwe Krause, *Verwitwung und Wiederverheiratung*, vol. 1 of *Witwen und Waisen im Römischen Reich*, 4 vols., HABES 16–19 (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1994), 7–73, esp. 67–73, and Richard P. Saller, *Patriarchy, Property, and Death in the Roman Family*, CSPESPT 25 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 68. This analysis of the demographic evidence has been challenged recently by Sabine Huebner. The particular point of contention is the likelihood of remarriage for women versus for men. Bagnall and Frier, and others who followed them, interpreted the data to indicate that women had a much lower incidence of remarriage than men (hence producing a larger number of widows). Huebner argues for an alternative interpretation in which women’s incidence of remarriage is closer to that of men’s. Huebner’s challenge ought to be regarded as at least calling the scholarly consensus into question. See Sabine Huebner, *The Family in Roman Egypt: A Comparative Approach to Intergenerational Solidarity and Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 92–106.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas A.J. McGinn, “Widows, Orphans, and Social History,” *JRA* 12 (1999): 617–632, at 618 (citing Krause, *Verwitwung und Wiederverheiratung*, 73).

<sup>11</sup> Bagnall and Frier, *Demography*, 115.

Furthermore, the census returns and other documentary papyri indicated that widows lived in a variety of household arrangements and socioeconomic situations.<sup>12</sup> Prior to my consideration of this material I imagined that nearly all widows in the Roman Empire had been utterly destitute, largely alone and dependent on the charity and goodwill of others, while a very few were extremely wealthy and powerful.<sup>13</sup> It is certainly true that widows existed at both ends of the socioeconomic spectrum. It is also true that the majority of widows were likely quite poor (as was the majority of the population of the Roman Empire as a whole)<sup>14</sup> and that being a widow was usually socioeconomically challenging. However, the documentary evidence shows us more diversity. While many widows lived as a member of the household of a male relative (often an adult son), others were themselves heads of households, and some even lived in majority female households.<sup>15</sup> As members of households these widows would have been participants in the social arrangement that was the Roman Empire's primary engine of production.<sup>16</sup> While a gender divide in types of occupation was most definitely present there is evidence for widows' participation in a variety of jobs including, for example, the textile

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<sup>12</sup> Legal material is also quite informative when it comes to considering the varieties of living experiences of widows in the Roman Empire. See especially Judith Evans Grubbs, *Women and the Law in the Roman Empire: A Sourcebook on Marriage, Divorce, and Widowhood* (London: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>13</sup> A not uncommon way of thinking about widows in early Christianity, as reflected in the title of Jan N. Bremmer's article "Pauper or Patroness: The Widow in the Early Christian Church," in *Between Poverty and the Pyre: Moments in the History of Widowhood*, ed. Jan N. Bremmer and Lourens van den Bosch (New York: Routledge, 1995), 31–57. This way of thinking is also evident in Peter Brown's description of widows in the early church as either "helpless creatures, destitute old ladies only too glad to receive food and clothing from the hands of the clergy" or "women of high status," "wealthy and cultivated young women," "influential and devout widows." Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 147–8.

<sup>14</sup> Steven J. Friesen, "Poverty in Pauline Studies: Beyond the So-called New Consensus," *JSNT* 26 (2004): 323–61, at 337–47.

<sup>15</sup> Hanson, "Widows Too Young," 151–2.

<sup>16</sup> "Roman families were the units that organized most of the production of the Roman economy. In the absence of corporations, they owned and deployed most of the capital; they were also responsible for the training and organization of most of the labor." Richard P. Saller, "The Roman Family as Productive Unit," in *A Companion to Families in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, ed. Beryl Rawson (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2011), 116–28, at 127.



industry and agriculture.<sup>17</sup> Widows who did find themselves alone, without a household to join or unable to form one, would have been particularly vulnerable to poverty.<sup>18</sup> As I reviewed this evidence, the lives and identities of widows in the Roman Empire were suddenly both more common and much more varied than I had anticipated—and so the question of what was going on with widows in early Christian sources also took on more breadth, depth, and complexity.

What *was* going on with widows in early Christian sources? In many these women were represented as the source of a certain amount of textual discomfort of one sort or another—while also (often in the same text) being figures worthy of respect. Widows were presented as a problem, a puzzle, for some early Christians. From 1 Timothy to Tertullian, Polycarp to the Didascalia apostolorum, Acts to John Chrysostom, widows, their place and their work in early Christian communities were set out as matters of concern. In discussing widows the texts were often engaged in attempts to figure widows out, as it were—to understand and also to shape what the life of a Christian widow ought to look like and how it ought to fit in the life of an ideal, properly constructed Christian community.

In particular, a number of writers were driven to spell out what made a ‘true’ widow, in her constitution and her actions, and what did not. They developed ideal portraits of the virtuous Christian widow who stayed at home, engaged in constant prayer, was utterly chaste, and in her poverty was entirely dependent on the charity of the church for her sustenance. In contrast, rhetorical constructions of the ‘widow’ who was not truly a widow portrayed a woman who

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 120–6; Krause, *Wirtschaftliche und gesellschaftliche Stellung von Witwen*, vol. 2 of *Witwen und Waisen im Römischen Reich*, 123–60.

<sup>18</sup> Saller, “The Roman Family,” 127; Krause, *Witwen und Waisen*. I do not want to downplay the very real poverty that most widows in the Roman Empire would have experienced. Krause in particular emphasizes this throughout all four volumes of *Witwen und Waisen*. However I do wish to place it in the context of the poverty experienced by most inhabitants of the Empire, and to highlight that despite the blanket label of ‘poor,’ widows in the Roman Empire lived and worked in a variety of household and socioeconomic arrangements.

traveled about in public, engaged in various sorts of improper speech, struggled to control her sexual desires and cared more about money than prayer. Throughout the texts that treated widows, themes of purity and chastity, finances and material offerings, and prayer and speech repeatedly emerged, always thoroughly intertwined with questions of authority in the community. Purity, money, prayer, and power: each could evidently be contested with regard to widows, at least in some early Christian communities.

In the midst of these contestations and rhetorical constructions, a handful of texts employ the image of widows as an altar of God in service of attempts to understand and shape widows and their work. They offer the image generally with no explanation of what it meant, as though they assumed their intended audiences were already familiar with it (or could easily make sense of it). At the same time, though, they always employ it in the service of a clear persuasive aim with regard to widows and their work. The image of widows as altar worked for these texts as a particularly rich node in which they could bring together multiple frameworks and matters of concern, and through which they could express much in few words.

### History of Scholarship

This rich image of widows as an altar of God has received little sustained attention from scholars. What attention has been paid to it emerged as part of a larger flowering of research on widows in early Christianity that took place from the 1970s–1990s. Until the growth of scholarly projects with interests specifically in women’s history and feminist analytical methods, there was little scholarship on early Christianity that focused on widows in particular. What work was done tended to be in the course of treatments of texts that spoke of widows—notably 1 Tim 5. Beginning in the 1970s, as feminism’s influence was felt, there was a surge of interest in the

‘recovery’ of women, their roles, and their significance, in history and scripture. This surge produced the scholarship on widows in early Christianity that forms the foundation of this dissertation. Scholars such as Roger Gryson, Jo Ann McNamara, Jean Laporte, Elizabeth Clark, Carolyn Osiek, and Bonnie Bowman Thurston moved beyond 1 Timothy and published work in the 1970s and 1980s that collected and considered some of the evidence for widows in early Christianity.<sup>19</sup> This scholarship did the fundamental work of combing through early Christian texts for mentions of widows, collecting them, and reviewing what the texts had to say about who widows were and what they were doing (and what they should, and shouldn’t, be doing).

Scholars also looked again to well-known texts such as 1 Tim 5:3–16. In her 1984 article on this passage Jouette M. Bassler argues for the existence of a “widows’ circle” in the church.<sup>20</sup> She sees this circle as a place where, in an increasingly hierarchical and world-conforming church, celibate women maintained some of the original freedom they experienced in an earlier, more egalitarian and communitas-oriented church. In this understanding Bassler follows the work of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza.<sup>21</sup> 1 Timothy provides evidence, according to Bassler, of a ‘vicious cycle’ of sorts in which an increasingly regulatory church pushed more women towards joining the widows’ circle, but the bigger the circle got, the more problems it caused, and so the more restrictive the hierarchy became.

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<sup>19</sup> Roger Gryson, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church* (trans. Jean Laport and Mary Louise Hall; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1976); Jo Ann McNamara, “Wives and Widows in Early Christian Thought,” *IJWS* 2 (1979): 575–592; Jean Laporte, *The Role of Women in Early Christianity* (New York: E. Mellen, 1982); Elizabeth A. Clark, *Women in the Early Church*, MFC 13 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1983); Carolyn Osiek, “The Widow as Altar: The Rise and Fall of a Symbol,” *SecCent* 3 (1983): 159–69; Bonnie Bowman Thurston, “The Widows as the ‘Altar of God’,” *Society of Biblical Literature 1985 Seminar Papers*, SBLSP 24 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1985), 279–89; Thurston, *The Widows: A Women’s Ministry in the Early Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989).

<sup>20</sup> Jouette M. Bassler, “The Widows’ Tale: A Fresh Look at 1 Tim 5:3–16,” *JBL* 103 (1984): 23–41.

<sup>21</sup> As most thoroughly detailed in her work *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (10<sup>th</sup> anniv. ed.; New York: Crossroad, 1994), although Bassler does not cite this volume but rather several articles (it may be that *In Memory of Her* was not available as Bassler was writing the article).

This framework of understanding the early years of the Christian community as being a time in which widows flourished as an independent group, followed by increasing restriction of their activities and significance, is also followed by Bonnie Bowman Thurston. In her 1989 monograph *The Widows: A Women's Ministry in the Early Church* (which remains to date the only English language monograph focused entirely on early Christian widows), Thurston understands the rise and fall of the widows in terms of Max Weber's popular notion of institutions moving from charismatic to routinized leadership.<sup>22</sup> She also argues that the treatment of widows in early Christian communities was a marked improvement in their circumstances when compared to widows in the Roman Empire at large.<sup>23</sup>

Considering texts from the New Testament, the Apostolic Fathers, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and the Didascalia apostolorum, Thurston states "it is clear that by the late first century widows had an acknowledged claim to benevolence from and recognized status and privileges in the Christian community."<sup>24</sup> In the second century widows were "elevated...to the status of a clerical order."<sup>25</sup> In the Pastorals and the Apostolic Fathers, Thurston sees evidence for attempts at regulation and limitation of widows' activities, attention to their sexual purity, and the continued thriving of an order "responsible both for active service (intercession) and passive service (attitude and example) in the Christian communities of the second century."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Thurston, *Widows*, 115–6.

<sup>23</sup> "We have here sketched a portrait of the widow in the ancient world prior to the time of Jesus. In contrast to this bleak portrayal, the place of widows in Christian society from the late first century onward is much improved. Indeed, the widow even becomes an exemplary figure." *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

The third century was, according to Thurston, the era of widows' "greatest influence."<sup>27</sup> Tertullian continues the themes Thurston brought out in the Pastorals and Apostolic Fathers, focusing on widows' purity while also regarding them as "definitely an order" and according them "clerical status."<sup>28</sup> Summarizing Gryson's work on Origen and Clement of Alexandria, Thurston notes that both men list widows alongside other church offices such as bishops, presbyters, and deacons, and that they tend to follow 1 Tim 5 in their instructions to widows regarding behavior and activities. She disagrees with Gryson in that she sees Origen's work as reflecting a "living practice" of an order of widows, not (as Gryson does) one that has died out.<sup>29</sup>

Turning to the *Didascalia apostolorum*, Thurston states that "the widows of the *DA* obviously have more active ministries than their sisters in the order at earlier stages and in other locations."<sup>30</sup> She reviews the duties the *DA* prescribes for widows, which follow those of earlier texts: prayer, ministering to the sick, and "work[ing] at wool." While noting the restrictions which the *DA* attempts to place on widows in varieties of ways (prohibitions against teaching, questioning, wandering around, gossiping, and more), Thurston sees these as coming from concerns of the author to properly care for the community's financial resources and its standing in the broader community, as well as "a concern for the spiritual well-being both of the widows and of the church."<sup>31</sup> Looking beyond the *DA*, Thurston sees the order of widows as declining swiftly through continued institutionalization and the rise of deaconesses, who are "close

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 100 (italicized abbreviation original).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

associates of the bishop in pastoral work” and who take over many of the duties of the widows.<sup>32</sup>

The order of widows was “a victim of church history,” a result of the church moving “the primary qualification for ministry *from* charism *to* office.”<sup>33</sup>

Thurston’s work does the invaluable service of assembling and reading through many references to widows in early Christian texts of the first through third centuries in order to develop a sense of historical progression. Her assessment of the evidence is, I believe, accurate in its broad strokes. Widows as an organized group of ecclesiastical significance did figure regularly in many texts of the second and third centuries, and do seem to have declined thereafter. She also correctly identifies the topics that recur through many texts on widows, such as sexual purity, prayer, and community ministry of various sorts. In many ways the work of this dissertation stands on the work that Thurston (and others) have done.

However, Thurston’s work suffers from a case of over-accentuating the positive, as it were, and occasionally a related tendency to not sufficiently interrogate the texts in a critical fashion. Both of these tendencies are visible in her assessment of the DA. There she largely takes the text’s explanations for both its criticism and praise of particular sorts of behavior by widows at face value. For example, when discussing the DA’s criticism of widows as gossiping and stirring up quarrels, Thurston concludes that “the writer is obviously concerned that the widows will spread gossip, thereby creating dissension and malice within the Christian community.”<sup>34</sup> Assessing the text’s treatment of widows more broadly, she states that the “writer’s...intention may be to provide the best conditions possible (as he understands them) for the spiritual

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 116 (emphasis original).

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 102.

development of the whole church.”<sup>35</sup> These statements accurately reflect what the text itself says. But, they leave unexplored the ways in which the text’s rhetoric of concern for the community may obscure additional motivations or concerns that may be of greater import, as we will see in chapter four, regarding the ‘proper’ distribution of power, authority, and official roles within the community. This dissertation, which focuses on a smaller selection of texts than did Thurston, in some ways picks up where she left off by focusing more closely on a critical examination of the texts’ persuasive rhetoric.

### *Widows as Altar: History of Scholarship*

Carolyn Osiek and Bonnie Bowman Thurston are the only two scholars to have devoted any sustained attention to the question of the “widow as altar” image, each in an article written in the 1980s.<sup>36</sup> In her 1983 article “The Widow as Altar: The Rise and Fall of A Symbol,” Osiek gathers the references to the widow as altar and considers the symbol’s (her term of choice) “literary origins and function.”<sup>37</sup> She argues broadly that the ways in which the symbol is used in the texts illustrates the rise and decline of widows as figures of importance to the early church. Noting that the comparison of widows to altars occurs in a list of comparisons in the DA of various groups in the Christian church to divine entities, groups around Jesus, and groups within Israelite cult practice, Osiek concludes that “the origins of the equation widow = altar undoubtedly lie in the early Christian enthusiasm for comparing Christian categories of people to

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 103.

<sup>36</sup> Osiek, “Widow as Altar;” Thurston, “Widows as the ‘Altar’.” In addition Thurston’s last chapter in her monograph (*Widows*) is largely a duplication of the second half of her article.

<sup>37</sup> Osiek, “Widow as Altar,” 165.

objects and persons from the Old Testament and the idealized Time of Jesus. Its pre-Christian origins remain a mystery.”<sup>38</sup>

Turning to the “function” of the symbol, Osiek notes three areas in Jewish and early Christian literature on which the texts trade in connecting widows to altars: both are recipients of offerings, both are associated with prayer, and both are associated with purity.<sup>39</sup> She argues that while “the image originally bore a powerful literary and paraenetic function at the service of an ecclesiastical one,” the progression of the use of the image through time points to increasing restrictions on the activities of widows and their subordination to virgins.<sup>40</sup> It is unclear what functions precisely Osiek means to denote as literary, paraenetic, and ecclesiastical, but her general point is that the symbol did not originate as a repressive one but rather initially had a positive valence. She concludes her article thusly:

The metaphor that compared the widow to the altar of God was once a powerful symbol expressing a spiritual and social relationship of one group of women to other members of the Christian church. As virginity evolved into an enhanced ecclesiastical status, the symbol of the widow began to lose its power, until it could be used carelessly as part of a repressive polemic to subordinate widows to both virgins and male clergy, a symbol devoid of dignity and incapable of giving dignity to its referent. (169)

There are several fundamental aspects of Osiek’s analysis with which I agree and upon which I will draw, and others from which I will significantly depart. Like Osiek, I read the references to widows as altar as drawing particularly on connections of both to offerings and

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 166. Osiek notes that in the earliest reference (Polycarp), the comparison of widows to altar occurs alone, but she also notes that comparisons of this broader sort occur earlier than Polycarp, and so that perhaps “such allusions were widespread at an earlier period individually and in small groupings and were later combined into larger groupings” (ibid., 165). She does not remark on the fact that the comparison of widows to an object sets them apart from the other groups in the DA reference, who are all compared to either divine entities or persons.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 166–7. Osiek argues that “it can be stated with certainty that the original basis for associating widow and altar, at least in the Christian texts, is the depositing of the gifts of the faithful upon the altar and their distribution to widows as recipients of charity” (166). At the beginning of her article, she noted the strong portrayal of widows in “Jewish paraenesis” and early Christian literature as socially helpless and economically needy (159).

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 167, 169.



charity, prayer, and purity. As I noted, these issues often come up with regards to widows in early Christian texts, whether or not a comparison to an altar is invoked. Also like Osiek, I see the uses of this image as involved in articulations of power and status in early Christian communities—and its analysis as being able to tell us about the lives and positions of widows in such communities.

Unlike Osiek, I do not believe we can say with any certainty where the origins of this image lie. Nor do I believe we can map out a straightforward chronological progression of the image from the positive expression of a real and powerful position of widows, to its negative employment in service of repression and denigration. A close reading of all of the texts demonstrates a complexity in the work of the image that is neither straightforwardly positive and liberative, nor straightforwardly negative and denigratory. These categories themselves are of questionable analytical use when considering the complexities of the image.

In her 1985 SBL Seminar Paper “The Widows as the ‘Altar of God’,” Bonnie Thurston covers some of the same ground as Osiek. She devotes over half of the paper to a review of information and discussions about widows from Hebrew Bible, New Testament, and Patristic literature.<sup>41</sup> Like Osiek, she believes that widows were a group of some significance in early Christianity, and also like Osiek, she believes that analysis of the image of the widow as altar will be able to reveal something about widows in early Christian communities.<sup>42</sup> Like Osiek, she notes the connection of the image by the texts to matters of offerings, prayer, and purity. Unlike Osiek, she does not focus much on tracing a chronological development in the use of the image,

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<sup>41</sup> In this respect the paper is a teaser of sorts for her 1989 monograph, which discusses such evidence in much greater detail (see above).

<sup>42</sup> “When the image of the altar is properly understood, the widow emerges as a figure with a positive contribution, indeed, with spiritual power within the community.” Thurston, “Widows as the ‘Altar,’” 285.

and in not doing so she is more able to attend to the complexities of the image's various deployments when placed alongside one another.

Thurston briefly introduces two connected matters which will also appear in my work below, but I will differ from her in my analysis of them. She argues that widows were "effective agent(s)" within the Christian community, and she elides the 'altar' with the sacrificial offering placed upon it.<sup>43</sup> She has difficulty reconciling the notion of widows as performing an active role, with the passivity that she assumes is connoted by describing them as an altar (an object). While I will also see widows as actively engaged in the community, I do not see the altar image as making that understanding more difficult, and I do not elide the altar with the sacrificial offering. The texts themselves rarely employ a notion of the altar as a passive object in their use of the widows as altar image, even when they attempt to control widows' behavior. Rather, I see the altar image, and particularly its role in sacrifice, as communicating much about the effective roles of widows as crucial mediators at the center of the relationship amongst God and the Christian community.<sup>44</sup>

Scholarship on widows in early Christianity has been sporadic since the heyday of the 1970s through the mid-1990s. This was no doubt due at least in part to an increasing suspicion of projects of 'recovery' (which much earlier scholarship on widows had been), and of whether anything could be known of history beyond the text, as postmodernism and the 'linguistic turn'

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 285, 287–8.

<sup>44</sup> It strikes me that Thurston herself was trending in this direction. At one point in her article she describes the widow as "an effective agent in a spiritual transaction within the Christian community" (288), but she does not develop this notion of transaction at all, even to say what the components of the transaction were. I will take up the notion of widow as transactional agent (for lack of a better word) over the course of this project, particularly in relation to the DA in chapter four.

rose to prominence in the academy.<sup>45</sup> There has been little sustained attention to widows. When they have appeared in scholarship on early Christianity, it has generally been as evidence for a project that focuses elsewhere rather than on widows themselves.<sup>46</sup> Of the scholarship that has been produced focusing on widows in early Christianity, Charlotte Methuen, Michael Penn, and David Wilhite have written insightful pieces treating widows in specific texts that have been of use for the chapters below on Tertullian's *Ux.*, and on the DA.<sup>47</sup> Also deserving of mention is Jens-Uwe Krause's detailed four volume work on widows and orphans in the Roman Empire, the last volume of which focuses on the impact of Christianity on widows and orphans.<sup>48</sup> It is my hope that this dissertation will prove the value that can be gained by once again focusing sustained attention on widows in early Christianity in their own right.

### Why These Texts?

Examining the use of the widows as altar image in the small set of early Christian texts that employs it allows me to give this startling image the careful, contextual analysis that it deserves. It also gives me an entry point for exploring fundamental issues related to widows—

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<sup>45</sup> Elizabeth A. Clark, *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

<sup>46</sup> As for example in Bruce W. Winter, *Roman Wives, Roman Widows: The Appearance of New Women and the Pauline Communities* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); Reta Halteman Finger, *Of Widows and Meals: Communal Meals in the Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

<sup>47</sup> Charlotte Methuen, "Widows, Bishops, and the Struggle for Authority in the *Didascalia Apostolorum*," *JEH* 46 (1995): 197–213; Michael Penn, "'Bold and Having No Shame': Ambiguous Widows, Controlling Clergy, and Early Christian Communities," *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 4 (2001): 159–85; David Wilhite, "Tertullian on Widows: A North African Appropriation of Pauline Household Economics," in *Engaging Economics: New Testament Scenarios and Early Christian Reception*, eds. Bruce W. Longenecker & Kelly D. Liebengood (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 222–42.

<sup>48</sup> Krause, *Witwen und Waisen*. The four volume work as a whole is immensely valuable for its exhaustive collection and examination of literary, documentary, demographic, and legal evidence regarding widows in the Roman Empire. However the volume focusing on the impact of Christianity on widows and orphans (vol. 4, *Witwen und Waisen im frühen Christentum*) is less useful for this project because in areas relevant to my work it largely collects and reviews evidence available elsewhere and does not provide any particularly new insights.

the three core concerns of purity, community offerings and finances, and speech and prayer—that surface in most early Christian texts regardless of whether they employ the altar image. The deep exegetical work that I am able to engage in by focusing on these particular passages bears fruit for our understandings of widows in early Christianity more broadly.

The four texts that I examine in this dissertation, Polycarp’s *To the Philippians*, Tertullian’s *Ad uxorem*, Methodius’s *Symposium*, and the Didascalia apostolorum, are all commonly dated to the second and third centuries CE. The passages in these texts constitute, in my opinion, the core references to widows as altar. They demonstrate both the chronological (spanning roughly 150 years) and the geographical (from Carthage to Smyrna, Antioch to Lycia) range of the image. They also illustrate the principal ways in which the widows as altar image is employed in all of the known references. At the end of this dissertation I have included an appendix that discusses issues of authorship, dating, and manuscript history in detail for all four of these texts, as well as providing ancient language texts of the references to widows as altar.

There are some additional references to widows as altar in later Christian texts of the fourth and fifth centuries. Of the texts that contain these references, one is the Apostolic Constitutions, which largely takes up and occasionally reworks the references contained in the DA, and another is the pseudo-Ignatian *Epistle to the Tarsians*.<sup>49</sup> Both of these texts likely date to the fourth century, and due to their similarities many scholars suggest that they were crafted by the same person(s), or at least emerged from the same milieu.<sup>50</sup> The remaining texts are Gregory of Nazianzus’s *Funeral Oration on His Father* (delivered in 374 CE), in which he

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<sup>49</sup> “Honor those in virginity as priestesses of Christ; the widows in dignity as an altar of God” (*Ep. Tars.* 9).

<sup>50</sup> Shaye Cohen, “Dancing, Clapping, Meditating: Jewish and Christian Observance of the Sabbath in Pseudo-Ignatius,” in *Judaea-Palaestina, Babylon and Rome: Jews in Antiquity*, TSAJ 147, ed. Benjamin Isaac and Yuval Shahar (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 29–51, at 30.

compares his mother (newly widowed) to the unhewn altar of Deut 27:5,<sup>51</sup> and the Testamentum Domini, a Syriac church order generally dated to the fifth century.<sup>52</sup>

I have not considered these additional texts in this dissertation for two primary practical reasons. First, their later date places them at the outer edge of the time period where my greatest interest and expertise lies. Second, considering additional texts would have added significantly to the extent of this project but would not, I concluded, have given us much additional analytical insight into the uses and significance of the widows as altar image and the historical possibilities it may suggest. The later texts largely replicate the uses to which the image is put in the texts I consider in this dissertation. I will occasionally cite these texts in footnotes when points of comparative interest arise. For a scholar interested in examining specifically the decline and disappearance of the use of the image of widows as altar, these texts are of principal importance, but for the purposes of this project, their inclusion would have added little of substance.

### What Altar Is This?

When these texts speak of widows as an altar, to what altar do they refer? Do they indicate a specific altar, or a generic notion of ‘altar’? Do they refer to a single altar, or to altars in the plural? And what difference do the answers to these questions make to this project?

Knowing more about what is designated by ‘altar’ in these texts enables me to develop a more

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<sup>51</sup> “And if it was a great thing for the altar never to have had an iron tool lifted upon it, and that no chisel should be seen or heard, with greater reason, since everything dedicated to God ought to be natural and free from artificiality, it was also surely a great thing that she revered the sanctuary by her silence; that she never turned her back to the venerable table, nor spat upon the divine pavement; that she never grasped the hand or kissed the lips of any heathen woman, however honourable in other respects, or closely related she might be...” “On the Death of his Father,” *Oration* 18.10, *NPNF*<sup>2</sup> 7:257. I hesitate to say that this text specifically employs the image of widow as altar because in praising Nonna (his mother), Gregory describes her life up to this point, namely when she was a married woman, not a widow. This can be seen as further evidence of the generalization of the image beyond widows specifically.

<sup>52</sup> “Her requests to God will be acceptable; they are the sacrifice [whole burnt offering] and altar of God.” Test. Dom. 1.40; James Cooper and Arthur John Maclean, *The Testament of Our Lord: Translated into English from the Syriac With Introduction and Notes* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1902), 107.

detailed picture of the rhetorical worlds they attempt to construct, and to analyze those worlds with a more fine-grained sensitivity. Because I focus on analysis of the texts' rhetoric, and the ways in which the image is used both to support that rhetoric and offers alternative voices, this sort of detail is immensely helpful. Particularly when so much is expressed in so few words, having greater understandings of to what those words may refer enables us to illuminate what is not explicitly stated, but is nevertheless implicitly communicated.

As it happens, we are in luck: all of the texts under consideration in this dissertation specify that the altar in question is the, or an, altar of God, or Christ. These texts are not identifying widows with any sort of false 'pagan' altar used in the worship of idols, but with a 'true' holy altar, used in the worship of the one true God. This is further communicated by the vocabulary word used by most of the texts available in Greek to denote altar: *θυσιαστήριον*. Broadly speaking, Christian and Jewish authors of the first centuries CE traditionally employed *θυσιαστήριον* to refer specifically to altars to the true God and particularly the altars in the Tabernacle and Temple (this is the word employed in the Septuagint), while typically using *βωμός* to refer to a pagan altar.<sup>53</sup> This in itself communicates that the naming of widows as altar is a marker of some respect, an acknowledgment of their place in right worship, not a denigration of their practices or selves as false or blasphemous.

Intriguingly, all of the passages refer to "altar" in the singular—and most of them refer to widows in the plural. That is, for most of these references, the connection is being made between widows plural and a single altar. This does suggest that something may be going on with regard to a corporate identity for widows, or their work as a group, rather than as individuals.

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<sup>53</sup> This distinction blurred over time, so that while *θυσιαστήριον* is rarely if ever used for 'pagan' altars, *βωμός* is occasionally used to denote an altar to the true God. As we will see in chapter three, Methodius employs *βωμός*. Johannes Behm, "θυσιαστήριον," *TDNT* 3:182–3.

Some texts provide further specificity as to the identification of the altar. Methodius is the most precise and detailed: in his *Symposium*, widows are the bronze altar of the Israelite Tabernacle, the construction of which is described in Exod 38. Both Polycarp and the DA provide context that suggests that they, too, often have an ancient Israelite altar in mind. Polycarp employs a very unusual vocabulary word for inspecting offerings for blemishes that is used only two other times in all Greek literature dated prior to him that is accessible via the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae (TLG)*, in Philo and Clement of Rome.<sup>54</sup> In both of these references it is explicit that the sacrificial system under consideration is that of ancient Israel. The DA connects the altar with Israelite sacrificial practice as detailed in the Pentateuch in two of its seven references to widows as an altar. In one reference it lists the altar along with priests and Levites, and in the other it connects the altar with Deut 23:18's injunction against bringing the 'price of a dog' or the 'fee of a prostitute' into the house of the Lord.

Might something in addition to an altar in the Israelite sacrificial system ever be meant by these texts? Certainly. Tertullian, who says as little as possible about the image of widows as altar, gives no additional clues beyond designating it the altar of God. The DA also designates the altar several times as that of Christ. When greater detail is given, however, it is an Israelite altar of sacrifice of some sort that is most commonly referenced. Whenever possible, when the texts offer greater specificity regarding the identity of the altar I take that into careful consideration in my analysis of the effects of the image of widows as altar.

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<sup>54</sup> *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae® Digital Library*, ed. Maria C. Pantelia, University of California Irvine, <http://www.tlg.uci.edu>.

Although the texts differ somewhat with regard to precisely what sort of altar of God they reference, in all texts (with the possible exception of Tertullian)<sup>55</sup> the altar image is plainly utilized for its role in sacrifice. I use the term ‘sacrifice’ to designate ritualized behavior intended to cultivate reciprocal communication between humans and god(s), in which humans bring something to the divine and hope to receive something from the divine in return.<sup>56</sup> If this sounds broad, it is—practices of prayer, or of charitable giving, could conceivably fall under that description (and indeed analogies amongst those practices are fundamental to the force of the widows as altar image). When the texts provide more indications as to what sort of sacrificial process they might be referencing, this will be taken into account in the subsequent chapters.

Through all this it is important to remember that there is a distinction between practices of sacrifice on the one hand, and writing, talking, or thinking about sacrifice on the other. The one is a ‘doing,’ the other an evaluative (even when ‘simple description’), discursive reflection on the doing.<sup>57</sup> The texts that I examine are all discursive interpretations of sacrifice. They often explicitly draw from other interpretations of sacrifice, as when they utilize Pentateuchal discussions of sacrifice—for those too are not windows into actual Israelite practices but rather texts that prescribe particular behaviors and interpretations thereof that their authors considered correct. While the texts I consider have much to tell us the ways in which some early Christians thought with sacrifice, they do not provide for us any window into sacrificial practice.

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<sup>55</sup> As we will see in chapter two, Tertullian’s use of the image is so brief and seems to be such an ill fit with the rest of *Ux.* that it is difficult to discern why exactly he utilized it.

<sup>56</sup> See Daniel C. Ullucci, “Sacrifice in the Ancient Mediterranean: Recent and Current Research,” *CurBR* 13 (2015): 388–439, at 407.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 391–4.



## Four Discursive Constructions of Widows and Widowhood

The uses of the image of widows as an altar of God reflect attempts to understand and shape understandings of widows and their work in early Christian communities. The understandings of widows crafted in the four texts I will consider draw upon and presume multiple pre-existing discursive constructions of widows and widowhood. These constructions reflect various ways of thinking about widows and widowhood particularly in terms of how widows are related to, and ought to interact with, other groups within society. In order to more fully consider the various kinds of work that the image of widows as altar does, four such constructions in particular ought to be kept in mind. These are: the widow as ‘ambiguous’ and so potentially threatening for prescriptive Greco-Roman (and other) sociocultural dynamics; the widow as paradigmatic recipient of charity in Hebrew Scriptures; the widow as ‘better’ than the married woman in 1 Cor 7; and the good widow / bad widow of 1 Tim 5. Each of the texts I will examine in the dissertation draws upon one or more of these constructions.

These discursive constructions support structuring sets of beliefs about how a society and culture ought to operate. They do not necessarily reflect the realities of widows’ lived experiences, although of course discourse is not separable from ‘reality.’ For this reason I refer to these understandings as ‘constructions’ of widowhood, in order to remind us of their crafted nature. Here I highlight the main features of each construction. Their complexities appear more fully in the analysis of specific texts in chapters one through four. The four constructions presented here are often bound up with and creative of one another. When we turn to consider the textual deployment of the image of widows as altar of God we will see the ways in which these constructions are ‘source material,’ as it were, for the image and the ways in which it is used.

*The 'Ambiguous' Widow of the Greco-Roman World*

Scholarly works that consider the ways in which widows were regarded in the Greco-Roman world<sup>58</sup> often find recourse to words beginning in 'ambi-'—ambiguous, ambivalent, even once, rather wonderfully, amphibious.<sup>59</sup> This ambi-ness—a sort of both / neither, inside / outside-ness—attached to widows in matters of household participation, sexual experience, even sexual identity (among other matters). In terms of household participation, once widowed a woman had lost her proper place as subordinate partner to a *pater familias*. She ought then join the household of a male relative such as a son or brother, or risk standing outside of, and thus posing a threat to, normative household structure for the rest of her life.<sup>60</sup>

Thomas A.J. McGinn has pointed out that the matters of concern expressed about widows were in many ways the same as those expressed about all women, but they were expressed about widows in a particularly concentrated form: “[widows] constituted, as individuals, a kind of ‘woman-plus,’ attracting at times a greater measure of praise or (especially) blame than others, perhaps, but not of an appreciably different kind.”<sup>61</sup> The intensity of concern about widows reflects their status as women who had been properly under the control of men (their husbands),

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<sup>58</sup> By ‘Greco-Roman world’ I mean, broadly speaking, the societies living around the Mediterranean from the time of classical Greece through the fall of the western Roman Empire *as presented in the (largely elite) texts that have survived*. There is of course no one Greco-Roman world. What I offer here is a sampling of ideas about widows that are, I believe, illustrative of primary ways in which widows were regarded and presented by those elite male authors with an interest (articulated or not) in upholding the status quo. As such these may not necessarily represent ways in which widows were understood by the vast majority of people who populated the Greco-Roman world, or the lived experiences of widows. However, their influence is felt in many early Christian texts that treat widows.

<sup>59</sup> “Influential and devout widows were disturbingly amphibious creatures. They were neither unambiguously disqualified as married, sexually active persons, nor were they fully at home in the ranks of the clergy.” Brown, *Body and Society*, 148.

<sup>60</sup> As we saw above, Ann Ellis Hanson has documented that while widows did frequently join the households of male relatives, there was also a high instance of widows forming part of a majority-female household. Hanson, “Widows Too Young,” 152.

<sup>61</sup> Thomas A.J. McGinn, *Widows and Patriarchy: Ancient and Modern* (London: Duckworth, 2008), 31.

but what men if any truly controlled them now was no longer clear. The anxiety this occasioned comes through particularly clearly regarding widows' sexual experience and identity.

Widows were women who were no longer sexually innocent, but who, being without a husband, ought now be celibate. As such they occasioned concern over whether, having tasted the joys of sex, as it were, they would maintain proper sexual conduct. Several sources convey a sense of widows as sexually aggressive women (thus transgressing proper gender roles), or as women who were unable to control their sexual impulses. Petronius's telling of the story of the widow of Ephesus details a beautiful widow who, despite her very virtuous nature, cannot help herself and sleeps with a soldier who finds her mourning in front of her husband's tomb just days after his death.<sup>62</sup> Plutarch tells the story of Ismenodora, a wealthy and beautiful widow who falls in love with a youth while negotiating his marriage to a younger female relative of hers. Ismenodora desires Bacchon, the youth, so much that she kidnaps him in order to marry him, while others involved in the situation are vigorously debating whether or not such a union is proper.<sup>63</sup>

While in these sources the widows in question are portrayed rather gently as virtuous women who nevertheless are overcome by amorous drives, other sources are not so gentle. Appearing throughout Greek and Roman literature is the figure of the nasty old woman, often wealthy, who is sexually voracious and pursues younger men.<sup>64</sup> These women are often not

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<sup>62</sup> Petronius, *Satyricon* 110–2.

<sup>63</sup> Plutarch, *Amatorius*. The story of Ismenodora is the framing narrative for the entire dialogue. Michel Foucault observed that the traits given to Ismenodora in the story “are those which characterize the lover of boys in the traditional pederastic model.” *The Care of the Self*, vol. 3 of *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1986), 196. Foucault treats the full story in detail in his chapter on Plutarch.

<sup>64</sup> Aristophanes, *Ecclesiazusai* (1065ff) and *Plutus* (959ff) are examples, as cited in Peter Walcot, “On Widows and Their Reputation in Antiquity,” *SO* 66 (1991): 5–26, at 18–9. The Roman satirists Juvenal, Martial, and Horace all also provide examples of this figure. For more references, see Walcot, “On Widows,” and Amy Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus: Sexual Aggression in Roman Humor* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 109–16.

identified as widows *per se*, but their age, wealth, and independence of action all suggest widowhood as a likely state. Horace's *Epodes* 8 and 12 provide particularly harsh examples, communicating senses of both scorn and revulsion at the figure of the ugly, sexually aggressive and needy old woman.<sup>65</sup>

In contrast to these sexually problematic widows, Greek and Roman literature also often praises sexually virtuous widows. Widows were women who could be seen to occupy both ends of the virtue spectrum. Virtuous widows honor the memories of their husbands either by not remarrying and instead concentrating on raising exemplary children (the Roman ideal of the *univira*, or one-man woman),<sup>66</sup> or, disturbingly, by committing suicide after his death.<sup>67</sup> Praise of widows who commit suicide highlights the extent to which widows were seen as out of place and potentially problematic. No longer properly ensconced in a household, without a husband as outlet for her sexual impulses, the widow conveniently removes herself, thus solving the problem of what to do with her. These two sets of portraits—of the widow as sexually troublesome or as sexually virtuous—are reflected in 1 Timothy (see below) and carried on in later Christian literature on widows.

The 'ambiguity' of widows manifests itself in Greco-Roman medical literature as well. Running through most Greco-Roman medical texts from the Hippocratic corpus through Galen

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<sup>65</sup> Richlin, *Garden*, 109. Richlin's translation of *Epode* 8 makes the disgust quite clear: "You, foul by your long century, ask / what unmans my strength, / when you've a black tooth, and old age / plows your brow with wrinkles, / and between your dried-out cheeks gapes filthy / an asshole like a dyspeptic cow's? / But your chest and decaying tits arouse me, / like mare's udders, / and your soft belly and your skinny thigh / on top of swollen shins. / Congratulations, and may images of great men / precede your funeral train, / nor may there be a wife who walks / laden with rounder pearls. / And so what if Stoic booklets like to lie / between your silk pillows? / Do unlettered cocks harden less for that? / Or does the phallus droop less, / which you have to work on with your mouth / to raise from its proud crotch?" Richlin, *Garden*, 110.

<sup>66</sup> Majorie Lightman and William Zeisel, "Univira: An Example of Continuity and Change in Roman Society," *CH* 46 (1977): 19–32. See also Walcot, "On Widows," 8–9, 21.

<sup>67</sup> As did Porcia the wife of Brutus and Arria the wife of Caecina Paetus. Walcot, "On Widows," 21.

and Soranus is an understanding of women's bodies as being inferior versions of men's bodies, and a particular association of femaleness with motherhood and reproduction.<sup>68</sup> Women who were not reproducing—pre-menarchic girls, and post-menopausal women—were in some ways closer to the 'male' end of the one-sex spectrum. A post-menopausal widow, then, not only no longer played the proper female role of subordinate wife to her husband, but was even in her very body moving away from the constructs of 'ideal femininity.'<sup>69</sup> What of widows who had not yet reached menopause and so were still capable of reproduction? As we have seen such women occasioned anxiety over their supposed inability to resist their own sexual impulses. If they did manage to resist, and did not find outlet in remarrying, the Hippocratic author provides us with one possible result: they would effectively turn into men and then die.<sup>70</sup>

Soranus, it should be noted, thought celibacy was a healthy option for a woman, so the entire Greco-Roman medical corpus did not take this remarkable view.<sup>71</sup> But it remains that for the medical literature of ancient Greece and the Roman Empire, a woman was defined as such through her role in reproduction and childbirth. And so here too widows are women who are constructed as ambiguous, both belonging to and standing apart from the modes of ordering marked as proper and natural by the largely elite, male-authored sources.

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<sup>68</sup> See Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990); Rebecca Flemming, *Medicine and the Making of Roman Women: Gender, Nature, and Authority from Celsus to Galen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>69</sup> The idea that women could in a sense become men—or at least move closer to the male end of the spectrum—surfaces in multiple places in early Christian literature with the idea that spiritually elite women 'become male.' See Elizabeth Castelli, "I Will Make Mary Male: Pieties of the Body and Gender Transformation in Late Antiquity," in *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, ed. Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub (New York: Routledge, 1991), 29–49.

<sup>70</sup> As Ann Ellis Hanson describes the case, found in *Epidemics* 6: "The women ceased to menstruate, their voices deepened, shaggy beards grew, and their progressive masculinization ended in death, since menstruation was never restored for them" (Hanson, "Widows Too Young," 150). The Hippocratic corpus regarded sexual intercourse as necessary to maintaining a woman's health.

<sup>71</sup> "We, however, contend that permanent virginity is healthful, because intercourse is harmful in itself." Soranus, *Gynecology* 1.32. Owsei Temkin, *Soranus' Gynecology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956), 29.

### *Widows as Paradigmatic Objects of Charity*

The understanding of widows as objects of charity found in Hebrew Scriptures requires much less space to discuss sufficiently (for our purposes) than the notion of the ‘ambiguous’ widow, but is no less fundamental to the portraits of widows that emerge in early Christianity. Simply put, when texts of the Hebrew Scriptures denote what groups of people should receive the community’s charitable support, widows are almost always mentioned along with orphans and often resident aliens.<sup>72</sup> This reflects an understanding of widows as no longer having the potential for socioeconomic security occasioned by a husband and household and so as being particularly vulnerable to poverty and oppression.<sup>73</sup> As they are so vulnerable, God takes particular care of widows (and orphans; he “executes justice for the orphan and the widow” Deut 10:18), and provides instruction for their charitable support in the regulations he gave to Israel.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> See Karel van der Toorn, “The Public Image of the Widow in Ancient Israel,” in *Between Poverty and the Pyre: Moments in the History of Widowhood*, ed. Jan N. Bremmer and Lourens van den Bosch (London: Routledge, 1995), 19–30, and Karel van der Toorn, “Torn Between Vice and Virtue: Stereotypes of the Widow in Israel and Mesopotamia,” in *Female Stereotypes in Religious Traditions*, ed. Ria Kloppenborg and Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 1–13.

<sup>73</sup> “You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry; my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children orphans.” Exod 22:22–24. All English citations of Hebrew Bible and New Testament texts in this dissertation are taken from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

<sup>74</sup> E.g., Deut 14:28–29 “Every third year you shall bring out the full tithe of your produce for that year, and store it within your towns; the Levites, because they have no allotment or inheritance with you, as well as the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows in your towns, may come and eat their fill so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work that you undertake.” Also Deut 24:19–21 “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. When you beat your olive trees, do not strip what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow.”

The idea of widows as a particular group deserving of charitable support is continued in early Christian texts.<sup>75</sup> For example, in Acts 6:1, widows in particular are said to receive daily food distributions, and Acts 9:36–41 tells the story of Tabitha / Dorcas, a woman known for her charitable works who seems to have lived with, and/or cared for, a group of widows. 1 Tim 5 also draws on this understanding, as we will see below. Of the four texts I will examine in the dissertation, the *Didascalia apostolorum* draws most heavily upon this tradition of the widow as charitable recipient.

### *More Blessed: Widows in 1 Corinthians 7*

Two New Testament texts discussing widows underlie nearly all subsequent early Christian treatments of widows in one way or another: 1 Cor 7:8, 25–40, and 1 Tim 5:3–16. 1 Corinthians was almost certainly written by Paul and Sosthenes, and likely dates to sometime in the 50s CE. In 1 Cor 7 Paul tells the Corinthian community that it is better to be unmarried than to be married, and in so doing provides one of the foundational documents for the subsequent growth of Christian practices of celibacy. In 1 Cor 7:8, Paul speaks: “To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am.” In vv. 39–40, Paul instructs that “a wife is bound as long as her husband lives. But if the husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, only in the Lord. But in my judgment she is more blessed if she remains as she is.” Paul’s instructions in vv. 25–35, which begin addressed to virgins but which quickly broaden outward, are also relevant. Here he says that in view of the “impending crisis” people should remain as they are, married or not; but those who are married experience distress and are

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<sup>75</sup> As it is in Rabbinic texts. The support of widows most certainly does not become a solely Christian concern. See Frank M. Loewenberg, *From Charity to Social Justice: The Emergence of Communal Institutions for the Support of the Poor in Ancient Judaism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2001), and Gary A. Anderson, *Charity: The Place of the Poor in the Biblical Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013) for more on traditions of care for the poor, including widows.

caught up in the cares of the world, while “the unmarried woman (ἡ γυνή ἡ ἄγαμος) and the virgin are anxious about the affairs of the Lord” (7:34). The basic message is clear: it is not a sin to marry or remarry, but if possible it is better to remain unmarried, if that is the state you are in.

Although the maintenance of celibacy particularly for religious reasons was certainly not unheard of in the ancient world before Paul,<sup>76</sup> this sort of pronouncement that *in general* it would be better for everyone (that is, all who follow Christ) to remain unmarried is unusual. Paul’s instructions are cited repeatedly in later Christian texts that argue for the superiority of celibacy, including in Tertullian’s *Ux.* and Methodius’s *Symp.*, which we will examine in chapters two and three of this dissertation respectively. 1 Cor 7 and often the texts that employ it argue that widows should remain as widows, rather than seeking to remarry.<sup>77</sup> In so doing they cultivate the possibility that widows be recognized, and respected as blessed, as a group of women who practice celibacy—and who should be encouraged to continue doing so. What, then, is a Christian community to do with all of these blessed widows? 1 Tim 5 provides one possible answer.

#### *Bad Widow, Good Widow, True Widow: Widows in 1 Timothy 5:3–16*

1 Timothy 5:3–16 is (or aspired to be) the white paper on widows for early Christian communities. 1 Timothy claims Pauline authorship, but was likely written by someone else in a Pauline community sometime in the late first or early second century CE. It is the earliest extant Christian text that explicitly presents some widows as potentially posing problems for the

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<sup>76</sup> We might think of, for example, the Vestal Virgins in Rome, or the Therapeutae of Egypt as described by Philo in *De vita contemplativa*.

<sup>77</sup> The demographic data described above may indicate that despite practical and cultural pressures toward remarriage, most adult women did not remarry once widowed—and so Paul’s instructions here are in effect telling widows that they are blessed to do what they had been doing already.



Christian life, and it does so in ways that will shape how widows are depicted and debated, constructed and made invisible, for much of Christianity's subsequent history—including in all of the texts examined in this dissertation. This passage has been analyzed extensively by many scholars, so my treatment of it here will only touch upon those matters of most relevance for the work of the dissertation.<sup>78</sup>

1 Timothy 5:3–16 presents two<sup>79</sup> discursive constructions of widowhood, one of which the author approves and one of which he<sup>80</sup> finds thoroughly troubling. These portraits draw clearly upon the ‘ambiguities’ of widows discussed above. They are constructed with a persuasive aim in mind, and as such usual caution must be observed in taking anything said about widows in this passage at ‘face value.’ The purpose of the passage as presented in the text is to provide criteria by which to determine whether or not a widow should be “enrolled” on a church list of some sort, likely in order to receive financial support. The notion of widows as recipients of charity, which we saw above in our discussion of its appearance in Hebrew Scriptures, is of great significance for the shaping of the image of widows as altar. In presenting the two constructions of widowhood, the author of 1 Timothy constructs what he considers to be true Christian widowhood in relation to the three core concerns I described above: purity, material offerings and finances, and activities of prayer and speech (accompanied also by concerns with movement in space, which we will also see in the DA). In constructing ‘proper’

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<sup>78</sup> Two works which I found particularly insightful in their treatments of this passage are Deborah Krause, *1 Timothy, Readings: A New Biblical Commentary* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), and Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, *Gossip and Gender: Othering of Speech in the Pastoral Epistles*, BZNV 164 (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2009).

<sup>79</sup> Or perhaps three; scholars disagree on whether the category of “real” widows is the same as that of widows who are put “on the list.” For our purposes whether these two categories match up is less relevant; both fall under the broader heading of ‘approved by the author,’ as it were.

<sup>80</sup> While it is impossible to say for certain whether the author of 1 Timothy was a man, the sociocultural prevalence of male authorship and the thoroughgoing androcentric nature of the positions taken in 1 Timothy lead me to consider it appropriate to refer to the author of the text with masculine pronouns.

widows the author in many ways conforms to modes of ordering broadly prevalent in the Greco-Roman world.

In verses five and six of the passage, the positive and negative portraits of widowhood, the true widow and the one who does not deserve that designation, are set up in direct comparison and opposition. The one who according to the text actually is a widow is one who has been “left alone,” presumably utterly without any familial or household support structure. Not only is she alone, she also devotes all of her time to “supplications and prayer,” having “set her hope on God.” Here we see the notion of the widow as a person engaged in constant prayer that will play a fundamental role in the shaping of the image of widows as an altar of God. The author crafts a particularly poignant figure of a woman alone, presumably destitute, with no familial safety net, yet devoted through night and day in her hopes and her prayers to God. This is an emotionally fraught picture that seems designed to elicit a sympathetic response—of course such a woman is a true widow!—but at the same time makes any woman who is other than this and who claims the name ‘widow’ immediately suspect.

Although the letter writer describes this ideal widow’s ‘actions,’ there is little sense in verse five of the true widow as an active agent, able to affect her own life situation. Like a good woman she is largely passive; her action is to rely on the agency of God to come to her aid.<sup>81</sup> This idealized construction of the widow who deserves the name is followed by a clause baldly describing the one who is not worthy of being called widow: ἡ σπαταλῶσα ζῶσα, “she who lives for pleasure.” Such a woman is described as having died, while technically living (5:6). Not only is such a woman not a true widow, it seems she is not truly alive, according to the author.

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<sup>81</sup> We will see aspects of this reliance on God surface in the constructions of widows developed in Tertullian’s *Ux.* and the *DA*.

The author continues to develop the discursive constructions of those who deserve the name ‘widow’ and those who do not in verses nine through fourteen. The first criterion the letter writer provides is age: a widow can be enrolled only if she is sixty years of age or older.<sup>82</sup> The second criterion listed by the author is that a widow must have been ‘the wife of one husband,’ ἐνὸς ἀνδρὸς γυνή, which the NRSV translates as having been “married only once.” This criterion is in direct parallel to the requirement given in the text for both bishops and deacons that they be “the husband of one wife” (3:2, 12). It would eliminate from consideration both any women widowed after a second (or third, etc.) marriage and any women who had never married.<sup>83</sup> The high valuation on a woman who had been the wife of one husband mirrors clearly the (particularly elite) Greco-Roman value placed on the *univira*, the one-man woman.

In verse ten the letter writer provides, and expands upon, the final criterion for determining eligibility for enrollment: the widow must be “well attested for her good works.” These good works are then enumerated: she must have “brought up children, shown hospitality, washed the saints’ feet, helped the afflicted, and devoted herself to doing good in every way.” These “good works” harken back to 2:10 where the author describes his model woman as being adorned not with ornaments but “with good works, as is proper for women who profess reverence for God.” In order to be a true Christian widow, one must have first been a true Christian woman.

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<sup>82</sup> Sixty was recognized as genuine old age in Greco-Roman antiquity; it was also an age by which time no woman could reasonably be expected to bear any more children, since she had almost certainly long since ceased to menstruate. Widows sixty and older were ‘safer’ for the letter writer to allow on the list—less prone to being sexually problematic, and closer to the male end of the sex spectrum. It was also the case that very few women in the Roman Empire lived to the age of sixty or beyond, and so the practical effect of this age line would have been to drastically limit the number of widows eligible for enrollment. For life expectancy demographics in the Roman Empire, see e.g. Saller, *Patriarchy*, 12–25; Walter Scheidel, “Demography,” in *The Cambridge Economic History of the Greco-Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 38–86, at 38–41.

<sup>83</sup> Here it is important to keep in mind that the notion of ‘widow’ prevalent in Greco-Roman antiquity could include women who were without husbands for any number of reasons.

The portrait presented here mirrors that of the ‘real widow’ of verse five in its clearly idealized and rhetorically constructed nature. The letter writer immediately contrasts this portrait of the ideal elderly widow with a thoroughly negative rendering of the women whom he portrays as most problematic: the “younger widows.” He follows a command to have nothing to do with younger widows with a laundry list of reasons why. In this laundry list the core concerns along which the author has been constructing his portrait of the true widow are again in play, here in service of the construction of that portrait’s negative.

In terms of sex and marriage the author sets up a chain reaction with unfortunate consequences: younger widows have sexual desires, which cause them to want to marry, which causes them to violate a pledge they had already made.<sup>84</sup> As younger women they are still dangerously prone to sexually wanton behavior, which, the author asserts, is in contradiction to Christ. This notion of widows as having problematic sexual desires that they cannot control is reminiscent of the portraits of widows we saw above in Petronius and Plutarch.<sup>85</sup>

As the author continues to construct his portrait of the ideal widow’s opposite he moves to a second set of objections concerning stereotypically feminine behaviors, particularly laziness and loose speech.<sup>86</sup> This laziness is in contrast to the busy nature of the true widow, who is occupied with good works. Although the author describes these widows as “learning to be idle,”

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<sup>84</sup> Most scholars understand this to mean that the younger widows had made some sort of pledge of celibacy. If this is so, then perhaps we see *in nuce* here the notion that would later develop into the idea of women religious being pledged in marriage to Christ, a notion picked up in Tertullian’s *Ux.* as we will see in chapter three.

<sup>85</sup> The inevitable result of this dangerous sexual energy is that the young widows “want to marry.” In the phrase *γαμεῖν θέλουσιν* itself we may detect another shade of the young widows’ impropriety. The widows want “to marry,” in the active, not “to be married,” in the passive. As Deborah Krause has noted, the use of the active form of the verb ‘to marry’ with female subjects is somewhat odd; in most Hellenistic literature, it is men who marry, and women who “are married” (Krause, *1 Timothy*, 103). Again we see these younger widows portrayed as dangerously agentive, their actions running counter to the dominant socio-sexual mode of ordering being employed by the author and here enacted in linguistic convention.

<sup>86</sup> Kartzow, *Gossip and Gender*, 11–40.

it is made immediately obvious in verse thirteen that the younger widows are not in fact ‘idle’ but rather are engaged in activities of which the author disapproves. These activities center around what we might see as two modes of communication: movement and speech. By “going about to the houses,” these younger widows are moving outside of what would be considered their ‘proper’ place—that is, the supposedly ‘private’ space of their own household—and into both the households of others and public space. This troubling behavior is picked up by the DA in its own construction of problematic widows.

The author of 1 Timothy continues to develop his construction of these women by detailing their troublesome speech. It seems that in going about the houses they learn to be “not merely idle, but also gossips and busybodies (5:13).”<sup>87</sup> Not only are their actions essentially worthless, but the situation gets worse when they open their mouths. The author continues to describe the troublesome speech of these younger women with the participial phrase “saying things that ought not [be said] (5:13).”<sup>88</sup> This phrase makes clear that the young widows’ speech crosses a boundary. This is speech that should not have been uttered.

As rhetorically constructed by the author of 1 Timothy, these young widows (who do not deserve the designation) are transgressors, violators of boundaries of desire, activity, space and

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<sup>87</sup> Kartzow has done extensive work exploring the semantic range of the term *φλύαροι* in particular, but also *περίεργοι* in the course of her detailed discussion of this verse (see esp. Kartzow, *Gossip and Gender*, 50–66, 152–59). She demonstrates that words of the *φλύαρ-* root are rarely used explicitly in connection with women; rather they are often used of men in philosophical discourse to characterize the speech of their opponents (64–6). Perhaps here the author acknowledges (likely unintentionally) that the younger widows against whom he writes are part of a group with real, and troubling (to him), power, perhaps who participate in a strand of knowledge and teaching with which he disagrees. *Περίεργοι* may mean busybodies (as most frequently translated in this passage), but it may also carry a connotation of superstitiousness and even the practicing of magic (149–51). Is the author simply denigrating the younger widows as “gossips and busybodies,” or do his word choices unintentionally convey a reality that he hopes to obscure and against which he argues, a reality in which these younger women are Christian practitioners with a certain power and authority?

<sup>88</sup> My translation. Note that the Greek does not itself specify whether these are things that should not have been said by anyone or things that simply should not have been said by the younger widows, as is implied by the NRSV’s translation of “saying what *they* should not say” (emphasis added).

speech. In their continued femaleness they are inevitably incapable of properly engaging in these masculine realms—they are, so to speak, guaranteed to ‘do it wrong,’ at least according to the author of 1 Timothy. But in this passage they are ‘doing’ nonetheless. This rhetorically constructed portrait of the young widows, the very negative of what the author would consider the ideal widow to be, is a portrait (intentionally so, or not) of women with the power to act.

That the author tags these actions as so troublingly improper is yet another clear indication of what he considers proper and he does not hesitate to assert this forthwith. His solution to the problem of these young women’s ‘acting out’ is to firmly re-place them in a proper female place in a household—that of wife, mother, and household manager (5:14). These younger women are now set on the path of the ideal Christian woman indicated in 5:10, taking their proper place and engaging in their proper activities. By encouraging remarriage the author of 1 Timothy is going against the advice of Paul in 1 Cor 7. If we read 1 Timothy’s instructions here in conjunction with its apparent disallowance of women who have had more than one husband onto the official list of widows (5:9b), then the effect of this instruction to remarry would be to reduce the number of women who would be eligible for consideration for inclusion on the list. These younger women are removed from the category of widow in the present, and are removed from the possibility of inclusion in the future. The Christian widow continues to disappear.

All of these discursive constructions of widows and widowhood—the ambiguous widow, the widow as object of charity, the widow who remains unmarried of 1 Corinthians and the good and bad widows of 1 Timothy—make their influence felt in the texts I consider in this dissertation.

## Chapter Outline

In the first chapter I examine the reference to widows as altar of God contained in Polycarp's letter *To the Philippians*, likely dating to the second century CE. The reference occurs in a list that encourages and discourages particular behaviors in wives, widows, deacons, younger men, virgins, and elders. By comparing Polycarp's treatment of widows with his treatment of these other named groups, I determine with whom widows align most closely.

When I scrutinize the three core concerns as they appear in this letter, it becomes clear that Polycarp is particularly interested in connecting the image of widows as altar to concerns regarding their prayer and speech. I argue that in so doing Polycarp's epistle participates in an ongoing discourse in antiquity comparing prayer to sacrifice. I examine Polycarp's use of two verbs in particular in connection to widows: *ἐντυγχάνω* and *μωμοσκοπέω*. The first indicates an understanding of widows as engaged in a particularly privileged communication with God. The second works with the altar image to place the exhortations to widows in the framework of the discourses of sacrifice in Leviticus, especially concerning the worthiness to participate of priests and sacrificial victims. Bringing these considerations together with the work done earlier in the chapter regarding widows' alignment with other groups, I examine what historical possibilities for widows as important intercessors for the community may be illuminated by viewing Polycarp's exhortations to widows through the lens of the widows-as-altar image.

In the second chapter I consider the reference to widows as altar contained in Tertullian's *Ad uxorem*, dating to the earliest years of the third century CE. This reference stands apart from the references in the other three texts in several ways, including being the least developed of all of them. Tertullian does not make the identification of widows with the altar of God as explicit

as it is in the other three texts, but he does make plain what the point of connection is upon which he trades: purity.<sup>89</sup>

I examine the ways in which Tertullian attempts to bring the image to bear for his principal rhetorical project of convincing Christian women not to remarry after they have been widowed. I note that this image seems to be an ill fit for Tertullian's rhetoric, contrasting it to his preferred image for widows in *Ux.*, that of the widow as wife—especially as wife of God. By bringing this contrast into conversation with Tertullian's treatment of 'pagan' widows in *Ux.*, as well as with evidence from some of his other writings, I expand upon why the widows as altar image seems so out of place in Tertullian's rhetoric. I propose that even in this extremely brief reference we catch a glimpse of an understanding of widows as sacerdotally powerful women.

In the third chapter I examine the references to widows and virgins as altars of God contained in Methodius's *Symposium*, a text dated to sometime in the third century CE. These references are the most explicitly developed of all we will consider, contained as they are in a typological reading of the Tabernacle as representative of the Church, which itself is representative of heaven. I demonstrate that Methodius employs the identification of widows with the altar of God in order to establish a hierarchy of sexual purity in which virgins are superior to widows. This hierarchy supports the overall rhetorical project of the *Symp.*, which is to praise purity in many forms but virginity in particular. Methodius does so by inserting virgins into the image and modifying it such that widows are compared specifically to the bronze altar of sacrifice in the Tabernacle, while virgins are the gold altar of incense, closer to the Holy of Holies.

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<sup>89</sup> While he does not explain of what the purity of the altar of God consists (trading simply on the notion that altars must be kept pure), he is very clear that the purity of the widows with which he is concerned is of the marital and sexual variety.



The *Symposium* explicitly portrays widows as recipients of offerings (a thread which will be picked up by the DA as well). I propose to attend to the differences between the types of sacrifices offered on the gold and bronze altars as unbloody and bloody respectively, a difference upon which Methodius insists. In doing so we will see that the text taps into a powerful complex of associations among blood sacrifice, gender and women's procreative capabilities. I draw on the work of Nancy Jay and Nicole Ruane in particular to explore the significance of blood in Methodius's allegorical presentation of widows and virgins as altars. I suggest that Methodius's overwhelming interest in virgins can make it difficult to discern what understanding of widows is communicated by his use of the altar image. Despite his subordination of widows to virgins, I argue that Methodius communicates a sense of widows as holy women, reflections on earth of the truth of heaven, women whose very bodies are sacred.

In the final chapter I turn to the text with the most references to widows as altar of God: the *Didascalia apostolorum*. This text, which dates to the third century CE, provides a rich and dynamic understanding of the significance of the image of widows as altar as it weaves together strands that we have seen present in the texts examined in earlier chapters. I examine the text's treatment of widows in comparison with its treatment of bishops. While the rhetoric of the text promotes an understanding of bishops as the supreme authorities in Christian communities, this same rhetoric gives us glimpses of alternative understandings of the community in which widows play a significant role while bishops are not particularly necessary.

I examine each of the seven references relevant to the widows as altar image in relation to one another and to the rhetorical project of the text regarding the authority of bishops over widows. In particular, I attend to the text's presentation of widows as both recipients of offerings from the community and important offerers of prayer on the community's behalf. I propose that

in so doing, the text participates in the discourse comparing prayer to sacrifice (as in Polycarp's epistle), as well as in a discourse that compares almsgiving to sacrifice. I argue that the text joins these discourses with the image of widows as an altar of God. This placement of widows at the center of processes of almsgiving and prayer—processes that help sustain the community's communicative relationship with God—suggests an understanding of widows as figures of crucial importance, women whose work links humans with the divine.

## Chapter One

### Prayer as Sacrifice: Widows as Altar in Polycarp, *Philippians*

Widows should be self-controlled about the faith of the Lord, interceding incessantly<sup>1</sup> for everyone,<sup>2</sup> being far from every slander, evil report, false witness, love of money, and every thing of evil, knowing that they are an altar of God and that all things are inspected for blemishes and nothing has escaped his notice, not reasonings, nor thoughts, nor any of the things hidden in the heart. (4.3)<sup>3</sup>

The reference to widows as altar in Polycarp's letter *To the Philippians* (*Phil.*)<sup>4</sup> is quite brief, yet its occurrence is marked by a number of characteristics that we will find throughout the texts we will consider. One of these characteristics is its very brevity—most of the references we will encounter are similarly short, seemingly passing references offered with little or no explanation and often in service of an argument to which the widow-altar image does not seem to be directly related. Polycarp's letter is not focused on widows; rather, its dominant theme concerns how members of the community ought properly to conduct themselves in order to live a righteous life in accord with proper teachings. Polycarp's reference to widows as altar serves as an instantiation of that theme.

And yet this mention of widows as altar, despite its brevity, provides us with a potent sense of the significance of widows and their work for the community of the faithful. In this chapter I will use this image of widows as altar, and the scene of sacrifice in which it is located,

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<sup>1</sup> Reminiscent of the widow praying “night and day” in 1 Tim 5:5.

<sup>2</sup> Or ‘all things,’ πάντων.

<sup>3</sup> Translation is my own, from the Greek edition of Paul Hartog, *Polycarp's Epistle to the Philippians and the Martyrdom of Polycarp: Introduction, Text, and Commentary*, OAF (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> As noted in the appendix, most scholars, regardless of their position on its attribution, date this text to sometime in the second century CE—however, a persuasive case could be made for a later date of composition, such as the fourth century. We will see a number of resonances between this text and the *Didascalia apostolorum*, which likely dates to the third century, with translations occurring in the fourth.

as a lens through which to sharpen our sense of the text's understanding and presentation of widows. I will first consider the text's treatment of widows in the context of, and in comparison to, its treatment of other groups in the community such as wives and elders. I will then examine the reference to widows more closely via the three core concerns I have identified as running through the texts, namely purity, material offerings and finances, and prayer and speech. While the first two are relatively insignificant for Polycarp, the third—prayer and speech—is of great importance, and the vocabulary he uses to denote widows' prayer suggests that their prayer holds particular power.

I turn next to the text's portrayal of widows as altar, setting out briefly the well-established connections of prayer to sacrifice in Jewish and Christian literature and then considering carefully the way in which the text, with a few words, sets up a scene of sacrifice that focuses on the worthiness of the participants. The identification of widows with the altar lives at the center of this scene, both anchoring and participating in multiple ways in a shifting network of resonances amongst prayer, sacrifice and the conduct of the Christian community. From this swirl of resonances the import of widows and their work emerges with clarity.

Finally, I employ this understanding of widows as altar as a lens through which to reconsider the material concerning widows in relation to other groups in the text that I examined earlier in the chapter. While Polycarp does exhort the widows (as he does other groups) toward appropriate behavior as he sees it and employs the widows as altar image to that end, he does not denigrate or minimize widows and their work. In conclusion I argue that in this brief reference we glimpse widows who converse with the divine on behalf of the community and who are crucial participants in the sacred relationships amongst humans and God. Given their role as

privileged intercessors, portrayed here with the language and logic of sacrifice, the widows of *Phil.* 4.3 emerge as figures of sacerdotal significance.

### Polycarp, *To the Philippians*

The letter is divided by editors into fourteen chapters. It presents itself as addressed by Polycarp “and the presbyters who are with him” to the “ἐκκλησία of God that temporarily resides in Philippi” (prol.).<sup>5</sup> The occasion for its composition, as inscribed in the text itself, was a request by the Philippians for Polycarp to send them a collection of the letters of Ignatius (13.2). This letter accompanied the collection. The letter also suggests that the Philippian community has asked Polycarp for teachings about δικαιοσύνη, righteousness, and that he is responding to this request (3.1).<sup>6</sup>

Δικαιοσύνη constitutes one of the major themes of the letter. The majority of Polycarp’s references to righteousness are connected to what Berding refers to as “the practice of holy living”—moral / ethical conduct.<sup>7</sup> In a manner reminiscent of the *Haustafeln* (Household Codes) and the instructions for conduct of community leaders in the Pastoral epistles, Polycarp enjoins right behavior (as he envisions it) by various groups within the community. Like the *Haustafeln* and passages from the Pastorals this letter offers prescriptions for how a Christian community

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<sup>5</sup> Unless otherwise noted (as with translation of 4.3 above), translations of *Phil.* are taken from *The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. Bart D. Ehrman, vol. 1, LCL (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 332–53, with occasional noted modifications.

<sup>6</sup> Whether there is also some polemical intent occasioned by those who think or act differently from Polycarp is suggested by a reference at a particular point in the letter to “false teachings” (7.2). This apparently refers to the immediately preceding section in which Polycarp speaks of people who do not confess that Jesus came ἐν σαρκί (7.1, also labeling such people “an antichrist”). In the same section Polycarp speaks of anyone who “distorts the words of the Lord for his own passions, saying that there is neither resurrection nor judgment” as “a firstborn of Satan” (7.1). This is the same phrase with which Polycarp addressed Marcion, according to Irenaeus (*Haer.* 3.3.4).

<sup>7</sup> Hartog, *Polycarp’s Epistle*, 51, quoting Kenneth Berding, *Polycarp and Paul: An Analysis of their Literary and Theological Relationship in Light of Polycarp’s Use of Biblical and Extra-Biblical Literature*, VCSup 62 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 170.

ought to be organized and to conduct itself. This similarity throws into sharp relief the fact that while there is some connection via the matter of troublesome speech, Polycarp's treatment of widows here is largely *unlike* (and shorter than) that of 1 Tim 5:3–16, which we considered in the introduction.

Polycarp speaks of the proper living of wives, widows, deacons, younger men, virgins and elders (4.2–6.1), as well as repeatedly exhorting his addressees more broadly with the first person plural.<sup>8</sup> It is not entirely clear to whom this use of first person plural refers—all Christians? the Christian community at Philippi? some subset thereof?—but it reads as laying down broad prescriptions for some large entirety, spoken by an authority within that entirety. The statements are exhortatory commandments, in a way, speaking to everyone about the ways in which they should properly live.<sup>9</sup> Polycarp's exhortations to widows in 4.3 are of a piece with the text's larger focus on righteous behavior, providing guidance specific to widows as to how they ought to conduct themselves.

In terms of improper behavior Polycarp spends some time addressing the troubling conduct of an elder in the Philippian community named Valens and his wife (11.1–4). The apparent misbehavior of Valens and his wife involved *φιλαργυρία* / *avaritia*, the love of, and greed for, money and material gain.<sup>10</sup> *Φιλαργυρία* and the importance of abstaining from it

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<sup>8</sup> For example, “we should arm ourselves with the weapons of righteousness and teach one another, first of all, to walk in the commandment of the Lord,” (4.1) and “so we should serve as his slaves, with reverential fear and all respect, just as he commanded” (6.3).

<sup>9</sup> Polycarp also connects right conduct and right belief to rewards in the next life: “If we please him in the present world, we will also receive the coming one, just as he promised to raise us from the dead; and that, if we will conduct ourselves worthily of him, we will also reign with him—if indeed we believe” (5.2).

<sup>10</sup> Beyond this it is not clear from the letter what exactly Valens and his wife did to earn the disapproval of Polycarp and (presumably) the Philippian community, except that whatever he did, Polycarp judged it to evidence disregard on Valens's part for the position he held in the community (11.1). One logical hypothetical scenario would involve Valens and his wife somehow using the community's common resources for their own private gain. This would bear some similarity to the actions of the married couple Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1–11, who also kept money that ought to have gone to the community for themselves. Ananias and Sapphira too suffered from a love of money

constitute one of the letter's notable themes, including in sections not directly related to the misbehavior of Valens and his wife. Avarice is, in Polycarp's view, characteristic of unrighteous behavior and he exhorts various groups in the community, including widows, to avoid it.

Polycarp's discouragement of love of money in widows almost immediately precedes his use of the image of widows as altar and serves to connect it to the core concern of community offerings and finances.

In what follows I take up the text's self-presentation of its authorship and occasion as part of my analytic frame. In so doing, however, I do not wish to make any historical claims about whether or not Polycarp actually wrote the letter or whether its contents relate to actual, specific historical situations in the Philippian community.<sup>11</sup> The text's inscription of its authorial voice and its occasions for composition have certain effects, regardless of whether or not those claims accurately present the historical 'truth.' It is to those effects that I wish to attend, and so in what follows I read the text as it asks to be read with regard to these matters without thereby endorsing their accuracy. I will therefore continue to refer to the text's author as Polycarp. I believe that analysis of this text does open up historical possibilities for consideration, but we cannot fix those possibilities to the time and place of Polycarp or the Philippian community.

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(although the text of Acts does not use *φιλαργυρία*). In the case of Ananias and Sapphira, Ananias sold a piece of land and did not turn all of the proceeds over to the apostles as he should have (Acts 4:32–35), and then lied about it. Sapphira also lied to the apostles about the sale price of the land; as a result of their misdeeds both Ananias and Sapphira were struck dead. If such divine punishment has been visited upon Valens and his wife, Polycarp does not mention it.

<sup>11</sup> See the appendix for more on questions of authorship, etc.

## The Widows Amongst Others: Comparing Polycarp's Treatment of Different Groups

How do widows figure into this letter? Their most significant mention is in *Phil.* 4.3, the focus of our study, where they are spoken of as “knowing that they are an altar of God.”<sup>12</sup> No other group of people is spoken of with such explicitly figurative language, nor does Polycarp mention that any other group has such a clear knowledge of their own identity. As Polycarp focuses more broadly in the letter on the connection of right behavior to right belief, here with regard to widows specifically he connects their right behavior with their proper knowledge of themselves as altar. This connection occurs near the beginning of a series of injunctions toward proper behavior by various groups in the community in *Phil.* 4–6, the groups in order being: wives, widows, deacons, young men, virgins, and elders. The groups of women listed here seem at first glance to be categorized according to their sexual / marital status—virgins, wives, widows—while the groups of men seem to be categorized according to their age and position in the community—deacons, young men, elders. Note the absence of ‘husbands’ as a category for the men.

Polycarp's address to these groups resembles the form of the *Haustafeln* in Ephesians and Colossians and the similar exhortations to various groups to engage in proper conduct contained in 1 Timothy and Titus. While many of the virtues espoused by Polycarp are the same as those found in these epistles—love, self-control, sober speech—we should not thereby assume that Polycarp will similarly replicate the ‘family values’ of properly gendered dominance and obedience contained in the New Testament selections. In fact, nowhere in Polycarp's treatment

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<sup>12</sup> The only other mention of widows in the letter occurs at 6.1, when Polycarp urges presbyters not to neglect “the widow, the orphan, or the poor.” This is a clear echo of the notion of widows as paradigmatic subjects of charity in the Hebrew Bible, which we examined in the introduction.



of wives, widows and virgins does he speak of their obedience in any form, despite a main focus of the letter being right behavior. Comparing Polycarp's exhortations concerning widows to those concerning the other groups will help us to gain some sense of what issues are in play with regard to widows, and may complicate the seemingly clear distinctions between how the men and women are grouped.

Polycarp opens the section with a passage that foregrounds his exhortative intentions and gestures toward the dichotomy of proper behavior motivated by proper faith versus improper behavior motivated by improper faith. Immediately referring to *φιλαργυρία* as "the beginning of all difficulties" (4.1), Polycarp signals its significance throughout the next several chapters. He proceeds to say in effect that, as we all know we can't take material wealth with us when we die, we should concentrate on our righteousness and on following the Lord's injunctions.<sup>13</sup> He then lays out what such righteousness and proper following of the Lord should and should not look like for the various groups within the community. How do the exhortations to the different groups compare? What follows is a catalog of the behaviors and characteristics Polycarp highlights for the various groups:

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<sup>13</sup> "The love of money is the beginning of all difficulties. And so, since we know that we brought nothing into the world and can take nothing out of it, we should arm ourselves with the weapons of righteousness and teach one another, first of all, to walk in the commandment of the Lord" (4.1).

**Table One**

<b>Group</b>	<b>Recommended</b>	<b>Discouraged</b>
<b>Wives</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• [Being taught in] faith given them</li> <li>• Love</li> <li>• Purity</li> <li>• Feeling affection for husbands “in all truth”</li> <li>• Loving all equally “with all self-restraint”</li> <li>• To teach children in “the reverential fear of God”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nothing stated</li> </ul>
<b>Widows</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being self-controlled “concerning the faith of the Lord”</li> <li>• Interceding incessantly concerning everyone</li> <li>• Knowing that they are an altar of God</li> <li>• <i>Perhaps</i>: Inspecting others and/or being inspected (see below)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Slander</li> <li>• Evil report</li> <li>• False witness</li> <li>• Love of money</li> <li>• Everything of evil</li> </ul>
<b>Deacons</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being blameless as ministers of God and Christ, not people</li> <li>• Free of love of money</li> <li>• Self-restrained “in every way”</li> <li>• Compassionate</li> <li>• Attentive</li> <li>• Proceeding “according to the truth of the Lord, who became a deacon / minister for everyone”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Slander</li> <li>• Insincerity / deceitfulness</li> </ul>
<b>Young Men</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being blameless “in all things”</li> <li>• Concerned about purity above all else</li> <li>• Keeping themselves in check “with respect to all evil”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sexual immorality</li> <li>• Effeminacy</li> <li>• Male prostitution</li> <li>• Aberrant behavior<sup>14</sup></li> </ul>
<b>Virgins</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Walking “in a blameless and pure conscience.”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nothing stated.</li> </ul>
<b>Elders</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being compassionate</li> <li>• Being merciful to all</li> <li>• Turning back those who have strayed</li> <li>• Visiting all the weak / sick</li> <li>• Always taking thought for the good “in the sight of God and people”</li> <li>• Knowing that “we are all in debt because of sin”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being neglectful of “the widow or orphan or poor person”</li> <li>• All wrath</li> <li>• Partiality / prejudice</li> <li>• Unrighteous judgment</li> <li>• Love of money</li> <li>• Hastily believing something against someone</li> <li>• Being harsh in judgment</li> </ul>

<sup>14</sup> In between Polycarp’s exhortations of young men and virgins comes a brief general condemnation of the passions of the flesh: “For it is good to be cut off from the passions of the world, since every passion wages war against the spirit, and neither the sexually immoral, nor the effeminate, nor male prostitutes will inherit the kingdom of God; nor will those who engage in aberrant behavior. Therefore we must abstain from all these things, and be subject to the presbyters and deacons as to God and Christ” (5.3). These condemnations are not explicitly connected to any one group (except for the ‘we’ at the end), but their placement, and what is being discouraged, suggest that they are intended for the young men.

Listing the exhortations in this way allows us to see several notable correspondences and lacks of correspondence concerning how widows are characterized in comparison to the other groups. Perhaps most noticeable, given the concept's emphasis at the opening of the passage, is that *φιλαργυρία* is discouraged for widows, deacons and elders but is not mentioned for wives, virgins or young men. Wives, widows, deacons and young men are all exhorted to have some sort of self-restraint or self-control although the activities to which this is connected differ: for wives, self-restraint in "lov[ing] everyone equally;" for widows, self-control "concerning the faith of the Lord;" for young men, curbing themselves from "all evil," and for deacons (who apparently pulled the short straw), self-restraint "in every way." Widows and young men are both exhorted to avoid everything evil. The language of purity (*ἀγνεία*), which is used to describe wives and virgins, is not used of widows as it will be by Methodius but it is used of young men.<sup>15</sup> The only connection explicitly made amongst the groups is that between elders and widows, when elders are exhorted to not neglect the widow.<sup>16</sup>

Another category of conduct that appears often is that of speech. Slander and various sorts of deceitful speech are discouraged for widows and deacons, but are not mentioned for any of the other groups. Elders are discouraged from various sorts of bad judgments of others, which are arguably related to speech in that such judgments would likely be made manifest in speech (as slander?), but are not identical. Speech or related concepts of any sort are not mentioned for younger men or virgins. The 'speech' mentioned for wives is that of teaching children, which is

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<sup>15</sup> For both Tertullian and Methodius the sexual purity of widows is at the forefront of their concerns, but it does not appear to be for Polycarp (see below). Polycarp's attention to the purity of young men, combined with the activities from which he discourages them, suggests that they are the group who are (potentially, at least) the most problematic when it comes to sexual issues.

<sup>16</sup> The epistle does make an additional explicit connection between the general "we," and presbyters and deacons, when it says "we must abstain from all these things, and be subject to the presbyters and deacons as to God and Christ" (5.3). 'We' here would seem to be speaking broadly to all Christians, but perhaps with a special emphasis for young men.

encouraged. Speech of various sorts—to God in their intercessions, and (improper) speech to humans—constitutes a greater portion of the exhortations concerning widows than it does of any of the other groups. As we have already seen in 1 Timothy and will see again in the Didascalia apostolorum, engaging in improper speech of various sorts in the community (e.g., gossiping, lying, teaching, whispering when they should be silent, saying what they should not say) is a charge that is frequently leveled at widows. We will return to consider widows' intercessions in more detail below.

With whom are the actions of these various groups connected? The conduct of widows and deacons in particular, and to a lesser extent elders, is articulated by Polycarp as being in relationship to God: widows are an altar of God, deacons are ministers (or “servants,” *διάκονοι*) of God and elders are to take thought for the good in the sight of God (and of people). The connection of wives to God is indirect, as they are told to teach children of the “fear of God” (4.2). God and Christ are not mentioned in Polycarp’s exhortations to young men and to virgins. The passage that links them (see above, ns. 14 and 16) does establish a connection to God, but it is intriguingly indirect: people (young men in particular?) are exhorted to submit to the elders and the deacons “as to God and Christ” (5.3). While the connections to God for deacons and widows (and to a lesser extent elders) is direct, here the connection for others is to deacons and elders as God’s representatives and not directly to God himself. Note that widows are not here listed as representatives of God to whom others should submit; however, as we will see they are named explicitly as intermediaries between humans and the divine.

Wives, widows and elders are exhorted in some way regarding their actions toward specifically named groups of people (for widows, this is ‘everyone’). Specific groups are not named in direct relation to deacons, but Polycarp’s exhortations to them to be “ministers,”

“compassionate,” and “attentive” like the Lord who “became a minister for everyone” (5.2), all make clear that deacons are being encouraged regarding their actions toward the entire community, as widows were. We could also see implicit exhortations regarding actions toward other people for the younger men, given that they are told to avoid sexual immorality and male prostitution and engaging in either would generally involve other people. These would be the only exhortations to *avoid* engagement with people, rather than to engage in particular kinds of actions with people.

In all of these exhortations only widows are explicitly portrayed as acting as intermediaries in communication between God and people, when they are encouraged to intercede “incessantly” for everyone. As noted above, deacons and elders do provide a sort of connection between God and people when “we” are told to submit to them “as to God and Christ” (5.3). In addition, the descriptions of the activities of deacons and elders do suggest that they are acting amongst the community with some sort of special connection to God and God’s wishes. And yet, only widows are said to speak directly with God. The explicitness with which widows are characterized as intermediaries in human-divine communication is unmatched in this text.

Where does this leave us with regards to widows? Several observations stand out. Widows are the only group exhorted with a figurative self-identification—their knowledge of themselves as an altar. This exhortation may be a reminder to widows of an identity they had already taken on, or it could be an encouragement toward a self-identification the widows did not yet have. In either case, the specific language stands out amongst the passage’s exhortations to right behavior. It is also the only time that a specific object of any sort is mentioned in Polycarp’s addresses to any of the groups.

In general the passage's treatment of widows more closely resembles its treatment of deacons and elders than its treatment of wives<sup>17</sup> and virgins, suggesting that perhaps sex / gender is not the governing characteristic at work here.<sup>18</sup> The issues at play regarding widows are most similar to those of the elders and deacons, particularly in terms of (discouraged) love of money, speech of various sorts (particularly improper speech) and relation both to other community members and to God. The absence of purity language also aligns widows more closely with the deacons and the elders than with the wives, young men and virgins. While we might expect a division along sex/gender lines in these exhortations, widows stand not so much with wives and virgins as they do with elders and deacons. This suggests that widows are a group of particular significance for the life of the community.

In this comparative work we have seen matters of sexual purity, of finances, and of prayer and speech arise for widows and others. I will now consider more specifically these three core concerns as they are manifest in the text with regard to widows. I will focus in particular on the matter of prayer, and its connection to sacrifice, which will lead us into an examination of the specific image of widows as altar.

### Widows and Material Gain

As we have noted, one of the issues for which Polycarp's treatment of widows parallels his treatment of deacons and elders is the discouragement of love of money. The relationship of

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<sup>17</sup> In some ways, wives are the category that stands closest to the middle amongst these groups. They receive much more attention than young men and virgins, and their activities are more closely related to those of the widows, elders, and deacons in that they are articulated in terms of relations to other people (and indirectly to God). At the same time though they are connected to the young men and the virgins by the language of purity.

<sup>18</sup> Keeping in mind, of course, that the understanding of sex/gender at work here is different than our own. As was noted in the introduction in some ways widows could be understood as falling more towards the 'male' end of the spectrum than other women, and this treatment of widows in ways similar to groups of men might be a manifestation of that understanding.

widows to material gain in various forms is a topic that appears frequently in early Christian texts that speak about widows, including 1 Timothy and several of the other texts we will examine in later chapters. Both Methodius's *Symposium* and the *Didascalia apostolorum* directly connect the widows' receipt of material gain with their identity as altars through the notion of altars as the place where offerings / sacrifices are received. Polycarp does not make this connection directly. Rather, he lists love of money (*φιλαργυρία*) as one of the vices that widows should avoid. The flow of the passage, from the list of evil behaviors and vices directly into the identification of widows with an altar and the notion of God's inspecting for blemishes, suggests strongly that the love of money is one of those blemishes that will not escape God's notice. Thus presumably *φιλαργυρία* would disqualify widows and others from participation in whatever activities or behaviors are being represented here by the process of sacrifice.

Polycarp's concern with the problem of love of money for widows seems to be relatively minor compared to his attention to their speech and prayer. His exhortation to them to avoid love of money directly parallels his exhortations on the same matter for deacons and elders suggesting that this is a stock concern of some sort for these groups, perhaps brought to the fore by the matter of Valens (the presbyter who fell victim to the love of money and disregarded his position) and his wife. The appearance of this particular concern with deacons, elders and widows, in addition to its principle role in the events surrounding Valens, suggest that the money at stake here is that of the community. Widows, deacons and presbyters seem to have access in some way(s) to funds belonging to or coming from the community and its members, and they must be warned not to abuse that access. In this wise, Polycarp's treatment of widows'

relationship to material gain is entirely negative—his sole mention of it is to discourage *φιλαργυρία*.<sup>19</sup>

We might consider the implications of this relationship to money for widows of differing socioeconomic statuses. While a wealthier widow might enter the game, as it were, at greater risk for *φιλαργυρία*, she would also be much better equipped to avoid using community funds should she so choose. A poorer widow, on the other hand, might count more heavily on access to community funds in order to survive—and so would continue to be potentially subject to accusations of *φιλαργυρία*. It would be useful and fascinating to know what uses of the common funds were considered appropriate by Polycarp; for example were deacons (or widows, or other people of significance) paid a wage? We are reminded here of 1 Timothy's discussion of financial remuneration for widows.

### Marital and Sexual Purity

If Polycarp's concern regarding widows and finances is relatively minor, then concerns regarding their sexual and marital purity are arguably practically nonexistent. Although arguments from silence are of necessity somewhat thin, I would note two absences in Polycarp's text. First, Polycarp exhorts the wives, younger men, and virgins to maintain purity, employing the vocabulary word we would expect for purity and will encounter again in Methodius—*ἀγνεία*—but he does not exhort widows with this word. Second, while Polycarp invokes the image of widows as altar, he does not make the connection that both Tertullian and Methodius will make to the status of altars in particular as objects of ritual purity (and in Tertullian's case, objects

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<sup>19</sup> As we will see, this differs from the treatment of material gain in the *Symp.* and the DA, both of which treat material gain in some form as a sort of right due to widows. This is a right connected to their identity as altars, albeit in the DA's case a right that can easily be abused.



whose ritual purity requires vigilance to maintain). For both Tertullian and Methodius, the ritual cleanliness of the altar is manifested in the widow in her chastity. Polycarp, however, does not make this connection to altars and the practice of sacrifice. Rather, he connects the widows-as-altar to the sacrificial notion of being inspected for blemishes, which as we will see relates to the ritual participants of priests and victims, but is not a notion that is ever employed in the Septuagint or the New Testament in relation to altars.

It is certainly possible that considerations of sexual purity might exist in the background of this notion of inspection for blemishes—after all, the priests of the Pentateuch were also held to particular standards of sexual and marital conduct (see Lev 21:7, 13–15). But there is no indication in the text that Polycarp has a specific concern with widows’ sexual purity or marital status. This might simply be a result of the brevity of the reference to widows in the text. However, the fact that *ἀγνεία* is mentioned in the equally brief references of other groups suggests (as I noted above in comparing the groups) that at least for Polycarp widows are of a category, along with elders and deacons, about whose sexual purity he does not need to be immediately concerned.

### Speaking with God

Rather than their activities concerning money or their sexual status, it is on widows’ prayer and speech—the third core concern—that Polycarp principally focuses. He both condemns improper speech and encourages proper speech in the form of prayer. It is to the concern of prayer and speech that Polycarp’s presentation of widows as altar is most clearly connected. We noted above that Polycarp’s condemnation of various sorts of improper speech for widows—“slander, evil report, false witness”—mirrors 1 Timothy’s condemnations of gossip

and things that ‘should not be said.’ All of the speech that Polycarp condemns is speech directed toward other people, and he does not encourage widows toward any speech with other people. Also as in 1 Timothy, though, Polycarp does exhort widows to engage in constant prayer. But Polycarp differs from 1 Timothy regarding widows’ prayer practices in two significant ways: the verb that Polycarp uses is suggestive of a particular sort of communicative relationship with God; and Polycarp specifies whom widows’ prayers are supposed to be about, namely, everyone. With these two components Polycarp establishes a sense of widows as privileged intermediaries between humans and the divine.

While the reference to the intermediary work in prayer of the widows-as-altar is brief, the vocabulary is suggestive. The verb that Polycarp uses to denote their communicative activity between God and people is *ἐντυγχάνω*.<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately as *Phil.* is Polycarp’s only surviving work, and this is the only occurrence of the verb in the letter, we can draw no inferences concerning its semantic impact from how Polycarp employs it in other contexts. As a result any musings concerning it must be entirely hypothetical, but its use here may be suggestive of how widows’ work is viewed in the text. By comparison, 1 Tim 5:5 speaks of widows continuing night and day in “supplications and prayers” (*ταῖς δεήσεσιν και ταῖς προσευχαῖς*). Elsewhere in *Phil.*, Polycarp uses words related to both of these terms used in 1 Tim 5:5 to speak of entreating

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<sup>20</sup> Definitions for *ἐντυγχάνω* in LSJ include: fall in, meet with; converse with, talk to; have sexual intercourse with; petition, appeal to. “*ἐντυγχάνω*,” LSJ 578a. Unfortunately aside from telling us that this interceding ought to take place constantly for everyone, Polycarp gives us no indication of the content of the widows’ prayers or the manner in which they prayed. What sorts of things did they pray for and about? Who decided what that was? Did they pray aloud, or silently? In private, or in public? Alone, or in groups? Spontaneously, or with a script? Polycarp tells us none of this, but as we will see his use of the language and logic of sacrifice in connection to the widows’ prayer work suggests that this work was to be considered sacred and of importance.

God, and of prayers: *δέμεθα* in 6.2, and *εὐχὰς* and *δεήσεσιν* in 7.2, all with the first person plural ‘we’ engaging in the activity. He does not use such vocabulary in relation to widows in 4.3.<sup>21</sup>

Instead, the verb Polycarp uses, *ἐντυγχάνω*, is one that appears fairly rarely in the Septuagint and those texts that would later form the New Testament.<sup>22</sup> It appears six times in the Septuagint, although only in those texts that would later be termed the Apocrypha (1 Macc 10:63, 64; 2 Macc 2:25, 6:12, 15:19; Wis 16:28). These references from the Apocrypha are not particularly significant for our consideration of Polycarp’s usage, in part because the letter as a whole likely contains no allusions to any of the Apocryphal books so there is little to suggest that Polycarp’s use of *ἐντυγχάνω* was influenced by its Apocryphal appearances.<sup>23</sup> In addition, almost

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<sup>21</sup> In the section of the letter preserved only in Latin, Polycarp also employs the second person plural imperative *orate* (12.3). It is impossible to know what Greek lies behind this, but given the semantic range of *oro* and the context and addressees here, it seems much more likely to be from *δέομαι* or *προσεύχομαι* than *ἐντυγχάνω*.

<sup>22</sup> I have chosen the set of texts that would later become canonical scripture as the basis for comparison regarding *ἐντυγχάνω* for a largely practical reason: much scholarly work has been devoted to examining *Phil.* for evidence as to whether or not Polycarp was familiar with these texts, and so whether or not they might reasonably be looked to as potentially shaping Polycarp’s vocabulary usage. As far as I have been able to determine, very little work has been done to determine whether *Phil.* shows evidence of knowledge of extracanonical early Christian texts (aside from the other texts of the ‘Apostolic Fathers’), or indeed of texts not typically identified as Jewish or Christian. In Hartog’s 2002 volume on Polycarp and the New Testament, only three pages are devoted to allusions to non-NT material, and all of it is from Hebrew Scriptures. Paul Hartog, *Polycarp and the New Testament: The Occasion, Rhetoric, Theme, and Unity of the Epistle to the Philippians and Its Allusions to New Testament Literature* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 174–7. It might very well be that a comparison of Polycarp’s use of *ἐντυγχάνω* with a different set of texts would reveal something of great interest for our consideration of this verb in relation to widows’ prayer practices. However if we wished to extrapolate something more specific about Polycarp’s usage of *ἐντυγχάνω* from that comparison, we would need to be able to demonstrate that *Phil.* shows some sort of connection to, or awareness of, the texts serving as comparanda. For more on Polycarp’s potential references to texts of the Septuagint, the New Testament, and the Apostolic Fathers, see Hartog, *Polycarp’s Epistle*; Hartog, *Polycarp and the New Testament*; Berding, *Polycarp and Paul*; Kenneth Berding, “Polycarp’s Use of *1 Clement*: An Assumption Reconsidered,” *J ECS* 19 (2011): 127–39; Michael Holmes, “Polycarp of Smyrna, *Letter to the Philippians*,” *ExpTim* 118 (2006): 53–63; Boudewijn Dehandschutter, “Polycarp’s Epistle to the Philippians: An Early Example of ‘Reception,’” in *The New Testament in Early Christianity: la reception des écrits néotestamentaires dans le christianisme primitive*, ed. J.-M. Sevrin, BETL 86 (Leuven: Peeters, 1989), 275–91.

<sup>23</sup> See Hartog, *Polycarp’s Epistle*, 53–5 for a discussion of various scholars’ positions regarding Polycarp’s use of the Hebrew Bible.

all of the Apocryphal references invoke a different semantic range of the verb than that employed by Polycarp.<sup>24</sup>

The New Testament references, however, are of more interest, particularly given that *Phil.* “quotes more documents now in the New Testament than any other work of its era,” and Jefford describes the text as being “inundated” with allusions to the New Testament.<sup>25</sup>

Ἐντυγχάνω is used only four times in the books of the New Testament: three times in Romans (8:27, 34; 11:2) and once in Hebrews (7:25).<sup>26</sup> In all four New Testament references, God is the entity with whom someone is interceding, as is implicitly the case in *Phil.* 4.3. Those who are doing the interceding in the New Testament references—those in the position parallel to that in which Polycarp places the widows—are the Spirit (Rom 8:27), Christ Jesus (Rom 8:34), Elijah (Rom 11:2), and again Jesus, this time figured as the high priest (Heb 7:25). Of these Elijah is the only (solely) human figure, and he is also the only one who intercedes ‘against’ someone (κατὰ τοῦ Ἰσραήλ, unsuccessfully). The other three instances concern intercessions ‘on behalf of’ (ὑπὲρ) people (compared to the widows’ perhaps more neutral περὶ, ‘concerning’).

Again, a proverbial mountain should not be built out of the stuff of this relative molehill of a singly occurring verb. Nevertheless, it remains intriguing that Polycarp employs a verb to refer to the widows’ activity that is used most frequently in the texts that would become the New

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<sup>24</sup> The references in 1 Macc relate to the meaning of bringing charges or petitions against someone; those in 2 Macc relate to the meaning of reading. The only related use is that in Wis, where ἐντυγχάνω is used to mean “to pray” (“...one must rise before the sun to give you thanks, and must pray [ἐντυγχάνειν] to you at the dawning of the light.”) Here the people doing the praying to the Lord are his “sons” (οἱ υἱοὶ σου).

<sup>25</sup> As quoted in Hartog, *Polycarp’s Epistle*, 55.

<sup>26</sup> A variation of the verb is also used in Rom 8:26 (ὑπερεντυγχάνω), with the same subject as in v.27 (the Spirit). The references from Paul are particularly interesting to us as *Phil.* is “filled with Pauline quotations and allusions” (ibid.). Scholars agree more consistently that Polycarp was familiar with Romans than with Hebrews, and Polycarp himself invokes Paul’s name, authority, and letter-writing habits on several occasions (3.2, 9.1, 11.2, 11.3). Ibid., 65–8; Hartog, *Polycarp and the New Testament*, 177–9, 190.

Testament of the intermediary activity of divine entities.<sup>27</sup> The suggestiveness is heightened when we consider that Polycarp makes no references to the (Holy) Spirit in the entire letter.<sup>28</sup> Activities that are pneumatological in the New Testament are often attributed elsewhere in *Phil.* (notably to Jesus).<sup>29</sup> I do not suggest that Polycarp regards widows as being somehow divine in a way parallel to the Spirit or Jesus. I would argue, however, that in the text's use of *ἐντυγχάνω* we can glimpse a clear respect for the widows' intercessory efforts for the community—and a clear indication that they possess some higher level of status and/or authority.

#### A Scene of Sacrifice: Widows as Altar of God

Polycarp's reference to widows as altar follows upon his references to (encouraged) prayer to God and (discouraged) improper speech to other people. Both of these are forms of verbal communication directed outwards, to others.<sup>30</sup> It precedes mention of what we might call interior communication—"reasonings," "thoughts," and "things hidden in the heart" (4.3). These interior communications are said to not escape God's notice, that is, God pays attention to all of the thoughts and secrets a person—here specifically a widow—holds within herself. How does Polycarp's use of the image of widows as an altar of God relate to these interior and exterior communications had by widows? How does the comparison of widows to an altar function in

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<sup>27</sup> Leaving aside the impossibly thorny issue of determining precisely how 'divine' Paul regards the 'Spirit' to be.

<sup>28</sup> Holmes, "Polycarp," 60.

<sup>29</sup> Speaking of this trend generally, Holmes argues that it suggests that where "Paul understands Christian existence primarily in terms of divine empowerment, Polycarp apparently views it more as a matter of human effort or achievement." Holmes does not specifically address the use of *ἐντυγχάνω* in relation to this matter (nor do any other scholars that I have found). *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Certainly prayer does not have to be conducted verbally. However *ἐντυγχάνω*'s connotations of conversation suggest verbal communication (whether spoken aloud or silently).

Polycarp's text? What work does it do, and how does it fit with the text's portrait of, and exhortations to, widows?

Polycarp does not explain explicitly how he wants the image to function. He invokes it without clarification of its meaning. This in itself is notable because he seems to presume that his audience will understand why he employs this particular figure of speech, and will know upon what discourses he draws in so doing. Perhaps this is an image with which Polycarp assumes his intended audience will be familiar. Despite Polycarp's lack of explanation we can discern some points about what the work of the image does, and what it might allow us to glimpse about widows.

Polycarp develops the image by invoking the sacrificial concept of 'inspecting for blemishes,' a move which orients the image toward questions of worthiness of participants but which also leaves unresolved the question of precisely who or what must be worthy (and for what), and what role the altar plays in this worthiness. If widows are the altar, then what is being inspected, and why? Who is doing the inspecting? Of what would the many possible elements of the process of sacrifice consist? Osiek identifies the widows as the 'things' being inspected, making them both altar and offering.<sup>31</sup> While this is certainly an interpretation that the indefiniteness of the text allows, as we shall see it is not the only one. The brief figurative passage provides no single set of correspondences, instead producing a shifting network of

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<sup>31</sup> Osiek, "Widow as Altar," 167.

If Polycarp speaks here of widows as being inspected for blemishes, then he holds them to a high standard of some sort of cleanliness, or purity. As we have noted above, while marital / sexual purity (in particular the maintenance of chastity) is a frequent matter of concern in texts on widows, it does not seem to be a matter of concern for Polycarp here. Could it be that marital / sexual purity is in play here through his concern that widows be inspected for blemishes? That is certainly a possibility. After all, Israelite priests—who along with sacrificial victims are spoken of most frequently in the Septuagint as needing to be without blemish—were held to a certain standard of marital / sexual purity as well, as detailed in Lev 21:1–15. However, the language of 'blemish' is not used in the Septuagint when speaking of the priests' marital and sexual regulations. I would argue that given Polycarp's general inattention to concern for marital / sexual purity for widows, and focus instead on concern regarding prayer / speech, that there is no reason to regard this invocation of 'inspection for blemishes' as referencing a particular sort of marital or sexual purity for widows.

resonances that allow this scene of sacrifice to function in multiple different ways, all of which make clear the significant place of widows and their work for the community. A consideration of the verb ‘to inspect for blemishes,’ and its Levitical roots, will help us to explore further some of these possible figurative resonances.

### *Inspection for Blemishes*

*Phil.* 4.3 places us in the realm of figurative sacrifice with the use of two brief phrases: *θυσιαστήριον θεοῦ* and *πάντα μωμοσκοπεῖται*. Both of these phrases are dependent on the participle ‘knowing,’ indicating that they are both pieces of knowledge that widows already have, or should have. They know that they are an altar of God, and they know that all things are inspected for blemishes. The identification of widows as altar of God forms the germ from which the scene develops. The widows are not a pagan *βωμός* altar, used in the false worship of idols, but the *θυσιαστήριον θεοῦ*—an altar of the one true God, used in his proper sacrificial worship. To what aspect of this sacrificial worship does the text draw our attention? That of inspecting for blemishes.

The highly unusual vocabulary word meaning ‘to inspect for blemishes’ (*μωμοσκοπέω*) locates us solidly within the realm of (figurative) Israelite sacrifice.<sup>32</sup> It and its cognates are used only twice in texts that pre-date Polycarp in all Greek literature searchable via the *TLG* (Philo’s *De agricultura* 130.5, and 1 Clement 41.2), and in both of those cases they are explicitly used to

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<sup>32</sup> I wish to remind us here of a point made in the introduction. In what follows I will make reference multiple times to Israelite sacrificial practices and will draw upon references from the Pentateuch in particular. It is important to keep in mind that here I refer specifically to textual prescriptions for what some author(s), editor(s), etc. thought Israelite sacrificial practices should look like, and not actual Israelite sacrificial practices themselves. I draw here—as did Polycarp—on discourses written about sacrifice, which are in and of themselves interpretations of sacrificial practices.

denote the act of inspecting for blemishes as part of the Israelite sacrificial process. The verb continues to be used largely in a figurative sense in Greek Christian literature after Polycarp. A *TLG* search revealed no instances of the verb or its cognates being used by any non-Christian authors, besides its initial use by Philo, through the fifth century CE (the end date for the search I conducted). *Μωμοσκοπέω*, it seems, is an extremely specific verb used to denote the inspection for blemishes conducted in Israelite sacrifice, but which from its first appearance takes on a figurative cast. As we will see below, both Philo and Clement of Rome employ it to speak specifically about the process of Israelite sacrifice, but they do so in order to make figurative arguments about the realms of right belief and proper conduct.

This context suggests that the altar of God with which Polycarp identifies widows is an altar in the Temple or Tabernacle. While the compound verb *μωμοσκοπέω* does not appear in the Septuagint or the New Testament, the words for blemish and blemish-free (*μῶμος* / *ἄμωμος*, hereafter designated (*α*)*μωμος*) appear a great number of times, principally in Levitical discussions of sacrificial offerings.<sup>33</sup> As I have noted, one understanding of *Phil.* 4.3 sees the

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<sup>33</sup> (*Α*)*μωμος* occurs quite frequently in the Septuagint. The majority of occurrences take place in the Pentateuch, in descriptions of the animals required for particular sacrifices. Leviticus 22 also discusses the need for priests to be blemish-free. The term occurs beyond the Pentateuch as well, frequently in Psalms and wisdom literature. Here it tends to carry more of a sense of blame or blamelessness, as opposed to a physical defect as in the sacrificial regulations of the Pentateuch. This usage is similar to the usage of Polycarp. A *TLG* search reveals the following occurrences of (*α*)*μωμος* in the Septuagint. I have noted where the reference is to priests, or to something else; all other references are to sacrificial animals:

Exod 29:1, 38

Lev 1:3, 10, 3:1, 6, 9, 4:3, 14, 23, 28, 32, 5:15, 18, 25, (6:6), 9:2, 3, 12:6, 14:10 (2x), 21:17 (priest), 18 (priest), 21(2x, priest), 23 (priest), 22:19, 20, 21 (2x), 25, 23:12, 18 (2x), 24:19 (person who has been injured), 20 (same)

Num 6:14 (3x), 7:88, 15:24, 19:2 (2x), 28:3, 9, 11, 19, 27, 31, 29:2, 8, 13, 17, 20, 23, 26, 29, 32, 36

Deut 15:21(2x), 17:1;

2 Kgs (2 Sam) 14:25 (Absalom), 22:24 (David), 31 (God's way), 33 (same)

Ps 14 (15):2 (good people), 17 (18):24 (speaker of Psalm), 31 (30, God's way), 33 (32, same), 18 (19):8 (law of God), 14 (13, speaker of Psalm), 36 (37):18 (good people), 63 (64):5 (same), 100 (101):2 (God's way), 6 (good people), 118 (119):1 (same), 80 (heart of speaker);

Prov 11:5 (good people), 20 (same), 20:7 (same), 22:11 (same)

Song 4:7 (beloved of speaker)

Ezek 28:15 (King of Tyre), 43:22, 23 (2x), 25, 45:18, 23, 46:4 (2x), 6 (2x), 13

Dan 1:4 (2x, noble young male Israelites)



widows as altar as that being inspected for blemishes, and this is indeed a possible understanding. It is worthy of note, however, that (α)μωμος is used neither in the Septuagint nor the New Testament to describe an altar, which suggests that if Polycarp speaks in *Phil.* 4.3 of the *altar* as inspected for blemishes, this would mark a departure from the notion of ‘blemish’ as it appears in Israelite sacrificial prescriptions.<sup>34</sup>

In what follows I will briefly consider the Levitical and New Testament usages of (α)μωμος, and the ways in which both Philo and Clement of Rome employ μωμοσκοπέω and its cognates, in order to help us better see additional ways of understanding ‘inspecting for blemishes.’ These additional ways will in turn help us to flesh out potential understandings of Polycarp’s use of the image of widows as altar. I do not wish to argue for a direct literary dependence of Polycarp on any of these sources. Rather, I wish to consider how, if placed alongside Polycarp, these usages might illuminate potential ways of reading Polycarp’s text—and so potential ways of understanding his use of the image of widows as an altar of God.<sup>35</sup>

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Wis 2:23 (“us”)

Sir 11:31 (actions), 33 (bad people), 18:15 (actions), 20:24 (a lie), 31:8 (rich person), 33:16 (speaker), 23 (honor), 40:19 (wife), 47:20 (Solomon)

1 Macc 4:42 (priests)

<sup>34</sup> In fact, they are never used to describe any object. Their usages are overwhelmingly with animals and with people; the only exceptions in the Septuagint are a couple of references to God’s way and God’s law, and a couple of references to actions.

<sup>35</sup> A brief note here on the grammatical uncertainties of the phrase πάντα μωμοσκοπεῖται: the text clearly establishes neither what is being designated with “all things,” nor who or what is doing the inspecting. Πάντα is a neuter plural subject of the singular verb μωμοσκοπεῖται, which is middle/passive. The closest neuter noun preceding πάντα is θυσιαστήριον, “altar.” This suggests that perhaps πάντα could designate ‘all the altars,’ but two factors argue against this: First, the language of ‘blemish’ is never used in the Septuagint or New Testament in conjunction with altars (or any object), but only with people and animals. (Perhaps then Polycarp is thinking here of the widows as people, but then why not use a feminine form to designate “all”?) Second, in identifying widows as the altar of God in the preceding clause, Polycarp has specifically identified them as a singular altar, so that a plural verb is completed by a singular object—perhaps emphasizing the true altar of God in comparison to the myriad false pagan altars. Given this construction which emphasizes the singular nature of the altar, it would be odd for Polycarp to immediately change to a plural designation with πάντα. Perhaps πάντα refers back to the earlier πάντων, which could be masculine (and so be translated ‘everyone,’) or neuter (and so be translated ‘all things’ or ‘everything’). In this case, that which is inspected for blemishes is also that about which widows intercede with God. Whether Polycarp was

The usages of *(α)μωμος* in the Pentateuch, and particularly Leviticus, are located in passages prescribing the ‘actual’ sacrificial practice that Polycarp, Philo and Clement draw upon in their more figurative usages of ‘inspecting for blemishes.’ Chapter 21 and 22 of Leviticus are particularly rich in this vocabulary, and both employ *(α)μωμος* in discussions of sacrificial cleanliness and acceptability—in Lev 21, that of priests for making offerings at God’s altar,<sup>36</sup> and in Lev 22, that of the animals who are to be sacrificed.<sup>37</sup> For both priests and animals, having a blemish of some sort or another disqualifies them from participation in the sacrifice, and so it is these participants who would need to be inspected. The blemishes named in Leviticus are physical, and those named for priests are similar to those named for animals. In order to be acceptable, both the priests and the animals must be physically perfect. As part of this perfection, the priests and the animals discussed in Lev 22 must be male (and ‘perfect’ males at that, with fully intact genitalia).<sup>38</sup>

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intentionally being imprecise here is impossible to say, but the lack of clarity regarding who or what is being inspected, and who or what is doing the inspecting, opens up many possibilities for interpretation.

<sup>36</sup> “The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to Aaron and say: No one of your offspring throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the food of his God. For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, one who is blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, or one who has a broken foot or a broken hand, or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a blemish in his eyes or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles. No descendant of Aaron the priest who has a blemish shall come near to offer the Lord’s offerings by fire; since he has a blemish, he shall not come near to offer the food of his God. He may eat the food of his God, of the most holy as well as of the holy. But he shall not come near the curtain or approach the altar, because he has a blemish, that he may not profane my sanctuaries; for I am the Lord; I sanctify them” (Lev 21:16–23).

<sup>37</sup> “The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to Aaron and his sons and all the people of Israel and say to them: When anyone of the house of Israel or of the aliens residing in Israel presents an offering, whether in payment of a vow or as a freewill offering that is offered to the Lord as a burnt offering, to be acceptable in your behalf it shall be a male without blemish, of the cattle or the sheep or the goats. You shall not offer anything that has a blemish, for it will not be acceptable in your behalf. When anyone offers a sacrifice of well-being to the Lord, in fulfillment of a vow or as a freewill offering, from the herd or from the flock, to be acceptable it must be perfect; there shall be no blemish in it. Anything blind, or injured, or maimed, or having a discharge or an itch or scabs—these you shall not offer to the Lord or put any of them on the altar as offerings by fire to the Lord. ...[lists several other physical defects]...since they are mutilated, with a blemish in them, they shall not be accepted in your behalf” (Lev 22:17–25).

<sup>38</sup> While female animal sacrifices could be made (see Lev 3:1, 6, where both male and female are specified as needing to be without blemish), the particular sacrifices spoken of in Lev 22, where the sorts of blemishes are enumerated, require male animals. In general, as discussed in Leviticus the sacrifices that were more holy required

In contrast to Leviticus, the New Testament usages of  $(\alpha)\mu\omega\mu\omicron\varsigma$  never refer specifically to physical blemishes of a priest or sacrificial victim.<sup>39</sup> In these references the words generally refer rather to the conduct and state of being proper to followers of Christ (in the sense of being ‘blameless’), and also to the perfection of Christ himself. These more figurative uses of the words are not new creations of the New Testament authors; the existing scriptural traditions of Psalms and wisdom literature had already begun to employ them in more figurative ways.

To critically examine each New Testament use of  $(\alpha)\mu\omega\mu\omicron\varsigma$  would carry us too far afield of Polycarp’s use of the image of widows as an altar of God. It is not immediately evident in all of the references that the word’s use is drawing upon its sacrificial senses (Heb 9:14 being the clear exception), nor is it evident that Polycarp had any of these verses in mind when he composed *Phil.* 4.3. Furthermore, what constitutes a blemish, and what being without blemish looks like, differs amongst these texts in important ways. However, their frequent usages of  $(\alpha)\mu\omega\mu\omicron\varsigma$  to refer to Christ’s followers—the Christian community—is potentially illuminating for our consideration of Polycarp’s text.

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only male animals. Polycarp’s widows are not male, and yet by identifying them as the altar of God and connecting them with this notion of inspecting for blemishes, he places them in the midst of a holy transaction whose participants—victims and officiants alike—are overwhelmingly gendered male. We might think here of ways in which widows might fall more towards the ‘male’ end of the spectrum than other people identified now as women, as was briefly discussed in the introduction. Is there a way in which the greater maleness of widows makes it safer for them to be present in this scene of sacrifice? We will encounter this same puzzle when we turn to Methodius in chapter three, who also clearly places the widows-as-altar in an overwhelmingly male dominated sacrificial space.

<sup>39</sup> The usages of  $(\alpha)\mu\omega\mu\omicron\varsigma$  in the New Testament are as follows; in parentheses are what is said to be (or should be) blemished or without blemish:

Eph 1:4 (“us”), 5:27 (the church)

Phil 2:15 (“you” / children of God)

Col 1:22 (“you”)

Heb 9:14 (Christ)

1 Pet 1:19 (Christ / a lamb)

2 Pet 2:13 (false prophets), 3:14 (“you”)

Jud 24 (“you”)

Rev 14:5 (the 144,000 who have been redeemed)

Perhaps we might see in *Phil.* 4.3 a sense that it is the community (which is, after all the focus of the letter) that must be inspected for blemishes. As noted above (n. 35) one might read the *πάντα* that are inspected for blemishes as referring back to the *πάντων* about whom (or which) widows intercede with God. In saying that “all things are inspected for blemishes,” perhaps Polycarp is again reminding the community of the need for right behavior and belief—and in reminding widows that they should know of this inspection, perhaps he is exhorting widows to attend to whether the community members are living to that standard. Perhaps the widows might be understood as inspectors for figurative blemishes, ensuring the worthiness of community members before they intercede concerning them with God, the ultimate inspector of blemishes. If this is so, then widows stand in a position of great importance for the continued spiritual health of the community.

Like the New Testament references, Polycarp does not speak at all of actual physical blemishes in *Phil.* 4.3. Instead his usage of the notion of blemishes, and inspecting for them, might be called figurative—like the figurative image of widows as an altar. The blemishes Polycarp references are not outwardly physical. Nonetheless, in this instance being figurative does not make the impact of their presence any less real. Whatever these blemishes consist of, none of them escapes God’s notice—“not reasonings, nor thoughts, nor any of the things hidden in the heart” (4.3).<sup>40</sup> Their presence would make impossible the successful engagement in whatever process Polycarp is figuring with ‘sacrifice,’ much as the presence of a physical blemish on a sacrificial victim would disqualify it for sacrifice in the Levitical sacrificial prescriptions. If we turn to the two uses of *μωμοσκοπέω* and its cognates that pre-date Polycarp

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<sup>40</sup> As full as *Phil.* 4.3 is with references to communication of various sorts it would make sense to see these acts of communication as what is inspected, and we will explore that possibility below.

in Philo and Clement of Rome, we will see that both authors refer more specifically to the Israelite sacrificial process than does Polycarp. But like Polycarp, they do so in order to make a figurative point about something other than the physical perfection of priests or sacrificial victims.

Philo's employment of the notion of inspecting for blemishes more obviously resembles Polycarp's use than does Clement's. Philo too points to the importance of blemishes that are interior, blemishes of the mind and soul. In his *De agricultura*, he uses the rejection of Cain's offering to discuss what makes a right offering. In addition to "holy and perfect victims," the offering must be apportioned properly. Philo reads this allegorically to refer to the proper apportioning of God's honor—it is not right to honor all things as made by God, but rather only good things. It is absurd, says Philo, to care so much for the physical perfection of priests and sacrificial animals, and "to appoint men, and to say whom and how many ought to be appointed for this business, whom some call inspectors of blemishes (οὓς ἔνιοι μωμοσκόπους ὀνομάζουσιν),<sup>41</sup> to take care that the victims may be brought to the altar without any blemish or imperfection, and yet to allow the opinions which are held concerning God to be in confusion in the soul of each individual, and not to take care that they are discriminated by the rule of right reason" (*De agr.* 130).<sup>42</sup>

As inspectors of blemishes discern physical blemishes, so the "rule of right reason" (κανόνι ὀρθοῦ λόγου) ought to discern spiritual blemishes in beliefs concerning God. It makes no sense, says Philo, to care so much about discerning physical blemishes on sacrificial victims, if one does not also thoroughly inspect "the opinions which are held concerning God." We see here

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<sup>41</sup> Philo employs an adjectival cognate of μωμοσκοπέω. Greek text obtained from the *TLG*.

<sup>42</sup> Translation from C.D. Yonge, *The Works of Philo Judaeus: The Contemporary of Josephus*, 4 vols. (London: Bohn, 1854–1855). Obtained online from: <http://www.earlyjewishwritings.com/text/philo/book11.html>.

a notion similar to that of Polycarp. For both, it is not (only, in the case of Philo) the physical bodies of the priests and animals involved in sacrifice that must be blemish free, but more importantly matters connected to the workings of reason and of the interior heart or soul.

Clement of Rome too employs the notion of inspecting for blemishes in order to make a point about something other than the physical perfection of priests and victims.<sup>43</sup> In his case he draws not on the notion of blemishes *per se* so much as on inspection for blemishes as being one step in an orderly process prescribed by God. He emphasizes the importance of following God's instructions in order to maintain harmonious order, particularly in relation to debates over who holds positions of authority and how they ought to go about the proper execution of their duties. Clement employs the analogy of the orderly process of sacrifice to exhort his audience to stay in their own appointed positions and not violate the communal order and plan as set out by God: "a sacrifice is not made in just any place, but before the sanctuary on the altar, after the sacrificial animal has been inspected for blemishes (*μωμοσκοπηθῆεν*) by both the high priest and the ministers mentioned earlier. Thus, those who do anything contrary to his plan bear the penalty of death" (41:2–3).<sup>44</sup>

Clement's employment of the notion of inspecting for blemishes does not bear immediate similarities to Polycarp's usage of it, in the way that Philo's did. Clement does not invoke notions of spiritual, or interior, blemishes of reason or heart. Nevertheless, there is a way in which the rhetorical thrust of Clement's usage resembles the overarching rhetorical thrust of *Phil.* 4.3 and indeed the letter as a whole: it is focused on the importance of maintaining proper behavior in a Christian community, behavior that upholds a particular established order. Perhaps

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<sup>43</sup> Although the authorship of the letter is in doubt, for expediency's sake I will continue to refer to the author as Clement of Rome.

<sup>44</sup> Greek text and English translation from Ehrman, *Apostolic Fathers*, 1.108–9.

we might see in Polycarp's use of *μωμοσκοπέω* as well not only a reminder of the importance of avoiding interior blemishes, but also the important role that doing so plays in the proper functioning of the Christian community.

Attending to this unusual vocabulary of *μωμοσκοπέω* gives us a more textured sense of Polycarp's analogical use of the broader world of sacrifice through his passing reference.<sup>45</sup> It also adds for us to the multiple resonances possible between Polycarp's scene of sacrifice, and the Christian community—especially the work of widows within the community. We have considered the possibility that it is the members of the community, about whom widows intercede with God, that are inspected for blemishes. We have seen that, like Philo, the blemishes of which Polycarp speaks are not physical, but that does not make their impact any less real. We

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<sup>45</sup> The use of *μωμοσκοπέω* in a figurative sense continued in Greek Christian authors after Polycarp, including in Clement of Alexandria, Origen, John Chrysostom, and the Apostolic Constitutions. Clement of Alexandria speaks of those who according to the law were “inspectors of blemishes of the sacrificial animals” (οἱ τῶν ἱερείων μωμοσκόποι), interpreting the concept to refer to skilled persons who are able to inspect the soul and distinguish propension (ὄρεξις) from desire (ἐπιθυμία) (*Strom.* 4.18.117). Origen employs the verb to refer to the need to inspect oneself and one's thoughts in prayer (βαπτολογοῦμεν δὲ, ὅτε μὴ μωμοσκοποῦντες ἑαυτοὺς ἢ τοὺς ἀναπεμπομένους τῆς εὐχῆς λόγους λέγομεν τὰ διεφθαρμένα ἔργα ἢ λόγους ἢ νοήματα; “We babble when we do not scrutinize ourselves and the words in which we offer our prayer, but speak of perishable works or words or thoughts,” *De or.* 21.1).

Origen also makes reference to the practice of inspecting for blemishes in *Comm. Rom.* 9.1.7, in the course of a lengthy discussion of Romans 12:1 (although we cannot know if he used the verb in question as this text is preserved only in Latin). In the broader passage Origen presents a “spiritual understanding” of “the law of the sacrifices contained in Leviticus” (9.1.3), explaining how it is that one ought to properly present oneself as a “living sacrifice” to God, and the ways in which this sacrifice is made “holy and acceptable” through not just physical perfection but also moral purification. When Origen makes reference to the practice of inspecting for blemishes, he employs two levels of physical perfection in the animals (1. cleanliness, and 2. lack of defects) to refer to physical and behavioral / psychic perfection in continent people (1. maintaining continence, and 2. being free from things like slander, or pride): “On the other hand, if the bodies of virgins or of the continent are polluted by the blemish of pride or by the stains of greed or by the defilement of slanderous speech or lying, they must not be supposed to have offered a sacrifice that is holy and pleasing to God solely on the basis of the virginity of the body. For even in the law, when a sacrifice was offered, it was carefully inspected by the priest, not only to see whether it came from the clean animals, but to make sure it did not possess a defect in its eye or ears or feet, lest a lame or one-eyed or plucked animal should be removed from the divine altar. So, then, the sacrifice that is living, holy, and pleasing to God, and must be offered in a reasonable manner, is examined and thoroughly scrutinized in all its members” (*Comm. Rom.* 9.1.7). This passage is of particular interest to us because it employs the sacrificial analogy in a way extremely similar to Polycarp. Origen speaks specifically of some of the same ‘blemishes’ that Polycarp did in relation to widows (slander, lying, greed), and he speaks of them specifically in relation to continent persons, a group to which widows belonged. Where Polycarp and Origen differ in their use of this analogy is that Origen makes specific reference to the importance of physical purity for the continent (while noting that it is not enough), while Polycarp, as we have seen, makes no specific reference to the marital / sexual state of widows.

have considered that perhaps as in Clement the importance of inspecting for blemishes reinforces the importance of ordered communal conduct.

But ‘inspecting for blemishes’ was only one of the phrases that invoked the world of Israelite sacrifice; what of the image of widows as an altar of God? In contrast to the various possibilities for what is being inspected in Polycarp’s figurative references to sacrifice, the widows as altar identification is specifically made. There is no doubt about what is the altar of God. I suggest that if we take this figurative identification as grounding the figurative use of sacrifice more broadly, we will see an additional way of understanding widows and their work that points to their importance.

### Prayer and Sacrifice

In considering the exhortations to widows in *Phil.* 4.3 above, we saw how Polycarp is principally concerned with widows’ speech and prayer. If widows are the altar of God, then it would make sense that what goes up from them to God—namely, their prayers—would be analogous to the burning sacrifice, the smoke from which rises up to God. I suggest that *Phil.* 4.3 presents the widows’ speech and prayers as comparable to or figurative of sacrifice. In so doing, I argue that the text participates in a longstanding discourse in Jewish and Christian sources<sup>46</sup> that connects the activity of prayer with the activity of sacrifice, seeing them as activities that go

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<sup>46</sup> Such discourse is present in ‘pagan’ sources as well. Everett Ferguson’s article “Spiritual Sacrifice in Early Christianity and its Environment” is a treasure trove of references from ‘pagan,’ Jewish, and Christian sources, many of which illustrate the strong connections between prayer and other forms of ‘rational’ worship and sacrifice—for example, the fourth century CE philosopher Sallustius’s remark that “prayers divorced from sacrifices are only words, prayers with sacrifices are animated words, the word giving power to the life and the life animation to the word” (a position which we must imagine was developed in the context of the growth of Christianity and the ongoing debates about the usefulness of sacrifice). Everett Ferguson, “Spiritual Sacrifice in Early Christianity and its Environment,” *ANRW* 23.2:1151–89. See Laura Nasrallah, “The Embarrassment of Blood: Early Christians and Others on Sacrifice, War, and Rational Worship,” in *Ancient Mediterranean Sacrifice*, eds. Jennifer Wright Knust and Zsuzsanna Várhelyi (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 142–66, and Daniel C. Ullucci, *The Christian Rejection of Animal Sacrifice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).



hand in hand, as types of one another, or seeing one (prayer) as a substitute for the other (sacrifice). A brief consideration of this discourse will help to ground our further examination of Polycarp's text.

Both prayer and sacrifice are sets of practices engaged in by humans that may be understood<sup>47</sup> as somehow cultivating a relationship with the divine—or at least as attempting to get the attention of the divine. Many scholars have conceived of the comparison of prayer to sacrifice in Jewish and Christian sources as being a substitutionary matter in which prayer (or other more 'spiritual' matters such as obedience, or a good heart) is understood as a substitute for sacrifice after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE.<sup>48</sup> Certainly the rabbinic literature is rich with references, but the discourse is rooted and developed in texts in the Hebrew Scriptures written long prior to the Second Temple's destruction.<sup>49</sup> Throughout this discourse, the relationship of practices of prayer to practices of sacrifice was not always simply one in which one practice replaced another. At times the practices were seen as intertwined and often taking

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<sup>47</sup> I hesitate to say anything about the 'meaning' of sacrifice or prayer, given the widely divergent meanings that could be assigned to them by practitioners, observers, etc. Everett Ferguson and others have made arguments regarding a spiritual 'true meaning' of sacrifice and/or a progressive 'spiritualization' of sacrifice particularly with the advent of Christianity. However, I agree with Jonathan Klawans and Daniel Ullucci in their critiques of Ferguson and others who have made similar arguments—such arguments reproduce the rhetorical arguments of the ancient sources rather than examining and critiquing them. Ferguson, "Spiritual Sacrifice;" Jonathan Klawans, *Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple: Symbolism and Supersessionism in the Study of Ancient Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Ullucci, *Christian Rejection*.

<sup>48</sup> For example: "Following the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D., prayer became a legitimate substitute for sacrifice. The precentor in the synagogue was the substitute for the sacrificing priest in the temple. Not surprisingly, prayer in place of sacrifice became normative for Christianity." Thurston, "Widows as the 'Altar,'" 285, citing T.H. Gaster, "Sacrifices and Offerings," *IDB* 4:147–59.

<sup>49</sup> For example, 1 Sam 15:22: "And Samuel said, 'Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obedience to the voice of the Lord? Surely, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams;'" Ps 141:2: "Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice;" Hos 6:6: "For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings." For more references in Jewish literature see Ferguson, "Spiritual Sacrifice," 1156–62. For an extensive discussion of rabbinic 'substitutes' for sacrifice, including prayer, see Stefan C. Reif, *Judaism and Hebrew Prayer: New Perspectives on Jewish Liturgical History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 95–102. We will consider the notion of almsgiving as another type of or substitute for sacrifice in chapter four; see Anderson, *Charity*.

place together in a mutually enhancing way, and at times prayer was spoken of not as replacing sacrifice, but as being a sort of sacrifice.<sup>50</sup>

Out of this discourse comparing prayer with sacrifice emerges the first example I have been able to find of a person, or an aspect of a person, being compared explicitly with an altar. Everett Ferguson speaks of Philo of Alexandria as often putting ‘sacrifices and prayers’ together in his writing, showing that “they formed a natural pair in his thinking. Sacrifice is a medium of prayer and thanksgiving.”<sup>51</sup> In his *De specialibus legibus*, in the midst of a discussion of laws relating to the altar, Philo provides an allegorical interpretation of the altar, writing that “the true altar of God is the thankful soul of the wise person” (1.287). This text, which scholars have not yet to my knowledge brought into conversation with the Christian texts comparing widows to altars, is one of only two examples of Jewish texts I have found in which an explicit comparison is made between a person and an altar.<sup>52</sup> This same image of the souls of the good person being the altar on which prayers are offered as a sacrifice is also found in two famous Christian Alexandrians (both of whom postdate Polycarp), Clement and Origen.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> See Ferguson, “Spiritual Sacrifice;” Reif, *Judaism and Hebrew Prayer*; Anderson, *Charity* for examples. See also Klawans, *Purity*, particularly chapter six “The Purity of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple in Rabbinic Literature” for much relevant discussion. Klawans asserts that “...by appealing to the prophetic passages and other biblical precedents, it is clear that, for the rabbis, both prayer and acts of loving-kindness *always* coincided with, and were *always* more important than, sacrifice. And either can continue without it. Because of their insistence that prayer was an ancient part of the temple practice, the rabbis cannot be accused of replacing sacrifice with an extratemple act: in their view (whether true or not) one act that was performed in the temple—prayer—can continue, while another—sacrifice—cannot” (207).

<sup>51</sup> Ferguson, “Spiritual Sacrifice,” 1187.

<sup>52</sup> The second example is a much later text from Midrash Tanhuma, Vayishlach 6 in which a wife is compared to an altar: “R. Phinehas the priest, the son of Hama, declared: A woman who is modest in her home atones for her household, just as the altar brings atonement.” Samuel A. Berman, *Midrash Tanhuma-Yelammedenu: An English Translation of Genesis and Exodus from the Printed Version of Tanhuma-Yelammedenu with an Introduction, Notes, and Indexes* (Hoboken: KTAV, 1996), 210. This text also has not been referenced in discussing widows-as-altars, to my knowledge.

<sup>53</sup> “The altar, then, that is with us here, the terrestrial one, is the congregation of those who devote themselves to prayers. ...the sacrifice of the church is the word rising like smoke from holy souls, when the whole mind together with the sacrifice is unveiled to God. ...the righteous soul is the truly sacred altar and the incense rising from it holy

The discourse that compared prayer with sacrifice was a live one which early Christians drew upon in seeking to understand, explain and argue for their own developing practices (and to sort out how to understand the place of scripturally prescribed practices—namely, sacrifice—in their own lives). I argue that Polycarp’s reference to widows as an altar of God also draws upon this discourse. As we have seen, the image of widows as altar is surrounded in *Phil.* 4.3 by mentions of various sorts of communication—encouraged, discouraged, outward, and interior—all of which are connected through this passage’s waterfall of clauses to the notion of being inspected for blemishes. As we have also seen, it is the sacrificial victim that is most frequently spoken of as needing to be without blemish in order to be worthy to be sacrificed, in the Hebrew Scriptures.

I suggest that, according to Polycarp, it is widows’ speech that must be judged worthy. Of this speech, their intercessions are of particular importance, being the speech that links humans to the divine. The sacrifice of prayer ascends to God from the widows who are God’s altar. Polycarp’s use of the image of widows as altar draws upon the discourse comparing prayer with sacrifice in order to prescribe proper behavior for the widows, proper behavior focused notably in the area of widows’ speech / prayer. By conceiving of widows as the altar from which prayer ascends to God—and in recognizing the behavior of widows as significant enough that it needs to be shaped and controlled—Polycarp’s text acknowledges the importance of widows and their work for the community’s relationship to God.

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prayer” (Clement, *Strom.* 7.6; translation in Ferguson, “Spiritual Sacrifice”). Speaking of Celsus, Origen says that he “does not perceive that our altars are the spirit of righteous men from which truly and intellectually there arises a sweet smelling incense, prayers from a pure conscience” (*Cels.* 8.17, translation in Ferguson, “Spiritual Sacrifice”).

A clear distinction between these texts and the texts identifying widows as altars is that the three Alexandrians all identify the altar with a person’s soul, while the texts we are examining do not specify a particular part of the widow which is the altar—it seems that her whole person is. Given the long tradition (beginning with Paul) of identifying the church as a body made up of different members, it is intriguing to speculate as to whether widows might have sometimes been considered the ‘soul’ of the body of the church. Tertullian employs similar imagery in *De oratione* 28, but without identifying the soul as the altar (see chapter two).

### Widows, Sacrifice, and Community

We have seen multiple possible ways of reading Polycarp's figurative use of sacrifice in *Phil.* 4.3. Considering the notion of inspecting for blemishes, I noted that one interpretation of this passage sees widows as that being inspected, making them both the altar and the sacrifice upon it. I have suggested above two additional possibilities: that the Christian community is inspected, and that widows' prayers are inspected. With any of these connections, Polycarp's passage places the emphasis upon the need for the offering to be blemish-free, and upon the activity of inspecting for those blemishes. And with all of these possibilities, the text's connection of widows to an altar of God stands firm.

Who determines if the community—or the prayers, or the widows—are blemish-free? Here too the text offers us several possibilities. Above all, it is clear that the ultimate inspector of blemishes is God. It is God to whom the text refers when it says that “nothing has escaped his notice.” In addition to God, I suggest that the text offers us the possibility of widows as inspectors of blemishes as well. The text exhorts widows to attend to their own behavior and to the content of their speech, presenting them as engaging in a sort of self-inspection. If we understand the Christian community to be the sacrificial offering, then might we see widows here too as inspecting blemishes? I would argue yes—that the text here allows for the possibility of widows as attending to the conduct of community members, perhaps in order to ensure their worthiness for intercession.

From a brief passage centered on the image of widows as altar of God comes a mix of resonances between Israelite sacrifice and Christian community. God, the recipient of the sacrifice, is the ultimate inspector of blemishes; the community, those for whom the widows

intercede, may themselves be the sacrifice, and perhaps here we might also see the community as both inspectors and offerers of themselves. Widows, the altar of God, may also be understood as the sacrifice; as the offerers of the sacrifice of their prayers; and as inspectors of blemishes, both for themselves and for the community.

What is striking is that through all of these resonances, widows and their work remain crucial. They are at the center of this communication between the community and God, portrayed here with the language and logic of sacrifice—itsself one of the most important ritual methods of establishing and maintaining connections between humans and the divine. Widows alone are portrayed as providing the connecting link to God. What is perhaps even more striking is that when we step back and look at this entire shifting set of identifications, the cast of characters remains the same: God, the widows, and the community. As portrayed in this brief passage, these are the only participants needed for engaging in this sort of human-divine contact. There is no mention here of elders or deacons—or priests. The community more generally, but widows in particular, emerge from this passage as the principal ritual officiants.

Our consideration of Polycarp's brief use of the image of widows as altar in particular serves to further sharpen and reinforce our understanding of widows and their work derived from our examination of their treatment in the passage more generally. Earlier in this chapter we considered how Polycarp's presentation of widows aligns more closely with his presentation of deacons and elders than it does with his presentation of wives and virgins, in terms of his apparent lack of concern for their sexual purity, his attention to their access to community funds, and his presentation of their connection to God and to the community. This alignment of widows with deacons and elders clearly suggests that widows are understood in the text as figures of some importance in the community—figures with some amount of authority and responsibility.

In addition, we considered how Polycarp's employment of the verb *ἐντυγχάνω* for widows' intercessions with God suggests that in some way these are not your 'average pray-ers' as it were. The verb's usages in the texts that would become the New Testament suggest a particularly privileged relationship with God on the part of those who are interceding—the intercessors in the New Testament texts almost always being figures who are in some way themselves divine.

These privileged intercessors with God, persons of significance for the life of the Christian community, as the altar of God live at the very center of a communicative relationship between humans and God portrayed by Polycarp with the language and logic of Israelite sacrifice. As noted in the introduction, it might make sense to us as modern readers to assume that in portraying widows as altar Polycarp is working to objectify them (literally)—to present them as passive objects under the control of others, and so to obscure their importance. And yet, we do not see this sense emerging from Polycarp's text. Rather, as we have seen, while grounded in their identity and self-knowledge as altar of God widows also morph through analogical connections in which they may be understood as the sacrificial offering, the offerer of the sacrifice of their prayers, and also the ritual officiant who considers the worthiness of participants. Far from being passively under the control of others, in this figurative scene of sacrifice widows are arguably the most active participants—and the only participants portrayed as forming the central, communicative link between humans and God. When we bring this understanding of widows as altar back to our consideration of widows in comparison to elders and deacons, and widows as privileged intercessors, these pieces of evidence sharpen and reinforce one another, giving us a glimpse of women whose work on behalf of the Christian community is key for its ongoing relationship with God. Through Polycarp's work to shape widows' behavior runs an understanding of widows as women of sacerdotal significance.

## Chapter Two

### The Altar Must Be Pure: Widows as Altar in Tertullian's *Ad uxorem*

1.7.4 How depleting to faith, how great an obstacle for holiness second marriages are, the teaching of the church and the rule of the apostle make evident, since they do not permit the twice-married one to preside, nor do they allow a widow to be selected for the order<sup>1</sup> unless (she is) an *univira*. For the altar<sup>2</sup> of God must be displayed clean. All that is pure of the church is a reflection of (its) holiness.

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<sup>1</sup> *Adlegi in ordinem*. William P. Le Saint, S.J., in his 1951 translation of the text, regards this as a reference to the enrollment of widows in 1 Tim 5:9 and nothing more. He is at pains to argue against a more sacerdotal understanding: "Tertullian appears to speak of the 'ordination' of widows...but their selection was never by the rite of ordination properly so called." William P. Le Saint, *Tertullian: Treatises on Marriage and Remarriage*, ACW 13 (New York: Newman, 1951), 122 n.66. In contrast, Bonnie Bowman Thurston, while also regarding this as a reference to 1 Tim 5:9, reads it as providing evidence that Tertullian regarded 'enrollment' as referring to widows belonging to an "ecclesiastical order" that was parallel to the orders of male clergy (*Widows*, 84, 88; she also sees evidence for this in other texts of Tertullian). I am more inclined to agree with Thurston on Tertullian's general understanding of widows, but Tertullian's use of the term *ordo* is proof of nothing in and of itself. Scholars have often in the past attended to the use of vocabulary words such as *ordo* in debating whether or not widows counted as 'clergy.' I am not certain that this is the right debate to have, given the fluidity of ideas of 'clergy' and 'ordination' at this point in early Christian history.

<sup>2</sup> Tertullian uses *ara* here rather than *altaria*, which is intriguing. In an LLT-A search of Tertullian's corpus I found 31 instances in which he used *ara*, and this is one of only two uses that do not clearly refer to a pagan altar. (I employ the vocabulary of 'pagan' throughout this chapter to communicate Tertullian's disapproving sense of the idolatrous practices of the great majority of the inhabitants of the Roman Empire who were neither Jewish nor Christian). The other is *De oratione* 19, where Tertullian speaks also of the *aram Dei*: "Similarly, too, touching the days of Stations, most think that they must not be present at the sacrificial prayers, on the ground that the Station must be dissolved by reception of the Lord's Body. Does, then, the Eucharist cancel a service devoted to God, or bind it more to God? Will not your *Station* be more solemn if you have withal *stood* at God's *altar*?" (*ANF* 3:687). This reference clearly connects the *aram Dei* to Christian ritual practices. I also conducted an LLT-A search of Tertullian's corpus for altar\*, which revealed 23 instances of its use, only two of which (*Apol.* 25.59 and *Ad nat.* 2.17.5) clearly referred to pagan altars. The vast majority of his uses of *altaria* were in reference to the altar of the Jewish Temple and were direct quotations from, or references to, Hebrew Bible and New Testament texts (he also employed it in reference to the heavenly altar of Rev 6:9). As far as I was able to determine, Tertullian never uses *altaria* to depict contemporary Christian ritual practice—except in two instances, which are discussed below in this chapter, when he employs the *altaria* of the Temple figuratively to speak of Christian people and prayer practices.

Why did Tertullian use *ara* here when most of the time he used *ara* to denote pagan altars and *altaria* to denote the altars in God's Temple? It is of course impossible to say for sure—and it could have just been a stylistic choice of some sort—but several other possibilities present themselves. Perhaps he wished to subtly tar the image of Christian widows as altar with the brush of paganism, but this strikes me as unlikely. I think more of a clue is found when we note his use of *ara* for contemporary Christian practice in *De or.* 19, in comparison to the majority of the *altaria* references which are closely tied to scriptural depictions of the Jewish Tabernacle and Temple (no longer in existence in Tertullian's time). Perhaps for Tertullian *altaria* was principally the altar used in Jewish ritual sacrifice as depicted in scripture, while *ara* is more suitably used to discuss contemporary practice. If so, this use of *ara* in the widow-altar image contrasts with our other principal texts, and Methodius's *Symp.* in particular, which explicitly connect the widow-altar to the altar in the Tabernacle or Temple. One might speculate that this suggests that Tertullian's widow-altar was not entirely figurative, but reflected some more concrete role or practice involving widows in Christian ritual.

1.7.5 A priesthood of widowhood and the single life exists among the nations, obviously (because) of the rivalry of Satan. For the king of the age, the pontifex maximus, to marry again is a crime. How greatly does holiness please God, that even now the enemy strives after that, certainly not as someone partaking of what is good, but striving after the abuse of what is pleasing to God the Lord.<sup>3</sup>

For the second use of the widow-altar image we move from Polycarp's letter *To the Philippians* (*Phil.*), a second century (if written by Polycarp) Greek letter originating in Asia Minor with a communal inscribed audience, to an early third century Latin treatise originating in North Africa with an inscribed audience of one: Tertullian's *Ad uxorem* (*Ux.*). Tertullian's employment of the image shares several commonalities with Polycarp's. He uses it only once and there very briefly, a passing reference made, like Polycarp's, without any explanation of how it is to be understood. Like Polycarp, Tertullian seems to assume that his audience will understand his use of the image, again suggesting that the identification of widows with the altar of God was well-known enough to not require elucidation. Like Polycarp—arguably even more so—Tertullian's use of the image stands out in the text, in that he employs almost no other sacrificial or liturgical vocabulary of any kind elsewhere in this treatise. Like Polycarp, Tertullian clearly employs this image in a particular way, shaping it and trading on certain aspects of the altar image in order to support his own argument. Like all of our authors, Tertullian seems to employ the image in service of controlling behavior but does not employ the image to denigrate widows.

In further examining Tertullian's rhetorical employment of the image, it becomes clear that its similarities with Polycarp's usage largely end with those outlined above. While Polycarp's attention was not primarily focused on widows, widowhood—more precisely, the

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<sup>3</sup> My own translation, which follows the Latin quite closely (hence its somewhat wooden feel). Elsewhere in this chapter, unless otherwise noted, translations from *Ux.* outside of this passage are taken from Le Saint's translation; translations from other works of Tertullian are taken from the *ANF*, occasionally with some modifications by me.



decision to remain a widow and not remarry—is seemingly the single-minded focus of Tertullian’s treatise. Polycarp’s usage had little to say about marital / sexual purity, but rather was linked to widows’ prayer and speech (and to a lesser extent community finances), and employed the sacrificial logic of inspecting for blemishes in a way that shifted widows through various roles in sacrificial practice. In contrast, Tertullian invokes the image of widow as altar in support of one matter: purity. Tertullian attempts to direct the power of the image solely in this direction, perhaps hoping to obscure by inattention what else the image might convey—and does convey, as I argue below. Tertullian treats widows’ prayer practices elsewhere in the treatise and financial concerns related to widows are arguably a major concern of his, but he does not directly connect either of these matters to the altar image. Why not?

In what follows I suggest that the disconnection of the image of the widow as altar from the rhetorical framework of the rest of the text stems from a failure of the image to fit well with Tertullian’s persuasive aim. With an entire treatise devoted to widowhood, Tertullian had ample space to develop the image of the widow as altar should he so choose, but he does not. Instead, the primary figurative (and literal) representation Tertullian employs for the widow is as wife within a household. It is with this image, not the image of widow as altar, that Tertullian approaches the same three core concerns we have identified elsewhere: purity, material offerings and finances, and (to a far lesser extent, for Tertullian) prayer and speech. Through the two books of the treatise he constructs three possible marriages for the widow: the widow as wife of God, the widow as wife of a pagan man, and the widow as wife of a Christian man. It is for the first that he argues—likely, as we will see, at least in part in order to keep the financial resources of wealthy widows within the church. As Tertullian develops the images of widow as wife,

perhaps he simply does not want to muddy the waters by developing a different figurative representation of the widow—that of the altar of God—any further.

With such a brief mention it is impossible to speak beyond the hypothetical. Nonetheless, I argue that the brevity and disconnection of the use of the widow-altar image here goes beyond a simple desire to streamline figurative representations. When we consider Tertullian's brief invocation of the widow-altar image in comparison with his push to consider the widow as wife as well as his portrayal of pagan priestesses, we are given a glimpse of another way of conceiving of Christian widows—one which does not necessarily mesh well with Tertullian's intended rhetorical message. I suggest that the widow-altar image is too risky for Tertullian to develop because it leaves too much space for widows to be sacerdotally powerful, and it does not sufficiently answer the question of who controls the widows and their money (or perhaps answers it in a way that makes Tertullian uneasy). Why would Tertullian bother to use an image that does not fit well with his ultimate persuasive project? We cannot know for sure, but I hypothesize that the image was powerful and well-known enough that he wanted to be able to harness it to his project in some way. By employing the image in the way that he does Tertullian attempts to shape it to his own ends, while blunting its potentialities for subverting his aims.

In what follows I will first consider carefully Tertullian's rhetorical project in *Ux.* as a whole, focusing particularly on the images of the widow-as-wife that he develops. As we examine the work we will encounter and explore the three core concerns that I identified in the introduction and considered in the first chapter as well—those of purity, of material offerings and finances, and of prayer and speech. I will then focus more closely on Tertullian's use of the image of the widow as altar of God. I will read his employment of the image in the context of the overall rhetorical project of *Ux.* In the contrasts between the two I will argue that we may see the

potential of the image of the widow as altar for conveying a sense of widows as sacerdotally powerful and communally significant figures, the control of whom is perhaps too hazy for Tertullian's comfort.

### God as Second Husband: The Persuasive Aim of *Ad uxorem*

The main thrust of Tertullian's two-book treatise as he sets it forth is to convince his wife that should he die before her, she should not remarry—or, if she must remarry as he discusses in book two, it should be to another Christian man. The text is ostensibly focused entirely on one of the three core concerns: that of purity. While his primary inscribed audience is his wife, the treatise is clearly geared toward a broader audience of women as Tertullian says his topic is also worthy of consideration by “any other woman who belongs to God” (1.1.6). In so broadening the pool of women for whom his argument is relevant Tertullian makes clear that he considers widowhood to be the state in which all once-married Christian women should remain. Widowhood—in this case envisioned as occurring upon the death of Tertullian himself—is held up as a dignified and praiseworthy state, one in which the widow enters into the “angelic family” (1.4.4, my translation).

### Book One: No Remarriage!

Although Tertullian describes the topic of book one as what his wife's life should be like after his own death (1.1.1), most of the book is focused not on setting forth the proper life of the widow but rather on setting up and refuting arguments for remarriage. Tertullian presents three principal motivations for why a woman might want to remarry: fleshly desires, worldly desires, and the desire for posterity. Fleshly desires include not only the desire for sex (which is what

Tertullian presumably means by “the functions of maturity,” 1.4.3) but also desires for other sorts of security and companionship that a husband might provide for a wife (“on account of power and solace, or to guard her from wicked rumors,” 1.4.3, my translation). Worldly desires are principally desires for money and status that might be gained in remarriage. Desire for posterity reflects a desire to live on through one’s children, and to experience the joys and sorrows of parenthood (Tertullian calls this “the bitter sweet which comes of having children,” 1.5.1).<sup>4</sup> All three of these categories of desires reflect advantages that are gained through membership as a wife in an earthly household; perduring advantages that could aid a woman in maintaining socioeconomic security and even comfort. Tertullian’s presentation of desires of the world in particular make clear that the women at whom he is aiming his rhetoric are of relatively high status—women to whom it would make sense to speak of “spending extravagantly,” having a “mass of jeweled pendants,” and “lending luster” to one’s wedding with “mules from Gaul” or “porters from Germany” (1.4.7). Being the wife in a wealthy household, as Tertullian presents it at least, has real advantages.

What draw could choosing to remain a widow have, in comparison?<sup>5</sup> Drawing on 1 Cor 7, Tertullian makes very clear that celibacy—whether from birth or from the end of a marriage—is the spiritually desirable state, the state truly blessed by God. He dismisses all of the arguments from desires, saying that “the servant of God is above all such supposed necessities” (1.5.3).

Referencing Matt 6:25–34 / Luke 12:22–31, Tertullian reminds his audience that with regard to

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<sup>4</sup> This particular desire Tertullian will dismiss as “sheer nonsense”—in particularly lurid language he describes how widows will not be hampered by children at the resurrection; rather “at the first sound of the angel’s trumpet they will leap forth lightly, easily able to endure any distress or persecution, with none of the heaving baggage of marriage in their wombs or at their breasts” (1.5.32).

<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting that Tertullian does indeed present the options of remarriage or remaining a widow as a choice that could be made, not the result of demographic circumstance or economic necessity. This further points to an implied audience of elite women, as poorer women may have been less likely to have the option to remarry, and if they did have the opportunity, would likely have experienced more economic pressure to do so. See the introduction for some discussion of remarriage patterns in antiquity.

worldly desires a true Christian has the confidence that God will provide for any needs. “The widow whose life is stamped with the seal of God’s approval has need of nothing—except perseverance” (1.4.8)! A widow does not need an earthly household to take care of her material needs because God himself will provide.<sup>6</sup>

### *The Widows’ Prayers as Marriage Portion and Pillow Talk*

When he moves on to refute fleshly desires, Tertullian makes explicit what he had begun to imply in his refutation of worldly desires when he spoke of God as provider. A true Christian widow is indeed the wife of a household—God’s household. What need could a woman have for an earthly husband when she has God as her partner? Tertullian presents the relationship of widows with God in vivid language:

In fact, they choose rather to be married to God. They are God’s beautiful ones, God’s girls. With him they live, with Him they converse, with Him they spend day and night. Just as their prayers are dowries they confer to the Lord, so they obtain from him dignity as conjugal duties, however often they desire. Thus they have taken possession of their eternal good, a gift of the Lord, and now on earth, not marrying, they are considered as belonging to the angelic family. (1.4.4, my translation)<sup>7</sup>

This passage represents one of the only moments in the treatise where Tertullian describes what activities widows might engage in after choosing to remain a widow. It is also the only significant reference to widows as those who offer prayers to God and speak with God in the

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<sup>6</sup> It is worth asking how such rhetoric might have been received by the vast majority of poor widows for whom “porters from Germany” would be so remote as to be laughable. How might such a widow respond to the notion that all she needs is perseverance, and the rest of her needs will be met? Carried to its extreme, Tertullian’s logic would seem to state that a widow who has to devote time and effort to the struggle for her own survival neither serves God properly, nor has true faith in him.

<sup>7</sup> Malunt enim Deo nubere. Deo speciosae, Deo sunt puellae. Cum illo uiuunt, cum illo sermocinantur, illum diebus et noctibus tractant. Orationes suas uelut dotes Domino assignant, ab eodem dignationem uelut munera maritalia, quotienscumque desiderant, consequuntur. Sic aeternum sibi bonum, donum Domini, occupauerunt, ac iam in terriis, non nubendo, de familia angelica deputantur. Text from the edition of Charles Munier, *Tertullian: A son épouse*, SC 273 (Paris: Cerf, 1980).

entire *Ux.*—and it does so in the framework of marriage and household, not, as we have seen in Polycarp and will see in our other texts, in the framework of sacrifice and the image of widows as God’s altar.<sup>8</sup>

The similarities between this portrayal of widows and their prayers to those in *Phil.* and those we will see in chapter four in the *Didascalia apostolorum* (DA) make the differences between them all the more striking. As in *Phil.* and the DA, widows here are portrayed as engaging in prayer constantly, ‘day and night,’ an image with its roots in 1 Tim 5:5. As in *Phil.* with *ἐντυγχάνω*, the verbs used by Tertullian to denote communicating with God—*sermocinor* and perhaps *tracto*—do not carry a sense of entreaty or supplication but rather a sense of discussion, of the back-and-forth between colleagues, partners or negotiating parties. As we will also see in the DA, Tertullian here portrays the widows and God as engaged in some sort of exchange, or at least a relationship of mutual giving, in which prayers (*orationes*) function as a gift or item of exchange.

But unlike in both *Phil.* and the DA, Tertullian does not frame the relationship of widows to God and the exchange involving prayer with the language and logic of sacrificial practice in which widows are God’s altar. Rather, he frames it with the language and logic of the household and family in which widows are God’s wives, members of the angelic household. Tertullian focuses on the spousal relationship with strongly marital, almost romantic language. The widows are God’s *puellae*—his girls, his sweethearts, his young wives. Tertullian’s reference to the widows’ talking day and night with God, coming as it does in the midst of the language of

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<sup>8</sup> Tertullian references prayer practices only three other times in the text, all quite briefly, toward the conclusion of book 2. All of these mentions are made in the contexts of what it would be like to be married to either a pagan or a Christian man. Two references note the difficulties for prayer that would be incurred by marrying a pagan man: “Do you think to escape notice...when you get up, as you do even at night, to say your prayers?” 2.5; “Is there ever any mention of God? Is there any prayer to Christ?” 2.6), and one describes the ease with which a Christian married couple would pray together (“They pray together, they worship together, they fast together,” 2.8).

cohabitation, of sweethearts, of nuptial gifts and obligations, conjures an image not so much of the old widow engaged in solitary supplication but rather of newlyweds sharing intimate conversations.

He next presents an explicit comparison between the two sides of the exchange between widows and God: just as (*uelut*) the widows give over to God their prayers as a marriage portion, so they receive from him honor as *munera maritalia*. Given that Tertullian presents *munera maritalia* as parallel to *dotes* (dowries), its likely meaning would seem to be something akin to bride-prices. However since Tertullian says that these widow-wives obtain *munera maritalia* from God *quotienscumque desiderant*—however often they desire, or ask—this suggests not so much a one-time handing over as with a bride-price but rather some sort of ongoing marital obligations. These could be understood as ongoing gifts, or the maintenance of the wife in material comfort. I suggest that we might also see in this phrase a reference to the conjugal obligations of 1 Cor 7:3.<sup>9</sup> Tertullian designates what the widows receive from God as *dignationem*—dignity, esteem, reputation. The widows give prayers to God, and God gives them honor. The husband esteems the wives, with whom he converses continually.

Notably absent from this marital dyad is any place or role for the Christian community. We remember that in *Phil.*, Polycarp stated explicitly that the widows should intercede with God “for everyone.” When we turn to the DA in chapter four, we will find this triadic relationship developed further using sacrificial logic. Community members provide material support and prayerful requests to the widows, the widows convey the requests to God, and God (one hopes) answers those requests. In this passage Tertullian, in contrast, makes no mention of widows

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<sup>9</sup> Obligations often understood in 1 Cor 7:3 to include sexual intercourse. I do not suggest that here Tertullian is presenting the widows as engaging in sexual intercourse with God. Rather, I suggest that the language Tertullian uses can evoke a broad range of obligations that spouses are understood to have to one another and that the language serves to flesh out the portrayal of God and the widows as husband and wives.

interceding with God on behalf of anyone in particular, and the response from God brings nothing for anyone but the widow-wives.

Why might this be? We can only hazard guesses as to what motivated this particular portrayal, if anything. There is no reason why his employment of the framework of household instead of sacrifice should on the surface prevent Tertullian from involving the community; after all, a household had many members in it beyond the husband and wife. Perhaps Tertullian did not wish to risk presenting the widow-wives as possessing some power in and over the community, as the *domina* would over many household members (e.g., slaves and minor children). The effect of the limitation of the prayer-esteem exchange relationship to between God-husband and widows-wives is that the audience of the text is given no sense that the prayer activities of the widows are of significance for the community in any way. This absence is thrown into high relief when *Ux.* is compared with *Phil.* and the DA, both of which make clear the importance of widows' prayers for the community.

Having presented and refuted various arguments for (earthly) remarriage, Tertullian has one principal remaining argument to present in book one in support of choosing celibate widowhood: even the pagans can manage it (1.6–7). Pagan women maintain widowhood in honor of a dead husband; pagan women maintain celibacy, as virgins or widows, in priesthods for several deities. It is in this context that Tertullian employs the image of the Christian widow as altar of God, which we will explore in greater detail shortly.



## Book Two: But If You Must, Marry a Christian

Book two of the treatise has little to say directly about widowhood<sup>10</sup> as in it Tertullian focuses on why, if a woman really must remarry, she should marry a Christian. Tertullian compares the obstacles faced to participation in the Christian community by a woman married to a non-Christian, to the free participation that would be experienced by a woman in a Christian marriage. Would a pagan husband, Tertullian asks, permit his wife to “go about the streets to the houses of strangers, calling at every hovel in town in order to visit the brethren” (2.4.2)? Or worse, spend the entire night away from the house during Easter rituals, or participate in the Lord’s Supper “when such vile rumors are spread about it,” or slip into prison to kiss a martyr’s chains, or share the ritual kiss with any “brethren,” for that matter (2.4.3)? A Christian husband would, of course, understand the true import of these matters. Wives—and husbands—in Christian marriages may act freely in performance of Christian duties: “Unembarrassed they visit the sick and assist the needy. They give almost without anxiety; they attend the Sacrifice<sup>11</sup> without difficulty; they perform their daily exercises of piety without hindrance” (2.8.8).<sup>12</sup>

In book one, Tertullian portrays the widow who remains a widow as being a spouse in the ultimate Christian marriage—to God. Would Tertullian allow the widow who remains a widow

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<sup>10</sup> The opening of book two does give us some interesting insight into Tertullian’s ideas about widowhood, although it comes in an offhand remark he makes. Speaking of women who choose to remarry, he describes them as “certain women who, when given an opportunity of practicing continence by reason of a divorce or the death of a husband...” (2.1.1). This may be an indication that Tertullian includes divorcées in his understanding of ‘widows.’

<sup>11</sup> *Sacrificia*. Tertullian likely here means the celebration of the Eucharist. Considering Jesus’s death as a sacrifice, and the Eucharist as a sacrificial commemoration thereof, is perhaps the most significant way in which the language and logic of sacrifice have entered the Christian tradition. None of the texts that employ the sacrificial image of widows as an altar connect it with the Eucharistic sacrifice. However, exploring the developments of those two ways of thinking with sacrifice in conversation with one another could certainly be of interest. A connection of sorts is suggested by a later text of Pseudo-Epiphanius in praise of the Virgin Mary, in which he speaks of her as the “virgin priestess” and also “the altar, the one who, bearing the table, offered the heavenly bread Christ for release from our sins” (PG 43.497; my translation).

<sup>12</sup> On *Ux.*’s treatment of household religious practices, see Caroline Johnson Hodge, “Daily Devotions: Stowers’s Modes of Religion Meet Tertullian’s *ad Uxorem*,” in “*The One Who Sows Bountifully*”: *Essays in Honor of Stanley K. Stowers*, ed. Caroline Johnson Hodge et al., BJS 356 (Providence: Brown University Press, 2013), 43–54.

(and so is married to God) the same free participation and activity that he allows the widow who remarries a Christian man? And as he presents the portraits of the active wife in a Christian marriage and the struggling wife married to a pagan man, what underlying issues seem to be at stake?

### *Marriage and Money*

One issue which repeatedly crops up in book two is money—particularly the question of what happens to a widow’s money after she remarries. While Tertullian had nothing to say about the importance of widows’ prayers for the community, he demonstrates a fair amount of interest in the material resources they might bring. This concern seems to be from a very different direction than our other sources. As we will see in chapters three and four, when connecting the altar image to concerns with finances and material support, both Methodius in his *Symposium* (*Symp.*) and the DA do so specifically through the recipient role—altars and widows both receive offerings. Tertullian, in contrast, does not connect finances to the altar image, and when he does make reference to financial matters it is to widows as the possessors (or would-be possessors) of funds, not the needy recipients.

As we noted above and as David Wilhite has ably demonstrated, the rhetoric of *Ux.* makes clear that Tertullian’s implied audience is wealthy widows, not the majority of widows who would have survived in poverty and near-poverty.<sup>13</sup> This is the audience for whom it would

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<sup>13</sup> “Tertullian on Widows: A North African Appropriation of Pauline Household Economics,” in *Engaging Economics: New Testament Scenarios and Early Christian Reception*, ed. Bruce W. Longenecker & Kelly D. Liebengood (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2009), 222–42. Wilhite’s insightful article is a principal source for this section on marriage and money.

make sense to reference “jeweled pendants” (1.4.7) and “elaborate coiffures” (2.3.4),<sup>14</sup> about whom to ask “where but from the devil will they get husbands able to maintain their sedans, their mules, the outlandishly tall slaves they need to dress their hair” (2.8.3)? Tertullian clearly states at the opening of the treatise that his aim is to convince his wife and other women not to remarry, but rather to remain in the more spiritually desirable and admirable state of being without a (human) spouse. However, this concern for the maintenance of widows’ chastity is not all that is at stake. As Wilhite has demonstrated, Tertullian is motivated at least in part by a desire to keep widows’ wealth accessible to the church, for “if the widows remarry, their ‘dowries’ will be paid to new husbands and not to God via the church.”<sup>15</sup>

Tertullian makes reference to widows’ dowries at several points in the treatise, including in the passage we examined above (p. 84). His references contribute significantly to the broader rhetorical framework of presenting a marriage to God as the best option for a widow, followed by marriage to a Christian, while marriage to a pagan man is to be avoided at all costs. As we saw above, widows’ ‘dowries’ given to God are recompensed with honor in a love-filled, intimate relationship. In contrast, when in book two he speaks of pagan men who might appear to tolerate a Christian wife’s practices, Tertullian warns “they practice tolerance because they intend to make the dowries of their wives the price of their silence, that is, by threatening to expose them to the scrutiny of a judge. This is a thing a great many women failed to think about, but came to understand only after their property had been extorted from them or their faith had been destroyed” (2.5.4). This marriage, according to Tertullian, is not only not mutually

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<sup>14</sup> Le Saint’s choice for translating *exstructionem*, which literally means ‘an erecting’ or ‘a building up.’ He compares Juvenal’s *Sat.* 6.502, which speaks of a woman’s hair as *altum aedificat caput*.

<sup>15</sup> Wilhite, “Tertullian on Widows,” 234.

beneficial but is actively dangerous for the wives' property and faith. The seemingly tolerant pagan husband is really just after the widow's money, and will use unsavory means to obtain it.

Taking a Christian husband, and particularly a less well off husband, is Tertullian's compromise. Such a marriage will be beneficial to the wealthy widow spiritually if not financially—"for if the kingdom of heaven belongs to the poor, it does not belong to the rich; and thus a woman who is wealthy will be better off with a man who is not. She will receive a dowry ampler than her own from the goodness of one who is rich in God" (2.8.5). This marriage is mutually beneficial, and while it does not provide the same sort of relationship and rewards in this life as a marriage to God would, seemingly it will aid her standing in the kingdom of heaven.

We see then that financial matters with regard to widows are of great concern to Tertullian, but from the angle of widows as possessors of funds, not as recipients of offerings (as we will see in the *Symp.* and the *DA*). And once again, as we saw with his treatment of widows' prayer here too Tertullian does not connect his financial discussions to the image of the altar at all, but rather frames them in terms of household and family (specifically marriage). This makes perfect sense—as Tertullian is concerned in particular with what will happen to widows' dowries, he presents the widows with an alternative marriage plan that keeps their dowries in the family. The image of the widow as altar could obfuscate this persuasive framework.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> It would also not serve as well to ensure that the widows remained subordinate in a properly hierarchical relationship. For the sake of comparison between the two figurative identities—widow as altar, and widow as wife of God—let us perform a thought experiment and ask whether it would be possible to make Tertullian's argument for keeping the widows' resources 'in the family' by using the image of altar and the framework of sacrifice. The answer is yes, easily: the widows would be the altars upon which the offerings of their own resources were transmitted to God. In this understanding, widows would be both the donors of the offering and the altar from which it ascended. This differs from the altar-offering framework that we will see at work particularly in the *DA*—there, widows are dependent on others bringing them offerings, and what they in turn give to God are prayers on behalf of the offerers. A wealthy widow-altar would not be so dependent on others. When we compare the transfer of widows' own funds, as it were, conveyed with the widow-wife image versus the widow-altar image, we can see that a question of control arises. The dynamic of control between *domina* and *dominus* is clear (and would have been clear to Tertullian's early audiences)—in 'marrying' God and handing her dowry over to him, the widow is entering into a relationship where she must submit to her husband. To whom would a widow-altar who provides her own offerings have to submit, to whom would she be beholden? Perhaps no one. Here it is important to keep in mind the

David Wilhite wonderfully christened Tertullian's presentation of the widows' marriage options as the "dueling *domini*."<sup>17</sup> One could not serve God while also serving a pagan *dominus*; a (human) Christian *dominus* is better but not ideal. While marriage to God is clearly Tertullian's favored option, it is also the only one of the three options for which Tertullian does not present some portrait of the widow-wife engaged in activities (beyond prayer). When discussing the perils of taking a pagan man for a husband, Tertullian stresses how this husband will prevent her from engaging in her Christian activities while forcing her to participate in all sorts of blasphemous pagan undertakings (2.4–6). When painting a portrait of a Christian marriage, Tertullian idyllically presents the couple engaged in their Christian activities together—praying together, worshipping together, visiting the sick together (2.8.7–8). Aside from her prayer-as-pillow-talk, the widow as God's *matrona* is not portrayed as doing anything, and certainly nothing active involving the community.

Why not? Given that God is in some sense the ultimate Christian husband, Tertullian's rhetoric at least allows for the space to imagine the Christian widow as wife of God engaging in the same activities as he allows the wife of the human Christian. We might see God as functioning as the spouse who freely allows widows' travel and activities. Perhaps this is the sort of argument that we can imagine widows themselves having made in support of their activities (my true spouse is God, and he encourages me in my work). However, while Tertullian's rhetoric allows for the space to imagine he would condone widows behaving thusly, I wonder if confronted in reality with such behavior absent the governance of a living human (Christian) husband he would be so sanguine about such conduct. Perhaps Tertullian is silent about the

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'ontological naiveté' I encouraged in the introduction before assuming that an altar would necessarily be an object under the control of a person.

<sup>17</sup> Wilhite, "Tertullian on Widows," 237.

activities of the wife of God out of a sense of caution—for to present widows as God’s *dominae* active and engaged in the world could be to present powerful women indeed, women with no obvious human oversight.

Does Tertullian present portraits of active, engaged widows anywhere in *Ux.*? Yes—but only of pagan widows. In particular, in several instances Tertullian presents portraits of pagan widows as priestesses. These portraits contain some of the only sacerdotal imagery in *Ux.* I would suggest that in the portraits of the pagan priestesses (particularly the passage we will examine below) we can see the full flowering of the danger Tertullian seeks to avoid by focusing on the widow as wife, and only briefly referencing the widow as altar—the danger of an active, sacerdotally powerful woman.

### The Widow as Altar

Tertullian’s brief mention of the widow as altar is unusual in the broader context of *Ux.*, in which (as noted) he employs sacrificial or sacerdotal terminology almost nowhere else. It seems that Tertullian drops the image in to buttress his argument for widows remaining in widowhood, trading on the connection of purity and the need for altars to be kept pure if they are to be used. Having dropped it in once he never returns to it or expands on it. He steps outside of his usual framework to employ an image that he must have anticipated would pack a strong rhetorical punch. Or, perhaps the image was so significant in the communal conception of widows that he did not want to miss a chance to use it or didn’t feel he could get away without using it.

The image, in book one, falls toward the end of a short passage outlining a few arguments against remarriage. Citing 1 Cor 7:27–28, Tertullian argues that since the death of a husband was

clearly willed by God, God must also have willed that the widow be free from marriage and so she ought to embrace the opportunity (1.8.2). He then moves to an argument against remarriage based in the idea of maintaining holiness—and particularly holiness appropriate for an official engaged in religious practice. He first discusses Christian church authorities, and then adds the extra punch of an argument from pagan custom.

Tertullian notes that both Paul’s precept and the instruction of the church make clear how detrimental second marriages are to faith and holiness. He invokes here two authorities:

*praescriptio apostoli*, by which he likely means passages in 1 Timothy referring to the marriage practices of church officials (3:2 regarding bishops and 3:12 regarding deacons) as well as 1 Cor 7, and *disciplina ecclesiae*, by which he likely means the teachings and practices (written or not) of the Christian churches—or at least what he understands they should be. In a sense he invokes the two-pronged authority of scripture and tradition to argue against remarriage for two types of persons: the person who presides (likely referencing bishops—overseers—in particular) and the widow. A person cannot preside if he has been married twice, and a widow cannot be “selected for the order” (*adlegi in ordinem*) if she is not an *univira* (once-married).

It is at this point that Tertullian makes reference to the image of the altar, saying that “the altar of God must be displayed clean” (*aram enim Dei mundam proponi oportet*). Of what does the cleanliness of the altar consist? The association of an altar with purity or cleanliness makes sense—after all, altars needed to be ritually clean in order to be used.<sup>18</sup> But Tertullian is not speaking about, for example, a need to ritually purify a widow after she had been polluted by contact with a woman who had recently given birth as one might purify an ancient altar. The argument of the entire treatise, and the particulars of the surrounding passage, make clear that

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<sup>18</sup> See, e.g., Exod 29:36–37.

here the cleanliness of the altar consists in a widow not remarrying—that is, in a widow maintaining her marital / sexual purity. We remember that in Polycarp’s use of the widow-altar image, he made no connection of the widow to purity per se (*ἀγνεία*), despite using this vocabulary when discussing others such as virgins and young men. In closer proximity to the widow-altar image, Polycarp spoke instead of being inspected for blemishes, using a form of a word (*μῶμος*) which as we saw has heavily sacrificial connotations but is never used in scripture to describe an altar. Tertullian uses the word *mundus*—clean, or pure. This is not the Latin word that corresponds most closely to *ἄμωμος*; that word is *immaculatus*—without stain or spot.<sup>19</sup>

Tertullian’s choice of *mundus* is scripturally-speaking a more usual vocabulary choice to employ with altar. In the Latin Vulgate, *mundus* and related words are used in the two passages of the Hebrew Bible that speak specifically of cleansing the altar: Exod 29:36–37<sup>20</sup> and Ezek 43:20–27.<sup>21</sup> These passages describe the process of ritually cleansing the altar by anointing it with blood and offering sacrifices upon it in order to make atonement for it and consecrate it. Tertullian himself uses *mundus* and related words in a variety of ways. A search of his corpus via LLT-A shows that most fall into two categories, both of which draw on scriptural usages: 1) to

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<sup>19</sup> *Immaculatus* and related words (*maculo* (v); *maculatus* (pte); *macula* (n)) are the words used most frequently in ancient Latin versions of the Pentateuch where the Septuagint uses (*α*)*μωμος*.

<sup>20</sup> Exod 29:36–37: Et vitulum pro peccato offeres per singulos dies ad expiandum mundabisque altare cum immolaris expiationis hostiam et ungues illud in sanctificationem. Septem diebus expiabis altare et sanctificabis et erit sanctum sanctorum omnis qui tetigerit illud sanctificabitur.

<sup>21</sup> Ezek 43:20–27: Et adsumens de sanguine eius pones super quattuor cornua eius et super quattuor angulos crepidinis et super coronam in circuitu et mundabis illud et expiabis. Et tolles vitulum qui oblatus fuerit pro peccato et combures illum in separato loco domus extra sanctuarium. Et in die secunda offeres hircum caprarum immaculatum pro peccato et expiabunt altare sicut expiaverunt in vitulo. Cumque conpleveris expians illud offeres vitulum de armento immaculatum et arietem de grege immaculatum. Et offeres eos in conspectu Domini et mittent sacerdotes super eos sal et offerent eos holocaustum Domino. Septem diebus facies hircum pro peccato cotidie et vitulum de armento et arietem de pecoribus immaculatos offerent. (26) Septem diebus expiabunt altare et mundabunt illud et implebunt manum eius. Expletis autem diebus in die octava et ultra facient sacerdotes super altare holocausta vestra et quae pro pace offerunt et placatus ero vobis ait Dominus Deus.

A search of the Vetus Latina unfortunately reveals that Tertullian nowhere directly cites the verses in question, so we cannot be entirely sure that his version of the Hebrew Bible contained these vocabulary words.



describe a more literal cleanliness or process of cleansing;<sup>22</sup> and 2) to figuratively describe a moral or spiritual cleanliness.<sup>23</sup> There is of course no clear line dividing these two categories, and the state of a person's literal cleanliness may be an indication of their spiritual cleanliness as in Tertullian's figurative reading of the Levitical discussion of the cleansing of lepers in *De pudicitia* 20. His use of *mundam* with *aram* in the passage with which we are concerned fits well with this pattern—the cleanliness of the widow-altar, demonstrated by her maintenance of chastity, is the manifestation of her spiritual purity. Tertullian expresses a similar sentiment in the sentence immediately following his reference to the altar when he says that everything that is *candida* (shining, splendid, spotless) of the church is copied from, or is a 'transcription' of, *sanctitate* (holiness).

The widow, then, like the altar, must (according to Tertullian) display the cleanliness appropriate to her identity. Who must make certain that this happens? The grammatical construction of the sentence leaves it unclear whose responsibility it is to ensure that the altar is displayed clean—it simply says that it ought to be, but does not say by whom. I would suggest that here the lack of specificity allows for Tertullian's primary point—that widows ought to be pure—to stand, while not muddying the waters by designating control of that purity and its display in a way that might have left audience members less than happy. While clearly concerned with the control of widows (and their money), throughout the entirety of *Ux*. Tertullian rarely portrays widows explicitly as being under the control of other humans. Given that Tertullian's intent is to convince women to remain widows, I would suggest that this serves to present

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<sup>22</sup> E.g., *Ad nat.* 1.5 used to describe a clean complexion; *De or.* 13 used to describe literally clean hands.

<sup>23</sup> E.g., *De paen.* 9.22, used in describing a man rendered 'clean' by exomologesis; *De pud.* 2.89, used to speak of cleansing of sins (*delicta*). Scripturally we may think of Psalm 50:12: *Cor mundum crea in me Deus et spiritum rectum innova in visceribus meis.*

widowhood as an appealing state in which to remain. The place where control appears most clearly as a topic is in book two when Tertullian details the unpleasant control a former widow would experience should she remarry a non-Christian (2.4–6). By not specifying that supervision of a widow’s purity and its ‘display’ is under the control of another (a bishop, perhaps), Tertullian avoids portraying outright the positive state of widowhood as one which is subordinate to other persons.

But on the other hand, Tertullian also does not specify that it is widows themselves who alone are in control of maintaining and ‘displaying’ their purity. The passive construction of *aram...proponi oportet*—“the altar...ought to be displayed”—may suggest that it is someone other than the altar who is supervising and controlling this display. This leaves open the possibility for understanding that widows should indeed be controlled in some way by others in the church.

By only briefly mentioning the image of widows as the altar of God, and by not explicitly clarifying the structure of control for the maintenance and display of the altar’s purity, the text seeks to accomplish two things: it illumines for an instant the power of the image of the pure altar, and at the same time attempts to limit the potential impact of the image in directions that are less supportive of the overall persuasive aim of the text. The image does not identify widows too strongly with a sacerdotal framework (instead of the household framework that is the principal focus of Tertullian’s work), and it avoids the pitfalls of on the one hand placing widows too explicitly under the control of others, and on the other allowing widows unbridled control over themselves.

The purity of the altar must be maintained—widows must remain chaste. This is all that Tertullian does with the image of the altar; he does not develop any further ritual connections,

nor does he connect the image with prayer, as in our other sources. But this was not because he was incapable of doing so. In *De corona*, Tertullian speaks of Christians as figuratively composing different elements of the Jewish Temple:

I think not even the temple of God itself was crowned; as neither was the ark of the testament, nor the tabernacle of witness, nor the altar, nor the candlestick crowned ... But if these things were figures of us (for we are temples of God, and altars, and lights, and sacred vessels), this too they in figure set forth, that the people of God ought not to be crowned. The reality must always correspond with the image. (9.8)<sup>24</sup>

While this reference isn't developed any further, we see here that Tertullian is capable of conceiving of a broader figurative world, as it were, in which Christians are conceived of as parts of the Temple. The reference to the widow as altar in *Ux.* is not a strange, solitary occurrence of this phenomenon in Tertullian's corpus.

Of even more interest to us is Tertullian's sacrificial presentation of prayer in *De oratione*:

For this [prayer] is the spiritual victim which has abolished the pristine sacrifices... We are the true adorers and the true priests, who, praying in spirit, sacrifice, in spirit, prayer—a victim proper and acceptable to God, which assuredly He has required, which He has looked forward to for Himself! This victim, devoted from the whole heart, fed on faith, tended by truth, entire in innocence, pure in chastity, garlanded with love, we ought to escort with the pomp of good works, amid psalms and hymns, unto God's altar, to obtain for us all things from God. (28)<sup>25</sup>

Here we have a beautifully clear elaboration of the process of prayer as the process of sacrifice, in which Christians—the true priests—offer their prayers as sacrificial victims upon God's altar (*ad dei altare*). These prayers are, much like the widows in *Ux.* 1.7.4, 'pure in chastity' (*castitate mundam*). Such a figurative presentation is part of a rich tradition of imagery comparing prayer

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<sup>24</sup> ANF 3:98.

<sup>25</sup> ANF 3:690.

to sacrifice (as we discussed in chapter one), a tradition upon which both Polycarp and the DA draw when identifying widows as altar. Tertullian does not do so in *Ux.*, but, as this reference from *De oratione* demonstrates, that is not because he was unaware of the tradition, or was somehow incapable of figuratively conceiving of Christians in prayer in sacrificial terms. Tertullian was perfectly capable of connecting the widow-altar image to prayer, and of developing the image further through a sacrificial framework; but he does not.

### *The Priesthood of Widowhood*

As we have noted, Tertullian's brief reference to the widow as altar occurs in the midst of a passage promoting the importance of single marriage for maintaining the holiness of religious officials. Having pointed this out for widows and for 'those who preside,' Tertullian presents a counterpoint to these groups: the *sacerdotium uiduitatis et caelibatuum*, the 'priesthood of widowhood and the single life' among the nations (1.7.5). These pagan priests and priestesses, with the Pontifex Maximus at their head, adhere to the principle of single marriage because it is so pleasing to God—but not in order to please God. According to Tertullian, as agents of 'the enemy' (Satan) these pagans imitate what is pleasing to God in order to abuse it. This is a rather neat rhetorical move on Tertullian's part, as he is able to both use the pagans' ability to adhere to single marriage to challenge Christians to maintain the same standard, and address potential questions raised as to why Christian and pagan religious officials do maintain similar practices.<sup>26</sup>

What are these pagan widow priestesses imitating? We see evidence in other texts of Tertullian that he did have an understanding of widows as a group of liturgical importance in the Christian community. In *Exhortatione castitatis* 11 he makes reference to the ordination of a

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<sup>26</sup> That is, it is not because pagans are actually following God, nor is it the case that Christians are following the practices of the 'enemy.'

priest taking place “at the altar surrounded by widows;”<sup>27</sup> in *De monogamia* 11 he groups widows with other officials when he asks: “how will you dare request the kind of marriage which is not permitted to the ministers from whom you ask it, the bishop who is a monogamist, the presbyters and deacons who are bound by the same solemn obligation, the widows whose way of life you repudiate in your own person?”<sup>28</sup> He is famously horrified, in *De virginibus velandis* 9, that a virgin was allowed to sit in the place reserved for widows who actually met the qualifications (derived from 1 Tim 5), and in *De pudicitia* 13 he speaks of a repentant adulterer being prostrate before the widows and elders.

In this passage of *Ad uxorem* (1.7.4–5) we have widows as altars placed in fairly clear comparison to pagan priestesses. I would suggest that while Tertullian does not say so explicitly, this comparison and his use of the language of imitation make clear that it is the Christian widows as altar that are imitated by the pagan priestesses. Both occupy sacerdotal space (although Tertullian would acknowledge only one as sacred). Tertullian develops the widow-altar image no further, but he has already offered more of the pagan priestesses, in the passage which occurs very shortly before his reference to the altar. Tertullian opens this passage (1.6.3–5) with a telling statement that brings the position of the Christian widows in close parallel to the pagan priestesses. It is a very difficult thing, says Tertullian, that (Christian) holy women (*sanctae feminae*) bear chastity after their husbands’ departure for the sake of God, while pagans, “the priesthoods of both widows and virgins” (*gentiles...et uirginitatis et uiduitatis sacerdotia*), do so for Satan.<sup>29</sup> While placing the Christian and pagan women parallel to one another,

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<sup>27</sup> Le Saint, *Tertullian*, 60.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>29</sup> *Durum plane et arduum satis continentia sanctae feminae post uiri excessum Dei causa, cum gentiles satanae suo et uirginitatis et uiduitatis sacerdotia perferant* (1.6.3).

Tertullian uses fully sacerdotal terminology only for the pagans. He then goes on to give examples of these pagan priesthoods. The passage regarding widows is worth quoting in full:

Further, we know that widows minister to the African Ceres, indeed having been withdrawn through a most unyielding oblivion from wedlock. For while their husbands are still living, they not only depart from marriage, but even thrust other women in their place, no doubt while their husbands smile cheerfully; having been deprived of all contact, even with the kiss of their sons and yet, with enduring practice, they continue steadfastly in such a discipline of widowhood, which excludes even the holy comforts of pious affection. (1.6.4)<sup>30</sup>

Tertullian's tone, while exhibiting a certain amount of disparagement of the perhaps overly extreme practices of these priestesses, seems also reluctantly admiring of their commitment.<sup>31</sup>

Notice how active these widow priestesses are, how directive of their own situation. They

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<sup>30</sup> Ceterum uiduas Africanæ Cereri adsistere scimus, durissima quidem obliuione a matrimonio allectas. Nam manentibus in uita uiris non modo toro decedunt, sed et alias eis, utique ridentibus, loco suo insinuant; adempto omni contactu, usque ad osculum filiorum et tamen, durante usu, perseuerant in tali uiduitatis disciplina, quæ pietatis etiam sancta solatia excludit (1.6.4). My translation. Tertullian invokes this same imagery in *Exhortatione castitatis* 13.

It is interesting to think about the difference between this pagan practice of ritual separation resulting in the creation of widows, and the Christian practice of abstinence by mutual consent within marriage that Tertullian references but whose practitioners he does not name as widows (1.6.2). If we knew more about the ritual widowhood of the priestesses of African Ceres we might be able to address some of the questions that immediately come to hand. Was their separation from their husbands regarded as a divorce, and that is why they were widows (and provided new women for their husbands)? Was this a permanent separation, or only for a certain period of time (was this position of priestess one that, once adopted, was held to the end of life)? Does the use of 'widow' to describe the pagan practice here but not the Christian one suggest that one of the real issues defining widowhood was the transition of the woman out of the household of her husband?

<sup>31</sup> Elsewhere in *Ux.* we see additional evidence that Tertullian regarded widows' commitment to maintaining chastity with respect. Comparing widows' chastity to that of virgins, he states that virgins' chastity may be perfectly intact and so they will "look upon the face of God more closely," but nevertheless the condition of widowhood is more difficult to sustain because the widow knows what she is giving up. "Chastity is most praiseworthy when it is sensible of the right it has sacrificed and knows what it has experienced" (1.8.2). Virgins may have chastity through happy grace, but widows work personally to achieve it through their own virtue. This characterization of widows is interesting on a number of fronts. Tertullian evaluates the worth of chastity as present in virgins and widows on two different scales: that of length and perfection of chastity, which result in grace and a particular closeness to God; and that of difficulty of individual sacrifice and endeavor, which result in personal virtue (1.8.3). The reward of virginity (being closer to God) may be, strictly speaking, more desirable and prestigious, but one gets the impression that Tertullian has more respect for the work of widows (or at least his rhetoric works effectively to portray them as more worthy of respect). This presentation of widows in comparison to virgins is also noteworthy for the way in which Tertullian emphasizes the importance of widows' own individual efforts in achieving their chastity. Again we might compare this rhetorical positioning of widows to the likely reality that, for most widows, their continued widowhood was less the result of personal choice and effort than of demographic and sociocultural circumstance. (And as an aside, of course we can note that here Tertullian assumes that in practicing chastity the widows are giving up something they would actually miss). In chapter three, we will see that Methodius also ranks virgins and widows in terms of their chastity and places virgins closer to God.

withdraw (*decedunt*) from their husbands, and thrust (*insinuant*) others in their place.<sup>32</sup> They persevere (*perseuerant*) in a discipline of widowhood which shuts out (*excludit*) even the holy comforts of usual familial affection. In doing so, says Tertullian, they are following the commands of the devil (*haec diabolus suis praecipit, et auditur*).

Tertullian's portrayal of these pagan priestesses provides an alternative understanding of a relationship between widows and a divine entity than the young wife imagery he employed in 1.4.4. These are not newlyweds who have handed over their dowry and are whispering with their divine spouse. These are members of a priesthood, in service to a god, who have chosen to separate themselves from family structures and persevere in a strict and unyielding way of life.

It is with pagan priestesses that Tertullian places the widow-altar image in parallel. Indeed they are not only placed in parallel; when speaking of widows as altar Tertullian says that the pagan priestesses come to be in imitation of Christian practice. It is also in this passage that Tertullian speaks of Christian widows in conjunction with bishops (or some other religious official), and it is here that Tertullian speaks of widows as being selected for the *ordo*—the order, or rank. I suggest that the widow-altar image, placed in comparison as it is with Christian religious officials and as the source for the imitative practices of pagan priestesses, gives us a glimpse of another way of understanding widows and their work in the Christian community—one of which Tertullian was aware, and one which he brushes up against in employing the altar image, but one which he develops no further in this treatise. This is an understanding of Christian widows as sacerdotally significant figures in the community.

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<sup>32</sup> We see here an indication that Tertullian's conception of widowhood goes beyond simply that state occasioned by the death of a husband, to encompass states occasioned by other sorts of marital separation.

## Tertullian's Widows

Throughout *Ad uxorem* Tertullian treads a fine line when it comes to questions of power and control of widows. A plausible historical reconstruction sees him as concerned with maintaining control of wealthy widows' funds for the church and in order to maintain that control he sets out to convince women to choose to remain widows.<sup>33</sup> In order to do so he must paint a positive portrait of widowhood when compared to its alternatives. He is certainly, then, not going to present widowhood as a desolate and unimportant state in which one is dependent on the largesse of others and one's behavior is monitored and regulated by one's local bishop. But his presentation of widowhood also does not trend to the opposite end; he does not present widows as figures of power and authority, whose work (spiritual and otherwise) is of great importance to the community and who do not fall under the control of other humans.

Instead, Tertullian presents the widows with three options for what their future might look like: as wife of God, as wife of a pagan, and as wife of a Christian man. All of these options place the widow within the structure of kyriarchal marriage. By utilizing the image of the widow as wife of God, Tertullian is able to present a positive picture of widowhood while still keeping widows within the bounds of well-understood frameworks of kyriarchal authority. The wife of a wealthy household may be an important figure, but she is definitively subordinated to her husband. And when portraying the widow as wife of God, Tertullian does not portray her as the *domina* of a household, someone with responsibility and authority over others. She is rather a *puella*, a young newlywed beloved of her husband, while other members of the household—the Christian community—are not in sight, even in relation to her prayers. In contrast, the Christian wife of the pagan husband is overly controlled, in a manner detrimental to her spiritual and

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<sup>33</sup> Wilhite, "Tertullian on Widows."



financial health, and she is prevented from participating in the Christian community. The wife of the Christian man participates in the community—with her husband. None of these portraits show a Christian woman who is active in the community independent of a human husband. That option, it seems, does not exist in the rhetorical world which Tertullian has constructed.

The way in which Tertullian so briefly employs the image of the widow as altar, focusing solely on the matter of purity and ignoring any other implications, hinting with a passive construction that perhaps others have a hand in monitoring widows' purity, and neither further developing nor returning to the image again, suggests strongly that, outside of this circumscribed use, the image was not particularly supportive of Tertullian's rhetorical aims in the treatise. Why not? On a surface level, perhaps Tertullian simply didn't want to mix metaphors too much—he was focused on the widow as wife, and didn't want to muddy the waters. Why bother invoking the image of the widow as altar at all, if it was such an ill fit with Tertullian's overall rhetorical purpose? This is an impossible question to answer from our vantage point in history.

Nonetheless, we might hazard a few guesses. It could be that the image had enough currency that Tertullian somehow felt obliged to include it. Perhaps he included it precisely in an attempt to refocus its significance on the question of widows' purity, and obscure the possible implications of sacerdotal authority for widows. Alternatively, perhaps he included it to provide a Christian counterpoint to (and indeed source for) pagan widow priestesses.

I would suggest that the image of the widow as altar carried with it an understanding of the widow as a sacerdotally significant, and communally involved, figure—one perhaps not as clearly under the control of others as Tertullian would like, given the persuasive aim of the treatise. We saw in *Phil.*, and will see again particularly in the DA, that the widow who is the altar not only has a close, even privileged, relationship with God, but also is engaged in activities

of great consequence for the community—activities which these other texts attempt to control. We have seen in other texts written by Tertullian that he had an understanding of widows as figures of liturgical importance for the Christian community. Perhaps here in *Ux*. Tertullian touches only briefly on the widow as altar because its sacerdotal implications undermine the persuasive goal of the text to present widows with life paths that maintained their ‘proper’ hierarchically subordinated positions. And yet even with so brief a mention, the sacerdotal implications of the image of widow as altar emerge nonetheless.

In a text that rarely employs ritual or sacerdotal terminology of any sort, we have seen that Tertullian’s use of the image of the widow as altar is placed in parallel to the sacerdotal image of pagan priestesses. These priestesses present an alternative portrait of a relationship between widows and a divine being—they minister to the deity, actively separating themselves from the traditional bonds of marriage and family even while that family is very much in existence. I suggest that we see here precisely the sort of sacerdotally significant, independent official that was left in shadow by this text’s brief invocation of the image of the Christian widow as altar, but that emerges anyway. When we read Tertullian’s reference to the widow as altar in *Ux*. in the context of his portrayal of widows as wives throughout the treatise, and in comparison to his portrayals of pagan priestesses in the same text and of Christian widows in other texts, we catch a glimpse of an understanding of widows that is not the one for which Tertullian advocates in *Ux*. This alternative understanding, like the understanding we saw emerging in *Phil.*, is one of widows as persons of sacerdotal importance for the Christian community.

### Chapter Three

#### Bloody Altar, Bloody Widows: Widows as Altar in Methodius's *Symposium*

...for also it was handed down that the unbloody altar of God is the gathering of the pure.<sup>1</sup> Thus what a great and glorious matter virginity is shown (to be). Wherefore indeed also one must preserve it undefiled and clean in every way, not taking part in the unclean things of the flesh, but within “in front of the testimony,” gilded with wisdom, situated in the Holy of Holies, sending forth the sweet smelling vapor of love to the Lord. For he says “you shall make for me,” after the altar made all around of bronze—to which they used to carry up the whole burnt offerings and the offerings—another “altar out of incorruptible<sup>2</sup> wood,” “and you shall fully gild it with gold,” “and you shall place it opposite the curtain that is on the ark of testimony” in “front of the mercy seat,” which is “on the testimonies,” “in which I will come to be known by you there. And Aaron shall burn incense of aromatic herbs to the Lord upon it in the morning, when he adorns the lamps; he shall burn incense upon it throughout in the presence of the Lord into your generations. He shall not offer upon it incense of another sort or a whole burnt offering; he shall not offer upon it sacrifice or drink offering.”<sup>3</sup> (5.6.24–41)<sup>4</sup>

For as the Jews declared beforehand our things, so we ourselves announce beforehand the heavenly things, inasmuch as just as the Tabernacle is a token of the church, so the church [is a token] of the heavens. Wherefore these things being in this way and the Tabernacle being understood as in the type of the church, as I have said, it is necessary that also the altars bear some sign of the matters concerning the church, and on the one hand that which has been made all around of bronze be compared to the council and the enclosure of the widows—for they are a living<sup>5</sup> altar<sup>6</sup> of God to which carrying up the calves and the tithes and the free-will sacrifices we

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout my translation and discussion I have chosen to translate *ἀγνεία* and its cognates with ‘purity’ and its cognates. More commonly (as in Herbert Musurillo’s English translation), when scholars have translated and discussed the *Symp.* the preferred translation has been ‘chastity’ and its cognates. I have chosen ‘purity’ for two reasons: 1) to illustrate, in English, the Greek vocabulary shared by Methodius and Polycarp; and 2) because ‘chastity’ in contemporary English usage has come to bear primarily a sense of physical chastity, and particularly abstention from sexual intercourse, that does not effectively communicate the fuller sense of *ἀγνεία* which Methodius presents in the *Symp.* I occasionally employ ‘chaste’ and ‘chastity’ in my own writing below; when I do, I mean to emphasize the sexual aspects of purity.

<sup>2</sup> The same word—*ἄσθητος*—is used to describe the bodies of virgins in 5.8.14, below.

<sup>3</sup> Exod 30:1, 3, 6–9. I have maintained the multiple separate quotations indicated by Musurillo in the Greek edition.

<sup>4</sup> The English translations of these two passages are my own, from the Greek edition of Herbert Musurillo, *Méthode D’Olympe: Le banquet*, trans. Victor-Henry Debidour, SC 95 (Paris: Cerf, 1963). Their awkward nature often is a result of closely following the Greek and not making modifications for readability. Unless otherwise noted, English translations elsewhere in the text are taken from Herbert Musurillo, *St. Methodius: The Symposium: A Treatise on Chastity*, ACW 27 (New York: Newman, 1958). I have made one consistent modification to Musurillo’s translations throughout; see n.1 above.

<sup>5</sup> Although the Greek vocabulary used is different, the resonances of this description with Romans 12:1, in which Paul exhorts his audience to present their bodies to God as a “living sacrifice” (*θυσίαν ζῶσαν*), is clear. See Nasrallah, “Embarrassment,” esp. 148–9.

fulfill for the Lord—and on the other hand the altar surrounded in gold within in the Holy of Holies set up in front of the testimony, into which it is forbidden to offer sacrifice and drink-offering, (is) to be compared to those in virginity who have fortified the bodies incorruptible<sup>7</sup> by sexual intercourse with pure gold.

For two things are commonly said in praise of gold, both that it does not allow rust and that it appears within measure to be the neighbor of the color of the sun’s rays; and so this is suitably a symbol of purity which does not admit stain or spot but ever gleams with the light of the word.

Wherefore indeed it stands within closer in the Holy of Holies and in front of the curtain with undefiled hands sending up prayers in the manner of incense acceptable to the Lord for “an odor of sweetness,” just as also John revealed, when he showed that the incense in the bowls of the twenty-four elders are the prayers of the saints.<sup>8</sup> (5.8.1–25)

For the third example of the image of widows as altar, we turn from Tertullian’s *Ad uxorem* (*Ux.*) to the *Symposium* (*Symp.*) of Methodius of Olympus. In so doing we move from a late second / early third century CE Latin text composed in North Africa, to a Greek text likely composed in the late third century CE, perhaps somewhere on the southern coast of Asia Minor, although little can be said with any certainty about its origins.<sup>9</sup> The *Symposium*—a text devoted almost entirely to discussions of virginity as a particular sort of purity—is largely unlike the previous two texts we have examined. The treatise is structured as an allegorical narrative within

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<sup>6</sup> βωμός. It is worth noting that the use of βωμός here is the only occurrence of this word in all of the references to widows as altars discussed in this project; at all other places the word used is θυσιαστήριον. The precise significance of its use here is impossible to ascertain; a search of the *TLG* reveals no other occurrences of this phrase anywhere in the searchable corpus (nor any occurrences of ἔμψυχος with θυσιαστήριον). As noted in the introduction, Jewish and Christian authors traditionally employed θυσιαστήριον to refer specifically to altars to the true God and particularly the altars in the Tabernacle and Temple, reserving βωμός to denote pagan altars. That distinction blurred over time; although θυσιαστήριον was never used to denote pagan altars, βωμός was occasionally used to denote an altar to the true God. Perhaps Methodius uses it here because he is in a Platonic frame of mind. Perhaps he uses it as an additional way to communicate the hierarchy of virgins, for whom βωμός is never used, over widows, for whom θυσιαστήριον is never specifically used in this passage (although the plural θυσιαστήρια is used to denote both altars together).

<sup>7</sup> The same word—ἄσηπτος—is used to describe the wood of which the incense altar is constructed in 6.6.33, above.

<sup>8</sup> Referring to Rev 5:8: “When he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell before the lamb, each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.”

<sup>9</sup> See the appendix for more information. For expediency’s sake I will continue to refer to the author of the text as Methodius, although very little is known about this person.

a narrative consisting mainly of characters giving speeches directed at other characters in the narrative. The *Symposium* inscribes multiple voices which deliver the content of the text—all of them female, none the male voice of the author. The text ranges widely in content, containing some attention to proper living (in many ways the main focus of the previous two texts we have examined) but also much scriptural interpretation (primarily allegorical) and discussions of philosophical matters such as the ascent of the soul.

Like both Polycarp and Tertullian, Methodius employs the image of widows as altar not to denigrate them as ‘objects,’ but rather as a marker of respect and acknowledgement of their importance. But he does so with a distinct twist: he expands the image to include virgins as the gold altar of God in the Tabernacle,<sup>10</sup> while specifying that widows are the bronze altar. In this comparison he focuses particularly on the bodies of widows and virgins and their relative purity when it comes to sexual experience. In explicitly comparing the bronze widow altar to the gold virgin altar, Methodius clearly presents virginity as the superior state to widowhood. Much as Paul argued in 1 Cor 7 (a text which Methodius discusses in detail in the second and third orations of the *Symp.*), widows are good; virgins are better.

As with all of the principal texts I examine in this dissertation, the *Symp.* employs the image of widows as altar in service of a particular rhetorical goal, in this case, the praise of virginity. Methodius’s reference to widows as altar is fairly brief. He speaks of the image with just enough detail that he is able to draw out the comparisons he wishes with the gold virgin altar, and no further. Yet in keeping with his attention to allegorical interpretation Methodius spends more time on the image—and his expansion of it to include virgins—than either of our

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<sup>10</sup> The Tabernacle, or tent of meeting, is the sanctuary described as having been constructed and moved about by the Israelites during their years in the wilderness after leaving Egypt. For God’s instructions to Moses on building the Tabernacle, see Exod 25–31.

previous texts, thus providing us with the fullest exposition of the image we have seen so far. We can ask of Methodius's text the same sorts of questions we have asked of our others: What issues in particular seem to be at stake with its usage? Towards what persuasive ends is its use directed? What understandings of widows might we be able to glimpse through the use of this image that are richer and deeper than the understanding upon which the text focuses in its employment of the image toward a particular rhetorical end?

In what follows I will first consider carefully the text and its rhetorical project as a whole, focusing on Methodius's notion of *ἀγνεία* ("purity") and the life of the pure person. Throughout the chapter I will note Methodius's attention to the three core concerns outlined in the introduction—purity, material offerings and finances, and prayer and speech—as they arise. I will attend to the text's particular interest in pure women and its focus on virginity, and to the textual enfleshment of exemplary virgins in the characters of the women who speak the text.

Next I will move to a close consideration of Methodius's employment and development of the image of widows as altar and his allegorical interpretation of it, attending to his reading of the image through the lens of the New Testament book of Hebrews. As Methodius develops his allegorical reading of the altars, I explore how he makes clear that it is widows' (presumed) sexual experience that makes them inferior to virgins. I suggest that he does this by focusing on the differences in material composition, position in the sanctuary, and sacrificial function between the two altars. I argue that this instantiation of the widow-altar image allegorically connects types of sacrifice suitable for the different altars, particularly in their relative bloodiness, to sexual intercourse (or lack thereof). Drawing on the work of Nancy Jay and Nicole Ruane in particular, I consider the potential implications of the textual interplay between

sacrifice and gender for the text's implicit understanding of widows and their place in Christian community.<sup>11</sup>

Methodius's use of the image of widows as altar shows us how the potency of the image may be focused in a way different from what we have seen so far in *Phil.* and *Ux.* While both of those texts employed the image in attempts to shape understandings of widows' proper behavior (whether in practices of prayer and speech as in *Phil.* or in whether or not to remarry as in *Ux.*), I argue that the *Symp.* employs it with a particular interest in shaping understandings of widows' bodies. Even more than widows' bodies, though, the image's attention is on the bodies of virgins, and widows provide a useful comparand. In expanding the image to include virgins, Methodius shifts the primary focus of the altar image and its effects from widows to virgins. I propose that the potency of the image, which in our previous texts was used solely in relation to widows, here has been harnessed largely in support of virgins, with particular attention to their bodies.

The *Symposium's* primary interest in virgins, and the deployment of the altar image in support of virginal bodies, can have the effect of obscuring the understandings of widows and their bodies that make the praise of virgins and virginity possible. I suggest that the text's presentation of virgins trades upon a particular understanding of widows. In order for virgins to be more pure, to be closer to God's divine presence, widows must be pure and close to God's presence. In effect, the sacred nature of widows as God's altar is assumed by the text. In both *Phil.* and *Ux.* I argued that grounding, and yet sometimes counter to, the texts' rhetorics were understandings of widows as figures of sacerdotal significance. Here in the *Symp.* the attention is

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<sup>11</sup> Nancy, Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion, and Paternity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Nicole J. Ruane, *Sacrifice and Gender in Biblical Law* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

not so much on the activities of widows and the roles they play in the community, as it is on their flesh and blood bodies. I propose that at the foundation of the *Symp.*'s particular rhetorical deployment of the image of widows as altar is an understanding of widows and their bodies as sacred to the Lord.

### The Women of the *Symposium*

Although modeled after Plato's,<sup>12</sup> Methodius's *Symp.* is a treatise focused primarily on the value and place of purity, and its particular instantiation in virginity, in a Christian's life and spiritual development. As such it is a treatise focused in effect entirely on the first of the three core concerns we have identified in our texts—that of purity—although Methodius takes pains to emphasize that purity goes beyond physical chastity. The work is set sometime in the late apostolic age or just after, as indicated by the fact that Thecla, Paul's disciple, is an attendee. The influences of Plato and Neoplatonic ideas, particularly regarding the descent and ascent of the soul; of Christian scripture, particularly as material for allegorical interpretation; and of Origen, in both philosophical ideas and interpretive methods, are evident throughout the text.<sup>13</sup> Allegory shapes the work, both in Methodius's interpretations of scripture and in his construction of the textual narrative itself.

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<sup>12</sup> See Alexander Brill, "Plato and the Symptotic Form in the *Symposium* of St. Methodius of Olympus," *ZAC* 9 (2006): 279–302, for an in-depth discussion of the relationship of Methodius's *Symp.* to that of Plato in terms of the symposium as literary genre and social institution. Brill regards Methodius as having little knowledge of symposiastic convention aside from what he has gleaned from Plato, and asserts that "the formal similarities between the respective works of the two authors had, in the manner of an ignis fatuus, misled some classicizing Christian scholars to overlook the numerous artistic defects in Methodius' *Symposium*" (280). Thankfully, it is not a goal of this project to evaluate the artistic merit of Methodius's work.

<sup>13</sup> Methodius's relationship to Origen's thought—as both a student and a critic—has been the topic of much scholarly examination. For a thorough consideration including references to previous scholarship, see L.G. Patterson, *Methodius of Olympus: Divine Sovereignty, Human Freedom, and Life in Christ* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1997).



The text is set up as a series of discourses on purity and virginity, given by a group of ten virgin women as part of a banquet they are sharing. The framing narrative concerning the occasion of the banquet is clearly allegorical, drawing upon both Platonic notions of the soul's ascent and the paradise of Eden. The location of the banquet is an beautiful, lush garden meadow ("the meadow of immortality") reached by a difficult path beset by monsters (prol. 54–60). The host of the banquet is Arete ("virtue"), the daughter of Philosophia ("philosophy"). The banquet itself takes place under the shade of a "chaste-tree" (prol. 77–8).<sup>14</sup>

The characters in the text are marked as being of elite status. Much like the characters in Plato's *Symposium*, they host and are guests at sumptuous banquets, and they discourse knowledgeable about philosophy. They also demonstrate a detailed knowledge of scripture and skill in its interpretation. What is more remarkable than their elite status is their gender: every single speaking character in Methodius's *Symp.* is female. This is true through all narrative layers of the text—all of the speakers at the banquet are women; their discourses have been reported by one of them (Theopatra) to the narrator, Gregorion, who may or may not have been present at the banquet but is now reporting what she heard to her friend, Eubolion.<sup>15</sup> There are only two mentions of specific men in the entire text who are not scriptural figures, and neither is a

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<sup>14</sup> The *Vitex agnus-castus*; see Plato, *Phaedr.* 230b. So-called because it was believed to act as an aphrodisiac; Pliny the Elder identifies it as having been used by matrons participating in the Thesmophoria as a sort of bedding (*Nat.* 24.59). As per usual for the *Naturalis historia*, Pliny gives many medicinal uses for the plant, including to promote menstruation, to promote milk production, as an aphrodisiac, a diuretic, a hangover cure, to reduce testicular swelling, to treat snake and spider bites, and to prevent chafing of the thighs (*Nat.* 24.49–63). Lucia Nixon notes that the Hippocratic Corpus recommended the vitex for gynecological uses as well, and that there is some modern evidence that the plant acts on the pituitary gland and may impact hormones in this way. Lucia Nixon, "The Cults of Demeter and Kore," in *Women in Antiquity: New Assessments*, ed. Richard Hawley and Barbara Levick (London: Routledge, 1995), 75–96, at 87.

<sup>15</sup> The prologue is somewhat confused on this; Gregorion reports that she heard about the speeches from Theopatra, while at one point Eubolion asks Gregorion to tell her about "where you held the meeting, what you had to eat, how you yourself served the wine" (prol. 26–7).

participant in the discussion.<sup>16</sup> The pervasiveness of the presence of women in the text is thrown into higher relief when one recognizes that Eubolius (masculine) is the name that Methodius typically gave to characters that were his alter-egos in other writings, but here Methodius has named the character Eubolion—a woman.<sup>17</sup>

While the banquet participants are all women—and apparently all virgins as well<sup>18</sup>—they display characteristics that are typically understood as markers of (elite) maleness. They travel about in public without male escorts; they host and are guests in their own right (and not as companions of men) at sumptuous banquets; and they comfortably deliver learned speeches to one another.<sup>19</sup> They even, it seems, drink wine (prol. 26–7); even though later in the *Symp.* Thallousa says that virgins are forbidden from doing so (although it is not entirely clear whether she is speaking of wine itself or of wine allegorically; 5.5–6). I suggest that these definitively female banquet participants, who behave in ways traditionally marked as male, not only provide teachings on the ideals of purity but are themselves embodiments of them. While on the one hand it might make sense to see this as an example of the valorization of the masculine and the

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<sup>16</sup> One is an unnamed “informant” in the prologue who did not know what had gone on at the banquet (prol. 18); the other Methodius himself, who is mentioned in the epilogue as having questioned Arete (the banquet host) about what went on (epil.8).

<sup>17</sup> Thinking of Eubolion as the female alter-ego of Methodius is complicated by the fact that there is a male character named Methodius who (as just noted) is mentioned in the epilogue and who presumably is meant to indicate Methodius himself. However, I would argue that these characters may both be understood as representational of Methodius in some fashion. What is remarkable is that in maintaining the complete presence of women as knowledgeable speaking characters in the text, Methodius has in a way changed himself into a woman in Eubolion. Patterson, *Methodius*, 67.

<sup>18</sup> Several of the banquet speakers refer to the entire group as “virgins;” e.g. Arete at prol. 86.

<sup>19</sup> “Methodius’ symposiast women are...unlike classical Athenian dames in every way: they go about unattended like male citizens (prol. [5,1–21]), lead a life outside the home, are educated, evidently devoting much of their time to books of various kinds (probably an unAthenian activity for respectable women); they do not wear jewellery, or other kinds of bodily adornments (V 6 [60,15–18]; VI 4 [69,12]) such as cosmetics (prol. [5,8]); they attend symposia at which they recline (prol. [5,24]) and drink wine. On the other hand, they are unlike Athenian *demi-mondaines* in respect of their virginity and in respect of the fact that they do not appear at the *symposion* for the purpose of satisfying men’s pleasures. Hence Methodius’ women are completely out of place in a classical setting... His characters fit into none of the accepted classical female categories” (Bril, 294).

idea of the male as more perfect than the female,<sup>20</sup> on the other perhaps we might see these virginal embodiments of the ideals of purity<sup>21</sup> as challenging and complexifying the male/female sex/gender binary.

It is tempting to ask whether the characters of the *Symp.* are reflective in some way of the audience for whom Methodius originally wrote this text, or the community out of which it emerged. While it is difficult say anything with certainty about the rhetorical-historical context of the *Symp.* or its intended audience, there has been some speculation that Methodius could have written this text for a community of pure women whom he knew, perhaps one of whom (the “lady of Termessus” mentioned in connection with Methodius in the epilogue) may have been his patroness.<sup>22</sup> Musurillo and Patterson have both suggested that the names of the virgins who attend the banquet might include names of women from that community.<sup>23</sup> There is some evidence from his other writings that Methodius did have some connection to women in particular. He names his correspondent in *De cibis* as a woman (or women, it is unclear if the two names belong to one woman or two), Phrenope Kallonia, and in *De lepra* Sistelius, the main

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<sup>20</sup> Hanson, “Widows Too Young;” Castelli, “Make Mary Male.”

<sup>21</sup> As well as our transgendered author / character, Methodius / Eubolion.

<sup>22</sup> Musurillo, *Methodius*, 11. The primary textual clue that Musurillo cites is found at the beginning of the epilogue, when Gregorion, the woman who had been relating the story of the symposium to another woman, Eubolion, concludes her tale and returns to conversation with Eubolion. Their dialogue at this point is as follows: “*Eubolion*: ‘And tell me, what of our Termessian friend? Was she not listening from the outside? I should be surprised if she sat idle when she heard about this banquet and did not immediately run to listen to our discussions, like a bird in search of food.’ *Gregorion*: ‘No; the report is that she was with Methodius when he was questioning Arete about this matter. It is indeed a good and blessed thing to have a guide and teacher like Arete’” (Epil. 4–10). Musurillo’s phrase “our Termessian friend” renders the Greek ἡ Τελμησσιακὴ ξένη; he takes (sensibly, to my mind) Τελμησσιακὴ to be derived from the place name Termessus (Telmessus), although scholars past had considered it to be a woman’s name. His choice of ‘friend’ as the translation for ξένη is somewhat odd, given that ‘stranger’ might be a more typical rendering; perhaps the older sense of ‘host’ is better here. Musurillo proposes that “the peculiar nature of the reference to the Lady and Methodius suggests that it was intended as a kind of ‘seal’ (σφραγίς) or signature on the work; and the Lady from Termessus, who is pictured as running ‘like a bird in search of food,’ was perhaps a benefactress of Methodius, and may well have been the moving spirit of a household of women consecrated to chastity, somewhat like Olympias, the friend of Gregory of Nyssa and John Chrysostom” (240 n1).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 11; Patterson, *Methodius*, 65 n2.

character, reports on a conversation he had with a learned, ascetic Lycian woman—whom he regards as a spiritual authority—on an interpretation of Leviticus.<sup>24</sup>

Given the reappearance of women in significant ways in several of his texts, it seems reasonable to hypothesize that Methodius did have some connection to Christian women, perhaps a group of ascetic women with a learned and/or elite woman at their head. It also seems reasonable to hypothesize that these women were in some way related to the composition of the *Symp.*—perhaps as intended recipients, perhaps as inspiration for the characters, perhaps both. Beyond this we can say nothing about the particular historical situation of the work’s composition or its audience.

### What Is Purity?

The purity and virginity of which these women speak do not stop at the practice of abstinence from sexual intercourse. As M. Benedetta Zorzi has effectively demonstrated, the principal focus of Methodius’s text is a purity (ἀγνεία) that goes beyond simple physical abstinence to denote at its fullest a complex ideal of Christian spiritual life that involves scripturally-guided combat with the passions and victory over them.<sup>25</sup> Virginity (παρθενία) falls under the larger umbrella of and contributes toward ἀγνεία, although Methodius is certainly not

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<sup>24</sup> Patterson notes the possible connection between this Lycian woman and the “lady of Termessus” of the *Symp.* (Termessus was located in Lycia, the province in which Methodius likely resided). As Patterson also notes, *De lepra* may have been a sort of preliminary writing project for the *Symp.*, and here “particular interest attaches to the views of the ascetic woman, who clearly presents the life of chastity as the model for the generality of Christians as expounded in a more subtle fashion in the *Symposium.*” Patterson, *Methodius*, 238 n8, 239.

<sup>25</sup> M. Benedetta Zorzi, “The Use of the Terms ἀγνεία, παρθενία, σωφροσύνη, and ἐγκράτεια in the *Symposium* of Methodius of Olympus,” *VC* 63 (2009): 138–68.

rigorously consistent with his terminology and occasionally uses *παρθενία* (the part) to stand for *ἀγνεία* (the whole).<sup>26</sup>

In terms of sexual status, virginity is most certainly the preferred state, although both non-virginal continence and marriage are acceptable and (properly conducted) do not seem to prevent one from achieving *ἀγνεία*. Arete, in her concluding oration, presents this position eloquently as she outlines how those who resist fleshly desires but may suffer from other faults, such as arrogance, conceit, pride in material wealth, and love of self above love of neighbor, do not honor purity but rather dishonor it. She states, “thus it would be ridiculous to keep one’s generative organs pure, but not one’s tongue, or to keep one’s tongue pure, but not one’s sight, one’s ears or hands; or to keep all these pure, but not one’s heart, allowing it to consort with anger and conceit” (11.36–41). Those who think that purity consists simply of proper sexual behavior fail at it.<sup>27</sup> Nonetheless, when we turn to consider Methodius’s use of the image of widows as altar we will see that the relative sexual purity of bodies continues to be of great importance.

While the *Symposium* focuses on the broad virtue of purity, Methodius has relatively little concrete to say about anyone except virgins who might practice sexual abstinence. In fact, unless the reader makes a point of stopping at every mention of pure persons to remember that this

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<sup>26</sup> Zorzi, “Use,” 167.

<sup>27</sup> Thalloussa, in her discourse (which also contains the reference to widows as altar), provides some guidance on how the pure person should conduct herself. Speaking in the first person she explains what it means to offer oneself completely to the Lord, honoring him in the actions of one’s mouth, eyes, ears, hands and feet. She opens her ears only to the word of God, not to slander; she speaks the word of the Lord, her tongue a pen consecrated to him (see Ps. 44.2); she trains her eyes not to take pleasure in impure things; she restrains her hands from “ignoble trade and barter;” and keeping her feet on the right paths, she does not “stray to the law courts and to revels where malefactors are born” (5.4). Giving further instruction for the progress of virgins, she tells them to abstain from wine and anything like it, and to avoid jewelry and luxurious clothing, things which might lead her to “lose control of herself and give herself to feminine weaknesses and silliness and wasting time and fatuous conversation” (5.6)—injunctions which certainly echo some of 1 Timothy’s statements about women in chapters 2 and 5. It is immediately following these statements that Methodius turns to his first mention of the image of pure women as altars.

includes non-virginal celibates as well as married people, the reader might easily gain the impression that virgins are the only group about whom Methodius has anything to say. As the preferred category of the pure, virgins receive almost all of Methodius's attention, while others are relegated to brief mentions.

### Excursus: Widows Elsewhere in the Symposium

Aside from the passage we are about to consider, Methodius mentions widows only two other times in the *Symp.*, and both mentions are scriptural references. In the first, while discussing Paul's recommendations concerning marriage in 1 Corinthians, Methodius quotes 1 Cor 7:8 and notes that Paul prefers chastity for those who have lost spouses.<sup>28</sup> Methodius here assumes that Paul himself was a widower.

In the second mention Methodius produces a scriptural-hybrid widow of sorts. He combines the story of the widow's mite in Luke 21 with the story of the woman with the lost coin in Luke 15, plus perhaps a hint of the person who is swept clean of unclean spirits but remains empty and so falls victim to even worse possession in Luke 11 / Matt 12. Methodius mixes these scriptures together to produce a widow who only finds her mite after she has swept her house and cast out the passions.<sup>29</sup> This could easily be a simple instance of the confusion of

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<sup>28</sup> "But next we must again scrutinize closely the Apostle's message for whatever inspired word it may contain with regard to men who have already lost their wives and women who have lost their husbands. 'But I say to the unmarried and to the widows: It is good for them if they so continue, even as I. But if they do not contain themselves, let them marry. For it is better to marry than to be burnt.' Here again he consistently gives his preference to chastity. For holding himself up as the greatest example, he challenged his hearers to emulation in this state of life, teaching that it is better for one who had been married to one spouse to remain single, just as he himself did" (3.12.22–32).

It is worth noting that here Methodius specifically addresses both men and women who have lost spouses but he does not use the terms "widow" (*χήρα*) or "widower" (*χήρος*, a fairly rare word in Greek) to denote these people. Rather, he describes them as "men or women who have lost spouses" (*τῶν ἀποβαλομένων ἤδη γαμετὰς ἀνδρῶν ἢ γυναικῶν*). *Χήρα* appears only in the direct quotation from 1 Corinthians.

<sup>29</sup> "For it is only after the mind has been cleansed by laborious ascetical exercises from the different notions which obscure it, that it can look with sharp gaze upon the truth. Thus it was too that the widow in the Gospels found her

scriptures—Methodius has reached into his memory bank of scriptural stories and unintentionally pulled out a combination of two or three. It could also, though, be a relatively purposeful hybridization.

Intentional or not, the combination of these three scriptural passages pulls together elements of each story that will work together to form a useful allegory for Methodius's argument. The character of the widow from Luke 21 fits Methodius's preference for physical chastity, and the high symbolic value of her 'mite' aligns with the high value of the 'truth' that one may view after cleansing the mind. The notion contained in Luke 15 of the effort of sweeping to find something that had been obscured, and the rejoicing that follows its uncovering, stands well for Methodius's emphasis on the effort of ascetical practices to enable one to see truth. Finally, the story of the cleansing of the soul in Luke 11 / Matt 12 establishes that the allegory concerns work done in one's individual self to cleanse oneself of undesired elements (demons in the scriptural passage, passions for Methodius), rather than work done in service of others as in Luke 15 and 21.<sup>30</sup>

### Altars of God

Methodius makes two references to women as altars in the fifth discourse, separated by a paragraph in which Thallousa, the woman speaking, describes what grounds her allegorical technique. Both references involve the allegorical interpretation of passages of Exodus referring to the Tabernacle and its altars, and particularly to a passage in Exod 30 regarding the

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mite only after she had swept her house and cast out the filth—the passions which obscure and darken the soul, which grow strong in us through our carelessness and living in luxury.” (9.4.7–13).

<sup>30</sup> This is not to suggest that Methodius has no concern for communal values, as it were. However, the principal focus of the *Symp.* is on the individual, and the efforts and rewards connected with individual practices of purity.

construction and use of the gold altar of incense.<sup>31</sup> The first reference (5.6.24–41) describes the gold altar of incense in the Tabernacle as “the gathering of the pure;” the second reference (5.8.1–25) describes widows as the bronze altar of the Tabernacle and virgins as the gold altar. In these references Methodius expands the groups of people under consideration and the altars to which they are compared while also making the comparisons more specific. While the references are still fairly brief, Methodius does more work to set up and interpret the image than was done by either Polycarp or Tertullian. He explains to his audience both how the altars are to be understood as relating to widows and virgins (they are ‘types’), and what it is about virgins in particular that makes the gold altar an apt symbol for them—and so by inference what it is about widows that, according to him, makes the bronze altar more appropriate for them.

Both of Methodius’s references serve the broader rhetorical purpose of the *Symp.* of praising purity in general and virginity in particular. By explicitly comparing the bronze and gold altars on three points—their location in the Tabernacle, the material of which they are made, and the sorts of sacrifices offered upon them—Methodius makes clear that while the bronze altar is of significance, the gold altar is superior to it, and so virgins are superior to widows. Although throughout the *Symp.* Methodius presents a broad notion of purity, in this allegory he focuses a great deal on the purity of physical bodies in relation to sexual experience. In so modifying and deploying the image, Methodius not only works to focus the attention of his audience on the superiority of virginity, but also works to shift the focus of the altar image and its effects from widows to virgins. In other words, the power of an image that in our previous examples was used

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<sup>31</sup> Throughout the rest of the chapter I will occasionally make reference to passages in the Pentateuch, particularly passages in Exodus and Leviticus, that prescribe various aspects of Israelite sacrificial ritual. It is important to note that these passages are almost certainly not ‘objective’ descriptions of sacrifice (and the construction of the Tabernacle, etc.) as they actually occurred, but are rather prescriptive, idealized constructions of the way in which some person, or group of persons (the so-called ‘priestly author’ in most source criticism of the Pentateuch), thought they ought to occur.



solely in relation to widows has here been largely re-directed and harnessed in support of virgins—and in particular of virginal bodies.

Intriguingly, in discourse five Thallousa introduces her audience to the figurative language of the pure as altars of God by saying that it has been “handed down” (*παρεδόθη*; 5.6.24). She signals that this is a pre-existing image on which she draws. Not only is it a pre-existing image, but it is something that has been considered worthy enough to be preserved and passed down. Methodius confirms for us what the full corpus of references to widows as altar also suggests, namely that this image was a part of early Christian tradition.

Thallousa’s discourse is devoted primarily to the allegorical exposition of scriptural references from the Hebrew Bible, but with attention to some New Testament texts as well. She explains her intentions clearly at the beginning of the discourse. Having noted that she has “become fully convinced, from what I have observed from Holy Scripture, that the greatest and most illustrious offering and gift is the prize of purity,” she tells her fellow virgins: “I must try to explain to you by true reasoning the spiritual meaning of the Scripture” (5.1.4–8, 2.1–2).

In the passage intervening between the two references to pure people as altars, Thallousa describes the allegorical interpretive method she uses.<sup>32</sup> Referencing 2 Corinthians 3, Thallousa describes this reading as the removal of “the veil of the letter which is spread over it [the Law]” and the contemplation of “its true meaning stripped bare” (5.7.1–4). She sets the symbolism up for her audience quite explicitly: the Tabernacle is a symbol of the church, and the church is a symbol of the heavens. Jews had access to the Tabernacle, “a shadow of an image;” Christians are privileged to behold “the image of the heavenly dispensation;” and reality itself—the

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<sup>32</sup> This is a method of reading the text for various levels of meaning that Methodius employs throughout the *Symp.*, and which is clearly shaped by the interpretive methods of Origen.

heavenly city—will be revealed after the resurrection.<sup>33</sup> The Christian community in the form of the church provides a reflection of the heavenly community to come.<sup>34</sup>

*In the Holy of Holies: The Altar Image Through the Lens of Hebrews*

In setting forth his interpretation of the pure as altars of God, Methodius seems to draw upon another text that presents an understanding of the Tabernacle as in some way representative of the Church: the New Testament book of Hebrews. While this broad parallel between the texts in their analogical usages of the Tabernacle is fairly clear, the likelihood of Methodius's use of Hebrews is highlighted by a particular detail: the location of the gold altar.

As we noted above, Methodius focuses on three matters in particular when comparing the gold and bronze altars: location, material, and type of sacrifice. Methodius never specifies exactly where the bronze altar is, saying only that the gold altar is closer to the Holy of Holies. This seems to be of a piece with a broader strategy he exhibits of discussing the bronze altar only as much as he needs to in order to make the comparisons he wants. At the close of the first reference, Methodius describes the altar of incense as being set up “within ‘in front of the testimony’ . . . situated in the Holy of Holies.” (He also locates the gold altar within the Holy of Holies in the course of the second reference). This is not where the altar is generally understood

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<sup>33</sup> 5.7.15–21: “The Jews announced what was a shadow of an image, at a third remove from reality, whereas we ourselves clearly behold the image of the heavenly dispensation. But the reality itself will be accurately revealed after the resurrection when we shall see the holy Tabernacle, the heavenly city, ‘whose builder and maker is God,’ ‘face to face,’ and not ‘in a dark manner’ and only ‘in part.’”

<sup>34</sup> It is important to note that while Methodius's focus in this work is not explicitly on crafting an anti-Judaic argument, his readings are nevertheless heavily supersessionist. He regards Israelite ritual as the profoundly inferior, ‘physical’ precursor to the spiritual truth of Christianity, ritual that existed primarily to signal the coming truth and which now has no purpose. In this way Methodius's interpretations resemble somewhat those of the book of Hebrews, upon which he seems to draw in this section concerning the Tabernacle's altars. While my interest in this project is in the ‘spiritual’ readings of Methodius concerning the church, I in no way wish thereby to endorse his supersessionist ideology.

to be located in Exod 30, where it is described as being “in front of the curtain that is above the ark of the covenant, in front of the mercy seat that is over the covenant” (30:6). ‘In front’ here likely means on the outside of the curtain, as placing it inside the curtain would locate it within the Holy of Holies, an area of the Tabernacle entered only once a year by the high priest (thus making it very difficult for the daily offerings of incense prescribed in Exod 30 to be made on the incense altar). And yet, in the Holy of Holies is exactly where Methodius places the incense altar, even though several lines later he quotes directly from Exod 30:6.<sup>35</sup>

Many commentators have noted this altar placement, but none to my knowledge have connected it with Heb 9:3–4, where this same placement also occurs.<sup>36</sup> The placement of the incense altar in Hebrews (along with other ‘anomalies’ in its descriptions of the Tabernacle) has been a source of consternation for exegetes for centuries,<sup>37</sup> but of importance for us is that the placement in *Symp.* suggests that Methodius may be allegorizing the Tabernacle and its altars through the lens of Hebrews.<sup>38</sup>

Methodius further signals the involvement of Hebrews in 5.7 when Thallousa describes her process of allegorical analysis. Here she quotes and alludes to Hebrews several times, notably Hebrews 10:1.<sup>39</sup> This verse states plainly the relationship of earthly law to heavenly perfection, and encapsulates the project of Hebrews 8–10 to contrast the imperfect, earthly first

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<sup>35</sup> “‘And you shall place it opposite the curtain that is on the ark of the testimony,’ in ‘front of the mercy seat,’ which is ‘on the testimonies’” (5.6.34–6).

<sup>36</sup> “Behind the second curtain was a tent called the Holy of Holies. In it stood the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant overlaid on all sides with gold, in which there were a golden urn holding the manna, and Aaron’s rod that budded, and the tablets of the covenant” (Heb 9:3–4).

<sup>37</sup> See Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 230–8.

<sup>38</sup> See Stephen Finlan, “Spiritualization of Sacrifice in Paul and Hebrews,” in *Ritual and Metaphor: Sacrifice in the Bible*, ed. Christian A. Eberhart, RBS 68 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2011), 83–97.

<sup>39</sup> “Since the law has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered year after year, make perfect those who approach” (Heb 10:1).

covenant, sanctuary, and sacrificial practice to the perfect and everlasting sacrifice of Christ in the heavenly sanctuary, which has established the new covenant.<sup>40</sup> In Hebrews, “the law,” including the earthly Tabernacle and the sacrificial practices conducted in it, are “only a shadow of the good things to come, and not the true form of these realities” (10:1).

Christ in Hebrews is figured as both the High Priest and the sacrifice—specifically, his blood is figured as the blood which the High Priest dashes inside the Holy of Holies during the once-yearly Day of Atonement rituals. Christ, as the High Priest performing his own self-sacrifice, entered the heavenly sanctuary and removed sin once for all.<sup>41</sup> Methodius refers to Christ as the High Priest early in the *Symp.* while also placing him at the head of the company of virgins, saying of him that “it was only fitting that he who was Head Priest, Head Prophet, and Head Angel, should also be called Head Virgin” (1.4.9–10, my translation). This earthly-heavenly typology of Hebrews and its notion of the Israelite Tabernacle and practices as ‘shadows’ of the true reality may be seen as providing a framework for Methodius’s own

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<sup>40</sup> See Attridge, *Hebrews*, 216–82 for an exhaustive and masterful examination of 8:1–10:18, a passage which Attridge describes as “the heart of the christological exposition of Hebrews” (216). (Of particular note is his excursus on “The Heavenly Temple and Its Significance” (222–224)). Attridge summarizes his analysis of this passage thusly, in the commentary introduction: “The basic framework of the typology is simple enough. As the high priest goes once a year into the inner sanctuary of the earthly temple, so Christ entered once for all by his self-sacrifice into the true inner sanctuary, heaven itself. Yet that deceptively simple analogy is only the beginning of the elaborate interpretive process of chaps. 8–10. It is complicated by the introduction of other sacrificial acts, various purificatory rituals, and above all a covenant-inaugurating sacrifice (9:15–22) to serve as the images that interpret Christ’s self-sacrifice...The concluding portion of the exposition (10:1–10) emphatically affirms the very earthly and physical reality of Christ’s self-sacrifice. Yet that earthly reality remains a ‘heavenly’ one because of another quality of the sacrifice that was necessary to inaugurate the new and *interior* (8:10) covenant.” (26–7, italics original). Attridge points out that the passage’s typological analysis of the earthly Tabernacle and its sacrificial rituals is not solely an imperfect mirroring of heavenly by earthly—for Christ’s sacrifice of himself is understood both as having occurred on earth and as being a heavenly reality.

<sup>41</sup> “But when Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation), he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption” (9:11–12).

allegorical presentation of the shadow-Tabernacle as symbol of the image-church, itself a symbol of the reality-heaven.<sup>42</sup>

Are there implications for our consideration of the images of widows and virgins as altars, when we understand Methodius's allegorical interpretation as having been shaped by Hebrews' own typology of the Tabernacle? I suggest yes: the influence of Hebrews reinforces Methodius's aim of positioning virgins (gold altar) as spiritually superior to widows (bronze altar). It is the gold altar of incense that is referenced in Hebrews and that is present at the sacrifice understood as the type of Christ's sacrifice—the bronze altar is never specifically identified in Hebrews. By placing the gold altar within the Holy of Holies, Methodius (and Hebrews) is placing it in the same sacred space as the Ark of the Covenant, the place where God's presence dwells, the place where only one human being (the High Priest) ever enters, and that only once a year. In contrast, the usually assumed location of the altar of incense—in the outer portion of the Tabernacle—is entered by priests on a daily basis; and the location of the bronze altar of burnt offerings—the Tabernacle court—is accessible to all Israelites as long as they are ritually pure (although only priests are allowed to perform the sacrificial rituals directly involving the bronze altar).

As we can see from the passages translated at the opening of this chapter, Methodius makes much of the placement of the gold altar in 5.6–8. He emphasizes several times that it is set up “in the Holy of Holies,” even specifying that it is “nearer” to the Holy of Holies—nearer than what is not said, but a likely presumption would be nearer than the bronze altar mentioned previously. Virgins, then, may be understood to be closer to the divine presence than widows—

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<sup>42</sup> *Symp* 5.7. Patterson points out that here Methodius is almost certainly influenced by Origen's interpretation of Hebrews 10:1. Patterson, *Methodius*, 88.

perhaps even as in the divine presence—and virgins represent on earth the heavenly gold altar, present, in Hebrews, at Christ’s sacrifice.

### *On the Relative Purity of Metals and Bodies*

As he develops the imagery of the widows and virgins as Tabernacle altars, in addition to attending to their relative locations, Methodius focuses on the materials out of which they were crafted. Here too he emphasizes a hierarchy of the two altars based upon their materials’ relative purity. He focuses most of his attention on the praise of the gold altar while giving the bronze altar a quick mention. Methodius says nothing negative about the bronze composition of the altar—it, and the widows whom it figures, are of significance—but the praise that he lavishes upon the gold altar of virgins in comparison makes plain who, in Methodius’s eyes, are the real stars of the show. His emphasis on gold’s purity also makes clear whence, in this instance, the superiority of virgins stems. I argue that Methodius trades on the relative purity and value of gold and bronze to communicate the relative purity and value of widows and virgins, and in particular the relative sexual purity of their bodies.

When Methodius makes the connection between virgins and the gold altar he does not simply say that the gold altar is to be compared to virgins. Rather he continues by drawing out what in particular about virgins he wants to emphasize: their pure, fortified, incorruptible bodies (σώματα). The gold altar is compared to “to those in virginity who have fortified the bodies incorruptible by sexual intercourse with pure gold (5.8.12–4).” This word ‘incorruptible’ (ἀσηπτος) was also used in Methodius’s initial reference to the gold altar in 5.6, there in a

quotation of Exod 30:1 to designate the wood of which the gold altar was crafted.<sup>43</sup> As the wood of the gold altar may not be corrupted by rot, so the bodies of the virgins may not be corrupted by sexual intercourse. Virgins have protected their bodies against this corruption, but widows, even if currently chaste, have not. While the bodies of virgins are protected by the pure gold of complete sexual abstinence, widows are surrounded with only the lesser, mixed bronze of purity preceded by sexual experience. Tellingly, Methodius describes the gold that fortifies the virgins as ἀκηράτω, a word that may be used to describe both gold and virgins: undefiled, inviolate, but also *unmixed*.<sup>44</sup> This pure stuff of virgins stands in contrast to the bronze of widows, the mixed, alloy metal of those whose bodies have mingled with others in sexual intercourse and so are no longer inviolate.

Methodius does not spell out the less-than-perfectly-pure nature of the bronze of the altar (and hence of the widows), but he does not have to—the attention he pays to the purity of the gold in comparison to his relative silence about the bronze does that for him. He continues in his praise of gold, comparing its untarnishable nature (another sort of incorruption) and brilliant color to the spotless nature of purity, which gleams with the light of the word. Notice that here Methodius compares gold not as we would expect to virginity specifically, but to purity more generally.<sup>45</sup> I suggest that this single move produces effects in two different directions. We have seen that, for Methodius, purity is a state of being that goes beyond the sexual purity of one's body. On the one hand, then, this comparison of gold to purity more generally serves to remind one of the bigger picture, of the ultimate prize toward which one should strive. On the other

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<sup>43</sup> This incorruptible wood—acacia wood in modern translations—is also the stuff of which the bronze altar was constructed (Exod 27:1), a fact which Methodius does not mention.

<sup>44</sup> “ἀκηράτος,” LSJ 49–50.

<sup>45</sup> “And so this is suitably a symbol of purity which does not admit stain or spot but ever gleams with the light of the word” (5.8.17–9).

hand, though, this particular mention of purity happens in the midst of a description of virginity—so there is a way in which the effect is also to narrow what ‘really counts’ as pure to virgins alone.

These effects coexist, allowing for at least two possible readings of Methodius’s use of ‘purity’ here in 5.8.18, depending on whether one sees ‘purity’ or ‘virginity’ as the governing notion. Methodius has already made a similar move in his first reference to the altar image, in 5.6.24–6, where he first describes the gold altar as the “gathering of the pure” but then immediately speaks of how this understanding shows how glorious “virginity” is. Here too the slippage in categories between purity and virginity may cut both ways. On the one hand it reminds of the greater importance of the broader category of purity, on the other it restricts the truly important sort of purity to virginity.

### *The Enclosure of the Widows*

In the passage explaining the symbolism of the two altars, the text presents some puzzling vocabulary in conjunction with the widows. Specifically, it says that the bronze altar is to be compared to τῆ γερουσία καὶ τῶ περιβόλῳ τῶν χηρῶν. Translators and commentators have taken this construction in various ways. Musurillo opts for “the enclosure and assembly of holy widows” (switching the positions of γερουσία and περιβόλῳ, and supplying ‘holy’), while Debidour in his French translation of Musurillo’s Greek edition chooses “au sénat et à la garde d’honneur que forment les veuves.”<sup>46</sup> Zorzi takes only περιβόλῳ to be describing the widows,

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<sup>46</sup> Musurillo, *Methodius*, 89; Musurillo, *Méthode*, 161.



with *γερουσία* designating a separate entity, when she asserts that “the elderly (*γερουσία*) and the widows are said to be the bronze altar.”<sup>47</sup>

Zorzi’s solution is grammatically possible, although Methodius rarely speaks of the elderly as a group anywhere else in the *Symp.* While *γερουσία* typically denotes a group or council of older men with no particular assumption regarding their sexual status, the focus of this passage is squarely on pure women. However, it could also be that Methodius includes the elders here as a further way to dilute the particular association of widows with the image of the altar—not only are widows not the only group to be understood as a Tabernacle altar, they are not even the only group to be understood as the bronze altar.

Musurillo’s choices of “assembly” and “enclosure” make some sense, particularly as we have textual and archaeological evidence of widows and other pure women having areas within the sanctuary specifically designated, even demarcated, for their sitting or standing.<sup>48</sup> But the introduction of these intervening concepts seems odd, particularly as so translated they (and especially *περίβολος*) introduce a new element of corporate space and identity into the image which interrupts the connection between the widows and the altar. This intervening element is not included in the immediately following comparison of virgins to the gold altar. Methodius could again be aiming to weaken the connection of widows to the altar by introducing an intervening element, or he could simply be using more elaborate language for stylistic purposes. Taking cues from the surrounding lines leads us to an alternative (but certainly not mutually exclusive) way of understanding this construction that makes sense within the context of

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<sup>47</sup> Zorzi, “Use,” 154.

<sup>48</sup> See Joan R. Branham, “Women as Objects of Sacrifice? An Early Christian ‘Chancel of the Virgins,’” in *La cuisine et l’autel: les sacrifices en questions dans les sociétés de la méditerranée ancienne*, ed. Stella Georgoudi, Renée Koch Piettre and Francis Schmidt, BEHER 124 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), 371–86.

Methodius's broader allegory. I propose that, as Methodius trades particularly on the relative purity and value of gold and bronze to communicate the relative sexual purity of the bodies of widows and virgins, *περίβολος* here may be understood as designating the widows' physical bodies, the flesh that encloses the soul.<sup>49</sup>

The words Methodius uses to designate the two altars here are not simply 'bronze' and 'gold' but *περικεχαλκωμένον* and *περίχρυσον*—surrounded in bronze and surrounded in gold. In Exodus's descriptions of these two altars, they are in fact made of acacia wood, and then overlain—covered, surrounded—with metal.<sup>50</sup> This *περι*-prefix, with its sense of being all around, surrounding, or enclosing, appears also in our puzzling word *περίβολος*. I suggest that Methodius uses this word, with its basic sense of enclosure, something which surrounds, to designate the physical bodies of the widows in comparison to the bodies of the virgins, which he designates with *σώματα*. While there is some slippage in specifics here between what exactly is doing the surrounding and what is being surrounded (the widows' *περίβολος* is a sort of enclosure, but it is also enclosed in bronze), the figurative connections are clear. Perhaps Methodius plays further with the notion of enclosure, and the common understanding of *περίβολος* as an enclosing wall, when he speaks of the virgins' bodies as *κατησφαλισμέναις* (fortified, secure, safe, made fast).

But is *περίβολος* ever used to designate the physical body? Yes, and in an author of particular significance for Methodius, especially in the *Symp.*: Plato. In his *Cratylus*, a work

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<sup>49</sup> How to understand *γερουσία* is another question. If we take it (contra Zorzi) as referring to the widows, it may perhaps best be taken to signify some sort of council-like grouping or assembly of them, as Musurillo does. It could also be that perhaps it is being used in an unusual way here to designate the age of the widows—perhaps they are to be understood as a more mature (elderly?) group than the virgins.

<sup>50</sup> Exod 27:1–2, 30:1–3. The bronze altar of sacrifice, which is larger than the gold altar of incense, is also described as being made hollow (27:8).

dealing with the question of whether the relationship of words to their referents is natural or conventional, Plato (through his main character, Socrates) considers possible etymologies of the word *σῶμα*. The passage is worth quoting in full:

I think this admits of many explanations, if a little, even a very little, change is made; for some say it is the tomb (*σῆμα*) of the soul (*ψυχῆς*), their notion being that the soul is buried in the present life; and again, because by its means the soul gives any signs which it gives, it is for this reason also properly called “sign” (*σῆμα*). But I think it most likely that the Orphic poets gave this name, with the idea that the soul is undergoing punishment for something; they think it has the body as an enclosure (*περίβολον*) to keep it safe (*ἵνα σώζηται*), like a prison, and this is, as the name itself denotes, the safe (*σῶμα*) for the soul, until the penalty is paid, and not even a letter needs to be changed. (400b–c)<sup>51</sup>

Plato presents an understanding (held by the “Orphic poets”) of the body as an enclosure of the soul, which functions to preserve—and imprison—it. Methodius’s allegorical interpretation, with its language of bodies, enclosures and keeping safe (albeit with a different word employed for this third notion) resonates strongly with this passage of Plato. I suggest that the presence of such resonances with an author of significant importance to Methodius supports the likelihood of this understanding of Methodius’s allegorical interpretation, and of his use of *περίβολος* in particular.<sup>52</sup> This Platonic passage also resonates with Methodius’s description of the widows as bronze altar as an *ἔμψυχος βωμὸς*: an altar with a soul in it, a living altar. This altar encloses the soul just as in *Cratylus* the body encloses the soul, just as widows’ physical bodies—figured as the bronze altar—enclose their souls.

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<sup>51</sup> Plato, *Crat.* 500b–c (Fowler, LCL).

<sup>52</sup> Note that in Brill, “Plato,” *Cratylus* is not included in a list of Plato’s works whose influence has been discerned in Methodius’s writings (not just the *Symposium*). I do not here wish to propose any sort of direct dependence of Methodius on *Cratylus* for his use of *περίβολος*. I wish simply to suggest that the presence of the use of *περίβολος* to denote a bodily enclosure in an author of great importance for Methodius allows us to take more seriously the possibility that Methodius too used *περίβολος* in this way.

## (Un)Bloody Altars, (Un)Bloody Women

In his presentation of the images of widows and virgins as altars, Methodius makes clear the superiority of virgins to widows not by denigrating widows, but by saying relatively little about them and the bronze altar while praising various aspects of virgins and the gold altar. As we have seen he does this by speaking about the altars' positions in the Tabernacle and the material of which they were composed. He does so in one final category as well: that of the sort of offerings that were made upon the altars, and in particular their relative bloodiness. It is with this distinction that the text's deployment of the altar image taps into a complex of relationships among sacrifice, gender and human procreation and kinship.

In his very first reference to any altar comparable to the pure, the opening adjective which Methodius uses to describe this altar is ἀναίμακτον—"unbloody." It becomes clear in the subsequent exposition that here Methodius means the gold altar of incense, upon which no blood sacrifices were to be offered.<sup>53</sup> Why emphasize so the unbloodiness of the gold altar? Methodius wastes no time in making this plain: as the gold altar is not touched by blood sacrifices, so virgins must not participate in "the unclean things of the flesh" (5.6.27–8). The unbloodiness of the gold altar signifies the absence of defilement of virgins by sexual experience.<sup>54</sup> Only a particular sort of incense may be offered upon the gold altar, and that only by the High Priest.

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<sup>53</sup> It should be noted that blood was applied to the gold incense altar in the course of some of the rituals of purification offerings in order to purge the altar and the sanctuary of contamination (e.g., Lev 4:7), but in the prescriptions of Leviticus no sacrificial animals were ever to be placed or burnt upon the gold incense altar. Methodius of course does not mention that blood did make contact with the gold altar, because to do so would complicate his rather neat analogy of the blood of sacrifice with sexual experience. We may also note that here Methodius's location of the gold altar within the Holy of Holies would also seem to limit further its exposure to blood, as in that location the altar would have been daubed with blood only once a year, during the Yom Kippur rituals.

<sup>54</sup> The emphasis on unbloody here may also tap into a strain of critique of sacrifice visible from the Hebrew Bible through to, for example, the late second century writing of Athenagoras (and beyond), who asserts "what is necessary is bloodless sacrifice: to move towards rational worship" (*Leg.* 13.4, referencing also Rom 12:1). See Nasrallah, "Embarrassment," 148. For a thorough exploration of early Christian attitudes toward sacrifice, see Ullucci, *Christian Rejection*.

Methodius's continued quotation from Exodus emphasizes the limited sort of offering that may be made upon the gold altar, and the multiple sorts that are not allowed: "he shall not offer upon it incense of another sort or a whole burnt offering; he shall not offer upon it sacrifice or drink offering" (5.6.40–1). Methodius brings this up again when he describes the gold altar as that on which "it is forbidden to offer sacrifice and drink offering" (5.8.12).

In contrast to this is the bronze altar, which regularly received sacrifices of all sorts, including all of the animal sacrifices performed at the Tabernacle. On this altar according to Methodius "they" (not solely the High Priest) would offer "whole burnt offerings and offerings" (5.6.32). As "they" brought to the bronze altar various sacrifices including bloody ones, so do "we" bring to the widows "calves and tithes and free-will sacrifices" (5.8.9). By comparison to the gold altar, the bronze altar is the bloody altar, approached by an unnamed plurality of people, thoroughly exposed to the blood of sacrifice—and so by analogy widows too are the bloody ones. Methodius presumes—and by presuming, rhetorically attempts to establish—that widows as distinct from virgins have been corrupted by the "unclean things of the flesh," namely the messy physicality of sexual experience, the blood and other bodily fluids of sexual intercourse and birth. The blood and flesh of animal sacrifice resonates with the blood and flesh of sexual experience.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> While in what follows I draw primarily from the work of Nancy Jay and Nicole Ruane, I wish to highlight Joan Branham's work as providing a related extremely fruitful avenue of exploration, one that attends particularly to the gendered nature of sacred, sacrificial space. In her article "Women as Objects," she mentions the texts that employ the widows as altar image, considering them evidence for "figural affinities between women's bodily space and sacrificial space" (382). In relation to Methodius she notes that by placing the gold altar within the curtain of the Holy of Holies an affinity is created with virgins, who were also veiled (381). Her article "Bloody Women and Bloody Spaces: Menses and the Eucharist in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages," *HDB* 30.4 (2002) 15–22, offers a fascinating discussion of the sacrificial blood-reproductive blood relationship (which we will consider in more depth below) in terms particularly of the development of early Christian sacred spaces.

*Nancy Jay, Childbirth, and Blood Sacrifice*

Here the *Symposium* taps powerfully into complex associations between blood sacrifice and gender that have been explored by the late Nancy Jay and Nicole Ruane as well as Stanley Stowers—but the *Symp.* does so in a rather unusual direction.<sup>56</sup> Through considerable cross-cultural examination including of biblical laws of sacrifice, in her monograph *Throughout Your Generations Forever* Jay argued that women were excluded from blood sacrificial practice across multiple cultures. She persuasively argued that at the root of this exclusion lay a move to enable the establishment of kinship relations through men through practices of blood sacrifice, and so to supersede those kinship relations naturally established ‘by blood’ through women.<sup>57</sup>

Jay proposed that that through the establishment of agnatic kinship, sacrifice acted to replace matriliney with patriliney. This would be an extremely consequential move in societies in which social location, power, and property ownership were all to a large extent dependent upon lineage. Sacrifice worked to erase the danger of matriarchy and establish the certainty of paternity.<sup>58</sup> The blood of sacrifice counteracted the blood of childbirth, constructing notions of filiation and affiliation in which the male line was what mattered and women served to further that line, not to challenge it.

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<sup>56</sup> Jay, *Throughout*; Ruane, *Sacrifice*; Stanley K. Stowers, “Greeks Who Sacrifice and Those Who Do Not: Toward an Anthropology of Greek Religion,” in *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks*, ed. O. Michael White and L. Larry Yarbrough (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 293–333.

<sup>57</sup> Jay, *Throughout*, xxiii, 30–60, 147–50.

<sup>58</sup> “Sacrificially constituted descent, incorporating women’s mortal children into an ‘eternal’ (enduring through generations) kin group, in which membership is recognized by participation in sacrificial ritual, not merely by birth, enables a patrilineal group to transcend mortality in the same process in which it transcends birth. In this sense, sacrifice is doubly a remedy for having been born of woman” (Ibid., 40).

## *Women and Sacrifice in Biblical Regulations*

As Methodius is working from the prescriptive sacrificial texts of the Hebrew Bible, it is useful to consider to what extent Jay's argument holds when these texts are closely examined.<sup>59</sup> In her monograph *Sacrifice and Gender in Biblical Law*, Nicole Ruane thoroughly examines the ways in which gender interacts with sacrificial regulations in the Hebrew Bible. Although she provides important correctives to and nuancings of Jay's work,<sup>60</sup> nevertheless, her consideration of the evidence confirms that women's participation in any sacrificial activity as prescribed in the Pentateuch was heavily circumscribed. They are "either excluded from sacrificial activity or have a lesser role in it due to their secondary status in both society and in the patrilineal system highlighted in official sacrificial worship."<sup>61</sup> As presented by the biblical texts, women never served as ritual officiants—never made offerings on an altar, never performed blood manipulation, never "effect[ed] atonement, or otherwise officiate[d] in sacrificial rites."<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Jay's monograph considered many cultures, not just the sacrificial regulations included in the Hebrew Bible; given the breadth of her considerations, each culture was not considered in extremely great detail. Whether or not her argument fully holds for the sacrificial texts of the Hebrew Bible does not ultimately determine whether or not these notions of the intertwining of blood sacrifice and procreation, and the omission of women from blood sacrifice, are present in Methodius's text. That is, we can see these notions as present in Methodius's *use* of the scriptural texts, regardless of whether one sees them as present in the scriptural texts themselves. Nevertheless, exploring the scriptural texts themselves gives us a foundation for considering how Methodius used them.

<sup>60</sup> As Ruane notes, "the gender divisions in sacrificial activity are more complicated than just the juxtaposition between childbearing and sacrifice. Jay's work sometimes suffers from an overly simplified view of gender that does not consider wealth, class, rank, nationality, and other factors that complicate gendered roles." Ruane, *Sacrifice*, 7. Furthermore, she observes that Jay's work applies to the public sacrificial systems as prescribed in the "male-authored texts," and does not take into account the religious activity of women excluded from these texts "either as unimportant, not 'religious,' or heterodox, or, since it took place largely in the private and domestic realm, because it was unknown to them" (the male authors of the texts). *Ibid.*, 8. Even in considering the sacrificial regulations of the Hebrew Bible Jay did not thoroughly attend to instances in which women, even childbearing women, participated in sacrificial rituals in some way (see, e.g., Lev 12). *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 38. It is possible that women could have slaughtered some sacrificial animals—the biblical texts are often unclear as to who precisely is doing the slaughtering, perhaps reflecting the relative unimportance of that step in the ritual process for biblical authors—but there are no clear instances of this as a legitimate activity in the texts.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 37. The sacrificial offerings that women are portrayed as bringing are generally as a result of personal vows and/or ritual defilement, never as a part of communal sacrifices or feasts.

Women’s access to sacrificial meat—even women who were members of priestly families—was restricted and mediated by men in their families.<sup>63</sup>

Furthermore, Ruane’s consideration of purity regulations in the Hebrew Bible as they interact with sacrificial regulations<sup>64</sup> demonstrates the extent to which women’s reproductive capacities were, as Jay argued, considered by the biblical authors a threat to patrilineal society and so needed to be managed through ritual.<sup>65</sup> Ruane asserts that for the priestly authors male patrilineage, “the ritually constructed line from father to son,” was the basis of society—indeed of life—and it was in their reproductive capacities that women had the most potential to intervene in this world.<sup>66</sup> Therefore it was here that “the social power of ritual most needs to be asserted for society to manage potential female power.”<sup>67</sup> Thus according to Ruane, the Hebrew scriptural texts regarding sacrifice engage not so much in a simple opposition of childbirth to blood sacrifice, and not merely the counteraction of the one by the other, as in a more complex management of hierarchical gender relations, lineage, and power.

### *The Symposium, Altars, and the Signification of Blood*

What do we see when we bring the work of Jay and Ruane to Methodius’s allegorical reading of the Tabernacle altars? For one, we notice the out-of-place-ness of the virgins and widows as altars. According to the levitical prescriptions, no women would ever have

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 37–9.

<sup>64</sup> Scholars such as Jonathan Klawans have argued that the purity and sacrificial systems of the Hebrew Bible should not be studied separately; see Ruane, *Sacrifice*, 148–51. The ritual purity of a person determined whether or not they were able to participate in sacrificial ritual, and also often dictated when they were expected to make prescribed sacrificial offerings (as for example in Lev 12, the offerings prescribed for a new mother).

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., Ch. 5, “Impurity and the Creation of Difference,” 148–93.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 187.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 184.



participated in any aspect of sacrificial ritual that took place at either altar. These were thoroughly male-dominated spaces, and even more so for the gold altar than for the bronze (as the gold altar was located in the Tabernacle itself accessible only to male priests, while the bronze altar in the Tabernacle courtyard was in a space accessible to ritually pure men and women, although it itself was accessible only to male priests).

There is, however, a way in which this makes some sense. As non-childbearing, celibate women, both virgins and widows would have been ‘safer,’ as it were, to include in sacrificial spaces (as noted by both Jay and Ruane). As non-procreators, virgins and widows share an important characteristic with men, and virgins, having never procreated, are more similar to men than widows would likely be. Methodius’s (and our other texts’) willingness to allegorically place women in male sacrificial space makes clear that his rhetorical project involved not the erasure and replacement of women’s procreative capabilities but rather the construction and management of hierarchical identities based on purity—and particularly sexual purity.<sup>68</sup> In this way the notion of women as (hierarchically ranked) altars is of a piece with the tenor of the rest of the *Symp.*

As Ruane noted regarding the levitical texts, for Methodius, too, sacrifice and purity are thoroughly intertwined. Jay’s and Ruane’s work highlight the connection, also made by Methodius as discussed above, between the blood of sexual experience and the blood of sacrifice. For Methodius the concern is not with continuing childbirth (as neither virgins nor widows as he envisions them would be bearing children) but rather with the sexual experience widows presumably had had previously in their lives when they were married. Thus although

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<sup>68</sup> It could also quite easily be the case that Methodius is not here dramatically placing women in male-dominated sacrificial space so much as he is reflecting sacrificial practices with which he would probably have been familiar in his own surroundings. While likely not participating in blood sacrifice, women in Greco-Roman antiquity would have participated in sacrifices of other sorts in various settings, including as priestesses.

currently celibate, widows continue to be marked by their status as sexually experienced—and likely childbearing—women. It is here, with regards to blood, that Methodius does something unexpected: rather than seeing the blood of sacrifice as separate from and counteracting the blood of sexual experience (as we might expect from Jay’s work), Methodius *identifies* these two types of blood with each other. As we noted above, Methodius is explicit in his allegorical understanding of blood sacrifices as representing sexual experience. For the “unbloody altar” must be preserved “undefiled and clean in every way, not taking part in the unclean things of the flesh” (5.6.26–8).

How are we to understand this? Perhaps the allegorical identification reflects a distaste on Methodius’s part for blood sacrifice, and so connecting it to something ‘unclean’ would make sense. Perhaps the identification is itself a sort of counteraction—or at least an obscuring. Although for Methodius the church is the present truth of which the Tabernacle was an earlier symbol, perhaps here the symbol impacts the understanding of what it represents. Perhaps the sacrificial nature of the blood of the bronze altar subsumes and obscures the sexual nature of the ‘blood’ of the widows.

Whether or not we see this subsumption as present, I suggest that by identifying sacrificial blood with the blood of sexual experience Methodius comes dangerously close to doing something he emphatically does not wish to do: sacralize the prior sexual experience and reproductive capabilities of widows. While for Methodius things of the flesh are ‘unclean,’ blood offered in sacrifice—at least as set out in levitical sacrificial prescriptions—is by its very definition perfect and sacred to God.<sup>69</sup> Perhaps it is in order to avoid going down this road that

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<sup>69</sup> As Ruane notes with regard to biblical sacrifice, “the essence of sacrifice is of making something sacred. The victim or object of sacrifice becomes holy and thus divinely accepted; its acceptability is shown by the very fact of its consecration or destruction. Victims must be perfect or unblemished in order to be sacrificed and the fact that

the text attends not to the bloodiness of the bronze altar but rather to the unbloodiness of the gold.<sup>70</sup> But we ought to pause and consider what remains unarticulated in Methodius's allegory. That which Methodius posits as the reason for widows' inferiority to virgins—their sexual experience—is (if understood as sacrificial blood) perfect, sacred, and essential for maintaining the relationship of the people with God.<sup>71</sup>

Going further, we might ask whether this identification also opens up the possibility of understanding widows as being of some particular importance to the continuance of the Christian community. In other words, could widows, or their 'blood,' be somehow significant for the establishment and continuance of Christian 'lineage,' as Jay and Ruane posit that sacrificial blood was for the establishment of patrilineality? Is there space in Methodius's reading for a notion of widows as generative for the community (perhaps spiritually generative, given the allegorical nature of the interpretation)? While it is impossible to say whether such a notion was present for Methodius, or for any of the other authors whose works I examine in this dissertation, I suggest that reading Methodius in close conversation with Jay and Ruane's work does open up the space for this understanding.<sup>72</sup>

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they are sacrificed affirms their unblemished status. . . . One of the functions of sacrificial acts, then, is to define and represent what is holy, and thus ideal, and what is not." Ruane, *Sacrifice*, 10.

<sup>70</sup> And perhaps it is in order to avoid going down a related road that the text does not do more with Hebrews' allegorical understanding of the Tabernacle—for there the blood of sacrifice is Jesus's blood. Were these connections to be followed to a possible logical conclusion, the sexual experience of widows would be identified with the saving blood of Jesus, shed in his self-sacrifice.

<sup>71</sup> In her consideration of the exclusion of menstruating women from late antique and early medieval Christian sacred spaces, Joan Branham attends to what she calls the "rivalrous bloods" of reproduction and sacrifice ("Bloody Women," 20). She posits that "what appears to be an absolute antipathy between the two fluids may arise from their *kindred or similar powers* of purification, life, and rebirth." *Ibid.*, 15, emphasis original.

<sup>72</sup> Here it is worth noting that Jay explores the way in which the development of Eucharistic practice in early Christianity—and the idea of the Christian priest as the offerer of that 'blood sacrifice'—may have served to fortify apostolic lineage. Jay, *Throughout*, 112–27.

### *Calves, Tithes, Free-Will Offerings, and Incense*

In addition to pointing out the relative unbloodiness of the gold altar of virgins, Methodius compares what sorts of offerings may be offered (and what may not be offered) on the gold altar and the bronze altar of widows. This comparison further serves to emphasize the absence of blood at the gold altar, but in naming particular offerings it goes beyond just emphasis. In so doing the *Symp.* is the first of the texts we are considering to clearly describe widows as recipients of offerings, thus touching upon the second of the three core concerns (finances and material offerings) that we have identified in our texts. In 5.8 Methodius specifies that to the bronze altar of widows are brought “calves and tithes and free-will sacrifices,” while incense is offered at the gold altar.

As this passage is part of an allegorical reading, one would expect these types of sacrifices to be representative of something else. While Methodius tells us what this is in the case of the incense (see below), he does not do so for the offerings made at the bronze altar. We can only speculate as to why he did not do so; perhaps it is another instance of Methodius wishing to be brief in his mention of the widow-altar while focusing his audience’s attention on virgins? Or, one wonders if these three sorts of offerings are representative of types of offerings brought to widows, or perhaps types of activities in which they engaged.<sup>73</sup>

That Methodius mentions tithes here is particularly interesting. The tithes prescribed in the Pentateuch were not sacrifices brought to the altar and burned, but rather were portions of the

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<sup>73</sup> Calves—in this text identified as male calves by the Greek masculine article (τοὺς μόσχους)—were a very commonly prescribed offering on various occasions, particularly when one recognizes that the Septuagint has μόσχος throughout Leviticus where modern English translations have not only ‘calf’ but also ‘bull.’ The freewill offering seems to designate a subcategory of other offerings (notably the sacrifice of well-being and the burnt offering) that is different from votive offerings and thanksgiving offerings (see Lev 7:12–18 and 22:18–23).

Freewill offerings are animal sacrifices, but the animal offered depends upon the category of sacrifice being offered (burnt offering or sacrifice of well-being). Whereas Methodius’s first category, calves, designated the substance offered for the sacrifice, his third category, freewill offerings, designates sacrifices offered out of a particular motivation (or perhaps better, in the absence of other specified motivations)—freely, not because of a need to give thanks or a need to fulfill a vow.

produce of Israel set aside for God and used for the support of and consumption by particular groups of people (the texts are not unanimous as to whether tithing included animals or only agricultural products). According to the Deuteronomic author, tithes were to be consumed by the people who produced them, but every third year they were to be offered instead to “the Levite, who has no hereditary portion as you have, and the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow in your settlements” (Deut 14:22–28). According to the priestly author, however, all tithes were given to Levites “in return for the services they perform, the services of the Tent of Meeting” (Num 18:21), and the Levites in turn gave a tithe of what they had received to the priests (Num 18: 25–32).

While the Deuteronomic author groups the Levites with the paradigmatic needy and powerless—the stranger, the orphan, and the widow—and so the third year giving of tithes takes on the character of charitable giving, the priestly author is clear that tithes are in effect the salaries paid to the priests and Levites for their work. This method of compensating the ritual officiants—as well as their reception of portions of the meat of sacrifices—is what Paul has in mind in 1 Cor 9:13 when asserting his right to be supported by the communities he has established (while at the same time emphasizing that he has never taken advantage of that right but has always been self-supporting). I hypothesize that Methodius’s mentioning of tithes brought to widows indicates that he may be aware of practices of communal support of widows, and perhaps even of an understanding of this support as wages for services. We will encounter the question of charity versus wages again in our discussion of the *Didascalia apostolorum*.

While Methodius does not expand upon the offerings brought to the bronze altar, he makes clear the true identity of the incense offerings brought to the gold altar: they are prayers (5.8.22). Methodius quotes Rev 5:8, in which the twenty-four elders enthroned around God are

said to hold golden bowls full of incense, “which are the prayers of the saints.”<sup>74</sup> Here Methodius invokes the third of the three core concerns we have highlighted—speech and prayer. While he associates the role of offering up prayers with the identity of women as an altar, he associates it not with widows, as we saw in Polycarp and will see in the DA, but rather with virgins.

Furthermore, there is a difference in the way Methodius describes the two altars’ involvement in the offering. While the bronze altar of widows is not said to do anything (rather ‘we’ bring offerings to it), the gold altar of virgins is said to be “with undefiled hands sending up prayers in the manner of incense” (5.8.21–2). There is a sense of activity and involvement for the virgins here that is reminiscent of the sense we had in Polycarp regarding widows (particularly in his use of the verb ἐντυγχάνω). I propose that we see here quite clearly the way in which Methodius’ rhetorical expansion and shaping of the altar image is directed toward his primary objective of praising virgins and virginity. But it is more than that, because in so reshaping the image he in effect transfers to virgins a role of particular significance for widows—that of the intermediaries who offer prayers up to God.<sup>75</sup>

Methodius takes pains throughout the *Symp.* to specify that purity is more than just virginity and that non-virgins can be pure people too. But his deployment of the image of

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<sup>74</sup> The Testamentum Domini connects widows to the elders of Rev 5:8 several sentences after it makes reference to widows as altar. Speaking of widows the text says: “Her requests to God will be acceptable; they are the sacrifice and altar of God. For those who have ministered well shall be praised by the archangels. But as for them who are dissolute and raging and drunken, and babblers and curious and evil, that is, those who love pleasures much, the figures of their souls, which stand before the Father of light, perish and are carried to darkness to dwell. For their deeds which are visible, going up before the most High, drag them easily to the pit, so that after this world is changed and passeth away the figures of their souls may stand against them as witnesses, not allowing them to look up. For the figure and type of every soul standeth before God from the foundation of the world. Therefore let her be chosen who can go to meet the holy phials. Of them are the twelve presbyters who praise My Father who is in heaven. These who receive the prayers of every holy soul, offer [them] to the most High [as] a sweet savour.” Test. Dom. 1.40; Cooper & Maclean, *Testament*, 107. Perhaps there is a relationship between this connection to elders, and Methodius’ the use of the term γερούσια in relation to the bronze altar of widows.

<sup>75</sup> I do not mean to say that Methodius invents here the idea that virgins were praying to God. Rather I wish to illustrate another way in which Methodius shapes the image of the pure as an altar to praise virgins and virginity above widows.

widows as altar, and his expansion of it to include virgins, focuses on physical chastity in a way that makes clear the superiority of virgins to widows. In his allegorical interpretation of the widows as bronze altar and virgins as gold, he argues for the superiority of virginity—and incorruptible virginal bodies—through the altars’ relative placements in the Tabernacle, the materials of their composition, and the sorts of offerings offered upon them (particularly their relative bloodiness).

But Methodius’s use of the altar image in support of virginal bodies does more than just praise their physical state; it communicates an elevated spiritual status. It is virgins who stand within the divine presence; it is virgins whom Methodius explicitly portrays as communicating actively with God, offering up the prayers of the community. As he presents the allegorical reading of the altars, it seems that this elevated spiritual status is a result primarily of the greater purity of virginal bodies. While elsewhere in the text Methodius is at pains to emphasize the reach of purity beyond physical virginity (e.g., 5.4–6; 9), saying that “many who thought that purity consisted rather in the repression of sexual desires to the neglect of other impulses, have failed in it” (11.49–53), his deployment of the altar image makes clear that to him, physical virginity has real spiritual effects.

Nonetheless, it is important to remember that Methodius’s presentation of virgins as the gold altar rests on the presentation of widows as the bronze—and so the presentation of virgins as somehow more holy rests on the presentation of widows as holy.<sup>76</sup> This notion of widows as holy is clearly present in the rhetoric of the passages we have considered in this chapter. There is not the need, with Methodius, to read ‘against the grain’ in the same way as there was with

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<sup>76</sup> Methodius is the first of the early Christian texts that employ the image of widows as altar to expand that image to include virgins. Whether or not Methodius was the first *ever* to do so is unimportant; it is reasonable to hypothesize that in early Christian texts, the image of widows as altar preceded the image of virgins as altar. This suggests that it was the identity of widows as altar that grounded Methodius’s allegorical interpretation and formed the basis for the widows-virgins comparison, not the identity of virgins as altar.

Tertullian in particular, or to go quite so far in search of what is assumed in the text, as there was with Polycarp. It is simply the case that Methodius's overwhelming focus on virgins, and his clear project of positioning them as superior to widows, draws attention away from the briefer and less ostentatious way in which he establishes the significance of widows.<sup>77</sup> Widows, too, are earthly representations of a heavenly reality. Widows, too, receive the sacred offerings of the people. Widows, too, are possessed of bodies that—even though sexually experienced—are sacred to the Lord.

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<sup>77</sup> A later reference to widows as altar in Pseudo-Ignatius is reminiscent of Methodius's hierarchical ranking of virgins and widows: "Honor those in virginity as priestesses of Christ; the widows in dignity as an altar of God" (*Ep. Tars.* 9). Here we see the same move that was employed by Methodius to rank virgins above widows. What is unique here is that the text does not shy away from using priestly vocabulary when it describes virgins as "priestesses" (ἱερείας). In so ranking virgins, the text participates in the ongoing development in Christian literature of a focus on virgins in particular. In denoting virgins as priestesses, I would argue that the text demonstrates what matters are at stake in the image of widows as altar—namely, that they are figures of sacerdotal importance. The expansion of the imagery here to include virgins works in much the same way as Methodius's expansion does, that is to say that virgins and widows are similar in some way but virgins are superior and the force of the image of widow-as-altar is shifted to apply even more so to virgins. Here the 'even more so' is signaled by naming virgins as priestesses—and so showing, I would suggest, that in the image of widow-as-altar was contained a sense of widows as figures of sacerdotal importance.



## Chapter Four

### Wiser Than the Bishops: Widows as Altar in the *Didascalia apostolorum*

The final text we will consider is the *Didascalia apostolorum* (DA), a church order<sup>1</sup> that claims to have been written by the apostles during the council in Jerusalem of Acts 15. The majority of scholars agree that the text in its original Greek likely dates from the third century CE, and was composed somewhere in Syria, perhaps Antioch. While each of the previous texts we have examined contains a single reference to widows as the altar of God, the DA contains many—six or seven, depending on how picky one chooses to be. Through this wealth of references, the DA presents an understanding of the image of the widow as altar that is reminiscent of all three of our prior texts, but that functions in dynamic ways far beyond what we have seen to this point.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A manual of sorts for the organization and functioning of a Christian community. A cluster of ancient church orders, including the *Apostolic Tradition* traditionally attributed to Hippolytus, the *Canons of Hippolytus*, the *Testamentum Domini*, the *Apostolic Constitutions*, and (perhaps most well known) the *Didache*, were composed likely between the second and fifth centuries CE. Much attention has been devoted to attempts to figure out how the various church orders are related to one another, and to when they should be dated. A classic, if now outdated, work on the genre is Arthur J. Maclean, *The Ancient Church Orders* (1910; repr., Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2004). For more recent treatments, see Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and Methods for the Study of Early Liturgy* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 73–97, and Paul F. Bradshaw, Maxwell E. Johnson and L. Edward Phillips, *The Apostolic Tradition: A Commentary* (ed. Harold W. Attridge; Hermeneia; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Because of the volume of references to widows as altar in the DA, I have included the English translations of them throughout the body of the chapter where they are discussed, rather than all together at the beginning. Because of the DA's complicated manuscript and text history, I have included two translations for each reference. Where the reference is available in Latin (four of the seven references), I have provided my own translation of the Latin. Where it is available in Greek (one of the seven), I have provided my own translation of the Greek. For the two references that are available in neither Greek nor Latin, I have provided my own translation of the Greek of the corresponding portions of the *Apostolic Constitutions* for reference. For all seven references, I have provided Arthur Vööbus's translation of the Syriac as well. Each translation is clearly labeled. Where translations of the DA are provided throughout the chapter that fall outside of the seven references to widows as altar, the translations are those of Vööbus from the Syriac unless otherwise noted. See the appendix for more information on the manuscript and text history of the DA and for further reference information for editions and translations. Please also see below, p.148 n.5, for a description of my citing practices for the DA. Arthur Vööbus, *The Didascalia Apostolorum in Syriac*, 4 vols., CSCO 401–2, 407–8; ScrSyr 175–6, 179–80 (Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1979).

In what follows I will first provide a brief overview of the contents and particular concerns of the DA relevant to this project. I will then consider how the text portrays widows more broadly, attending to the portraits of the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ widow that it develops, which draw from 1 Tim 5:3–16. The DA, like all of our texts, touches upon all three of the core concerns I have identified—purity, material offerings and finances, and prayer and speech—and I will highlight those as we encounter them. The second and third core concerns are of particular importance for the DA’s treatment of widows. I will next consider the text’s participation in a discourse that likens almsgiving to sacrifice, much like the discourse that compares prayer to sacrifice that we considered in the first chapter, in which discourse the DA also participates. Then I will turn to consider the references to widows as altar of God.

The rest of the chapter will consist of a close examination of these references, individually and in conversation with one another, and in the context of the text’s broader presentation of widows. The DA does not present an explanation of how it wishes the image of widows as altar to be understood (as in Methodius’s allegorical reading). However, in large part due to the greater number of references, the specific rhetorical goals of each, and the frequent deployment of the interactivity of prayer and offerings in the references, it develops the most textured and dynamic portrayal of the image in any of our texts. I will attend to the text’s deployment of the image in attempts to control widows’ activities of prayer and receipt of material support and to establish the authority of bishops over widows.<sup>3</sup> I will argue that while the text works extensively to establish the bishop as the principal authority to be obeyed, in firm control of the entire community and particularly the flow of funds amongst its members, this emphatic rhetoric contains within itself a different story.

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<sup>3</sup> On the relationship of bishops and widows in the DA, see also Methuen, “Widows, Bishops,” and Penn, “‘Bold and Having No Shame.’”

The image of the widows as an altar of God in the DA communicates an understanding of the vital role widows play as they in effect transform material offerings into prayers and so sustain the relationships amongst the community and God. This understanding emerges in part from the DA's participation in discourses that compare both prayer and almsgiving to sacrifice, and its placement of widows as altar at the connection of those discourses. I will propose that this transformative theo-economy<sup>4</sup> has no real need for a bishop despite the DA's best attempts to convince its audience otherwise. The widows of the DA emerge as figures of sacerdotal significance, principal mediators between humans and God, in a process understood through the language and logic of sacrifice.

#### The Content and Concerns of the Didascalia apostolorum

The Didascalia apostolorum presents itself, in a proem and its twenty-fourth chapter, as being a product of the council of the apostles in Jerusalem as described in Acts 15. Chapter twenty-four (of twenty-six chapters total) quotes extensively from Acts, and the apostles, speaking in the first person, state that having sent the letter to the Gentiles, "we ourselves remained in Jerusalem many days. And we were consulting and arranging together those things which are helpful for all the people and again we were writing also this catholic Didascalia" (24;

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<sup>4</sup> The term 'theo-economic' was employed by David Wilhite in his essay on Tertullian's *Ux*. (Wilhite, "Tertullian on Widows"). Wilhite coined the term as an adaptation of John D. Caputo's concept of 'theo-poetics,' and employs it in resistance to modern dichotomies such as that between theology / religion, and economics. Rather per Wilhite these issues are often indistinguishable from one another, and economics is "inextricably entangled with religion" (Ibid., 224). The concept of theo-economics is being extensively developed in Jennifer Quigley's work particularly in relation to Paul's letter to the Philippians. Quigley calls for us to attend to the inseparable intertwining of theology and economics in antiquity and to the ways in which divine and semi-divine beings were understood as actors within the economic sphere. See Jennifer Quigley and Laura S. Nasrallah, "Cost and Abundance in Roman Philippi: The Letter to the Philippians in its Context," in *Philippi, from colonia augusta to communitas christiana: Religion and Society in Transition*, eds. Steven J. Friesen, Daniel N. Schowalter and Michalis Lychounas (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming), as well as Quigley's forthcoming Harvard University dissertation "Divine Accounting: Theo-economic Rhetoric in the Letter to the Philippians." As I use the term 'theo-economy' here, I mean a system of exchange amongst humans and the divine in which the goods being exchanged include not only money and material goods, but also more immaterial, theological goods such as prayer and divine attention.

6.13.1).<sup>5</sup> The text draws on the authority of Jesus's own apostles, and the significance of what is traditionally one of the most important moments in early Christian history for the formation of the early church, to both ground and shore up the authority of its prescriptions and presentation of the proper ordering of the life of the Christian community.

The twenty-six chapters of the DA consist primarily of instructions for behavior of community members and community officials. As such, its treatment of widows, which focuses largely on their conduct, is of a piece with much of the rest of the text. It contains some instructions directed at men and at women regarding their relationships with their spouses and also instructions regarding bathing (chapters two and three); a chapter on the raising of children (chapter twenty-two); and some instruction regarding proper behavior, and proper seating arrangements (including for widows), during worship services (chapters twelve and thirteen).<sup>6</sup> It also contains directions for the appointing and conduct of church officials including deacons, deaconesses, and, most particularly, bishops.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> There is some variation across editions and translations of the DA with regard to how to number text divisions and indicate location in the text. There are two principal systems: The first system follows the internal divisions of the DA itself, which, as noted above, is divided into twenty-six chapters and a proem. Unfortunately, some of these chapters are quite lengthy and the text does not contain any indicated subdivisions. The second system, instituted by Funk, employs the divisions of the Const. ap. and maps them on to the DA, so that the DA is divided up into six chapters that mirror the first six chapters of the Const. ap. (with smaller divisions for sections and sub-sections, although these do not always precisely match between the DA and the Const. ap.). The advantage to this system is that it is generally referenced in some way by most editions and translations, it simplifies comparison between the two texts, and it allows for fairly precise location designations. The disadvantage is that these divisions are not those indicated in the text of the DA itself. In order to facilitate ease of consultation of editions, I have provided two textual designations at the conclusion of each quotation. The first follows the first, internal system and provides the chapter as designated by the DA itself. The second follows the second, external system, designating chapter, section, and sub-section. When I make reference to the text but do not include a specific quotation, I may include only the first designation.

<sup>6</sup> "Let the aged women and widows sit by themselves" (12; 2.57.8).

<sup>7</sup> Although the DA has references to Christian rituals such as baptism and the Eucharist, unlike other church orders it contains no instructions for the performance of those rituals. The last third of the text moves away (although not consistently) from the mode of behavioral instruction and includes a discussion of the resurrection of the dead, a lengthy passage on Passover and Jesus's passion, warnings regarding heresies, assertions of God's having passed from the synagogue to the church, and descriptions of the Jerusalem council and activities of the apostles (chapters 20–26). The DA quotes from sacred texts frequently, from texts of what would become the New Testament but also, and quite heavily, from texts of the Hebrew Scriptures. It does so in an uneven fashion, so that some chapters consist

The text of the DA exhibits a few particular concerns. Two in particular are of relevance for this project: its attention to the authority of bishops, and its concern regarding the collection and distribution of funds and material offerings in the community. Attention to the conduct of bishops is extremely strong throughout the text; of the twenty-six chapters, ten are directed in part or in their entirety to bishops, containing exhortations on such matters as how to judge and admonish, how to welcome back those who repent, and how to distribute funds.<sup>8</sup> Alistair Stewart-Sykes has noted that the bishop's role, as described in this text, seems to be primarily disciplinary and economic.<sup>9</sup> In addition to concern for the bishop's own conduct, the text also exhorts other members of the community to show proper respect for and obedience to their bishop.<sup>10</sup> The language the text uses here is quite strong—community members are told to regard their bishop as their father, their master, and even to honor him as God.<sup>11</sup>

With regard to community finances, the text emphasizes heavily that it is the bishop's responsibility, and the bishop's alone, to receive and distribute funds for those in need (as well as for his own support). The effect is that of a funnel; all funds are to pass through the bishop, and he decides to whom the funds should go.<sup>12</sup> We see here the intersection of two of the text's

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largely of quotations from Hebrew Scriptures (such as chapters 6–7, on how bishops ought to handle wrongdoers), while others contain comparatively few scriptural quotations or allusions (including chapters 14–15 on widows). Charlotte Fonrobert has argued convincingly that the DA often employs hermeneutic techniques well known in midrashic literature. Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, “The *Didascalia Apostolorum*: A Mishnah for the Disciples of Jesus,” *JECS* 9 (2001): 483–509, at 502–509.

<sup>8</sup> Chapters 4–8, 10–12, 18–19; brief exhortations to bishops also appear in other chapters.

<sup>9</sup> Alistair Stewart-Sykes, *The Didascalia Apostolorum: An English Version*, STT 1 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), 56.

<sup>10</sup> Chapter 9, and elsewhere throughout the text.

<sup>11</sup> “He is a servant of the word and mediator, but to you a teacher, and your father after God, who has begotten you through the water. This is your chief and your leader and he is a mighty king to you. He guides in the place of the Almighty. But let him be honored by you as God (is), because the bishop sits for you in the place of God Almighty” (9; 2.26.4).

<sup>12</sup> Although this is the text's prescription (e.g., chs. 8, 9), the text also seems in places to indicate that this is not how the practice has been conducted. It also contains instructions for those who wish to give payment directly to other

concerns: to reinforce (or newly establish) the authority of the bishop as leader of the community, and to regulate the flow of funds among community members. Both of these concerns are relevant for our discussion of the image of widows as the altar of God in the text.

### Widows in the Didascalia apostolorum

Widows appear in the DA in references throughout the text as important recipients of material support from members of the community, and are the principal focus of chapters fourteen and fifteen. In these references they are often paired with orphans, reflecting the frequent pairing of these two groups in the Hebrew Scriptures as the paradigmatic worthy recipients of charity. The matters at stake in the DA's general treatment of widows are usually the same as those at stake in its references to widows as an altar in particular: prayer and speech, receipt of funds, and relationship to other community members, in particular donors and bishops. The matter of widows' marital status and sexual conduct is discussed in the DA's general prescriptions for widows, although it is not as much of a concern for the DA as we have seen it was for Tertullian or Methodius. Sexual and marital matters do not appear in the passages regarding widows as altar. As we will discuss these matters in more detail with regard to the references to widows as altar, I will offer here only some brief generalizations that will provide context for those discussions.

With regard to the matter of the flow of community funds to widows, various references to widows in the DA indicate that the text's preference for funds to flow through the bishop was prescriptive rather than descriptive and other paths were operative. This is evident in a short and intriguing passage in which widows appear in chapter nine, immediately following the DA's first

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officials in the church hierarchy (9), and exhorts widows in effect to not be envious when one of their ranks receives a gift from someone (15). We will return to this.

reference to widows as altars.<sup>13</sup> This lengthy chapter is titled (in the text itself) “An Exhortation to the People: That They Should Honor the Bishop,” and as it opens it is concerned particularly with this need for funds to be given to the bishop for him to distribute. The text then passes immediately to say “And to those who invite widows to the agapes, let him frequently send her whom he knows to be afflicted in particular. And again, if anyone gives gifts to widows, let him send in particular her who is in want.”<sup>14</sup> But let the portion of the shepherd [i.e., the bishop] be separated and be divided for him according to rule at the agapes or the gifts, even though he be not present, in honor of Almighty God” (9; 2.28.1–2).<sup>15</sup> This passage indicates that meals that are of some sort of ritual significance for the community are organized and hosted by people who are not named as members of the church’s clerical hierarchy.<sup>16</sup> Widows, it seems, are common guests at ἀγάπη meals, but the support distributed at such meals (be it food or some other sort of gift) ought also (according to the DA) be used to support the bishop, even if he is not present.<sup>17</sup> It

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<sup>13</sup> Reference one, below (9; 2.26.4–27.1).

<sup>14</sup> There are interesting passages in the *Apostolic Tradition* and *Canons* of Hippolytus that do not exactly parallel this passage, but that also suggest the connection of widows with particular meals. In these texts it seems to be a supper specifically for widows, and the texts are concerned that the widows return to their homes at the conclusion of the dinner before nightfall; if that might not be accomplishable, then the widows should be given food and drink and sent back to eat in their own homes (*Apostolic Tradition* 30A and parallel in *Canons* of Hippolytus; see Bradshaw, Johnson and Phillips, *Apostolic Tradition*, 162–3 for translations of both passages). As we saw in the introduction in relation to Acts 6:1–2 connections between widows and community meals have been present from quite early in Christian history. See Finger, *Of Widows and Meals*.

<sup>15</sup> The passage continues: “But however much is given to one of the widows, let the double be given to each of the deacons in honor of Christ, (but) twice double to the leader for the glory of the Almighty. But if anyone wished to honor the presbyters also, let him give him a double, as to the deacons, for it is required for them that they should be honored as the apostles” (9; 2.28.3–4). This passage indicates that bishops, deacons, and presbyters at least in some instances receive support through exactly the same channels as widows (ritual communal meals); and that the text is quite concerned to differentiate these officials and bishops in particular from widows through the not-uncommon banquet practice of scaling portion size to the importance of the guest.

<sup>16</sup> In other words, the ritual life of the community may not be restricted to gatherings and events overseen by the bishop. Given the text’s concern for delineating and reinforcing hierarchical authority, particularly that of the bishop, we might expect that if the “those” who are holding these ἀγάπη meals were (or in the author’s mind, ought to be) bishops or deacons, that they would be named as such.

<sup>17</sup> This notion of a portion being set aside for the bishop echoes the setting aside of portions for priests and Levites discussed in the Pentateuch (e.g. Num 18:8–32; Deut 18:1–8; see also 1 Cor 9:13).

seems, then, that at least in some instances the communal flow of support is not being directed by the bishop (as the text elsewhere indicates it should be), and indeed bishops receive support through the same channels as widows—although the text is at pains to indicate that the bishop deserves special honor.

Widows appear most significantly in chapters fourteen and fifteen of the DA. In the relatively brief chapter fourteen, entitled “On the Time for the Ordering of Widows,”<sup>18</sup> the text gives instructions reminiscent of, but differing from, those of 1 Timothy regarding who should be ‘appointed’ as widows. The text states that women who are to be appointed widows should be fifty years of age or older (compared to 1 Tim 5:9’s sixty). In relation to the core concern of purity, the DA does not specify as 1 Timothy does that a widow should have been married only once, but it speaks several times of a ‘second husband’ or ‘second marriage’ as things to avoid, seeming to indicate that it has women married once in mind.<sup>19</sup> As in 1 Timothy, the DA exhibits a concern that young widows who have been appointed will not be able to maintain their vows and will remarry, but the solution proposed by the DA differs intriguingly from 1 Timothy. Where 1 Timothy instructed young widows to remarry, the DA says instead that while such young widows should not be appointed, they should nevertheless receive support from the

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<sup>18</sup> Several manuscripts of the DA often have variant titles for the chapters. For this chapter, variants are “about the widows and the third marriage which is counted for fornication,” and “concerning widows and concerning the time of their ordering in the church; praise on her who keeps the statute of her widowhood before God, and condemnation on her who tramples on her statute. And exhortation to the bishop concerning the widows, the poor and he [*sic?*] the needy.” Vööbus, *Didascalia* 408: 141, n.2).

<sup>19</sup> In relation to the avoidance of a second marriage, DA 14 also gives us a very interesting indication that the definition for ‘widow’ at work in the text is broader than our own, as discussed in the introduction and as was also evident in Tertullian as discussed in chapter 2. Speaking of young women who will be honored by men and blessed and praised by God because they have continued in “the honor of widowhood,” the text describes such a woman as “one who is young, who has been a short time with her husband and her husband [has] die[d], or for some other cause there [has] be[en] a separation” (14; 3.1.3). Sadly the text gives us no further indication of what ‘other causes’ there might be, but the (former) husband in those cases must still be living (at least potentially), leaving open the possibility for divorcées, and women whose husbands have gone missing in war, or otherwise left them, to be included among the group known as ‘widows’ in the DA.



community so that they do not remarry out of necessity.<sup>20</sup> Chapter fourteen then goes on to emphasize (again) the importance of the bishop as the funnel for the community's charitable donations to widows and others.

Chapter fifteen contains the real meat of the DA's treatment of widows, and again it is reminiscent of, but differing from, passages in 1 Tim 5:3–16. Like 1 Timothy, the DA sets up two contrasting portraits: that of the good widow and that of the bad, 'undisciplined' widow. The core concerns of finances and material offerings, and prayer and speech, are very much in evidence in these portraits. The good widow (which should be "every widow") is "humble and quiet and gentle" (15; 3.5.1). She is without anger, not talkative or loud, ignores hateful matters, and cares "for nothing else except this, to pray for those who give, and for the whole church" (15; 3.5.2). The good widow should sit always at home, reflecting constantly on the Lord. At home, she should work with wool to provide for the afflicted. She should be chaste, obedient to bishops and deacons, and should "revere and reverence and fear the bishops as God" (15; 3.8.1). She should not be envious or slanderous, and should be glad when her fellow widows receive donations. She should not curse, and she, nor any women, should most certainly not baptize (15; 3.9–10).

In contrast, the bad widow curses; she incites strife, is talkative, without discipline, envious, and most especially, greedy—and does much to feed her greed. She roves around to different houses, and doesn't care to visit those who are sick, but will gladly visit those who give her funds, even if they "are gone out from the church" (15; 3.8.3). The text does not specify

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<sup>20</sup>"But let not widows, those who are young, be appointed to the office of widows, yet let them be taken care of and helped in order that by cause of their being in need they may not desire to become (a wife) to a man for a second time, which would be an act of damage. . . . On this account, support those who are young that they may continue in chastity unto God. And thus take care of them, O bishop" (14; 3.2.1–3.1). This passage clearly indicates for us that at least as the text presents the matter, a subset of the widows in the community are appointed to hold a particular sort of position.

explicitly that bad widows teach or baptize, but given the strong injunctions that widows ought not do these activities, we can imagine that a ‘bad’ widow might have engaged in them. She whispers during church services and is distracted in her prayer because “her mind is held captive too much by the diligence of (her) greed” (15; 3.7.4). In her greediness she is vulnerable to Satan. She complains when a gift is given to a widow whom she regards as less needy than herself. Her concern for money is so great, she regards her reception of funds from the church as “commerce” and even lends money out at interest.<sup>21</sup> This ‘bad’ widow, then, most certainly does not submit to the authority of the bishop in the way the text considers proper. In particular, it seems, she is inattentive to her prayer responsibilities and is far too independent in her receipt and management of material offerings. The DA’s deployment of the image of the widow as altar brings these concerns about prayer and material support together.

### Almsgiving as Sacrifice

Before we turn to consider the specific uses of the image of the widow as altar, I would like to consider more carefully the text’s construction of widows as recipients of material offerings of the community, and how this construction meshes with the sacrificial language and logic of the image of widows as an altar of God. In the DA the text speaks of widows (and orphans and widows, and persons more generally) as receiving alms, thus echoing the second discursive construction of widows discussed in the introduction. As we will see below, when the DA connects widows receiving alms to the widows as altar image it does so by figuring the alms as the offering brought to the altar.

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<sup>21</sup> “Now we see that there are widows who regard the matter as one of commerce, and they receive in greed. And instead of doing good and giving to the bishop for the reception of strangers and the relief of those afflicted, they lend out on bitter usury. And they care only for mammon, those ‘whose god is’ their purse and ‘their belly; indeed, where their treasure is, there is also their heart’” (15; 3.7.3, referencing Phil 3:19).

In so understanding the giving of material support as being a sort of sacrifice, the DA participates in an already existing discourse in Judaism and Christianity that favorably compares practices of charitable giving to practices of sacrifice. Practices of charitable giving could be understood, like practices of prayer and sacrifice, to establish and maintain relationships amongst humans and the divine—or at least, to get the attention of the divine. Gary Anderson, in his 2013 volume on almsgiving,<sup>22</sup> traces the development of this discourse in some Jewish and early Christian literature. According to Anderson, Second Temple Judaism in particular develops the notion of charitable giving as being “a fit alternative to sacrifice,” a form of “sacrificial exchange” in which the donor in effect grants a loan to God and “funds the heavenly treasury.”<sup>23</sup> The poor, as the recipients of charity, are “a privileged port of entry to the realm and, ultimately, being of God...the poor become a necessary and indeed nonnegotiable point of access to the Kingdom of God.”<sup>24</sup> Anderson, drawing in particular on Tobit and Sirach, sees this discourse developing already by the third and second centuries BCE, striking as “many believe this idea came into focus only once the temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE.”<sup>25</sup>

Nascent Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism, growing from and drawing on Second Temple Judaism, inherit this discourse. As Anderson states his thesis, “almsgiving became such an important part of Second Temple Judaism (and by extension the early church and synagogue) because it was not just a human transaction but a sacrifice made to God himself.”<sup>26</sup> As part of this discourse of almsgiving as a form of sacrifice, Anderson wants to see present a conception

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<sup>22</sup> Anderson, *Charity*.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 20, 3, 159.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

of the poor as the altars upon which the sacrificial gift of alms was placed: “as the purpose of the altar was to convey goods from heaven to earth, the poor were imagined, both in Judaism and Christianity, as direct conduits to the Holy One (Blessed be He!).”<sup>27</sup> In being kind to the poor, “one finds oneself before the altar of God.”<sup>28</sup>

However, despite Anderson’s argument for the development of the discourse of almsgiving as sacrifice in Second Temple Judaism, he is unable to provide any textual examples of the specific comparison of the poor to altars in Jewish literature—in fact, the only example he cites in which this comparison is made is from a homily of John Chrysostom. Anderson speaks of (and quotes) Chrysostom: “He begins by acknowledging the honor that his congregation shows to the altar in his church. The altar is worthy of such veneration, he explains, ‘because it receives Christ’s body.’ But this is not the only altar to be found in Antioch. ‘Whenever then you see a poor believer,’ out on the streets of Antioch after mass has ended, ‘imagine that you behold an altar. Whenever you meet a beggar, don’t insult him, but reverence him.’”<sup>29</sup> We have seen and will see several examples of the comparison of widows as recipients of offerings to altars that predate Chrysostom, notably in Methodius and here the DA.<sup>30</sup> And so it seems that while the discourse of almsgiving as sacrifice was developing in Second Temple Judaism, the earliest explicit comparisons of recipients of alms to an altar occur in early Christian texts and are focused particularly on widows. I suggest that this may be precisely because of the way in which some early Christians understood the dynamic role of widows as recipients of offerings and

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>30</sup> Where, as we have noted, the comparison is also made to orphans, and others, who have received alms.

offerers of prayer. We will see this role developed in the references to the widow as altar in the DA.

### References to Widows as an Altar of God in the Didascalia apostolorum

The Didascalia apostolorum provides us with our greatest concentration of references to widows as altar—and no wonder, for as we have seen, widows are a repeatedly appearing concern of the text. In devoting two chapters specifically to widows, the DA gives them more explicit and lengthy attention than is given to any other group or position within the community, except for bishops. Aside from bishops, widows are the only group to have a chapter of the DA, to say nothing of two chapters, devoted exclusively to them.<sup>31</sup>

In what follows I will discuss each of the DA's references to widows as an altar of God, as well as provide translations of them as they are discussed. The image of widows as altar appears on six different occasions in the DA. I have included a seventh reference as well, because it also employs the image of altar and is significant for our exploration of the work this image does. I will refer to them throughout the analysis by the numbers with which they are designated as I provide them below. I have provided my own translations of the Latin and Greek wherever it is available, and have provided Arthur Vööbus's translation of the Syriac for all references.<sup>32</sup> For those passages which have not been preserved in Latin or Greek, I have also provided my translations of the corresponding passages from the Apostolic Constitutions (Const. ap., a later reworking of the DA) for comparative reference. For the sake of space I have provided only the translation of the reference itself and its immediate relevant context. However,

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<sup>31</sup> In contrast, one chapter is devoted to the role and conduct of deacons and deaconesses together (16), deacons are discussed briefly in another chapter (as needing to be of the same mind as the bishop, who is the main focus, 11), and the election and duties of presbyters and deacons are discussed in a few paragraphs in another chapter (3), which also discusses the election of bishops and the proper conduct of lay women.

<sup>32</sup> Vööbus, *Didascalia*.

the more extensive context of each reference is often quite useful for its analysis, and will be brought into discussion as needed.

### Who's In Charge Here?

As we have seen in prior texts, the references to widows as altar in the DA also are concerned with shaping and governing the widows' roles as recipients of offerings, as those who offer prayers to God on behalf of the community, and also to a certain extent as those whose speech in the community may be of (contested) import. Concomitant with these concerns about widows' roles are concerns about ensuring the 'proper' flow of funds and of prayers, as well as to a certain extent other information (e.g., teachings and other talk). With its extensive and repeated employment of the image of widow as altar, the DA presents a picture of the workings of a sort of theo-economy in which the widows occupy an important—and necessary—position. While the previous texts we have examined have employed the image of widows as altar in relation to one or more of the core concerns of purity, finances and material offerings, and prayer and speech, the DA more than any other shows us the interweaving of concerns, their dynamic interrelation and transformation. I will argue that the widows of the DA work at the crucial juncture of a functioning economy, framed by and intertwined with the language and logic of sacrifice, through which the community's relationship with the divine is sustained by the transformative exchange of alms with prayer.

### *Reference One*

#### *Latin*

Truly the bishop is your chief priest and Levite; this is the one who ministers the word to you, and is your mediator; this is your powerful king; this is your teacher and after God your father who begets anew through water. This one, following the place of God, ought to be honored by

you just as God (is), because the bishop watches over you in the type of God. But the deacon stands in the type of Christ; therefore he ought to be esteemed by you. In truth the deaconess ought to be honored by you in the type of the Holy Spirit. And also the presbyters ought to be regarded by you in the type of the apostles; however widows and orphans ought to be considered by you in the type of the altar. Therefore just as it was not permitted to him, who was not a Levite, to offer anything or to approach the altar without a priest, in this manner also you are to do nothing without the bishop. (9; 2.26.4–27.1)

*Syriac*

...but the Levite and high priest is the bishop. He is a servant of the word and mediator, but to you a teacher, and father after God, who has begotten you through the water. This is your chief and your leader and he is a mighty king to you. He guides in the place of the Almighty. But let him be honored before you as God (is), because the bishop sits for you in the place of God Almighty. But the deacon stands in the place of Christ, and you should love him. The deaconess, however, shall be honored by you in the place of the Holy Spirit. But the presbyters shall be to you in the likeness of the apostles, and the orphans and the widows shall be reckoned by you in the likeness of the altar. For as it was not lawful for a stranger, that is for one who was not a Levite, to approach the altar or to offer anything apart from the high priest, so you also shall do nothing apart from the bishop. (9; 2.26.4–27.1)<sup>33</sup>

The DA employs the understanding of widows as altar in attempts to control and shape the activity and behavior of widows in the community, as well as the behavior of those who interact with widows (primarily bishops and donors of funds). The text is generally explicit about what sort of behavior it prescribes (and what it proscribes). The first reference has little to say about widows directly. In presenting the image of widows as altar, this passage does not tell us in what way widows are an altar or how their activities are those of an altar. Instead, it works primarily to shape the behavior of community members in their treatment of figures of

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<sup>33</sup> For the sake of analysis of this passage, it is useful to have some of the prior text as well. This passage is preceded by the following: “Hear these things now, you laymen also, the elect church of God. For the former people also were called a church; you, however, are the catholic Church, the holy and perfect, ‘a royal priesthood, a holy assembly, a people for inheritance,’ the great Church, the bride adorned for the Lord God. Those things then which were said before, hear also now. Set apart oblations and tithes and firstfruits to Christ, the true High Priest, and to His servants, tithes of salvation (to Him) the beginning of whose name is the Decade. Hear, you catholic Church of God, that were rescued from the ten plagues and did receive the ten sayings, and did learn the Law, and hold the faith and believe in the Yod in the beginning of the Name, and are fixed in the perfection of His glory: instead of the sacrifices of that time, offer now prayers and supplications and thanksgivings. At that time there were firstfruits and tithes and oblations and gifts, but today the offerings which are presented through the bishops to the Lord God, for they are your high priests. But the priests and Levites now are the presbyters and deacons, and the orphans and widows—but the Levite and high priest is the bishop.” (9; 2:26.1–3).

importance in the community, and particularly to emphasize the authority of, and proper reverence for, the bishop. Read in its broader context the first reference does this in a way that echoes the allegorical rhetoric of Methodius that we have already seen—by presenting the church as the current ‘holy and perfect’ incarnation, as it were, of the sacrificial system (particularly its sacerdotal aspects) set forth by God for the Israelites. The authority of the bishop as ‘high priest’ is emphasized repeatedly, alongside of exhortations to community members that they must not participate in this perfect system without their bishop: offerings must be made “through the bishop,” and community members are to “do nothing without the bishop.” This last injunction is made in connection with the notion that lay Israelites could not approach the altar or make an offering without a priest—and so the force of the statement to “do nothing without the bishop” is directed to the idea that community members must not make offerings to the “altar” (i.e., the widows) on their own.

As the text employs this identification of church figures and practices with the figures and practices of the Israelite sacrificial system, it also employs another set of identifications: that of church figures with persons of the trinity. Bishops are a type of God, deacons a type of Christ, and deaconesses a type of the Holy Spirit, and all should be honored by the community as such.<sup>34</sup> In addition, presbyters are understood as a type of the apostles. At the conclusion of these ‘trinitarian’ identifications the text returns to the sacrificial, and identifies widows—and

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<sup>34</sup> This presentation of deaconesses as a part of the trinity—perhaps presenting the possibility of understanding the trinity as having a ‘female’ aspect—is fascinating but largely outside of the scope of this project. Deaconesses appear often in the DA, and scholars have noted the way in which deaconesses seem to supplant widows as the church hierarchy develops. We see here an earlier indication of this trend. We can compare this ranking of deaconesses and widows to Methodius’s ranking of virgins and widows. See Thurston, *Widows*, 105; Charlotte Methuen, “‘For Pagans Laugh to Hear Women Teach’: Gender Stereotypes in the *Didascalia Apostolorum*,” in *Gender and Christian Religion: Papers Read at the 1996 Summer Meeting and the 1997 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society*, ed. R.N. Swanson (Suffolk, UK: Boydell, 1998), 23–35, at 25–6.



orphans<sup>35</sup>—as the type of the altar. In the midst of this mix, the text does something intriguing—it groups widows and orphans with deacons and presbyters as being the current Levites. This passage thus presents two identities accreting to most of the figures discussed. Bishops are both high priest and god; deacons both Levite and Christ; presbyters both Levite and apostle; and widows and orphans both Levite and altar.<sup>36</sup>

Three of these four identifications make ontological associations in ways perhaps unfamiliar to some modern minds. Bishops and deacons are identified with both divine and sacerdotal human figures; presbyters alone stay at relatively the same point on the spectrum in their identification with two significant human groups (Levites and apostles). Widows and orphans alone are identified with both a liturgically significant human group and a liturgically significant object—the altar. The DA is the only one of our texts to offer figurative understandings of other Christians as priests and Levites, and thus as people who would interact with the Israelite altars. Given the DA's particular concern with establishing the control of bishops over widows this is not a surprising move for it to make. In fact the lesson that the text explicitly draws for its audience from this set of comparisons is about the bishop's control of the community's access to widows. As later references will make more clear, this is particularly a concern with the bishop's control of community offerings intended for widows.

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<sup>35</sup> As already noted, widows and orphans are repeatedly grouped together in literature from throughout Jewish and Christian history, beginning in the Hebrew Bible, as the paradigmatic needy of society. I would suggest that orphans are included here because they are the second half of this common word pairing, and including orphans with widows may attempt to lessen the importance of widows as the only group identified as the altar. I would suspect that orphans do not have the same sort of sacerdotal authority that I suggest widows might have; although the possibility would be interesting to consider.

<sup>36</sup> That deaconesses alone are presented with only one identity signals, to my mind, that their inclusion in this sort of supersessionist figurative understanding is a relatively new development.

## Reference Two

### Greek Fragment

[Therefore it is] not [necessary] either for wom[en] to b[e] teach[ers especial]ly concerning th[e] nam[e] of the Lord and [his <redeem>]ing suffer[ing]. For you do not res[ide, O] women [in tea]ching a[nd especial]ly the widows [but on]ly to b[eseech] God. ... Therefore [let] the [widow] know that she [i]s an alta[r] of God and [she is to si]t in [he]r house not with [some pret]ext... (*the fragment becomes illegible here for several lines*) (15; 3.6.1–3)<sup>37</sup>

### Syriac

Therefore, it is not required nor necessary that women should be teachers, and especially about the name of Christ and about the redemption of His passion. Indeed, you have not been appointed to this, O women, and especially widows, that you should teach, but that you should pray and entreat the Lord God. ... But let a widow know that she is the altar of God. And let her constantly sit at home, and let her not wander or run about among the houses of the faithful to receive. The altar of God, indeed, never wanders or runs about anywhere, but is fixed in one place. A widow must not therefore wander or run about among the houses. For those who are roving and who have no shame cannot stay quiet even in their houses. (15; 3.6.1–4)

While the first reference had little to say about the behavior and conduct of widows themselves, the second and third references focus primarily on these matters—and in particular on conduct of widows that the text deems improper. These references occur in chapter fifteen of the DA, (the second of two chapters focused on widows) separated only by a paragraph that continues the discourse on widows' problematic behavior. Echoing 1 Timothy, both references treat the widow in relation to space and prayer and speech, as well as to charity. They employ the image of widows as altar to argue that the proper behavior of widows consists of sitting always at home and praying to God. In contrast to this location of the widow's body firmly in private space and her speech in the context of private prayer, the text finds widows teaching, widows going about in public to various houses and widows soliciting funds to be thoroughly problematic.

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<sup>37</sup> J. Vernon Bartlet, "Fragments of the *Didascalia Apostolorum* in Greek," *JTS* 18 (1917): 301–9. This is one of the few short Greek fragments of the DA that have been preserved.

The second reference to the widow-altar acts as a bridge between a condemnation of women teaching and the exhortation to widows to constantly sit inside their homes. While the reference is more clearly connected to the exhortation to sit, I would argue that it connects to the prior discussion of teaching as well. In prohibiting women's teaching, the text singles out widows as those who especially have not been appointed to teach.<sup>38</sup> Widows are not teachers and were not appointed by Christ to be such; rather, widows must understand that they are an altar of God. The altar self is provided as the true role, in contrast to the false notion of widows as teachers.

Teaching does not constitute appropriate speech for widows, nor, it seems in the intervening paragraph between references two and three, does much speech by widows at all: "because they are talkative and chatterers and murmurers, they incite strifes, and they are bold and they have no shame. They that are such, indeed, are unworthy of Him who called them" (15; 3.6.4) The only speech proper to a true widow-altar, it seems, is that of private prayer. These references tell us nothing about the content of these prayers or whom they affect, and do not explicitly connect the widows' praying to their status as altar. This leaves in shadow the significance of such prayers and what the image of widows as altar signifies about widows' communication with God. Later references will shed some light on this and will complicate the way in which these references seem to gloss over the work of prayer and isolate widows from the community.

If widows ought not to be teachers or engage in much public talking at all, then what ought they be? The answer we know already: they are an altar of God. But what does this

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<sup>38</sup> "Indeed, you have not been appointed to this, O women, and especially widows, that you should teach, but that you should pray and entreat the Lord God" (15; 3.6.2).

indicate? Here the second reference does explicitly connect the altar image to particular conduct: because widows are an altar of God, they should behave as such and not move around but rather remain in one place (inside their houses). The assertion that the altar of God “never wanders or runs about anywhere, but is fixed in one place” is at least partially inaccurate, as according to the Septuagint the altars of the Tabernacle were specifically made to be portable (and were transported)—a scriptural fact which an author as scripturally literate as the author(s) of the DA would certainly have known.<sup>39</sup> This somewhat awkward attempt to direct the force of the altar image toward particular behavior in contravention of a scriptural reality does make one wonder why the author(s) of the DA chose to employ the image at this point. Perhaps they felt that the image was important enough—and perhaps established enough—that it should not be ignored, but that it also carried the rhetorical potential to run counter to their aims and so needed to be reshaped.

Both the first and especially the second references work to establish the idea of the altar as an inactive object in ways that we have not seen in the texts we have examined to this point. This can be seen as remarkable in its own way; after all our prior texts were often concerned in some way with the control of widows’ behavior but none of them traded emphatically on the notion of the altar as an object controllable by others in order to buttress that control.<sup>40</sup> That the DA does work to establish this conception of the altar ought to caution us, I think, from

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<sup>39</sup> See e.g. Exod 27:6–7, 30:4–5. We remember that it was to the altars in the Tabernacle that Methodius compared widows and virgins. It is also worth noting that altars in the Greco-Roman world came in a huge variety of sizes, including small, eminently portable ones, with which the author of the DA was almost certainly familiar. While such altars would not be altars of *God*, their existence would make it clear that altars were not all immobile.

<sup>40</sup> As we have discussed, Tertullian in *Ux.* spoke of the need for the altar to ‘be kept’ pure, thus leaving open the notion that others might be responsible for that. We also noted the difference between the activity of the gold virgin-altar in its relationship to the offerings received, and the relative passivity of the bronze widow-altar, in Methodius’s *Symp.* So this is not to say that our prior texts made no gestures in this direction; however these references in the DA trade on the notion of control of a passive object in a much more explicit and direct way than our other texts.

assuming that a notion of passive ‘objectivity’ is necessarily inherent in all characterizations of widows as the altar of God.

### *Reference Three*

#### *Latin*

For a similar reason also the eyes of the heart of widows of such a kind are closed, because they do not address the Lord sitting within their houses, but they run about for the invention of profit, and they drive forward through verborities, which are the desires of the enemies. Therefore a widow who is such has not been appointed<sup>41</sup> as an altar of Christ, as it is written in the gospel: “If two have come together<sup>42</sup> as one and have said to this mountain, “Lift and throw yourself into the sea,” it will be accomplished. We see then that widows do not come together,<sup>43</sup> because they do not obtain although they seek.<sup>44</sup> (15; 3.7.1–3)

#### *Syriac*

So in like manner the ears of the hearts of widows, those who are such, are shut, because they will not sit beneath the roof of their houses and pray and entreat the Lord, but they hasten to run as for profits, and through their vociferousness they effect the lusts of the Enemy. However a widow who is such does not conform to the altar of Christ. For it is written in the Gospel: “If any two shall agree together as one, and shall ask concerning anything whatsoever, it shall be given them; and if they shall say to a mountain that it be removed and fall into the sea (*sic*), it shall be thus.” (15; 3.7.1–3)

Both the second and the third references connect the ‘inappropriate’ public movement of widows to their receipt of—or perhaps better their pursuit of—alms. This concern with widows’ relationship to community financial support and financial resources is one of the principal

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<sup>41</sup> *Non est conlegata altario Christi*. How to translate *conlegata* here is a bit challenging, as the verb from which it presumably derives (*conlego* or *collego*) does not appear in Lewis & Short’s Latin Dictionary. Vööbus’ translation of the Syriac as “conform to,” and the Const. ap.’s use of the middle/passive of the Greek verb *προσαρτάω* (to be attached to, belong to, be devoted to) in its corresponding passage, suggest some sense of belonging to a standard or ideal of some sort. The prefix *con-* in *conlegata* can carry a sense of ‘together’ or ‘with’ (although in compounds it can also just serve to intensify the verb). However the verb *lego* (*-are, -avi, -atum*) from which *conlegata* is formed means to appoint, or to send (as in to send as an ambassador); and a *legatus* is an ambassador or a deputy. It seems quite possible that *conlegata* here is reminiscent of 1 Tim 5:9’s use of *καταλέγω* to say widows should be ‘enrolled,’ or ‘put on a list.’ See also *collega* (colleague, one chosen at the same time as another).

<sup>42</sup> Or: agreed (*convenerint*)

<sup>43</sup> Or: agree (*convenire*)

<sup>44</sup> Or: demand; beseech (*petant*)

concerns of all of the subsequent references to widows as altar in the DA, and indeed as we have seen of the entirety of the text's treatment of widows. One of the most defining characteristics of an altar is that it is a place to which offerings are brought; a characteristic we saw at play particularly in Methodius's *Symp*. If widows are working altars, then widows too must receive offerings; this would not seem to be a negotiable aspect of the role. The DA shows a great deal of discomfort with the relationship of widows to offerings but this is not a relationship that can be done away with. Instead, the rhetoric of the text works to present widows as violating their altar role by being governed by greed and a desire for profit, and to present the proper 'fix' for this violation by placing bishops in control of the distribution of all alms.

The third reference lays out this violation explicitly: the widows who do not stay at home praying to God but who rather "run about for the invention of profit" (*discurrunt ad exinventionem lucri*), such a one has not "been appointed as an altar of Christ." The Latin text goes on to explain how why this is so. It quotes a composite of Matt 18:19 and 21:21 to say that those who gather properly and ask the Lord for anything are given what they ask. Widows (presumably those who run about seeking profit) are not given what they ask for ("they do not obtain although they seek"), and so it is evident that they have not properly come together.<sup>45</sup> We can see the text here not merely as saying these widows are violating their appointment as an altar, but even as challenging the right for widows who (supposedly) neglect the proper performance of prayer in favor of seeking profit to bear that title, or role, at all. According to the

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<sup>45</sup> It seems that the notion of coming together (or agreeing; *convenire*) is connected to the notion of being appointed (*conlegata*). Perhaps widows have a particularly strong identity as a corporate body rather than as individuals; or perhaps the DA wishes to enforce a particular standard of widowhood that one must agree with in order to be truly counted as an altar.

text's rhetoric, the true widow-altar must not be actively involved in obtaining support but rather should wait passively to receive what she is given.

If the first three references present a portrait of the true widow-altar as one who sits in private, engages in private prayer and passively waits to receive alms, subsequent references complicate this portrait as they expand on what the widows are praying about, how that prayer affects the community, and how the widows' prayers are connected to the alms they receive. In a sense, when the elements of these relationships are presented in stasis as they largely are in the first three references, it is easier to restrict the import of widow-altars and their work in this theoeconomy. Once the dynamic flow of prayers and funds is set in motion as it is in the DA's subsequent references, the role that widows play becomes clearer and the obscuring of their importance proves more difficult.

#### *Reference Four*

##### *Syriac*

And again also the widow who has received alms of the Lord, let her pray for him that did this service, concealing his name like a wise (woman), that his righteousness may be with God and not with men, as He said in the Gospel: "When you do alms, let not your left hand know what your right hand does"—lest, when you articulate and reveal his name in praying for him that gave, his name be revealed, and come to the ears of the pagan, and the pagan, being a man of the left hand, know it. It may, indeed, happen that one of the faithful, hearing you, will go out and talk. And it is not fitting that those things which take place or are spoken in the church should travel outside and be revealed. For he who goes out and speaks of them disobeys God, and becomes a betrayer of the church. But pray for him as you conceal his name, and so shall you fulfill something which is written, you and the widows, those who are such (as you); for you are the holy altar of God (and of) Jesus Christ. (15; 3.10.6–7)

##### *Greek of the Apostolic Constitutions*

Likewise also the widow who has received compassion let her pray together for the one who has given her the service.

Yet let the one who does this conceal well the personal name like a wise (woman), not trumpeting (it) about, so that the alms might be in secret before God, just as the Lord said, that "and when you do alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be in secret." And let the widow pray on behalf the one who has given, whoever

he may be, as she is a holy altar of God, and the father who sees in secret will deliver openly what was well given. (3.10.6–7)

The fourth reference to widows as altar acts as the capstone to a passage concerned with an aspect of the content of widows' prayers. It is the only use of the image of widows as altar in the DA that directly addresses widows. This second-person exhortation suggests that there is an importance of some sort to its content. The passage urges widows to not speak the names of those for whom they pray, who are those from whom they have received alms. Here for the first time in the text's use of the image of widows as altar, a direct connection is made between the widows' reception of support and their work of prayer. Here also for the first time a reference gives us an indication of the content of the widows' prayer, and it does so in an attempt to control that content.

The passage presents two interconnected arguments for why the widow should conceal the donors' names: first, invoking Matt 6:3, so that the donor's "righteousness may be with God and not with men;" second, so that the donor's name is not heard by, or spread about among, the wrong people (namely 'pagans'). While earlier references had mandated that widows pray quietly in their own homes, this reference makes plain that widows' prayers are heard by others (even pagans!) and are spoken aloud in church. The passage seeks to control the content of the widows' prayers and also the public flow of information stemming from those prayers. Future references will make clear that the text believes that bishops should know (and have control over) who the donors are. In a sense this injunction against widows' sharing the names is an attempt to stop them from exhibiting control over information that according to the text should rightfully be under the control of the bishop.



Should widows properly conceal the names, then they will “fulfill something which is written.” While it seems likely that this refers back to the text’s quotation of Matt 6:3, it is tempting to consider that it might refer forward to the statement “for you are the holy altar of God (and of) Jesus Christ” at the conclusion of this reference. Could this identification of widows as altar stem from something that “is written”—that is, some sort of sacred writing?<sup>46</sup> While such an idea is speculation, it remains that the way in which the identification is employed in this passage—as a capstone statement, a pronouncement made to reinforce what has gone before but one that needs no explanation—suggests again that this image holds established significance upon which the author attempts to trade.

As in earlier references, in this fourth reference the altar image is tied in to widows’ work of prayer, their receipt of alms and the relationship of the widows in some way to the broader community; and is employed in an attempt to control some aspect of these matters. This particular reference makes clear for the first time the relationship between alms and prayer: the widows receive alms and pray for those who give. The passage makes no attempt to explain the relevance of the image of widows as altar for its argument, seeming to assume that the audience would understand. The next reference sheds some light on this relevance.

### *Reference Five*

#### *Latin*

If indeed a person receives support, being established in orphanhood or in poverty or through the failing of old age or because of the weakness of illness or because of (the weakness of) children, because they are many, someone who is such, it is said, also will be praised; for (s)he has been esteemed an altar of God and will be honored by God, since without wavering (s)he beseeches constantly for those who give to that one, and (s)he was not accepting idly but (s)he was giving

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<sup>46</sup> We remember here the use of *παρεδόθη* (“handed down”) in Methodius to describe the tradition of the pure as altar.

back as much of his/her wages through prayer, as the strength of that one was allowing. Therefore they will be blessed from God in eternal life. (17; 4.3.3)

*Syriac*

If a man has received on account of youth due to orphanhood, or on account of the feebleness of old age, or on account of the infirmity of sickness, or on account of the bringing up of children—this shall even be praised—indeed, he is to be reckoned as the altar of God. On this account he shall be honored by God. For he did not receive vainly because he was praying diligently, as indefatigable at all times, for those who give. Indeed his prayer, which is his strength, he offered as his payment. Those then who are such shall receive a blessing from God in the life everlasting. (17; 4.3.3)

The fifth reference is in some ways the most intriguing of the DA's references, in part because it expands the group of people who may be considered an altar of God beyond the bounds of widows. We saw in the first reference an inclusion of orphans in the altar image, but this expansion is both bigger and more detailed. In this way it is more reminiscent of the expansion of the altar image that we previously saw in the *Symp.* to include virgins. While English translations of this passage typically employ a masculine subject, neither the Latin nor the Syriac of the DA nor the Greek of the *Const. ap.* need be taken to assert such specificity. This may be simply the masculine singular as universal subject.<sup>47</sup> Be that as it may, this passage at the very least clearly expands the altar identity beyond just widows, and could easily be read as replacing widows with a more masculine subject. It is also the reference in the DA that most clearly sets forth a transactional relationship between alms and prayer and that argues most strongly for the worth of the work of prayer.

I suggest that these moves are related to one another. While previous references have ignored the significance of widows' prayer work or have attempted to diminish it (and control their receipt of support), this reference is the rhetorical flip-side. It acknowledges and, indeed, argues for the worth of the work of prayer and the legitimacy of the receipt of funds by those

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<sup>47</sup> Thank you to Giovanni Bazzana for consulting the Syriac.

who are an altar; but it expands that group to contain many beyond the bounds of widowhood. In so doing this reference attempts at the very least to dilute the importance in particular of widows and their prayer work and, perhaps, to transfer that importance to others.<sup>48</sup> This is the only time in the DA anyone besides widows (and orphans) is said to be an altar. In this passage's articulation of the validity and worth of the work of prayer and its compensation, I believe we can see the sort of articulation that may have been made specifically about the work of widows by those with whom this text disagrees. In so shifting what persons are the altar, this reference removes that sense of worth from widows in particular.

The logic of the dynamic process outlined in the fifth reference is both simple and has profound consequences for the import and value of those who receive alms. Such a person—who may receive support for any number of reasons, be they age, poverty, illness, etc.—is considered an altar of God, and not only that but is honored by God and will be blessed by God in eternal life. This is quite an elevation for persons who otherwise would likely be relatively low on most measurements of any sort of capital (financial, educational, social, political, ecclesial and the like). Why is this person so honored and considered to be God's altar? Because s/he has prayed without hesitation for those who provided the support.

This work of prayer is just that, according to this passage: work, an activity of significance, worthy of recompense. The one praying was not receiving this support idly (*otiose*, the adverbial form of the adjective *otiosus*—at leisure, unoccupied, idle, unemployed);<sup>49</sup> this was not an unemployment benefit, as it were. In fact, this person was giving back as much of what s/he received as her/his strength would allow—but in the currency of prayer rather than alms.

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<sup>48</sup> This is reminiscent of Methodius's move to include virgins in the image of the pure as altars, which we saw in chapter 3.

<sup>49</sup> Reminiscent of 1 Tim 5:13's charge that certain widows learned to be idle.

Furthermore, these alms that are received are designated in this passage as *merces*: wages, recompense, income.<sup>50</sup> While the elements are in many respects the same as in earlier references—widows (here widows and others, or perhaps just others), prayers, alms and an altar image—the activity portrayed, and the relational dynamics amongst these elements, seem to carry a notably different valence. The altar of this passage—honored by God, constantly at work, producing as much in prayer as s/he receives in funds—seems a far cry from the altar of earlier references, sitting in prayer quietly at home, passively waiting to receive.

Whether or not one sees in this passage a deliberate broadening of the altar identity in an attempt to obscure the importance of widows or a deliberate replacement of widows in order to co-opt their importance for others, I would argue that the process articulated, and the significance of its participants, may be properly applied to the understanding of widows as altar. The process portrayed here is dynamic, interactive and transactional—people give alms to the ‘altar;’ the altar takes those wages and produces as much prayer to God for those who gave the wages as possible. This is a functioning theo-economy in which goods of various sorts flow amongst humans and the divine—and all pass through the ‘altar.’ Those who are understood as altars here are crucial participants in a divine-human transaction of great importance. By supporting such persons a donor might hope to gain God’s ear, as it were, and receive from God blessings or whatever might have been more specifically requested on their behalf.

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<sup>50</sup> *Merces* may also carry the meaning of reward, but the overwhelming majority of its meanings carry the sense of recompense for work done, not reward. Given the rhetorical push of this passage to argue for the value of the work of prayer, I think it unlikely that *merces* here is meant as reward.

## Is One Woman's Charity Another Man's Wages?

Before we continue I want to pause on a matter that this fifth reference has raised for us: how is one to distinguish between receipt of wages, and receipt of charity? What makes one sort of transaction different from the other? This is clearly a much more complicated and extensive subject than we could possibly explore here, but in the case of the image of widows as altar in the DA I want us to be aware of the possibility that something more complicated than the simple receipt of alms may be going on, something having to do with the boundary (or lack thereof) between charity and what we might call wages.

As we briefly noted in our discussion of Methodius, in the scriptural discussions of Israelite sacrifice the priests and Levites were entitled to portions of sacrifices and offerings (see e.g. Num 18:8–32; Deut 18:1–8; see also Paul's reference to such practices in 1 Cor 9:13). They were also entitled to tithes. According to the so-called 'deuteronomic author,' tithes were generally to be consumed by the people who produced them, but once every three years they were to be given to widows, orphans, strangers, and Levites (Deut 14:22–28). According to the so-called 'priestly author,' all tithes were given to Levites "in return for the services they perform, the services of the Tent of Meeting" (Num 18:21), and the Levites in turn gave a tithe of what they had received to the priests (Num 18: 25–32). In the one instance the Levites are grouped with the paradigmatically needy to receive what we might recognize as charity; in the other the Levites and priests are in effect given wages—they receive the tithes in return for work they have done.

It is this very distinction between charity and wages and its blurring that I want us to keep in mind when we consider widows as recipients of charity and the work of prayer in which they engage. Consider our discussion above of the ἀγάπη meals from which both widows and bishops

received portions. Remember also the text's intriguing identification of widows and orphans as Levites alongside of deacons and presbyters (9; 2.26.3). It is also made clear throughout the DA's treatment of widows that widows engaged in important activities on behalf of the community, however much the DA's rhetoric works to place any such activities under the control of the bishop.

Might it be the case that the image of widows as altar both draws on the discourse of charitable giving being compared to sacrifice and reveals in the DA in particular a disputed understanding of widows as holders of an office, workers in the *ἐκκλησία* with a right, like the bishops, presbyters, and deacons, to the sacred portion? If bishops and widows both receive funds from the same source—community offerings—what makes one payment wages and the other charity? Is there, in fact, a clear distinction? If there is, who gets to make that distinction? Were this last question posed to the authors of the *DA*, their answer would be quite clear: the bishops. I am not entirely sure, however, that they could provide as ready and as simple an answer to the previous two questions. I would like for us to keep the complexity of the relationship of wages to charity in this instance clear in our minds as we continue to consider the text's deployment of the image of widows as altar.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> For many in the modern west, notions about what it means to receive charitable assistance have been influenced by cultural rhetoric about 'welfare queens' and the like in which receipt of charity is constructed as the polar opposite of worthwhile work. There are instances of similar rhetoric in early Christianity; we need think only of 1 Timothy's criticism of lazy widows in 5:13, or indeed the DA's own criticisms of greedy widows running after handouts. Nevertheless we must be attentive to, and wary of, the extent to which we import modern notions when we read the words 'charity' or 'almsgiving' in our texts. In the DA at least, however much the text's rhetoric might attempt to persuade otherwise, any boundary between wages and charity is difficult to discern.

## Power and Control in a Theo-Economy

### *Reference Six*

#### *Latin*

Therefore bishops and deacons, attend to the altar of Christ, that is to widows and orphans, with all diligence, taking care for these with scrupulousness, how they are received, of what sort that man is who gives, or that woman who gives, so that they might eat. Again and again we say, since the altar ought to receive from the labors of righteousness...(*manuscript breaks off*) (18; 4.5.1–2)

#### *Syriac*

Thus be you the bishops and the deacons persevering in the service of the altar of Christ—we mean, however, (the service of) the widows and the orphans—so that you will endeavor with all care and with all diligence to investigate concerning those things that are given, what is the conduct of him, or of her, who gives for the nourishment—we say again—of ‘the altar.’ For when widows are nourished by the labor of righteousness, they will offer a holy and acceptable service before Almighty God through His beloved Son and His Holy Spirit—to whom be glory and honor for evermore. Thus take care and be diligent to serve the widows out of the ministry of a pure conscience, that something they ask and request may be given them quickly with their prayers. (18; 4.5.1–3)

### *Reference Seven*

#### *Syriac*

That guilty are the bishops who take alms from those who are blameworthy. On this account, wherefore, O bishops, fly and abide far from such services. Indeed it is written: ‘There shall not go up upon the altar of the Lord of the price of a dog, or of the fee of a harlot.’ For if widows pray for fornicators and transgressors of the Law through your blindness, and be not heard, their requests not being received, you will force blasphemy to come upon the word through your evil management, as though God were not good and ready to give. Thus be very watchful that you serve not the altar of God out of the services of transgression of the Law.<sup>52</sup> (18; 4.7.1–3)

#### *Greek of the Apostolic Constitutions*

Therefore shun services such as these as the price of a dog and the contract-price of a prostitute; for each are forbidden by the laws. For neither did Elisha take the things brought from Azael, nor Ahijah the things from Jeroboam; and if the prophets of God did not accept hospitality from the impious, neither (is it) right for you, O bishops. But also Simon the mage, when he offered

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<sup>52</sup> This passage goes on with a bit of speech-in-character. The bishops object that only the blameworthy give alms, and if they do not accept from them, then there will be nothing from which to serve the widows, orphans, and afflicted. The apostles reply that God has instructed that people should give first-fruits and tithes so that the community will not be dependent on the blameworthy; but if the community is indeed so poor that only the blameworthy can give, then “it would be better for you rather to be destroyed by famine than to take from evil persons” (18; 4.8.1–2).

money to me, Peter, and John, he was trying to take as a buyer the priceless grace; having not accepted, we bound him with eternal curses, because he believed that the gift of God is acquired not from goodwill toward God, but (from) the exchange of money. Therefore flee the contributions from a bad conscience to the altar of God; for “keep away from”, he says, “that which is unrighteous, and you will not be afraid and trembling will not approach you.”<sup>53</sup> (4.7.1–3)

Funds from donors to altars, prayers from altars to God, blessings from God back to donors—this would seem to be a fairly efficient and effective system for attempting to transform material resources into divine favor. What, then, of the bishops without whom, according to our first reference, a person should not approach an altar? The sixth and seventh references to the image of widows as altar work to reinsert bishops and their work into this functioning theonomy at an important juncture ‘upstream’ of the widows, as it were, in the flow of alms / prayers. Both references are contained in the DA’s chapter eighteen, a chapter concerned with the importance of not accepting donations from sinners, and in particular with the bishop’s role in ensuring the worthiness of donors. The chapter expands on the ways in which the economy of alms and prayers, understood with the language and logic of sacrifice, works. It illuminates more sources of activity that contribute to the proper functioning of the process and further complicates any straightforward understanding of the role of the ‘altar.’

As the chapter unfolds, a number of actors<sup>54</sup> come into play: donors, bishops (and deacons), widows (and orphans), and, although not explicitly noted, God. Both the sixth and the seventh references emphasize that bishops must take care that donations for widows only come

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<sup>53</sup> Clearly the Const. ap. reference here is quite different from the DA. The Const. ap. does not include the same sort of explanation for why a bishop should not accept such donations, and so does not make the connection between widows and the altar clear (the Const. ap. reference does not even mention widows). Instead, the Const. ap. includes a sort of personal anecdote from the apostles, which is typical of the material that the Const. ap. contains but the DA does not.

<sup>54</sup> I do not use the term ‘actor’ here with the intention of importing the extensive scholarship concerning questions of agency. I use it simply as in Merriam Webster’s first definition for the word: “one that acts: doer.” Merriam-Webster.com. “Actor,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/actor>.



from donors whose money was not obtained through morally problematic or blasphemous activities.<sup>55</sup> Bishops must scrutinize the conduct of donors, men and women alike, to ensure that what the altar receives comes only from “labors of righteousness” (18; 4.5.2). While the first reference to widows as an altar emphasized the importance of bishops by stressing the reverence that was due them, the sixth and seventh references emphasize their importance by noting, in effect, what happens when bishops fail to do (an aspect of) their jobs properly. While the language (coming from the mouths of the apostles, we remember) is admonitory, one of the effects is to promote the critical nature of the bishop’s activity in the transformation of alms to prayers to blessings. According to this chapter, if bishops channel funds to widows that come from unworthy sources then the widows’ prayers will be largely ineffective.<sup>56</sup>

According to the sixth and seventh references, then, the efficient theo-economy of the fifth reference was missing a crucial player. The bishop once again takes up his sacrificial sacerdotal role, monitoring and ensuring the purity of the offerings of the people—a role, and a process, with which we are familiar from Polycarp’s letter.<sup>57</sup> The penalty for funneling impure donations to the widows is severe: bishops who do so “shall give an account in no ordinary

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<sup>55</sup> The chapter provides a fascinating list of such problematic donors and their activities: “Indeed, they [the bishops] receive, namely, for the service of the nourishment of orphans and widows, from the rich who have shut men up in prison, or act badly with their slaves, or conduct themselves cruelly in their towns, or oppress the poor; or from the filthy, and those who use their bodies wickedly, or from evildoers, or from those who substract (*sic*) and lend, or from lawless advocates, or wicked accusers, or from hypocritical lawyers, or from painters of pictures, or from makers of idols, or from workers of gold and silver and bronze as thieves, or from unjust tax gatherers, or from seers of spectacles, or from those who alter weights, or from those who measure deceitfully, or from tavern keepers who mingle wine with water, or from soldiers who conduct themselves in wickedness, or from murderers, or from spies of condemnation, or from any Roman officials, those who are polluted with wars and have shed innocent blood without judgement, perverters of judgement who for (reasons of) theft deal in wickedness and in deceit with the peasants and with all the poor, from idolaters, or from the polluted, or from those who take usury, and extortioners.” (18; 4.6.1–5; 408:163–4)

<sup>56</sup> We can connect this to Polycarp’s statement that “all things are inspected for blemishes” (*Phil.* 4.3; see chapter 1). When we considered that statement, we noted that there are several options for what or who the ‘things’ are that are inspected, and who is doing the inspecting. In the DA here it is clearly the donors—the community members—who are being inspected, and it is bishops who are doing the inspecting (and who may need to do a better job of it).

<sup>57</sup> Although in Polycarp’s case that role was filled by God and perhaps the widows and/or the community more generally.

manner” and “shall be found guilty in judgment in the day of the Lord” (18; 4.5.4, 6.6)

Furthermore they “force blasphemy to come upon the word through your [the bishops’] evil management, as though God were not good and ready to give” (18; 4.7.3). A bishop who fails in his duties in this regard not only impedes the vital work of widows in their communication with God, but impugns God himself—because if the prayers of the widow are not answered (through fault of the bishop), then it might seem as if God, in ignoring the prayers, were not a good and giving God.

While bishops make a comeback in these last two references, the widows are not reduced again to the private, passive recipients whom we saw in references two and three in particular. Rather the interconnected web of actors expands and the widows retain their significance even as the successfulness of their prayers is made contingent upon the proper conduct of bishops (and donors).<sup>58</sup> The passage containing the sixth reference makes a point of emphasizing the widows’ status as an altar in relation to both their reception of proper donations and the effectiveness of their prayer work. Depending on whether one follows the Latin (which cuts off partway through the reference) or the Syriac the precise points of emphasis differ somewhat, but the broad thrust remains largely the same: it is extremely important for the *altar* to be ‘nourished’ from ‘the labor of righteousness.’

The Syriac goes on to explain why: because it is only with that proper nourishment that the widows will “offer a holy and acceptable service before Almighty God” (18; 4.5.2). This is a clear reference to Rom 12:1, in which Paul urges his audience to present their bodies as a living

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<sup>58</sup> On a related note, as the potential sources of agency in this dynamic system expand, so to do the potential sources for blame should the system not perform successfully. If the widow-altars’ prayers do not produce the desired blessings, it might be as a result of failings on the part of the widow-altars, the bishops or the donors.

sacrifice “holy, acceptable to God” (*ἁγίαν εὐάρεστον τῷ Θεῷ*).<sup>59</sup> The DA does not seem to pick up in particular on the bodies-as-sacrifice element of this reference.<sup>60</sup> Rather we see in this passage that the ‘materials,’ as it were, on both sides of the transformative work of the widow-altar are identified as the sacrifice. The altar receives, or is nourished, from the ‘labor of righteousness’—the widows receive, as sacrificial offerings, material support from righteous members of the community. What the widow sends on to God is her service—her service of prayer, holy and acceptable, rising from the altar.

The widow is not an isolated transformative actor. The full effectiveness of her work depends, as the sixth and seventh references make clear, on the righteous work of donors and on the successful surveillance of offerings by bishops. But her prayer work is not solely dependent on the proper performance of others; the altar remains effective through her own righteousness, as the passage of chapter eighteen that bridges between the sixth and seventh references makes clear. However, this righteousness cannot overcome unrepentant sinfulness of the donor: “But again, if she be nourished from (the sources) of iniquity, she cannot offer her service and her intercession with purity before God. Even if she is righteous and pray for the wicked, her intercession for them will not be heard, but that (only) for herself alone” (18; 4.6.8). The widow may succeed in her work of transforming funds into intercessions with God, but whether or not God chooses to fulfill the requests of the intercessions—to further transform the prayers into blessings—depends on the righteousness of the person on whose behalf the intercessions are made. The widow as altar remains a central actor in this theo-economy, but for others to benefit they must do more than simply give. While these donors continue to rely on the widow for

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<sup>59</sup> Although strangely none of the editions and translations I have consulted—those of Funk, Connolly, Tidner, and Vööbus—make note of this reference to Rom 12:1. We remember also the connection to Rom 12:1 that we saw in Methodius, who described widows as a ‘living altar.’

<sup>60</sup> Interesting in itself, as this is a point at which a tie to widows’ chaste bodies could easily be made.

intercession on their behalf she needs no such middleman: she has a direct line to God, and her intercessions on her own behalf will be heard (assuming that she is righteous) whether or not her donors themselves are righteous.

At the same time, though, the text seems to suggest that the benefit to the widows is not entirely insulated from the relative sinfulness of those who donate. From a purely pragmatic perspective one might ask: if the widows are receiving the practical support they need, and their prayers on their own behalf are being heard, then why should it matter to them whether or not their donors are righteous? The text does a fairly poor job of answering this. In the passage between references six and seven, we are told somewhat opaquely “if a widow be nourished with bread only from the labor of righteousness, it shall profit for her, but if much be given her from (the sources) of iniquity it shall be a loss for her” (18; 4.6.7). The very broad semantic range of the Syriac words translated here as ‘profit’ and ‘loss’ include both financial meanings as well as more general meanings of ‘increase’ and ‘decrease.’<sup>61</sup> Profit and loss, increase and decrease: one is clearly better than the other, but of what they consist is vague and in what way the profit or loss to the widow is realized is just as unclear. The focus of the text here remains on the significance of the bishop in this economy—his proper supervision of the donations can result in ‘profit’ and ‘loss’ (material? spiritual? both?) for the widows.

Elsewhere the DA speaks more explicitly about the problems of widows receiving from and communicating with blameworthy people. There, though, the text makes clear that the consequences for widows stem not so much from the blameworthiness of the people in question as from widows communicating with people outside of those with whom the bishop has commanded them to communicate. This scenario is presented in some detail in chapter fifteen,

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<sup>61</sup> Giovanni Bazzana, pers. comm. The Peshitta employs these words in its translation of Phil 3:7 “yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.” See Quigley and Nasrallah, “Cost and Abundance,” and Quigley, “Divine Accounting.”

and is presented without the use of the image of the widows as altar (although the image does occur in surrounding passages).<sup>62</sup> Here the text is highly critical of widows who (according to it) neglect proper conduct even during church services in order to pursue and manage funds. The text presents these widows as unwilling to attend to even their fellow widows who are ill, but “to others, those who are at fault or are gone out from the church, because they give much (to you), you are gladly ready to go and to visit them” (15; 3.8.3). Such a widow, by praying for people when she has not been commanded to do so by the bishop or the deacon is to “be reprovéd because she was carried away for lack of discipline” (15; 3.8.1). According to this passage widows must only pray for (or eat and drink or fast with, or receive from, or lay hands on) those whom they have been commanded to do so by the bishop or deacon. Indeed, says the text, “with whomsoever you communicate through the command of the bishop, you are without blame before God” (15; 3.8.4).

Here we see a version of the same logic we discussed in regard to references six and seven: the bishop makes the choices and gives the commands, and as long as the widow does as he says she will bear no responsibility should the person in question be not righteous. In fact, says the text, it is the bishops who must “render an account for everybody” who obeys them (ibid.). If, however, a widow—or anyone—should disobey the bishops or deacons in this regard, then they (the bishops and deacons) will bear no responsibility for any of the disobedient party’s offenses.<sup>63</sup> Here the text states a strong consequence to such communication made without

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<sup>62</sup> That the image is not used here is consistent with the general pattern of usage in the DA and all of our texts. The understanding of widows as altar is treated universally as a positive and used as a marker of whatever the text regards as appropriate behavior. Reference three in particular emphasizes this pattern when it speaks of widows who are behaving inappropriately as not adhering to their appointment as altar.

<sup>63</sup> “And so it (is for) every brother of the laity who obeys the bishop and submits to him, for they (namely, the bishops) are to render an account for everybody. But if you obey not the mind of the bishops and deacons, they

bishop's approval: anyone who prays or communicates with someone who is expelled from the church (e.g., the widows described just a paragraph earlier who visited those who "are gone out from the church") is to be reckoned with the expelled.<sup>64</sup> While references six and seven (from chapter eighteen) emphasized the importance of the bishop in approving donors, these passages of chapter fifteen emphasize the importance of widows (and others) not receiving from—or even communicating with—people who have not received the bishop's approval.

This scenario gives us another glimpse into what is at stake in the text when it comes to the flow of funds and communication among widows, community members and God, and brings us back to the question that references six and seven seem to attempt to answer: what need is there for bishops in this flow? This passage in fifteen does not so much answer that question as it does outline consequences for those who ignore the bishop's role. In one revealing moment, the text chastises widows who visit with and receive from 'unapproved' people in this manner: "You then, those who are such, ought to be ashamed. For you wish to be wiser and more intelligent, not only than the men, but even than the presbyters and the bishops" (15; 3.8.3)

At stake are not only judgments of authority and obedience but also judgments of wisdom. Reading against the grain of this rhetoric would suggest that there were widows who considered themselves perfectly intelligent and wise enough to judge for themselves who they should visit and from whom they should receive. And perhaps this judgment of their wisdom and intelligence did not rest solely with themselves; presumably members of the community would not choose to donate to them, or receive their visits, if they did not judge them worthy. And so

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indeed will be set free of your offenses, but you shall give an account of all that you do of your own will (O men) or of your own will (O women)" (15; 3.8.4).

<sup>64</sup> "Indeed, everyone who shall pray or communicate with one who is expelled from the church, must rightly be reckoned with him. Indeed, these things lead to the dissolution and destruction of souls. For if one communicate and pray with him who is expelled from the church, and obey not the bishop, he does not obey God, and he is defiled with him (who is expelled)" (15; 3.8.5).

once again we see evidence of theo-economic networks of donation and communication amongst widows and the community that seem to have functioned without the involvement of the bishop.

### From Alms to Prayers: The Transformative Work of Widows

As we have seen, in portraying widows as the altar of God the DA trades in particular upon two roles that it connects to widows: that of recipients of material support and that of offerers of prayer. In so doing, it participates in two ongoing discourses in Jewish and Christian literature that we have considered above in this chapter and in the first chapter on Polycarp: that comparing prayer to sacrifice, and that comparing almsgiving to sacrifice. I wish to consider briefly how it is that the DA employs these discourses in relation to one another and what that might say about the positions of widows as the altar in the midst of it all.

In the DA, the understanding of almsgiving as sacrifice stands in a sort of chronological relation to the understanding of prayer as sacrifice—that is, they are related to each other through the process of sacrifice, but they are not understood as being identical aspects of the process. When we considered Polycarp’s epistle we noted its participation in this discourse comparing, and in some ways equating, the practice of offering prayer to the practice of sacrifice. This was also a discourse in which Methodius participated in his identification of virgins with the gold altar, offering up prayers ‘like incense.’ In this discourse the prayers are figured as the sacrificial offering and the person who is doing the praying is occasionally (as is the case in our texts) explicitly figured as the altar. It is often the case in this discourse that the prayer is figured as the sacrifice already burning upon the altar, and specifically as the smoke rising up from that burning sacrifice. This was the case in Methodius as we say in chapter three, as it was in the examples of

Clement and Origen cited in chapter one.<sup>65</sup> So in a sense when prayers are understood through the language and logic of sacrifice they are sometimes related to a particular time in the process of sacrifice when the offering has been placed on the altar and is being consumed by fire. This is the time when smoke—and prayers—rise up to God.

The DA also understands the prayer of widows as connected to this particular time in, and aspect of, sacrifice when it invokes the image of the widows as altar. However, it does not draw this connection by using language of smoke or prayers rising up to God; rather it does so by connecting the discourse of prayer as sacrifice with that of almsgiving as sacrifice. The DA places these sacrificial discourses in relation to one another by understanding them as chronologically or processually different aspects of sacrifice, connected to one another at the placing of the offering upon the altar (that is, the widows). For the DA, the community's bringing of material offerings to widows is figured as the sacrificial bringing of offerings to the altar, before they are transformed by being burnt. The image of the widows as altar places the widows at the very center of this crucial process of communication with God, acting as that sacred juncture that receives the offerings of the people and, having God's ear, is able to send the prayers of the people upward to God.

The rhetoric of the DA certainly does not present widows in this light, however. It works hard to establish the complete authority of the bishop, and in deploying the image of widows as altar it attempts to direct the force of that image in support of its goal. This is identical to the way in which the image was deployed in all of our prior texts, although the rhetorical goals of the texts have differed. Considered together, the references to the widows as altar in the DA are

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<sup>65</sup> See above, p.70 n.45. Note that in all three of these examples—Methodius, Clement, and Origen—the prayers are specifically figured as a sacrifice of incense. In this they all likely draw up on Psalm 141:2: “Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice.”



shaped to support the bishop by portraying the bishop as being in control of the offerings that will come to the altar. The DA attempts to establish bishops as the most important controlling (human) actor in the dynamic flow of the commodities of funds and prayer, while at the same time attempting to restrict the import of widows in the same economies. According to the DA, the most significant (human) role in this process properly belongs to bishops as the crucial sacerdotal juncture that properly regulates the flow of sacrifice.

And yet the text's attempts to establish the importance of bishops also make clear that the theo-economy in which widows transform alms to prayers could easily function without the presence of the bishop. The activity of the altar could not be entirely erased, but is visible within the text's rhetoric of control. These widows are women of sacerdotal significance, an understanding that we have already seen emerging in Polycarp's *Phil.* and in Tertullian's *Ux.* It is the widows who receive offerings and the widows who communicate with God in prayer on behalf of the community. The widows are the privileged actors who transform the offerings of funds into the sweet smoke of prayer that is received by God. The widows stand at the juncture of the discourses that compare prayer and almsgiving to sacrifice. It is the widows who, perhaps understood by some as "wiser...even than the presbyters and the bishops," work at the center of a transformative process of human-divine communication.

## Summary and Conclusions

### Summary

At the beginning of this dissertation, I noted that widows often appear in early Christian texts as a problem or puzzle of some sort. Why might this be? I also noted how surprised I was when I came to realize the sheer number of widows in antiquity, the variety of their socioeconomic circumstances and that the Greco-Roman cultural conception of ‘widow’ included women who were without a husband for a number of reasons beyond simply their death. Recognizing the prevalence of widows and the variety of their circumstances made the question of what was going on with widows in early Christian texts even more intriguing. The use of the image of widows as an altar of God, I suggested, was a way in which some could attempt to solve the puzzle—to understand and shape the place and role of widows.

The image appears in four early Christian texts of the second and third centuries CE, which I have examined in this dissertation. In each of these texts the image was deployed, generally without explanation, in attempts to support the text’s persuasive goals. In all of the texts these goals included control of widows’ behavior, and/or cultivating an understanding of widows as subordinate to some other. And yet, the image resists conforming to these textual boundaries. Through careful analysis of these texts, I have shown that in each case the depictions of widows as altar offer evidence for historical widows as figures of importance in some early Christian communities. These depictions are always intertwined with matters of purity, of community offerings and finances and of prayer and speech—matters which I have designated ‘core concerns.’ This dissertation has demonstrated that through its connections with these three concerns, the image of widows as altar offers evidence of the historical possibility that widows

did significant sacerdotal work for some communities by functioning as privileged intermediaries who connected humans and the divine.

This evidence is often to be found through the text's rhetoric, in the implicit assumptions about, and discomforts with, the image itself. In order to piece this evidence together I have read the texts slowly and deeply, with attention to the resonances of particular words and to the scriptural worlds invoked by particular turns of phrase. In these bits of language are contained voices that speak a story different from that proclaimed by the text's authorial voice.<sup>1</sup> I have in many places been inspired by the feminist rhetorical critical practice of reading 'against the grain,' a way of working backwards through textual rhetoric to arrive at the practices and understandings that concerned the text's author(s).

As texts written almost certainly by men who were attempting in some way to control widows, these texts form challenging terrain in which to seek alternative understandings of widows and their work.<sup>2</sup> But they tell us more than just what they explicitly communicate. In the words of Mayra Rivera, I have attempted to be "attentive to loss and opacity, to interruption and silence."<sup>3</sup> I have sought to reconstruct these alternative understandings and their attendant

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<sup>1</sup> Speaking of entirely different sources coming from a different world (Vedic India), Stephanie Jamison described a very similar sort of analytical work perhaps more eloquently than I can: "Our preserved texts provide us with a very limited segment of the whole discourse of the society in which they were composed...It is the tediously proverbial tip of the iceberg, and what we are after—women's discourses—are way below the waterline. But the composers of our texts of limited content participated in many different discourses in their lives, only one type of which has been preserved. And the stuff of discourses—words and syntactic constructions—travel through many levels of discourse and do not shed their associations when going from one to another. In other words, linguistic levels are not watertight. We can use language as a sort of periscope to peer below the waterline, if we can tap into the associational nexus that the elements of language are part of." *Sacrificed Wife / Sacrificer's Wife: Women, Ritual, and Hospitality in Ancient India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 12.

<sup>2</sup> Again Stephanie Jamison expresses this well: "Our investigations must take place in what may seem like the most unpromising of verbal territory: texts preserved by men for men as the foundation and support for an elaborate, well-organized, institutionalized religious system. How can we even hope to glimpse women's experience in these structures, and if we do glimpse something, how can we tell what it represents? We must make the texts tell us things that their composers did not think they were saying; we must read between the lines" (ibid.,4).

<sup>3</sup> Mayra Rivera, *Poetics of the Flesh* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 3.

historical possibilities in order to bring attention to a group of women whose presence in early Christian texts is often obscure and marginal. I have sought to show that this marginality was perhaps not always so in the practice of early Christian communities.

By close critical analysis of references to widows as the altar of God we have been able to gain greater insight into widows' practices of prayer and speech, the importance attached to their purity (and of what that purity is said to consist) and their varied relationships to community financial matters. I have moved beyond the questions of who widows were and what they were doing, to how these widows and their work were regarded and what significance they may have held. We have seen the ways in which activities of prayer and receipt of alms take on sacerdotal significance. We have seen an understanding of widows as God's privileged conversation partners, forming a crucial link between a community and God so that the welfare of the community, and the needs of its members, could be effectively brought before the divine. This dissertation has enabled us to see an understanding of early Christian widows as sacred women, doing holy work.

### *Summary of Scholarship*

Through this project I have sought to bring scholarly attention to an understudied group of women. Much of the scholarly work that treats early Christian widows in some way has been, and continues to be, focused on 1 Timothy. And yet, the early Christian texts that discuss widows extend far beyond that seminal passage of 1 Tim 5:3–16. This project builds upon the work done by scholars such as Roger Gryson, Jo Ann McNamara, Jean Laporte, Carolyn Osiek and Bonnie Bowman Thurston, all of whom looked beyond 1 Timothy. In the 1970s through the 1990s these and other scholars published work that collected and considered some of the

evidence for widows in early Christianity.<sup>4</sup> Osiek's 1983 article and Thurston's 1985 article have remained the only scholarly treatments of the image of widows as altar until this dissertation. Thurston's 1989 volume *The Widows: A Women's Ministry in the Early Church* has remained the only English language monograph to date focused entirely on widows in early Christianity. This scholarship offers foundational work of examining early Christian texts for mentions of widows, collecting them and reviewing what the texts had to say about who widows were and what they were doing. It leaves room for closer and more critical analysis of this evidence.

Subsequent scholarship has often treated widows in early Christianity as part of a broader topic such as women in early Christianity, evidence for attitudes toward sex and marriage or evidence for practices of commensality, or it has continued the practice of collecting and providing overviews of evidence.<sup>5</sup> However, it is rare that this more recent scholarship has contributed new insights into widows and widowhood in early Christianity. It is more common for already existing evidence regarding widows to be used to help explore these broader topics rather than for widows themselves to be the focus of much critical consideration. There has sometimes been a sense among scholars of early Christianity, I would argue, that we already know what there is to know about widows. This dissertation has demonstrated that this is not the case.

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<sup>4</sup> Gryson, *Ministry*; McNamara, "Wives and Widows;" Laporte, *Role of Women*; Osiek, "Widow as Altar;" Thurston, "Widows as the 'Altar;'" Thurston, *Widows*.

<sup>5</sup> E.g., Karen Jo Torjesen, *When Women Were Priests: Women's Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of Their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993); Susanna Elm, *Virgins of God: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Ute E. Eisen, *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity: Epigraphical and Literary Studies* (trans. Linda M. Maloney; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2000); Winter, *Roman Wives*; Finger, *Of Widows*; Bremmer, "Pauper or Patroness."

### *Summary of Chapters*

In the first chapter I examined Polycarp's epistle *To the Philippians*. In this text, he proclaims that widows should know "that they are an altar of God" (4.3). Polycarp's focus in his letter is not upon widows in particular; rather he invokes them briefly in service of his larger argument for the importance of proper conduct for all Christians. He deploys the image of widows as altar—and in particular widows' knowledge of themselves as the altar of God—in order to prescribe standards of behavior for widows, especially concerning their prayer and speech. At the same time his use of the image shows us an understanding of widows as privileged intercessors with God, crucial participants in a process of communication amongst human and divine expressed in the language and logic of sacrifice.

I considered the way in which the text treats widows in comparison to other groups, noting the similarities they share with deacons and elders in particular. Although Polycarp also discusses wives and virgins, his treatment of widows aligns more closely with that of deacons and elders than it does with these other groups of women. This suggests both that sex / gender is not one of the primary governing characteristics at work here, and that widows were figures of some significance for the life of the community. However, while widows align more closely with elders and deacons, it is only widows whom Polycarp portrays as acting as intermediaries in communication between God and people, when he encourages them to intercede "incessantly for everyone" (4.3).

When I turned to consider the three core concerns in Polycarp, it became clear that it is widows' intercessions, and other acts of speech and thought, that occupy most of Polycarp's attention in this brief passage. He does exhort widows to avoid love of money (*φιλαργυρία*), an exhortation he also shares with deacons and elders but not with wives, young men, or virgins.

This suggests that perhaps the money he speaks of is some sort of communal fund to which widows, deacons and elders have access. He says nothing in particular about widows' marital or sexual purity, and in this he is unusual amongst the texts I have considered. He does invoke a different sort of purity—a kind of spiritual cleanliness—when he speaks of widows as an altar of God. He has more to say about prayer and speech, as he advises widows to avoid various sorts of negative speech (e.g., slander), and reminds them that they should be constantly interceding for all. I considered the vocabulary word which Polycarp chooses to denote widows' intercessory activity—*ἐντυγχάνω*—more closely. I proposed that it suggests an understanding of widows as being particularly privileged in their communication with God because of its employment in New Testament texts almost exclusively for the communication between a divine being (i.e., Jesus or the Spirit) and God.

I argued that in Polycarp's text, it was with widows' role as intercessors that their depiction as an altar of God was most closely connected. I examined the text's employment of the widows-as-altar image as part of a 'scene of sacrifice' that focused on the worthiness of the participants. The scene of sacrifice is set when Polycarp speaks of widows as "knowing that they are an altar of God and that all things are inspected for blemishes and nothing has escaped his notice, not reasonings, nor thoughts, nor any of the things hidden in the heart" (4.3). This notion of inspection for blemishes invokes the scriptural world of Israelite sacrificial practice in which both priests and animal offerings had to be ritually perfect. Contrary to a common scholarly understanding that widows are here the sacrifice (in addition to the altar), I proposed that widows' prayers might be seen as the sacrificial offering, and also that widows might be understood as ritual inspectors of blemishes. In so considering prayers as sacrificial offerings, I argued that Polycarp's letter here participates in an ongoing discourse in Jewish and Christian

literature in which the process of prayer is understood as comparable in some way to the process of sacrifice. Widows, as the altar that offers up prayers, are at the very center of this fundamental process of establishing and maintaining connection to the divine. Bringing this image of widows as altar back together with the evidence for widows as particularly privileged intercessors, and for their alignment in the text with deacons and elders, allows these pieces of evidence to sharpen and reinforce one another. Here we have a glimpse of women whose work on behalf of the Christian community was crucial for its ongoing relationship with God.

Tertullian's *Ad uxorem*, considered in the second chapter, in contrast to Polycarp's letter has little to say about widows' prayer practices and much to say about the importance of their sexual purity—as the principal focus of the text is on arguing against remarriage by widows. As such it is ostensibly entirely devoted to one of the three core concerns, that of purity. It becomes evident that concern with finances is also of great importance, as the text's emphasis on the trappings of wealth (e.g., “jeweled pendants” (1.4), “elaborate coiffures” (2.3), “outlandishly tall slaves” (2.8)) makes clear that the intended audience for this text was the socioeconomic elite.

I argued that Tertullian demonstrates a sort of unease with the image of widows as altar that arises from the fact that despite his efforts, the image was not particularly supportive of his rhetorical aims in the treatise. Speaking of church teachings and scripture, he says “nor do they allow a widow to be selected for the order unless (she is) an *univira*. For the altar of God must be displayed clean” (1.7.4). He invokes the image of widows as altar extremely briefly and solely in support of marital purity. While Tertullian argues for widows to remain widows, he also wishes for the Christian community to maintain a level of control over these widows and particularly over their money—a level of control that is much more effectively presented by portraying widows as wives of God.



Tertullian spends much time on the image of widow as wife. He presents widows with three options: to be the wife of a pagan man, the wife of a Christian man, or the best option (according to Tertullian), the wife of God. What these options have in common is a continued placement of widows within a ‘proper’ domestic hierarchy—and as wives of God, widows’ money would remain with the church. Tertullian presents this option in vivid, even romantic, terms, speaking of widows as “God’s beautiful ones, God’s girls,” who speak with him “day and night” (1.4.4). Widows’ prayers are “dowries they confer to the Lord” and in return they “obtain from him dignity as conjugal duties, however often they desire” (1.4.4). The core concern of material offerings and finances appears here with the idea of dowries.<sup>6</sup> The core concern of prayer and speech also clearly appears—but offered by the widows as wives, not as the altar of God (as in Polycarp). Evidence from his *De corona* and his *De oratione* show that Tertullian is perfectly able both to associate prayer with sacrifice, and to envision community members as elements of the Israelite Tabernacle—including altars. He would certainly be capable of connecting the image of widows as altar to their practices of prayer; but he does not.

Tertullian walks a fine line when it comes to power and subordination in this treatise. While wishing to present a pleasant enough picture of widowhood (marriage to God) to convince women to remain widows, he shies away from presenting them as powerful *dominae*, choosing instead imagery reminiscent of young newlyweds. I argued that it is precisely because he wishes to present widows as properly controlled within a family hierarchy, and not as women with any independent power, that the image of widows as altar is such an ill fit for Tertullian. This image

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<sup>6</sup> Although here Tertullian speaks of a metaphorical dowry, elsewhere he exhibits a fair amount of concern for the disposition of widows’ actual dowries. He cautions them that a pagan husband would rob them of their money (2.5). A Christian husband, particularly a poor one, is better in that at least then the dowry would go to support a worthy Christian (2.8). Still, it is best to be wife of God, in which case—although Tertullian never explicitly says this—the widows’ dowry would be given to the church.

does not work with Tertullian's preferred imaginary of the community as God's household, with widows as sweet young wives constantly whispering to their husband.

Why Tertullian bothers to include the image of widows as altar at all is difficult to discern. However, the immediate context in which he employs the image is telling—it is placed in a discussion of the importance of single marriage for religious officiants. The image of Christian widows as altar is followed shortly by, and placed parallel to, the image of pagan widow priestesses. Tertullian turns to such priestesses elsewhere in the text as well, widows who “minister to the African Ceres” (1.6.4), portraying them as women who actively separate from their still-living husbands and devote themselves to lives of discipline (which he seems to reluctantly admire). I argued that in these portraits of pagan priestesses we can see the full flowering of the danger that Tertullian seeks to avoid by focusing on the widow as wife, and only briefly mentioning widows as altar—the danger of an active, sacerdotally powerful woman. When we read Tertullian's reference to widows as altar in the context of his portrayal of widows as wives throughout the treatise, and in comparison to his portrayals of pagan priestesses in the same text and of Christian widows in other texts, we catch a glimpse of an understanding of widows that is not the one which Tertullian places at the rhetorical forefront of *Ux*. This alternative understanding existing underneath and resisting Tertullian's rhetoric is an understanding, like that we saw emerging in Polycarp, of widows as persons of sacerdotal importance for the Christian community.

In the third chapter we turned to Methodius's *Symposium*. This text too has a clear rhetorical project, and here too the image of widows as altar is deployed in a particular way to support this rhetorical goal. Like Tertullian, Methodius's attention is overwhelmingly paid to one of the three core concerns: purity. Methodius argues for living a life of purity of the whole self,

of which sexual chastity is only one component. Despite this, the entire text makes clear that virginity is the ideal as distinguished from lesser forms of purity such as widowhood. This hierarchical distinction is emphasized in Methodius's deployment of the image of widows as altar, which occurs in a section of the text given over to allegorical interpretations of scriptural passages. By allegorically interpreting the gold altar and the bronze altar of the Israelite Tabernacle as virgins and widows respectively (5.6, 8; see Exod 27, 30), Methodius declares the superiority of virgins over widows, and particularly of virginal bodies over widowed bodies. He does so by comparing the altars on three fronts: their relative placements in the Tabernacle, the materials of their composition, and the sorts of offerings offered upon them.

In the course of his interpretation, Methodius briefly brings the core concerns of prayer and of material offerings into play, and both support the ranking of virgins above widows. Here it is not the bronze altar of widows that is portrayed as offering up prayers, but rather the gold altar of virgins, standing "in front of the curtain with undefiled hands sending up prayers in the manner of incense acceptable to the Lord" (5.8). The bronze altar of widows is not portrayed as doing anything; rather others bring offerings to it. The *Symp.* is the first of our texts to explicitly portray widows as recipients of offerings (a thread which will be picked up by our final text, the DA). I argued that when we attend to the difference between the types of sacrifices offered on the gold and bronze altars as unbloody and bloody respectively—and in particular Methodius's insistence on that difference—we can see that the text taps into a powerful complex of associations between blood sacrifice, gender and women's procreative capabilities. Drawing on the work of Nancy Jay and Nicole Ruane in particular, I argued that for Methodius as for many others, sacrificial and procreative blood are connected. It is the absence of both types of blood

from the virginal gold altar that elevates it above the bronze altar, and through this comparison Methodius elevates virginal bodies above widowed bodies.

Despite his heavy use of allegorical interpretation Methodius's employment of the widows-as-altar image is in a way the most straightforward of all of our texts, because this text does not seem to have problems with widows the way the others do. Where Polycarp, Tertullian and (as we will see) the DA employ the image as a sort of prod toward certain behavior for widows and a critique of others, Methodius provides no explicit critique of widows and pays no attention to their behavior. He does not speak ill of widows—they are a representation on earth of a heavenly reality—but by understanding virgins as the holier altar, closer to the presence of God, he works to co-opt the potency of the altar image for virgins.

Because of Methodius's focus on virgins and virginity, it is easy to lose sight of the holiness with which he endows widows. While the gold altar of virgins may be spiritually superior, as the bronze altar, widows and their bodies, too, are sacred to the Lord. Methodius makes no attempt to rhetorically obscure this understanding, but his attention to virgins, and his moves to transfer the potency of the altar image to them, can make it difficult to discern. There is a way in which the sacrality of widows is assumed in Methodius's allegory of the two altars and becomes overshadowed by the persuasive project of promoting virgins.

Methodius's deployment of the altar image does not give us a glimpse of widows as sacerdotal figures in the way that we saw in Polycarp and Tertullian. However, attention to the quiet assumptions of the passage shows us that it is the fundamental sacrality of widows as an altar upon which the sacrality of virgins as an altar is built. The *Symposium*, more than any of our other texts, allows us to see an understanding of widows' very selves, including their bodies, as

sacred to God. They are holy women, built of holy flesh; a “living altar” (5.8) who, on earth, provide glimpses of a heavenly truth.

In the fourth chapter, it is with the *Didascalia apostolorum*’s six or seven references to widows as altar that threads visible in our previous texts are woven together, and we receive a fuller glimpse of the importance of widows and their work. While the text does attend to widows’ marital purity, its deployments of the widows-as-altar image are concerned primarily with the other two core concerns—material offerings and finances, and prayer and speech—and the authority that accompanies their control. A fairly lengthy Church Order, written in the voice of the apostles, the text pays a great deal of attention to the proper conduct of various members of the Christian community—and widows are a particular concern.

I argued that the text is focused on establishing the primary authority of the bishop in a community, and especially the bishop’s control over widows’ receipt of community offerings and their practices of prayer. Analysis of the text’s treatment of widows, however, makes clear that alternative understandings of the flow of power, offerings and prayers are present—understandings that privilege the place and work of widows, and that have no need for bishops. The text’s repeated use of the widows-as-altar image shows both of these aspects. The references are rhetorically directed to support the authority of bishops. Yet attentive reading ‘against the grain’ reveals the very significance of widows, as those who receive offerings and in turn bring prayers for the community before God, that the text attempts to conceal and supersede.

Aspects of the DA’s treatment of widows are familiar to us from the texts examined in previous chapters. The DA depicts widows as receivers of offerings, as did the *Symp.*, and as offerers of prayers, as did *Phil.* The text exhibits a (perhaps unwilling, in this case) acknowledgment of their importance as did all of the previous texts in their own ways, as well as

a deep discomfort with their sacerdotal significance as in *Ux*. We see here the most obvious (and ham-handed) attempt in all of the texts to deploy the image to control widows' behavior.<sup>7</sup> But we also see the clearest expression of respect for the role of the 'altar' in the exchange of offerings and prayers amongst humans and God.<sup>8</sup> However, this esteem for those who are an altar of God accompanies a significant broadening beyond widows in terms of who exactly is the altar, and perhaps a replacement of them. I proposed that this passage's understanding of the role in the community of those who are an altar, and the respect it shows them, may reflect the understanding of widows in particular and the respect given to them. By broadening the identity of who is 'esteemed an altar,' and by not mentioning widows specifically, I argued that the text seeks to dilute the importance of widows and co-opt their significance for others.

I demonstrated that in addition to the discourse comparing prayer to sacrifice, familiar to us from Polycarp's letter, the DA's use of the image of widows as altar also participates in a discourse comparing almsgiving to sacrifice. The comparison trades upon the notion of both practices as ones that get God's attention and enable a connection between humans and the divine.

This discourse, developed particularly in Second Temple Judaism and then further in both Rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity, has been thoroughly explored by Gary Anderson in his volume *Charity: The Place of the Poor in the Biblical Tradition*. Anderson argues for the presence, in this discourse, of the notion of the poor as the altar of God. And yet, the only textual

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<sup>7</sup> "The altar of God, indeed, never wanders or runs about anywhere, but is fixed in one place. A widow must not therefore wander or run about among the houses" (DA reference two; 15; 3.6.4).

<sup>8</sup> The text says of one who is "esteemed an altar of God" that (s)he "will be honored by God, since without wavering (s)he beseeches constantly for those who give to that one, and (s)he was not accepting idly but (s) was giving back as much of his/her wages through prayer, as the strength of that one was allowing. Therefore they will be blessed from God in eternal life" (DA reference five; 17; 4.3.3).

example he cites of this is from a fourth century CE homily of John Chrysostom.<sup>9</sup> All of the examples of widows as altar that this dissertation has considered predate Chrysostom. The earliest explicit identifications we have of recipients of alms with an altar are those that identify widows as an altar of God, and the alms the widows receive are understood as the offerings brought to the altar. I suggested that this early identification of widows as an altar within the framework of the discourse comparing almsgiving to sacrifice may have come about precisely because of the way in which some early Christians understood the work of widows, as recipients of alms and offerers of prayer. While accepting the importance of the role of widows as recipients of alms, I also sought to challenge somewhat the line between charity and wages, noting that the DA gives us evidence of bishops and widows drawing from the same pool of community support.

The Didascalia apostolorum brings the two discourses comparing prayer and almsgiving with sacrifice together, and it does so with the figure of the widows as altar at the very center. In seeking to promote the authority of the bishop, the text attempts to put bishops in control of both the alms given to widows and the content of widows' prayers. But the DA's use of the image of widows as altar allows us to see an understanding of widows as those who engage in transformative work on the community's behalf—and who do not need a bishop to do so. As those who are able to speak directly to God, widows receive the material support of the community and in turn convey the prayers of the community to the divine, effecting a sort of transformation of alms into prayers. Widows are the altar that “makes the gift sacred.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Anderson, *Charity*, 67, 25.

<sup>10</sup> “How blind you are! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred?” (Mt 23:19).

## Conclusions

Each one of the texts that I have considered has employed the image of widows as altar in support of a rhetorical project having to do in some way with the control or subordination of widows. Each text has attempted to direct the power of the image toward its persuasive goals, using the image only for particular kinds of work. And yet, in the uses of the image, much more can be learned about widows and their work than perhaps the authors of these texts intended to convey. In all of these texts the image is always employed as an indicator of a kind of respect and acknowledgment of importance, as a marker of what the text considers right, even when the text is attempting to control or subordinate widows. Analysis of the image in its contexts has in various places given us insight into widows' relationships with other community members, into differing constructions of community authority, into widows' relationships with financial matters in the community and into the great importance of widows' prayers.

We have seen that the image opens up space for the historical possibility that widows were people with a great deal of significance for some Christian communities. These widows were women whose very bodies were holy and who formed a vital connecting link between the community and the divine as they received offerings and offered prayers. In fulfilling these roles, widows sound a great deal like priests. I am not suggesting that widows *were* priests *per se*. Much early Christian literature, in fact, evidences a reluctance to use the explicit terminology of 'priest' (ἱερεύς) to describe members of the Christian community, and when the terminology is first used it is applied to the community as a whole, not to particular groups within the community (e.g., 1 Pet 2:5, 9; Rev 1:6, 5:10).<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, the image of widows as altar as

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<sup>11</sup> Timothy Wardle, "Who is Sacrificing? Assessing the Early Christian Reluctance to Transfer the Idea of the Priesthood to the Community," in *Ritual and Metaphor: Sacrifice in the Bible* (RBS 68; ed. Christian A. Eberhart; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 99–114.



employed in these texts allows us to see widows who perform sacred and sacerdotal work, and who are themselves holy.

### *Additional Avenues of Exploration*

I have chosen in this project to focus on analysis of the image of widows as altar in the contexts of the early Christian texts in which it is employed. It is a rich image, however, that would lend itself well to multiple other avenues of exploration. One could consider the image in the context of the Greco-Roman literature, ritual practice, and material culture that helped form the broader society in which these texts were created. For example, one might place the image in conversation with the worship of Hestia / Vestia, the goddess of the hearth; with evidence for female priestesses (including the Vestal Virgins); or with practices of patronage and benefaction involving wealthy women. In terms of material culture, one might consider the image in relation to the myriad altars of various shapes and sizes that populated the Greco-Roman cityscapes out of which these texts likely emerged.

One might also consider the image of widows as altar in conversation with developing notions and instantiations of Christian sacred space.<sup>12</sup> For example, one could consider the use of the image in conjunction with developing Christian ritual practices that began to involve a physical altar; or in conjunction with spatial divisions within Christian sanctuaries such as seating arrangements. One might also very productively bring the image of widows as altar

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<sup>12</sup> Joan R. Branham's work has begun this exploration. See Branham, "Bloody Women;" Branham, "Women as Objects;" and Branham, "Mapping Sacrifice on Bodies and Spaces in Late-Antique Judaism and Early Christianity," in *Architecture of the Sacred: Space, Ritual, and Experience from Classical Greece to Byzantium*, ed. Bonna D. Westcoat and Robert G. Ousterhout (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 201–30.

together with developing Christian imaginations, from Paul to Eusebius, Shenoute, and beyond, of the Christian community itself as the sacred sanctuary<sup>13</sup>

Turning away somewhat from ancient contexts, the image of widows as altar might also be explored productively by focusing more closely on the materiality of widows and altars. Here I think a consideration of the image in light of the work of new materialists such as Jane Bennett could be particularly fruitful.<sup>14</sup> The work of new materialists could enable us to challenge the notion of the passivity of objects such as altars, and move beyond a simple active / passive divide when speaking of agency and activity. It would also help us to think through the implications of considering widows' fleshly bodies to be holy matter that makes sacred what it touches, like the wood, metal, or stones of an altar. We might also use a focus on materiality to attend more closely to the altar side of the equation, as it were. What was it about altars, that made them comparable in some way to widows? What might that tell us about ancient conceptions of altars, and of the activity of things?

Finally, the methods I have employed in this project, and the results I have obtained, might be used and brought into conversation with treatments of widows and other groups of women in different cultures, places, and times. Comparison with women in South Asia at various points in history would prove to be remarkably fruitful.<sup>15</sup> For example, Stephanie Jamison, in her

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<sup>13</sup> Paul: e.g., 1 Cor 3:16; Eusebius: *Hist. Eccl.* 10.4 (the “Panegyric on the Building of the Churches, Addressed to Paulinus, Bishop of Tyre”); Shenoute: *Discourses* 8, work 8. A special thanks to Dan Schriever for pointing the Shenoute reference out to me. See also Timothy Wardle, *The Jerusalem Temple and Early Christian Identity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010).

<sup>14</sup> See for example Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*. “If matter itself is lively, then not only is the difference between subjects and objects minimized, but the status of the shared materiality of all things is elevated. All bodies become more than mere objects, as the thing-powers of resistance and protean agency are brought into sharper relief” (13).

<sup>15</sup> A contemporary example might be the support of widows in Afghanistan through the provision of jobs, as advocated by western aid agencies, versus through *zakat*, the obligatory money given by Muslims as an act of worship which is redistributed to those in need. Anila Daulatzai speaks to this issue in her article “What Does Work Mean to Widows in Afghanistan?” *HDB* 43.1–2 (2015), <http://bulletin.hds.harvard.edu/articles/winterspring2015/what-does-work-mean-widows-afghanistan>. Discussing a particular moment in her fieldwork, she says, “it was only

1996 volume *Sacrificed Wife / Sacrificer's Wife: Women, Ritual, and Hospitality in Ancient India*, engages in a project with strong parallels to this dissertation. She examines in great detail Vedic texts that set forward how certain rituals are to be conducted, particularly sacrificial rituals, focusing on the roles prescribed for the wife of the man doing the sacrificing. What she uncovers is that in the course of these rituals the wives often function as *mediators*—both between humans, and between humans and the divine. Speaking of the role of the wife in the complex system of *śrauta*, or solemn, ritual, Jamison says that “she links gods and men and allows the religious life of the community to proceed.”<sup>16</sup> Jamison connects this to the similar function women often play in Vedic rituals of hospitality.<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, Jamison argues that in sacrificial rituals the wife of the sacrificer is often homologized to the sacrificial victim, mediating by becoming that which is passed from men to gods. Speaking of a particular narrative in which the wife is tied to the sacrificial victim’s stake, Jamison states that it “is merely a more explicit rendering of various episodes in ritual itself, in which the wife covertly functions as victim, as *exchange token* between men and gods, as the *gift* men give to the gods in anxious expectation of a counter-gift.”<sup>18</sup> The parallels between the role of the wife in Vedic sacrificial ritual as discussed by Jamison, and the role of widows as altar in

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as I sat with Rehana and her in-laws that I realized how inappropriate it was for me to think that waged work would somehow ‘rescue’ widows from this ‘dependence,’ which is inherent in their *haqq* (right, entitlement) to be cared for by others.” Bringing this particular discussion to the notions of work and charity as they have arisen in this dissertation could lead to a productive re-imagining of the relationship of early Christian widows to these notions.

<sup>16</sup> Jamison, *Sacrificed Wife*, 254.

<sup>17</sup> “Though we tend to think of these relationships [managed by hospitality rituals] as forged between males (and indeed they are, in some sense), the pivotal, mediating figure between the males is frequently a woman. She often dispenses hospitality and, perhaps more important, she is often the means of making alliances—through marriage. She performs this mediating role not only between *human* males but also between men and gods.” (Ibid., 6; emphasis original).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 256; emphasis original.

early Christian texts examined in this dissertation, are astounding, and the differences fascinating. An in-depth comparison of the two might greatly enrich our understanding of both.

### *Implications and Possibilities*

The textual analysis in which I have engaged in this dissertation opens up the historical possibility that holy widows, working to link humans with the divine, were present in some early Christian communities. Texts do not come to be in a vacuum; rather, the discursive and nondiscursive, linguistic and material, rhetorical and ‘real,’ are continually co-constitutive of one another. And so the images of widows that we have gleaned from the texts we have examined also have something to tell us about the lives of widows in ancient Christian communities. Precisely which communities we will likely never be able to determine. Nevertheless, these historical possibilities must be taken seriously because they carry the potential for a profound reimagining of the lives of women, and widows in particular, in both ancient and contemporary Christian communities. Widows—women without husbands—formed a significant portion of the adult population of the Roman Empire. Truly attending to widows and their work as God’s altar has implications for the writing of the history of early Christianity, and as historians we must not remain blind to the presence and importance of widows. We must look for, and see, widows present in the financial dealings, prayer practices and sacred spaces of early Christianity.

It is not only widows in the early church who are sometimes unseen. I believe that for many contemporary Christian communities in the United States, widows have become largely invisible. In a culture that frequently prioritizes marriage and family, this often holds true for women who fall within the broader ancient notion of widowhood—divorced women, single mothers and other women alone—but I believe it holds true particularly for those women, often

older, who are widows by our contemporary definition. However, on one occasion when I had given an informal talk on my research on widows in early Christianity, I was approached afterward by a Roman Catholic priest who had been in the audience. His congregation, he told me, was in the process of reviving the order of widows. He and widows in the congregation were meeting to read 1 Timothy and discuss how they might bring the scriptural prescriptions regarding widows to life again in their community. This was, to me, both heartening and saddening. Such an endeavor brings to light the presence of widows as a group in the community and offers them communal roles. It also risks both replicating the submission and control of widows evident in texts from 1 Timothy onward, and perhaps missing the richness of the presence of widows in the early Christian tradition and the sacrality of their work.

What an endeavor it would be, to instead bring to life again a knowledge of widows and their work as of sacerdotal significance for the Christian community. What would it mean for an understanding of widows as an altar of God to be brought into churches today? What would it look like if the work that widows do, now, in churches and communities, were sacralized—be it work to sustain spaces of worship, work of liturgical service, of education, of social justice? What would it be like for members of Christian communities today to bring their prayers to the widows, in the knowledge that their prayers would be brought before God?

This dissertation could easily (and accurately) be described as a project of retrieval; and it has been inspired by such work of earlier feminist historians of Christianity. But I have sought not so much to retrieve specific historical women and their importance—the Priscillas and Melanias of early Christianity—as to open spaces of historical possibility. This project gestures toward the idea of poetic writing as articulated by Mayra Rivera in *Poetics of the Flesh*: “a practice of creating—from ‘shattered histories,’ ‘shards of vocabularies,’ ambiguous words, and

reassembled rituals—imaginative spaces for the affirmation of corporeal possibilities.”<sup>19</sup> This dissertation has been replete with such remnants. In working to piece them together, I hope to have illuminated the potentialities for deeper understandings and reimaginings of widows and their work in ancient Christian communities.

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<sup>19</sup> Rivera, *Poetics*, 148.

## Appendix

In this appendix I provide brief overviews of information regarding the manuscript traditions, attribution, date, unity, and other text history matters for the four texts I have examined in this dissertation. In addition, I provide below the ancient language references to widows as altar contained in these texts, upon which I based my English translations provided in chapters one through four. For the most part, neither precise dating nor the verification of attribution has an impact on the substance of my argument in this project. Nevertheless, in imagining the historical possibilities out of which each text's use of the image of widows as altar might have emerged, such textual data can provide useful context.

### Polycarp, *To the Philippians*

#### *Greek Text*

Τὰς χήρας σωφρονούσας περὶ τὴν τοῦ κυρίου πίστιν, ἐντυγχανούσας ἀδιαλείπτως περὶ πάντων, μακρὰν οὔσας πάσης διαβολῆς, καταλαλιᾶς, ψευδομαρτυρίας, φιλαργυρίας, καὶ παντὸς κακοῦ, γινωσκούσας ὅτι εἰσὶ θυσιαστήριον θεοῦ καὶ ὅτι πάντα μωμοσκοπεῖται, καὶ λέληθεν αὐτὸν οὐδὲν οὔτε λογισμῶν οὔτε ἐννοιῶν οὔτε τι τῶν κρυπτῶν τῆς καρδίας. (*Phil.* 4.3)<sup>1</sup>

#### *Manuscript Tradition*

The manuscript tradition for Polycarp's letter *To the Philippians* (*Phil.*) is, in the words of Bart Ehrman, "unusually deficient."<sup>2</sup> Although the letter, almost certainly written in Greek, is

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<sup>1</sup> I have used the Greek edition of Paul Hartog, *Polycarp's Epistle to the Philippians and the Martyrdom of Polycarp: Introduction, Text, and Commentary*, OAF (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). For ease of reference I have provided full citations of texts in the footnotes, even if they have been cited earlier in the dissertation.

<sup>2</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, introduction to *Letter of Polycarp to the Philippians*, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 1, LCL (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 324–31, at 329.

usually dated to the second century CE, the earliest of the extant Greek manuscripts dates to the eleventh century CE.<sup>3</sup> As all of the Greek manuscripts, of which there are perhaps ten, break off abruptly after 9.2 and continue immediately with the text of the letter of Barnabas 5.7, it is clear that they derive from a common exemplar. Ehrman notes that when the manuscripts differ amongst each other, *Vaticanus graecus* 859 is generally judged to be the closest to the archetype.<sup>4</sup>

The Latin manuscript tradition offers a somewhat earlier and more complete attestation of the text. The thirteen or fourteen Latin manuscripts of *Phil.* contain the complete text of the letter, in a Latin translation evaluations of which have ranged from ‘loose’ and ‘corrupted’ to ‘literal’ and ‘generally reliable.’<sup>5</sup> The oldest of these manuscripts dates to perhaps the ninth century CE, and Michael Holmes believes the Latin translation to be based on a Greek text older than our extant Greek manuscripts.<sup>6</sup> In addition to the Latin and Greek manuscript traditions, some Syriac fragments are extant, as well as an Armenian translation.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The manuscripts with their accepted datings are: *Vaticanus gr.* 859 (v, 11<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> century); *Neapolitanus Bibl. Naz. Borbonicus* II.A.17 (n, 15<sup>th</sup> century); *Florentinus Laurentianus plut.* 7.21 (f, 15<sup>th</sup>–16<sup>th</sup> century); *Vaticanus Reginensis gr. Pii* II.11 (‘*Theatinus*,’ t, 15<sup>th</sup>–16<sup>th</sup> century); *Romanus Bibl. Casanatensis* G.V.14 (c, 15<sup>th</sup>–16<sup>th</sup> century); *Vaticanus Ottobonianus gr.* 348 (o, 16<sup>th</sup> century); *Parisinus Bibl. Nat. gr.* 937 (p, 16<sup>th</sup> century); *Andros Hagias* 64 (a, 16<sup>th</sup> century); *Salmasianus Andrius gr.* (s, date unknown, may be identical to c); and *Vaticani graeci.* 1655 (d, 15<sup>th</sup>–16<sup>th</sup> century). The combined witness of these manuscripts is abbreviated as G. In his list of manuscripts Ehrman emits d, which Hartog notes was added as a witness by Prostmeier in 1994. Ehrman groups the nine he includes as v o f p / c t n s / a; Hartog, following Prostmeier, groups them as v o / f p / n t [b] c[s] a d r (Hartog, *Polycarp’s Epistle*, 26–27; Ehrman, introduction, 329–30).

<sup>4</sup> Ehrman, introduction, 329.

<sup>5</sup> Hartog, *Polycarp’s Epistle*, 27, citing Lightfoot, Bardenhewer, Kleist, Shepherd, and Holmes.

<sup>6</sup> Michael W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 277.

<sup>7</sup> Hartog, *Polycarp’s Epistle*, 27.



### *Attribution, Date, and Compositional Integrity*

Much of the scholarship on *Phil.* has focused on questions of its attribution and its literary integrity. Scholars have considered whether or not the letter was actually written by Polycarp (the second century CE bishop of Smyrna), and whether the text as we have it is a single letter or is (in the most common alternative theory) composed of portions of two separate letters.<sup>8</sup> Irenaeus of Lyons makes reference to a letter Polycarp wrote to the Philippians in *Haer.* 3.3.4,<sup>9</sup> giving a possible *terminus ante quem* for *Phil.* of the late second century. However as Irenaeus provides no quotations we cannot know if he was referring to the text that we now know as *Phil.* Eusebius quotes *Phil.* 9.1–2 and 13.1–2 (*Hist. eccl.* 3.36.13–15),<sup>10</sup> and Jerome also makes reference to a letter from Polycarp to the Philippians, which he calls “very valuable” and which he states is “read to the present day in meetings in Asia” (*Vir. ill.* 17).

Because of its reference to epistles and martyrdom of Ignatius, the dating of *Phil.* is heavily entangled with the dating of the Ignatian correspondence and Ignatius’s death. The Ignatian correspondence, with its multiple recensions including supposedly pseudonymous epistles, and complicated manuscript history, is itself a minefield when it comes to questions of

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<sup>8</sup> The argument that Pol *Phil.* is a composite of two letters is based upon the seeming contradiction between 9, which seems to regard Ignatius as already having been martyred, and 13.2, which may be read as indicating a belief that Ignatius was still alive. P.N. Harrison proposed the theory that *Phil.* is a composite work in 1936 in *Polycarp’s Two Epistles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), and his theory has been debated, modified, supported, and argued against by numerous scholars since. See Hartog, *Polycarp’s Epistle*, 33–40, for a detailed summary of the ongoing debate. Thankfully, the question of whether or not *Phil.* is a composite text has no impact on this dissertation’s consideration of the text.

<sup>9</sup> “There is also a most powerful letter Polycarp wrote to the Philippians, from which those who wish and care for their salvation may learn about the nature of his faith and preaching.” Also quoted by Eusebius in *Hist. eccl.* 4.14.6.

<sup>10</sup> Note that chapters 9 and 13 of the text as we have it, because of their references to Ignatius, his martyrdom, and his letters, are the most hotly debated sites of the letter in terms of being possible interpolations or indicating that the letter is a composite.

dating and ‘authenticity.’<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless the majority of scholars continue to hold to a second century CE date for *Phil.*, whether they consider it to be a unity, a composite, or as containing interpolations.<sup>12</sup> Given that the earliest quotation of *Phil.* that we have is from Eusebius, *Phil.* could conceivably be dated as late as the fourth century CE, and there is no definitive evidence from the history of the Ignatian correspondence that would deny that possibility outright.

For the purposes of this study, questions of attribution, unity and dating are not of great consequence. Whether or not the letter (or letters) that we have was composed by Polycarp himself, it still contains the intriguing and brief reference to widows as an altar of God. Accepting attribution of the reference to Polycarp would have the result of placing this image in the hands of an early and significant figure in the emerging so-called “proto-orthodox” church hierarchy, but the simple existence of the reference in an early Christian text is intriguing enough to warrant further consideration. The text presents itself as having been authored by Polycarp (and so as having been authored in the second century CE), and my analysis in chapter one takes up that self-presentation without thereby endorsing it as historical ‘truth.’ If we assume that early recipients of the text to which we currently have access believed it to have been written by Polycarp, then in some sense it might as well have been—the impact of the ‘author function’ would have been the same. Should *Phil.* be dated later than the second century CE, that would result in a reordering of the chronology of references to widows as altar. However, as the argument of this dissertation is not based upon textual chronology, such a reordering would have little impact.

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<sup>11</sup> For a succinct review of much of the scholarship, see William R. Schoedel, “Polycarp of Smyrna and Ignatius of Antioch,” *ANRW* 27.1:272–358, at 285–92. Also useful is Paul Foster, “The Epistles of Ignatius of Antioch (Part 1),” *ExpTim* 117 (2006): 487–95.

<sup>12</sup> Hartog, *Polycarp’s Epistle*, 40–5.

Tertullian, *Ad uxorem*

*Latin Text*

Quantum detrahant fidei, quantum obstrepant sanctitati nuptiae secundae, disciplina ecclesiae et praescriptio apostoli declarant, cum digamos non sinit praesidere, cum uiduam adlegi in ordinem nisi uniuiram non concedit. Aram enim Dei mundam proponi oportet.<sup>13</sup> Tota illa ecclesiae candida de sanctitate describitur.<sup>14</sup>

Sacerdotium<sup>15</sup> uiduitatis et caelibatum<sup>16</sup> est apud nationes, pro diaboli scilicet aemulatione. Regem saeculi, pontificem maximum, rursus nubere nefas est. Quantum Deo sanctitas placet, cum illam etiam inimicus affectat, non utique ut alicuius boni affinis, sed ut Dei Domini placita cum contumelia affectans. (Tertullian, *Ux.* 1.7.4–5)<sup>17</sup>

*Manuscript Tradition*

The manuscript tradition for Tertullian's corpus is complicated and extensive.<sup>18</sup> Of the five collections of his work known to us, *Ad uxorem* (*Ux.*) has been preserved in two of them: the *Corpus Agobardinum*, and the *Corpus Cluniacense*.<sup>19</sup> The *Corpus Agobardinum* is extant in a sole witness, the ninth century *Codex Agobardinus* (A), although scholars generally date the original assemblage of the corpus to sometime in the fifth century. While it originally contained

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<sup>13</sup> The edition of Munier that I have used here differs occasionally from the CSEL edition, which is also commonly used (see below, n.17). I have noted differences (excluding differences in editorial decisions regarding punctuation) in the footnotes. Here, the sentence order is reversed in the CSEL edition: *Tota illa...* is followed by *Aram enim...*

<sup>14</sup> The CSEL edition has *conscribitur* instead of *describitur*.

<sup>15</sup> The CSEL edition begins with a possible *<Ceteram ut>* preceding *sacerdotium*.

<sup>16</sup> This word is confused in the manuscript tradition; the CSEL edition has *caelibalium*.

<sup>17</sup> I have used the Latin edition of Charles Munier, *Tertullian: A son épouse*, SC 273 (Paris: Cerf, 1980). Munier's edition is slightly different in a couple of places from the CSEL Latin edition, which is the edition on which the commonly-cited ACW English translation of 1951 was based. CSEL: Emil Kroymann, *Quinti Septimi Florentis Tertulliani Opera*, vol. 2.2, CSEL 70 (Vienna: Hoelder-Pichler-Tempsky; Leipzig: Becker & Erler, 1942). ACW: William P. Le Saint, *Tertullian: Treatises on Marriage and Remarriage*, ACW 13 (New York: Newman, 1951).

<sup>18</sup> The information on manuscripts and manuscript families contained in the following paragraphs is derived from Munier, *Tertullian*, 64–70, as well as “The Text Tradition (An introduction to and overview of the manuscripts),” The Tertullian Project, <http://www.tertullian.org/manuscripts/>.

<sup>19</sup> Munier, *Tertullian*, 64.

twenty-one works by Tertullian, the manuscript is incomplete and now contains only thirteen. *Ad uxorem* is present in its entirety, contained between *De cultu feminarum* and *De exhortatione castitatis*.<sup>20</sup>

The *Corpus Cluniacense* is the main family of Tertullian manuscripts, at its fullest containing twenty-one or twenty-two works (in twenty-eight ‘books’) in two volumes. This family has the most extant witnesses, most of them late (post-fourteenth century) copies of earlier manuscripts. It may have originated in Spain in the sixth or seventh century in the milieu of Isidore of Seville, although the oldest manuscripts date to the eleventh century (and do not contain *Ux.*). *Cluniacense* is itself divided into two branches,  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$ . The two oldest witnesses of  $\alpha$  do not contain *Ux.*, but a fifteenth century manuscript, which has been demonstrated to descend from one of the two oldest, does. This fifteenth century manuscript, known as N, is the only surviving complete witness to the  $\alpha$  branch, and consists of two parts contained in one volume with a total of 22 works.<sup>21</sup> *Ad uxorem* is contained in the second part, between *De exhortatione castitatis* and *De monogamia*.<sup>22</sup> The  $\beta$  branch descends from a manuscript (*Codex Hirsaugensis*, believed to be twelfth century) now lost, but which was used in part for the first printed edition of Tertullian’s works by Beatus Rhenanus in 1521. In addition to the *editio princeps*, two manuscripts (F and X, both fifteenth century) are considered the most important witnesses for this branch.<sup>23</sup> In all of these *Ux.* occurs between *De cultu feminarum* and *De fuga in persecutione*.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> *Codex Florentinus Magliabechianus Conv. Soppr. I.VI.9*, also designated as *Florentinus BNC* (Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale) *Conv. Soppr. J.6.9*.

<sup>22</sup> Munier, *Tertullian*, 65.

<sup>23</sup> F: *Codex Florentinus Magliabechianus Conv. Soppr. I.VI.10*, also designated as *Florentinus BNC* (Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale) *Conv. Soppr. J.6.10*. X: *Codex Luxemburgensis* 75.

The Latin text I employ here, that of Charles Munier in the Sources chrétiennes series (1980), is established from a collation of witnesses A, N, F, and X, as well as early printed editions.<sup>24</sup> While A is considered a witness of the highest value, it also contains a number of lacunae and intelligible passages, and Munier turns to the collection of Cluniac mss to complete and correct the problems of A. When the Cluniac witnesses diverge, Munier typically judges the reading of N to be best, although occasionally he judges that shared by F and X to be better. In general, Munier observes that A and N share a number of readings that differ from those shared by F and X.<sup>25</sup> Thankfully, the passage under consideration here is relatively free of textual variations, and those present are generally minor and do not affect the sense of the passage.<sup>26</sup>

#### *Attribution and Date*

Despite the late date of the extant manuscripts (a problem afflicting Tertullian's entire corpus), scholars have not questioned the attribution of *Ux*. The location of composition—Carthage—is similarly not in dispute. Scholarly consensus judges *Ux*. to have been written during Tertullian's "Catholic" period, but with little in the text to point to a specific date, the date range generally agreed upon for possible composition is 193–206 CE.<sup>27</sup> As was the case with *Phil.*, here too the precise date of the text has little to no impact on our analysis.

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<sup>24</sup> Munier, *Tertullian*, 66.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 66–68.

<sup>26</sup> With, perhaps, one notable exception: in 1.7.4, where A preserves *uiduam adlegi in ordinem* (followed by Munier in his edition, and Kroymann in the CSEL edition), the Cluniac corpus and the earliest printed editions have *uiduam adlegi in ordinationem*. Whether or not this is a significant variation would depend on how Tertullian uses *ordo* and *ordinatio* in the rest of his corpus, and whether or not *ordinatio* had come to mean ordination as a member of the clergy.

<sup>27</sup> Munier, *Tertullian*, 9; Le Saint, *Tertullian*, 8.

*Greek Text*

Καὶ γὰρ θυσιαστήριον ἀναίμακτον εἶναι παρεδόθη θεοῦ τὸ ἄθροισμα τῶν ἀγνῶν. Οὕτως μέγα τι χρῆμα καὶ ἔνδοξον ἢ παρθενία φαίνεται. Διὸ δὴ καὶ ἄχραντον αὐτὴν καὶ καθαρὰν πάντη φυλακτέον, μηδὲν κοινωνοῦσαν ταῖς σαρκὸς ἀκαθαρσίαις, ἀλλ' ἔσω «κατὰ πρόσωπον τοῦ μαρτυρίου» σοφία κεχρυσωμένην εἰς τὰ ἅγια τῶν ἀγίων ἰδρῦσθαι τὴν εὐωδίαν τῆς ἀγάπης ἀναθυμιῶσαν κυρίῳ. «Ποιήσεις» γὰρ «μοι», φησί, μετὰ τὸ θυσιαστήριον τὸ περικεχαλωμένον—εἰς ὃ τὰ ὀλοκαυτώματα ἀνεκομίζοντο καὶ αἱ προσφοραὶ—ἄλλο «θυσιαστήριον ἐξ ἀσήπτων ξύλων», «καὶ καταχρυσώσεις αὐτὸ χρυσίῳ», «καὶ δώσεις αὐτὸ ἀπέναντι τοῦ καταπετάσματος τοῦ ἐπὶ τῆς κιβωτοῦ τοῦ μαρτυρίου» κατὰ «πρόσωπον τοῦ ἰλαστηρίου», ὃ ἐστὶν «ἐπὶ τῶν μαρτυρίων», «ἐν οἷς γνωσθήσομαι σοὶ ἐκεῖ. Καὶ θυμιάσει ἐπ' αὐτοῦ Ἰαρών θυμίαμα κυρίῳ ἀρωμάτων ἐν πρωΐ, ὅτε ἀγαθὴν τοὺς λύχνους· θυμιάσει ἐπ' αὐτοῦ θυμίαμα διαπαντὸς ἔναντι κυρίου εἰς τὰς γενεὰς ὑμῶν. Οὐκ ἀνοίσεται ἐπ' αὐτοῦ θυμίαμα ἀλλότριον καὶ ὀλοκαύτωμα· θυσίαν καὶ σπονδὴν οὐ σπείσεται ἐπ' αὐτοῦ.» (Methodius, *Symp.* 5.6.24–41)<sup>28</sup>

Ἰουδαῖοι μὲν γὰρ τὰ ἡμέτερα προανεφώνησαν, ἡμεῖς δὲ τὰ οὐράνια προαγγέλλομεν, ἐπειδήπερ ἡ μὲν σκηνὴ σύμβολον ἦν τῆς ἐκκλησίας, ἡ δὲ ἐκκλησία | τῶν οὐρανῶν. Διὸ τούτων οὕτως ἐχόντων καὶ τῆς σκηνῆς ἐν τύπῳ τῆς ἐκκλησίας, ὡς ἔφην, λαμβανομένης χρῆ καὶ τὰ θυσιαστήρια σύνθημά τι τῶν κατὰ τὴν ἐκκλησίαν πραγμάτων φέρειν, καὶ τὸ μὲν περικεχαλωμένον ἀπεικάζεσθαι τῇ γερουσίᾳ καὶ τῷ περιβόλῳ τῶν χηρῶν—θεοῦ γὰρ εἰσιν ἔμψυχος βωμὸς εἰς ὃν ἀνακομίζοντες τοὺς μόσχους καὶ τὰς δεκάτας καὶ τὰ ἐκουσία θυσίας τελοῦμεν κυρίῳ—τὸ δὲ περίχρυσον θυσιαστήριον ἔνδον ἐν τοῖς ἀγίοις τῶν ἀγίων ἀνακείμενον κατὰ πρόσωπον τοῦ μαρτυρίου, εἰς ὃ ἀπείρηται θυσίαν καὶ σπονδὴν ἀναφέρεσθαι, ταῖς ἐν παρθενίᾳ παραβλητέον τῷ ἀκηράτῳ χρυσοῦ τὰ ἄσηπτα συνουσίας σώματα κατησφαλισμέναις.

Δύο γὰρ τὰ εἰς ἔπαινον θρυλλοῦνται χρυσοῦ, ὅτι τε ἰὸν οὐ παραδέχεται καὶ τὴν χροιάν ταῖς ἡλίου μετριῶς παραπλησιάζειν φαντάζεται βολαῖς· σύμβολον δὲ εἰκότως ἄρα τοῦτο τῆς ἀγνείας τῆς μὴ προσειμένης ἐστὶ κηλῖδα καὶ σπῖλον ἀλλὰ τῷ φωτὶ καταστραπτομένης αἰεὶ τοῦ λόγου.

Διὸ καὶ ἔνδον εἰς τὰ ἅγια τῶν ἀγίων ἔστηκε πλησιέστερον καὶ ἔμπροσθεν τοῦ πετάσματος ἀχράντοις χερσὶ θυμιαμάτων δίκην τὰς προσευχὰς ἀναπεμπάζουσα<sup>29</sup> κυρίῳ δεκτὰς εἰς «ὀσμὴν εὐωδίας», καθὼς καὶ Ἰοάννης ἐμήνυσε, τὰ θυμιάματα τὰ ἐν ταῖς φιάλαις τῶν εἰκοσιτεσσάρων πρεσβυτέρων προσευχὰς ἀγίων εἶναι φράσας. (Methodius, *Symp.* 5.8.1–25)

<sup>28</sup> I have used the Greek edition of Herbert Musurillo, *Méthode D'Olympe: Le banquet*, trans. Victor-Henry Debidour, SC 95 (Paris: Cerf, 1963).

<sup>29</sup> This word (*ἀναπεμπάζουσα*), present in the principal manuscripts used by Musurillo, was per Musurillo changed to *ἀναπέμπουσα* by Bonwetsch in his earlier edition of the text. In my translation in chapter 3 I translated Bonwetsch's alteration (as did Musurillo in his own English translation of the text). The manuscript reading would mean something like "counting over again."

### *Manuscript Tradition*

The *Symposium* (*Symp.*) is the only one of Methodius's extant works preserved in near-entirety in its original Greek. The attribution of the text to Methodius has not to my knowledge been challenged, although relatively little can be said with certainty about its author (see below). As was the case with both *Phil.* and *Ux.*, the available manuscripts of the *Symp.* are all quite late. While Methodius likely composed the work in the later third century CE, the oldest extant manuscript dates to the eleventh century, and the earliest quotation is found in Andreas of Caesarea's circa 614 CE *Commentary on the Apocalypse* (itself with oldest manuscripts dating to the twelfth century).<sup>30</sup>

The task of reconstructing the text of the *Symp.* is "a very difficult one, even if we rely on the earliest extant sources and manuscripts leaving all copies out of account."<sup>31</sup> In his critical edition, Musurillo lists nine extant manuscripts as principle sources of the text,<sup>32</sup> along with quotations found in Andreas of Caesarea and two sets of quotations that derive from Andreas (Arethas of Caesarea's late-ninth or early-tenth century *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, and a work of the same name by Pseudo-Oecumenius, judged to be an abridgment of Andreas's earlier work). Also of note for the reconstruction of the text are quotations preserved in the eighth

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<sup>30</sup> Information regarding the manuscript tradition in this and following paragraphs is taken from Herbert Musurillo, *St. Methodius: The Symposium: A Treatise on Chastity*, ACW 27 (New York: Newman, 1958), 23–30, as well as from Musurillo, *Méthode*, 31–38. Musurillo's introduction to the SC edition is largely a translation into French of his introduction to the ACW volume. His ACW translation of *Symp.* is based upon his own edition of the Greek text, although that edition was not published until five years after the publication of the ACW translation, with the publication of the SC edition.

<sup>31</sup> Musurillo, *Methodius*, 28.

<sup>32</sup> The manuscripts are: P (*Patmiacus graecus* 202, 11<sup>th</sup> cent.); O (*Ottobonianus graecus* 59, 14<sup>th</sup> cent.); B (*Barberinus graecus* 427, 16<sup>th</sup>/17<sup>th</sup> cent.); M (*Parisinus graecus* 946, 16<sup>th</sup> cent.); V (*Vaticanus graecus* 1451, 15<sup>th</sup>/16<sup>th</sup> cent.); Sin. (*Sinaiticus graecus* 1139, 17<sup>th</sup> cent.); Barb. (*Barberinus graecus* 463, 1623/44 CE); Ath. (*Atheniensis Bib. Nat.* 391, 17<sup>th</sup> cent.); and Vall. (*Valllicellianus* 119.2, 16<sup>th</sup>/17<sup>th</sup> cent.).

century *Sacra Parallela*, and Photius's ninth century *Bibliotheca*, as well as a quite small (and relatively insignificant) Syriac fragment.<sup>33</sup>

Photius records that the *Symp.* "has been extensively tampered with: you can find Arian passages interpolated in it as well as sections inserted from other authors."<sup>34</sup> Photius's quotations often do not resemble the text preserved in the manuscripts, leading to the hypothesis that at some point (perhaps in the fourth century CE) two different editions of the *Symp.*, one "orthodox" and the other "Arian," were developed.<sup>35</sup> Whether or not this was the case, all of the other principle sources for the text, including all of the extant manuscripts, are believed to derive from the "orthodox" edition. Of the nine extant manuscripts, two—O and P—are considered the oldest and most significant, and the other seven are all judged to be copies descended from these two. Musurillo's critical edition is based chiefly on O, with weight also given to P (particularly after O breaks off at the beginning of discourse nine) and the quotations contained in Photius, Andreas, and Arethas.<sup>36</sup>

### *Attribution and Date*

Although (or perhaps because) the manuscript tradition of the *Symposium* is meager, scholars have not raised any major concerns regarding the attribution or date of the text.<sup>37</sup>

Methodius of Olympus is generally regarded to have been the author of the text, which is

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<sup>33</sup> Musurillo, *Methodius*, 25–28.

<sup>34</sup> *Bibliotheca* cod. 237, quoted in Musurillo, *Methodius*, 25.

<sup>35</sup> Although Musurillo notes that Photius "quotes nothing that could be stigmatized as definitely of Arian provenance, and our problem is made all the more complicated by the suspicion that Photius may have been quoting from two different editions of the text, one the Arian and the other the 'Orthodox.'" (*Methodius*, 25).

<sup>36</sup> Musurillo, *Methodius*, 28, slightly differently stated in Musurillo, *Méthode*, 37.

<sup>37</sup> Alexander Brill, "Plato and the Symptotic Form in the *Symposium* of St. Methodius of Olympus," *ZAC* 9 (2006): 279–302 at 281.



typically dated to some time in the middle to late third century CE. Unfortunately beyond these general characterizations we can say relatively little about the text or its author that will help to ground our consideration of his use of the language of widows as altar. Herbert Musurillo tells us that almost nothing can be said about Methodius's life with any certainty: "the author of the *Symposium* was undoubtedly a Christian teacher, and perhaps a bishop and martyr, who was familiar with certain localities in Lycia (such as Patara, Olympus and Termessus) and flourished in the latter half of the third century. Beyond this meager statement, I feel, it is very difficult to go."<sup>38</sup>

### Didascalia apostolorum

#### *Reference One*

#### *Latin Text*

Primus vero sacerdos vobis e[s]t Levita episcopus; hic est, qui verbum vobis ministrat, et mediator vester est; hic est rex vester potens; hic est magister et post deum per aquam regenerans pater vester. Hic locum dei sequens sicuti deus honoretur a vobis, quoniam episcopus in typum dei praesidet vobis. Diaconus autem in typum Christi adstat; ergo diligatur a vobis. Diaconissa vero in typum sancti spiritus honoretur a vobis. Praesbyteri etiam in typum apostolorum sperentur a vobis; viduae et orfani in typum altaris putentur autem a vobis. Sicuti ergo non licebat eum, qui non erat Levita, offerre aliquid aut accedere ad altarem sine sacerdote, ita et vos sine episcopo nolite aliquid facere. (DA 9; 2.26.4–27.1)<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Musurillo, *Methodius*, 5. Lycia was a province on the southern coast of what is now Turkey.

<sup>39</sup> I have employed Erik Tidner's edition of the Verona Palimpsest for all Latin passages, while comparing also to the editions of R. Hugh Connolly and Franz Xaver Funk. Erik Tidner, *Didascaliae apostolorum, canonum ecclesiasticorum, traditiones apostolicae, versiones Latinae*, TUGAL 75 (Berlin: Akademie, 1963). R. Hugh Connolly, *Didascalia Apostolorum: The Syriac Version Translated and Accompanied by the Verona Latin Fragments With an Introduction and Notes* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1929). Franz Xaver Funk, *Didascalia et constitutiones apostolorum*, 2 vols. (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schoeningh, 1905). See above, p.148 n.5, regarding my citation practices for the DA.

## Reference Two

### Greek Fragments

ουκ [ουν δει  
ουτε γυναι[κας διδασ  
καλους ειν[αι μαλισ  
τα περι το[υ ονομα  
τος κυ<sup>40</sup> και τ[ου <λυτη>  
ρειου παθ[ους αυτου·  
Ου γαρ πατα[κεισθε ω  
γυναικες [εις το δι  
δασκειν κ[αι μαλισ  
τα αι χηραι [αλλα μο  
νον θν<sup>41</sup> π[ροσαιτειν·

κα[ι γαρ αυτος ο διδασ  
καλος <οτε>] ημας [τους  
δωδεκα ε]πεμψεν  
μαθητε]υσαι τον λα  
ον και τ]α εθνη συν  
ημιν <εξε>]λων και μα  
θητριας].· μαριαν την  
μαγδαλ]ινην και μα  
ριαν ια]κωβου και  
την σαλω]μην· ου συν  
εξεπε]μψεν αυτας  
ημιν μα]θητευειν η  
<σωζειν> τον κοσμον.  
ει γαρ η]ν αναγκεον  
διδασκ]ειν γυναικας  
αυτος α]ν ημων ο δι  
δασκαλ]ος ταυταις  
εκελευ]σεν συν ημιν  
κατηχ]ειν  
γνωριζ]ετω ουν η  
χηρα ο]τι θυσιαστη  
ριον ες]τιν θυ<sup>42</sup> και

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<sup>40</sup> *Nomen sacrum*

<sup>41</sup> *Nomen sacrum*

<sup>42</sup> *Nomen sacrum*

καθησθ]ω εν τη οικια  
αυτη]ς μη μετα  
τινος προφας]εως<sup>43</sup> (DA 15; 3.6.1–4)<sup>44</sup>

### *Reference Three*

#### *Latin Text*

Simili ratione et earum viduarum qu<a>e tales sunt clusi sunt oculi cordis, ut non sedentes intus in domos suas adloquantur dom<inum>, sed discurrunt ad exinventionem lucri et per verboritates, quae adversarii sunt desideria, agunt. Quae talis ergo est vidua non est conlegata altario Christi, quoniam scriptum est in evangelio: “Duo si convenerint in unum et dixerint monti huic: ‘Tolle et mitte te in mari’, fiet.” Videmus ergo aliquantas viduas non convenire, quia non in petrant, cum petant. (DA 15; 3.7.1–3)

### *Reference Four*

#### *Greek of the Apostolic Constitutions*

Ὅμοίως καὶ ἡ λαβοῦσα χήρα τὸ ἔλεος συμπροσευχέσθω τῷ διδόντι αὐτῇ τὴν διακονίαν.  
Ἡ μέντοι εὖ ποιοῦσα ἀποκρυψάτω τὸ οἰκεῖον ὄνομα ὡς σοφή, μὴ σαλπίζουσα ἔμπροσθεν αὐτῆς, ἵνα γένηται ἡ ἐλεημοσύνη ἐν κρυπτῷ πρὸς θεόν, καθὼς φησιν ὁ Κύριος, ὅτι· «Σοῦ δὲ ποιοῦντος τὴν ἐλεημοσύνην, μὴ γνώτω ἡ ἀριστερά σου τί ποιεῖ ἡ δεξιὰ σου, ὅπως ἢ σου ἡ ἐλεημοσύνη ἐν τῷ κρυπτῷ.» Καὶ ἡ χήρα προσευχέσθω ὑπὲρ τοῦ δεδωκότος, ὅστις ποτ’ ἂν ἦ, ἅγιον θυσιαστήριον θεοῦ ὑπαρχουσα, καὶ ὁ πατήρ ὁ βλέπων ἐν τῷ κρυπτῷ ἀποδώσει τῷ εὖ ποιήσαντι ἐν τῷ φανερῷ. (Const. ap. 3.13.2–14.1;<sup>45</sup> corresponding to DA 15; 3.10.6–7)

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<sup>43</sup> The fragment becomes illegible at this point for several lines, but picks up again for nine more lines before ending.

<sup>44</sup> J. Vernon Bartlet, “Fragments of the *Didascalia Apostolorum* in Greek,” *JTS* 18 (1917): 301–9. I have followed Bartlet’s edition, including the lack of breath marks and accents. Anything occurring before a ] or after a [ is not present in the fragments; Bartlet reconstructed it from the Greek of the Const. ap. and Funk’s Latin translation of the Syriac of the DA. Underlining indicates a reading Bartlet judged to be unique to the fragments (not contained in the Const. ap. or the DA). Words or fragments contained in <> are plausibly supplied by Bartlet based on other sources or context.

<sup>45</sup> I have used the edition of Marcel Metzger, *Les constitutions apostoliques*, 3 vols., SC 320, 329, 336 (Paris: Cerf, 1985–7).

### *Reference Five*

#### *Latin Text*

Si enim in orfanitate constitutus est aut in paupertate aut per senectutis defectionem aut propter <a>egritudinis infirmitatem aut propter filiorum, quia multi sunt, nutrimenta accipit, qui talis, inquit, est et laudabitur; altaris enim dei deputatus est a deo et honorabitur, quoniam sine dubitatione pro his, qui dant illi, frequenter orat et non otiose accipiebat sed pro id, quod dabatur illi, mercis <tantum per orationem reddebat,> quantum virtus illius admittebat. Hii igitur in aeterna vita a deo beatificabuntur. (DA 17; 4.3.3)

### *Reference Six*

#### *Latin Text*

Episcopi ergo et diacones, observate altario Christi, id est viduis et orfanis, cum omni diligentia, curam facientes de his, q<uae> accipiuntur, cum scrupulositate, qualis est ille, qui dat, aut illa, quae dat, ut adescuntur. Iterum adq<ue> iterum dicimus, quoniam altare de laboribus iustitiae accipere debet... (DA 18; 4.5.1–2; Latin manuscript breaks off at this point, reference continues in Syriac through 4.5.3)

### *Reference Seven*

#### *Greek of the Apostolic Constitutions*

Περίιστασθε οὖν τὰς τοιαύτας διακονίας ὡς ἄλλαγμα κυνὸς καὶ μίσθωμα πόρνης· ἐκάτερα γὰρ τοῖς νόμοις ἀπηγόρευεται. Οὔτε γὰρ Ἐλισσαῖος τὰ παρὰ τοῦ Ἀζαήλ προσκομισθέντα ἐδέξατο, οὔτε Ἀχίας τὰ παρὰ τοῦ Ἱεροβοάμ· εἰ δὲ οἱ τοῦ θεοῦ προφηῆται τὰ παρὰ τῶν ἀσεβῶν οὐ προσήκαντο ξένια, δίκαιον μῆτε ὑμᾶς, ὧ ἐπίσκοποι. Ἀλλὰ καὶ Σίμων ὁ μάγος ἐμοὶ Πέτρῳ καὶ Ἰωάννῃ χρήματα προσενεγκῶν ἐπειρᾶτο ὠνητὴν τὴν ἀτίμητον χάριν λήψεσθαι· ἅπερ μὴ προσηκάμενοι ἀραῖς αἰωνίοις αὐτὸν ἐδησάμεθα, ὅτι τὴν δωρεὰν τοῦ θεοῦ οὐκ εὐνοία τῇ πρὸς θεόν, ἀλλὰ χρημάτων ἐναλλαγῇ ἐνόμισεν κτᾶσθαι. Φεύγετε οὖν τὰς δυσσυνειδήτους εἰς τὸ θυσιαστήριον τοῦ θεοῦ εἰσφοράς· «Ἀπεχε γάρ, φησὶν, ἀπὸ ἀδίκου, καὶ οὐ φοβηθήσῃ καὶ τρόμος οὐκ ἐγγιεῖ σοι. » (Const. ap. 4.7.1–3; corresponds roughly to DA 18; 4.7.1–3)

#### *Manuscript Traditions and Text History*

The Didascalia apostolorum (DA) is generally regarded as one of the oldest of the existing church orders. It was almost certainly originally composed in Greek, but only a fragment

of one Greek manuscript survives, likely dating to the fifth or early sixth century CE.<sup>46</sup> The Apostolic Constitutions (Const. ap.), the first six books of which are largely a duplication (with alterations and expansions) of the DA, offers us the possibility of that some of the Greek of the DA has been preserved, but scholars are somewhat skeptical that the Greek of the Const. ap. is faithful to the precise Greek of the DA.<sup>47</sup> The Didascalia apostolorum is preserved in its entirety only in a Syriac translation from the Greek, extant in multiple manuscripts, the oldest dating to the eighth century.<sup>48</sup> Approximately two-fifths of the DA are also preserved in a very literal Latin translation from the Greek.<sup>49</sup> This translation is extant in the Verona Palimpsest, a portion of a collection of church orders dating to the late fifth century which was preserved in an eighth century codex of the *Sententiae* of Isidore of Seville.<sup>50</sup> Happily for us, many of the references to

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<sup>46</sup> Bartlet, “Fragments,” 301.

<sup>47</sup> The Const. ap., which consists of eight ‘books,’ is preserved in Greek and generally dated to the late fourth century CE. The first six books are typically regarded as being duplications, with modifications and enlargements, of much of the DA (the seventh book contains a version of the Didache, and the eighth a version of the Apostolic Tradition commonly attributed to Hippolytus). For an extensive exploration of the tangled relationships of the various church orders to one another, see Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and Methods for the Study of Early Liturgy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 73–97.

<sup>48</sup> Arthur Vööbus, *The Didascalia Apostolorum in Syriac*, 4 vols., CSCO 401–2, 407–8; ScrSyr 175–6, 179–80 (Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1979), 401:13\*. See Ibid., 11\*–69\*, for extensive descriptions and discussions of the extant Syriac manuscripts. As I do not work directly from the Syriac in this project, I will omit listing all of the Syriac manuscripts here.

<sup>49</sup> Both R. Hugh Connolly and Arthur Vööbus, two principal scholars of the DA who published editions and translations of it in the twentieth century, note that the Syriac translator(s) faced the challenge of translating the Greek into a Semitic language with a very different morphology. The translator(s) made an effort to render the text in appropriate Syriac idiom, resulting in a translation that cannot be described as literal. In contrast, the translator(s) into Latin had the advantage of working with a language of a morphology similar to Greek, and they seem to have made a particular effort to stay as close to the Greek as possible, occasionally even deviating from ‘proper’ Latin structures in order to more closely replicate the Greek. These two versions thus provide useful complements to one another; the Syriac a “very good and intelligent, though not by any means a literal, translation;” the Latin in contrast “studiously literal” and “often reflect[ing] a Greek influence.” Connolly, *Didascalia*, xvi, xix; see also Vööbus, *Didascalia*, 402:25\*, 29\*.

<sup>50</sup> The manuscript of the *Sententiae* contains 99 leaves, of which 41 are palimpsest. Scholars believe the full codex from which the palimpsest was taken was 104 leaves, of which the majority—an estimated 86 leaves—belonged to the DA. 32 of these 86 leaves are preserved in the Palimpsest; The remaining nine preserved leaves belong to the Apostolic Church Order and the Apostolic Tradition. Vööbus, *Didascalia*, 402: 28\*–30\*; Connolly, *Didascalia*, xviii).

widows as altars are preserved in both the Syriac and the Latin, and the existing Greek fragment also preserves a portion of one reference.

Scholars typically date the composition of the DA to the third century CE, likely the first half, with the translations to Latin and Syriac both occurring in the fourth century. Both R. Hugh Connolly and Arthur Vööbus concur that comparisons of the Latin and Syriac of the DA with each other and with the Greek of the Const. ap. suggest that the text of the DA is well preserved and “suffered no serious modification during the fourth century.”<sup>51</sup> The DA claims the authorship of the apostles meeting in Jerusalem as described in Acts 15, but no scholars regard this to be an accurate attribution. Nothing can be said with any certainty about the DA’s actual author(s) and/or redactors, except to say that they likely lived in the early- to mid-third century CE. Given the text’s early translation to Syriac many scholars locate its composition in Syria, perhaps in a city such as Antioch or Edessa.<sup>52</sup>

In his 2009 introduction to and translation of the DA, Alistair Stewart-Sykes developed a detailed and complex theory regarding multiple sources for, and redactions of, the text.<sup>53</sup> According to Stewart-Sykes, the DA’s concern to restrict the authority of widows when it comes to teaching and baptizing, and its concern to control charity received by widows and promote the authority of bishops, come from two different redactional levels. Stewart-Sykes’s theory does bring to the fore the interesting question of how the text of the DA as we have it now might

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<sup>51</sup> Assuming that the modifications of the Const. ap. were introduced by the Const. ap.’s own compiler. Connolly, *Didascalia*, xx; Vööbus, *Didascalia*, 402:32\*.

<sup>52</sup> Connolly, *Didascalia*, lxxxvii–lxxxviii. See also Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, “The *Didascalia Apostolorum*: A Mishnah for the Disciples of Jesus,” *JECS* 9 (2001): 483–509 at 487–8; Michael Penn, “‘Bold and Having No Shame:’ Ambiguous Widows, Controlling Clergy, and Early Syrian Communities,” *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 4 (2001): 159–185 at 162.

<sup>53</sup> This is largely contra Connolly, who firmly sees the text as a unity (*Didascalia*, xxxvi), but similar in some ways to Vööbus, who sees in the manuscript tradition of the DA two principal recensions, one earlier than the other (*Didascalia*, 402: 43\*–67\*). Alistair Stewart-Sykes, *The Didascalia Apostolorum: An English Version*, STT 1 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), 7–89, esp. 11–48.

contain within itself shifting concerns reflective of different time periods and authors / redactors. However, to my mind his theory contains perhaps more certainty and detail than is warranted by the evidence. For the purposes of this project, which focuses on the ways in which the portrait of widows as altar is deployed throughout the text as a whole, the question of whether the text had one or multiple authors or redactors need not make a difference.

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