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No Lack of Gain: A Biblical Theology of Feminine Generosity

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NO LACK OF GAIN
A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF FEMININE GENEROSITY

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To Norman, who generously gives me good things.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
ANE	Ancient Near East
BDAG	*Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.
BDB	Francis Brown et al. *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*. Peabody, Mass., Hendrickson, 2008.
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
BLS	Bible and Literature Series
BST	Bible Speaks Today
CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
ConcC	Concordia Commentary
ICC	International Critical Commentary
JCA	*Journal of Consumer Affairs*
JSOTSup	*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement*
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary Series
OTL	Old Testament Library
TDNT	*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary

ABSTRACT

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This thesis traces a biblical theology of feminine generosity. The capable wife of Prov. 31:10–31 sets an Old Testament paradigm, which is inhabited and enlarged by women in the New Testament. The thesis considers the women who supported Jesus’ ministry (Luke 8:1–3); the widow and her mites (Luke 21:1–4); Mary’s anointing of Jesus (John 12:1–8); and Tabitha caring for the widows (Acts 9:36–42). Throughout these profiles, a picture emerges of women who make essential contributions to the mission and work of Christ as agents of generosity that is derivative, expressive, contextual, intemperate, and Christocentric, always flowing from and returning to Christ.

CHAPTER ONE

DEFINING GENEROSITY

Current Status of the Question

The ascendency of gender-studies in recent decades has accelerated the number of works that focus on issues of gender in the biblical corpus. Standard works such as *Biblical Foundations for Manhood and Womanhood* and *Discovering Biblical Equality* dialogue about the relationship between the genders, offering complementarian or egalitarian treatments respectively. These works make valuable contributions, but their purview is wide and their methodology systematic.

Other works have taken a biblical theological approach, such as Andreas and Margaret Köstenberger's book, *God's Design for Man and Woman.* Some authors, such as Tikva Frymer-Kensky in *Reading the Women of the Bible*, narrow the focus exclusively to women, but the treatment still proceeds on a macro-level.

Numerous scholars have explored economics in the Bible, both with systematic[1] and biblical theological[2] approaches. Specific considerations, such as Jesus'[3] or Paul's[4] relation to the economic system of their day, receive treatment, but a gendered perspective is not illuminated.

Gift and patronage is a well-developed area of scholarship. Ancient treatment in Seneca's *De Beneficiis* and modern monographs recognize that there is both a relational and economic dimension to a transfer of goods, whether paid or unpaid. Marcel Mauss' seminal sociological

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[1] E.g. Albino Barrera, *Biblical Economic Ethics* (Lanham, MA: Lexington, 2013).

[2] Walter Bruggemann, *Money and Possessions* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2016).

[3] Douglas E. Oakman, *Jesus and the Economic Questions of His Day*, vol. 8, Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1986).

[4] David E. Briones, *Paul's Financial Policy*, vol. 494, Library of New Testament Studies (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).

essay *The Gift* undergirds much of current scholarship. John Barclay applied patronage studies to the Pauline epistles, concluding that Paul's use of χάρις operates within the contemporary milieu of benefaction. Within patronage scholarship, some even offer niche confessional considerations, such as Risto Saarinen's compilation *Luther and the Gift*.

Specific themes of women and generosity are studied exegetically as they arise,[5] but such treatments remain isolated in their specific context.

The Thesis in the Context of Current Scholarship

The proposed thesis fills a gap in scholarship by presenting a biblical theology of female generosity as seen through didactic and narrative passages in scripture. Scripture reflects that abundant, unencumbered giving directed outward to the benefit of others is rooted in the character of God. As a result of His beneficent work, such generosity is mirrored in God's people, including women.

While adjacent to gift and patronage studies, this thesis will not utilize a framework of benefaction or primarily address those complex dynamics.

This has significant pastoral implications for parish ministry. Although women regularly rate lower in financial literacy than men,[6] the biblical witness demonstrates that women not only have a place utilizing wealth, but that they ought to do so influenced by biblical principles. Christians are a people possessed by God, which transforms their relationship to their

[5] See, for example, Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, AB (London: Yale, 2009), 888–920; Roland E. Murphy, *Proverbs*, WBC 22 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 243–50; Andrew E. Steinmann, *Proverbs*, ConcC (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009), 627–45.

[6] Raquel Fonseca, et al, "What Explains the Gender Gap in Financial Literacy? The Role of Household Decision Making," *The Journal of Consumer Affairs* 46, no. 1 (2012): 90–106.

belongings. According to the biblical portrait, this metamorphosis extends to women and their possessions.

Establishing Definitions

In embarking on an exploration of generosity, it is proper to begin by defining terms. In doing so, however, there is an initial obstacle. While generosity is frequently described or assumed in scripture,[7] there is a paucity of specific lexical reference. Two key conceptions are seen.

First is the idea of favor. In our modern western context we tend to view generosity as transactional, while the ANE honor-shame culture situated it in the context of interpersonal relationships. When Jacob seeks to make amends with Esau, he sends an extravagant gift to solicit his brother's favor (Gen. 32:13–15). Esau's gracious reception bears such a striking resemblance to divine favor that Jacob reflects, "I have seen your face, which is like seeing the face of God" (Gen. 33:10). Jacob then urges his brother to accept the gift he has sent, saying, "Please accept my blessing that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me, and because I have enough." Favorable disposition overflows in bountiful gifts, first from God and then into our relationships with one another.

Second is the idea of sincerity. When one gives with ulterior motives of receiving something, it is not truly a gift. When one gives with no pretense, it is unadulterated generosity. Thus, Paul exhorts servants to give unreserved obedience to their masters, "not by way of eye-

[7] Proverbs, for example, is replete with extortions to generosity, however they are couched in counsel about everyday situations, not bald commands. See Prov. 14:21, 31; 19:6, 17.

service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord" (Col. 3:22).[8] Likewise, the apostle exhorts the Corinthian church to keep their giving untainted by reluctance or compulsion, but to give sincerely (2 Cor. 9:6–7).

Generosity is also expressed through idiom. At the king's joy at finding such a worthy bride as Esther, Ahasuerus hosts a feast, proclaims a tax holiday, and gives, as the ESV renders, "with royal generosity" (Esther 2:18). The idiom reflects royal largess, literally "according to *the hand* (bounty) *of the king.*"[9] In Jesus' parable, the landowner chides the laborers who are disgruntled at his charitable allocation of pay, saying "Do you begrudge my generosity?" Literally he asks, "is your eye evil because I am good?" (Matt. 20:15; cf. Prov. 22:9).

Turning to a standard English dictionary, Merriam-Webster defines generous as "liberal in giving : openhanded."[10] Indeed, openhanded is exactly how Moses enjoins Israel to respond to his brother's poverty: "If among you, one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns within your land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother,[8] but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be" (Deut. 15:7–8). Moses' description is concrete and corporeal: avoid an evil eye, a tight fist, and a hard heart. Rather, "You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor" (Deut. 15:11).

Generosity is liberal giving for another's benefit. The liberality is always seen in the

[8] Cf. Rom. 12:8; James 1:5. Of ἁπλότης, BDAG avers, "The interpretation generosity, liberality has frequently been proposed for Ro 12:8; 2 Cor 8:2; 9:11, *13 … but this sense (adopted by NRSV et al.) is in dispute, and it is prob. That mng. 1 in the sense of sincere concern, simple goodness is sufficient for all these pass." William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. ἁπλότης, 2.

[9] Francis Brown, Samuel Rolles Driver, and Charles Augustus Briggs, *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977), s.v יָד, 5.e.

[10] https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/generous Aug 12, 2022.

attitude of the giver and usually in the measure of the gift.

Genesis 1

God's generosity is foundational to scripture's portrait of the Godhead. It resounds through the opening narrative of creation. This is no addendum, but is integral to God's divine nature.[11] God is introduced as the good Creator and His creative work is typified by pattern and plenty given for the benefit of mankind.[12]

The creation account progresses from emptiness to abundance. Sufficient in Himself, God nevertheless chooses to create and does so incrementally and intentionally. The barrenness of the beginning is replaced by a verdant world teeming with life. Genesis 1:2 presents a bleak portrait of desolation and darkness: "The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep." The traditional translation of תֹּהוּ·and בֹּהוּ·treats each word as a separate idea.[13] It is preferable to understand this as an instance of hendiadys, particularly since בֹּהוּ only occurs

[11] When Martin Luther wishes to explain the first person of the Trinity in the first article of the Creed, he focuses on God as Creator and Giver. He states,

> I believe that God has made me and all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still takes care of them. He also gives me clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and children, land, animals, and all I have. He richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life. He defends me against all danger and guards and protects me from all evil. All this He does only out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me. For all this it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey Him.
>
> This is most certainly true.

Martin Luther, The Small Catechism, *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 354–55.

[12] The creation account builds to the apex of creation of man, celebrated in 1:27 with poetic outburst. Westermann argues that even the usage of the verbs בָּרָא and עָשָׂה point to the anthropocentricity of creation: "God made or created a world ruled by space and time, and living beings to inhabit it. These verbs indicate the creation of a world that is meant to be a living space for humankind, not the world in the sense of the universe," Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 87.

[13] The RSV and ESV render the phrase "without form and void." The KJV has the nearly identical, "without form, and void." NIV and HCSB translate "formless and empty," while NASB embellishes, "formless and desolate emptiness."

in collocation with תֹּהוּ.[14] The lexicon frankly states of תֹּהוּ that the "primary meaning [is] difficult to seize."[15] It is used of the primeval earth (Gen. 1:2; Isa. 45:18) and of judgment to return the earth to an undeveloped and chaotic state (Job 26:7; Isa. 24:11; 34:11; Jer. 4:23). Its usage extends to that which is empty, literally of deserts (Job 6:18; 12:24; Ps. 107:40) and figuratively of idols (1 Sam. 12:21; Isa. 41:29) or baseless arguments (Isa. 29:21; 59:4) and vanity (Isa. 40:17, 23). The picture in Gen. 1:2 is one of a wasteland, a primary feature of which is its hostility to life.[16] Into this vacuum, God efficaciously speaks. From barrenness to bounty, God generously fashions a world that is very good.

Three aspects of God's generosity can be seen in the creation account.

Autonomy

The biblical account stands in sharp contradistinction to the other ancient Near Eastern creation myths. In the cosmogonies of the day, god (or gods) often created through struggle.[17] YHWH does not need to war with other deities or labor to create the earth, He simply speaks. God's omnipotence enables His generosity. The other gods have limited power used for selfish purposes. God has unlimited power used for benevolent purposes. Gordon Wenham highlights a key difference between the Atrahasis Epic, Enuma Elish, and the Genesis account:

> Certainly Genesis gives man a very different place in the created order from that given him by oriental mythology. Man was according to this view created by the gods as an afterthought to supply the gods with food … Gen 1 paints a quite contrary

[14] Victor Hamilton nicely maintains the nominal character, translating "a desert and a wasteland," *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1–17,* NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 103. With typical vividness, Luther refers to the earth as "a shapeless lump," Martin Luther, *Luther's Commentary on Genesis*, trans. J. Theodore Muller (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), 1:9.

[15] BDB, s.v. תֹּהוּ.

[16] The language used of creation writ-large is later used of the nation of Israel. Just as God creates the earth as a nourishing habitation for mankind out of תֹּהוּ, so also when God found Israel in תֹּהוּ "he encircled him, he cared for him," giving him rich food (Deut. 32:10).

[17] See Westermann, *Genesis 1–11,* 28–29.

> picture. Man is the climax of creation, and instead of man providing the gods with food, God provided the plants as food for man. (1:29)[18]

YHWH does not need anything from man and that independence positions Him to be altruistic. He does not take from man, but generously provides for him, giving the sun and moon[19] for time and vegetation for food.

Order

When considering generosity, we often think first of tangible gifts. However, before God creates physical items, He crafts the necessary infrastructure. The Lord not only gives life in ample measure, He provides the context in which it can thrive.[20] God's generosity in the creation narrative is seen *both* in His ordering and abundance.

Genesis 1 reflects a parallelism of forming and filling. Victor Hamilton notes, "The pattern into which these creative acts fall provides even further evidence of the author's intention to describe the creation schematically."[21] Wenham's diagram showcases the correspondence with brevity and clarity:

Table 1: Days of Creation as Delineated by Wenham

Day 1	Light	Day 4	Luminaries
Day 2	Sky	Day 5	Birds and Fish

[18] Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, WBC (Waco: Word, 1987), xlix. Wenham also notes that because of his omnipotence, God is not threatened by man's presence and proliferation: "whereas after the flood the Mesopotamian deities looked for means to limit population growth, the LORD positively encouraged it. Noah, like Adam, was told, 'Be fruitful and multiply,'" *Genesis 1–15,* xlix.

[19] Wenham points out that there is a polemical thrust to this as well, as the biblical account "insists that the sun, moon, stars and sea monsters—powerful deities according to pagan mythology—are merely creatures," *Genesis 1–15*, xlix.

[20] Thus, Paul enjoins orderly worship practices on the grounds that "God is not a God of confusion but of peace" (1 Cor. 14:33).

[21] Hamilton, *Genesis 1–17*, 125.

Day 3	Land (Plants)	Day 6	Animals and Man (Plants for food)
Day 7		Sabbath[22]	

God separates the light from the dark (1:4), the terrestrial from the heavenly waters (1:6–7), and the waters from the sea (1:9), drawing each into its own realm.[23] Only then does He populate with luminaries and living things.

The ordering is both in creation's initial architecture and its ongoing activity as vegetation, fish, fowl, livestock, and critters all propagate not in a random pattern, but according to their kind (1:11–12, 21, 24–25). In a culminating act of ordering, the Godhead resolves to bring forth man "after our likeness," and gives him dominion over animals. Man is God's viceroy who is patterned after God and maintains God's pattern on earth.

Abundance

Having arranged the architecture of the universe for life, God is ready to fill it. And fill He does! God's generosity is evident in the diversity and plenty of creation. God lavishes life on the earth in a profusion of generosity.

As with the ordering, this is not only an initial endowment, but an ongoing imperative. Fish, fowl, and humans are blessed by God and invited to "be fruitful and multiply" filling the seas and the earth (Gen. 1:22, 28).

[22] Wenham, *Genesis 1–15,* 7.

[23] God's delineation is not limited to space, but extends to time as He orders chronology through the celestial bodies (1:14, 18). God further ordains time through instituting a pattern of Sabbath rest.

The creation narrative teems with fecundity. The earth sprouts, plants yield, trees bloom, waters swarm, birds flock, critters creep. The cornucopia of creation brims with abundance.

In a personal pronouncement, God makes it explicit that all of creation is a gift from Him. He has provided food for man and animals with neither parsimony nor monotony. God declares, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food" (1:29). Following on the heels of God's proclamation, the pronouncement that has punctuated the chapter is strengthened to reflect the completion of creation: "And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good" (Gen. 1:31). With the fullness of creation, God basks in His work through sabbath rest.

These three aspects of God's generosity are summed up in Isa. 45:18:

Table 2: Aspects of God's Generosity in Creation

For thus says the LORD, who created the heavens (he is God!),	Autonomy
who formed the earth and made it (he established it;	Ordering
he did not create it empty, he formed it to be inhabited!):	Abundance
"I am the LORD, and there is no other.	Autonomy

Human Participation

Man is invited to participate in God's creative generosity. The sun and moon are deputized for a role in God's ordering, ruling over the day and night. Marine and avian creatures are directed to join God's abundance through being fruitful and multiplying. Yet, only man is invited to participate in both: "Be *fruitful* and *multiply* and *fill* the earth and *subdue* it, and have *dominion* over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing

that moves on the earth" (Gen. 1:28, emphasis added).[24] Unlike God's independent omnipotence, man's authority and generosity are derivative. God needs nothing, so everything is a gift. Man is dependent on God for all his needs[25] and gives only from the measure that he in turn has received.

Anarchy, Disorder, and Devastation

Man's sin rends asunder creation's perfect weave of order and abundance. Bountiful goodness is supplanted by prolific evil. The Fall cuts through the line of God's generosity. The Serpent questions God's abundant provision ("Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?" 3:1), ordering, and autonomy ("You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil," 3:4–5). By eating the fruit, the woman subverted God's generosity in creation.[26] In a garden swollen with plants given for her enjoyment, she eats of the single forbidden tree. All that God had given her was not enough; *she* wanted to choose what was best. Instead of imitating God's beneficent giving, Eve shares catastrophe with Adam. Adding gall to the treachery, Adam blames God's generosity for his sin: "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate" (Gen. 3:12).

In the curse, God's good order is temporarily frustrated, both between man and woman ("Your desire shall be contrary to your husband, but he shall rule over you," Gen. 3:16) and

[24] Note also the collaborative cultivation described in Gen. 2:5: "for the LORD God had not caused it to rain on the land, and there was no man to work the ground." God provides the rain, man supplies the labor. Chapter 2 further shows man's participation in ordering through his naming of the animals (2:19–20).

[25] A dependence that is underscored through the absence of a helpmeet and the creation of woman.

[26] In the second giving of the Law, Moses reminds Israel that repentance and obedience can bring God's renewed blessing of fertility in human, animal, and agrarian spheres: "The LORD your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all the work of your hand, in the fruit of your womb and in the fruit of your cattle and in the fruit of your ground. For the LORD will again take delight in prospering you, as he took delight in your fathers" (Deut. 30:9).

between man and the plants that God had given him for food ("in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life," 3:17). The marital relationship of trust and mutual help is distorted into one of frustrated desire. Though God had provided everything they could ever want, Eve's misplaced desire for something beyond God's good gifts now sabotages their ability to have their basic needs met.

The creation account shows a progression from chaos to developed order. Through the fall, that momentum is reversed. Man was lovingly crafted from dust, but now he will die and decay. God's structure crumbles to dust.

Further, abundance becomes a quality of pain ("I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing," Gen. 3:16 and "thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you," Gen. 3:18). The tragedy in the garden is not only the infection of the good, leading to death, but the explosion of evil.[27]

Protoevangelion

Before leaving the Genesis account, it is important to note that God's generosity is not expended. In the midst of judgment, God gives a promise, foreshadowing His greatest gift: "he shall bruise your head." In the person of Christ, order will be reinstituted and abundance erupt, flowing in wine (John 2) and bursting from baskets of leftover loaves (John 6).

If Genesis provides a framework of divine generosity, what then does human generosity within the people of God look like? We will now consider one passage from each testament that illuminates the topic of human generosity.

[27] This is worse than the wasteland of Gen. 1:2, a space uninhabitable. Evil is an invasive plant that overtakes the garden, choking out the life that God had graciously given.

First Chronicles 29:1–22

At the coronation of Solomon,[28] the Chronicler relates the gifts of David and Israel for the construction of the temple.[29] It is a capital campaign par excellence, yielding storehouses of building materials and money. William Johnstone notes, "the prodigious value of David's gifts of 3000 talents of gold and 7000 talents of silver, and the totals contributed by his people … can be appreciated by comparison with other passages in the Hebrew Bible" [30] he catalogs Solomon's annual income of 666 talents (2 Chron 9:13), the 100-talent price tag of hiring an army of 100,000 in 2 Chron. 25:6 among others.

After the staggering scale of the gifts[31] is detailed, David asserts that this is not actually Israel's offering at all: "For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you … O LORD our God, all this abundance that we have provided for building you a house for your holy name comes from your hand and is all your own" (1 Chron. 29:14, 16).

It is a bold statement of ownership: everything belongs to God. All that we have is on loan. Underpinning David's declaration are three facets of generosity:

Derivative: Role

A proper understanding of ownership flows from an accurate grasp of the structure of reality. When David delineates what God owns, he includes items ("all that is in the heavens and

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[28] It's striking that, despite the occasion, the focus is not on Solomon's kingship, but God's. Jacob Myers states, "For the Chronicler the chief concern in the transition of the kingdom from David to Solomon was religious," Jacob M. Myers, *I Chronicles*, AB (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), 191.

[29] This passage comes in the midst of an extended tract that is preoccupied with Solomon's installation as king and the undertaking of temple construction. The opening verses mirror 1 Chron. 22, with a direct address from David. After an interlude in which David provides for the organization of the priests, musicians, gatekeepers, and military—note that again we see structure and abundance occurring in tandem—David resumes his speech.

[30] William Johnstone, *1 and 2 Chronicles*, JSOTSup, ed. David J.A. Clines and Philip R. Davies (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997), 1:284.

[31] A large collection is necessary, since there is an appropriate opulence to the undertaking. "for the palace will not be for man but for the Lord God" (29:1).

in the earth is yours," 1 Chron. 29:11), but also authority ("Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty … In your hand are power and might, and in your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all," 1 Chron. 29:11–12). God's possessions are a result of His person: "you are exalted as head over all" (1 Chron. 29:11). Identity dictates ownership. At this coronation, we must first recognize God's kingship. Within the context of God's supremacy, we can then understand the derivative authority of the king[32] and his subjects to return possessions and honor to God. In contrast to God's preeminence, David presents man's hopeless[33] contingency ("in your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all," 29:12) and transience ("Our days on the earth are like a shadow," 29:15).

Expressive: Root

Because he recognized his place as a subject and steward under God, David responded with a hearty offering. Throughout his address, David highlights the importance of motives in giving. The king does not tax the people, levying an obligatory contribution. Rather, he invites them to bring a free-will offering, a נָדַב. The term נָדַב is relatively rare in the Old Testament, its usage focused on Israel's free and responsive gifts for the place of God's habitation. The word echoes back to giving for construction of the tabernacle (Exod. 25:2, 35:5, 21, 22, 29)[34] and will again appear in the post-exilic rebuilding of the temple (Ezra 1:6; 2:68; 3:5). In response to God's

[32] Roles are highlighted throughout. David, as head of Israel, leads the giving by offering not only from Israel's storehouses, but his own personal treasury. He then solicits contributions from the leaders on each organizational level of society, from the heads of houses to military and diplomatic leaders in 29:6. David also founds his prayer on Israel's role as the chosen people of God (29:10 and 18).

[33] The end of v. 15 literally reads "there is no hope."

[34] See Roddy Braun, *1 Chronicles*, WBC, ed. by David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker (Waco: Word Books, 1986), 280.

word, the people give eagerly and excessively to support God's work.[35] Giving to the construction of the temple is an act of pious devotion and David accentuates the role of affection throughout the chapter:

- "because of my *devotion* to the house of my God I give it to the house of my God" (29:3)
- "Who then will *offer willingly*" (29:5)
- "the leaders of fathers' houses made their *freewill offerings*" (29:6)
- "Then the people rejoiced because they had *given willingly*, for *with a whole heart* they had *offered freely* to the Lord" (29:9)
- "But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able thus to *offer willingly*?" (29:14)
- "I know, my God, that you test the *heart* and have pleasure in uprightness. In the uprightness of my *heart* I have *freely offered* all these things, and now I have seen your people, who are present here, *offering freely* (29:17)
- "O Lord … keep forever such purposes and thoughts in the *hearts* of your people, and direct their *hearts* toward you" (29:18)

Generosity overflows from a grateful and affectionate heart. It is not giving because you have to, it is giving because you want to—even to the point of seeing it as a privilege to do so. Motives matter—so much so that David appeals to God to "keep forever such purposes and thoughts in the hearts of your people, and direct their hearts toward you." The king knows that affections will be a rudder that steers the future of his people.[36]

Expressive: Result

There is an overwhelming effect to the generous outpouring. Following their free-will offering, the text swells with celebration. Generosity generates joy. While joy in the recipient would be understandable, this is joy in the giver. Giving to others does not leave one depleted,

[35] The king's invitation for a free-will offering is couched in religious terminology. What the ESV renders "consecrating himself" (29:5) is literally "filling his hand." David Johnstone explains, "One may suspect that this is not just a vivid phrase for open-handed generosity; 'to fill the hand' is the technical term for consecrating a priest of Levite," *1 and 2 Chronicles,* 285. See Exod. 28:41; 29:29, and 32:29.

[36] Cf. Matt. 6:19–24.

but filled. Not only does Israel rejoice—they rejoice greatly.[37] This is not a slight smile, but a deep, contagious belly laugh. Israel punctuates their giving with worship and festal celebration. The section closes with a joyful feast in the presence of God: "And they ate and drank before the LORD on that day with great gladness" (1 Chron. 29:22). Each attendee of the banquet attesting to the truth that it is happier to give than to receive (Acts 20:35).

2 Corinthians 8–9

2 Corinthians 8–9 is a typically dense Pauline argument.[38] Entire tomes have been written on the dynamics at play in this epistle. While there is a wealth of material to mine regarding God's grace as expressed in the cultural context of the day, we can also glean four dynamics of generosity under the new covenant.

Derivative

In these chapters, Paul enters into an extended treatise on Christian giving, but human giving is always grounded in God as the ultimate Giver. Paul employs the language of grace throughout the discussion. Grace (χάρις) is a word whose meaning encompasses the entire life-cycle of giving, from the favorable disposition of a giver, the gift bestowed, the extraordinary effect the gift endows, and the returning of thanks to the giver.[39] God is the source of all gifts.

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[37] The construction uses cognate accusative: שָׂמַח שִׂמְחָה.

[38] Of the opening verses of chapter 8, Ralph Martin bemoans, "All these items make for a very confused passage whose sense, while tolerably clear, is far from certain," Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, WBC 40 (Waco: Word, 1986), 260.

[39] BDAG, s.v. χάρις, 3.b, "the context will show whether the emphasis is upon the possession of divine favor as a source of blessings for the believer, or upon a store of favor that is dispensed, or a favored status (i.e. standing in God's favor) that is brought about, or a gracious deed wrought by God in Christ, or a gracious work that grows fr. more to more."

Our generosity is an echo of God's grace.[40] Paul begins by citing the laudable giving of the Macedonian churches.[41] However, they are mere conduits of the grace of God that has been given among them. Mark Seifrid clarifies, "the Macedonians … are an example, not of moral virtue that is to be imitated, but of the grace of God that is to be sought."[42]

In chapter 9, Paul cites the psalmist's profile of a righteous man with wealth and riches (Ps. 112:3) who freely distributes to those in need (Ps. 112:9).[43] Paul is not extoling some example of inherent moral rectitude, but illustrating how God is able to make all grace abound to His children (2 Cor. 9:8). Ultimately who has distributed freely? Who has given to the poor? Whose righteousness endures forever? In the preceding psalm,[44] the psalmist has foreshadowed the answer: "Great are the works of the LORD … and his righteousness endures forever" (Ps. 111:2–3). We again see that our generosity is derivative. We give because God has first given to us. Paul draws his argument to a close with the doxological exclamation, "Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift." It is all gift, from beginning to end.

Intemperate: Inversion

Paul presents giving as Chistological and cruciform. Ironically, what we refer to as "the Fall" was an attempted ascension. Adam and Eve sought to usurp God's role. Man's whole being

[40] Martin states, "here … [χάρις] carries the theological weight of a divine attribute, namely, love in action, expressed on sinners' behalf and reaching out to help the undeserving," *2 Corinthians,* 263.

[41] In line with David's view that giving to support God's work is a privilege, the Macedonians begged earnestly for the favor of taking part in the collection (2 Cor. 8:4). To do so is a joy, as the use of χάρις hints. "The basis of the usage is the relation to χαίρω. χάρις is what delights…" Walther Zimmerli, "χάρις" in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 9:373.

[42] Mark A. Seifrid, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 317.

[43] The righteous man of Ps. 112 bears notable correspondence to the woman of Prov. 31, who will be considered in the next chapter. See Al Wolters*, The Song of the Valiant Woman* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster, 2001), 5.

[44] Psalm 111 and 112 are not only linked in subject matter, but are both acrostic psalms.

was debased by sin, yet the corruption of his faculties results in man thinking "of himself more highly than he ought to think" (Rom. 12:3) and acting from the cardinal sin of pride. Thus, the Beatitudes open by declaring the blessedness of "the poor in spirit" (Matt. 5:3). Only in recognizing our poverty, can we gain access to the mercy of God.[45] Staggeringly, Paul declares that Christ not only gives *from* His riches, but gives *up* His riches.[46] In the Fall, Adam sought to take more than he ought. In the incarnation, the second Adam gave up what was rightfully His: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9; cf. Phil. 2:5–8).[47]

This transposition reorders reality. Paul elsewhere assures the church, "What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" (Rom. 8:31–32). The dam has broken and the currents of free-flowing grace surge through the redeemed to the world.

Christ's inversion now manifests itself in His followers. The Macedonian Christians' extreme poverty paradoxically overflows in "abundance of joy" and "a wealth of generosity."

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[45] This line runs throughout scripture, perhaps nowhere with greater clarity than in the Magnificat:

> "his mercy is for those who fear him
> from generation to generation.
> He has shown strength with his arm;
> he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;
> he has brought down the mighty from their thrones
> and exalted those of humble estate;
> he has filled the hungry with good things,
> and the rich he has sent away empty." (Luke 1:50–53)

[46] Margaret Thrall helpfully summarizes "His self-impoverishment in the whole event of the incarnation was for the spiritual enrichment of believers … The riches are not further defined, and are probably to be understood in a comprehensive sense as all the blessings of the eschatolofical salvation" present and future, Margaret E. Thrall, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians,* ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 2:534.

[47] It first appears that in this exchange Christ is the loser and we are the winners. However, God's generosity is never used up. Christ's humiliation may look temporarily like a loss, but it is followed by His exaltation, where God gave Him the name above all names (Phil. 2:9–11).

This is the tumbling of the gospel. The self-exalted are brought low, while the humble are lifted up through the humiliation and exaltation of Christ.

Expressive

Our gifts are the outward expression of the inward character worked in us by the grace of God in Christ. Paul opens this paraenesis by extolling the transformation God has worked in the Corinthians—faith, speech, knowledge, and earnestness. He then exhorts them to express those traits by this act of grace. Love does not keep to itself. The Corinthians can demonstrate (8:8, 24) the genuineness of their affection through a tangible act. Paul does not expect them to conjure generosity, but to channel the love and readiness already evident in them. This giving must not be compulsory, but freely and cheerfully flowing from the heart (9:7). God's grace enters the Christian through the gospel, and then proceeds from the Christian in generosity (9:12–14). This pattern is also attested in the Macedonian church who expressed their abundant joy through extravagant generosity (8:1–5).[48]

Contextual: Instrumentality

Finally, Paul makes clear that God's χάρις is mediated through His people. When God's grace was given to the Macedonian Christians, they gave themselves first in devotion to God and then practically to Paul and other Christians (8:5).[49] In a virtuous cycle, the zeal of the Corinthian church has previously incited generosity in the Macedonian church (9:2) and Paul now hopes the example of the Macedonian church will do the same to the Corinthians (8:1–9:15).

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[48] Titus (8:16) and Paul (8:19–22) are further examples in this passage.

[49] Bo Giertz writes, the Macedonian Christians "have not only given of their money—as so many do to get rid of a troublesome collector—but they have engaged themselves personally for Christ and for his apostle," *The New Testament Devotional Commentary,* trans. Bror Erickson (Irvine: 1517, 2022), 2:416.

Paul expounds the fellowship of the saints: the Corinthians can share with the church in Jerusalem in her hardship now, and in the future she can reciprocate. This results in fairness. In a surprising turn of logic, Paul grounds his argument by appealing to God's miraculous provision of manna to Israel (8:15). This makes clear that the gift is not a *quid pro quo*, but a grace-based economy. Following the exodus, God worked directly to shower bread and quail from heaven for His people. Today He works through the giving of churches to supply the needs of their brethren.

Concluding with an agrarian metaphor, Paul notes that whether it is the seed in the hand of the sower or the bread on the table for food, God is the one superintending it all (9:10). God's grace is not given simply for our enjoyment, but our service. Paul notes the blessed alchemy that: "God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work" (9:8).

Through this passage, we see that generosity originates with God, whose nature it is to be gracious. The self-giving of Christ now inaugurates transformation in Christians, who become channels of this grace in the lives of those around them.[50]

Summary

Discussions of human generosity are erroneous if they begin with us and our stuff. Scripture depicts generosity as beginning and ending with God, who expresses His benevolent nature by giving for our advantage. Giving is actually receiving. We give, because God has given to us. We give generously, because God has showered us with blessings, climatically in giving His Son for our redemption. Paradoxically, giving is a net benefit. We receive joy as we

[50] While our focus is on broad level themes, the passage is replete with practical considerations, such as the importance of transparency and accountability in financial practices (8:20–21) and deciding donation amounts in advance (9:7), which reflects the order that provides the appropriate context for generosity.

participate in God's kingdom economy. Hence, Paul says we should be regarded "as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God" (1 Cor. 4:1). After all, "What do you have that you did not receive?" (1 Cor. 4:7).[51] That is why, when John relates a celestial scene of the twenty-four elders enthroned and adorned, they cast their crowns before the throne of the true and ultimate King with the appropriate and adoring acknowledgment:

> "Worthy are you, our Lord and God,
> to receive glory and honor and power,
> for you created all things,
> and by your will they existed and were created." (Rev 4:11)

Based on the passages above, we can define generosity as open-handed giving that is derivative, expressive, contextual, and intemperate.

Scripture brims with God's generosity and humankind's responsive giving. Subsequent chapters will trace the outlined definition of generosity along the course of feminine generosity. Scripture presents a rich portrait of women participating in God's work through generosity that enlivens the contemporary understanding of Christian giving and has import for the exercise of generosity in the church today. Women make essential contributions to the mission and work of Christ as agents of generosity that is derivative, expressive, contextual, and intemperate.

[51] Paul further asks, "If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?" The apostle echoes Jeremiah's admonition not to glory in the gifts, but the Giver: "Thus says the LORD: 'Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, [24] but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD'" (Jer. 9:23–24; cf. Gal. 6:14–15).

CHAPTER TWO

PROVERBS 31:10–31

Because our space is limited and the incarnation transforms the Christian and her expression of generosity, the majority of this study will focus on narrative New Testament examples. Still, one Old Testament figure looms large and demands treatment: the woman of Prov. 31.

Date and Authorship

Little can be said with certainty about either the date or source of Prov. 31:10–31. Many scholars believe that this material was written by the final editor of the book. Michael Fox notes, "Prov 31:10–31 has been dated anywhere from the premonarchic period … to the second century B.C.E. … not on very strong grounds. Most commentators avoid putting a date on a text that is detached from any particular historical setting,"[1] The passage bears thematic connections within chapter 31[2] and the wider book,[3] as befits a capstone composition.

[1] Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, 899. See also Steinmann, *Proverbs*, 16–18; Crawford H. Toy, *Proverbs*, ICC (New York: Scribner, 1899), xxx.

[2] Notable for our study, the mother of Lemuel warns him against women who destructively take (31:3), while the capable wife is one who continually gives. Just as the king is to open his mouth for the marginalized (31:8–9), so the capable woman opens her hand to them (31:20). Further connections have been drawn out by Murray H. Lichtenstein, "Chiasm and Symmetry in Proverbs 31," *CBQ* 44 (1982): 202–11.

[3] Claudia Camp argues that the female imagery in Prov 1–9 and 31 is an "interpretive framework around the proverb collection," Claudia V. Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in Proverbs,* BLS vol. 11 (Sheffield: Almond/JSOT, 1985), 186. On pp. 188–89, Camp lists eight areas of correspondence between Wisdom in chapters 1–9 and 31. Camp at times overstates her case, but there are clear thematic and linguistic links between the sections, especially worth "more precious than jewels" (Prov. 3:15; 8:11; 31:10); resultant gain (Prov. 3:13–14; 8:17–18; 31:11); and her provision of food (Prov. 9:1–6; 31:14–15).

Identity

The pericope presents a glowing profile in a domestic setting. Before we can consider the generous traits of this wife, we must first establish her identity. Is this woman a direct reprisal of Lady Wisdom from chapters 1–9, abstract and unreal? Or is she a portrait of an individual woman, concrete and particular? The most compelling argument understands an interrelation between the two. The language used to describe Lady Wisdom is larger than life. In expansive terms, Proverbs paints an allegorical portrait of Wisdom, present with God at creation and then calling out in the streets for disciples. In chapter 31, the scene has changed. While the language used to describe the capable wife is hyperbolic, it is specific and domestic. Roland Murphy writes, "If Wisdom is inviting guests to her home in chap. 9, the portrait in chap. 31 symbolizes Wisdom finally settled down with her own."[4]

The book of Proverbs is both philosophical and practical. Proper thinking is expressed through right (that is, righteous) living. The book that has traced wisdom through extended metaphors and pithy proverbs, now closes with a portrait of wisdom in practice in the life of one woman in one household.[5]

The woman of Proverbs 31 is depicted through vignettes, unified by an acrostic format. The dominant trait of this woman is strength.[6] She is heralded as a woman of חַ֫יִל. The word

[4] Roland E. Murphy, *Proverbs,* WBC (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 250. Cf. Clifford: "We propose that it is a portrait of an ideal wife (of a great house) and, on a metaphorical level, a portrait of Woman Wisdom and what she accomplishes for those who come to her house as disciples and friends," Richard J Clifford, *Proverbs*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 274.

[5] The tension of her actuality is indicated by the opening question: "An excellent wife who can find?" Rhetorically, it implies doing so is difficult, if not extraordinary. Yet, she has been found by one fortunate husband. The woman of Prov. 31 is elusive, but tangible. Murphy, *Proverbs*, 246.

[6] Western culture pits strength and gentleness against each other, but scripture does not. Indeed, these traits come together most fully in Christ (Matt 11:29). Strength is a threat because of its destructive potential, but in the eschaton creation shall be restored and "they shall not hurt or destroy any more," (Isa. 11:9) so that wolves and lambs are bunkmates, toddlers and vipers playmates (Isa. 11:1–9). This woman's strength is not in competition with

denotes strength and ability, shading into moral virtue.[7] She is robed in strength (31:17, 25) and described using terms with military undertones. שָׁלָל rendered "gain" in 31:11 is used most often for "*booty, spoil* of war."[8] Her strength eclipses that of other women (31:29). Strength is her melodic line.

In this portrait of the capable wife, three aspects of generosity are evident.

Derivative

First, this superlative wife is herself a gift from God. The opening query, "An excellent wife who can find?" harkens back to Prov. 19:14: "House and wealth are inherited from fathers, but a prudent wife is from the LORD."[9] Murphy elucidates, "An heir could count on receiving the inheritance, all things being equal, but it was another thing to acquire a wise wife. That is the supreme gift…what the father *must give* by law … the Lord *gives as a gift.*"[10] The text upholds the capable wife as a worthwhile pursuit[11] yet does so in a context that acknowledges God as the source of such a prize. Also understanding her dependence, the capable wife exercises her ability wisely, ordered by the fear of the Lord (31:30). When the passage builds to a crescendo of praise

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her spouse. Indeed, it serves her husband, who is called בַּעְלָהּ, "her lord" throughout rather than the more ordinary אִישׁ. She girds herself with strength (31:17), and she also opens her mouth kind instruction (31:26).

[7] The moral dimension is seen most clearly in Exod. 18:21: "Moreover, look for able men [אַנְשֵׁי־חַיִל] from all the people, men who fear God, who are trustworthy and hate a bribe, and place such men over the people…" BDB, s.v. חַיִל, 2. The challenge of capturing the nuance is reflected in the English versions where it is rendered as "excellent" (ESV, NASB), "virtuous" (KJV), "noble" (NIV), "capable" (HCSB), and "virtuous and capable" (NLT). She is also described with עֹז in 31:17 and 25.

[8] BDB, s.v. שָׁלָל, 2. Fox also points to חָגְרָה בְעֹוז מָתְנֶיהָ in 31:17. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, 891.

[9] So also Prov. 18:22: "He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favor from the LORD."

[10] Murphy, *Proverbs*, 144.

[11] The text's statement that "She is far more precious than jewels," has added significance in a culture where monetary exchanges were part of marital arrangements. See Christine Roy Yoder, *Wisdom as a Woman of Substance: A Socioeconomic Reading of Proverbs 1–9 and 31:10–31* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2001), 49–58.

of this woman, it is not her strength, nor resultant profitability that is lauded, but her fear of the Lord. Strength forms an inclusion around this passage, with חַ֫יִל in 31:1 and 31:29, but fear of the Lord brackets the entire book (1:7 and 31:30).

Expressive: Industrious

The capable woman is always on the move. Proverbs 31:27 summarizes, "She looks well to the ways of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness." Her strength is intended for and exercised in work.[12] The chapter hums with activity. She cheerfully undertakes handicrafts (31:13, 19, 22, 24) and is not afraid to get her hands dirty. Michael Fox notes of her use of the distaff and spindle, "The spinning of textiles was a time-consuming chore. It could be delegated to servants, female or male. This task, unlike the others mentioned in this poem, was not held in particular respect, as 2 Sam. 3:29 shows. The fact that this well-to-do woman performs it is evidence of special industriousness."[13] Her craftsmanship is parlayed into profit (31:24). She skillfully engages in commerce, both in sales and acquisitions[14] (31:14, 16, 18, 21, 24). The wealth that the capable wife shares is not incidental. She works slavishly, then she shares lavishly. Up before the sun, she evidences the trait that Paul adjures: "Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need" (Eph. 4:28).[15] Her industry brings blessing[16] and

[12] Toy, *Proverbs*, 544–45.

[13] Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, 895.

[14] She does not settle for whatever is at the local market, but brings the best food from afar, 31:13.

[15] See also Acts 20:35 where Paul reminds the Ephesians, "by working hard in this way we must help the weak."

[16] The teaching of this chapter is consistent with the book of Proverbs, which exhorts hard work and denounces sluggardliness. Proverbs acknowledges the benefits of wealth, while holding it in healthy suspicion, clear-eyed about the carcinogenic effect of greed. See for example Prov. 28:20, 25.

confident security to her household (31:18, 21, 25).[17] The capable wife's open-handed generosity is enabled by calloused palms.

Contextual

The capable wife is constantly giving. She perpetually does good for her husband (31:12); allocates food to her household, including servants (31:15); gives to those in need (31:20); provides luxuriously for her household (31:21); benefits the reputation of her husband (31:23); dispenses wisdom and kind instruction (31:26); and gives of her time, attention, and labor for her household (31:27). Giving is at the heart of this passage: verses 19–20[18] form a chiasm of openhanded generosity. The same hands that give through menial household tasks, also give support to the poor. English versions obscure the symmetry of the chiasm, which uses both hand, יָד, and palm, כַּף. Murphy's translation captures the lexical pattern:

> "She puts her hand to the distaff;
> her palms grasp the spindle.
> Her palms she extends to the poor;
> her hands she reaches to the needy."[19]

[17] This capable woman who "laughs at the time to come" (31:25) find her foil in the wicked servant in the parable of the talents. Unlike his faithful colleagues, this servant sees the money entrusted to him as a liability, not an opportunity, and in fear hides it. Upon his return, the master condemns the useless servant for the wickedness and sloth that did not recognize and respond to the master's grace. The wicked servant is bitter, paralyzed, and useless. The woman is blessed, active, and capable because she fears the Lord. Jeffrey Gibbs writes, "the parable's exhortation is this: Do not forget who your Master is. And do not forget who you are—the slave of a particular Master," *Matthew 21:1–28:20*, ConcC (St. Louis: Concordia, 2018), 1337.

[18] While the passage is grounded by this chiasm, the poem resists attempt to impose rigid structures beyond the acrostic spine. While some of Lichtenstein's work is illuminating, he argues for a four-part structure with a nine-verse unit (31:10–18); two-verse chiastic unit (31:19–20); nine-verse unit (31:21–29); and two-verse coda (31:30–31), 208. However, the line between the final unit and the coda is tenuous. Clifford sees a steady progression from private to public life (*Proverbs,* 273), but the text is not so linear. The focus ricochets from the woman's spindle to far-flung-ports whence come her provisions, back home for breakfast, out to the city gates, and so forth. The passage telescopes in and out, always following the kinetic energy of the capable wife.

[19] Murphy, *Proverbs*, 243.

The capable wife's generosity is personal and direct. Giving is woven into the fabric of her life, through spindle and scarlet garb.[20] Her generosity is meted out through her relationships, in concentric spheres of influence. She gives to her husband, children, and maidservants. The king, because of the particulars of his station, must open his mouth in defense of and justice for the vulnerable (31:8–9). The wife, in her station, opens her hand to the vulnerable and cares well for her household.[21]

In contemporary western culture, aspects of life are increasingly compartmentalized or outsourced. "Charitable giving" is reduced to a line-item in a budget, electronically dispensed at a distance. The capable wife sees it as a through-line of her life. The woman of Proverbs 31 presents a picture of integrated generosity.

Closing Thoughts

As we have seen in other passages, this woman's generosity is a net gain. She is always giving, but also always receiving. She receives the trust of her husband (31:11); the successful yield of her work (31:16, 24); security (18, 21, 25); luxurious plenty (21, 22); and praise from all who know her (31:28–31).

In our exploration of generosity as open-handed giving that is derivative, expressive, contextual, and intemperate, the capable wife expands our understanding of generous character.

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[20] The Hebrew of Prov. 31:21 "כִּי כָל־בֵּיתָהּ לָבֻשׁ שָׁנִים" is seen as confusing and rendered in some manuscripts as "שְׁנָיִם" double thickness. Using the principles of textual criticism, the harder reading is preferred. It may indicate that in the face of snow, the capable wife's provisions are so lavish that she need not only consider warmth, but attractiveness and luxury.

[21] Christine Roy Yoder explores the role of women in the Achaemenid empire, whether married or not, was centered in the home and family. Their responsibilities included the care and education of children … and management of the household economy," *Wisdom*, 59.

While David underscored the importance of devotion, Paul of cheerfulness, the capable wife shows the diligence and energy that overflows in generosity.

CHAPTER THREE

LUKE 8:1–3

Luke 8 introduces us to women who were beneficiaries of Jesus' ministry. In response, they not only join His ministry, but underwrite it.

Identity

These women are constant figures in the ministry of Jesus,[1] appearing at pivotal times in the life of Christ, including His crucifixion,[2] burial,[3] resurrection,[4] and are present with the nascent church in Acts.[5] They are given narrative prominence, reflective of their historical importance, even though featuring women was a liability to the fledgling church.[6] All the evangelist include these women, but they are mentioned most often by Luke, consistent with his overall inclusion of women.[7]

We are only given a sparse sketch. The delineation of the group varies through the Gospels.

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[1] Indeed, the only people who can answer in the affirmative to all the verses of the negro spiritual "Were You There?" are the women.

[2] Matt. 27:55–56; Mark 15:40–41; Luke 23:49; John 19:25.

[3] Matt. 27:61; Luke 23:55.

[4] Matt. 28:1; Luke 24:10; John 20:1–18.

[5] Acts 1:14.

[6] Derek and Dianne Tidball, *The Message of Women*, BST (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 194.

[7] Nolland explains, "Luke establishes a deliberate parallel between the apostles and the women (his gospel is marked by such paralleling of men and women: Zechariah and Mary in Luke 1–2; the woman of Zarephath and Naaman in 4:25–27; perhaps the demoniac and Simon's mother-in-law in 4:31–39; the centurion and the widow of Nain in 7:1–17; the man with sheep and the woman with coins in 15:3–10; perhaps the vindicated widow and the justified tax-collector in 18:1–14)," John Nolland, *Luke 1–9:20,* WBC 35A, (Dallas: Word, 1989)*,* 366. The next chapter will explore the contrast between the contributing widow and the exacting Pharisees in Luke 20–21.

Table 3. Named Women Followers of Jesus in the Gospels

Name	**Reference**
Joanna, the wife of Chuza	Luke 8:3, 24:10
Mary Magdalene	Matt. 27:56, 28:1; Mark 15:40; Luke 8:2, 24:10; John 19:25, 20:1
Mary the wife of Clopas	John 19:25
"the other Mary"	Matt. 27:61, 28:1
Mary, Jesus' mother	John 19:25; Acts 1:14
Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses	Mark 15:4
Mary the mother of James and Joseph	Matt. 27:56
Mary the mother of the mother of James	Luke 24:10
Salome	Mark 14:40
Susanna	Luke 8:3
The mother of the sons of Zebedee	Matt. 27:56
Jesus' aunt (Mary's sister)	John 19:25

Aside from their names and familial connections, we are told three things about this group of women: Jesus healed them from diseases and evil spirits (Luke 8:2); after which they followed Jesus from Galilee (Matt. 27:55–56; Mark 15:40–41; Luke 23:55); and minister to Jesus and the twelve (Matt. 27:55; Mark 15:41; Luke 8:3).

In the current passage, three women are listed: Mary, Joanna, and Susanna. Mary and Joanna each have explanatory notes. Magdalene is presumably a demonym, though Magdala is

unattested.[8] Historically, Mary has been identified as the sinful woman of Luke 7:36–50, however, modern scholars view that as unlikely.[9] Mary was healed of seven spirits, "The number 'seven' points to the severity of the demonized state."[10]

Joanna is noted for her elite status as the wife of Chuza, Herod's household manager, and thus a member of Herod's court. Richard Bauckham writes,

> while we cannot rule out the possibility that Chuza was manager of one of Antipas's royal estates in Galilee or Perea, it is more likely that he was in charge of Antipas's property and revenues generally. This would be a highly important position, especially in the early years of Antipas's reign, when large amounts of money needed to be raised, no doubt from taxation, in order to finance the building of three new cities (Sepphoris, Livias, and Tiberias)[11]

This is the only mention of Susanna in scripture. Fitzmyer succinctly states, "Susanna. She is otherwise unknown."[12]

We glean three traits of generosity from this passage.

Intemperate: Inclusive

The women listed show the broad reach of Jesus' generosity. From women of status to women of scorn, Jesus gives to all. Beyond the variety, the admittance of women to Jesus' followers is startling. Witherington writes, "Luke 8:1–3 stands in contrast to its historical context in rabbinic Judaism. We know women were allowed to hear the word of God in the synagogue

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[8] Though Nolland notes that it may possibly "be identified with Tarichaeae, a town on the west coast of the Sea of Galilee whose name in later rabbinic writings appears as *Migdāl nûnayyā',*" Nolland, *Luke 1–9:20*, 366.

[9] Bevon is the most positive when he avers that the identification of Mary as one healed of seven spirits "makes her identification with the sinful woman of Luke 7:36–50 impossible," Françios Bovon, *Luke 1*, Hermeneia, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 301. See also Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50,* BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 713; I. Howard Marshall, *Luke*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 316.

[10] Nolland, who further notes that her place first in the list indicates priority, possibly because she was a chief witness to the resurrection or because of the infamy of her healing, Nolland, *Luke 1–9:20,* 366; Bovon, *Luke 1,* 300; Arthur A. Just Jr., *Luke 1:1–9:50*, ConcC (St. Louis: Concordia, 1996), 331.

[11] Richard Bauckham, *Gospel Women* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 137.

[12] Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., *The Gospel according to Luke I–IX*, AB 28 (New York: Double Day, 1981), 698.

but they were never disciples of a rabbi unless their husband or master was a rabbi willing to teach them."[13] Bailey is more blunt: "in the contemporary Middle East, I know of no place in traditional society where the social scene presented in this text is possible."[14] The indiscriminate nature of God's generosity has always chaffed fallen humanity,[15] yet He continues to give to all.[16]

Derivative

These women give generously to the ministry of Jesus, but only after receiving healing from Jesus. Luke offers a trim but telling account: "some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities." The summary statement of Luke 8:1–3 follows on the heels of Jesus explaining the transformational nature of forgiveness: the one to whom much is given responds in measure (7:47). They had received, so they give. Their activity as disciples[17] and patrons flow from their condition as healed. The generosity of these women is preceded and enabled by the

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[13] Ben Witherington III, "On the Road with Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and Other Disciples: Luke 8:1–3," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche*, 70, nos. 3–4 (1979), 244.

[14] K. E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*: *Studies in the Gospels* (London: SPCK, 2008), 192.

[15] E.g. Jonah 4; Matt. 20:1–16; Luke 15:11–32; and the reaction of Simon (Luke 7:39), in the passage immediately preceding this pericope.

[16] Matt. 5:43–48.

[17] I use the term "disciple" to refer to a dedicated follower of Jesus. Luke uses various monikers to refer to the followers of Jesus. Fitzmyer explains,

> Luke refers to the members of the church in different ways, sometimes with terms that reveal some sort of structure, sometimes with terms that do not. He knows, for instance, that the followers of Jesus, the Christ, have come to be known generically as "Christians" (*Christianoi,* Acts 11:26). Sometimes he refers to them simply as *mathētai/mathētria*, "disciple(s)," using a term that suggests their following of Christ rather than any ministry of function that they may have within the community (Acts 6:1, 2, 7; 9:1, 36, etc.). Again, sometimes he refers to them as *adelphoi,* "brothers, brethren," using a term that implies community rather than a function or ministry within it (1:15; 9:30; 10:23; 11:1, 29, etc.). Both of these terms have roots in the ministry of Jesus itself (see Luke 6:1, 13; 22:32).
>
> Luke is also aware that some members of the church served in special functions or ministries: "elders," "the Twelve," and "apostles." These reveal that the Christian community was organized or structured, and that some members played roles in it that others did not. However, it is not always clear just what these roles were.

Fitzmyer, *Luke I—IX*, 252–53.

generosity of God in their lives. Green explains, "These women are thus characterized as … persons who mirror the graciousness of Jesus' own benefaction."[18]

Human generosity is always derivative. Gifts are received from God and shared through tangible help of neighbor or intangible worship of God. Through the peculiarity of the incarnation, God Himself receives concrete help from these women. Through the prophet Isaiah, God clarifies He needs nothing, asking: "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me?" (Isa. 66:1). Yet, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Luke 9:58). Thus, Jesus benefits from the hospitality of others and the pecuniary support of these women.

Intemperate

How did these women exercise generosity? It says that the women "provided for them out of their means" (8:3). The verb used is διακονέω, which is governed by the following prepositional phrase. They served Jesus and their service took the form of financial support. Bauckham outlines the assets these women may have used,

> A Palestinian Jewish woman in this period had the following seven possible sources of independently disposable property: (1) inheritance from her father if he died without sons to inherit; (2) property acquired by a deed of gift from father, mother, husband, or other; (3) her ketubba money; (4) her dowry; (5) maintenance from her deceased husband's estate; (6) inheritance from her husband if their marriage and any previous marriage of the husband were childless: (7) money earned by working for payment … [19]

[18] Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 320.

[19] Bauckham, *Gospel Women*, 121.

While there are other mentions of financial considerations of expenditure (Matt 17:24–27) and treasury (John 12:6; 13:29) in Jesus' ministry, no one else is credited with monetary contributions.[20]

That the women supported Jesus is significant, but it is not all. Witherington notes, "It was not uncommon for women to support rabbis and their disciples out of their own money, property, or foodstuffs."[21] These women could have responded to Jesus' ministry with an appreciative contribution and enjoyed the satisfaction of being patrons from afar.[22] That did not suffice: "these women are far more intimately caught up in the enterprise in which Jesus is engaged."[23] These women, just as the disciples,[24] left everything to follow Jesus. They not only gave their money, but their time, attention, and affection.[25] These women embody the attitude of the man in the parable of hidden treasure—gob smacked, grateful, and giving—that Jesus describes when he says, "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field" (Matt 13:44).

The treasure they'd found prompted them to give everything, from riches to relationships. The text does not illumine the current familial situation of these women. Husbands and sons are noted, but not the role these women currently played in their homes. Broadly speaking, we can say that these women might have been widows and wholly alone in the world. If not, the women

[20] Cf. Phoebe's support of Paul (Rom. 16:1–2).

[21] Witherington, *On the Road*, 244.

[22] Some scholars reduce the women's contribution to a simple act of gratitude. Green rightly notes that it goes much deeper: "In Jesus' ministry debts are canceled. His mission is to release persons from evil in all of its guises, including the evil of the never-ending cycle of gifts leading to obligations. His graciousness toward these women is not repaid by their benefactions; rather his graciousness is mirrored in theirs," Green, *Luke*, 319.

[23] Nolland, *Luke 1–9:20,* 367.

[24] Mark 10:28–30.

[25] Luke 7:44–47; John 2:1–18.

had at least secondary and tertiary relationships that they left to follow Jesus. If this is the case, their allegiance to their own families was trumped by their devotion to Christ.[26] In turn, Jesus clarifies later in the chapter who His true family is: "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it" (Luke 8:21). The capable wife of Proverbs 31 focuses her generosity on her household. For these women living during the earthly life of Christ, just as for the apostles, their inclusion in the household of faith supersedes earthy affiliations.[27]

Conclusion

These women show the Christocentricity of generosity under the new covenant. The capable wife ordered her life under the beneficent rule of God and gave generously through her circle of influence. For Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and the other women, God's generosity is given through the person and work of Christ and returned through supporting His ministry. The inbreaking of reign of God incited an outpouring of generosity from this group of Galilean women that was not only monetary, but comprehensive.

[26] Just as the apostles did. There is similar ambiguity about Peter's current marital status, given Luke 4:38–40. The text does show James and John leaving their father and their role in his livelihood, Matt. 4:21–22.

[27] Mark 10:28–30. Godet writes, "some pious women spontaneously rendered Him the services of mother and sisters," Frédéric Louis Godet, *A Commentary on the Gospel of St. Luke*, trans. E. W. Shalders and M. D. Cusin (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1881), 232.

CHAPTER FOUR

LUKE 21:1–4

Luke 21:1–4 is a brief vignette in the life of Christ. Jesus observes wealthy individuals putting contributions into the temple treasury. After observing a poor widow dropping two meager coins into the collection box, Jesus states, "Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on" (Luke 21:3–4).

Before we can glean aspects of feminine generosity from this passage, there are fundamental interpretive questions that must be answered.

Positive or Negative Portrayal?

Historically, most treatments of the text present this woman as a moral example. Scholars view Jesus as criticizing the perfunctory rich and commending the piety of this impoverished woman. John Wesley is representative when he writes, "*I say to you, that this poor widow hath cast in more than they all*—See what judgment is cast on the most specious, outward actions by the Judge of all! And how acceptable to him is the smallest, which springs from self-denying love!"[1] She is, thus, an apothegmatic anecdote amid Jesus' temple discourse.[2]

Addison Wright has introduced an alternate and opposite interpretation. He notes the proximity to the condemnation of "the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love greetings in the marketplaces … who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long

[1] John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (London: John Mason, 1831), 1:179.

[2] Such a moral illustration is not unique to Christianity: "Greek literature, Jewish tradition, and even Buddhist tradition can be quarried for stories or statements that set a higher value on the small gift of the poor than on the extravagant gifts of the rich," Nolland*, Luke 18:35–24:53,* WBC 35C (Dallas: Word, 1993), 979.

prayers" (Luke 20:46–47). Wright reads this passage not as a glowing endorsement of the widow, but a lament that "her religious thinking has accomplished the very thing that the scribes were accused of doing"[3] verses earlier: devouring widows' houses. According to Wright, Jesus' statement is all the more damning, given that it is followed by the prediction of the destruction of the very temple complex she was supporting. "Her contribution was totally misguided, thanks to the encouragement of official religion, but the final irony of it all was that it was also a total waste,"[4] summarizes Wright.

Wright, I would assert, overcompensates for traditional sentimental treatments of this passage. Foundational to Wright's argument are two faulty inferences. First, Wright finds the woman's actions to be disturbing and, therefore, must not be supported by Jesus. He avers, "apart from the text, if any one of us were actually to see in real life a poor widow giving the very last of her money to religion, would we not judge the act to be repulsive and to be based on misguided piety because she would be neglecting her own needs?"[5] However, Nolland rightly notes that Jesus is not concerned with pragmatism. Jesus "calls for radical self-abandonment to God in a manner that frequently leaves unanswered questions about the practicalities of life (cf. at 9:59–61; 12:22–34)."[6] Jesus elsewhere says hyperbolic things that on their face sound harsh, such as "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26).

[3] Addison G. Wright, "The Widow's Mites: Praise or Lament?—A Matter of Context," *CBQ* 44 (1982), 262.

[4] Wright, "Widow's Mites," 263.

[5] Wright, "Widow's Mites," 256.

[6] Nolland, *Luke 18:35–24:53*, 979.

Second, Wright posits that this cannot be a commendation of the widow because, "it is not consistent at all with Jesus' Corban statement"[7] of Mark 7:10–13, in which Jesus says that "human needs take precedence over religious values when they conflict…the same idea is expressed in his healings on the Sabbath and perhaps in the parable of the Good Samaritan, but the Corban-statement provides a perfect parallel to the situation of the widow in the story."[8] Wright makes a categorical error in equating these passages. In Mark 7, and the healings on the Sabbath, the needs of another are in view, not one's own need. Jesus exhorts love of God and love of neighbor (Matt. 22:37–39). Both duties are threatened by our inordinate love of self,[9] which is why Jesus calls us to denial of self (Luke 9:23). Because of these weaknesses in his argument, Wright's stance of viewing "Jesus' attitude to the widow's gift as downright disapproval and not as an approbation," is not convincing.

Wright's treatment, however, is not without positive contribution to scholarship on the passage. He appropriately notes that most expositions of the passage sever it from its context, thus do not fully appreciate the import of Jesus' words. He also rightly states that, "Jesus' saying mentions nothing of the disposition of the widow nor does the narrative…the inner attitude of the widow is not available to the reader."[10] Any morals drawn about the cheerful generosity of the widow as opposed to the parsimony of the rich are extrapolations.

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[7] Wright, "Widow's Mites," 260.

[8] Wright, "Widow's Mites," 261.

[9] As Luther vividly states, "Due to original sin, our nature is so curved in upon itself at its deepest levels that it not only bends the best gifts of God toward itself in order to enjoy them (as the moralists and hypocrites make evident), nay, rather, 'uses' God in order to obtain them, but it does not even know that, in this wicked, twisted, and crooked way, it seeks everything, including God, only for itself," Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans* (Louisville: Westminster, 1961), 159.

[10] Wright, "Widow's Mites," 258.

What can responsibly be said of the text? The temptation is to say too much about the widow and not enough about the Pharisees.

Wright correctly underscores that "widow" is "more than a catchword"[11] between Luke 20:45–47 and 21:1–4. The Pharisees are implicated in both passages. Jesus states that the scribes "will receive the greater condemnation" (Luke 20:47) for enjoying the benefits of piety while sabotaging its substance.[12] The exact nature of devouring widows' houses is unknown,[13] but God's judgement for mistreatment of the vulnerable is replete in the pages of scripture. Many parallels could be cited.[14] The language of devouring widows' houses is reminiscent of the graphic imagery of Micah 3, where the cultic and civic leaders of Israel are described as cannibals "who tear the skin from off my people and their flesh from off their bones… and flay their skin from off them, and break their bones in pieces and chop them up like meat in a pot," (Mic. 3:2–3), all the while claiming that God is in their midst (Mic. 3:11). The rapacious and

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[11] Wright, "Widow's Mites," 261. Françios Bovon, *Luke 3*, Hermeneia, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 80; Fitzmyer, *Luke X–XXIV*, 1319; and Marshall, *Luke*, 750, see it as a lexical link.

[12]. Nolland summarizes, "Jesus' critical eye now turns to some of the scribes whose ostentatious self-importance and publicly demonstrated piety go along with heartless exploitation of the weak," *Luke 18:35–24:53*, 975.

[13] Fitzmyer delineates the proposed options:

> "(a) Scribes accepted payment for legal aid to widows, even though such payment was forbidden … (b) Scribes cheated widows out of what was rightly theirs; as lawyers, they were acting as guardians appointed by a husband's will to care for the widow's estate … (c) Scribes sponged on the hospitality of these women of limited means … (d) Scribes mismanaged the property of widows like Anna who had dedicated themselves to the service of the Temple … (e) Scribes took large sums of money from credulous old women as a reward for the prolonged prayer which they professed to make on their behalf … (f) Scribes took houses as pledges for debs which could not be paid … "

Fitzmyer himself acknowledges, "The trouble is that there is no explanation in the text itself," Fitzmyer, *Luke X–XXIV*, 1318.

[14] James Voelz notes in reference to Mark 12:40, "The cruel action toward widows should perhaps remind us once again of Jeremiah 7, the chapter from which is drawn Jesus' comment about people making his house a den of robbers," shortly before this passage and includes a call to do justice to the widow (Jer. 7:6). James W. Voelz and Christopher W. Mitchell, *Mark 8:27–16:20*, ConcC (St. Louis: Concordia, 2019), 939. In wisdom literature Prov. 30:12–14 is thematically parallel, describing hypocrisy (30:12), arrogance (30:13), and "those whose teeth are swords, whose fangs are knives, to devour the poor from off the earth" (30:14).

arrogant actions of these scribes fly in the face of God's way: "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (Mic. 6:8). Luke then moves on to depict the type of vulnerable person whom the scribes should protect, yet who is left destitute. Indeed, Luke's introduction of the story of the widow is even more closely linked than the Marcan parallel.[15] Luke describes Jesus as glancing up to watch the offerings clank into the coffers. The indictment of the scribes is clear and scathing.

The widow is not, *pace* Wright, condemned by Jesus. Yet, she is also not explicitly commended or rewarded by Jesus.[16] James Voelz, comments on the Marcan parallel,

> It seems unlikely that Jesus is, strictly speaking, "disapproving" of the widow and her actions…at minimum the incident says … there is proper worship under the old covenant and the widow displays it … The widow has done something noble and worthy of note, to be sure. But she, like the sensible (νουνεχῶς) scribe in [Mark] 12:34, is still (only?) 'not far' (οὐ μακρὰν, 12:34) from the eschatological kingdom.[17]

It is appropriate to see this passage as a commendation of the widow, but the nature or the extent of the commendation must not be overstated, nor should the condemnation of the scribes be obscured from view. This widow apparently does not give a thought to how she will buy her next meal while the religious elite devour widow's houses. If we rejoice in her small example, we must also reject the broader moral failing of the religious leaders and heed the words of Jesus: "Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice'" (Matt. 9:13).

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[15] Marshall concurs: "the incident is thus connected more closely with what precedes in order to emphasize the contrast," *Luke,* 751.

[16] So Voelz, who further notes that "in this text these is no relation between what the widow does and the coming of the eschatological rule and reign of God," *Mark 8:27–16:20,* 940.

[17] Voelz, *Mark 8:27–16:20,* 940. Nolland makes sense of Jesus' actions by asserting that "the Lukan Jesus is thoroughly in favor of the temple and its worship," *Luke 18:35–24:53*, 979. While Luke does place a stronger emphasis on cultic life than other gospel accounts, it is not always a positive depiction. Indeed, the good found in the temple is in spite of the official proceedings, not because of it (E.g. Simeon, Anna, or the young Jesus teaching), which supports Voelz's argument.

With this understanding of the passage, what can be said about the generosity of this woman? Given the limited information, we cannot say much, but two qualified observations can be made.

Contextual

The contexts observed thus far have been positive. The capable wife, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna have resources to share and do so generously. The poor widow[18] has two small copper coins[19] on which to subsist and exists in a religious structure that not only has not provided for her as it ought, but actively exploits women like her. And yet she gives. We know nothing of the motives of this woman, only her evident actions. Elsewhere, Christ calls for generosity in the face of unjust treatment: "Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles" (Matt. 5:39–41).[20] Christian generosity is not merited by the situation or recipient; it flows from the giver.

Intemperate

This woman "put in all she had to live on" (21:4). According to all earthly standards, that is an unwise thing to do. Jesus specifies that the rich gave from having too much (περισσεύοντος), while she gave from not having enough (ὑστερήματος). What's more, she held nothing back. The

[18] Luke displays overt skepticism about wealth throughout his gospel: 6:2–21, 24–25; 6:38; 12:13–34; 14:12–24; 16:1–13; 16:15–15; 16:19–31; 18:18–30; 19:1–10; 19:45–46.

[19] Measly denominations indeed: "two of the smallest coins in circulation in Palestine at the time," Nolland, *Luke 18:35–24:53*, 979.

[20] Her actions are also consistent with Jesus' frequent statements advocating abdication of material possessions for investment in the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 6:33; Mark 10:29–30; Luke 18:22).

text specifies that she put in two λεπτός: "she could have given just one lepton, but instead she gave more."[21] Her generosity seems imprudent. Bevon rightly comments, "Christian existence is neither reasonable nor achievable."[22]

The actions of this woman appear illogical, but that is a matter of perspective. As a widow with no male provider, this woman was deeply vulnerable in her culture, yet she does not act with calculated defensiveness. Her actions conform to the pattern Jesus describes in Luke 12:4–34. She does not store up things for herself but is rich toward God (Luke 12:21).[23] She flits through this passage like a bird blissfully unconcerned about food, knowing that her Father will be her true provider (Luke 12:22–34).

While we do not know the internal disposition of this woman, we have already discussed another instance of generosity from material deficit. The Macedonian church's "extreme poverty…overflowed in a wealth of generosity" (2 Cor. 8:2). Like this woman, they gave "beyond their means" (2 Cor. 8:3). Yet, they did not see this as a hardship, but a joy and privilege (2 Cor. 8:2, 4). One cannot draw from this passage the conclusion that we should "give till it hurts." We are not told how this woman felt giving from her lack, but, as for the Macedonians, giving from their lack *did not* hurt: generosity begets joy.

[21] Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53*, 1646.

[22] Bevon, *Luke 3*, 95.

[23] Nolland, *Luke 18:35–24:53*, 979. See also Jesus' conclusion in the notoriously challenging parable of the shrewd manager. While scholars debate the meaning of the parable, Jesus' statement is clear: "One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much…If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?" (Luke 16:10–11)

Conclusion

The widow with her mites presents a limited portrait,[24] lacking internal commentary and explicit blessing or reward from Jesus, but she is consistent with the New Testament teaching of intemperate, contextual generosity, even in the face of hardship.

[24] While her contribution to the overall understanding of generosity is modest, the widow and her mites loom so large in Christian consciousness, that she warrants inclusion in this study to clarify our understanding of her narrative.

CHAPTER FIVE

JOHN 12:1–8

We move from two meager (yet meaningful) coins to a pound of unadulterated perfume. John 12:1–8 presents us with a portrait of generosity that is striking in its opulence.

This passage occurs at a shift in John's gospel from Jesus' ministry to His passion. Jesus approaches Jerusalem as the gravitational pull toward the cross intensifies.[1] John[2] carefully situates this scene after the raising of Lazarus and before that Passover where Jesus Himself would be the Paschal lamb (12:1).[3]

At a dinner given in Jesus' honor,[4] the evening is disrupted when Mary, the sister of Lazarus, anoints Jesus' feet with a large quantity of choice perfume, causing an outcry.

Derivative

Mary's generosity toward Jesus is undergirded by His ministry to her. The raising of her brother is noted before this incident.[5] Jesus loved Mary (John 11:5) and her family, a love that is

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[1] Momentum toward the cross has been building in John's gospel since the beginning of Jesus' ministry, when Jesus reminded His mother that His hour had not yet come (John 2:4; cf. 12:23 and 17:1). Jesus had recently retreated, thwarting attempts on His life before the due time (John 11:54). Now, the hour is at hand and Jesus comes out into the open. See Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, revised ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 510.

[2] This chapter will address John's account of the anointing of Jesus in all its richness. Some references will be made to the accounts in Matthew and Mark's Gospels, adopting the view that there were likely two distinct anointings, one reflected in Luke, another related in Matthew, Mark, and John. For a summary of the similarities, distinctives, and textual issues, see Gibbs*, Matthew 21:1–28:20*, 1382–83 and a helpful chart provided by Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John I–XII*, AB 29 (Garden City, NY: Double Day, 1966), 450.

[3] Note also the use of οὖν in 12:1 and 12:3.

[4] John does not identify the host. Some see Lazarus' posture reclining at the table as evidence that he was not the host, C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 411. Cole suggests that Simon the Leper, named as the host of the anointing in Matthew and Mark, was Lazarus' father. R. A. Cole, *The Gospel according to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 285. Any such relationship is purely speculative. John's account is not concerned with whose house it was, but what happened there.

[5] John 11:2 proleptically identifies "it was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill." The two events are inextricably linked in the mind of John.

demonstrated by His intentional timing, presence with them in mourning, and raising of Lazarus (John 11:17–44). Luke's gospel tells us that Mary sat at Jesus' feet, the posture of a learner (Luke 10:39).[6] She has received Jesus' word, care, and provision, and now she gives to Him.

Intemperate

The dominant trait of Mary's generosity is extravagance. Anointing a guest was a common custom,[7] however, Mary amplifies this everyday interaction. She used spikenard of the highest caliber, described as expensive and unadulterated.[8] Only a small quantity of the pungent liquid was needed, but Mary uses a staggering amount. A λίτρα "is a measure of weight, not volume and denotes a Roman pound, that is 12 ounces."[9] Godet notes, "it was an enormous quantity for a perfume of this price. But nothing must be wanting to the homage of Mary, neither the quality nor the quantity."[10] Unleashing such an inordinate amount of the unguent overwhelms the house.

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[6] Tidball and Tidball, *Message of Women*, 190. Indeed, when we see Mary, she is perpetually at the feet of Jesus, learning (Luke 10:39), mourning (John 11:32), and anointing (John 12:3). Morris understands Mary's anointing of feet, not head, to be indicative of humility, Morris, *John*, 509, 512. Brown is of the opinion that it reinforces the burial preparation: "one does not anoint the feet of a living person, but one might anoint the feet of a corpse as part of the ritual of preparing the whole body for burial," Brown, *John I–XII*, 454. Gibbs understands a totality of anointing, including both head and feet, Gibbs, *Matthew 21:1–28:20,* 1383.

[7] Anointing is a practice that is culturally removed from modern Americans. This disconnect is likely why some read ritual anointing for office into Mary's actions, such as George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, WBC 36 (Waco: Word, 1987), 208; Barrett, *John*, 409. This inference into a common custom is not warranted by the text. Voelz explains that oil "was poured on the living, both to welcome and to honor guests at a feast (see Lk 7:46) and to express happiness at occasions of joy (see Is 61:3; Ps 45:8 [LXX 44:8; ET 45:7], quoted in Heb 1:9; Ps. 23:5 [LXX 22:5] may encompass both contexts," Voelz, *Mark 8:27–16:20,* 1010–11.

[8] The unguent is described as νάρδου πιστικῆς. The adjective πιστικῆς has little attestation and is "variously interpreted, but evidently suggesting exceptional quality," BDAG, s.v. πιστικός. The most likely understanding sees it as related to πίστις, faithful, and meaning in this context, unadulterated. Some more tenuous derivations see the adjective as a demonym or a reference to pistachio. See Morris, *John,* 511–12.

[9] Morris, *John*, 511.

[10] Frédéric Louis Godet, *A Commentary on the Gospel of John*, trans. Timothy Dwight (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1886), 2:206. Outlandish quantities of herbs for burial preparations for the Messiah will again be seen. After Jesus' death Nicodemus procures "a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds [λίτρας] in weight" (John 19:39), an amount appropriate for a royal burial, Morris, *John*, 729.

With olfactory vividness,[11] the Evangelist recalls, "The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume" (John 12:3).[12]

The price of such a gesture is given by Mary's detractor, Judas, as three hundred denarii.[13] It is difficult to establishing ancient currency with any economic certainty. Many scholars cite Matt. 20:2 as proof that a denarius was a day's wage. However, the landowner in the parable is chiefly known for acting with economic unpredictability and generosity. Jesus' parables are populated by people who behave in illogical ways suffused with grace. Fathers hitch up their robes to run, sowers throw seeds on inhospitable earth, and Samaritans bandage Jews left for dead by their countrymen. We can ascertain from Matt. 20:2, 13 that a denarius was not too low for a day's wage, but the text does not say if it was a competitive wage or well above the going rate. Three hundred denarii was at the very least the equivalent of a typical annual salary.[14]

The high price tag invites the question of how Mary could afford this offering. We are not told Mary's financial situation. It is possible that this luxurious gift was purchased from a

[11] Martha's objection when Jesus called for the stone to be removed from Lazarus' tomb was ἤδη ὄζει: "he already stinks" (John 11:39). Martha was concerned about the odor of death. As Jesus' death approaches, Mary provides a pleasing aroma. This may support the reading that Mary was not aware of the significance of her actions: the sisters didn't know that Lazarus would live, nor did they know that Jesus would die.

[12] Some see John's comment about the permeating smell to be symbolic for the lingering aroma of the good deed. It is, they argue, John's way of capturing Jesus' pronouncement that the account of the anointing would accompany the spread of the gospel (Mark 14:9; Matt. 26:13). Scholars point to the rabbinic statement "(The scent of) good oil is diffused from the bed-chamber to the dining hall while a good name is diffused from one end of the world to another," cited in Morris, *John*, 513 and Brown, *John I–XII*, 453. This connection is noted, but dismissed by Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John*, trans. Cecily Hastings, et. al. (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 2:367. While it is an intriguing conjecture, it cannot be justified on the grounds of the text. Barrett avers, "Whether John was aware of these (late) rabbinic passages is highly doubtful," *John*, 412–13.

[13] In Mark 14:5 it is "*more than* three hundred denarii," emphasis added.

[14] On this point, I am indebted to the insight of Dr. Jeffrey Oschwald.

surplus,[15] in which case Mary had freely received and freely gave.[16] Alternately, she may have sacrificed some level of current comfort or future stability[17] in this lavish outpouring. Whatever Mary's monetary condition, she was open-handed in her giving. Her primary concern was not her own needs—they do not even bear mention—but Christ's.

Mary's intemperance is not only costly ointment, but personal involvement. Godet explains, "As if this precious liquid were only common water, she pours it over His feet, and in such abundance that it was as if she were bathing them with it; so she is obligated to wipe them"[18] with her hair. It was a social taboo for an upright Jewish woman to unbind her hair in public, "but Mary did not stop to calculate public reaction."[19] Like the women who traveled with Jesus (Luke 8:1–3), her generosity was not tempered by social mores. "Mary has recognized the dignity and greatness of Jesus,"[20] but did so at the cost of her own dignity.

Expressive

This passage presents a stark contrast between the character and actions of Judas and of Mary. Judas is one of Jesus' chosen band of apostles. Even more, he was trusted with the role of treasurer. Judas was one of twelve men to whom God generously granted the gift of being with

[15] For the ways women would have funds under their control in the ancient Near East context, see chapter three, footnote 19.

[16] This is the language Jesus' uses when He commissions His disciples to go out and minister in Matthew 10. They are to announce the Kingdom of Heaven and dispense supernatural healing because they have received a heavenly visitation. Even though He sends them out into a hostile environment, "like sheep among wolves" (Matt 10:16), they are not to take money or even a change of clothes, but rest in the provision their heavenly Father, given through the hospitality of others. Jesus' statement, "Freely you have received; freely give," (Matt. 10:8) is perhaps the best summary of Christian generosity.

[17] Köstenberger suggests that the funds may have come from Mary's dowry. If so, Mary used a sum kept in store for her bridegroom, to anoint the bridegroom of the Church. Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, BECNT (Grand Rapids; Baker Academic, 2004), 363.

[18] Godet, *John*, 2:206–7.

[19] Morris, *John*, 512.

[20] Schnackenburg, *John*, 2:370.

Jesus, hearing His teaching, benefiting from additional explication, and being sent out by Jesus to heal disease and exorcise demons. In spite of all that God had given him in presence, proximity, and position, we are told two things about Judas: he was about to betray Jesus and he was a thief. Like Adam and Eve, what Judas had been given by God was not enough for him. Judas' objection to Mary's extravagance is not based in compassion for the poor as he purports, it is anger at a missed opportunity for misappropriation.[21] Judas was entrusted with the moneybox and he used to pilfer its contents—the money evidently supplied by Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and Jesus' other patronesses (Luke 8:1–3). Adding to this crime, Judas is about to commit the ultimate treason of handing over the Son of God. Judas' character (thief) is revealed by his actions (stealing).

Judas' avarice is the foil to Mary's expansive generosity. Judas takes from Jesus; Mary gives to Jesus. Expectations are turned on their head. One of Jesus' inner circle embezzles what has been entrusted to him and a woman, who has limited standing in society, gives—and gives with abandon. Godet states, Mary sought to honor Jesus "by a royal prodigality, which alone was capable of expressing the sentiment which inspired her."[22] Jesus' approval of Mary's devotion is seen in his protective statement: "Let her alone." In Matthew and Mark it is even more explicit: "She has done a beautiful thing to me" (Mark 14:6).[23]

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[21] Morris notes that Matthew and Mark follow this account immediately with Judas seeking the chief priests and offering to betray Jesus, which, "opens up the possibility that disappointed avarice may have been one of the motives leading Judas to betray Jesus … The impression left is that Judas seeing one source of personal enrichment lost, hastened to create another," *John,* 514.

[22] Godet, *John*, 2:205.

[23] Note the "to me." It is rare in the gospels to see Jesus receiving ministrations. Angels do so after Jesus' temptation (Matt. 4:11) and in Gethsemane (Luke 22:43); Peter's mother-in-law after her healing (Luke 4:39); the sinful woman of Luke 7:36–50; the women in Luke 8:1–3; Mary here; Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus after Jesus' death (John 19:38–42). The women sought to minister to Jesus' body at His tomb, but were too late. In the context of this study, it is noteworthy that the humans who minister to Jesus are predominantly female.

Contextual

The capable wife and the widow in the temple give from their material context. Mary's context is the temporal situation in the life of Christ. The defining feature of Jesus' life now is His impending death. Time telescopes in on itself and Jesus is "as good as dead."[24] What Mary has done was warranted to prepare God incarnate for burial.

The construction in 12:7 troubled copyists of the New Testament manuscripts[25] and modern scholars alike. The confusion surrounds the subjunctive construction in 12:7: "ἄφες αὐτήν, ἵνα εἰς τὴν ἡμέραν τοῦ ἐνταφιασμοῦ μου τηρήσῃ αὐτό." Most scholars take the ἵνα clause with the subjunctive as imperatival or purpose. In both cases, scholars seem burdened by an overly literal timeline and ask how Jesus can point to saving something that is already wasted. Barrett, for example, laments, "None of these [options] can be dismissed on purely grammatical grounds, and the construction remains uncertain and obscure."[26] In light of the prepositional phrase εἰς τὴν ἡμέραν τοῦ ἐνταφιασμοῦ, purpose seems most warranted.[27] Beasley-Murray notes "it may be viewed as elliptical: 'Let her alone; (she did this) in order to keep it … '"[28] Bruce's paraphrase captures the sense: "Let her keep the credit of having performed the last rites for me here against the day of my burial."[29]

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[24] Gibbs, *Matthew 21:1–28:20,* 1379.

[25] Hence the textual variant οτι.

[26] Barrett, *John*, 414.

[27] Gibbs notes that ἵνα with the subjunctive is used in Matt. 26:56 to indicate purpose identified by Jesus that was not recognized by those performing the action: τοῦτο δὲ ὅλον γέγονεν ἵνα πληρωθῶσιν αἱ γραφαὶ τῶν προφητῶν. Jeffrey Gibbs to author, email, November 7, 2022.

[28] Beasley-Murray, *John*, 205.

[29] F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 257. George MacDonald masterfully lyricizes,

"Her hands unwares outsped his fate,
The truth-king's felon-doom;
The other women were too late,

It is further debated whether Mary was cognizant of Jesus' impending death or unaware, yet timely.[30] What is clear and decisive in the text is that Jesus understood and proclaimed her actions to be significant because they prepare Him for burial. The reason that her apparent waste is justified is because God is about to die.

Judas' statement is true: the price of this ointment could have filled many starving stomachs. But there is something more crucial unfolding before them.[31] The importance of Jesus' mission "overwhelms all other concerns—even concerns for the poor."[32]

Jesus states that "you do *not* always have me" (12:8, emphasis added). This is not a commentary on theocentric giving writ large that excludes neighbor. There was something unique about the presence of God incarnate that warranted prioritizing the presence and needs of Christ. This is why Jesus' disciples left all—even their families and obligations—to follow Him. It does not follow that concern for the poor is now irrelevant. Even as Jesus called for intemperate discipleship during His earthly life, He simultaneously considered the needs of the poor (Matt. 19:16–22).

For he had left the tomb."

George MacDonald, "Mary," *The Complete Poetical Works of George MacDonald,* Kindle Edition (Chicago: Musaicum, 2017), 275.

[30] Brown, *John I–XII*, 454, sees Mary as unconscious of the significant of her actions (as does Gibbs, commenting on Matt.26:6–13, Gibbs, *Matthew 21:1–28:20,* 1379). Beasley-Murray remains agnostic on the question, *John,* 209. Morris sees it likely that Mary anticipated Jesus' death, *John*, 514–15. Voelz, in his explanation of Mark 14:3–9, makes Mary's apprehension and belief in Jesus' predictions of his death the key reason that she is praised by Jesus and that her story accompanies the gospel to this day, Voelz, *Mark 8:27–16:20*, 1012. In the Johannine presentation, the close proximity to Lazarus' burial and the threats on Jesus' life could be read as giving Mary an inkling of Jesus' possible death. However, Jesus had frequently told of his coming death, and his statements elicited confusion (Mark 9:30–32), distress (Matt. 17:22–23), and outright rebuke (Mark 8:31–33).

[31] This echoes the surfeit of the offerings for building the temple, which David noted was fitting "for the palace will not be for man but for the Lord God" (1 Chron. 29:1). This is also why many Christian traditions have beautiful churches, with the most elaborate and ornate features focused in the sanctuary, where the sacramental presence of God visits His people. Bo Giertz writes, "There is a wastefulness of love, a joyful extravagance, which gives its best to Jesus," Bo Giertz, *A Hammer for God*, ed. Eric Andræ (Fort Wayne, IN: Lutheran Legacy, 2010), 311.

[32] Voelz, *Mark 8:27–16:20*, 1011, where he rightly cites Jesus' comments in Mark 2:19–20 regarding appropriate moral practices that must be suspended in light of the presence of Christ.

The statement "the poor you always have with you," should not be read as callous disregard for the poor when quoted by Jesus in John 12 nor when originally penned by Moses in Deut. 15:11. Moses opens his chapter on the year of release by assuring "there will be no poor among you … for the LORD will bless you … if only you will strictly obey … " (15:4–5). He acknowledges that because of Israel's disobedience, "there will never cease to be poor in the land" (15:11). The concession is made in order to command "You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land" (15:11).[33]

Conclusion

Mary's generosity highlights the Christocentricity of giving in the Kingdom of Heaven. Christ is the epicenter of generosity. Christ is the ultimate expression of God's generosity to humanity (Rom. 8:32). As such, Christ is worthy of the most excessive demonstrations of generosity.

The next chapter will explore how the generosity that Christians share is through Christ.

[33] Walter Brueggemann, *Money and Possessions* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2016), 47.

CHAPTER SIX

ACTS 9:36–42

Tabitha provides the final incarnation of feminine generosity.[1] She is a fitting individual with whom to conclude this study. Tabitha reprises themes from the generosity of the capable wife, bringing them into a full Christian expression.

We are told that Tabitha's name, both in Aramaic and Greek, means "gazelle," and she is swift to benevolent works. Tabitha is an integral member of her Christian community,[2] showering the marginalized with provisions. After she falls ill and dies, the church enlists the help of Peter to address the situation.[3]

Expressive

Tabitha is introduced by Luke as "full [πλήρης] of good works and acts of charity" (Acts 9:36). πλήρης is used in Acts to reflect noteworthy character, both positive, such as Stephen ("ἄνδρα πλήρης πίστεως καὶ πνεύματος ἁγίου" Acts 6:5; cf. 7:55) and Barnabas ("ἀνὴρ ἀγαθὸς καὶ πλήρης πνεύματος ἁγίου καὶ πίστεως," Acts 11:24) and negative, such as Elymas ("πλήρης παντὸς δόλου καὶ πάσης ῥᾳδιουργίας" which equates to being a "υἱὲ διαβόλου, ἐχθρὲ πάσης

[1] The women included were selected since they are examples of demonstrated generosity. Other women are seen showing some measure of generosity, but not sufficient to allow textual exploration. Lydia, for example, is noted as having ample resources ("a seller of purple goods," Acts 16:14). Whatever generosity she went on to dispense in Philippi, the text only shares of her extending hospitality to Paul's traveling contingent, which would be a normal social function at the time.

[2] Tabitha is described as a μαθήτρια, the only use of the feminine form of disciple in the New Testament.

[3] Peter was approximately 10 miles away in Lydda, where he had healed Aeneas. This continues Luke's pattern of pairing a narrative about a male character with a narrative of a female character. It is noteworthy that Luke devotes more time to describing the person of Tabitha and the attendant miracle than he does to Aeneas, underscoring the importance of women in the church. See Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Acts* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 159; Craig Keener, *Acts*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 2:1710; Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 328, 330–31.

δικαιοσύνης" Acts 13:10). Tabitha's generosity flows from her character and is described using the language of plenty. She doesn't just dabble in good works, she is brimming over with them.

The ESV translation "acts of charity"[4] obscures the manner of her benevolence. The focus of ἐλεημοσύνη is financial support, hence the KJV's rendering "almsdeeds." Like the women who supported Jesus' ministry, her generosity was not exclusively monetary, but fiscal contributions were a key form it took.

Intemperate

Tabitha's generosity overflows in provision for the widows in the church at Joppa. Luke's declaration that Tabitha "was full of good works and acts of charity" (Acts 9:26) indicates nimiety. The volume and variety of her giving is illustrated through the abundance of clothing she made for the widows in the church: both tunics (χιτών) and outerwear (ἱμάτιον). When Peter arrives[5] in the upper room[6] where Tabitha's corpse has been laid out, the grieving widows show him the many garments she had woven. The middle voice of ἐπιδεικνύμεναι makes clear "the

[4] So also HCSB, NASB, and RSV. NIV and NLT render "helping the poor." NKJV translates "charitable deeds."

[5] Commentators note the urgency of the disciples' message to Peter "because custom demanded rapid burial of the corpse," Keener, *Acts*, 2:1717. These disciples sent word to Peter expecting him to do something. It may be that they knew they were out of their depth and his help generally. If they expected Peter to resurrect Tabitha, it is remarkable. Though Peter had performed healings through the authority of Jesus, he had not, as far as we know, raised the dead. Jesus raised the dead, but He was never asked to do so. Mary, Martha (John 11:3), Jarius (Mark 5:22–23), and a centurion (Luke 7:2) send to Jesus when someone they care about is near death. Understanding the finality of death, Jairus' servants ask "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the Teacher any further?" (Mark 5:35; cf. 2 Sam. 12:22–23). Only the Shunamite woman seems to ask for resuscitation of her dead (2 Kings 4:28), though perhaps that is more accusation than petition.

Their petition is either a sign of desperation or reflective that these disciples, like Abraham, consider that God was able even to raise her from the dead, from which, literally speaking, they did receive her back (Heb 11:19). This appears to be intemperate hope, undeterred by fear of death.

[6] Scholars suggest the upper room mentioned may link this miracle to 1 Kings 17:9–10:24 and 2 Kings 4:8–32, but too little is known about ANE architecture to say if this is a significant detail or a natural designation. See Keener, *Acts*, 2:1717.

women *show* the garments *on themselves*, i.e. as they are wearing them."[7] The widows are arrayed in her good works.[8] The garments are not incidental visual aids; they demonstrate that Tabitha's generosity is knitted into the warp and weft of the church at Joppa.[9] This is not an off-handed knitting project, but industrious generosity that makes first one garment, then another and another and another. Like the capable woman, "She seeks wool and flax, and works with willing hands" (Prov. 31:13).

Note that generosity multiplies itself in a virtuous cycle. Tabitha's intemperate giving has fostered ardent affection from the church.

Contextual

We have seen handiworks crafted to serve others previously in this study. The capable wife centers her generosity on her household: husband, children, maidservants. Tabitha is focused on the household of faith (Gal. 6:9–10). There is no mention of Tabitha's family in this passage. The widows are the ones sitting vigil with Tabitha after her death and who rejoice when she is

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[7] BDAG, s.v. ἐπιδείκνυμι, 1.

[8] Tabitha did not only adorn herself in good works (1 Tim 2:9–10), but others as well. Compare the attire in the great nuptial announcement:

> the marriage of the Lamb has come,
> and his Bride has made herself ready;
> it was granted her to clothe herself
> with fine linen, bright and pure"—
> for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. (Rev. 19:7–8)

Lest this be seen as meritorious of the saints, the evangelist later tells us that the great throng of saints "have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (Rev. 7:14). Apart from Christ, our good deeds are filthy rags (Isa. 64:6). Through His purifying blood, they are radiant.

[9] The implication, artfully drawn out by George MacDonald, is that the widows were naked, and she clothed them (Matt. 25:36):

> Home, home she went, and plied the loom,
> And Jesus' poor array'd.
> She died—they wept about the room,
> And showed the coats she made.

MacDonald, "Dorcas," *Complete Works,* 364.

raised. Note that Peter presents her alive to "the saints and widows," singling out the widows for mention because of the special role Tabitha held for them. It is possible that Tabitha was herself a widow. If so, she did not hoard her resources to preserve her own security. The church has become her family and she showered them with gifts.[10]

This passage bears similarities to other resurrection accounts,[11] including the raising of the widow of Zarephath's son; the Shunamite woman's son; the widow at Nain's son; and Jairus' daughter.[12] In each of these instances, a parent is bereft at the loss of their only child. Keener notes that it is "likely that these widows are dependent on … [Tabitha] here, as the widow in Luke 7:12 would have been dependent on her deceased son, deepening the sense of tragedy."[13] It is as if Tabitha is all these widows have to live on.

There is also a pronounced physical context to this narrative. Tabitha's generosity, and the generous miracle of Peter, are markedly corporeal. The Kingdom of Heaven is not a spirituality divorced from our physical existence, but an incarnate reality. It follows that Christian generosity is not ephemeral well wishes, but tangible and bodily, concerned with the practicalities of life (James 2:15–16). Tabitha cared for widows, providing shirts and coats to cover and warm them.

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[10] Witherington takes the narrative to "suggest that she was woman of means, with the leisure and freedom to do good deeds for others," *Acts*, 331. Gaventa notes, "this description of her conforms to Luke's implicit association of faithful believers with the responsible use of possessions (see, e.g., 4:26–37; 16:15; 20:33–35)," *Acts*, 159.

[11] For a helpful summary of the parallels, see Keener, *Acts*, 2:1711.

[12] Some scholars cite the similarity between ταλιθα and Ταβιθά as a link between the raising of Jairus' daughter and the raising of Tabitha, C. K. Barrett, *Acts 15–28*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2004),199; F. F. Bruce, *Acts,* NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 213; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Acts*, AB 31 (Garden City, NY: Double Day, 1999), 443 and 445; Witherington, *Acts*, 332–33. There is obvious assonance between ταλιθα and Ταβιθά, but Luke does not use ταλιθα κουμ (Mark 5:41) in his account of raising Jairus' daughter. He records Jesus' words as παις εγειρε (Luke 8:54). While a correspondence may be in the background, the case must not be overstated. If Luke, methodical as he was, desired this connection to be made, he could have used the Marcan phrasing in his Gospel or made an explicit connection in Acts.

[13] Keener, *Acts*, 2:1718.

In turn, the widows wash and lay out Tabitha's corpse.[14] When Peter comes, he kneels, he turns, he takes her hand.

The Kingdom of God is not escapist: it is at hand. Thus, John describes his message as "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life" (1 John 1:1). The care of God, given through His people, extends to eyelids, knuckles, and knees.

Derivative

Peter generously gives life to Tabitha, but not of his own authority.[15] Jesus raised with a word (Luke 7:14; 8:54; John 11:43), but Peter prays, dependent on the power of God for the resurrection (Cf. Mark 9:28–29).

Tabitha's generosity is interwoven with the gifts of God in her own life. She is given spiritual life in Christ (made a μαθήτρια), a church family, and then physical life through Peter's miracle. Christians are continually filled with good, which then overflows to those around them. This is not a simple tit for tat—God gives, so we make a gesture of giving—but a vivification. Tabitha's generosity results in the preservation of human life through almsdeeds. The generosity of God results in faith and life everlasting to those in Joppa who heard of her resurrection (Acts 9:42) and Tabitha was drawn into the greater work of God to expand his church.

[14] Gaventa notes, "the inclusion of this intimate detail here provides one of several indications of Tabitha's significance to this community of believers," *Acts*, 160.

[15] Fitzmyer nicely captures, "In virtue of Jesus' power, Peter heals and resuscitates," *Acts*, 443. The authority is both delegated by Jesus, but also in line with the generous, plosive power of Jesus' work. See also Gaventa, *Acts*, 161–62.

Conclusion

Tabitha mirrors the generosity of the capable wife of Proverbs 31, but does so in a way that is reshaped by the gospel, focused on the church and mission of Jesus. Her generosity benefits those close to her (Prov. 31:1–12). She industriously works in handicrafts (Prov. 31:13, 19, 21–22), but the garments Tabitha makes are not draped on her family or turned for a profit, but given to the household of the faith. She cares for the poor (Prov. 31:20), focusing on the vulnerable within the Christian community. Like the capable wife, others rise up and sing Tabitha's praises (Prov. 31:28–31; Acts 9:39).

The centerpiece of the poem about the capable wife describes Tabitha:

> She puts her hands to the distaff,
> and her hands hold the spindle.
> She opens her hand to the poor
> and reaches out her hands to the needy. (Prov 31:19–20)

CHAPTER SEVEN

IMPLICATIONS

Summary

Generosity is fundamental to the character of God and infused into creation. In the opening chapters of Genesis, God gives abundantly to and through the created order and deputizes humanity to be agents of His giving, extending His benevolence.

Our study focused on women as agents of generosity. Feminine generosity pulses through scripture, enriching the community of faith and energizing the mission of God. A pattern of generosity is provided at the close of the book of Proverbs. The practical instruction and personification of wisdom are distilled into an archetypical portrait of a capable wife in Prov. 31:10–31. The אֵשֶׁת־חַיִל serves as a pattern of generosity, industriously working and abundantly giving to those within her sphere of influence.

The incarnation of Christ marks a significant progression of generosity. God's generosity reaches its *ne plus ultra* in the gift of His beloved Son. Jesus is both the greatest gift and the greatest giver, inaugurating the inbreaking of the Kingdom of Heaven with all its abundance. The bounty of the Kingdom of Heaven is reflected in the feminine generosity displayed in the gospels and Acts. Women receive the gifts of God through the ministry of Jesus. God's generosity forms and fills them to give. Women make essential contributions to the mission and work of Christ as agents of generosity that is derivative, expressive, contextual, and intemperate. Generosity externalizes character worked by God, meted out through the life circumstances of each individual. These women give liberally, unconcerned by social conventions or personal ramifications.

Generosity shows canonical development as adoption into God's family supersedes one's affections and allegiances. Generosity always centers on Christ, the locus of God's generosity toward us, "for from him and through him and to him are all things" (Rom. 11:36).

Implications

In conclusion, I would like to consider some of the ways that the Western church's expression of generosity can grow and be realigned by the biblical portrait of feminine generosity. There are, in all corners of the world, female disciples practicing intemperate generosity in thousands of ways. In my own parish, I could talk of Krista Cooke, Yvette Afriyie-Agyemang, or Debra Terhune giving endlessly without fanfare or thanks.

There are, however, too many of us who hold back, hesitant. The generosity of the church today is often fettered and frail. Mercifully, the antidote for this malady is the gospel. If the church today falls short in the implications drawn out below, I am the chief offender.

Essential

The generosity of women is not ancillary to the mission of Jesus. It is not a nice augment to the generosity of men. Women make essential contributions to the ministry of Christ and the life of the church. If women do not exercise generosity, the church is poorer. Women should be encouraged to exercise their gifts of generosity within the church and the community.

Derivative

Humans give because they have been deputized to participate in God's generosity. Discussions of generosity often spring from capital campaigns or need for funds. Teaching on Christian generosity is reduced to stewardship talks. As already noted in the introduction, if we start with us and our stuff, we've already gotten generosity backwards.

Humans form the central link in generosity. We have received from God, and then we are deputized to give. The wonder of Christian generosity is that God invites us to participate in His economy of giving. This is a fundamental aspect of what it means to be human. Unlike the rest of the created order, we are invited to participate in God's ordering and abundance. Properly understood, Christian generosity is not an isolated task, it is an integrated role. It is a privilege to be independent agents of God's generosity. This is why God's people, from David raising funds to build the temple to the Macedonians supporting the Jerusalem church, view it as an honor to give.

Expressive

Giving externalizes internal character worked by God. Generosity is the natural state of the Christian. Based on the healing, resurrection, and cleansing we've been given, we give (Matt. 10:5–8). Freely we have received. Freely we give. When Jesus stands at the final judgment and tells the generous Christians that they have fed, welcomed, clothed, and visited Him, they don't know what He is talking about (Matt. 25:31–40). Giving was an unconscious way of life. What else would they have done? It was instinctual and automatic.

If Christians are not giving generously, it is symptomatic that something is wrong. Our reticence to give indicates that we have not grasped all that has been given to us (Matt. 18:21–35; Luke 7:36–50).

Intemperate

Generosity is unfettered. Christians give liberally, unconcerned by social conventions or personal ramifications.

The only woman in our survey who did not display intemperance is the capable wife. She was generous and industrious, but not out of proportion. The inbreaking of the reign of heaven inaugurates a time of abundance, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined (Isa. 25:6). Intemperance erupts in the people who have come into the orbit of the reign of heaven. The capable woman outfitted her family and extended her hand to the poor. Tabitha made the poor of the church her family, dressing them in tunics, cloaks, and affection. Compare also the widow at Zarephath to the widow with her mites. The widow at Zarephath shared all that she had to live on, but only at the request, and with the reassurance, of the prophet (1 Kings 17:11–14). The widow in the temple, apparently, needed no prompting. We cannot know if the widow in the temple was a follower of Jesus, but her actions mirror the trusting generosity He adjured (Luke 12:22–31).

Perhaps influenced by a down-to-earth Protestant work ethic, giving in the Western church is typically moderate and sensible. We qualify. We rationalize. I fear that we are formulating our giving based on earthly considerations, not allowing them to be shaped by the expansive generosity of the reign of heaven. The generosity of scripture knows nothing of modern Western culture's insistence on boundaries. Generosity overruns what is prudent, what is seemly, to the blessing of the recipient and the joy of the giver. Christian generosity will sometimes, perhaps often, mean doing things that only make sense when illuminated by the dawn of heaven.

Contextual

Generosity is meted out through the life circumstances of each individual woman, attuned to one's particular place in the world. Christian generosity is not discrete donations at a distance but integrated into the relationships and patterns of our lives. For the women living during the earthly life of Christ, generosity meant complete devotion to the person of Christ. For those of us

living in the age of the church, like benevolent Tabitha, it primarily means caring for Christ as we find Him in our brother, our neighbor, and the least of these.

Figuring out what generosity means and how it is lived out is the hard work of renewed minds. It may be as grand as selling all that you have and giving to the poor. Perhaps it would be easier if it were such a noble gesture, but it is more likely that our generosity will be played out over a thousand mundane moments: giving your money to relatives who recompense you only with manipulation and guilt; giving your sincere attention to the lonely widow as she tells you the same story for the seventh time; giving the right of way in bumper-to-bumper traffic that sets your teeth on edge. Indeed, this is only fitting for the little christs who follow in the cruciform path of Jesus, whose immeasurable generosity was not impressive by human estimation as He was placed by an unwed mother into a borrowed manger.

If this giving is to be Christian giving, it shall not be done grudgingly, with a martyr's air. We are not even exempted from generosity if we live in an unjust context. Christian generosity cascades out, pressed down, shaken together, running over, drenching us and everyone in our sphere with its refreshing grace.

Christocentric

Generosity flows from and returns to Christ. Our generosity will be bastardized if it is reduced to moralism. Generosity is not something to be conjured up in ourselves.[1] Christian generosity is given by the person and work of Christ and must always center on Him.

Christ is the ultimate expression of God's generosity toward us: "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?"

[1] Paul's pattern in 2 Cor. 8–9 show that exhortation and teaching do play a role.

(Rom. 8:32). Indeed, “from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace” (John 1:16). God’s provision in Christ gives us the security and resources from which we can be generous. Christ’s generosity toward us tumbles out as we join in the joyous generosity of the reign of heaven.

Far too often we ask about giving like the rich young ruler. We seek narrow advice to confirm our lifestyle and allow us to rest comfortably. If we resist the invitation of Christ, we cheat ourselves not only out of treasures in heaven, but the supreme gift of following Christ (Mark 10:17–27).

It is as though Jesus can already hear our objections to His admonition to, “Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Luke 12:33–34). We are not open-handed and intemperate, but white-knuckled and parsimonious. In the face of our clawing and clinging insecurity, Jesus assures: “Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32).

May God grant us to be a generous Easter people, drowned in Christ’s generous outpouring in death, vivified by His resurrection.

Break the box and shed the nard;
Stop not now to count the cost;
Hither bring pearl, opal, sard;
Reck not what the poor have lost;
Upon Christ throw all away:
Know ye, this is Easter Day.

Build His church and deck His shrine,
Empty though it be on earth;
Ye have kept your choicest wine—
Let it flow for heavenly mirth;
Pluck the harp and breathe the horn:

Know ye not 'tis Easter morn?

Gather gladness from the skies;
Take a lesson from the ground;
Flowers do ope their heavenward eyes
And a Spring-time joy have found;
Earth throws Winter's robes away,
Decks herself for Easter Day.

Beauty now for ashes wear,
Perfumes for the garb of woe,
Chaplets for dishevelled hair,
Dances for sad footsteps slow;
Open wide your hearts that they
Let in joy this Easter Day.

Seek God's house in happy throng;
Crowded let His table be;
Mingle praises, prayer, and song,
Singing to the Trinity.
Henceforth let your souls alway
Make each morn an Easter Day.[2]

[2] Gerard Manley Hopkins, "Easter," *The Major Works*, ed. Catherine Phillips (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 83–84.

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