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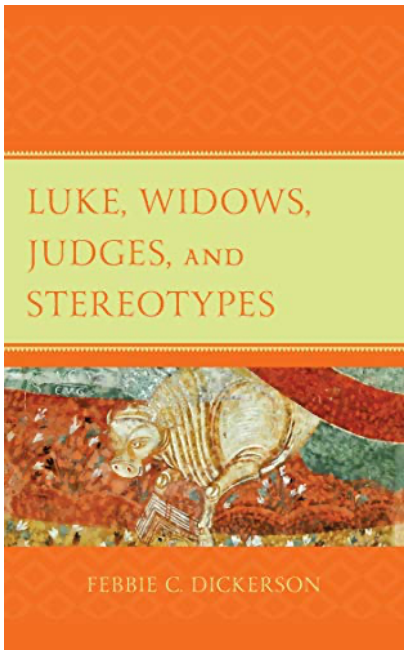

Febbie C. Dickerson

Luke, Widows, Judges, and Stereotypes

Womanist Readings of Scripture

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This book is a revised dissertation submitted to Vanderbilt University in 2017 under the supervision of Amy-Jill Levine. In this womanist reading of the parable of the widow and judge (Luke 18), Febbie C. Dickerson questions the traditional, stereotypical readings of the widow as old and of low socioeconomic status and the judge as one who abuses power and acts immorally. These readings, which appear across the interpretive spectrum, overlook the characters' ambiguous characterizations and the parable's challenges to stereotypes of widows and powerful men. They limit readers' options in their interpretive encounters. Often used as a tool to serve the dominant group's purposes, stereotypes emphasize differences ("real or imagined"), conceal commonalities, and mask diversity within groups. Dickerson argues that there is much more to the parable than a lesson in prayer, writing, "I suspect there is more to the story than what Luke provides and what commentators have said. And there are more readings of the story, both historical and hermeneutical, than Luke offers. What the evangelist forecloses, I seek hermeneutically to reopen" (31). Drawing on postcolonial and womanist biblical reading strategies in concert with historical-critical and literary approaches, she broaches the issues of gender, power, and stereotypes from her social contexts as a woman, African American, biblical scholar, and minister in the black church tradition. Dickerson challenges the reader to disengage from stereotypical views of widows and powerful men and recognize the biblical text's contours and complexities. Not only does Dickerson question traditional interpretations; she also questions Luke's narrative framework and

interpretation of the sacred text. His stereotyped portrayals of widows and judges deviate from ancient norms.

The book comprises seven chapters with a short conclusion. In chapter 1, an introduction, Dickerson draws attention to the price of stereotypes on African American men and women and how stereotypes function in society and biblical interpretation. The Bible, Dickerson argues, is rife with stereotypes and seeks to disrupt or deconstruct them. She introduces Melissa Harris-Perry's discussion on three historical stereotypes of African American women: irrationally angry, hypersexual, and asexual. These stereotypes are associated with Sapphire, Jezebel, and Mammy, which Dickerson elaborates in chapter 5.

Chapter 2 offers a close, narrative reading of the biblical text. Dickerson examines textual and linguistic problems concerning the stereotyped widow and judge and points out how cultural biases concerning widows and judges influence readers' reading of the parable. For instance, should the widow's request be interpreted as "vengeance" or "justice"? The Greek word ἐκδίκησόν is ambiguous. While many translators translate the word as "justice," literary evidence suggests that the notion of vengeance is plausible. Toward the end of the chapter, Dickerson discusses how the depiction of the widow as persistent in prayer in the black Christian tradition, perpetuated by African American homilists, has contributed to the stereotypical views of the widow and expectations of African American women.

Chapter 3 provides a survey of the parable's reception history and how allegorical interpretations from church fathers and stereotypical interpretations from later exegetes contributed to interpreting the parable. The problem with the stereotype of the widow seeking justice is that it limits her agency and places her in a perpetually marginalized position (58). Moreover, the stereotypes of the widow as needy and vulnerable do not reflect the reality of widows in the Bible and the Roman world. In chapter 4 Dickerson points out that widows in the Bible and antiquity represented all social strata and had different forms of access to power. Not all of them were needy and vulnerable, poor and helpless. Instead, many were active agents: willful and opinionated, bold and tenacious. Dickerson accuses Luke of deviating from ancient and biblical depictions of widows and domesticating the parable's widow by turning her into a prayerful petitioner and an exemplar for believers within the early community to emulate (79). For Dickerson, the widow is not requesting justice but seeking vengeance. As for the judge, in light of the ancient norms of masculinity, Luke's presentation of the judge's masculinity is both ideal and compromised. He is a magistrate with great power and wisdom in the public space. Still, he acquiesces to the widow's demand for fear of physical violence. Or using the Greek boxing terminology (ὑπωπιάζω), he is afraid of getting a "black eye" from the woman.

Chapter 5, the book's longest, focuses on Luke's widow and contains a comprehensive discussion of three cultural constructs of African American women popularized in the media and entertainment

before and during chattel slavery: Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire. Mammy is associated with asexual, high-maternal African American domestic workers subservient to their white masters and subscribing to white culture. Jezebel is a sexually promiscuous, oversexed black woman who uses her assets to manipulate and seduce men, both African American and white, to get what she wants. She is sexually aggressive, and her body becomes a marker of sexual availability. Sapphire is a belligerent, bold, and abrasive black woman who would confront anyone who disrespects her. Dickerson puts these constructed stereotypes in a critical intertextual conversation with the parable's widow by casting her as representative of each of these stereotypes to add complexity and nuances to the parable. The application of these figures allows the widow to speak on her terms, reveals the limitations of stereotype, and encourages victims of stereotype, that is, African American women and the widow, to (re)claim their agency.

Chapter 6 turns attention to the modern stereotypes of African American men/masculinity and their impact on black masculinity. The three stereotypes discussed are the Cool Black Male who performs with a stoic and serious masculine public demeanor; the Master-Pastor who rules his church as a slave master ruled the plantation with exploitation, arrogance, and malfeasance; and the Foolish Judge who uses humor to critique society. Dickerson puts these stereotypes in dialogue with the parable's judge by casting him as the Cool Black Male, the Master-Pastor, and the Foolish Judge to open the way for readers to reevaluate the judge and African American masculinity.

The book is a welcoming, stimulating addition to the topic of stereotypes at the time the United States and the world are fraught with ongoing concerns about racial injustice and systematic racism. Dickerson's book is a provocative read for those familiar with and new to this arena and is a fine case study of contextual engagement with Scripture. Dickerson reminds readers that everyone interprets the scriptural text differently and encourages readers to discern their contexts and perspectives and create their own voice: "Interpretations of the biblical text can be and are often different depending on the context of the reader" (199). She goes on inviting readers to appreciate the other contexts and perspectives of those involved in biblical interpretation, stating, "If the Bible is to have relevance in this twenty-first century, readers must examine themselves as they engage the biblical text and look to see the good in interpretations other than their own" (200). The book will challenge the conventional assumptions about the widow and the judge and invite readers to contend with ambiguity. It will encourage readers to deconstruct the presumed fixed categories, interrogate their biases, and discern the text at an unconventional level.

Even though Dickerson's primary audience is readers in the black church tradition, all readers will benefit from her work. It provides readers with an understanding of racial bias and marginalization toward African American communities, past and present. For one, I found the book richly illuminating, a valuable contribution to Lukan scholarship, particularly postcolonial and womanist biblical research. Dickerson's engaging writing makes the book easily accessible to a nonspecialist readership. The book's greatest strength is the interweaving of the stereotypes of widows and

judges in traditional interpretations with the stereotypes of African American men and women in literature and the media to yield an alternative reading of the text. The work is innovative and interdisciplinary and is recommended as a fine starting point for advancing a larger conversation about racism, sexism, and stereotypes in biblical interpretation and society.