

# Chapter 13

## Orphans, Widows, and the Economics of the Early Church



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**Abstract** The New Testament describes “religion that is pure and undefiled” as consisting of “care for orphans and widows in their distress.” This essay surveys the demography of orphans and widows in the Greco-Roman world and considers how the economic ramifications of these realities in early Christian communities can help interpreters make sense of otherwise opaque biblical texts.

**Keywords** Orphans in early Christianity · Widows in early Christianity · New Testament, economic interpretations of · First Letter to Timothy (New Testament)

### 13.1 Introduction

The historical study of economics and religion, as John Murray (2013b) notes, is typically approached from one of two directions. One approach employs economic ways of thinking to understand religious beliefs and behaviors. A second approach examines religious beliefs and behaviors in terms of the influence they have exerted on various economic aspects of the societies in which they are embraced.

This essay falls in the former category and intersects with Murray’s own research on the dynamics of life in religious communities and the welfare of women and children (1992, 1995, 2013a; Murray and Cosgel 1998). It takes as a point of departure the New Testament description of “religion that is pure and undefiled” as consisting of “care for orphans and widows in their distress” (James 1:27). I will briefly survey the demography of orphans and widows in the Greco-Roman world before considering how the social and economic ramifications of these realities in early

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Christian communities can shed light on otherwise opaque biblical texts, in particular Acts 6:1–6 and 1 Timothy 5:3–16.

## 13.2 Orphans in the Greco-Roman World

Most present-day languages apply the term “orphan” to children who have lost their parents. In ancient Greece and Rome, by contrast, the term (Gk. *orphanos*; Lat. *orphanus*, *pupillos*, *orbus*) typically denoted a child who had lost either parent. This definition of “orphan” lasted well into the early modern period. More commonly in antiquity, status as an orphan implied the loss of one’s father, even if the mother was still living. Shorter life expectancies for males and females alike, due to such factors as malnutrition and poor sanitation, created the conditions in which high numbers of children would lose a parent. Insofar as men married for the first time at an older age than women—perhaps a difference of 7 or 8 years on average (Saller 1987)—fathers would therefore be more likely to die before mothers, all else being equal. Mortality rates for women related to complications from pregnancy and labor were high, while frequent warfare led to higher mortality rates for men. Athens and some other Greek city-states had public programs for the care of war orphans, such as provision for a girl’s dowry, but this was the exception rather than the rule (Fitzgerald 2016, p. 37–39). Fewer legal arrangements are found on the books in Rome of the late republic and early principate, where attention was focused on regulation of guardians, many of whom were more interested in expropriating the inheritance of their charges than in seeing to their welfare (Saller 1994, p. 182–189; Miller 2003, p. 30–31).

By their teenage years, it is estimated that over one-third of children in the first-century Roman Empire were fatherless and therefore counted as orphans (Krause 1994, p. 9; Scheidel 2009). Census records suggest that 7 percent of children were “complete” orphans, though Hübner (2009, p. 523–524) suggests the figure was likely much higher. Only 20 percent of children would have reached adulthood with both parents still alive (Saller 2007, p. 91). Orphanhood might be a temporary status in the event that a widow was able to remarry.

Given their ubiquity in the ancient Mediterranean world, it is surprising to see how rarely orphans appear in the New Testament writings. Unambiguous references to orphans are found in only a few passages. Jesus (John 14:18) and Paul (1 Thess. 2:17) use orphan language figuratively to describe the sense of loneliness and abandonment that often arises when the disciple is separated from the master. Only in James 1:27 is there an explicit, if fleeting, mention of the *orphanos*, alongside the widows for whom believers are exhorted to provide care. Yet there are a few other texts in which an ancient reader would naturally assume the presence of orphans. The son of the widow of Nain, whose death is recorded in Luke 7:12, would count as an orphan by the ancient definition, as would the children of the widows in 1 Timothy 5:3–16 (see below). Orphans would also likely have accompanied the

widows receiving assistance from the early Christian community as described in Acts 6:1–2. The analogy used by Paul in Galatians 4:1–2 likewise presupposes orphan status for the child under the care of a guardian (Dunn 1993, p. 210–11). Finally, the enigmatic priest-king Melchizedek described in Hebrews 7:3 as “without father, without mother” might also technically qualify, though it appears he never had parents to lose in the first place, since he is also “without genealogy.”

### 13.3 Widows in the Greco-Roman World

Among the consequences of high mortality rates for males was not only a large population of orphans but of widows as well. This partly explains why they are so frequently mentioned together in biblical texts (Exod. 22:22–24; Deut. 10:18; 24:17; 27:19; Isa. 1:17; Ezek. 22:7). Most women in the Roman world would acquire the status of widow (Gk. *chēra*; Lat. *vidua*) at some point in their lives, at least once if not multiple times. At any given time, it has been estimated that 25–30% of all women were widows (Kraus 1994, p. 67–73). Widowhood might be a brief state for some women, but many would have remained without a husband for a considerable length of time before remarriage or death. Because women would often become widows in their early 30s, the image of an elderly woman conjured by the term “widow” for English speakers is somewhat inaccurate. (According to Kraus 1994, p. 68, the age of the average widow was 52.6.) On account of lower life expectancies, elderly women—if “elderly” is reserved for those above, say, 60 years of age—would have been relatively rare.

Women of childbearing age were generally encouraged and expected to remarry. The pressure to remarry could take legal forms, as in the Augustan legislation of the first century that imposed testamentary disabilities on women up to age 50 who remained single (*Lex iulia de maritandis ordinibus*; cf. Saller 2007, p. 91). By age 50, however, the likelihood of remarriage for a widow would have already declined significantly. Remarriage carried no social stigma in the Roman world, yet the ideal in many circles was for a widow to remain single, out of devotion to their deceased husbands. Thus, while widows could suffer from a reputation for being headstrong, busybodies, sexually profligate, and given to drink (Walcot 1991; Kartzow 2005), they could also be idealized as long-suffering exemplars of fidelity, praised in literature and in epitaphs as a *monandros* (Gk.) or *univira* (Lat.) (Rawson 1986, p. 33–34; McGinn 1999, p. 621).

Whereas many widows appear to have enjoyed the freedom from male authority afforded by their circumstances (too much so, in the eyes of many pagan and, later, Christian observers), the burdens imposed would have outweighed this benefit for widows without the means to support themselves. Constant reminders by Greco-Roman moralists to respect and care for the elderly is an indication that the duty was often neglected. There existed very little in the way of a publicly funded

“safety net” for the needy. Without property or an inheritance, widows had only their relatives for support. Under Jewish law, the institution of levirate marriage (Deut. 25:5–10) dictated that a widow would come under the protection of the dead husband’s relative, who would be expected to father a child to carry on the name of the deceased and inherit his property, in addition to supporting the widow. No such laws were on the books among Gentiles until the second century AD (Parkin 1997). Care for widows remained a feature of Jewish synagogues in the Roman period.

Widows might receive an inheritance from their husbands but were typically dependent on their grown children, who were more commonly favored in their father’s will. Having many children was thus considered a blessing. It comes as no surprise, however, to encounter literary and legal discussions of children who refused to meet their responsibility to their mothers or carried out their duties only begrudgingly (Malherbe 2008). Mothers could make use of their minor children’s inherited assets (usufruct) in coordination with a legally appointed guardian, when the terms of the will permitted (Grubbs 2002, p. 219–262). Remarriage, however, remained the best solution to the problem of support for a woman left alone by the death of her husband. Widows often needed a dowry to remarry, and some children naturally resented the way in which this would have adverse financial consequences for their own inheritance.

In comparison with orphans, widows appear in the pages of the New Testament with great frequency. The scribes and Pharisees are castigated for “devouring widows’ houses” out of greed (Matt. 23:14). In a memorable parable, Jesus tells of a widow who wears down a corrupt judge who finally agrees to take her case, if only to stop her constant complaining (Luke 18:2–5). A number of individual widows past and present are also singled out for their special faith (Luke 2:36–37; 4:25–26). Jesus effusively praises a particular poor widow who, in contributing her last two coins, is more generous than the wealthy (Mark 12:42–43; Luke 21:2–3). Another is comforted by Jesus when he raises her only son from death (Luke 7:12–15). A group of widows likewise accompanies Peter when he raises Dorcas from the dead (Acts 9:36–42). In response to the Corinthians’ question about matters pertaining to marriage, Paul counsels “the unmarried and widows” to remain single for the time being, so long as they can control their passions (1 Cor. 7:8–9). Many of these passages presuppose the same precarious status that is reflected in discussions of widowhood in the wider Greco-Roman world (Bremmer 1995).

### 13.4 Two Case Studies

Orphans and especially widows feature prominently in two New Testament texts that come into clearer focus when viewed through an economic lens: Acts 6:1–6 and 1 Timothy 5:3–16.

### 13.4.1 Acts 6:1–6

Widows appear in the *Acts of the Apostles*, the first “sequel” to the Gospels chronicling the early days of the Christian movement after the death of Jesus. In Acts 6:1–6, “the Hellenists” (Greek-speaking Jews) complain against “the Hebrews” (Aramaic-speaking Jews) because their widows are being neglected in the daily distribution of food. The numbers of widows in both groups are high enough to merit the immediate attention of the community’s leaders. The solution to this inequitable treatment is the appointment of special “deacons” who can oversee these daily affairs, thereby leaving the apostles free to teach and preach the good news about Jesus. Pressures exerted by Augustan legislation on widows to remarry resulted in a situation where the relatively large number of widows in early Christian communities would have been conspicuous. Indeed, the large number of widows and orphans in the church was noted late in the second century by Lucian of Samosata, a satirist, in his account of the charlatan Peregrinus and his conversion to Christianity (*Peregr.* 12). As outsiders sought to understand the nature of this new movement, its attention to widows and orphans led many to think of it as similar to other mutual aid societies found around the Mediterranean (Clark 2004, p. 21). Care for widows had also been a feature of the Jewish synagogue in the first century. Inasmuch as the Christian church in many ways modeled itself on the synagogue as an institution, members and nonmembers alike perhaps assumed that it would perform many of the same functions the synagogue was expected to perform, especially as the earliest members of the movement were almost exclusively Jewish (Winter 2003, p. 27).

The author notes in Acts 6:1 that the internal tensions over the provision of food for widows arose “when the disciples were increasing in number.” Sadly, no membership figures are available, hindering any attempt at a precise statistical analysis of the problem. According to Acts 2:41, 3000 people joined the fledgling movement in response to Peter’s Pentecost sermon. Most were pilgrims visiting for the Jewish Festival of Weeks (Shavuot) and would have returned to their homes elsewhere. The community of believers at Jerusalem, then, was probably much smaller.

Scarcity of resources surely exacerbated the preexisting tensions between the Greek-speaking and Aramaic-speaking members. Problems of scale also provide the context for understanding the situation in Jerusalem. After Pentecost, the faithful were “of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own” (Acts 4:32–34). Many landowners sold their property, and with the proceeds “distribution was made to each as any had need” (2:44–45). In addition to shared meals, study, and prayer, this idyllic gathering “held all things in common” (2:43). How long this practice continued is unclear, and historians are divided on the accuracy of this snapshot of the church’s early period (see, e.g., Ascough 2000; Capper 2002). From Mikhail Gorbachev, who called Jesus “the first socialist,” all the way back to Karl Kautsky and Friedrich Engels, Marxists have long pointed to these texts in support of the claim that early Christianity was a utopia guided by collectivist principles from which it quickly deviated. According to

Acts, however, this experiment in communal living operated on a voluntary basis. There is no demand for the abolition of private property, and when Jesus' disciples are exhorted to give up their possessions, they are to be delivered directly to the poor or to the church for redistribution.

By the time the widows make their appearance—with orphans in tow, if their circumstances were typical—the community has expanded numerically. Whatever system was in place before this growth and however efficiently it may have met the group's needs, it does not appear to have scaled very well. It is a problem that does not get any better with time. Two decades later, the Apostle Paul is still traveling around the Mediterranean, from Turkey in the east through Greece and Italy, with plans to visit Spain in the west, collecting funds to support the community in Jerusalem by collecting charitable gifts from Gentile Christians in the diaspora (Rom. 15:14–32; 1 Cor. 16:1–4; 2 Cor. 8:1–9:15). It is in this context that Paul tells the Corinthians that “God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9:7). This relief effort occupies a great deal of Paul's energies over a long period of time, and it stands as a reminder that the church in Jerusalem was destitute. Part of the arrangement with Peter, James, and John in devising a missionary strategy was that Paul would “remember the poor” in Jerusalem (Gal. 2:10). This was a symbolic gesture of solidarity across ethnic and cultural lines intended to strengthen ties between groups naturally inclined to distrust one another, but it also addressed a very concrete need. They appreciated the thoughts and prayers contained in Paul's letters, but they also sorely needed the financial assistance. Judged in purely economic terms, then, this putative experiment in socialism proved incapable of attaining financial self-sufficiency.

### ***13.4.2 1 Timothy 5:3–16***

The document known as 1 Timothy is a letter sent by the Apostle Paul to one of his trusted co-workers, Timothy, with instructions on how to oversee a Christian community in first-century Ephesus, one of the largest cities in the Roman Empire. Along with 2 Timothy and Titus, it is one of three documents usually called the Pastoral Epistles because, unlike the bulk of his correspondence which addresses whole groups in the form of an “open” letter, it is addressed to an individual and dispenses advice on stereotypically “pastoral” concerns.

This traditional understanding of the letter has been called into question over the last two centuries. A majority of scholars now consider it to be a pseudonymous composition written perhaps as late as 170 CE, a century after Paul's death. Linguistic, theological, and sociocultural factors play a large role in this consensus. In this reading, a Christian writing in Paul's name seeks to perpetuate the apostle's legacy and bring his authority to bear on circumstances facing the church a few generations after his death. Interpreters who endorse this reading believe the pseudonymous author wants to “rehabilitate” and “domesticate” Paul after his writings have become popular among “radical” Christian sects in the second century. The

widows discussed in 1 Timothy 5:3–16 are of particular interest to the author, according to this view, because they represent a dangerously egalitarian cadre of itinerant female missionaries or an ascetic “order” or “office” that threatens the patriarchal structures of the early Christian community by opening up previously closed avenues to power and agency outside traditional gender roles (Davies 1980; Bassler 1984, 2003; Thurston 1989, p. 36–55; Maier 2021).

When one takes proper account of the demographic realities and economic considerations of the implied situation, however, the heuristic value of speculative theories about the motivations of unnamed disputants in a second-century ideological struggle declines. This is not to say that traditional views of authorship, audience, and the like are therefore vindicated in every detail; only that a simpler explanation for the group dynamics and Paul’s advice becomes much more viable.

In 1 Tim. 5:3–16, Paul tells Timothy to “honor widows who are really widows.” From the following verse describing the religious duty of children and grandchildren as “repayment,” it is clear that “honor” (*tima*) here refers to financial support (Winter 1988; later applications of the biblical commandment in Exod. 20:12 to “honor thy father and mother” further illustrate that “honoring” them included caring for them in their old age). In v. 8, family members who do not provide for relatives, especially those of one’s own household (*oikos*), are considered “worse than an unbeliever.” Widows over the age of 60 and who have been married only once are to be put on a list. Women on this list merit community assistance so long as they have been actively involved in church ministries (e.g., “shown hospitality, washed the saints’ feet, helped the afflicted”). Younger widows are to be left off the list, as they are more prone to sensual desires and more likely to remarry, as well as engaging in “idle” pursuits such as gossip. Leaving aside questions about the accuracy of this generalization, it is noteworthy that Paul does not condemn remarriage in the case of younger widows. To the contrary, he encourages widows who have the opportunity to remarry, bear children, and manage their household. Paul concludes his instructions by urging believers to assist those of their relatives who are “really widows” (*hai ontōs chērai*). “Let the church not be burdened,” he says, “so that it can assist those who are real widows” (5:16).

The situation provides a fascinating glimpse into the social dynamics of the early Christian movement. Many scholars see here an attempt to regulate a formal “order” of widows exercising an unusual degree of autonomy and thereby to reclaim them for the patriarchal institution of marriage. To be sure, there is some evidence for such a contest over ecclesiastical power early in the second century in the letters of Ignatius of Antioch (*Polycarp* 4.1–3; *Smyrnaeans* 13.1) and at the turn of the third century in the writings of Tertullian (*De virginibus velandis* 9; *De pudicitia* 13). Yet it is certainly not self-evident that this is the only or even the most likely explanation for the specific scenario described in 1 Timothy. A number of economic concepts help in imagining the original context without the distraction of speculative theories.

First, scarcity of resources is a basic fact of life, whether it is the first or the twenty-first century. In an era where government-funded welfare programs and non-profit organizations attempt to meet a wide range of social and economic needs, it is sometimes easy to forget that the vast extent of these undertakings is exceptional

and that scarcity was experienced in a much more immediate way in antiquity than it is in the developed world today. To the modern ear, it may sound cold and heartless to say that a class of needy individuals might have no claim to material assistance. In a hypothetical world of unlimited resources, it would indeed be cruel to deny widows access to the goods and services they need to survive. Many churches today possess considerable wealth yet still lack the resources to accomplish all the good they would like. It does not appear that the church in Ephesus enjoyed the same position as modern churches, nor that its resources would have been sufficient to meet the needs of the widows seeking assistance. This reality is so fundamental that economics has been defined as the study of how to allocate scarce resources to satisfy unlimited needs and desires in the most efficient manner possible. It is also imperative to remember that a “church” (*ekklēsia*) in the first century was a gathering of people and that the term did not denote a building. Separate buildings dedicated to Christian worship do not appear until the third century or later; thus “the church” would not have possessed the property most modern Christian communities have that they might liquidate to meet the needs of the poor in their midst.

Second, due to scarcity, the community’s need to confront difficult trade-offs cannot be ignored. As uncomfortable as it may have been, it was essential for the church at Ephesus—a newly founded group without the longevity, stability, or institutional inertia conjured up by the English word “church”—to make an intentional and self-conscious determination about the scope of its financial obligations and, by extension, about the very nature of its core mission. In a very literal sense, here this means recognizing the truth of the adage that “there’s no such thing as a free lunch.” Daily food distribution to the needy was a feature of the Jewish synagogue in the first century and throughout the rabbinic period (*Bava Batra* 8b). The arrangement reflected in the situation in Acts 6 was modeled on this practice and also demonstrates that limited resources necessitated a hard look at opportunity costs; to wit, if we provide assistance to one individual or group, we will be unable to provide it to another individual or group. Hence the need to formulate a list of criteria for who qualifies for aid from the community chest.

Distinguishing “real” widows from those who, in the author’s reckoning, do not qualify as “genuine” widows is critical to this process. This distinction is attended by a paradox, namely, not all women with dead husbands were “real widows,” and some women with living husbands, furthermore, could be considered “widows” insofar as *chēra* could often denote any “manless” woman (Barclay 2020, p. 271), as in cases where newly converted women were divorced by their pagan husbands. Setting the age limit at 60 would automatically reduce the number of eligible women considerably, not to mention reducing the number of years for which the church would be responsible for giving aid, though Paul is not likely consulting actuarial tables in arriving at this figure. Once-married women would also, on average, have fewer children or grandchildren on which she might depend for support. Caring for children and nursing the sick are forms of “good works” that demonstrate commitment to the community that has pledged to support them. (It is conceivable but uncertain that such service might have included care for orphans.) When the needy in a city as large as Ephesus are so numerous, it is reasonable that the church would



expect reciprocity in this manner. Such a policy would also mitigate what economists call “free riding,” when outsiders join simply in order to take advantage of the benefits of membership without making a commensurate contribution to the community (Iannaccone 1992). Those widows who are “idle, gadding about from house to house” (v. 13), are not plugged into the household networks where “the routine benefactions that tie the community together” occur (Barclay 2020, p. 281). Their ability to conduct themselves in this way, not working but not suffering economic privation, may also indicate their relative affluence (Johnson 2001, p. 267).

True financial need is the most important element of the means test spelled out in this passage. Criticism of widows who “live for pleasure” (v. 6 NRSV) accentuates this requirement, though it is obscured in many translations. “Living self-indulgently” (RSV) is a more accurate rendering of the participle *spatalōsa*, which avoids the connotation of sexual immorality and fits better with the immediate literary context highlighting the defining quality of the “real widow, left alone, [who] has set her hope on God” (v. 5). Self-indulgence is not an option for those who are mired in abject poverty. Younger widows have a greater likelihood of rescue from this fate through remarriage. Paul’s encouragement of remarriage comports with Augustan social legislation (probably the least of his priorities) while recognizing natural human desires and at the same time acknowledging a legitimate solution to the fiscal constraints experienced by the church. Late in the second century, in *Ad uxorem* Tertullian will argue against remarriage for widows on the grounds that, if wealthy widows remarry, any dowries or legacies in their possession will no longer be available to fund church ministries. This goes against the grain of Paul’s instructions in 1 Timothy, but the bottom line is the same in that both Paul and Tertullian are concerned that the church not be unnecessarily “burdened” and thus hindered from assisting real widows. The key difference is that whereas remarriage in 1 Timothy eases the financial stresses on the church, remarriage of wealthy widows in Tertullian’s north African context a century later results in lost resources with which to aid the needy (Wilhite 2009).

Third, implicit in Paul’s instructions in 1 Timothy is the concept of moral hazard, the tendency of parties insulated from risk to behave differently than if they were not protected from that risk. Incentives matter, and when a group or individual perceives that there is little danger or downside to taking a certain course of action, it is not uncommon to witness riskier or less responsible behavior. Here the parties engaged in moral hazard are the relatives of the widows. They bear much of the brunt of Paul’s criticism. In 1 Tim. 5:4, children and grandchildren are to “learn their religious duty to their own family and make some repayment to their parents.” Jesus had earlier criticized a spurious loophole in the Ten Commandments by which children could dedicate a portion of their agricultural produce as a sacrifice to the Temple and thereby avoid caring for their parents (Mark 7:9–13). Paul’s characterization of this neglect in 1 Tim. 5:8 emphasizes lack of careful planning or calculation in his use of the verb *proneō*, “to think of or take into consideration beforehand” (Marshall 1999, p. 590). Whether out of carelessness or willful avoidance, it is unacceptable. It is another linguistic paradox found in this passage that many of Paul’s targets here would technically be orphans, in the sense that anyone—even an

adult—whose father had died was an orphan even if the mother still lived. But they are not let off the hook by virtue of their “orphan” status. Failing to provide financial support of parents and placing them on the church’s “list” is to neglect a basic religious duty. This framing of the issue distinguishes between the church as the “house of God” (*oikos theou*) and the mundane household (*oikos*) as the basic unity of society, whatever the similarities as expressed in kinship language (e.g., fellow believers as “brothers and sisters”). The two institutions do not serve the same precise functions, even if there is overlap in their missions (Johnson 2001, p. 274).

### 13.5 Conclusion

The author of 1 Timothy (1:4) states that one of his purposes in writing to his co-worker is to urge him to cultivate the *oikonomia theou* among his followers. To reason, on the basis of a wooden rendering of this Greek phrase, that this text is about “God’s economy” would be to commit a version of the etymological fallacy, assuming that the present meaning of a word reveals the meaning of the word from which it is derived. (“Divine training” [NRSV] is a more common translation.) Economic considerations are not a skeleton key unlocking the many exegetical mysteries of this text. For example, the impropriety of a communal welfare program administered by males for the benefit of young, unmarried females lacking any other form of social support or protection should be readily apparent, and economic analysis adds relatively little to our appreciation of the potential for abuse in such an arrangement. As John Murray (2013b, p. 150) has noted, the “a posteriori nature of examining given religious texts through social scientific lenses is inherently *ad hoc*” and in many cases would be more convincing with greater empirical support, if only such quantitative data were available.

Nevertheless, by approaching the scenario in 1 Timothy 5:3–16 with an eye turned toward a few basic economic factors at play, it may be possible to avoid violating the principle of Ockham’s razor in elucidating the social and cultural contexts of the situation behind the text. Put differently, when a simpler explanation accounts for the facts of the case, all else being equal, it is to be preferred to a more complicated explanation. Opportunity cost, scarcity, incentives, and moral hazard are hardly the most sophisticated concepts guiding the work of economists, but in the cases considered here, they keep the interpreter from making matters even more complicated than they already are.

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