

Febbie C. Dickerson, *Luke, Widows, Judges, and Stereotypes*.**Lanham, MD: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2019***Christy Cobb, Wingate University*

Febbie Dickerson's *Luke, Widows, Judges, and Stereotypes* is a thoughtful, provocative, and creative book. This project thoroughly covers the history of interpretation and important exegetical concerns about the Parable of the Widow and the Judge (Luke 18:2-5) while also offering innovative readings of the parable that address issues of gender and power. Writing a full monograph on one short parable is a challenging task, yet every page of Dickerson's book contains insightful connections and pertinent examples. Dickerson writes clearly; her book is accessible for laypeople, undergraduate students, and scholars alike. The first published monograph in a new series on Womanist Readings of Scripture, *Luke, Widows, Judges, and Stereotypes* illustrates the importance of womanist hermeneutics in the academy and for the church. Dickerson's project is not directly labeled as theoretical, yet it is clearly grounded in theory; she presents her sophisticated interpretation in a way that the reader unfamiliar with theory will grasp. I wholeheartedly recommend this book for a variety of contexts including courses on the New Testament, Parables, or Gospels, church Bible studies, and most especially for scholars of Luke, Gospels, and Parables.

The first task at hand for this book is to define and address stereotypes, specifically those imposed upon Black women and men as well as the ways in which readings of the Bible perpetuate stereotypes. Dickerson uses Luke's Parable of the Widow and the Judge to address stereotypes. This parable describes a harsh judge who rules over a town and a persistent widow who asks for justice but is continually refused by the judge. Ultimately, the judge grants the widow justice, yet his reason is because of the widow's persistence. Dickerson shows how stereotypes function within Luke's incorporation of this parable as well as the ways this parable is interpreted and understood allegorically by readers, which encourage even more stereotyping. For example, readers often assume the widow is old and needy, and that the judge is unfair and unjust. Luke's narrative context for the parable encourages the reader to assume this parable is about prayer, even though the parable itself never mentions prayer. Thus, Dickerson releases the parable from the text of Luke and interprets it independently. This interpretive strategy turns out to be very useful, when considering historical and biblical representations of widows as well as when reflecting on stereotypes often ascribed to African American women and men.

Dickerson's project connects to contemporary readers through numerous relevant examples. She opens the book by describing several instances of violence and injustice done to the Black community by white people and police officers.

Racial stereotyping is often the cause of this violence, and many stereotypes are perpetuated by biblical texts. As Dickerson notes: “Stereotyping. . . is usually, if not inevitably, dangerous” (4). Similarly, this book is peppered with references from popular culture that would resonate with readers. For example, when describing the Mammy stereotype, Dickerson includes critical analysis of the movies *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and *The Help* (2011).

Dickerson’s exegesis and attention to issues of translation is superb, but also explained clearly so that a reader not familiar with Greek will understand and follow her exegetical argument. Two examples of this are in Dickerson’s analysis of *ekdikēson*, which can be translated as either “justice” or “vengeance” (20), and *hupōpiazē*, which is often translated within this parable as “punish” but, as Dickerson notes, is a boxing term that would have led the reader to understand this as a physical threat. (25) Dickerson demonstrates how the customary translations of these words have impacted the reading of the parable. If the widow is asking the judge for vengeance rather than justice, this resists the stereotyping of the widow as an older, needy widow. Reading the judge as fearful of the widow’s punch adjusts our reading of the judge and perhaps even our understanding of the gendering (or masculinization) of the judge (as shown in chapter six). Dickerson convincingly argues: “The parable, stripped out of its narrative context, is not about eschatology or prayer but about tenacity and threat and the overlap between justice and vengeance.” (28)

For this reader, the most intriguing part of Dickerson’s project was her rewriting of the parable through the stereotypes placed upon Black women and men including Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire, the Cool Black Male, Master-Pastor, and the Foolish Judge. This analysis, found in chapters five and six, is filled with careful explanations and examples of each stereotype from history, literature, and film/television. Then, Dickerson includes a re-telling of the parable through each of these stereotypes. Simultaneously creative and provocative, these new parables bring insight to Luke’s parable that challenges stereotypes, both of Black men and women and of widows and judges. This bold and creative tactic by Dickerson was successful. All the new parables she provides are insightful and challenging.

This is precisely where the astute reader can find an example of theory at work in this book. For example, Dickerson describes her work as an example of Foucault’s “reverse discourse” as described in *History of Sexuality*. (197) Through this nod to Foucault, Dickerson signals to academic readers her theoretical move, which allows her to take these stereotypes mentioned above (the Mammy, the Jezebel, the Cool Black Male, etc.) and reclaim them through the parable. The strength and care for others exhibited by the Mammy is effective as she receives justice through her activism. The Cool Black Male is portrayed as sensitive and insecure; thus, the widow’s constant requests move him inwardly and he acquiesces to her demands. This use of reverse discourse serves two functions: it enhances our understanding of the Lukan parable, and it problematizes the persistence of these stereotypes.

Dickerson's analysis concerning gender is based upon an understanding of Greco-Roman ideals of gender, often understood as the "penetration paradigm." Recently, this paradigm has been subtly challenged, with scholars arguing that the gender dynamics were more complicated. I wonder how Dickerson's analysis could be even more productive if the recent scholarly resistance to this paradigm were applied to the Parable of the Widow and the Judge. I am thinking here of a recent article by Maia Kotrosits (2018), which complicates the penetration paradigm using the *Acts of Thecla* in order to show that masculinity and femininity were not always only about being penetrated and/or penetrating (and which was published just prior to Dickerson's book). Dickerson's interpretation of Luke's parable complicates gender as well; her womanist reading overturns the gender stereotypes of widows and judges. In this reading, the widow does not fulfill all feminized stereotypes in her push for vengeance/justice, and the judge also appears less than masculine, as he is fearful of the widow's fist. In this way, Dickerson's work is *already* problematizing understandings of gender and power, and the critique of the penetration paradigm has the potential to add another valuable dimension to this project.

Dickerson's approach is steeped in historical and textual criticism while incorporating womanist hermeneutics, pop culture, and a clear focus on the reader. Writing as a Black minister and professor, Dickerson "approach[es] the text with respect and inquiry." (9) In line with many other feminist and womanist scholars, she clearly addresses her own social location and encourages readers to do the same as they read parables. The final sentence of this book challenges us: "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) Future scholarship on Luke would benefit from Dickerson's thoughtful approach and analysis of gender and power, specifically Luke's perpetuation of stereotypes. If *Luke, Widows, Judges, and Stereotypes* is any indication of the future monographs to be published in this series on Womanist Reading of Scripture, we should expect great things.

Reference List

Foucault, Michel. 1988. *The History of Sexuality*. Vol. 1. New York: Vintage Books.

Kotrosits, Maia. 2018. "Penetration and Its Discontents: Greco-Roman Sexuality, the Acts of Paul and Thecla, and Theorizing Eros without the Wound." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 27 (3): 343–66.



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