Romancing the Widow:
The Economic Distinctions between the *ʾalmānâ,* the *ʾiššâ-ʾalmānâ* and the *ʾēšet-hammēt*

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1. Introduction to the Problem: Beyond "Widows"

Biblical interpreters have used the sixty-odd occurrences of *ʾalmānâ* in the canon of the Hebrew Bible, literature spanning from c. 1200 through the end of the first century B.C.E., to construct a system of social altruism and emotional regard for ancient Israelite widows.[1] This paper challenges the basis for this romantic universalizing depiction of the widow's circumstances based on sympathy and shows instead the harsh realities of the economic distinctions reflected in the use of the word *ʾalmānâ*, a women with limited economic resources, in contrast with other terms for widows:

- *ʾalmānâ* - a widow, in various stages of destitution, who may have had living male adult relatives, either too poor to help or unwilling to offer her economic support,
- *ʾiššâ-ʾalmānâ* - a widow who has redemption rights in her husband's ancestral estate which she exercises through her son, and
- *ʾēšet-hammēt* - a widow whose husband has died before fathering an heir to exercise the redemption rights to his ancestral holdings.

Building upon the distinctions between these terms, it will be possible to demonstrate that the common denominator in understanding widowhood in biblical Israel revolves around the existence or absence of ancestral land in the estate of the deceased husband. In this article, I will argue that the use of *ʾalmānâ* in the Hebrew Bible indicates the plight of the lowest end of the financial spectrum of widows in biblical Israel. A good example of this usage is Deuteronomy. 14:29 that says in regard to reserving every third year tithe, "Then the levite, who has no hereditary portion as you have, and the stranger, the fatherless orphan, and the widow (*ʾalmānâ)* in your settlements shall come and eat their fill."

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[1] Typically discussions of the biblical widow have been word studies. See, e.g., Baab (1962) and Fensham (1962).

[3]See, *ʾalmānâ* (Koehler, Baumgartner and Stamm, vol 1, p. 56; Botterweck and Ringgren, vol. 1, p. 288) and Otwell (1977: 123-31).

The differences that separate one group of ancient Israelite widows from the next[3] will be developed and the implications for interpreting biblical texts and understanding widowhood in the biblical text are explained. These interpretations are enhanced by combining the historical results of etymological analysis with the ahistorical results of cross-cultural studies on patrilineally organized societies. We will see that the issue relevant in categories of widowhood is the existence of patrilineal support on the husband's side through land in his estate. For each category, we will see that it is consistently used in the manner indicated above and there are no other places where it could have been used but wasn't.

The history of attempts to understand the economic destitution that was the everyday reality of the ´almānâ widow, and to appreciate the stages of widowhood, as well as to bring ritual studies to bear on issues such as the clothing of widows that distinguished them from other women, only skims the surface of the complex data in the Hebrew Bible.[4] Further work may expand the inquiry to aliens and orphans as in Exodus 22:21-22 and elucidate the use of the often mentioned conjunction of aliens, widows, and fatherless orphans, united by their landlessness. The implications of such study will contribute to the larger project of reconstructing the social world of ancient Israel.

2. A Cross-Disciplinary Analytical Model
Support Systems

We start by building a sociological model for analyzing the biblical material. A survey of cross-cultural perspectives reveals that support systems for widows can be separated into four overlapping support categories: (1) economic, (2) service, (3) social, and (4) emotional. Support is defined as "any object or action that the giver and/or receiver define as necessary or helpful in maintaining a style of life. A support system is a set of similar supports and a support network consists of those persons and groups who provide these supports."[5] These categories of support can be further divided into two types: formal and informal support.

Background Socio-Economic Principles

Our interest here is in economic support, a broad category whose precise components vary cross-culturally, but one that refers to the general economic resources by which a widow either supports herself or through which she receives economic support.[6] In

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[4]This may be suggested by the biblical injunction not to take the widow's garment as a pledge, e.g., Deuteronomy 1:21. Cross-cultural studies reveal the symbolic importance of clothing as an indicator of the stages of mourning and widowhood, and I intend to study this topic in future research. For the present, one notes that the significance of clothing is culturally determined. Thus the interpreter must analyze the clothing of biblical widows in light of the construction of gender in ancient Israel in order to grasp the particular meaning of women's garments as indicators of her widow status. On this subject in cross-cultural analysis, see, e.g., Goody (1962).

[5]Lopata (1987: 4).

[6]Interestingly, there are very few references to providing economic support for an ancient Israelite widow, and those that exist are all found in Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy 14:29; 24:17, 19, 20-21 and 26:12-13 concern tithing provided for widows; this issue will be discussed below. One notes with surprise that the widow is not mentioned in Deuteronomy 15:11 as being among those deserving of economic help. Other biblical references that have economic implications pertain to providing food (e.g., Deuteronomy 16:11, 14) or economic resources for the widow; these texts are the subject of analysis in this study. However, all of the rest of the occurrences of the ´almānâ in the Hebrew Bible focus on the social or legal protection due to the

the biblical world, the following set of socio-economic principles shape the economic support dynamics of a marriage:[7]

1. A primary concern in ancient Israel is patrilineal descent from one generation of men to the next.

2. Marriage is an economic arrangement whose purpose is the production of lineal descendants to the patrilineage. The biblical texts reveal a preference for vertical inheritance between the generations of the men of the patrilineage. The preferred marriage pattern is between spouses descended from the same patrilineage, with the couple residing patrilocally, and both of them bringing property to the conjugal fund on which the marriage is based. In such a case of patrilineally related spouses, the marriage reinforces kinship links and is categorized as an endogamous marriage.

3. A woman who brings property to the marriage, typically in the form of dowry—moveable goods transferred to her by her family at the time of marriage-- has rights in the marriage which make the marriage more difficult to dissolve, which guarantee her male offspring inheritance rights to their father's estate and which entitle her to be labeled a primary wife. The existence of a bridal dowry guarantees the woman economic rights that protect her against her husband's dissolution of the marriage, particularly when she has borne a male child to her husband. In the endogamous marriages in the Hebrew Bible, this dowry may include land (e.g., Judges 1:11-15).

4. A secondary wife is a woman without an economic foundation in marriage; she should be identified as a concubine whose primary function is for procreation or sexual pleasure for her husband.[8] Without property as a rationale for reinforcing lineage connections, marriage often is outside the kinship group and is labeled exogamous. In the case of this secondary union as a strategy for obtaining an heir (when the primary wife is barren) to the husband's estate, the secondary status of the woman is separated from the status of primary heir of her son—who is reckoned as the heir to the biological father and his primary wife.[9]

5. The vertical inheritance patterns whose economic interests are emphasized in the biblical text are those of the patrilineage descended from Terah, whose vertical line extends through Abraham, and then Isaac and Jacob.

6. In a society with strict patrilineal kinship boundaries, mothers tend to develop the loyalties of their sons where marriage patterns tend toward men marrying women younger than themselves, who will then likely predecease their wives, causing the widow to rely on her son for informal or formal economic support.

7. Women can control[10] and inherit property, including land. For example, in the case of the unmarried daughters of Zelophehad (Numbers 27:1-11; 36:1-12) daughters inherit their father's land until such a time as it can pass to

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widow in order to shield her from social and legal injustice and are generalizations, if not the fixed formula regarding "the stranger, the fatherless orphan, and the widow."

[7]These principles are discussed by Steinberg (1993: 5-34). For discussion of the historical developments of the ancient Israelite household, see the essays in Perdue, Blenkinsopp, Collins, Meyers (1997).

[7]In discussing the term *pîlegeš,* Ackerman (1998:236) argues that "in the Bible the term 'concubine' either can mean a woman who is part of a man's harem but is not one of his actual wives, or it can mean a woman who is married to a man as a secondary wife." In the present work, my understanding of the structure of Israelite marriage interprets concubine in the sense of a secondary wife.

[9]Steinberg (1993).
[10]E.g., Proverbs 31:10-31.

sons borne by them in endogamous marriages. They may inherit with their brothers (Job 42:15). Or, to take another example, from the book of Ruth, the land that is inherited by the man who exercises his levirate responsibilities is redeemed through the woman whose interests are tied to her husband's property until such a time as an agnatic heir is born.[11]

Properties of a Widow

In building a model to reflect the condition of widows in the biblical world, we need to identify the properties of the widow and her situation that will determine her circumstances.[12] Here we identify some of these properties and their values sufficient for this paper and leave a fuller elaboration of them for further work. A more complete study would expand the list of properties and examine how their variation in different cultures affects the condition of widows.[13] In the list of following properties, the name of the property is followed by some of its values in parenthesis.

- **Type of Wife** (primary, secondary)
- **Family Property** (land, livestock, other marketable goods, no property)

- **Wife's Property Brought to Marriage** (land, money, livestock, other non-used up goods, goods already used up, none)
- **Progeny**   (son, sons, daughter, daughters, no living children)
- **Patrilineal Family of Marriage** (father-in-law present, brother-in-law present, other patrilineal relatives present, no patrilineal relatives because of lack of obligation)
- **Patrilineal Family of Birth** (father's household available, father's household not available by law, father's family not available by choice)
- **Female Property Ownership** (allowed before marriage; not allowed when married; allowed when married)

The ´almānâ widow in the biblical texts is a widow that has no obligated basis of support from the patrilineage of her husband and has limited economic resources at her disposal but who may have a patrilineal birth family to return to if they agree to take her back (as was the case with Naomi's daughters-in-law) perhaps with the return of the dowry

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[11]I agree with Westbrook (1991: 58-67), who argues that redemption and levirate marriage go hand-in-hand, and that without the inheritance of landed property there is no rationale for a relative of the deceased to father a child for the widow. At the time such a child is born, rights to the patrimony of the deceased are vested in the infant heir.

[12]From a modeling standpoint, the list of properties above is the basis for classifying cultures and for using the classifications for cross-cultural analysis. For another model, see Whyte (1978). The issues that Whyte addresses as a question (p. 65), I have listed as properties.

[13]Most relevant for interpreting the biblical data is anthropological work on the relationship between marriage and patrilineal descent as it shapes inheritance patterns cross-culturally; see Goody (1976; 1990).

and bride price (a typical custom of the period). The case of a priest's daughter "married to a stranger" in Leviticus 22:13 is particularly instructive in this regard, "But if a priest's daughter is widowed or divorced, without offspring, and returns to her father's house, as in her youth, she may eat of her father's food. No lay person shall eat of it." A married woman, even a priest's daughter, belongs to her husband and his patrilineage after his death. However, when she is without patrilineal support on her husband's side after his death and without a son, she may end up with her biological family as a dependent ("as in her youth") and may find economic support there. The emphasis on "as in her youth" highlights that she can still be considered a part of her father's family for purposes of eating sacred offerings, which she cannot eat while her (non-priest or "stranger") husband or children are alive. In fact, it seems to be the case that she cannot eat sacred food if she ever had any children. However, presumably, she may return to her father's house and not eat sacred food, but other food purchased for her. In this regard she is worse off than a person purchased by her priestly father who can eat the sacred food (Leviticus 22:11)! Here, with her (non-priest or "stranger") husband deceased, she can eat the sacred offerings only if she has not had children, and acts as a dependent under her father's direction "as in her youth." Thus, after a woman moves from her family of birth to her family of marriage, her biological family is not obligated to take her back. Her own father is no different than anyone else that chooses to care for the widow in this respect.

Further evidence for this understanding of the circumstances of the ʾalmānâ widow are based on correct interpretation of Genesis 38, and the reference to Tamar as an ʾalmānâ widow—rather than an ʾēšet-hammēt—in light of the surviving son Shelah in the family of Judah and Judah himself, after the deaths of both Er and Onan. On first reading, it appears that Tamar is labeled by Judah as an ʾalmānâ widow in the context of a pending levirate marriage. However, the term ʾalmānâ widow applies to a woman whose biological family may choose to take her in after the death of her husband, and Judah advocates just such a return. More importantly, Judah's conceit is that he wants Tamar to act as if she does not have any support from his patrilineage. His choice of widow terminology reinforces his deceit and indicates that he has no intention of assuming his levirate obligations. Judah's words show his true intentions![14]

The conclusion to be drawn from the above analysis is that in terms of the list of properties in the model to describe the ʾalmānâ widow we have:

- **Family Property** = limited property
- **Wife's Property Brought to Marriage** = none, or goods mostly used up
- **Progeny** = may have living children
- **Patrilineal Family of Marriage** = patrilineal relatives may be alive but either cannot or will not support the widow
- **Patrilineal Family of Birth** = father's household not available by law or father's household not available by choice

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[14]Study of figurative references to widowhood, such as 2 Samuel 20:3, are beyond the scope of the present inquiry. Cities are figuratively referred to as being widowed in Isaiah 47:9 (Babylon) and Jeremiah 51:5 (Israel and Judah).

All other widows, such as the ʾēšet-hammēt in Deuteronomy 25:5 or the ʾiššâ-ʾalmānâ in 2 Samuel 14 we characterize in this paper as inherited widows, i.e., widows with some means of support identified by the above properties. Biblical research generally collapses three different textual descriptions of widows, the ʾalmānâ, the ʾēšet-hammēt or the ʾiššâ-ʾalmānâ into one English word, "widow" and thereby masks the biblical categorization that depends on the widow's access to her husband's property. Because of this conflation of Hebrew terms, scholars have failed to nuance the economic circumstances that separate one category of widows from the next. To avoid this terminological confusion, henceforth we will distinguish between the ʾalmānâ widow, a widow with limited economic support, and either the ʾiššâ-ʾalmānâ, an inherited widow with sons, or the ʾēšet-hammēt, an inherited widow without sons.[14]

The Meaning of ʾalmānâ

The excellent work of Paula Hiebert explored the ancient Near Eastern etymological history of the root of the biblical term ʾalmānâ. Based on her etymological studies and the usages and contexts of the ancient Near Eastern data, with a particular focus on Middle Assyrian legal material, Hiebert concluded that the status of ʾalmānâ defines those widows who were bereft not only of a husband, but who had neither a son nor a father-in-law to protect them against the social and economic vulnerabilities of being a woman alone.[16] Such a woman was in a dire economic situation, whether there were family property or not, because when her husband died, a woman was unable to inherit property beyond the dowry that she brought to the marriage—property that would probably not sustain her for long. In the case of a widow whose husband died leaving inheritable property, the widow remained as a continuing part of the patrilineal property and the legal standing of her marriage did not dissolve upon the death of her spouse. Thus, Hiebert determines that existence for a Mesopotamian widow would have been precarious at best, and that her well-being would have depended on whether or not she had a son or father-in-law to care for her after the death of her husband, the son being the one eligible to inherit property from the deceased, because a woman cannot inherit property. The Mesopotamian widow without inheritable property would have depended on whatever minimal economic welfare the state institutions of Palace and Temple provided for her.[17]

3. The ʾalmānâ and Other Biblical Widows

The foregoing discussion provides a background against which we now set out to look at some of the biblical texts referring to ʾalmānâ and to other types of widows, i.e., inherited widows. This extends Hiebert's study to cases in the biblical data where there are modified occurrences of the ʾalmānâ that separate one group of ancient Israelite widows from the next, and considers the implications of the differences for interpreting biblical texts. In particular, in the Hebrew Bible we have three primary types of widows:

- ʾalmānâ - a widow with limited economic support
- ʾiššâ-ʾalmānâ - an inherited widow with sons

[16]She studies Akkadian *almattu,* Ugaritic ʾlmnt, Phoenician ʾlmt, Aramaic ʾarmaltāʾ , and Arabic ʾarmalat; see Hiebert (1989).
[17]Harris (1992). See also, Hamilton, "Marriage (Old Testament and Ancient Near East)" (1992) and van der Toorn (1995) On this basis, Otwell (1977: 125) argues that in the Hebrew Bible ʾalmānâ is from the root ʾlm "to be silent."

- *ʾēšet-hammēt* - an inherited widow without sons

As we will discuss in examples below, the phrases *ʾiššâ-ʾalmānâ*, found in 2 Samuel and elsewhere and *ʾēšet-hammēt*, used in Ruth 4:5 and Deuteronomy 25:5 should be defined as "inherited widow." In other words, both phrases are meant to indicate that a woman is NOT an *ʾalmānâ* widow. In contrast to the *ʾalmānâ* widow stands the women who have redemption rights in their husband's property, whose legal protection by this property is jeopardized for one reason or another. The difference between the two terms *ʾiššâ-ʾalmānâ* and *ʾēšet-hammēt* rests in whether or not a son is alive to exercise the rights of redemption for this land. The four references noted below to the *ʾiššâ-ʾalmānâ* all specifically mention that the widow named has a son, but the *ʾēšet-hammēt,* used in Ruth 4:5 and Deuteronomy 25:5, envisions the circumstances of an inherited widow without a son.[18]

ʾiššâ-ʾalmānâ

In the Hebrew Bible there are four widows with sons, who are referred to as *ʾiššâ-ʾalmānâ,* an "inherited widow, with sons." These four are: 1) the wise woman of Tekoa (2 Samuel 14:5); 2) the mother of Hiram of Tyre, who is introduced as being "the son of an *ʾiššâ-ʾalmānâ* of the tribe of Naphtali" (1 Kings 7:14); 3) the mother of Jeroboam, first monarch of the Northern Kingdom, whose genealogy indicates he is "the son of Nebat, an Ephraimite of Zeredah, a servant of Solomon, whose mother's name was Zeruah, an *ʾiššâ-ʾalmānâ* " (1 Kings 11:26); and 4) the woman of Zeraphath (1 Kings 17:8-24), who is identified both as an *ʾiššâ-ʾalmānâ* (vv. 9-10) and as an *ʾalmānâ* widow (v. 20). In the first three cases, the sons presumably are providing substantial and adequate support for their mothers.[19]

This brings us to the final example (1 Kings 17:8-24), the widow of Zeraphath whose surviving son is brought back to life by Elisha at the very point when he is thought to be dead (possibly he is sick due to malnourishment because the story suggests that the woman and her son have only one meal left before starvation), i.e., the very point in the story when the death of the child turns the *ʾiššâ -ʾalmānâ,* a widow with a son, into an *ʾalmānâ* widow, a woman with very limited economic resources for survival. This issue of the occurrence of two distinct widowhood labels attached to the same individual ultimately conforms to the thesis of this study by its use of the term *ʾalmānâ* at the point when the woman's son is depicted as dead, and thus the house that she holds in trust (v. 17 identifies her as the keeper of the house) until her son is old enough to inherit it passes out of her control. The shift in terminology regarding the woman signals the question of how she will survive after the death of her son.[20]

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[18]The phrase indicates that the woman is part of the inheritance that passes to the nearest kinsman of the deceased.

[19]In 1 Kings 2:13-25, after the death of David, Bathsheba is never referred to as a widow, but is instead identified by her relationship with Solomon, i.e., she is "the mother of Solomon (v. 13). Possibly the widow terms discussed in this article were not ever applied in the strata of the ruling elite because economic issues never plagued people at this level in the economic hierarchy, e.g., the terms are also missing with regards to Abigail (1 Samuel 25:1b-42). Another example of a woman of wealth, who we may speculate may have been a widow but is never so identified, is Micah's mother who has lost her eleven hundred pieces of silver (Judges 17).

[20]Possibly others may now find economic (or other) distinctions separating the

zônâ from the *ʾiššâ- zônâ.*

The *ʾiššâ -ʾalmānâ* of Tekoa[21]

The narrative of 2 Samuel 14[22] tells of a woman from the village of Tekoa, who is hired by Joab to tell a fictitious story that is designed to bring about a reconciliation of David and his son Absalom, who has been banished for killing David's other son Amnon, who had raped David's daughter Tamar. In preparing the wise woman to tell her story that is aimed at bringing David to self-judgement, Joab charges her in verse 2 to behave like a mourner (*hith'abbelî-nāʾ*) and to dress herself in mourning garments (*welibšî-nāʿ bigdê-- ʾēbel*), instructions emphasizing the root *ʾbl*, "to mourn."

Joab's instructions here are worthy of comment because they contrast with the circumstances in Genesis 38:14, where Tamar, daughter-in-law of Judah, changes out of her widow clothing (*bigdê-ʾalmenûtah*) before going out to meet her father-in-law.[23] I believe that the difference here between garments of mourning and garments of the *ʾalmānâ* widow is far less confusing than it might initially appear, and suggest that there was a cycle of dress and behavior that accompanies the stages of initial grief from permanent widowhood. The wise woman puts on clothing that signals she is in mourning over the death of her son, but not yet in the state of an *ʾalmānâ* widow because she has another son, whereas the clothing that Tamar shed signals the circumstances of an *ʾalmānâ* widow, a woman without access to her husband's patrilineage—through either a son or the possibility of access to property. In light of Tamar's belief that she would not be called back by her father-in-law Judah in order for Shelah to fulfill his levirate duty,[24] she dresses in garments that the ancient Israelite observer would immediately recognize as those of an *ʾalmānâ,* rather than those of someone in mourning. That something comparable to an *ʾalmānâ* uniform existed in biblical Israel is suggested by the terminology in Genesis 38 and finds further support from the injunction, "Do not take a widow's garment (*beged ʾalmānâ*) as a pledge," (Deuteronomy 24:17b). Additional uniforms may have distinguished other types of widows as well as mourners in Genesis.

I focus on 2 Samuel 14 because in the case of the wise woman of Tekoa, we meet an individual who not only identifies herself as *ʾiššâ-ʾalmānâ,* "an inherited widow with sons" as she prepares to tell her parable to David, but one who feels it is necessary to explain further, "my husband is dead" (*wayyāmot ʾîššî*) (v. 5). Are these two phrases synonymous, and if so, why does the woman repeat her widowed status twice?

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[21]Within the scope of a paper of this length, it is not possible to analyze the two other biblical references to the *ʾiššâ-ʾalmānâ*. I suggest that both the unnamed mother of Hiram of Tyre (1 Kings 7:14) and Zeruah, wife of Nebat, from the northern tribe of Ephraim, the mother of Jeroboam, are referred to as *ʾiššâ-ʾalmānâ,* because they are inherited widows with sons.

[22]For further analysis of the many issues raised by this text, see Hoftijzer (1970); Camp (1981); Laffey (1988: 124-26); Carmody, (1988: 45-8); and Willey,(1992: 115-31).

[23]On the distinctive clothing of ancient Near Eastern prostititues, see Bird (1989: 134, n. 5 and 135, n. 15). Analysis of this text can be found inThompson and Thompson (1972); Brichto (1973: 16); Westbrook (1977); Niditch (1979); and Fisch (1982). See also Coats (1983: 272-76) for a discussion of the relevant literary forms in this text.

[24]Biblical commentators note the discrepancy between the biblical law concerning levirate duty and narrative fulfillment of these responsibilities. But in all societies one must distinguish between texts and practice. That we should not get trapped in the technical terms of law as it relates to practice is emphasized in the writings of both Watson (1998) and Jackson (2000: 70-92).

In presenting her ruse to the king, the woman of Tekoa is arguing that as *ʾiššâ-ʾalmānâ*, her future welfare depends on the life of her remaining son, who is in imminent danger of dying at the hands of patrilineal kinsmen who will kill him to avenge the death of his brother, who he has just killed. Should that death occur, the woman of Tekoa would be in a similar situation to that of Naomi in the book of Ruth. I believe that the Tekoaite woman is indicating that she is too old to be eligible for provisions of the levirate law, and should the second son of the woman from Tekoa die, the woman would be at the mercy of charity from others. Naomi would have been in the same circumstances as the woman of Tekoa vis-à-vis her husband's inheritance, but for the fact that Naomi has Ruth, who is the agent of redemption of Elimelech's patrimony. The woman of Tekoa specifically says in verse 7 that the death of her remaining son would leave her husband, "without name or remnant left on earth." Moreover, earlier in the same verse, she remarks that such a death would mean the death of the heir (*hayyôrēš*) and "would quench my soul surviving ember" (*wekibbû ʾet-gaḥaltî ʾašer niš'ārâ*). The woman expresses concern not only in the patrilineage but raises the issue of the impact of her son's death on her personal economic circumstances.[25] The woman of Tekoa seems to be indicating that she cannot exercise her proprietary rights towards her husband's land (presumably this is the field the brothers were in when the killing took place) should both sons die, probably because she is too old to do so. Her circumstances remind the reader of Naomi, who argues that her daughters-in-law should return to their birth homes after their husbands, her sons, die because she is too old to have another husband and bear sons. We can conclude that in her opening statement, the woman says in effect, "I am as good as the *ʾalmānâ* widow, a woman who will be dispossessed, because my husband is dead, my firstborn son is dead, and it looks like my sole surviving son will soon be killed." Thus, the intent of verse 5, with its repetition of the woman's widowhood status, is that the woman will be left with few economic resources should her son die, because her husband is already dead.[26] Her future will be one of destitution without her surviving son for support.

The *ʾēšet-hammēt* and Naomi and Ruth

A good place to begin our analysis of the *ʾēšet-hammēt* is with the story of Naomi and Ruth, who are both bereft of their spouses. Neither woman is referred to as *ʾalmānâ*. Ruth is identified as *ʾēšet-hammēt* (Ruth 4:5), literally, "the wife of a dead man." This is the same terminology used in Deuteronomy 25:5-10 to identify a woman who has died before her husband has fathered a child and to whom the law of the levirate applies, viz., an inherited widow without sons.[27]

In order to understand the dynamics intended by Deuteronomy 25:5-10, and to consider their application in Ruth, it is necessary to investigate the biblical statement of levirate intent, viz., that the child born of a union between the deceased husband's brother and the deceased's widow "shall succeed to the name of the deceased brother, so that his

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[25]For more on how the dynamics of this text reflect ancient Israelite kinship organization, see Bendor (1996).

[26]This repetition may then be a means to emphasize the woman's dire circumstances; see, Hofitjzer (1970: 421). Possibly synonymous parallelism is an appropriate form of formal speech when addressing the king. One notices the woman's deferential tone towards David when she refers to herself as his maidservant: *ʾāmâ* (vv. 15,16) and *šipḥâ* (vv. 6, 7, 12, 15, 17,19).

[27]For general background on the levirate principle, see, Kalmin (1992: 296-97). That the circumstances of the levirate widow are distinct from those of other widows is discussed in Wegner (1988: 97-113; 138-41). On the Deuteronomic formulation of this law, see Merendino (1969: 318-20) and Seitz (1971: 124-25).

name may not be blotted out of Israel" (Deuteronomy 25:6). The law of the levirate is designed to provide a child[28] who will serve the social and economic interests of the dead man by functioning as the heir who perpetuates the name, the property, and the inheritance of the kinship unit to which the deceased belonged. Thus, the levirate law is an expedient means to have property continue down the vertical patrilineage, viz., between generations rather than within a single generation, although as expressed in Deuteronomy 25:5-10, it does not cover each and every possible situation that might arise in fulfilling the kinship obligation to not alienate the dead man's land. The levirate law is a means to preserve the bloodline through the males, who inherit the name and the property attached to this name--including the widow of the deceased.[29]

As I have already stated, neither Naomi nor Ruth is identified as ʾalmānâ. On the one hand, Naomi is represented as having property that can be redeemed; she has proprietary rights in her deceased husband's land. On the other hand, Ruth, the daughter-in-law of Naomi's husband Elimelech, becomes the agent through whom this claim is realized. The key to interpreting the widowhood label that is implied for Naomi and is stated for Ruth, ʾēšet-hammēt, is that there is land to be inherited by the child Ruth bears. Thus, it is a by-product of the levirate law that the birth of a male child will ultimately guarantee the presence of someone to take care of Ruth in her old age (if she herself does not die before the child can protect her); the levirate provision enforced here is intended to serve the patrilineal kinship interests tied to land and property.[30] Not all women predeceased by their husbands are covered in the law of the levirate, just as not all women predeceased by their husbands are addressed in the laws of the ʾalmānâ, because these laws refer to distinctive categories of widows.

The literal interpretation of ʾēšet-hammēt, the wife of a dead man, clearly indicates that because of the inheritable property from which they can derive economic support, Naomi and Ruth are still in a very real sense married to their dead spouses.

The ʾalmānâ Widow in Deuteronomy

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[28]The stories of the daughters of Zelophehad (Numbers 27:1-11; 36:1-12) raise the possibility that a daughter could be borne who would inherit the land and then pass it on to her son in the next generation.

[29]Driver (1895: 284). The same principle of the inherited widow is evidenced in cross-cultural studies of the history of the family; see, Goody (1976: 83-84).

[30]Pressler (1993: 63-74). Pressler notes that there are few references to childless widows in the Bible; this is because the levirate law only had relevance when land was available to be inherited. With no land in her husband's name, a woman became ʾalmānâ, and was not able to avail herself of the levirate option of Deuteronomy 25:5-10. This law is the right of first refusal of the widow, given to the deceased husband's nearest patrilineal kin. Although the law may appear to protect the interests of the widow by providing her with a child to see to her needs in her old age, this humanitarian concern is a by-product of the law, and not its primary agenda. The law of the levirate protects patrilineal interests in its aim to produce an heir to the deceased in the event that there is property for vertical inheritance. These principles help us to understand why in the case of the Book of Ruth, where there is property to be inherited (4:3), Naomi is not referred to as ʾēšet-hammēt: according to Ruth 1:11-12, Naomi is too old to bear such a child to the patrilineage of Elimelech; thus, the responsibility falls to Ruth, who is an ʾēšet-hammēt. Finally, I disagree with Otto, who concludes regarding Deuteronomy 25:5-10, "But these provisions of the deuteronomic family law paved the way for the modern emancipation of women already, in antiquity, and their authors deserve our respect" (1998:140).   Regarding this humanitarian agenda, see Weinfeld (1972: 284);McBride (1981: 534-35); McBride (1987: 242). For more on how the literal concerns of texts regarding widows may mask their intended purposes, see Sneed (1999).

The above distinctions in categories of widows finds support in the only three texts in the entire Hebrew Bible that make specific economic provisions for the dire straits of the ´almānâ widow,[31] the poorest of the spectrum of widows, women who we may imagine begging at the city gates. We turn now to consider briefly Deuteronomy 14:28-29; 24:19-21; and 26:12-13.[32]

The evidence marshaled for interpreting the ´almānâ widow in economic terms in the Hebrew Bible finds support in the work of Lohfink, who investigates poverty in biblical law and concludes that the class of individuals included in the category of ´ebyôn and `ānî, "the poor," shifts from one biblical law code to the next.[33] Lohfink convincingly argues that in Deuteronomy the triad, the widow (´almānâ), the fatherless orphan (yātôm) and the sojourner (gēr),--united by their landlessness--a group traditionally understood as the poor throughout the Hebrew Bible, is a separate category from the poor, identified by the words ´ebyôn and `ānî, although the triad is still in need of support.

In two of the three laws in Deuteronomy with explicit economic directives for those in need, the tithing law of Deuteronomy 14:28-29 and its follow-up in 26:12-13, the traditional triad of the widow, the fatherless orphan and the sojourner has been expanded to include the disenfranchised rural priests whose economic livelihood dried up with the Deuteronomic centralization of worship in Jerusalem.[34] The addition of the Levites, a group without land, to the list of individuals in need of the tithing provisions, viz., the widow, the fatherless orphan, and the sojourner, establishes unambiguously that the common link in this list is landlessness, and establishes that the ´almānâ widow is a landless woman.[35]

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[31]To be an inherited widow upon the death of one's husband would not preclude the possibility of being an ´almānâ widow later in time. Thus, what if there were no available male to carry out the levirate responsibilities, or the available men proved to be barren? Another possibility that would present problems for the inherited widow would be if she were infertile.

[32]Although the implications of Deuteronomy 15:11 are economic ("you shall generously open you hand"), the text does not explicitly refer to provisions for the
´almānâ widow. The economic implications of deuteronomic legislation has
already been established; see, e.g. Steinberg (1991) and Glass (2000).

[33]See Lohfink (1991: 34-50). Lohfink draws his conclusions on the significant
differences in biblical attitudes towards the poor based on his study of the
Covenant Code (Exodus 20:22-23:33), Deuteronomy, and the Holiness Code in
Leviticus. Within these laws ´almānâ occurs in Exodus 22:21, 23; Deuteronomy 10:18; 14:29; 16:11, 14; 24:17, 19, 20, 21; 26:12, 13; 27:19; Leviticus 21:14; 22:12. The grouping of widow, fatherless orphan, and sojourner occurs in all of the above citations in Deuteronomy, except in 10:18. Deuteronomy 10:18 differs from the others ("He [Yahweh] executes justice for the fatherless orphan and the ´almānâ, and loves the sojourner, providing food and clothing") although it ultimately includes all three categories of individuals. For a general discussion of poverty in the Hebrew Bible, see Pleins (1992: 420-14). On the relationship between Deuteronomy and the Covenant Code, see Levinson (1997).

[34]Cf. Leviticus 19:9-10. For more on the economic repercussions of this shift to more centralized government, typically dated to the time of Josiah's reforms, and reactions to the new policies, see Gottwald (1993: 12-14).

[35]Lohfink (1991: 44) maintains, "It became clear that what Deuteronomy does in these laws is not to add new groups to the poor, but rather to change the structures of society, so as to provide support for those groups which, for very different reasons, are not in a position to live off their own land. If that system worked, these groups could no longer be considered poor....A widow then has the same status as, e.g., a Levite, who according to Deuteronomy, is a very honored person in Israel." It seems to me that this legislation is ideological and in practical terms does little to alleviate the needs of those without land to

The logic of tithing is explained in Numbers 18:21-24. Tithing is intended to give economic support to those who have no land to support themselves; tithing is equivalent to taxation, and results in a redistribution of goods from local landed citizens to the landless. In light of Lohfink's work that demonstrates that the ʾalmānâ is not grouped with the ʾebyôn and `ānî in Deuteronomy, but instead indicates a different category of indigent individuals, the listing of the Levites with the widow in the tithing laws of Deuteronomy demonstrates that this tri-yearly tithe aims to support those individuals without land by which to support themselves. Ultimately, Deuteronomy creates a socioeconomic class that is also a poverty category, with the result that the landless, including the ʾalmānâ widow, depended upon the landed for economic welfare.[36]

4. Conclusions

The foregoing analysis increases our scope of understanding of the spectrum of widowhood in biblical Israel. Our perspective builds on the economic basis for marriage, as a social mechanism to reinforce kinship boundaries. The socioeconomic nature of marriage underscores the connection between patrilineal descent and the existence of inherited property, and results in economic differentiation between kinship groups. The existence of inheritable property is the variable that determines the intersection of economic class interests, related to the reproduction of the patrilineage for purposes of a system of the transmission of property through inheritance, and gender construction, because different categories of widows are found in the biblical text based on whether or not there is inheritable property. Patterns of transmission of inheritance are based on vertical
patrilineal descent principles.

Future discussions of widows in biblical Israel must utilize terminology that distinguishes different categories of widows. I suggest that henceforth we distinguish between the ʾalmānâ widow, a woman without economic resources after the death of her husband, and what I have labeled, the inherited widow, an ʾiššâ-ʾalmānâ, an inherited widow with sons, or an ʾēšet-hammēt, a woman who is transferred by levirate procedures to the nearest patrilineal kin of her husband. According to this categorization of widows, ʾalmānâ should be understood as an adjective with economic implications, describing a particular category of widows who are predeceased by a spouse with no inheritable property. By contrast, an inherited widow is one who is married into a landed family. The property and the subsequent son, if any, are affiliated to the name of the woman's deceased husband, rather than her levirate spouse. However, if the ʾalmānâ widow subsequently remarries outside the patrilineage of her deceased husband, any sons she bears are affiliated to the patrilineage of her new spouse. Ultimately then, there are different economic circumstances that separate one category of widows from the other, and the distinction depends on whether or not the primary wife is married into a landholding family. Possibly, future research will recover other more subtle nuances in the spectrum of widows. As we reconstruct widowhood in the biblical text we must recognize that in ancient Israel all widows, mothers of sons and mothers without sons, or simply childless

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provide them with food and the means of an economic livelihood. Lohfink concludes, "The problem with this Deuteronomic view seems to have been that nobody believed in it" (47).
[36] For more on the exploitation of this group of individuals, see Bennett (2002).

widows, whether they were landed or landless, had to depend on others for support of one form or another.

Finally, on a methodological note, this study demonstrates the value of combining historical etymological analysis with ahistorical comparative anthropological studies for illumining biblical data. We must analyze biblical texts based not only on the etymology of the word *´almānâ* and its Semitic counterparts, but incorporate into our understanding of widows in biblical Israel the contexts and the usages of distinctive terminology for these women.[37]

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