

Ready to Strike a Blow: Women and Violence in Petitions from Egypt and Early Christian Discourse

Listas para golpear: mujeres y violencia en las peticiones
egipcias y en el discurso cristiano primitivo

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ABSTRACT: The judge in Luke 18:5 is afraid that a widow is going to give him a black eye. Is this rooted in everyday experience? The article looks for evidence for every day physical violence used by women. Every now and then we have petitions from Egypt accusing women of violent behavior. An analysis of this material generates some patterns regarding violence used by women. Against the background of this results, early Christian literature can be understood more nuanced compared to their environment. The article shows that petitions from Egypt support a literal translation of Luke 18:5 and that it is a bias that women in antiquity did not use violence in everyday life¹.

KEYWORDS: gender, papyri, petition, violence, widow, women.

RESUMEN: El juez de Lucas 18:5 teme que una viuda le ponga un ojo morado. ¿Tiene esto su origen en la experiencia cotidiana? El artículo busca pruebas de la violencia física cotidiana ejercida por las mujeres. De vez en cuando nos llegan peticiones de Egipto en las que se acusa a las mujeres de comportamiento violento. El análisis de este material genera algunos patrones relativos a la violencia utilizada por las mujeres. A la luz de estos resultados, la literatura cristiana primitiva puede entenderse con más matices en comparación con su entorno. El artículo muestra que las peticiones de Egipto apoyan una traducción literal de Lucas 18:5 y que es un prejuicio que las mujeres de la antigüedad no usaran la violencia en la vida cotidiana

PALABRAS CLAVE: género, papiros, petición, violencia, viuda, mujer.

1. Introductory Remarks

¹Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. ² He said: «In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared

1. With gratitude to Isabel Ward for proofreading.

what people thought. ³ And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, ‘Grant me justice against my adversary’.»

⁴ «For some time he refused. But finally, he said to himself, ‘Even though I don’t fear God or care what people think, ⁵ yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won’t eventually come and attack me!’» (Luke 18:1–5, NIV)

A judge who fears nobody – neither God nor humans, yields to a woman. A widow no less. The judge is afraid that she is going to give him a black eye (ὄπωπιάζω). The Greek word is specifically used for being stricken under the eye. Like the NIV many translations soften the meaning of ὄπωπιάζω². François Bovon acknowledges the violent notion of the verb in his commentary to Luke but nevertheless, concludes that ὄπωπιάζω is to be understood metaphorically meaning that the widow is morally attacking the judge’s honor³. Similarly, the commentary by Luke T. Johnson translates the verb figuratively as «trouble» or «suffering»⁴. Barbara Reid and Shelly Matthews point out that it is suspicious that ὄπωπιάζω is figuratively understood only in Luke 18 and therefore not translated literally⁵. Obviously, it seems difficult to believe that a widow uses violence. Where do we encounter women using violence in the bible and Graeco-Roman literature?

Several women might come to mind. There are famous biblical women like Jael and Judith, who decapitate the enemies of Israel (Jud 4: 17-22; Judith 10:11-13: 10a). Abimelech is fatally wounded by an unknown woman who drops a millstone on his head (Jud 9: 51-53). His army-bearer has to kill him to protect his honor, so nobody can say that he was killed by a woman. In Greek mythology we meet women like Penthesilea, Medea, Clytemnestra, and the Amazons. Roman historians have plenty of stories to tell about Roman empresses like Livia Drusilla, Valeria Messalina, and Poppaea Sabina and their brutality, plots to murder people or using poisons to get rid of enemies. Concerning these accounts, one has always to keep in mind the bias writers like Tacitus and Sueton might have had. Plutarch depicts Olympas and Roxana to use violence to secure successions to the throne in their favor. Timoclea kills the soldier who raped her, and an old woman drops a stone on Pyrrhus’ head according to Plutarch. Pausanias, in his description of Greece, mentions Arsinoe who is said to have killed her brother-in-law to protect her children and also reports on Olympias. Obviously, most of these women are either elite women in a position of power and/or women who use violence in the context of war, succession or madness. It is difficult to find literary descriptions of everyday violence used by women except in the context of slavery⁶. So, the first challenge we have is a lack of sources we could use to understand everyday violence used by women.

The topic of violence is firmly tied to Johan Galtung. He extended our understanding of violence by pointing out its structural aspects like gender, elitism, sexism or ethno-centrism. Some structural aspects of physical violence in antiquity come quickly to mind like the legal status or gender – to be a slave, freed or free-born person makes a difference, the same as being a child or adult, woman or man. But there are other aspects like economic

2. In most English translations you find «weary» (KJ21; ASV; GNT; ISV; NASB) and once «strike» (NABRE). Cf. Niemand (2010: 118-121).

3. Bovon (2001: 193).

4. Johnson (1991: 270).

5. Reid–Shelly (2021: 489).

6. Cf. satirical Juvenal about a woman abusing her slaves (Iuv., *Sat.* 6.474-511).

standing, hierarchy or ethnicity intertwined with violence⁷. Since the 1990s studies on violence have increased. Lennart Gilhaus published a concise and informative research survey⁸. He extracts four areas encountering violence: war, political order, religious violence and everyday violence. These areas mirror the main focus of the most recent publications. The analysis of everyday violence is challenged by a lack of sources. The volume «Topography of Violence in the Graeco-Roman World» edited by Werner Riess and Garrett Fagan offers a solid introduction into everyday violence. The most important monography «Violence in Roman Egypt», written by Ari Z. Bryen, investigates thoroughly petitions from Roman Egypt narrating acts of violence⁹. The issue of women using violence is a marginal topic. Edgar Kutzner mentions a few papyri who document violence used by women. Nevertheless, he states that there are «numerous acts of violence by women» and that women are persistent in getting justice¹⁰. The most important article was written by Maryline Parca on «Violence by and against Women in Documentary Papyri from Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt» (2002). She collected an invaluable corpus of documentary evidence and increased awareness for women being victims of violence as well as perpetrators. I take up these studies and deepen the discussion by looking at more evidence and trying to extract patterns.

What do I mean by «violence»? Different Greek and Latin words are being used to denote violence. The most common ones are βία and ὕβρις; *potestas*, *potentia*, *vis* und *violentia*¹¹. Βία can describe acts of physical violence against one's will. ὕβρις covers acts of physical but also verbal violence like an insult or offence. But violence is more than a linguistic term, it is a concept. Bryen points out that violence is «an ethical label, one that is located within matrices of power and of what one considers acceptable and unacceptable»¹². So, violence is as well a physical experience as a way of negotiating power. E.g. the *potestas* of the *pater familias* is an accepted form of power, even if we as modern readers perceive its manifestation as violence. Robert Knapp describes the relation between men and violence in the Roman Empire as follows:

It is much more important to acknowledge that for the ordinary man violence was embedded in every aspect of his life to the point where it was, quite simply, normal. He might mistreat his (and sometimes another's) slave by beatings, sexual assault, mental abuse; his children were entirely under his authority and could be physically punished at will. His wife likewise had little recourse against the violence of her husband. Outside the home, fights were a normal way to resolve personal differences as this honor-shame culture endorsed violent forms of self-assertion in the face of insult real or imagined¹³.

Therefore, the context and evaluation of violence as legitimate or illegitimate is crucial. Violence in antiquity in its different forms is not per se negative. There are at least two competing notions in antiquity: the virtue of self-control (σωφροσύνη) - meaning to restrain

7. Cf. Fagan (2016: 489-490).

8. Gilhaus (2017).

9. Cf. Bryen (2013: 203).

10. Kutzner (1989: 107).

11. Cf. Hahn (2006).

12. Bryen (2013).

13. Knapp (2011: 38-39).

from physical violence, and the virtue to defend oneself and physically retaliate¹⁴. This is also true for women. It depends on the context and circumstances if physical violence is regarded as a legitimate way of self-defence or illegitimate with a lack of self-control¹⁵.

The discourse on violence is a gendered one. Using violence can be a sign of losing manly self-control and self-restraint¹⁶. At the same time using violence is regarded as a manly expression of control and power. Those, and more notions existed simultaneously. Violence used by women is depicted mostly in a negative way in Graeco-Roman literature. In myth, we find violent women depicted as mad or possessed. Comedy uses violent women to evoke laughter and ridicule – the natural order is upside down and abused men are regarded as effeminate. Sometimes, violence is seen as the opposite of female virtues. Tacitus comments on Triaria, the wife of Lucius Vitellius, that she was «violent/ fierce beyond her sex (*ultra feminam ferox*)» (Tac., *hist.* 2,63). Mostly, female violence is depicted as the *mater familias* who abuses her slaves violently¹⁷. Juvenal writes about a mistress who tears her slave's hair, rips her clothing and has her whipped because she is displeased with her appearance. Philo gives a glimpse on male indignation about violent women in his rant about some women's inappropriate behavior. Philo recommends that a woman's place is inside the house and taking care of the home. He gives some examples of inappropriate female behavior. Among them women who run to aid their husbands in a fight with other men based on Deut 25:11:

But as it is now, some women are advanced (to shamelessness/*ἀναισχυντος*) as not only they are endlessly talking -women!- among a crowd of men, but even to insult (men) and revile (them) (*προπηλακίζω*), with hands practiced rather in works of the loom and spinning than in blows (*πληγή*) and violence (*ὑβρις*), like competitors in the pancratium or wrestlers. (Philo, *spec. leg.* 3: 174)

Is Philo describing what he saw in everyday life? Is he exaggerating? His indignation is tangible. On one hand he is bothered by women appearing in public, especially among men and on the other hand, it is the use of verbal and physical violence which he declares inappropriate behavior for women. He evokes pictures of Graeco-Roman sport and entertainment to strengthen his argument. Philo envisions women's life according to an aristocratic ideal of staying at home, taking care of the household and weaving – the only appropriate work for a woman.

Everyday violence of women is rarely reported in antique sources. This is mostly due to a lack of interest in writing about everyday life and women in general. The widow in Luke represents an ordinary woman who is thought to be capable of using violence. This essay explores what we do know about women using violence in everyday life from documentary evidence. I concentrate on physical interpersonal violence used by women against non-enslaved adults. The essay endeavors to understand if Luke describes a scenario the addressees would find plausible or ridiculous.

14. Cf. Asikainen (2018: 28-29).

15. Cf. Hylén (2019: 58).

16. Asikainen (2018: 28). Cf. Arist. *NE* 5:14: «The law also prescribes certain conduct: (...) that of a gentle man, for example not to strike, not to speak evil».

17. Ov., *ars* 3: 235-244; Iuv., *sat.* 6: 487-495; Apul., *met.* 3: 16.

2. Violence used by women documented in Petitions from Egypt

Petitions are formal complaints addressed to officials. They are not factual accounts but narratives trying to convince another party. The plaintiff regards the experienced violence as illegitimate. A petition narrating a violent incident is a hermeneutic act showing agency, perception and interpretation¹⁸. According to Bryen petitions complaining about an act of violence are a process revealing how people saw and located themselves in their social worlds¹⁹. Petitions not only complain about wrongs done in the past, but they also aim to restore social balance, honor and material goods²⁰. They tried to rearrange social relationships²¹. Thus, they have a goal. To achieve this goal your case must be unquestionable. On their own or with the help of scribes, the petitioners paint their stories in a light that would most likely benefit them. Therefore, there are some patterns commonly found in petitions – stressing, that the petitioner didn't know the accused, had no conflict with them and was in general completely surprised by the attack and innocent. We also find specific words and phrases being used like being beaten half to death, being thrown to the ground, clothes being torn, receiving many blows. There are also ancient topoi like the beating of a pregnant wife so that she miscarries and/or dies. Sometimes, the deeds are simply summarized as ὕβρις. The term itself implies an unjust use of physical or verbal force. It is not always clear if it refers to physical or verbal violence if there is no other information. So, petitions are also about perception and labelling actions as violent²².

The evidence is sparse and patchy, like it is so often the case with papyri. But I am more optimistic than Fagan concerning the value of petitions. He concludes that it is hard to say if an act of violence like a woman being beaten twice by another woman and suffering twice a miscarriage afterwards (SB 10,10239), is common or simply unlucky²³. I want to show that we have enough evidence to at least get a little bit more than a fragmentary picture. We are well informed about people's violent conduct through petitions²⁴. Thankfully, I could use the valuable database of 135 petitions compiled by Bryen and added another 29 petitions from Egypt ranging from 3rd Century BCE to 5th Century CE (all together 164 petitions). I searched papyri info database according to metadata (petition; violence, injury) and text (ὕβρις/βία (violence), πληγή (blow, stroke), κόπτω (strike), τύπτω (beat)) in different combinations. I do not claim to have exhausted all available petitions. Of these 164 petitions 34 feature women who used violence or were part of a violent action²⁵. I also analysed the papyri documenting male violence to be able to compare the data.

Acts of violence are narrated differently and at the same time in a similar pattern. I will analyse some exemplary petitions to get a better picture of women using violence. Afterwards, I will evaluate my findings and tentatively ask for patterns.

18. Cf. Bryen (2013: 203).

19. Cf. Bryen (2013: 204-205).

20. Bagnall (1989: 211).

21. Bryen (2013: 57).

22. Bryen (2013: 74).

23. Fagan (2016: 483).

24. Other sources are e.g. letters.

25. Cf. table in appendix.

The first petition we are looking at is very short. It stems from the province of Arsinoe, maybe the town of Philadelphia and was written in 22 CE (P.Sijp. 14). An unnamed parent accuses Taormotis and her daughter of orchestrating an attack on the parent's daughter.

... my daughter whom I sent shopping for four drachmas worth of grain. In some way Taormotis and her daughter –ous, the two of them, surrounded my daughter, beat (πληγή) her multiple times, and stole her tunic and the four silver drachmas. Therefore, I ask, if it seems fitting, to order the accused to be sent to you for the appropriate punishment. Farewell. Year 9 of Tiberius Claudius Caesar, 14 of the month of Sebastos.

P. Sijp. 14; translation Bryen

The daughter seems to have been attacked on her way to run some errands. Taormotis and her daughter ambushed her, beat her and took her tunic and the money. We don't get anymore background. Was this a robbery? Or was there a debt owed? The daughter either knew the attackers or there were witnesses, because they could be identified. What is clear is that the two women used physical violence against the third one. We will see that women are frequently accused of beating other people in petitions.

The second petition is from Oxyrhynchos, capital of the nome Oxyrhynchos and dates to 37 CE (SB 10,10239). Tryphon turns to the strategos Sotas. As strategos Sotas administers to the district (nome). He is responsible for jurisdiction and therefore complaints. Tryphon writes on behalf of his wife Saraeus. She was attacked by Thenamounis and her daughter.

To Sotas, strategos, from Tryphon, son of Dionysios, one of those from the city of Oxyrhynchos. Late at night on the dies Augusta of the present month of Epeiph, in the 1st year of Gaius Caesar Augustus, the woman Thenamounis from the Oasis (?) and her daughter, Demetrous, having no issue with me nor with my wife, Saraeus, attacked her for no reason and harmed her, despite her being pregnant and ...blows (πληγή) ... untimely birth (hand 2) therefore I approach you and ask that the accused be brought before you so that they get ... and ...

SB 10,10239; translation Bryen

In line with classic structure of a petition, Tryphon names the addressee and then introduces himself first stating his father's name and the city he is living in. Immediately afterwards, he jumps to narrating the reason for his complaint. First, he describes exactly the date and time of the attack. Then, he names the assailants: Thenamounis and Demetrous. He specifies where Thenamounis is from and the relationship between the two women – they are mother and daughter. Typically, we find a disclaimer: There is no previous conflict. Therefore, the attack was unprovoked and unexpected. He then turns to describing the attack. Without reason the two women harmed Saraeus despite her pregnancy. The papyrus is corrupt, so the next word we can reconstruct is «blows». They seemed to have beaten Saraeus. There is again something missing, but the attack seems to have caused a premature delivery. Another person then adds the demand that the assailants are brought before the strategos. Despite the missing lines, the chain of events seems clear. Two women attack physically a pregnant woman and cause a miscarriage.

Tryphon's petition is part of an archive²⁶. From this archive we learn, that he holds back one important detail which changes at least the context of the assault: Demetrous was Tryphon's first wife, they split and he accused her of theft (P.Oxy. 2,282). Regardless, this was not a spontaneous attack due to a violent nature of the accused. It seems likely that the attack was part of an ongoing conflict between Tryphon and his ex-wife Demetrous. His mother-in-law Thenamounis obviously supports her daughter. Tryphon withholds certain pieces of information which might weaken his case on behalf of his injured wife. Let us look at the violence being used. The two women beat Seraeus. We don't know if there was more physical violence because the lines are damaged. As a result, her child is born too early, so the attack must have been a hard one. Even though, losing a child through an attack is a common theme in petitions, doesn't make it less brutal. The violence is set in the context of relationship respectively family conflict. We don't have the women's voices here but only Tryphon's telling the story of the incident. It seems telling that the former wife attacks the current wife and the unborn child. We don't know of any children from the union between Tryphon and Demetrous, but he and Saraeus had at least two sons and one daughter during their relationship.

The third petition is from first century Euhemeria in the nome of Arsinoe (P.Ryl. 2,124). Located in the village of Euhemeria was a Roman fort, probably from the time of Augustus. The petition is part of an archive of petitions addressed to the chief of police, the strategos or other officials. The first line is lost, so we don't know to whom the petition was addressed. The petitioner is the public farmer Hippalos. The rural context is evident. He writes on behalf of his wife Aplounes and her mother Thermis who were attacked in a bath by a group of people. As a result of the attack not only is Aplounes bedridden but she and her mother also lost some valuable jewelry.

[recto] From Hippalos, son of Archis, a public farmer, one of those from the town of Euhemeria in the division of Themistos. On the 6th of Tubi my wife Aplounous and her mother Thermis— Eudemonis, daughter of Protarchos, and Etthytis, daughter of Pees, and Deios, son of Ammonios, and Heraklous attacked (ἐπέρχομαι) [them, and beat AEM: not in the papyri] my wife Aplounous and her mother in the town bath. They hit her (πληγῆ) multiple times on all the parts of her body and as a result, she's laid up. And in the fight, she lost a gold earring weighing a fourth ...[verso] a plain bracelet the weight of sixteen drachmas, and a bronze cup worth 12 drachmas. Her mother Thermis lost a gold earring weighing two and a half quarters ... they went out from ... those in charge of the bath ...

P. Ryl. 2,124; translation Bryen

Hippalos narrates the events in detail. He states the exact date of the attack and the place. His wife and mother-in-law were attacked in a town bath. Attacks in public baths are common. It is an opportunity for theft or to get back at someone in a vulnerable situation. Hippalos spares no detail of the attack, and he can identify the attackers: Eudemonis, daughter of Protarchos, Etthytis daughter of Pees, Deios, son of Ammonios and Heraklous. The group consists of two women and two men. Hippalos does not tell if and how they are related to each other. Are they a gang of criminals? Are they family? It seems that they managed to leave the bath with the stolen goods. The attackers hit Aplounous and her mother multiple times all over the body. It sounds like they were seriously beaten up.

26. Cf. Biscottini (1966).

Aplounous is said to be so severely injured that she must stay in bed. That's not the end. What follows is a meticulous account of the valuables the two women lost during the attack. Hippalos describes the jewelry by material, weight and value. There seems to be another party involved – those in charge of the bath but unfortunately the lines are corrupt. It is very common according to petitions that a theft is combined with a physical attack. It is hard to say what matters more – the physical injuries or the material loss. Every now and then such incidents are the result of an outstanding debt. But we don't know if this is the case because Hippalos doesn't mention anything similar. His narration depicts two innocent women taking a bath and being violently beaten up and robbed by a gang. What matters for us that two women are involved in the attack. Again, we only have one part of the story and no voice of the women involved.

The fourth petition is from the village of Bacchias and dates to 114 CE (BGU 1,22). Bacchias is located in the Fayum oasis and therefore also part of the nome Arsinoe. The village center was dominated by a temple for the popular god Sobek. The petition is addressed to the strategos Apion and the petitioner is a 30 year old woman called Tarmouthis. She accuses Taorsenouphis of attacking her violently without reason. She also destroyed clothes and took money. Later, her husband took valuables from her house, too. Tarmouthis asks the strategos that Taorsenouphis and her husband be brought before him to be punished. The papyrus shows no missing lines and is a rare example of a complete petition.

To Apion, strategos of the Arsinoite nome in the division of Herakleides, from Tarmouthis, daughter of Phimon, vegetable-seller from the town of Bacchias, at present not having a guardian. On the 4th of the present month of Pharmouthi, Taorsenouphis, the wife of Ammonios also known as Phimon, the elder of the town of Bacchias, having absolutely no issue with me, came into my home and did irrational violence (ἄλογος ἀηδία) to me. She not only tore my tunic and my cloak, but in the course of this violent (ἀηδία) act she took from me 16 drachmas lying there from the money from the vegetables that I sold. And on the 5th of the same month, her husband Ammonios also known as Phimon came to my house as if to search for my husband. He took my lamp and entered my house, and then carried off the pair of bracelets lying there, the value of which by weight was 40 drachmas of uncoined silver, my husband being on a trip at the time. Therefore, I ask that those accused be brought before you for fitting punishment. Farewell. Tarmouthis roughly 30 years old, with a scar on her right foot. Year 17 of Emperor Caesar Nerva Trajan Augustus Germanicus Dacicus. Pharmouthi 6.

BGU 1,22; translation Bryen

Tarmouthis addresses the strategon of her nome. It is remarkable, that she not only states her name – Tarmouthis, daughter of Phimon, but also her profession: she is a vegetable-seller. Furthermore, she mentions the village she is living in and that she has no guardian while her husband is away. We get the picture of an independent woman who is working and taking care of her own affairs. Still, she needs to mention that she has no guardian who can act on her behalf. As in the petitions before, the complaint quickly follows the incident. Tarmouthis submits the petition right after the second attack. So, we have a timeline: on the 30th of March Tarmouthis is being attacked by Taorsenouphis. The next day, March 31st Ammonios enters her house to take away some of her belongings. On the first of April she submits the petition. The accused are well known – Taorsenouphis

is the wife of a town elder of Bacchias. Tarmouthis claims that there was no conflict between her and Taorsenouphis. Tarmouthis accuses the other woman of ἄλογος ἀηδία – in Bryen’s translation «irrational violence». The noun ἀηδία means an odious, appalling deed. So, literally she says that she was the victim of an unspeakable odious deed. She elaborates that Taorsenouphis tore her cloak and tunic. This might be the reason why she labels the attack as ἀηδία – her modesty is being attacked and she is subjected to shame. On top of everything, Taorsenouphis takes her revenue from her sold vegetables. All in all, this means quite a financial damage: two torn pieces of clothes and the loss of her earnings. The next day, the elder himself enters Tarmouthis’ house under a pretense. He takes two valuable silver bracelets. It is interesting, that no violence is reported of Ammonios but only of his wife. Was there a struggle between the two women? Was Taorsenouphis too much afraid of a man or so shaken by the events the day before to put up resistance? She explains that her husband was away on a trip. Maybe she wants to show that the couple used her temporarily vulnerability of not having her husband at home. At the same time, Tarmouthis does not seem like a defenceless woman. Tarmouthis seems to expect to be successful with her petition against two persons who are very likely more powerful, better connected and wealthier than she is. The petition ends with stereotyped phrases including a description of Tarmouthis and the date.

The fifth petition is from the village Narmouthis in the nome Arsinoe dating to 155 CE (P. Sijp. 16). The goldsmith Neilos was robbed and beaten by a woman called Thamounis. He submits his petition to the local *beneficiarius*. A *beneficiarius* is a soldier deployed as policeman.

To the beneficiarius for the area, from Neilos the goldsmith. Today, which is the 9th of the month of Hadrianus, a certain Thamounis, wife of a certain Kofos the donkey-driver, came to my workshop on the pretense of (looking at) some silver rings. Seizing the opportunity, she not only abused (ἀυκίζω) me indecently with many blows (πληγῆ) but she also took from my counter a golden earring weighing four-thirds. Therefore, I submit (this), asking that she be brought before you (for) fitting punishment. Farewell. Year 19 of Antoninus Caesar, lord, 9th of the month of Hadrianus.

P. Sijp. 16; translation Bryen

Neilos does not address the *beneficiarius* by name but function. Obviously, he does not know the responsible soldier by name. Neilos knows the assailant by name and her husband but seems to distinguish himself from them – «a *certain* Kofos». Is that because Kofos is a donkey-driver? His wife Thamounis beat the goldsmith and stole a golden earring. Neilos tells the incident as an intentional crime. Obviously, Thamounis is rather confident in general and especially about her bodily strength. She attacks the goldsmith with blows. Regardless of gender stereotypes, a goldsmith is expected to have some bodily strength – especially in his arms. Did he really not defend himself? Was he taken by surprise or was Thamounis physically superior? I find it astonishing that he narrates the incident like this. We would assume that it is a blow to his manliness to be beaten by a woman. He does not seem to regard the incident as shameful or emasculating. Is that a sign of a different perception of women using violence?

The sixth petition is from Karanis written in 296 CE (P. Cair.Isid. 63). Karanis is an agricultural town and seems to have been mainly inhabited by Roman Greek-speaking veterans. Many houses show that the people lived in slightly better conditions than in

other parts of the Fayum. Archaeological evidence points to a character of the town «a little less of a typical Egyptian peasant village and a little more of a Roman town with a large number of moderately wealthy inhabitants who were no peasants»²⁷. Aurelia Taesis accuses her paternal uncle of withholding her legal inheritance. The conflict escalates and Aurelia is attacked by her paternal cousins and aunt.

To Aurelius Gordianus, beneficiarius on duty, from Aurelia Taesis, daughter of Kopres, from the town of Karanis. I have suffered damage and illegal prosecution ... by my paternal uncle, Chairemon, who is from the same town of Karanis. Not being able to bear these things, I have sought legal redress. When I was a young child I lost my parents, and I lived with my maternal uncle Ammonios, and was raised by him. But my paternal property was stolen and is being held by the aforementioned Chairemon. I remained passive about these matters while I was still a minor, but when thanks to the providence of god I came of age, I thought it necessary to sue the aforementioned Chairemon concerning the property which he was keeping from me. Not once but twice I petitioned the beneficiarius entrusted with the decarchy, and he ordered Chairemon to return the things he was holding on to. But he did not return them. Yesterday, which was the 24th, his daughters Kyrillous, Tasoucharion, Taesis, T—, and Thatres, their mother ... abused me with blows (πληγή), pulled out (?) my hair, tore my clothes, and threw me on the floor. They did this in the presence of Hol and Kasios, officials (δημόσιος) from the same village, who pulled me away from the women ...
P. Cair. Isid. 63; translation Bryen

The names in this petition are worth a closer look. The people mentioned in the other petitions before had mainly Greek and sometimes Egyptian names. The *beneficiarius* has a Roman name, the plaintiff's name is of Latin (Aurelia), Egyptian (Taesis) and Greek (Kopres) origin. All other names are Greek or Graeco-Egyptian (Tasoucharion) and one of Egyptian origin (Thatres). Names can reveal a person's ethnicity, origin or social standing. Aurelia gives background to the recent attack. She was orphaned as a child and grew up at the house of her maternal uncle. When she came of age, she unsuccessfully sought legal help to regain her inheritance embezzled by her paternal uncle Chairemon. Despite the official order to return her inheritance, Chairemon refused. Aurelia does not tell more. It seems that, out of the blue, the daughters of Chairemon and his wife attacked Aurelia. Again, she paints a vivid picture: She was beaten, her hair was pulled, her clothes got ripped and she was thrown to the floor. All of it happened in front of two public servants from the village. A δημόσιος can have a variety of tasks but it seems likely that the two officials were present because of a legal matter. Maybe concerning the embezzled inheritance. The women seem to have attacked Aurelia simultaneously. Maybe the attack was happening surprisingly, so that the officials had no chance to prevent it. But they intervened and pulled Aurelia away. Was this an inheritance dispute getting out of hand or was there more to it? Why were all these female relatives involved? We don't get answers. But this is another example of women using violence to resolve a conflict.

The last petition is once more from the town of Oxyrhynchos written in the third century (SB 6,9421). Aurelius A., a former magistrate responsible for organizing games, turns to Aurelius Alexander who has policing capacities. He accuses Didyme of physically and verbally attacking him and his granddaughters.

27. Van Minnen (1994: 234).

To Aurelius Alexander, one of those in charge of the peace, From Aurelius A—, also known as Aphynchis, former agonothetes in the city of the Oxyrhynchites, Yesterday evening a certain Didyme, wife of Agathos Daimon, the cook, appeared at my house and, finding me standing there with my family, did violence to us, in ways both sayable and unsayable. She is a completely shameless woman (ἀναιδεία), well-furnished with bravado (θράσος). When I tried to restrain her and advised her to keep away from us, because of the darkness of night she reached such a peak of insanity (ἀπόνοια) that she attacked me (ἐπιτηδάω), since she is naturally hot-tempered (?), reached out and struck me (τύπτω), and cursed out (διελοιδορέω) some of my granddaughters who were standing nearby. I have presented them as witnesses, and not only them, but also one of the officials of our city who was present as well. Having suffered such things and finding myself wounded (πλήσσω), I submit to you this petition, asking you to order her to be brought before you, so that I may receive the benefaction you extend to all. Farewell.

SB 6,9421, translation Bryen

Aurelius knows the assailant by name and tells us that her husband is a cook named Agathos Daimon. Again, the condescending «a certain Didyme» is being used. So, they are most likely lower in the social hierarchy compared to Aurelius who stressed that he used to organize games for the city. This means he was rather wealthy and prestigious. Said Didyme came by the house of Aurelius. It is unclear if the encounter happened outside or inside the house. The narration's rhetoric structure is elaborate. First, Didyme is accused in general of having used speakable and unspeakable violence (ἐξυβρίζω). Then, her character is demolished – she lacks shame (ἀναιδεία), is insolent or overtly bold (θράσος). I assume that Didyme was maybe abusing the family with foul language or insults. Or she demanded or criticized something Aurelius was not pleased about. Aurelius tried to regain the upper hand but failed. He blames the late hour which drove Didyme insane. Maybe he is alluding to stereotypes of women, nightfall and madness known from nocturnal rituals and female frenzy in the rites of Dionysios. Aurelius might simply try to find a way to convey the outrage he is feeling. Didyme then leaps upon Aurelius and strikes him. Besides, she is verbally abusing his granddaughters. He calls not only them as witnesses but also some town officials who were present. Again, we don't know why. Maybe because one of the parties involved them or called them. In the end Aurelius emphasizes that he suffered a great deal and is wounded – because of the verb used it is unclear if he means literally or metaphorically wounded (πλήσσω). The setting is quite remarkable. Didyme is said to have walked alone to the house of a person above her own status. There are family members present and even town officials. Nevertheless, she uses physical violence. Aurelius is rather obscure about the reason of the attack and frames it as female madness. An interpretation very commonly found to explain unwelcomed public display of female anger, rage or aggressiveness²⁸. Aurelius' petition is a fine example for the importance of framing and getting across your side of the story. The lower status of Didyme might also help to paint her as a deranged crazy person who attacked a distinguished family unprovoked.

Following patterns can be extracted from the above and other petitions:

- There is no difference in the use of words or language concerning violent acts of women compared to men. This might be because scribes documenting the violent incident used expressions, phrases and terms regardless of gender. Or women sim-

28. Cf. El Mansy (2023: 186-188).

ply committed similar violent acts like men. There is a difference in specific details: men refer more often to their social status, stressing their good standing. They start their petition with phrases such as I am a farmer, tax payer, former official. Women refer more often to their social status, stressing their need of help such as I am helpless, a widow, an orphan, without a guardian. The women depict themselves as powerless. Rarely, they mention their independence. One exception is Tarmouthis the vegetable-seller. The women may appeal to an assumed protective instinct of the male officials and thereby use gender stereotypes. Commonly used terms are *hybris* (ὑβρις), blows (πληγή), and to beat (τύπτω, πλήσσω).

- Women attack mostly other women. Every now and then a pregnancy is at risk because of the attack or a miscarriage is caused. We only get very few details and relationships are sometimes obscured on purpose. Still, women mostly use violence to solve an interpersonal conflict and/or it is a case of theft or robbery.
- Women often attack other women at home. Every now and then the incident takes place on a street or in a public bath. Men are more often attacked in public or while working on the field. In most cases there is also a property crime or theft happening. Regularly these seem to be the actual reasons for the use of violence.
- There are not enough documents to make a reliable statement about the social status of female attackers and attacked persons. Regarding petitions about men using violence, the male plaintiffs are mostly state officials, farmers and priests. The accused ones are mostly workers, tax collectors or other government personnel. Very often the plaintiff claims that there was no reason for the attack.
- Women also attack men. The men filing an official complaint are not ashamed to admit so. Women attack mostly on their own or with relatives. Men are more likely to attack on their own or in groups, which sometimes seem to be criminal gangs or those connected through work. Women seem to use insults slightly more often or are more often accused of doing so. It cannot be ruled out that insults used by a woman are differently perceived from a man using them.
- In general, violence is mainly used within family conflict or to recover debts – either the debtors attack to avoid settling the debt or the creditors to try to exact payment. Women and men alike usually use physical violence like hitting. Women tend to rip the clothes of the attacked person. Men use weapons like clubs, rods, swords or axes. It is not documented that women use weapons. Rarely, the pre-history of a violent incident is told.

All in all, less violence by women is documented. This is probably due to fewer occurrences, but maybe also fewer reports of men due to shame or lack of evidence. Papyri show that some women do use violence. There are some gender differences like the manner of attack or persons being involved. Most of the violence occurs in specific social contexts and very often within interpersonal conflicts. Even if the whole story is not recorded, it can be assumed that many incidents are only one event in an ongoing conflict. Violence is used by women to settle disputes, negotiate relationships inside and outside the family or redistribute property – regardless of being justified or unjustified. Differences between women and men using violence can be found in specific details but not in general. Therefore, Fagan's results regarding violence in Roman social relations can be confirmed in regard to women by the findings in petitions:

All of this evidence fleshes out our typology of violence in Roman social relations: violence was inflicted in interpersonal conflicts, as a status marker in circumstances where power differentials were made salient, as an act of revenge, as an expression of popular justice, or on oneself as an escape from present troubles²⁹.

3. Conclusions

Let us come back to the widow and the judge in Luke. The assessment of physical violence is ambivalent in the gospels, but mostly it is rejected. The Matthean beatitudes champion gentleness or meekness (πραῖος) and peacemaking (εἰρηνοποιός) as virtues (Matth 5:5.9). This can be regarded as a stance against using physical violence and is in accordance with ideals of self-control³⁰. Some interpreters regard Jesus' action of the temple cleansing as an act of violence, especially in the Johannine version where Jesus is using a self-made whip (Ioh 2:15)³¹. This can be regarded as expression of righteous anger – might this also be true for the widow? In the Gospel of Matthew one of Jesus followers draws a sword and cuts off the ear of a servant (Matth 26:51). Jesus asks him to put away the sword because all who draw the sword will die by the sword (Matth 26:52). In the sermon on the mount, we find the famous saying: «If anyone slaps (ράπιζω) you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also» (Matth 5:39). 1 Corinthians warns to insult other people (1 Cor 5:11; 6:10). Col 3:8 wants followers of Christ to reject anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language (ὀργήν, θυμόν, κακίαν, βλασφημίαν, αἰσχρολογία ἐκ τοῦ στόματος ὑμῶν). In many instances, there is no obvious gender difference being made. This is not always the case. 1 Tim 2:8 asks men to pray without anger (χωρὶς ὀργῆς). In 1 Tim 3: 3 the bishop should be a non-beating (μη πλῆκτην), non-fighting (ἄμαχον) man. Titus 3: 3 recommends everybody to be non-fighting, and the bishop should be non-beating. Women are foremost asked to be quiet (ἡσυχίος) and gentle (πραέως) (1 Tim 2:11-12; 1 Petr 3:4).

To no surprise, non-violent behavior is demanded regardless of gender. Noticeably, physical violence is more often connected to men except the story in Luke about the judge and the widow. Especially in the pastoral epistles beating is connected to men. The documentary evidence from Egypt shows that there is no reason to assume that women did not use physical violence. It would be a distortion to read the early Christian discourse as being not aware of women using violence or not anticipating women to use physical violence. This is a common bias replacing female capability with gender stereotypes – leading to translations erasing complexity and reality of female conduct and life in antiquity. Rather, the emphasis on a non-violent ethic in New Testament scriptures and the constant struggle in later Christian literature shows that not using physical violence is not self-evident – for either gender.³²

Translations and interpretations of Luke 18:5 taking the Greek text metaphorically ignore evidence like the ones found in petitions from Egypt. They do offer invaluable insight beyond gender stereotypes. Petitions show that women did use physical violence and that they were called out to do so. The petitions show no surprise that women fall back on violence. New Testament scriptures address their non-violent ethic to all gen-

29. Fagan (2016: 483).

30. Cf. Asikainen (2018: 84-86).

31. For a discussion cf. Asikainen (2018: 147-153).

32. An insightful article concerning the use of violence by early Christians was written by Derksen (2010).

ders. Only later writings like the pastoral epistles associate men with physical violence. Violent acts can be interpreted as moments of social fission, like Bryen suggests³³. In this very moment the fragile balance of power can be upset. Violence calls into question the proper order of society or reaffirms it. The violence used by women documented in petitions illustrate that physical violence is one way to negotiate gender, status, affiliation or property. Violence is embedded in social relations and tries to change or solidify these relations. The widow in Luke is not helpless. She has and uses as much agency as she can.

There is a danger in ignoring the capability of women to use physical violence. Not only because this means overlooking aspects of everyday life in antiquity but also spreading influential gender biases.³⁴ The intended audience in Luke was very aware of women using violence. It is thinkable that a widow attacks a judge – regardless of her gender, status or ethnicity. Therefore, the punch line is not that women would never physically attack a judge. The point is that this widow is persistent to get justice in a male dominated world by all means necessary, regardless of gender bias and gender roles – as her sisters before and after her.

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33. Bryen (2013: 178).

34. Cf. in modern times the long process to imagine, acknowledge and punish women for violent acts in concentrations camps during the reign of the Nazis in Germany. Another example is the National Socialist Underground trial in Germany (2013-2018). Cf. Kuhn (1993).

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5. Appendix

Compilation of petitions accusing women of using violence (presented by date).

Identifier	Date & Location	Involved parties	Accusation
P.Petr. 3,27	300 BCE (?) Arsinoites (?)	Petitioner: Nikaia (f) Victim(s): petitioner Assailant(s): woman	jumped upon bitten of a piece (ἀποδάκνω)
SB 10,10271	28.07.231 BCE Magdola	Petitioner: Thraseas Antipatros (f) Victim(s): petitioner Assailant(s): woman	beaten (τύπτω) bitten (δάκνω)
P.Enteux 83	24.02.221 BCE Magdola (public bath in Oxyrhyncha)	Petitioner: Thamounis Victim(s): petitioner Assailant(s): Thothortais	grapped cast out of a bath tub blows (πληγή) necklace stolen
P.Enteux 79	218 BCE Krokodilopolis (street in Psya)	Petitioner: Herakleides Victim(s): petitioner Assailant(s): Psenobastis	dispute chamber pot with urin emptied on clothes insults himation ripped spitten in face
P.Tebt. 3.1,800	153/142 BCE	Petitioner: Sabbataios Victim(s): wife (pregnant) Assailant(s): Joanna	blows (πληγή) fall
PSI 3,167	118 BCE Thinites (workshop - weaving)	Petitioner: Sarapias Hermon (weaver, pregnant) Victim(s): petitioner Assailant(s): colleague	dispute jumped upon thrown to the floor beaten (τύπτω) many blows (πληγή)
P.Ryl 2,68	89 BCE Hermopolis (town square)	Petitioner: Tereus (pregnant) Victim(s): petitioner Assailant(s): Teteharmaïs Theotnachthis	dispute beaten (πλήσσω) many blows (πληγή)
SB 18,13087	4 BCE Arsinoites (home)	Petitioner: Imouthous Ptolemaios (m) Victim(s): petitioner Assailant(s): Papontos' wife Herakleia and their son Andron	ὑβρις βία wounded 2 cloaks stolen
BGU 20,2870	1-50 CE Arsinoites	Petitioner: woman Victim(s): petitioner Assailant(s): woman	ὑβρις many blows (πληγή)
P.Sijp. 14	22 CE Arsinoites (street)	Petitioner: ? and daughter Victim(s): daughter Assailant(s): Taormotis and daughter	ambush/attack many blows (πληγή) tunic and 4 drachmas stolen

P.Ryl. 2,124	28-42 CE Euhemeria (public bath)	Petitioner: Hippalos Archis (public farmer) Victims: wife Aplounos, mother-in-law Thermis Assailant(s): Eudemonis (f), Etthytis (f), Deios, Heraklous	many blows (πληγή) valuables stolen
SB 10,10239	37 CE Oxyrynchos	Petitioner: Tryphon Dionysios (weaver) Victim(s): wife Saraeus (pregnant) Assailant(s): ex-wife Demetrous and mother-in-law Thenamounis	attack blows (πληγή) untimely birth
P.Lond. 3,1218	23.08.39 CE Euhemeria	Petitioner: Dikaios Chairemon (royal farmer) Victim(s): wife Assailant(s): Helenous Tothis	ὄβρις
P.Ryl. 2,151	40 CE Euhemeria (home)	Petitioner: Herakleios (administers money for gymnasiarch) Victim(s): daughter Assailant(s): Herais wife of Heraklas	grabbed many blows (πληγή) purple tunic ripped 100 drachmas stolen
SB 10,10244	50 CE Oxyrynchos	Petitioner: Tryphon Dionysios (weaver) Victim(s): petitioner, wife Saraeus (pregnant) Assailant(s): woman	attack many blows (πληγή)
SB 12,11018	1-50 CE Oxyrynchos	Petitioner: man Victim(s): petitioner Assailant(s): woman, hired men	verbal abuse (ακολογοῦσα πολλά καὶ ἀσχήμονα) having men assault him
BGU 1,22	01.04.114 CE Backchias (home)	Petitioner: Tarmuthis Phimon (f, vegetable seller) Victim(s): petitioner Assailant(s): Taorsenouphis and husband Ammonios (town elder)	ἄηδία torn chiton and pallium 16 drachmas and valuables stolen
P.Hamb. 4,240	30.08.119-28.08.120 CE (house)	Petitioner: Phibis Victim(s): Heros (pregnant) and her sister Assailant(s): Thaisarion, Thenapunchis	dispute many blows (πληγή)
P.Sijp. 16	155 CE Narmouthis (workshop)	Petitioner: Neilos (gold smith) Victim(s): petitioner Assailant(s): Thamounis (wife of Kofos the donkey-driver)	αἰκίζω (maltreat) many blows (πληγή) golden earring stolen

P.Ryl. 2,116	15.05.194 CE Hermopolis	Petitioner: Saprion Sarapion (former kosmetes and gymnasiarch) Victim(s): petitioner Assailant(s): his mother Eudaimonis with her brother- in-law Serenos (former gymnasiarch)	broke out into insolence (έξυβρίζω) clothes torn
P.Oxy. 51,3644	3 rd CE Oxyrynchos	Petitioner: Heras Papontos Victim(s): Syra Assailant(s): Sabina	beaten (πλήσσω)
SB 6, 9421 (P.Oslo inv. 1482)	3 rd CE Oxyrynchos (outside the house)	Petitioner: Aurelius A. (former agonothetes) Victim(s): petitioner, daughter- in-law Assailant(s): Didyme wife of Agathos Daimon (cook)	broke out into insolence (έξυβρίζω) beaten (τύπτω) railed furiously (διαλοιδορέομαι)
P.Cair.Isid. 63	296 CE Karanis	Petitioner: Aurelia Taesis Victim: petitioner Assailant(s): wife and daughters of paternal uncle Chairemon: Thatres, Kyrillous, Tasoucharion, Taesis, T-	pulled hair clothes torn thrown to the ground blows (πληγή)
P.Lond. 3,983	4 rd CE Hermopolite	Petitioner: Aurelius Sarapion Victim(s): his wife and daughter Assailant(s): woman	ύβρις
P.Herm 20	4 rd CE	Petitioner: Aurelius Beniamin Victim(s): his brother Assailant(s): Pemounios, Anoubion, Hermeies, Euthymia	blows (πληγή) strokes (πληγμα)
P.Oxy. 61,4122	22.06.305 CE Oxyrynchos	Petitioner: Aurelius Hierax Victim: his wife Sarapias Assailant(s): Psois, Tiron his brother-in-law and their wives and sons	blows (πληγή) beaten (πλήσσω)
P.Nekr. 38	307 CE Oasis Magna (house)	Petitioner: Syros Petechon (exopylates) Victim(s): petitioner, his wife Tsek- and children Assailant(s): Tabes daughter of Ammonia (exopylates), her husband Leloi, their sons Psenesis and Straton	Kidnapping & enslavement (wife & children) blows (πληγή) beaten (τύπτω)
P.Oxy. 51,3620	02.02.326 CE Oxyrynchos (home)	Petitioner: Aurelius Thonios Victim: his wife (pregnant) Assailant(s): Tapesis and her slave Victoria	ύβρις clothes torn body injured

P.Freib. 2,11	25.10.336 CE Oxyrynchos	Petitioner: Aurelia Thaeis Victim(s): farmers Assailant(s): Parakles, Ptollas, Thaeis, sister-in-law of Parakles, children of Onnophris	blows (πληγή)
P.Abinn. 51	26.08.346 CE ermopolis (house)	Petitioner: Aurelia Ataris daughter of Melas the veteran Victim(s): petitioner Assailant(s): Pol, Apion and his sister Kyriake	slayed (ἀποκτείνω) with blows (πληγή) imprisoned
P.Amh. 2,141	April of 350 CE Hermopolis	Petitioner: Aurelia Thaeis Victim(s): petitioner Assailant(s): her brother and his wife Rhia	blows (πληγή) punches (γρόνθος) kicks (λάκτισμα) clothes torn
P.Cair.Goodsp. 15	362 CE Hermopolis	Petitioner: Aurelia Eus Victim(s): petitioner, Taesis (pregnant), Sophia Assailant(s): Isakis Ammonios, his sister Tapiomis, Helene Panitis, Helene wife of Petersos, Ta-	blows (πληγή) miscarriage (Taesis) donkey stolen (Sophia)
P.Rain.Cent. 91	419 CE	Petitioner: Flavius Kyros (veteran) Victim(s): petitioner Assailant(s): woman	ὑβρις
PSI 8,876	5 th -6 th CE Oxyrynchos (stall [κέλλιον])	Petitioner: Philoxenos (builder) Victim(s): wife Assailant(s): neighbour with her family	ὑβρις