

Women in Scripture



A Dictionary of
Named and Unnamed Women in the
Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books,
and the New Testament



Carol Meyers,
General Editor

Toni Craven and Ross S. Kraemer,
Associate Editors

WILLIAM B. EERDMANS PUBLISHING COMPANY
GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN / CAMBRIDGE, U.K.

Mahlah 1

Mahlah 1

meaning uncertain; perhaps "wounded," from Hebrew *hl*, "pierce"; or "pleasing, ornament," from Hebrew *hlh*, "to mollify, appease" (Num 26:33; 27:1; 36:11; Josh 17:3)

Mahlah is one of the five daughters of Zelophehad who approaches Moses to ask for an inheritance of land alongside their male relatives.

KATHARINE DOOB SAKENFELD

SEE ALSO Part I: Hoglah; Milcah 2; Noah; Tirzah; Part II: Daughters of Zelophehad (Num 26:33, etc.).

Mahlah 2

(1 Chr 7:18)

According to the genealogical lists of 1 Chronicles, Mahlah is one of the children of Hammolecheth, the sister of Machir who is the son of Manasseh and the ancestor of a major clan in the tribe of Manasseh. The mention of women, including sisters and daughters, in kinship lists that are largely patrilineal served to reinforce the importance of the group.

ALICE L. LAFFEY

SEE ALSO Part I: Hammolecheth.

Mara

"bitter," from Hebrew *mar*, "bitter, bitterness"

(Ruth 1:20)

When Naomi returns to Bethlehem with Ruth, she is met by the women of the city, who ask, "Is this Naomi?" (1:19). She replies by asking them to "call me Mara," a name meaning "bitter," rather than Naomi, which means "pleasant." Her new name alludes to her difficulties — the death of her husband and sons, and her sojourn in a foreign land. It also provides a wordplay with her claim that "the Almighty has dealt bitterly [Hebrew *hēmar*] with me" (1:20).

CAROL MEYERS

SEE ALSO Part I: Naomi.

Martha

Aramaic *mārtā* or *mārtā*, "lady" or "mistress" (Luke 10:38–42; John 11:1–6, 17–44; 12:2)

Martha, identified as the sister of Mary, tends to be remembered primarily as she is depicted in Luke's very short exemplary story. This story appears to pit Martha and Mary against each other. It shows Jesus affirming the silent Mary who "sits at his feet" (learns from him as a disciple), against a complaining, bustling Martha who is busy with what is seen as the women's work of serving. The story is often read as permitting women to step out of the gender roles assigned to them (as Mary supposedly does), but at the cost of denigrating the "Marthas" who engage in the work of sustaining life.

The stories in John 11:1–12:19 present a quite different picture; they show the two women acting in concert on behalf of their brother Lazarus (11:17–44) and in gratitude for his restoration to them (12:1–8). In John's version of the story, Martha in particular is an example of faith (11:20–27). But the roles Martha plays in both stories require a second look.

Luke's story begins by mentioning Martha, saying that she "received" Jesus; in the context of Luke, this means that she offered him the hospitality of her home. Therefore she seems to have been the head of the household. The text goes on to say she had a sister called Mary; the standard translations say, "who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying" (10:39). Thus Mary takes on the role of the student of a rabbi, in contrast to Martha, who is "distracted by her many tasks" (10:40). But many ancient manuscripts include the word *also* in 10:39; it would be better translated: "She had a sister named Mary who also sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying." This version introduces Martha as a disciple and hearer of Jesus and introduces Mary as her sister and her companion in discipleship.

Reading the verse this way helps to bring out the real meaning of the next verse, "But Martha was distracted by her many tasks" (10:40). The word translated as "tasks" is *diakonia*; the related verb *diakonein* in her question is translated "to do

work." Although these words can mean "serving, waiting on table" in many contexts, throughout the New Testament they convey a double reference to table service and Christian ministries (Mark 10:41–45; Acts 6–7; 2 Cor 3:4–11; 4:1). The later Christian terms *deacon* and *dean* derive from these words. This context celebrates Martha as a minister (*diakonos*; compare Rom 16:1). But the approval Jesus gives to the silent Mary seems to discourage women from the ministry of preaching and charity. Unfortunately, this reading accords well with Luke's interest in including women in the narrative while carefully restricting their roles.

Martha is even more prominent in John's narrative. John 11:1–12:19 forms a unit bound together by references to the persons of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. The section opens with the introduction of Lazarus as being from "Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha" (11:1). The author goes on to identify Mary as "the one who anointed the Lord" (11:2), apparently expecting the reader to know both the anointing story and the names Mary and Martha. The progress of the story is explained through the relationships between Jesus and the three, but the emphasis is placed on Martha: "Jesus loved Martha and her sister and their brother Lazarus" (11:5).

When Jesus arrives in Bethany, Martha takes the initiative in going out to meet him, presenting him with an oblique request for his help (11:20–22). The dialogue between Martha and Jesus is used by the author to convey the special Johannine understanding of resurrection (vv. 24–26). Martha responds with a full confession of faith in Jesus (v. 27). With no prompting from Jesus, she returns and sends Mary back to meet Jesus, claiming that he has asked for her. Thus it seems that Martha has expectations from Jesus and is guiding the events that will ensue. This impression is undercut by Martha's objection to opening the tomb (11:39); but this objection gives Jesus the opportunity to recall for the reader their dialogue about resurrection (11:41). Martha's reaction to the miracle is not described, but the dinner in 12:1–8 appears to be a celebration of Lazarus's restoration; in 12:2, Martha is said to "serve." This

elaborate and dramatic narrative, usually referred to as the resurrection of Lazarus, actually focuses more on the two sisters, and particularly on Martha. It appears to have been developed from an earlier and simpler story about a woman whose brother Jesus raised; another version appears in the *Secret Gospel of Mark*, a version of Mark attested in a letter of Clement of Alexandria (late second to early third century). The author, or community of John, identified the woman with the famous disciple or minister (*diakonos*) Martha and introduced her sister into the story.

What then lies behind the two different Marthas? Should one be accepted over the other? The two stories appear to reflect the theological interests and gender assumptions of Luke and John, having only a few common features. In both, Martha is said to serve or minister (*diakonein*; Luke 10:39–40; John 12:1), whereas Mary is designated as "sister." In both, Martha welcomes Jesus (Luke 10:38; John 11:20); this may imply that she is the head of the house. This slender information appears to reflect the memory of the roles these two women played in the post-resurrection early Christian mission. Martha was known and remembered as Martha the *diakonos* ("minister"; compare Rom 16:1, Phoebe the *diakonos* of the church of Cenchreae).

Perhaps, like Prisca and Aquila, Philemon, and Nympha, Martha the *diakonos* was also the host to a house church along with "Mary the sister." Like Paul, who signed letters with his missionary companion (for example, Paul the apostle and Sosthenes the brother in 1 Cor 1:1), Martha may have worked with Mary in a missionary pair. Similar partnerships appear in Matt 10:1–4 and Romans 16. The latter includes female-and-male pairs who may have been marital partners (Prisca and Aquila, Junia and Andronicus, Nereas and his "sister"), and a pair consisting of two women, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. The title "sister," which applies to Martha as well as Mary, may indicate kin, erotic partners, and Christians in general, as well as specific roles in the mission. Here sisterhood may represent not blood relationship, but a shared commitment to the mission and perhaps to each other,

Mary 1

hinting at a prehistory of women's same-sex commitments.

MARY ROSE D'ANGELO

SEE ALSO Part I: Euodia; Mary 2; Syntyche; Tryphaena; Tryphosa.

FOR FURTHER READING: D'Angelo, Mary Rose. "Women Partners in the New Testament."

———. "Women in Luke-Acts: A Redactional View." Reinhartz, Adele. "From Narrative to History: The Resurrection of Mary and Martha."

Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth. "A Feminist Critical Interpretation for Liberation: Martha and Mary, Luke 10:38–42."

Mary 1

anglicized form of Maria, which is a Greek form of Hebrew Miriam or Mariamme, meaning unknown

(Matt 1–2; 12:46–50; 13:53–58; Mark 3:31–35; 6:3–4; Luke 1–2; 3:23; 4:16–30; 8:19–21; 11:28–29; John 2:1–12; 6:42; 19:25–27; Acts 1:14; Rom 1:3; Gal 4:4)

This article deals mainly with New Testament references to Mary the mother of Jesus and to Jesus' mother, rather than texts on how Jesus was born or his genealogy. It omits consideration of John 1:1–5, 10–18; Phil 2:6–12; and Revelation 12.

Traditions about Mary the mother of Jesus ultimately become so central in Christianity that many readers may be surprised to see how few of these are found in the New Testament itself. Rather, stories of Mary's own birth, life, death, and bodily ascension to heaven first appear in Christian narratives dating no earlier than the second century C.E. and usually significantly later, the best known of which is the *Protevangelium (Infancy Gospel) of James*.

The first two chapters of Luke are known as the infancy narrative. They give a beautiful, poetic account of the miraculous events resulting in the birth of Jesus, the Christ for Luke. Thought by many scholars to be a Jew from a Greek-speaking Roman province, Luke infuses these chapters with allusions to scriptural events while casting the story as a contemporary Greco-Roman birth narrative of

a "divine man." This ploy in some ways resembles how the Roman poet Vergil heralded of the birth of Augustus as the dawn of the new age and how the Roman historian Suetonius posited Apollo as the father of Augustus.

Luke introduces Mary in the middle of his story about Elizabeth and Zechariah. Thanks to God's help, Elizabeth has miraculously conceived a son, John the Baptist, in her old age. Next Luke surprises his audience, inverting the familiar scriptural topos of God granting sons to childless married women. Shockingly, a betrothed virgin is reported as God's choice as a mother for his son. The angel Gabriel visits a young virgin, Mary, living in Nazareth. She is betrothed to Joseph, a descendent of the Davidic line. Unlike the earlier miracle, in which Zechariah received the angel's message, Gabriel announces his news to the prospective mother and tells her that the son must be named Jesus. Despite her fear of the supernatural being, Mary musters the courage to ask how she could conceive a child, since she did not "know a man" (1:34; "since I am a virgin," in NRSV). She, too, appears to understand God's miracles as working through the natural order. Gabriel answers that the miracle God will perform for her will surpass that of Elizabeth and Zechariah and, by implication, that of Sarah and Abraham (Gen 18:1–15; 21:1–2). God's Holy Spirit will father Mary's son, and as a result, Jesus will be called "Son of God" (1:35).

At 1:36 Luke intertwines these two miracle narratives. Gabriel tells Mary that her own relative, the aged Elizabeth, is six months pregnant. One can only imagine Mary's surprise that another female member of her family has been visited by God in a similar manner. This information seems to allay Mary's fears — she will not be alone in her pregnancy and will have a confidante in Elizabeth, who will understand the divine event. Mary submits to God and agrees to the divine impregnation. She calls herself the "servant [literally "slave," in the Greek] of the Lord" and accedes to the angel's message: "let it be to me according to your word" (1:38).

When Mary arrives to stay with Elizabeth for three months, Elizabeth exclaims, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your