

A Feminist Companion to

Luke

edited by

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SHEFFIELD ACADEMIC PRESS
A Continuum imprint
LONDON • NEW YORK

SISTERS IN ADVERSITY: RETELLING MARTHA'S STORY*

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Martha, St. (Biblical). (Patroness of Cooks and Housewives.) (29th July). According to tradition, she was the means of converting her sister (see ST. MARY MAGDALENE) from her evil life, and is sometimes represented as leading her to CHRIST. She and Mary are symbolical respectively of active and contemplative life, or of female discretion and housewifery, as contrasted with frailty. A Provençal legend tells that while Martha was preaching near Aix, a dragon, who lived in the Rhone, devastated the country, but was overcome by her sprinkling holy water on him, bound with her girdle, and killed.

She is represented, often in homely dress, with some household or cooking utensil, or bunch of keys; sometimes with a pot of holy water in her hand, and a dragon, bound, at her feet.¹

When a mature student tells me, 'I've been Martha all my life – now it's my turn to be Mary', she is doing more than affirming the value of widening access to degree courses. She is using biblical stereotypes to tell the story of her own life (and because they are stereotypes which belong to a shared discourse-system, she can safely assume that I will understand her); and she is doing exegesis. In retelling the biblical story with herself as one (or rather two) of the characters, she is experiencing the text as part of her own world and exploring its significance for herself. This sort of exegesis, which I shall call here 'popular' exegesis, is a common phenomenon among churchgoing readers of the Bible, and more broadly (at least above a certain age range) among people who are not consciously either churchgoers or Bible readers, but who retain a sufficient stock of biblical memories from school or childhood to make

* I am fortunate to have had the opportunity to try out some of the ideas incorporated in this paper on a number of occasions during 1991. I am grateful to the colleagues in the Ehrhardt Seminar (University of Manchester), in the Sheffield Theological Society, and in the Theological Advisory Group of Chester Diocese for their comments and encouragement. Originally published in George J. Brooke (ed.), *Women in the Biblical Traditions* (Studies in Women and Religion, 31; Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), pp. 167-86. Reprinted by permission.

1. M.E. Tabor, *The Saints in Art* (London: Methuen, 1913), p. 80.

this kind of allusion natural. It is fed by 'popular' exposition: that is, by the ongoing process of preaching, teaching and retelling Bible stories that continues in churches, study groups and school classes, largely untouched by academic exegesis, and is probably still the widest source of biblical knowledge in this country. In this paper I will explore some aspects of this popular exegesis of the Martha and Mary story in Lk. 10.38-42, and ask what these particular stereotypes do for women. What messages do they hold for female expositors or auditors? What images of women's roles and characters within the Christian movement do they convey to male expositors or auditors?

A Tale of Two Women

It is not difficult to read Lk. 10.38-42 as a story with a positive message for women. The only characters, apart from Jesus, are women. The two women are presented, if we focus on Luke and ignore John (as I intend to do in this paper), entirely without male encumbrances: no hint of a brother, much less a father or a husband, disturbs this autonomous female household. Martha seems to be the owner of the house (Lk. 10.38), and she and her sister are able to offer hospitality quite freely to Jesus (the disciples are not mentioned, although the plural verb of Lk. 10.38 implies that they are not far away). Even more significantly, we are told in Lk. 10.39, Mary 'sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching' (the male disciples?), although the text does not speak of them. Mary thus assumes the role of a disciple (what else, after all, does a disciple do?), and when this role is challenged, she finds herself decisively defended by Jesus himself: 'Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her' (Lk. 10.42). The story can thus be read as a liberating text, in which Jesus affirms the right of a woman to abandon household chores and 'sit at his feet'. How this is translated into the auditor's own experience is a matter which the story leaves open: in a church context Mary's 'portion' can be identified as the right to be on a par with the male disciples, but it is often read much more broadly as a woman's right to pursue a career, to seek self-fulfillment, or simply (as we saw above) to study for a degree.

A closer examination, however, calls into question the liberating status of the tale. What message does the story convey to auditors who identify, from choice or necessity, with Martha? Mary is approved, certainly, but Mary is not the only woman in the story, and what is positive for one sister is correspondingly negative for the other. Mary's elevation is only achieved at the expense of Martha's humiliation. Mary crosses the

cultural boundary between the text,² implying the 'good' portion; if or what Martha is doing? I cannot be the or least, unfair to Mary Jesus, which is laud 8.2-3 also wasting inferior form of service was ; wandering charism have survived would Jesus have to leave the disciples an all-to group simultaneous helot class and d experience, rare 'fussing', they significantly female at know', they admirers, 'how wonderful' Not only does conversation; sphere of activity pointed out, it must be treated about Mary the She is pliable she listens, she is "a qu

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cultural boundary between female and male domains, and is praised for it but what does this do for her sister? Jesus' final words, however we read the text,² implicitly denigrate Martha's activities. If Mary has chosen the 'good' portion, Martha's must be at least 'not good', if not downright 'bad'; if only 'one thing is needful' (v. 42), then by implication what Martha is doing is, perhaps even more devastatingly, unnecessary.

I cannot be the only female auditor who feels that this is, to say the least, unfair to Martha. She is engaged in a form of διακονία, service to Jesus, which is lauded elsewhere in the gospel: were the women of Lk. 8.2-3 also wasting their time and resources in an unnecessary and inferior form of service? At the most mundane level, this type of practical service was absolutely vital to Jesus' mission: how would the wandering charismatics and their leader, to borrow Theissen's phrase,³ have survived without the hospitality of people like Martha? Where would Jesus have been if all his hosts had asserted their right, like Mary, to leave the dishes and sit at his feet? Told in this way, the story encapsulates an all-too-familiar double-think, whereby a dominant social group simultaneously assigns certain necessary but unpopular tasks to a helot class and denigrates their importance. Male preachers, in my own experience, rarely avoid falling into this patriarchal trap. Martha was 'fussing', they say, looking down from the pulpit on to their predominantly female audience, about unnecessary female concerns: 'and we all know', they add, before going home to their well-cooked Sunday dinners, 'how women do fuss'.

Not only does Martha 'fuss': even worse, she nags. She interrupts male conversation; she argues with Jesus; she asserts the value of her own sphere of activity and demands help. As E. Moltmann-Wendel has pointed out, the traditional (i.e. male) exegetical preference for Mary must be treated by feminists with a good deal of suspicion. What is it about Mary that makes her a 'good' character in the exegetical tradition? She is pliable (to the only male character in the story, not to her sister); she listens, she is attentive to her (male) guest. 'In Peter Ketter's phrase, she is "a quiet, tranquil soul", who is dear to the heart of preaching

2. Papyrus evidence on Lk. 10.42 supports ἐνὸς δὲ ἐστὶν χρεια against ὀλίγων δὲ ἐστὶν χρεια ἢ ἐνός, which looks like a conflated reading. Mary's choice is described as 'the good part', but it is not unreasonable to translate this as 'the better part', given the gradual obscuring of comparative and superlative forms in the *Koine*. See on this J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV* (AB, 28A; New York: Doubleday, 1985), p. 894. See further J.L. North, 'oligon de estin chreiahenos (Luke 10.42): Text, Subtext, and Context', *JSNT* 66 (1997), pp. 3-13.

3. G. Theissen, *The First Followers of Jesus: A Sociological Analysis of Earliest Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 1987).

theologians, in complete contrast to the self-confident and eloquent Martha'—and thus her story provides the lesson that

every housewife...according to Christ's will...must...be more to her husband than a mere housekeeper... Sometimes she must rest from work, sit down and listen patiently and caringly to her children or her husband, when they want to discuss their joys or their pains with her.⁴

Martha, by contrast, is independent, feisty, argumentative, busy with her own world of work and refusing to subordinate it to male demands for attention. Not unnaturally, many traditional portrayals have seen these as negative characteristics: Martha appears at the kitchen door brandishing a frying-pan, doing her best to distract her sister from her true spiritual destiny. Even their virtues are different: Martha is 'practical, competent, down-to-earth', while Mary is

quiet, restrained, a good listener, always receptive to others. If we are honest, Martha is presented to us as being useful and necessary. But, when it comes to a model, a comfort or an ideal, it's Mary all the time.⁵

Is it only the traditional predominance of male preachers in the church that has perpetuated this kind of stereotyping? Unfortunately, Martha fares little better when the story is told from a feminist perspective. The Martha I have just described sounds like an admirable feminist model, and is so identified by Moltmann-Wendel; but generally speaking, in feminist exegesis it is still Mary who scoops the prizes. Mary is praised for refusing to conform to the cultural stereotype, for not accepting the traditional role assigned to women in her society. But how does she achieve this breakthrough? Not by challenging the patriarchal denigration of 'women's work', but by accepting it: she can only achieve her own liberation by joining the men. It is a classic feminist dilemma, strikingly anticipated in a parallel story told at the end of the *Gospel of Thomas*. Here Mary's place among the disciples is challenged not by Martha but by Peter:

Simon Peter said to them, 'Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life'. Jesus said, 'I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the Kingdom of Heaven' (*Gos. Thom.* 114).

Read as a narrative about male and female roles, this is a revealing pericope. The scene is one familiar from the literature of childhood, and

4. E. Moltmann-Wendel, *The Women Around Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1982), pp. 54, 52, referring to Peter Ketter, *Christ and Womankind* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1952).

5. Moltmann-Wendel, *The Women Around Jesus*, p. 19.

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can be recognized even further back in the medieval tales of Robin Hood. Peter and the boys are having a great time, leaving their homes (and wives and/or mothers) behind, living like the birds of the air and the lilies of the field.⁶ It may be tough, but it's a man's life. Allowing Mary to join the group would spoil everything: 'Go on, tell her', Peter pleads: 'no girls allowed in our gang'. Jesus' answer is deeply ambivalent: Mary can join the group, but at a price. Like the tomboys of Enid Blyton, or like her namesake Maid Marian, she is only acceptable because she is 'as good as a boy'.⁷ The damaging cultural stereotypes remain securely in place.

Luke's story is not Thomas's, and there is no evidence that the two are related. Nonetheless the *Gospel of Thomas* story does give us an early instance of reflection on the traditional figure of Mary as the prototype female disciple, and, I think, demonstrates its limitations. Neither story does much to advance the cause of women in general: arguably, both perpetuate entrenched patriarchal perceptions of male and female roles and characteristics. In the *Gospel of Thomas*, this is signaled by Jesus' tacit acceptance of Peter's premise that discipleship is properly a male activity; in Luke, it is the treatment of Martha that causes the problem. The story is normally told in terms of a polarity between the two sisters, which we might express schematically thus:

Mary	Martha
sits at Jesus' feet	welcomes: serves
listens to Jesus' words	distracted: careful and troubled
one thing	many things
needful	[unnecessary]
— VINDICATED	— REBUKED
listening — discipleship	working in kitchen
join male disciples	WOMEN'S WORK
[male attitudes: no fuss]	'fussing'
pliable, acquiescent	independent, initiates action
attentive to male guest	busy with WOMEN'S WORK
good listener.	argumentative, 'nagging'.

If Mary is the 'good' sister, then Martha is clearly 'bad'. Any attempt to insist that there are good things about Martha (that independence and a sense of self-worth are good qualities for a woman; that 'women's work', rather than being denigrated, should be recognized as a valuable and

6. Theissen, *First Followers*, pp. 13-14.

7. E. Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982), pp. 72, 86-87.

essential contribution to the community) founders on the structure of the story itself, in which Jesus approves Mary and reproves Martha.

It may be objected that the readings I have outlined here are simplistic. They are, of course; but in the history of oppression, simplistic views do as much damage as sophisticated ones, perhaps more. The problem is that the popular expositions of this story, whether male or female, propel us straight into an exegetical trap. In affirming Mary's rights to pursue her own destiny, to leave the world of domestic tasks, we simultaneously condemn Martha to second-class status. Clearly the story has liberating potential for those who can identify with Mary, like the student with whom this paper began. Identifying with Martha is more difficult, simply because she is perceived at the negative pole of the story; but for those who identify themselves (or are identified by others) as fulfilling 'Martha' roles or bearing 'Martha' characteristics, the story carries an equivalent potential to oppress. The point is illustrated neatly by a contrary example: in the early 1990s Melissa Benn noted the positive effect of the 'outing' of motherhood in the life of the British Member of Parliament Harriet Harman:

Talk to a cross-section of youngish women, particularly those with small children, and the chances are they will say: 'Oh, Harriet Harman—I like her!' For a generation of women, touched by feminism but excluded by many of its genres (the single childless woman, the career woman who is a closet mother), Harman gives expression to undervalued experiences and difficulties.⁸

If Harman's (real-life) 'story' had positive value for this group, the treatment of Martha in the biblical story is negative in precisely the same way. Women as a group simply cannot afford to buy in to the traditional male devaluation of 'women's work' as inferior or unnecessary, much less to despise the women who (from choice or necessity) spend their time in doing it. What Martha needs is practical help (why didn't Jesus tell Peter and John to fill Mary's tasks?); at the exegetical level, she needs affirmation. Is there any way the story can be read so that it is not oppressive for Martha?

A Tale of Two Lifestyles

A brief glance at the exegetical tradition suggests that the problem goes a long way back. The medieval church saw the sisters not as two women but as types of two aspects of the spiritual life, the active and the contemplative. For Calvin, this was clearly an exegetical travesty:

8. *The Guardian*, 13 May 1992.

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Now this passage has been wickedly perverted to commend what is called the contemplative life. But if we aim at bringing out the genuine sense, it will appear that Christ was far from intending that His disciples should devote themselves to idle and frigid speculations.⁹

Once again the problem is that the polarity created by the story requires us to choose Mary (commended by Jesus) over Martha (reproved by Jesus). Everything that the story says about Mary's activity ('one thing needful'; 'good portion') is by implication true of the 'contemplative life', and everything it implies about Martha's activity (unnecessary; not-so-good portion) must equally be true of the 'active life', whether that be defined as the administrative, pastoral and charitable work that might form part of the duties of a cleric or religious, or as secular work (men's and women's) in general.¹⁰ Calvin's dilemma is that for him the world of work represented by Martha is clearly a good thing, ordained by God: 'But we know that men were created to busy themselves with labour and that no sacrifice is more pleasing to God than when each one attends to his calling and studies to live well for the common good'. If that is the case, then Martha (reproved by Jesus) cannot represent 'work' (approved by God); the story must be read in some other way.

Calvin was not the first to find that the Martha-Mary typology conflicted with his own convictions about the value of work. Meister Eckhart, in a striking example of 'reading against the grain', does not question the allegorical foundation of the traditional exegesis. His solution is to reverse the polarity so that Martha, not Mary, emerges as the favored sister:

Martha, being firmly established in virtue, open-minded, not hindered by things, wanted her sister to be like her, for she realised her insecurity. She had the highest motives, wishing her all that pertains to eternal felicity... Martha feared that her sister would stay dallying with pleasure and sweetness, so Christ says in effect: All is well, Martha, she has chosen the

9. Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke* (trans. T.H.L. Parker; Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1972), II, pp. 89-90.

10. It is clearly taken in the latter sense by Calvin, and also in the 'Treatise written to a devout man of secular estate, teaching him how to lead a spiritual life therein', which appears in the 1659 edition of Walter Hilton, *The Scale (or Ladder) of Perfection* (ed. J.B. Dalgairns; London: Art & Book Co., 1901). See further, R.C. Petry (ed.), *Late Medieval Mysticism* (LCC, 13; London: SCM Press, 1957), pp. 25, 53, 209. The tradition is surveyed by B.R. Heffner, 'Meister Eckhart and a Millenium with Mary and Martha', in M.S. Burrows and P. Rorem (eds.), *Biblical Hermeneutics in Historical Perspective: Studies in Honor of Karlfried Froelich on His Sixtieth Birthday* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), pp. 117-30.

best part, this will pass. The best that can befall creatures lies in store for her: she shall be blessed like thee.¹¹

Why does he have to do this? Partly at least because, like Calvin, he holds a prior conviction, which is not derived from the text but simply stated as an axiom, about the spiritual value of work: 'Means are twofold. One, without which I cannot get into God, is work, vocation, or calling in time, which interferes not one whit with eternal salvation, or calling in time, which interferes not one whit with eternal salvation.¹²

Eckhart's retelling of the story is playful and deliberately paradoxical; it is highly allegorical, but also draws on unnoticed details in the text to subvert the traditional reading.¹³ Calvin, by contrast, coming at the very end of this exegetical tradition, calls for a rejection of allegory and a return to the 'simple sense' of the text. What the two have in common is that both resort to exegetical tactics to extricate themselves from the impasse into which the story has forced them. If they accept the polarities of the tale they are compelled to condemn something which independent moral judgment tells them is admirable: but they cannot simply abandon the text, so it must be re-interpreted.

Recovery or Resistance?

A number of writers in recent years have drawn our attention to the hermeneutical problems created when a sacred text accepted as authoritative is perceived to be in conflict with the moral or political sensibilities of its readers.¹⁴ The problem is often identified in conjunction with feminist hermeneutics, but, as we have seen in this instance, it is not unique to feminists: in fact, as all students of intertestamental and rabbinic literature know well, the impulse to re-interpret a sacred text in line with the

11. Meister Eckhart, 'A Sermon on the Contemplative and the Active Life', in Petry (ed.), *Late Medieval Mysticism*, pp. 193-99, esp. p. 197.

12. Eckhart, 'A Sermon on the Contemplative and the Active Life', p. 195.

13. E.g. ('A Sermon on the Contemplative and the Active Life', pp. 194-95) the observation that Christ names (i.e. calls) Martha twice elicits two comments: first, that 'there never was nor ever shall be lost a single soul whom Christ has ever named by human mouth in the eternal Word' (backed by biblical examples); and second, that as a doublet the naming has double significance, once for this world and once for the eternal world (a principle which is also found in rabbinic exegesis).

14. E.g. E. Pagels, 'Paul and Women: A Response to Recent Discussion', *JAAR* 42 (1974), pp. 538-49 (esp. p. 547); D.J.A. Clines, *What Does Eve Do To Help?: And Other Readerly Questions to the Old Testament* (JSOTSup 94; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), pp. 25-48 (esp. pp. 45-48); F. Watson, 'Strategies of Recovery and Resistance: Hermeneutical Reflections on Genesis 1-3 and its Pauline Reception', *JSNT* 45 (1992), pp. 79-103; and cf. S. Durber's 'The Female Reader and the Parables of the Lost', *JSNT* 45 (1992), pp. 59-78.

reader's convictions is as old as the concept of a sacred text itself.¹⁵ Feminist criticism is perhaps unusual, however, (or at least characteristically modern) in its willingness to abandon texts that are beyond hope of recovery. In Francis Watson's words, one cannot always maintain 'the integrity of the text' at the expense of 'the integrity of commitments outside and beyond the text'. Sometimes one has to regard the text itself as part of the problem:

What is now concealed is the sinister fact that the original itself is the source of oppression... Here there can be no possibility of the mediating solution of a revisionary reading which prises the text out of the clutches of its interpreters and brings to light the emancipatory potential that they had concealed... the only solution appears to be an exodus out of the social space in which the text's sanctity and innocence are solemnly maintained.¹⁶

The problem for many exegetes is not whether such occasions exist but how one is to identify them. For as Watson rightly insists, it would be extreme to adopt the 'exodus' solution in every case where a biblical text is problematic. This is the question we now have to resolve in the case of the Martha and Mary story. Can we follow the example of Calvin and Eckhart and 'recover' the text from a history of misinterpretation, perhaps even learning from their exegetical strategies? Or should we conclude that the popular exegesis is right, and that the story will remain liberating only for Mary? Can we rescue Martha without doing violence to the integrity of the text? I would like to argue that we can, or at least that the attempt is worth making; how far it succeeds must be left to the reader to judge. We can only do this, however, in a manner consonant with our own critical principles: attractive as it is to explore the exegesis of an earlier era, ultimately I have to find a strategy that will satisfy my own 'integrity' as a twentieth-century critical reader as well as the 'integrity' of the text.

Rescuing Martha

The critical principle that seems most apposite here is that of attentiveness. As exegetes, we are learning to pay close attention to the text itself. We are also becoming more aware of the need to pay attention to the discourse of its co-texts, which means in this case, first, the Gospel of

15. Cf. P.S. Alexander, 'The Fall into Knowledge: The Garden of Eden/Paradise in Gnostic Literature', in P. Morris and D. Sawyer (eds.), *A Walk in the Garden: Biblical, Iconographical and Literary Images of Eden* (JSOTSup, 136; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), pp. 91-104 (esp. pp. 102-103).

16. Watson, 'Strategies of Recovery and Resistance', p. 81.

Luke and, secondly, gospel discourse in general. In the final part of this essay I shall examine two broad assumptions that underlie the exegesis of the text, and then go on to note a number of exegetical clues in the text itself which might help us to reassess Martha's role in the story.

Whose Story?

To tell this story as liberating is to concentrate on Mary's tale at the expense of Martha's. The exegetical tradition, however, both in the Middle Ages and in today's popular exposition, tends to assume that this is a story about two sisters, one approved and one reprov'd. The whole force of the traditional tale rests, as I have argued above, on maintaining a polarity between the two: whether women or lifestyles, we are offered a duality and expected to choose between them. But a closer attention to transitivity patterns within the text reveals that in fact the tale is Martha's much more than it is Mary's. There is no syntactical pairing corresponding to the ideological duality in the minds of exegetes. Martha is the subject of three finite verbs in main clauses in the narrative, with one participle, as against Jesus' score of two plus one. The two verbs describing Mary's activity in Lk. 10.39 are grammatically subordinated to the main clause of this verse, which uses an impersonal idiom to describe the relationship between the sisters: 'there was to her a sister', which the RSV and other English versions correctly render 'she [i.e. Martha] had a sister'. In direct speech, Martha is the subject of an infinitive in her own request in v. 40, and of two main verbs in Jesus' reply (10.41); Mary gets one finite verb in Martha's speech (subordinated to the impersonal οὐ μέλει σοι ὅτι...) 'does it not concern you that...', and one in Jesus' reply. The two other clauses ostensibly relating to Mary in 10.42 use impersonal verbs. These patterns serve to foreground Martha as the active partner with Jesus in the scene. Mary is a background character, of whom we are told (in a relative clause) only the bare minimum necessary to explain the dialogue that forms the culmination of the scene. Within that dialogue, Martha is allowed almost as many words as Jesus, and is accorded the unique distinction of being named by Jesus twice (10.41)—a point noted by Eckhart. What we have, then, is not a three-cornered scene but, as so often in the gospels, a dialogue between two characters, Jesus and Martha; Mary's actions provoke the dialogue, but she does not herself speak or appear on stage.

Paradigm or Paradox?

Calvin draws attention to an exegetical assumption which has persisted in limiting the ways this story is told well beyond the confines of the medieval allegory that he is seeking to undermine: 'The simple sense

shows easily how ignorantly they misused Christ's words to prove their invention. Luke says that Mary took her station at Jesus' feet. Does this mean that she was doing this the whole of her life?¹⁷ The allegorical approach to the story naturally moves from the particular (a single incident in Jesus' lifetime, involving specific, named characters) to the general (a generalizing rule about the value of one lifestyle over against another). Oddly, generations of exegetes who have been trained to avoid allegory like the plague in the interpretation of the parables continue to make this kind of generalization about Martha and Mary. Whatever the frame of reference (domesticity versus intellectual pursuits, secular versus spiritual, practical service versus contemplation), the two women are seen not as individuals but as types, cyphers from something intrinsically more interesting than the domestic problems of a harassed hostess. Calvin's *reductio ad absurdum* usefully reminds his readers that this is an assumption: the text tells us about a particular incident, but the interpretation has generalized this so that it becomes a paradigm for a lifestyle.

The same tendency to generalize leads to the related assumption that the apophthegm with which the story ends must be read as a general rule enunciated by Jesus establishing a permanent hierarchy of values as between one lifestyle and another. In fact Jesus' teaching in the gospels contains remarkably few general rules, and there is nothing to indicate that this is one (the persistence of the proper names in vv. 41-42 rather suggests the contrary). The story of the Good Samaritan, which immediately precedes this episode, suggests that the Lukan Jesus is more concerned with the reversal of existing value systems than with the setting up of new ones; and paradox plays an important part in this process, both in apophthegms and in parables (e.g. Lk. 14.26; 16.15; 17.33; 18.9-14, 27). Luke is particularly fond of stories (both parables and incidents in the primary narrative) that overturn the expectations of their auditors (e.g. Lk. 16.1-9; 17.11-19). They are intended to shock, not to lay down a code of Christian law. It seems at least worth asking whether there is an element of deliberate paradox in Jesus' reply to Martha, rather than treating it in a completely straightfaced fashion as a general rule for Christian (or female) behavior.

'A certain woman' (Lk. 10.38).

Luke tells us a number of interesting things about Martha. Is this the most significant? Is Martha's gender the major fact about her that we must bear in mind as we read this story? Popular exegesis has always tended to foreground gender in this story, taking it as a story which is

17. Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, II, pp. 89-90.

'addressed to women' in a particular way. In conjunction with the generalizing tendency just mentioned, this makes it almost inevitable that the story is taken as 'about women in general', and that whatever is said to Martha in the dialogue is laid down as a general rule 'for women'. But what are the grounds for this (implicitly sexist) assumption?¹⁸ Is it only in relation to female characters that gender becomes the all-important issue? In fact Luke has a habit of introducing his characters with the formula 'a certain man' (8.27), or 'behold a man [called]...' (5.12, 18; 8.41; 9.38; 19.2; 23.50); he uses the word *ἀνὴρ* significantly more often than Matthew or Mark, frequently in contexts where it is redundant.¹⁹ If gender is significant in this episode, it must be treated as equally significant in all the stories where Luke mentions it. It cannot be taken as uniquely significant for this story.

What we seem to be dealing with here is a general feature of Lukan narrative style which leaves open the question of narrative significance. Gospel stories, whether in the primary narrative or in parables, tend to use realistic characters and situations, and this means that, despite the economy of the narrative, there are elements in any gospel tale which serve simply as 'background' or scene-painting: thus, for example, the parable of the talents is not *about* capitalism (and certainly not an argument in its favor), but simply uses it as part of the realistic furniture of the tale. In similar vein, we could argue that Martha's story is not *about* women, or even primarily about Martha *as a woman*: her gender is simply part of the minimal background information which the narrator has to supply in order to explain the situation presupposed in the dialogue.

Martha 'received him into her house' (Lk. 10.38)

The scene is a dinner-party — a scene of hospitality. Luke is rather fond of these: Lk. 7.36-50; 11.37-52; 14.1-6, 7-11, 12-14, 15-24. A number of these contain an element of surprise and reversal, sometimes for hosts and sometimes for guests. Thus in ch. 14 the guests who make excuses are

18. This popular exegetical assumption should be distinguished from the feminist-critical strategy of foregrounding gender for specific ideological purposes. We are of course entitled as readers to focus on the gender issue if we want to, whether or not it was part of the agenda for the implied author or for earlier generations of readers. But we are equally entitled to ask, as exegetes, whether the foregrounding of gender is an appropriate strategy for understanding this particular text in its own terms and in this particular case the selective nature of the foregrounding renders it suspect.

19. E.g., at Lk. 5.12, where Luke has 'a man full of leprosy' for Mark's 'a leper', or at Lk. 5.18, where Luke has 'behold men carrying' for Mark's 'they [subject unspecified] came carrying'.

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Martha 'had a sister' (Lk. 10.39)

20. D. Gooding, *According to Luke* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1987), pp. 209-10.

20. D. Gooding, *According to Luke* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1987), pp. 209-10.

me, and all that is mine is yours') may also encourage us to look for gentle reproof rather than outright rejection in Jesus' reply to Martha. Eckhart may not be so far off the beam after all.²¹

Martha 'was distracted with much serving' (Lk. 10.40)

Up to this stage in the narrative we are still concerned with scene-setting. The information we have been given about Martha (and about Mary in v. 39) is just enough to explain the background to the dialogue, but not enough yet to explain how Martha is at fault. Nothing that we have heard about her so far is negative – the information that she is a woman, and that she has a sister, must rank as neutral, and her hospitality towards Jesus surely counts as a positive point in her favor. The positive note continues in v. 40: Martha's problem is 'much serving', πολλήν διακονίαν. It hardly needs to be underlined that διακονία, especially of Jesus, is a good thing in gospel discourse, and especially for Luke (e.g. 4.39; 8.3). Most significant is 22.24-27, where Jesus affirms his own role as διάκονος as a direct counter to the value systems of the world. Within the terms of this gospel, then, it is hard to construe v. 40 as negative. If it is Christ-like to serve, it is presumably even better to be engaged in 'much service'. Whatever Martha is doing wrong, it is surely not her διακονία.²²

It may be worthwhile, therefore, to explore the possibility that Martha is presented to us, not as someone who clearly puts herself in the wrong, but as someone who by all that we have been led to expect is in the right. We have already observed that in other disputes between siblings, Jesus in this gospel shows himself remarkably unconcerned about who is in the right and who is in the wrong. The prodigal's elder brother is after all quite clearly a man who does everything right, yet he ends up wrong-footed by his profligate younger brother. The Pharisee of 18.9-14, like the ruler of 18.21, had kept all the commandments and more, yet it was the tax collector, the 'sinner', who 'went down to his house justified'.²³ A

21. Cf. also Lk. 17.3-4: the brother who repents is to be met with unlimited forgiveness. It is tempting to cite Jn 21.20-23 in this context as well. Even asking questions about a brother's spiritual destiny is forbidden: 'What is that to you? Follow me'. 'Mind your own [spiritual] business!' seems to be a principle of this community ethic.

22. The fact that Martha is also 'vexed', 'troubled', or 'distracted' (περιεσπᾶτο) may have negative implications: the use of ἀπερισπᾶστος in 1 Cor. 7.35 suggests that it did in some circles. But within the gospel the verb occurs nowhere else, and the reader of this text has been given no clue which would make this in and of itself a sufficient reason for rebuke. A second-century papyrus text speaks of being 'troubled' or 'vexed' by tax collectors (LSJ 1386b), but this is hardly grounds for moral censure.

23. For an illuminating discussion of the role of the 'sinner' in Luke's gospel see

similar reversal has already taken place in 7.36-50, where Simon the Pharisee (another host) is contrasted unfavorably with the 'woman who was a sinner'. Christian prejudice against the Pharisees has I think obscured the deliberately paradoxical nature of these stories. As with Martha, we search to find what the Pharisee has done wrong, rather than starting with the premise that he is actually presented (however caricatured) as the epitome of a man who does everything right. Thus the 'good' character in the story ends up rebuked, and the 'bad' character vindicated.

<i>Bad</i>	<i>Good</i>
Woman (sinner)	Simon the Pharisee (host)
Mary (idle)	Martha (hostess)
Publican (sinner)	Pharisee (prays, fasts etc.)
VINDICATED	REBUKED

Mary is not of course portrayed as 'bad' in Lk. 10.38-42, except in the sense that her behavior overturns accepted norms for a woman. In this sense, auditors might well be expected to side with Martha in her complaint against her sister (and still do). In the terms of gospel discourse, however, the story offers a choice between two 'good' types of behavior, listening to Jesus and serving him, and this is at the heart of the paradox. This factor is more clearly exhibited in the Johannine variant on the anointing woman, where Mary of Bethany becomes the anointer, and her antagonist is not Simon but Judas (Jn 12.1-7). In this variant Mary is not identified as a sinner (that has been left to the popular exegesis which conflates all three women). John is careful to explain that it is Judas who is 'bad' (Jn 12.4, 6); but it is noteworthy that the action with which Mary's gesture is compared (and which is the point of the dominical saying in v. 7) is something that in itself is 'good', namely, giving to the poor. In the same way, we might argue, the behavior of Luke's Mary is contrasted not with a 'bad' course of action but with one which is in itself 'good', namely, serving Jesus. Both stories highlight a rather Pauline paradox, that 'good' behavior is not as important as devotion (even extravagant and embarrassing devotion) to Jesus — and this pattern too may be detected elsewhere in Luke. Jesus' teaching ministry ends in this gospel with the story of the 'ruler' who discovers that keeping the commandments is not enough (18.18-23): the 'one thing' he lacks (compare

Mary's 'one thing needful') is the will to follow Jesus without counting the cost.

Jesus	Good behavior
listening to Jesus	serving Jesus
anointing Jesus	concern for poor
following Jesus	keeping commandments
VINDICATED	REBUKED

I say 'paradox' with intent: to treat these stories as paradigms for Christian behavior is to fall into the ancient error of ἀνομία: 'are we to continue in sin that grace may abound'? The fact that the sinner is justified is not a prescription for Christians to emulate the publican, either as tax-collector or as sinner; and by the same token, the revelation that Mary's 'bad behavior' is actually the 'one thing needful' is not a prescription for Christians to emulate her in abandoning practical service.

'Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things' (Lk. 10.41) It is only when Jesus begins to speak that we are given explicit clues about the nature of Martha's mistake. Martha is 'called' by Jesus in this verse, and the attentive reader of Luke's gospel should already know that being 'anxious' (μεριμνῶς) is not a good thing for the would-be disciple. The interpretation of the parable of the sower in Lk. 8.9-15 issues dire warnings to those who allow 'the word of God' to become 'choked by the cares (μεριμνῶν) and riches and pleasures of this life' (Lk. 8.14): 'their fruit does not mature.' In Lk. 12.22-31 the warning against 'cares' is intensified: 'Which of you by being anxious (μεριμνῶν) can add a cubit to his span of life?' (Lk. 12.25) — a warning against worrying about food and drink which is embedded in a longer block of teaching on the dangers of riches as a distraction (Lk. 12.13-34). Mary's 'one thing needful' is echoed, as we have seen, in the ruler's 'one thing' (Lk. 18.22, which also picks up again the theme of 'treasure in heaven' (cf. Lk. 12.21, 33-34); but the theme of single-mindedness weaves in and out of this gospel (cf. Lk. 9.57-62; 11.33-36; 12.30-31).

I have not set out to give an exhaustive exegesis of this passage, much less to lay down rules for a definitive exegesis. All I have tried to do is to suggest some strategies that may enable Martha's supporters (myself included) to tell her story in a way that does justice *both* to the need to affirm the value of 'Martha' activities and characteristics *and* to the need for critical sensitivity to the text. Not all these strategies will necessarily be found useful at once. If we think of the text as a dramatic script,

successive tellers (number of possible ecclesiastical or social potential within the kind of discourse This is why it the text and to patterns suggest her sister: it is table activity, situation which doxical rather expectation: the story to us a number she is a woman discourse as disciple gender that Martha have to work for furnish character expect these may wait the 'a n }

successive tellers of Martha's story may want to 'perform' it in one of a number of possible ways. A performance may be popular or academic, ecclesiastical or secular; but if it is to be convincing it must draw on the potential within the text in a way that is perceived to be appropriate to the kind of discourse it contains.

This is why it is important to pay attention to narrative details within the text and to the expectations aroused by the co-text. Transitivity patterns suggest that Martha's story really does belong to her, and not to her sister: it is the story of a hostess who 'misses the point' of her hospitable activity, and invites its auditors to see the implications of this in a situation where the guest—and the point—is Jesus himself. It is paradoxical rather than paradigmatic, deliberately overturning its auditors' expectations about 'good' and 'bad' behavior—which means that using the story to set up a new code of behavior is to repeat the mistake. It tells us a number of interesting things about Martha, of which the fact that she is a woman is probably the least significant in terms of the wider discourse: Martha is important as sister, as hostess, as servant of Christ, as disciple. But for twentieth-century readers to whom the issue of gender has assumed a new vitality, there is also significance in the fact that Martha (and her sister) are women. None of the themes that we have traced in the story are uniquely 'women's business'. Their out-working may differ between men and women, just as the background furniture of this story is different from that of the stories with male characters—but the themes themselves all relate to the common experience of discipleship. The simple fact that Luke chooses to make these points by telling a story about two women makes it impossible to maintain that discipleship is men's business only (Luke will go out of his way in Acts 9.1-2 to stress that 'the disciples of the Lord' who 'belong to the way' include 'both men and women'). To insist that this is a story 'about women' is to risk confining it to the ghetto: 'women's stories', notoriously, are felt to have nothing to teach men. In medieval legend Martha is depicted both as a preacher (to men and women alike) and as a dragon-slayer, a female counterpart to the more familiar St George.²⁴ In spite of—or perhaps because of—her strength in traditional women's roles, she refuses to be limited by them. Her story should not be restricted by them either.

24. Tabor, *The Saints in Art*, p. 80; and further, Moltmann-Wendel, *The Women Around Jesus*, pp. 39-48.