

Module TRDL7072: The Bible: Contemporary Approaches

Assignment One: Textual Analysis

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Choosing Our Own 'Good Thing': A Feminist Re-reading of Luke 10:38-42

A central characteristic of feminist biblical interpretation, along with its particular attention to women's perspectives and commitment to the total well-being of all women, is that it "seeks the connections between text and the context of the interpreter, not as an afterthought as it were, but as integral to the very process of interpretation itself."¹ That is the starting point from which I approach this re-reading of the well-worn Mary and Martha pericope. A word, therefore, to my own context: I am a young, white, protestant woman, exploring my particular vocation and calling with regards to ministry in an individual church which is highly supportive, but within a Baptist Union which is predominantly hostile to female pastors. I am wrestling with feelings of insecurity and the need to prove myself as well as the remnants of a far more conservative church upbringing. As a wife and expectant mother, I also face questions and frustrations regarding my role in the home and concerns about balancing ministry with motherhood. In my particular context, I find in this text an encouragement for women to make time to listen and discern our own unique call or vocation and then to take that up in full confidence, whether that be ministry and church leadership, work in the secular world or indeed motherhood and unpaid domestic work, as well as a call for us to support and encourage our fellow sisters as they do the same. My interpretation is influenced particularly by the work of Warren Carter, Barbara Reid, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Mary Hanson and Mitzi J. Smith.²

Now to the text itself. Five short verses about which much has been written and yet, as Schüssler Fiorenza points out, "No consensus is found among interpreters as to what basic meaning the story seeks to convey."³ There is debate as to the meaning of διακονία (v40) in

¹ Ann Loades, "Feminist Interpretation," in *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation* (ed. John Barton: Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 84.

² Warren Carter, "Getting Martha out of the Kitchen: Luke 10:38-42 Again," in *A Feminist Companion to Luke* (ed. Amy-Jill Levine; London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 214-231; Barbara E. Reid, *Choosing the Better Part? Women in the Gospel of Luke* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1996); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "A Feminist Critical Interpretation for Liberation: Martha and Mary: Lk. 10:38-42," *Religion and Intellectual Life* 3, no. 2 (1986): 21-36; Mary Hanson, "A New Perspective on Mary and Martha: Luke 10:38-42." [Cited 9th August 2020]. Online: https://www.marystromerhanson.com/uploads/1/1/2/6/112678431/paper_for_sbl_3.29.14_du.pdf; Mitzi J. Smith, "A Tale of Two Sisters: Am I My Sister's Keeper?," *Journal of Religious Thought* 52 no. 2/1 (1996): 69-75.

³ Fiorenza, "A Feminist Critical Interpretation for Liberation," 26.

this context; issues of textual variants, particularly in Jesus' response to Martha in v42; concern that Jesus' words to Martha here seem contradictory to his teaching on service elsewhere, as well as questions of where the conversation takes place and indeed who is present.⁴

This text is part of the Lukan travel narrative, highlighted at the beginning of v38. Jesus is on the road with an unspecified group when he comes to a village and is welcomed by a woman named Martha. Carter notes here the important connection to Jesus' sending out of the seventy earlier in chapter 10, where those who would receive them did more than just offering sustenance. In this context, welcoming Jesus' disciples, and indeed welcoming Jesus himself, is about embracing his mission. Carter suggests that Martha is presented here as a model disciple: one who is open to the word and work of God. By receiving Jesus, Martha demonstrates her commitment to his mission and to the God who sent him.⁵ Such a presentation of Martha suggests that we perhaps should not be so quick to criticize and condemn her just a few verses later. Perhaps less surprising given the traditional preference for Mary, Carter points out that she is also presented in this way. She listens (ἤκουεν) to Jesus' teaching, in contrast to those who would reject the disciples in 10:16. The same word is used earlier by Luke as the appropriate response to Jesus and his teaching (8:8, 15, 21; 9:35).⁶ Here it is important to note the second καὶ in v39, for which one possible translation is 'also.' V39 could then read, "And she had a sister called Mary, who *also* sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his word." Both Mary and Martha are identified equally as disciples of the Lord.⁷ Janet Ruffing also recognizes how "both women, in different ways, can be seen to be exemplary models of discipleship."⁸ This is significant as perhaps one of the most harmful

⁴Some manuscripts do not include the words 'into her house' in v38, allowing for the possibility that this scene takes place elsewhere (see for example Reid and Hanson). Hanson also raises the interesting possibility that Mary is in fact not even present but is off engaging in missionary activity elsewhere.

⁵ See Carter, "Getting Martha Out of the Kitchen," 216-218.

⁶ Carter, "Getting Martha Out of the Kitchen," 218.

⁷ See Hanson, "A New Perspective on Mary and Martha," 6-7.

⁸ Janet K. Ruffing, "Martha and Mary: Integrating or Disintegrating Images for Action and Contemplation," *The Mast Journal* 12 no. 3 (2002): 20.

aspects of this story for women is the pitting of Mary and Martha against each other, with all that it can lead to.⁹

Martha, however, is distracted or concerned by or about her much διακονία. In feminist approaches to this text, the meaning of this term is particularly important. Does it refer to the work of preparing a meal, as was simply assumed for much of the history of interpretation? Or is it in fact a much broader kind of service? Carter, Reid, Fiorenza and others argue that διακονία here, as elsewhere in Luke-Acts, refers to service and leadership in the ecclesial context.¹⁰ Martha was not overburdened by meal-preparation, rather she was distracted with the concerns of being the head of a house church and all the ministry in which she was involved as part of that. Hanson argues that the Greek of v40-41 suggests Martha was in an “ongoing and acute sense of distress, which... seems greater than if her sister had just left her alone in the kitchen.”¹¹ However, my reading of this story does not require Martha’s διακονία to be understood as ministerial service over against table service. I would suggest that there is space for a broad understanding of the term, which allows women today to identify with Martha in this text whatever work, or service, they are involved in.

We turn now to Jesus’ response to Martha: “Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things; but one thing is necessary. For Mary has chosen good, and it will not be taken away from her.”¹² Most commentators and interpreters read this verse as a rebuke: Martha should not be so concerned and distracted with her serving, in whatever capacity that might be. Instead she should be more like Mary, sitting quietly at Jesus’ feet, taking time for prayer, contemplation, or simply being in the presence of her Lord. Interpreters

⁹ Here I have in mind the comparison, judgement and bitterness so often present in female relationships in a church or faith context and the elevation, depending on the particular setting, of either motherhood and domestic work or full-time work outside the home over the other.

¹⁰ See Carter, “Getting Martha Out of the Kitchen,” 218-227; Reid, *Choosing the Better Part*, 154ff; Fiorenza, “A Feminist Critical Interpretation for Liberation,” 30. Carter deals with the term more extensively and I find his argument to be thorough and convincing.

¹¹ Hanson, “A New Perspective on Mary and Martha,” 11-13. For Hanson, this is part of her argument that Mary is in fact not present: Martha is concerned for her sister and misses her. However, it could apply equally to Martha’s distress and concern over her many ministerial duties.

¹² In the translation here I am following Hanson, who argues that τὴν ἀγαθὴν μερίδα does not have to be taken comparatively. It can simply mean that Mary has chosen a good thing. See Hanson, “A New Perspective on Mary and Martha,” 14-15.

more concerned with the experiences of women have recognized how hurtful and harmful this rebuke has been to many women and search for other ways of understanding the exchange here. I would suggest, along with Smith and Terlesky,¹³ that Jesus is instead responding with compassion and empathy. He takes the time to see Martha in her situation, in her distress and concern, and then he gently points her to what she needs. I suggest that the difference between Mary and Martha is this: Mary knows her place. Not in a submissive sense but rather as a confidence in her vocation and calling, in her unique place in the world, whether that is, as Hanson argues, regularly leaving home to undertake missionary διακονία elsewhere, or as more traditionally understood, a quiet and contemplative life of faith. That is the ‘good thing’ which Mary has chosen, and which will not be taken away. Martha, on the other hand, is worried and upset about her διακονία. Reid suggests that Martha is distressed because others disapprove of her, as a woman, undertaking ministerial διακονία, and because her sister has left her to minister alone, not because she is off ministering elsewhere as in Hanson’s reading but because she has given in to the pressure that a woman’s place is to sit and listen in silence.¹⁴ Hanson and others note that the second verb used in v41 to describe Martha’s distress (θορυβάζει) is a *hapax legomenon*. Cognate words appear in the NT always in the context of disturbance by a crowd rather than simply an individual worry. There is some kind of larger, more public aspect to Martha’s concern. Perhaps she is concerned about how the community views her διακονία, particularly her fellow sisters in the faith. Perhaps she is concerned about having to fight for her place as a female leader of a house church in a man’s world. Perhaps she is concerned for her sister Mary who is ministering far away and wishing she would return and serve alongside her. Whatever the much διακονία about which Martha is worried refers to, Jesus’ response is to call her by name, to stop and take notice of her distress, and to gently point her in the direction of what is needed. Mary has chosen good, not

¹³ Smith compares this to Jesus’ response to Simon Peter in 22:31, suggesting that Jesus wants to empower Martha here as he empowered Peter. See Smith, “A Tale of Two Sisters,” 72. Terlesky puts great emphasis on Jesus stopping, listening and paying attention to Martha’s condition. For her, that alone is enough in a “system that traditionally has not heard women...[a]nd in not hearing, has not helped”. Jane Terlesky, “There Was an Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe: Was it Martha?,” *Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Theological Studies* 1 no. 2 (2018): 62.

¹⁴ Reid, *Choosing the Better Part*, 156-158.

necessarily better, but good¹⁵ and it will not be taken away from her. Smith suggests that the 'better part' which Mary has chosen is her engagement with Jesus which allows her to be comfortable in her own call: "This comfort comes as we engage the one who called so we can receive the initial call and nurture the ongoing call. If we are at home with our vocation, if we are confident about what God has called us to do, we will be able to empower each other in our various vocations."¹⁶ And that, if we insist on preferring Mary to Martha, is the reason why she is to be preferred. Because "Mary's actions forced Martha to confront Jesus with her own vocation and frustrations,"¹⁷ leading to the possibility for Martha too to find her 'good thing' and live out her unique vocation, her διακονία, with confidence.

¹⁵ So Hanson, "This is not to imply that Martha is not doing good, and Jesus also does not say that Martha should be doing the same as Mary. Jesus approves and supports Mary's decision for her; he is not necessarily defending her against Martha's mode of service." Hanson, "A New Perspective on Mary and Martha," 14-15.

¹⁶ Smith, "A Tale of Two Sisters," 74.

¹⁷ Smith, "A Tale of Two Sisters," 73.

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