

Women in Scripture



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



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here. Near the end of John 19:25–27, John tells us that “his mother” is at the foot of the cross. Jesus entrusts his mother to the “disciple whom he loved” (v. 26) in a quasi adoption scene: she gets a new son, and the disciple gets a new mother.

Interestingly, the earliest writings in the New Testament, the seven undisputed letters of Paul, contain no explicit mention of Jesus’ mother, although Rōm 1:3 and Gal 4:4 are sometimes taken as oblique references to her. Rōm 1:3 tells us that Jesus was a descendant of David “according to the flesh.” In first-century genealogies, this heritage would ordinarily be traced through the father; how Paul understands it is not clear here. Gal 4:4 says that “God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law.” We are not told how this took place, only that it did. Paul must have received this information from another believer, since he did not know Jesus.

VASILIKI LIMBERIS

SEE ALSO Part I: Elizabeth; Part II: Born of a Woman (Gal 4:4).

FOR FURTHER READING: Brown, Raymond, Karl P. Donfried, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and John Reumann, eds. *Mary in the New Testament*.

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(Luke 10:38–42; John 11:1–5, 17–20, 28–33; 12:1–8)

Mary, identified as the sister of Martha, is frequently remembered as she is depicted in Luke’s very short exemplary story, or confused with either the anonymous woman penitent who washes and anoints Jesus’ feet in Luke 7:36–50 or the famous disciple and witness to the resurrection, Mary of Magdala.

Luke’s story appears to pit Martha and Mary against each other. It shows Jesus affirming the si-

lent Mary who “sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to what he was saying” (10:39) against a complaining, bustling Martha who is busy with what is seen as the women’s work of serving a meal. A long tradition of interpretation made Mary represent the contemplative life, and Martha the “lesser” active life. Much ink has been spilled identifying the “better part” that Mary has chosen (10:42) and discussing whether the original text proclaimed “one” or “few” things necessary (10:42). Recently, the phrase “at his feet” has been reinterpreted as a term for learning from a teacher as a disciple (compare Acts 22:3, where Paul claims to have been educated “at the feet of” the famous teacher Gamaliel). Jesus’ rebuke to Martha is then read as permitting women to transcend the gender roles assigned to them, since Jesus appears to affirm Mary’s choice to sit at his feet and listen. But this reading denigrates the “Marthas” who engage in the work of sustaining life. Even if the words translated “tasks” and “to do work” (*diakonia*, *diakonein*) refer to Christian ministry, Martha’s role as minister is disparaged in favor of Mary’s discipleship.

The more complex stories of John 11:1–12:19 are bound together by references to the persons of Mary, Martha, 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 identifies 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 narrative stresses Jesus’ friendship with the three, but particularly with Martha: “Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and their brother Lazarus” (11:5). Mary’s only speech repeats Martha’s reproachful greeting word for word (11:31; compare v. 21); she disappears from the story after speaking.

In 12:1–8, Mary takes center stage; Martha is introduced to the scene as one having “served” (*diēkonei*) and Lazarus as one of the guests. The scene that follows bears a complex relationship to two other stories. Mark 14:1–11 (parallel to Matt 26:1–16) narrates an anointing in Bethany, associated with the Passover and the death of Jesus; in it an anonymous woman prophet anoints Jesus on the head,

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designating Jesus as messiah ("anointed, king"; Mark 14:3), in the same way that Samuel anointed Saul and David as king. In Luke 7:36–50, a woman sinner washes Jesus' feet with her tears, dries them with her hair, kisses them, and anoints them with ointment (Luke 7:37–38); Jesus interprets her gesture as signifying love and repentance (v. 47). Features of both of these stories appear in John 12:1–8; John's version could revise both Mark and Luke, or all three might derive from a single older story. The best explanation seems to be that John combines two different traditions that lie behind Mark's and Luke's versions. As in Mark, the story is set in Bethany, close to Passover and Jesus' death (12:1); a contrast is made with the betrayer (v. 6; compare Mark 14:10–11); Mary is said to use pure nard worth three hundred denarii (vv. 3, 5; compare Mark 14:3–4); Jesus defends her with a prediction of his own death (vv. 7–8; compare Mark 14:8–9). Like Luke's anonymous woman, Mary anoints Jesus' feet and wipes them with her hair (12:3). No penitence is implied here. Rather, her gesture looks forward to Jesus' washing and wiping of his disciples' feet (13:1). As a task allotted to a wife or a special disciple (*diakonos*; see Davies), it conveys intimacy and service. An atmospheric note follows her gesture: "The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume" (12:3). Coupled with the picture of Jesus reclining for the meal, this observation evokes the voice of the woman lover in Song of Solomon: "While the king was on his couch, my nard gave forth its fragrance" (1:12). The reference adds the messianic overtones of kingly anointing, while retaining and intensifying the erotic charge. Thus Mary's gesture identifies her as disciple, perhaps *diakonos*, and as friend of Jesus, but possibly also as a prophetic figure designating the messianic king.

What then lies behind the two different versions of Mary in Luke and in John? Should one be accepted over the other? The two stories have only few common features. In both, Mary is designated as "sister," whereas Martha is said to serve or minister (*diakonein*; Luke 10:39–40; John 12:1). Further, Mary is located "at the feet of" Jesus (she "sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying" in

Luke 10:39; "knelt at [Jesus'] feet" in John 11:32; "anointed Jesus' feet" in John 12:3). These details suggest two aspects of her career. First, this sister may have been famous among later believers as a disciple instructed directly by Jesus himself — "at his feet" and not through other missionaries and disciples. Second, the title "sister," which applies to Martha as well as Mary, may indicate kin, erotic partners, Christians in general, or a specific role in the mission. Like the missionary companions with whom Paul signed his letters (for example, Paul the apostle and Sosthenes the brother in 1 Cor 1:1), Mary worked with Martha in a missionary pair. Similar partnerships appear in Matt 10:1–4 and Romans 16. The latter includes female/male pairs (Prisca and Aquila, Junia and Andronicus, Nereus and his "sister"; Rom 16:3–5, 7, 16) who may have been spouses or lovers, and a pair of women, Tryphaena and Tryphosa (16:12). Thus sisterhood may represent a blood relationship, a shared commitment to the mission, or a commitment to each other.

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SEE ALSO Part I: Euodia; Martha; Mary 3; Syntyche; Tryphaena; Tryphosa; Part II: Woman Who Anoints Jesus (Mark 14:3–9); (Luke 7:36–50).

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Mary 3

(Matt 27:55–56, 61; 28:1; Mark 15:40–41, 47; 16:1, 9; Luke 8:2; 24:10; John 19:25; 20:1, 11, 16, 18)

This elusive figure is the most famous of Jesus' women disciples and the one who has been most misinterpreted in Christian history. It has been suggested that the epithet *Magdalene* meaning "tower of strength," was given her as a descriptor but it