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A Narrative Critical Analysis of Luke 10:38–42

Introduction

Luke's stated purpose at the beginning of his gospel is to "write an orderly account" (1:3). In the same way that others had previously compiled "a narrative of the things that have been accomplished" (1:1 ESV), he has drawn together the accounts of others into his own narrative of the ministry of Jesus. The way he compiles this orderly account may be chronological, logical, or functional, but it always has purpose – that his reader may "know the truth" (1:4).

In this analysis, we will consider one unit of his narrative – the story of Jesus being welcomed into the house of a woman named Martha. Martha seeks to offer Jesus hospitality, but her sister, Mary, does nothing to help her in this endeavour. Instead, Mary just sits and listens to Jesus teach. Martha becomes frustrated with her sister's apparent laziness, so she asks Jesus to instruct Mary to help her. However, it is Martha herself whom Jesus says is in the wrong, and he refuses to fulfil her request.

Our analysis will approach this account from a narrative critical perspective, considering aspects of its context, structure, content, and function, before drawing conclusions regarding Luke's use of the account within his wider narrative.

The Narrative Context

Luke 9:51 begins a section that records Jesus' journey to Jerusalem following the completion of his ministry in Galilee. After an initial account of his defence of the Samaritans despite their rejection of him (9:51–56), and several statements about the high cost of discipleship (9:57–62), chapter 10 opens with an extended passage

regarding the sending out and receiving back of seventy missionaries (10:1–24).

Jesus sends them to spread his message and receive hospitality wherever they are welcomed. There is then rejoicing as they return with a positive report, and Jesus gives praise to the Father.

The progress of the narrative's focus on the journey and the spread of the message is then halted by the question of "a certain lawyer" (10:25 NKJV). He wants to know what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus asks a counter-question, which coaxes the answer from the man himself; he must love God and his neighbour (10:25–28).

Yet, out of a desire to "justify himself" the lawyer seeks clarification of who his neighbour is (10:29). In response, Jesus tells a story about "a certain man" (10:30 NKJV) who is left for dead by robbers and ignored by a priest and a Levite.

Ultimately, it is the most unlikely person who comes to the man's aid – "a certain Samaritan" (10:33 NKJV) – a man from a people group who were despised by the Jews.¹ In a story that includes two respected religious leaders, it is astonishing that the Samaritan is the hero, but this is perhaps even more the case when viewed in light of 9:52–53 where the Samaritans had refused to receive Jesus. Thus, in response to the lawyer's question, we have a surprising "neighbour" who gives a challenging demonstration of what it means to fulfil the second commandment of 10:27. This forms the backdrop for the story of Mary and Martha.

¹ For information regarding the tension between Jews and Samaritans, see Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, "Samaritans," in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), pp. 1886–88.

The Narrative Structure

In Luke's Gospel, the characters of Mary and Martha are not developed any further than this passage,² and they do not play a significant role in progressing the wider story. Unlike, for example, Pilate, who is included because of his contribution to the progression of the passion narrative (Luke 23), Mary and Martha appear simply for the purpose of this account. Likewise, the timing and location of the event are both vague. John says that Mary and Martha lived in Bethany, not far from Jerusalem (John 11:1), suggesting that the account is not in chronological sequence. Jesus was still a long way away at this point,³ which may explain why the village is left unnamed.

Thus, the passage stands as a self-contained narrative unit. Luke does not include it here because of chronological sequencing, character development or the overall progress of the plot. Instead it is a short narrative section that serves to illustrate a point. In this way, it functions like one of Jesus' parables, and is particularly reminiscent of those recorded by Luke. As John R. Donahue says, in contrast to Matthew and Mark, "The drama in Luke's parables arises less from the mystery of nature or the threat of judgement than from the mystery of human interaction."⁴

Martha is therefore introduced as "a certain woman" (τις γυνή, 10:38), using the same format as with the lawyer and the characters in the previous parable. Luke

² Although they do appear in John 11–12.

³ Leon Morris, *Tyndale New Testament Commentary: Luke* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), pp. 209–10.

⁴ John R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1988), p. 126.

frequently uses this introduction to highlight the illustrative nature of their inclusion.⁵ Mary and Martha are two similar characters⁶ whose actions or traits are contrasted.⁷ One criticises the other,⁸ yet it is the critic who is ultimately chided⁹ to illustrate a particular teaching. Therefore, we must consider what point is being made and why Luke included it at this stage of his narrative.

The Narrative Content

As with many of Jesus' parables and example stories, the narrative starts out straightforward, but the point is driven home through a twist or shock. Martha is a hostess who welcomes Jesus into her home. She appears to be embodying the very thing that Jesus told the seventy to go looking for (10:5–8), so her complaint seems justified under the circumstances. The reader may be expecting Jesus to put Mary in her place, but instead he gently chides Martha!

That his rebuke is gentle can be seen through the repetition of her name.¹⁰ This is not an angry criticism as is often the case when he clashes with the religious

⁵ Ibid., p. 135.

⁶ Sisters. Cf. Luke 6:47–49 (builders); 7:41–43 (debtors); 15:11–32 (sons); 16:19–31 (men in the afterlife); 18:10–14 (men praying in the temple).

⁷ One attentively listening, one anxiously distracted. Cf. Luke 6:47–49 (one built on rock, one built on sand); 7:41–43 (one owed much, one owed little); 15:11–32 (one stayed with the father, one left); 16:19–31 (one rich, one poor); 18:10–14 (one a Pharisee, one a tax collector).

⁸ Cf. Luke 15:29–30; 18:11–12.

⁹ Cf. Luke 15:31–32; 18:14.

¹⁰ Norval Geldenhuys, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1952), p. 316.

authorities,¹¹ but a loving correction of someone who meant well, but missed the point. His criticism is that she is worried and distracted by many things. She lacks something that he told the seventy to look for wherever they stayed – peace. Jesus is not criticising her because there is work to be done, nor is he necessarily criticising her for *doing* that work. His issue is that she is worried and distracted. In this way, Martha's actions seem quite closely related to the parable of the rich fool, who works hard to get as much as he can but misses his opportunity to make the most of his life (12:16–21). This parable is given in response to a similar request – that of Jesus being asked to settle a dispute between two brothers (12:13). It is then immediately followed by Jesus' assertion not to worry¹² (12:22–34) and a parable about staying alert (12:35–40). Martha was worried and distracted, so she missed her opportunity to make the most of her time with Jesus. Mary, by contrast, seems completely relaxed and focused on him. Therefore, this is Jesus' reason for commending her. It is not about doing or not doing, instead it is about having peace and focus.

What, then, is Luke's reason for including the account at this point in his narrative?

The Narrative Function

With the previous passage being principally motivated by the question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" (10:25), the extremely practical example of the Samaritan may have left Luke keen to dispel any potential for reading a theology of salvation by

¹¹ See for example Luke 11:37–44; 13:11–17.

¹² 10:41 and the extended treatment in 12:11–34 are the only times that worry (μεριμνάω) is mentioned in Luke's Gospel.

works.¹³ This account, then, stands as a contrasting supplement to the parable of 10:29–37. Whilst the Samaritan is commended for taking action, as opposed to the passive priest and Levite, Mary is commended for her inactivity, as opposed to her frantic sister. Because of this function, Mary is quite passive within the narrative. Whilst the activities of the two sisters are described in contrast to one another, it is Martha's feelings toward her sister, her subsequent complaint to Jesus and his response that make up the account. Mary's thoughts and motivations are never made known, it is Martha whom the narrator is primarily shadowing.

Yet despite the differences, there are also key parallels between these two narratives. Just as it was astonishing that the hero of the first story was a Samaritan,¹⁴ so it is shocking that the hero of this story is a woman who does not assist in offering hospitality to guests.¹⁵ Instead of occupying her expected role, Mary's location at the feet of Jesus implies that she is his disciple (cf. Acts 22:3), a position that was not normally deemed acceptable for women.¹⁶

Yet the characters of the Samaritan and Mary are also united in another way – their expression of love. The Samaritan demonstrates love by helping a man in need, despite their cultural and religious differences. Mary demonstrates love for Jesus by giving him her full attention, despite her violation of cultural and religious

¹³ Morris, pp. 209–10.

¹⁴ Particularly in light of 9:52–53.

¹⁵ Particularly in light of 10:5–8.

¹⁶ Joel B. Green, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, UK: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), p. 435.

expectations. The Samaritan expresses love for another by providing for him, Mary expresses love for Jesus by allowing him to provide for her.

For this reason, it may be that the account of Mary and Martha serves as an illustration of the first commandment from 10:27, thus forming the following chiasm:¹⁷

A: Love the Lord your God with all your heart...

B: Love your neighbour as yourself...

B: The Good Samaritan.

A: Mary and Martha

This story, then, forms an appropriate companion to the parable of the Good Samaritan. It both complements and counterbalances the teaching of the parable to give a more complete answer to the lawyer's question in 10:25.

Conclusion

Luke's inclusion of this account at this juncture makes perfect functional sense. The story does not appear to be in chronological sequence, nor does it progress the overall narrative, but it does make an important contribution to his stated purpose. It is both orderly, and it assists the reader in knowing the truth. Without it complimenting and counterbalancing the previous parable the reader would have a skewed picture of the love that is commanded in 10:27 and a potential soteriology that is based primarily on works.

¹⁷ For an expanded presentation of this theory, see Donahue, pp. 136–38.

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