

Once More, Martha And Mary (Luke 10.38-42)

Arch B. Taylor, Jr.

The story of the two sisters, Martha and Mary, is a familiar one, and most of us have probably heard many sermons on this text. One common approach is to take Martha and Mary as typical of two general types of people: The Martha type is concerned with material, secular things. Such busy people don't take time for worship and Bible study; they get all worked up and bothered, even neurotic. Mary is the quiet, contemplative type. Such people take time for spiritual things like worship and Bible study. They have true peace of mind. These types include not only women but also men.¹

Now, of course, the Bible does have some teaching on the importance of spiritual things in contrast to material. However, *that is not the real meaning of this story*. For centuries it has been wrongly interpreted, and wrong interpretation caused mistranslation of the original Greek. To understand this story correctly, we must study the details of the original Greek, place it in the total biblical context, and see it against the cultural background of its time.

Only Luke's Gospel records the story of Martha and Mary. Luke, we know, includes much special material showing that Jesus took a sympathetic interest in women.² Therefore, this unique story of two women found only in Luke must have something particular to say about women, not about people in general. Moreover, I wish to emphasize strongly that what it says about women is not to criticize Martha as the nervous, pushy type of activist and praise Mary as the demure, submissive, "feminine" type. Not at all!

Consider Martha. Martha is not really a personal name; it is a title (perhaps in this case a nickname?); it is Aramaic for "mistress" or "lady of the house."³ According to the standards of the patriarchal society of that day, this woman was the ideal type. "Martha" knew that a woman's place was in the home, taking care of the men of the family. Men were socially superior to women and too much involved in important affairs to worry about the details of cooking, cleaning, and other tasks related to housekeeping. The Greek word for this kind of work is the noun *diakonia*, and it designates the work which was usually relegated to women and slaves.⁴ It was this *diakonia*, this lowly service, that Martha was faithfully doing. Not only was Jesus a man, he was a distinguished guest. Martha worked hard to entertain Jesus with an unusually fine dinner. She expected her sister Mary to help serve, and she asked Jesus to confirm her expectation.

What did Jesus reply? "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and concerned about many things." Jesus took note of the work that Martha was doing in preparing a dinner for him. What did Jesus say next? That is not at all clear. There are at least five different versions to be found in old manuscripts.⁵ Two versions have almost equally strong support, and usually the translations use one or the other. Both versions, in the Greek, are quite simple. One reads: "few things are needed, or one." The other reads: "one thing is needed." Notice also that Jesus is still talking about Martha's work of service, of preparation of dinner. Jesus is saying, "A big feast is not needed; a simple meal of only a few dishes, or even only one, will be quite sufficient."

Jesus was not a typical male chauvinist. He did not expect women in general nor Martha in particular to serve him like a slave. In fact, in Luke 22.27 Jesus told his disciples, "I am

among you as one who serves,” and he used the verb *diakoneo* which usually referred to women’s and slaves’ work. John 13.1-11 describes Jesus as washing the disciples’ feet, a menial type of service performed by women, slaves, or the most inferior in any group. Jesus knew the importance of the work women did. In his teaching he mentioned shopping, grinding, baking, spinning, weaving, sewing, washing, sweeping.⁶ Even today, this work is absolutely necessary for human existence. Jesus did not criticize Martha; he appreciated the work she did and wished to lighten it. He did not want a sumptuous feast, but only a simple meal.

Next, what of Mary? Her name too may have a special meaning. In the New Testament there are several women called Mary (Aramaic *mariam*).⁷ In the Bible, the first woman named Mary was the sister of Moses and Aaron (Hebrew *miriam*). This first Mary was a prophetess, and she helped in the liberation of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt (Exodus 2.4; 15.20). For centuries, Mary, the sister of Martha, has been praised, especially by men, because she was thought to be quiet and submissive, listening to the words of Jesus. Mary has been idealized because most men want women to be submissive. In fact, quite the contrary, Mary was a rebel! How do we know?

First, Mary demonstrated her refusal to do so-called “women’s work” as a slave to men. Next, consider Mary's posture: *she sat at Jesus’ feet*. In Luke 8.35 and Acts 22.3, to sit at someone’s feet means to be a disciple of that person.⁸ In that society, to be the disciple of a famous teacher was a high privilege. But among the Jews of Mary’s day, no teacher would accept a woman disciple. Jesus, however, *did*. Mary aspired to a privilege which, in her society, was limited only to men. She wished not to spend her life in housework, like other women, but to be the disciple of a great teacher.

This understanding is reinforced by one little detail. In the Greek text, speaking about Mary, there is a word which is not translated into any English version I know of. It is the Greek word *kai*, which most often means “and.” but here *kai* is used to call attention to something unusual or unexpected. Thus we would read: “*Mary also*,” or “*even Mary* sat at the feet of Jesus.”⁹ This unexpected act of Mary’s was a request to be given status as a disciple of Jesus, a status other teachers limited only to men. What did Jesus say to this? He said, “Mary has chosen the good part” (Greek *meris*, part of a whole that has been divided, a share, a portion)¹⁰ “and it shall not be taken away from her.” Jesus affirmed Mary’s desire to become one of his disciples!

As expected, Luke’s story of Martha and Mary does teaches something special about women. It shows first, that Jesus did not belittle the housekeeping work which women such as Martha did; he valued it, and wished it less burdensome. Second, it shows that Jesus gave to Mary the same privilege which up to that time was limited to men. Jesus dealt with Mary just as he would deal with a man. In fact, Jesus habitually treated women as human beings on the same level as men. Jesus is actually the greatest champion of women and proponent of the equality of sexes.

This attitude of Jesus was so unusual that many people, especially men, could not accept it. The freedom and equality Jesus gave to women in his disciple band was soon lost after his death. The Apostle Paul accepted the principle of equality of women and men, saying that in Christ there is neither male nor female (Gal 3.27,8). Yet Paul was unable fully to put the principle into practice in the social climate of his time (1 Cor 11.3.9; 14.33b-35).¹¹ In later generations, when men controlled all the chief positions of authority in the church, they could not understand this attitude of Jesus as expressed in his words to Martha and Mary. That is

probably what accounts for the great variety of versions we find in the manuscripts. Male domination in the church also accounts for the usual mistranslations of these words, and of the misinterpretation of the story as a whole.

Jesus respects the women who are housekeepers, and he values their work and their person. Jesus also sets women free to use their abilities and their education in careers outside the home, including the career of pastor. But because Jesus teaches the equality of the sexes, we must understand that housework is not exclusively the responsibility of women. Men, too, ought to share housekeeping and child rearing, especially if their wives are employed outside the home. When men share in work traditionally limited to women, and women share in work traditionally limited to men, both men and women enter into a richer, more meaningful human existence.

We must learn from Jesus the true value of equality of the sexes. When men are dominant and women are subordinate, human relations cannot be at their best and richest. Men often exploit women, and women must always be on guard against men's oppression. When placed in inferior, weaker positions, women may use emotion, or deceit, or flattery, or sexual charm as weapons against men. This makes men fearful and distrustful of women. In Jesus, men and women find the true freedom of the children of God. Then they can relate to each other without fear or oppression in true equality.

DEDICATION: I dedicate this essay to the memory of my wife, Margaret Hopper Taylor, faithful disciple of Jesus Christ and advocate of equality of women and men.

NOTES

¹ This interpretation was popularized in the church through the writings of contemplatives, who took Mary as their exemplar. See, for example, Clifton Wolters, translator and editor of the anonymous *The Cloud of Unknowing* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1961) pp 73-83. Wolters points out that the interpretation drew heavily on the writings of Augustine (p. 14) and that the unknown author "draws a great deal more out of it than would be permitted today" p. 29. One feature of this approach has been the identification of Mary the sister of Martha with Mary Magdalene (Luke 8.2; John 20.1-18) and the unnamed "sinful woman" who anointed Jesus' feet (Luke 7.36-50), but the biblical texts do not warrant this assumption.

² Harry Emerson Fosdick provides a convenient summary in his *The Man From Nazareth* (New York: Harper and Row Chapel Books, 1949) p. 143. Fosdick's treatment of Jesus' attitude toward women provides many helpful insights into this subject.

³ *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* [IDB] (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962) Vol. 3, p. 287.

⁴ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* [TDNT] (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1964) Vol. 2, pp. 84ff.

⁵ Kurt Aland and Matthew Black, eds., *The Greek New Testament* (London: United Bible Societies, 1966) pp 254-5. Actually there are more than five variations of the text, but many are only slight differences within the five main renderings. In the order listed in Aland-Black, they are: 1) Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needed. 2) Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; few things are needed, or only one. 3) Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; few things are needed. 4) Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things (omitting all that follows). 5) (omitting everything related to Martha).

⁶ Fosdick, pp. 144-5.

⁷ IDB, Vol. 3, p. 288.

⁸ Acts 22.3 is part of Paul's self-defense before the Jews; he says he was "brought up at the feet of Gamaliel," indicating that he had been a disciple of that well-known rabbi. Luke 8.35 is part of the story of Jesus' healing the man possessed by a legion of demons (Mark 5.1-20, Matthew 8.28-34, Luke 8.26-39). The demons went into the herd of swine, which drowned. People came and found the man healed, "clothed and in his right mind." The man wished to be with Jesus, but Jesus sent him as an evangelist to his own home. Luke alone emphasizes the desire of

this man to be a disciple of Jesus by the addition of the words, "*sitting at the feet of Jesus*, clothed and in his right mind."

⁹ W. Robertson Nichol, ed., *The Expositor's Greek Testament* (London: Hodder and Staughton, [nd]) Vol. 1, A. B. Bruce, *The Synoptic Gospels*, p. 545.

¹⁰ W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, eds., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: U. of Chicago, 1957) p. 506.

¹¹ Some scholars think that Paul's restrictions on women contained in these passages from Corinthians were requirements of the Jerusalem Church. Bengt Holmberg, *Paul and Power* (Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1978) p. 51.