

The Narrative Function of  
Mary of Bethany:  
Her Leadership of the Jews

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By  
Mary Stromer Hanson  
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7165 E. Bayaud Ave.  
Denver, CO, 80230  
Hm Ph 303-341-6425  
Cell Ph 303-902-0245  
hanson139@comcast.net

THE NARRATIVE FUNCTION OF MARY OF BETHANY:  
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*Leadership in Unlikely Places*

If one were seeking nominations for a leadership position, Mary of Bethany, as judged by human criteria for leadership, would not likely be a person to get the nod. Faced with the death of her brother in John 11, she appears to be overcome by catatonic sorrow. Upon approaching Jesus, she falls at his feet and mouths words identical with those her sister had greeted him moments before: “Jesus, if you had been here my brother would not have died” (11:32). Her more vocal sister is the one who takes command of the situation; Martha anticipates Jesus’ entry into the village and approaches him without waiting to be called. In the face of tragedy, she maintains the necessary composure to engage in a theological discussion that eventually results in Jesus’ “I am” statement. Martha’s confession is held up as the equivalent of Peter’s confession in the Synoptics and the model Johannine confession according to 20:31.

Likewise, in Luke 10:38-42, according to the traditional interpretation, no words come from Mary, apparently setting a positive example by her actions alone. Martha aggressively pursues Jesus for a solution to her sister’s absence and asks Jesus to intervene. Readers of both of the Gospels, inevitably conflate the characterization of the sisters as they are portrayed in each book. If Martha is the outgoing and vocal sister in Luke, then that is the expected personality in John, and because Mary is visualized as silent in Luke, sitting passively at Jesus’ feet, she is characterized as the more devout of the two in John.<sup>1</sup> If a reader is looking for a leader by drawing upon both Luke and John, again one can safely assume it would be Martha. Yet Jesus twice commends Mary’s behavior (Lk. 10:42; Jn. 12:7). Consistently over the many centuries of

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<sup>1</sup> Ben Witherington, III, *John’s Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1995), 199.

Christian interpretation, Mary is repeatedly held up as the sister to be emulated. What kind of example is Jesus extolling for women? Could it be possible that “silent leadership,” by actions only, but otherwise without voice or opinion is the illustration of leadership that Jesus recommends for women and the best use of their gifts?

After reading many commentaries, devotions, and sermons on Luke 10:38-42, I am particularly discomfited by conclusions that set the sisters against each other with the eventual “good and bad” result. The lesson taught is invariably, “Be more like Mary and less like Martha.” One woman is raised up at the expense of the other. These results are then inevitably carried over into the sisters’ appearance in John 11, but are rarely examined in the haste to get to the miraculous sign: the raising of Lazarus. The story seems to be about the male characters, with the sisters’ roles barely noticed, unless it is to point out again, “Mary got it right.” Many such dissonances launched a journey that resulted in writing my thesis on the identity of Mary of Bethany. I set out to research her identity with particular interest in uncovering any additional information about who she was and her behavior that Jesus actually commended. This topic was narrowed down to study specifically her narrative function through the lens of narrative criticism. This submission is a condensation of my findings as they apply to the John 11 narrative of the raising of Lazarus.

Can leadership be found in surprising places, in unlikely humans (female), hidden in the shadow of a more momentous event? I will pursue the premise that Jesus commissioned both sisters to demonstrate equally valid and essential leadership to make the result of his final sign most effective. The sisters together are ministering to different “flocks” demonstrating “good and good.” Together they make access to Jesus’ greatest statements of his identity available to the maximum possible number of followers.

To begin, it was necessary to strip away the “sister-versus sister” preconception from earlier study of both Luke and John: then whole new lessons begin to emerge. I uncovered several subtle hints in the Johannine text of more taking place in their individual interactions with Jesus than was immediately apparent. The main tool I am applying to the text is narrative criticism, also known as literary criticism, which focuses on a close reading of the surface structure of a text. Culpepper notes that narrative criticism is an inductive method where the interpreter works from observation of the text being studied.<sup>2</sup> This criticism was adapted to the study of biblical texts from the secular study of literature. Narrative criticism addresses the literary devices used by the author to create the desired effect on the reader.<sup>3</sup> The results of this criticism determine how the devices relate and how they contribute to the author’s presentation of a discrete narrative otherwise known as a pericope. The critic looks at the unified text in its final form and reads holistically.<sup>4</sup> Of particular interest in this narrative are plot, timing, movement, theme, motifs, repetition, and development of characters.

### *The Study*

As I carefully examined the “when and where” of each character in John 11, a subtle but surprising prominence is given to Mary. At the very beginning of the Lazarus pericope, this tendency is already apparent in the introductory verses as taking place in the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Worth noting is that the male character is introduced by his relationship to the female characters contrary to typical Greco-Roman literature.<sup>5</sup> Also, in that culture it is unusual that the sisters are taking the initiative in the care of the male member of the family contrary to

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<sup>2</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 9.

<sup>3</sup> William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2004), 59-60, 405.

<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey A. D. Weima, “Literary Criticism,” in *Interpreting the New Testament: Essays on Methods and Issues*, ed., David Alan Black and David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 151.

<sup>5</sup> Jean K. Kim, *Woman and Nation: An Intercontextual Reading of the Gospel of John from a Postcolonial Feminist Perspective* (Boston: Brill, 2004), 142.

the customs in patriarchal family structures. Why does the narrator mention Mary first and Martha is introduced in relationship to her?

John 11:2 includes a literary device known as a prolepsis, which appears to refer to an event that is yet to occur in the text: “This Mary whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.” The narrator provides a sort of poke in the ribs to make the readers aware that they should be especially engaged in this story because it concerns someone they already know. The author presumes that the upcoming anointing act of Mary was known to John’s readers either by oral tradition or from an earlier written source. Yet, this is the first introduction of Lazarus of whom the author assumes no prior knowledge in his readers even though Lazarus is the object of Jesus’ final and most memorable sign. Surprisingly, the writer does not assume his implied readers are “insiders” concerning knowledge about the Lazarus event. I find it hard to believe that Mary’s act of anointing was more well-known than the revivification event of her brother.

The Gospel of John was written perhaps two generations after the occurrence of Mary’s anointing of Jesus. Why would the implied readers of the last quarter of the first-century be expected to have previous knowledge of Mary of Bethany? Apparently, the anointing at the supper in honor of Lazarus was so remarkable that it had been repeatedly retold in the decades after the event among the Christ-followers. They knew of this Mary and were expected to be eager for more information about her. Yet, it would seem reasonable that they would also already know Lazarus because he was the reason for the dinner event.

The commentaries have come up with various theories concerning this prolepsis. Several consider the remark to be an insertion by later editors.<sup>6</sup> Another possibility is that Mary is so well

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<sup>6</sup> R. Brown, *Gospel*, 423, Schnackenburg, *Gospel*, 322; Lindars, *Gospel*, 386-387.

known by the act of her anointing, that she can be referred to even before the event is recorded.<sup>7</sup> This would also indicate that the Gospel was written to a community of believers who are already familiar with an anointing story. These same commentators often point out that even if the readers were not assumed to know the upcoming anointing narrative, it is a good literary device to draw special attention to Mary. O'Day and Huyen summarize this observation, "By pointing forward to the story of Mary's anointing of Jesus, the passion comes into view and begins to shape the reader's understanding of Lazarus's story."<sup>8</sup> A third possibility is that the author of John is assuming that his implied readers know of the story from reading the Synoptic narratives of Mark 14:3-9 and Matthew 26:6-13. This points out that although Mary of Bethany was not mentioned by name, now John is revealing her name, which was withheld in the Gospels that were written earlier.<sup>9</sup> Indeed in the Markan account Jesus said, "Wherever the gospel shall be preached throughout the whole world, this also that she hath done shall be spoken of for a memorial of her." It would be very disappointing if the name of the woman who should be so memorialized was forgotten. The fourth and last possibility is that the readers are familiar with the anointing woman from reading Luke 7:36-50. Yet the Lukan anointing event is quite different from the others. I will explain my conclusion and its importance as the paper progresses.

Continuing in John 11 the next several verses describe Jesus "across the Jordan" (10:40) receiving news from a messenger that "the one you love is ill." The assurance of Jesus' love for this person creates immediate discomfort by his lack of follow-up action. The narrator builds tension by noting that Jesus does not immediately go to the aid of his friend, but waits two days

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<sup>7</sup> Examples that consider this possibility include Ridderbos, *Gospel*, 386; Mullins, *Gospel*, 262; Köstenberger, *John*, 326; Whitacre, *John*, 277; Morris, *Reflections*, 403; Beasley-Murray, *John*, 185; Carson, *Gospel*, 407; Lincoln, *Gospel*, 318; Morris, *Expository*, 537; Bruce, *Gospel*, 239.

<sup>8</sup> Gail R. O'Day and Susan E. Huyen, *John*, WBC (Louisville: John Knox, 2006), 113.

<sup>9</sup> This possibility is considered by Burge, *John*, 312, n 5; Pink, *Exposition*, 158; Thomas, *Gospel*, 311;

before departing. This delay is an example of a motif throughout the entire Gospel when Jesus determines his own timing of events.<sup>10</sup> His ultimate purposes are not determined by human time.

In 11:19, Martha receives the first literary mention: “Many Jews had come out to Martha and Mary.” Although Martha is mentioned first in 11:19 and approaches first in 11:20, Mary was mentioned first in the opening of the pericope at 11:1 indicating that she was better known. It may be that Mary’s role in the narrative is second not because it is secondary, but because it is climactic.<sup>11</sup> When Martha heard that Jesus was approaching the village, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home (11:20). The author appears to be keeping the sisters in a power balance.

Why does Jesus pause outside the village and does not immediately accompany Martha to the house? Perhaps Jesus was intentionally delaying the time when he would face the Jews who were an unknown entity to him; were they friendly or antagonistic? Perhaps he wanted to meet them in a public or open space. Cultural-historical background informs that according to Jewish custom relatives of the deceased are said to sit *shiva* for a week following a death.<sup>12</sup> Close friends and family came to visit those grieving, who remained seated in their house for this mourning time. Mary apparently was reluctant to break this tradition, but Martha did not hesitate. Perhaps “Jesus had determined that the time of his public self-disclosure before the Jews was past.”<sup>13</sup>

Whatever the reasons, the result is that because Jesus remained on the edge of the village, he had opportunity for the private conversation and confession of Martha. As appears evident

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<sup>10</sup> O’Day and Hylan, 117.

<sup>11</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* Vol. 2 (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003), 845.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 842. The Jews mourned for seven days by sitting *shiva* at their house while receiving condolences from friends and relatives.

<sup>13</sup> Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 400.

from Martha's communication to Mary, "The teacher is here and wishes to speak to you," that Jesus' greater concern is private contact with those he loved. "Calling" is also a motif in John; Jesus called Mary as he calls his "sheep" (10:3) and his disciples. Jesus again determined the timing of events. When Jesus asks for Mary, it sets into motion the actual performance of the miracle. Note that between the sisters, they refer to Jesus as "the teacher." They had both spent time with him as students and the fact they are women is not even particularly notable.

"The Jews" are an entity mentioned prominently in John 11-12 and appear to influence every event. It is important to realize that all of the main characters of the Gospel are ethnic Jews. After Jesus and the disciples receive the news of Lazarus' illness, they express worry about Jesus' safety as they attempt to dissuade Jesus from returning to Jerusalem, "because the Jews recently tried to stone him" (11:8). Ominously, Thomas builds more tension by pointing out that the Jews likewise threaten the lives of the disciples. To complicate matters, Jews have come out from Jerusalem to comfort the grieving family, but some of them also report Jesus' actions back to the Pharisees. Notably, after the raising of Lazarus, some Jews are said to believe (11:45). As a result, the Jewish authorities not only plot to kill Jesus (11:50), but also to put Lazarus to death. The Jews related the death of Lazarus to the previous healing of the man born blind in chapter 9 by noting in 11:37, "Could not he who healed the blind man have saved Lazarus?" The dispute with the Jerusalem Jews in chapter 10 thereby adds more depth to chapter 11 by connecting them with the Lazarus miracle. By 12:53, the threat turns into a formal sentence on Jesus' life.

Brown has distinguished between different sub-groups of Jews, some of which are believers in Jesus but do not publicly profess out of fear.<sup>14</sup> Another group is those Jews who were believers publicly, but lacked real faith or knowledge (6:66); the brothers of Jesus in 7:3-5 could be an example. An important piece of information when looking deeper into this pericope

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<sup>14</sup> Raymond Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 71.



is that “the Jews from Jerusalem” who came out to comfort Mary are not a monolithic group but are in various states of belief or antagonism concerning Jesus.

Looking at this from a narrative critical perspective, one makes particular note of the movements of characters across the landscape. Martha was able to leave the house to meet Jesus without attracting attention; she slipped out either without anyone noticing or caring about her activity. On the other hand, when Mary leaves the house, “The Jews who had been with Mary consoling her, noticed the haste with which she got up and left, and they all followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn” (11:31). A detail that caught my attention early in my research is the curious reason the visitors from Jerusalem kept a more watchful eye on Mary than Martha. How is it that Mary attracts this notice from the Jerusalem visitors and Martha did not?

Remarkably, both sisters approach Jesus with the same remark. As the narrative unfolds, both sisters greet Jesus with the same observation, “If you had been here my brother would not have died.” One could imagine that the conversation in the house between those consoling Mary and Martha was dominated by the question: “Where is Jesus?” It is possible that this line of thought was echoing in the sisters’ minds and is first to their lips as each approached Jesus. More intriguing is the point that the writer is trying to make by having the narrator frame the sisters’ approach with this particular remark repeated twice.

In narrative criticism, the critic notices the frequency with which a character is noted. In verses 11:28-33, an unusual concentration of Mary’s name or feminine pronouns occur that draw special attention to her relationship with the Jews.<sup>15</sup> “And after she had said this, she went back and called her sister **Mary** aside. The Teacher is here, she said, and is asking for **you** (28). When **Mary** heard this, **she** got up quickly (29). When the Jews who had been with **Mary** in the house,

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<sup>15</sup> Satoko Yamaguchi, *Mary & Martha: Women in the World of Jesus* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002), 117.

comforting **her**, noticed how quickly **she** got up and went out, they followed **her**, supposing **she** was going to the tomb to mourn there (31). When **Mary** reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, **she** fell at his feet (32). When Jesus saw **her** weeping, and the Jews who had come along with **her** also weeping he was deeply moved in spirit (33).” Narratively, the number of times she is mentioned in connection with the Jews is the author’s indication of her importance and relationship to the Jews, but gives no hint as to the reason.

I was particularly intrigued with the observation in verse 33 that Jesus made special notice of Mary’s weeping. Was not Martha also weeping? Whether or not she is, it is Mary’s weeping, and the weeping of those with her that seem to move Jesus to his emotional reaction. Could it be that Mary’s weeping brings to Jesus’ memory an earlier incident of her washing his feet with her tears (Luke 7:36-50)? This is a tentative connection, but may be worth noting.

Following immediately after the revivification of Lazarus, I noticed a text that appears inadvertently to omit the mention of Martha. Such is how the few commentaries that actually notice the omission seem to understand it. In 11:45 is the offhand remark, “Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him.” Only one commentary ventures a reason for Mary’s solo notice: “It may be that Mary is the only one mentioned because she was better known among John’s readers.”<sup>16</sup> He goes on to give the reason that perhaps “she was more emotional, and therefore not as resilient as Martha and thus was more in need of help from others.”<sup>17</sup> The few words, “who had come to visit Mary” could have been omitted with no loss to the sentence. The end result is that many of the Jews, who saw Jesus’ sign, became believers. Why is Mary singularly mentioned in this context?

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<sup>16</sup> Leon Morris, *Expository Reflections on the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 419.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

### *Discussion*

As the author of John recounts this narrative to believers many years later, what is the importance of these details that the author chose to emphasize? How is it that Mary seems to enjoy recognition from some prior activities attached to her? Why is Mary being brought to the foreground by these many subtle narrative techniques?

Mary of Bethany had many resources available to her; she had no apparent financial concerns, she had a special friendship with Jesus, she had siblings, she had access to Jesus' teaching, and she lived close to Jerusalem. Apparently, she also had a history. Reasons for Mary's almost, but not quite concealed, prominence raise questions about what information is hidden just beneath the surface. Only a small minority of commentaries notice these subtle hints in the text and critically move past traditional interpretations. The first commentator that I read which drew me onto a path of uncovering the mystery of Mary of Bethany was Schüssler Fiorenza who brings up the suspicion that in an earlier tradition Mary may have had followers around her who were led to believe in Jesus.<sup>18</sup> In a later work of 2002, Yamaguchi is one of the few to notice and agree with this idea.<sup>19</sup> She notes that Mary appears as a friend and disciple of Jesus and is a leader with Judean followers. Prior to the events of John 11 and 12, Mary of Bethany had somehow become well-known and beloved with a devoted following. How could have this happened given that a quick reading of John 11 yields a very unimpressive resume: she is almost speechless and overcome with grief?

A reason for her fame and following may be inferred from a careful reading of Luke

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<sup>18</sup> Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "A Feminist Critical Interpretation for Liberation: Martha and Mary: Lk. 10:38-42," *Religion and Intellectual Life* (1986): 21-36.

<sup>19</sup> Yamaguchi, *Mary & Martha*, 122.

10:38-42 in Greek. In my unpublished thesis, I have explored this possibility.<sup>20</sup> In addition, it has occurred to me that the anointing woman of Luke 7:36-50 could be Mary of Bethany earlier in her life at her first acquaintance with Jesus. As Luke tells the anointing pericope it takes place in Jesus' Galilean travel narrative. Mary may have become a believer and repented of her earlier life with such an extravagant and memorable gesture that this event became legendary. John finally names her in 11:2 when Mary is introduced as the one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair. Instead of this remark anticipating an event that in John is yet to occur, he is bringing to remembrance Mary's previous anointing with which the Johannine readers are already familiar either from reading Luke or the oral tradition behind it. I would say that according to Mark and Matthew, she reprised the act a few years later before Passion Week. To further clarify, I propose that the anointing women in all four Gospels is Mary of Bethany, and she anointed Jesus twice, once early in Jesus' ministry in Galilee when she first repents of her sins, and then a few years later before Passion Week.

The relationship between the Gospel of John and the Synoptics is a complex discussion which is greatly abbreviated here. Although John is writing later than Luke, he could be writing from his memory as a direct witness.<sup>21</sup> The unique manner in which the stories interlock between John and the Synoptics seems to indicate that John knew the other Gospels, but intended to

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<sup>20</sup> Mary A. Hanson, "Mary of Bethany: Her Narrative Function," M.A.Thesis, Denver Seminary, 2010. PDF file available on my web site [www.boldgirlsofthebible.com](http://www.boldgirlsofthebible.com). Very briefly, my work in Luke 10:39 determined that by translating, *kai*. as "also" and using the relative pronoun *h[* as the subject, the participle *parakaquesqe*/sa, can be read substantively, "a person who sits oneself" making the translation of 10:39: "And she has a sister called Mary, who also sat herself at the feet. . ." This means that instead of Mary presently sitting at the feet of Jesus, both Mary and Martha are known as "sitters at the feet" or idiomatically, known as disciples. So, Mary is not in the house with Martha per the traditional reading, but somewhere that Jesus knows, perhaps following him in some unspecified ministry as the women in 8:2 or one of the seventy-two of 10:1. Martha's distress is over her sister's absence from home and she is asking Jesus to tell Mary to come home. Mary may have been able to build a following and reputation as an evangelist that included Jerusalem Jews. Jesus replies that Mary's choice is "good."

<sup>21</sup> C. H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: University Press, 1963), 423-432.

elaborate rather than to repeat familiar material.<sup>22</sup> Both of these conclusions are probably correct, in that the author wrote both from memory and with knowledge of Luke's work. Prior knowledge from the earlier written Gospels is presumed of the implied readers. Evidence of this is that characters and events are suddenly mentioned with no introduction, such as Andrew and Simon Peter (Jn 1:40), and readers are assumed to know in 3:24 the outcome of the story of John the Baptist. I think it is likely that the readers of John's Gospel would be familiar with the content of Luke's Gospel and know the anointing pericope from Luke 7:36-50 as well as the other mention of Mary and Martha in Luke 10:38-42.

Mary's prior reputation and ability to attract a crowd is an important piece of what Jesus is accomplishing in his final and greatest sign at the end of his public ministry. Schneiders notes that Mary of Bethany is the literary means for the Jews' arrival on stage for the raising of Lazarus.<sup>23</sup> Conway adds that John 11:31 gives the first indication of one of the roles that Mary will play in the narrative. "Unbeknownst to the Jews, she is actually leading them to Jesus."<sup>24</sup>

The climax of narrative tension occurs in 11:42 when Jesus prays out loud, "I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me." Jesus had master-planned the entire Lazarus narrative with the goal of bringing as many people possible out into the open, that they may be brought to belief by the performance of his final sign. The attraction of many mourners was set into motion at least four days earlier when Jesus waited before arriving in Bethany. Because of Lazarus' death, the Jews from Jerusalem who had come to comfort the sisters had swelled to a crowd. They were already

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<sup>22</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2009), 365.

<sup>23</sup> Sandra M. Schneiders, "Death in a Community," *Interpretation* 41 (1987): 55.

<sup>24</sup> Colleen M. Conway, *Men and Women in the Fourth Gospel: Gender and Johannine Characterization* (Atlanta: Society of Bible Literature, 1999), 143.

in place in Bethany when Jesus arrived. By not going directly to the house, he was able to call Mary to come to him, and with her came the many Jews consoling her. When he remained outside the house and arranged the ensuing scene to occur outside, Mary was in effect leading the Jews to Jesus, which was more effective than his coming to them. They were then ready to witness Mary's remark, her weeping and kneeling, which in turn released the emotional outburst of Jesus. Finally, they all proceeded to the tomb to witness the greatest and final sign of Jesus.

But what about Martha's entrance, conversation with Jesus, and her confession? Does her role fade in comparison? It is impossible to determine how many people witnessed the conversation between Jesus and Martha. Perhaps disciples were with Jesus, who had traveled with him from the "other side of the Jordan." Someone relayed at least the outline of the conversation including the confession to the writer of John, or he was a witness himself. First, Martha seems to ask Jesus obliquely for a miracle (11:22), which she believes could be possible if Jesus wills it. In her prior experiences with Jesus, she knows and has witnessed that whatever Jesus asks from the Father, he receives.

Martha's remark, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day" (11:24), results in Jesus' response, "I am the resurrection and the life." The great role of Martha is provoking the revelation that Jesus made about himself which is recorded for all ensuing readers of the Gospel, ancient and modern. Because Martha met Jesus by herself, without a crowd pressing about, this intimate exchange was facilitated. All readers of the passage since have the benefit of this conversation and important disclosure of Jesus' understanding of his impending death.

Still another important observation is that Jesus' interaction with Martha precedes the actual carrying out of the sign. Normally Jesus first performs the miracle, and then provides the

explanation. Therefore, Martha's confession concerning Jesus as the Christ is absolutely not a result of witnessing the raising of Lazarus. Her confession is purely the response to Jesus revealing himself verbally as the "resurrection and the life."<sup>25</sup> Likewise, Mary also confesses and worships Jesus physically by her actions. Neither Martha nor Mary needs a visible sign to facilitate belief.

Whether Jesus intended likewise to continue a discussion with Mary is unknown. Perhaps it was not possible because of the crowd that followed her. Perhaps he was hoping for a verbal confession from Mary in front of the crowd, which did not happen. Perhaps it happened just the way Jesus intended. What they did see was her worship and adoration at his feet. The author intended that both sisters greet Jesus with the same words, "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died." Jesus' different response to the identical statements makes possible a parallel comparison between Jesus' contrasting modes of consoling the mourners. In addition, imagine Jesus sighing, *Do they really think I could not have healed Lazarus from a distance if that was my plan; I have done it before!* Remember the official's son of John 4:43-54. Jesus is already teaching them that in the future he will not always be physically with them, but present in Spirit.

#### *The Narrative Role of Mary of Bethany*

Mary of Bethany's most important role is as a leader of the Jews of Jerusalem. One may ask how this is possible, considering at first glance that Mary does not appear in the text in any obvious leadership roles. She is certainly not very vocal and when she does speak once, it is not her own spontaneous speech. Looking closer, I conclude that Mary is the reason for the Jews coming out to Bethany to meet Jesus and to witness the subsequent miracle. In 11:42, although

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<sup>25</sup> Sandra M. Schneiders, *Written Than You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 2003), 106.

Mary is not mentioned at this point, Jesus' prayer spoken aloud to the Father proclaims, "For the sake of the crowd, so that they may believe that you sent me." This statement makes clear that the presence of the crowd is important to the total scene. Jesus performs the sign, not only to restore a dead friend to life, but also to convince the Jewish onlookers of his identity. Mary was probably not aware of her importance in bringing a crowd to Jesus, but without her "following" which she led out to meet Jesus, the number of Jewish witnesses and resultant believers, would not have been so large.

Mary brings the Jews of Jerusalem to Jesus, enabling them to witness his power and demonstration of his identity for themselves. Mary, not as a reflection on her own understanding, but on that of the Jews to whom she ministers, led those out to Jesus who needed to see a "sign." Mary by her example and actions shows who Jesus is and how he is to be worshipped.

Mary's leadership has now become obvious, but does Martha also have a leadership role? The narrative purpose for the sisters' separate visits to Jesus becomes clear. Jesus gave two different responses appropriate for the two different ministries the sisters led.<sup>26</sup> They are working together. Martha is Jesus' disciple, drawing on the portrayal from Luke, who ministered to "insiders," those who visited her home, in the village, and among those who are already followers of Jesus. "To the Evangelist and his audience, Martha undoubtedly represented those who believed before they had seen everything of what Jesus' "I am" would come to mean."<sup>27</sup> Martha's audience consists of those who did not need the "signs" noted by John to be necessary for those with marginal belief, such as Thomas being an example of needing to "see" (20:29). Martha elicits self-revelation from Jesus and responds verbally in faith. She receives the "I am" statement from Jesus not only for her benefit, but also for the benefit of all readers since. Since

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<sup>26</sup> Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger, "Mary of Bethany and Mary of Magdala: Two Female Characters in the Johannine Passion Narrative," *NTS* 41(1995): 578.

<sup>27</sup> Ridderbos, *The Gospel*, 400.



the time that Jesus left earth, every believer since is one who must believe without seeing: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (20:29).

### *Applications*

How many Christians past and present when experiencing a tragedy have cried, “Jesus, where were you? You weren’t here when I needed you. If you had been here, you could have prevented this.” The fact that both sisters are recorded as greeting Jesus with the same refrain may indicate that the author intends to illustrate two individual and uniquely appropriate responses to a tragedy. Martha and Mary asked exactly the same thing, and they invoked two different responses from Jesus.<sup>28</sup> In his private response to Martha, Jesus reveals his power and position. His public response to Mary is emotional as he matches her weeping. With Martha he explains himself, and with Mary he shares tears. Notably Jesus does not say, “If you believe in the resurrection, why are you wasting your time and your tears?”<sup>29</sup> Jesus does not reprimand anyone for crying. He understands each believer’s needs and allows for human sorrow. Showing emotions or questioning is not a sign of weak faith. Jesus affirms in the following chapters that he is always with his disciples, and they should trust him in his absence as when he is physically present.<sup>30</sup> “Abiding” is also a Johannine motif. Jesus will be near and comfort even after the ascension as he prepares his disciples for his absence. In this passage, he shows Mary and Martha that he was with them through the whole incident, and will be in the future.

The writer of John is presenting both Mary and Martha as female disciples of Jesus who learned from him as students would learn from a rabbi, when Martha refers to him as the “Teacher” (11:28). Not only were they learning from him, but putting their knowledge to use by

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<sup>28</sup> F. Scott Spencer, “You Just Don’t Understand or Do You?” in *A Feminist Companion to John* Vol 1 ed., Amy-Jill Levine (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2003), 19.

<sup>29</sup> Gary M. Burge, *John*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 323.

<sup>30</sup> Sandra M. Schneiders, “Death in a Community,” *Interpretation* 41 (1987): 51.

actively leading ministries of their own. Both women are portrayed in leadership roles. Martha represents those early followers of Jesus to the Johannine community just as Peter represented the disciples in Matthew 16:15-19.<sup>31</sup> Mary is shown as leading the Jews of Jerusalem out to Jesus (11:31) visibly demonstrating proper devotion and pointing them to the source of their salvation (12:3). In the next chapter, Jesus emphatically defends her role to Judas, “Let her alone” (12:7).

In John, Mary and Martha are different leaders of two groups of believers in different stages of understanding, even as they are struggling to understand their own grief. Women in leadership positions must meet those Christians to whom they are preaching and teaching where they are in their journey. Some believers need an object lesson and actual demonstration of how to worship and serve. Other Christians need a theology lesson, which Martha received and passed on to her circle of influence as well as future generations. Different leaders may have a more appropriate style for each group, and those who are leaders should strive to know who they are and when to apply which leadership approach. Both Mary and Martha recognized who they were as disciples called by Jesus, and even in their personal grief both reinforced and shepherded their following as appropriate.

Models of leadership have too often conformed to worldly standards of what a leader should look like. The result has been much grief and disappointment, not to mention the loss of so much leadership talent to the church. The servant model of leadership after Jesus’ example has not been the preferred model, because these are exactly the people who by human appearances are frequently overlooked when choosing leaders (Lk. 22:24-27).

Until very recently, the rare occasions when women have had the opportunity to lead, they had to conform to the masculine paradigm of male leadership. For many years the mantra

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<sup>31</sup> Schneiders, *Written*, 106.

has been repeated, “Women just can’t lead; they don’t have the intelligence, bravery, authority, commanding loud voice, big stature, and other qualities that are generally regarded as masculine.” But these qualities describe leadership from the human perspective. How many good leaders have been lost to the church because certain persons just did not “look” or “act” the part, as humans have determined that leadership should appear? Many “Marys” and “Marthas” have been passed over as not having leadership potential just as their actual functions in John 11 have been diminished until invisible.

With this new interpretation of Mary and Martha drawing from John 11 (and Luke 10), the old question, “Are you a Mary or a Martha?” can be thankfully put to rest. It is not a question anymore of whether a woman is more interested in housework than study, or the active life rather than the contemplative, or some other such “appropriate to women” application. Now “Are you a Martha or a Mary?” refers to the kind of ministry in which she is engaged and the demands of her leadership call. All the “Marthas” are to be encouraged as pastors as Martha was serving the insiders, those who were already believers.<sup>32</sup> “Marys” are laboring as evangelists to the “skeptics who must see to believe,” and more accurately stated, women and men must be supported to practice their ministries in the many ways appropriate to the believers they are serving.

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<sup>32</sup> Martha’s activity is described as *diakonia* in Luke 10:40 and John 12:2 which is a wider range of activities than housework. The word is often translated as “deacon” if it describes a man’s work.

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