

S22-330 Maria, Mariamne, Miriam: Rediscovering the Marys 4:00 PM – 6:30 Nov 22, 2015

Mary of Bethany: Her Leadership Uncovered

My premise is that Mary of Bethany is remembered as a stronger example of early Christian leadership than previously recognized. Several studies of Mary Magdalene, including one by Ann Graham Brock, have given Mary Magdalene more accurate and well-deserved attention.¹ Mary of Nazareth, the mother of Jesus, has always been the most esteemed Mary. Usually any character named Mary is assumed to be one of these two Marys. Mary of Bethany is the last to be considered.

Mary Ann Beavis has proposed in two articles that many of the earliest references to a Mary in non-canonical texts could actually be Mary of Bethany. She makes the case in her papers of 2012 and 2013 that when a Mary is referenced, and there is no specific indication that it is Mary Magdalene, or Mary of Nazareth, this could be Mary of Bethany.² In addition, when a Mary is paired with Martha, this is most certainly Mary of Bethany.³

Mark Goodacre proposes that frequent mention of a Mary Magdalene in early Christian works, are actually composite or harmonized portraits of two or more Marys. He points out that the designation Magdalene is rarely paired with a Mary and the Gospel of Mary does not identify which Mary by the title.⁴ For this paper, I am interested in the accounts that both Beavis and

¹ Ann Graham Brock, *Mary Magdalene, The First Apostle: The Struggle for Authority* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

² Mary Ann Beavis, "Reconsidering Mary of Bethany," *CBQ* 74 (2012) 281-97.

³ Mary Ann Beavis. "Mary of Bethany and the Hermeneutics of Remembrance." *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 75, (2013): 739-755.

⁴ Mark Goodacre, "The Magdalene Effect: Misreading the Composite Mary in Early Christian Works." Unpublished

Goodacre have uncovered, where an unspecified Mary is mentioned in positions of teaching and missionary activity.

In the 4/5 century *Acts/Martyrdom of Philip*, a Mary, otherwise unidentified, is depicted as the one who prepared and distributed the Eucharistic ministry. This Mary also kept the register of the lands from which missionary assignments were determined. The same Mary baptizes and preaches to the women while Philip ministers to the men. Mary's missionary activities in the *Acts/Martyrdom of Philip* are similar to those of Thecla, or Mary Magdalene in *The Gold Legend*.

I find the evidence for Mary of Bethany in early non-canonical and gnostic works to be convincing. I also find evidence for her later missionary and teaching activity found buried in the Greek of Luke 10 and in narrative details of John 11.

Mary and Martha of Luke 10:38-42 quoting Holly Hearon, "should come with a warning: proceed with caution!"⁵ For centuries, this well-known text is cited to illustrate the importance of prioritizing activities following the example of Mary, and minimizing the work of Martha. G. B. Caird in 1963 remarked, "Few stories in the Gospels have been as consistently mishandled as this one." Barbara Reid states, "Our instincts are correct when they tell us that something is wrong with this picture . . ."⁶ It is time for a new look at Mary and Martha.

Many variants testify to contention over this text since the earliest manuscripts. I propose an alternate understanding of Greek vocabulary, grammar, and consideration of the variants. The result will offer a more empowering view of both Mary and Martha in new activities. This text is

⁵ Holly E. Hearon, "Luke 10:38-42," *Interpretation* 58, no. 4 (October 2004) 394-395.

⁶ G. B. Caird, *The Gospel of St. Luke* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1963).

not at all about Mary passively listening to Jesus at his feet and ignoring Martha's plea for household help.

I propose that this passage reinforces issues that are a main concern in Luke's gospel such as giving our resources to serve Jesus, and forming new families in the Lord. Jesus requires Martha to allow Mary to follow her call, even to leave home to evangelize. Mary is away from Martha in the countryside engaged in evangelism and attracting followers to Jesus. Thereby, the foundation is set for her later prominence that has been overlooked.

How do I get to this?

What really is Mary doing in this text? The grammar of the verses indicates that Martha is the most important character, but the implications for Mary in this scene, are my main interest for this paper. I find no evidence that anyone other than Martha and Jesus are present. The text indicates that Jesus is by himself, so the popular story of Jesus with disciples entering Martha's house unexpectedly is simply not there. Martha receives or accepts Jesus as a believer, perhaps at her house but variants make that uncertain and, for my premise, location is not important.

Luke 10:39 continues: "And this one (fem.) has a sister called Mary." The conjunction to the next phrase, **kai .**, is often not translated, as in the NIV: "She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet..." Mary Rose D'Angelo remarks that if **kai .** is translated as "also," then both Mary and Martha are equally identified as disciples.⁷ The KJV reads, "And she had a sister called Mary, which also sat at Jesus' feet, and heard his word." In this case, the KJV accurately

⁷ Mary Rose D'Angelo, "Women in Luke-Acts: A Redactional View," *JBL* 109 (1990): 454-455.

translates the **kai** . as “also,” which is clearly retained in the UBS text, but has been dropped in most modern English translations.

“Who” **h** [is inserted in a widely dispersed set of manuscripts and is included by the UBS in brackets. By using this important variant **kai** . and translating it as “also”, the transition is completed as : “And this woman has a sister called Mary, who also having sat at his feet. .” in addition, with this relative pronoun **h** [as the subject, the participle **parakaqesqei/sa** can be read substantively, “a person who sat herself.” Nolland notes that if the **h** [is accepted then it should be linked to the following **kai** . with the result that whatever Mary is doing, Martha has also done.⁸ Christopher Hutson also concurs with this use of the variants.⁹

In summary, there are two possible ways of understanding the phrase. The more familiar, which I am questioning, describes Mary as sitting at the feet of Jesus in the narrative setting. The option proposed for this paper is that the participle could also name her as one who is “a sitter.” “Sitting at the feet”, as in Acts 22:3, is the traditional vocabulary of discipleship. So both Martha and Mary are known as “sitters at the feet” or disciples of Jesus. This is a figurative description, not literal.

But Martha was distracted **periespa/to peri pollh.n** in verse 40 which means, “was constantly being pulled concerning much.” The Greek imperfect tense indicates that this

⁸ John Nolland, *Luke 9:21-18:34, WBC (Dallas: Word Books, 1999)* 600, n. d.

⁹ Christopher R. Hutson, “Martha’s Choice: A Pastorally Sensitive Reading of Luke 10:38-42,” *Restoration Quarterly* 45 no 3 2003 139-150.

was not a one-time event, but was ongoing. Martha had overwhelming worries; which were not frantic preparations for a meal.

The source of Martha's distraction, **diakoni , a** has been studied extensively. J.N. Collins in 1990 determined that **diakoni , a** may be taken in the classic Greek sense of one who is a go-between or emissary," Phoebe being an example in Romans 16:1.¹⁰ Further, I agree with Warren Carter's 1996 article, who argues that Martha is engaged in house church ministry.¹¹ On this day, Martha is not overwhelmed in kitchen work, but she is burned out with diaconal work in her village, whatever it could be. For my purposes the meaning of **diakoni , a** is open to anything other than being confined to kitchen work. She is overworked by the demands of ministry.

The next item is Martha's question, "Do you not care that my sister (regularly) leaves me to serve alone?" Several variants replace the aorist **kate , lipen** for the imperfect **kate , leipen**. If the imperfect verb is considered, then Mary has regularly deserted Martha over a period of time. The addition of the word **mo , nhn** also adds to the sense that the distance between the sisters is more than a few steps between the kitchen and the dining room.

¹⁰ John N. Collins, "Did Luke Intend a Disservice to Women in the Martha and Mary Story?" *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 28 (1998), pp; 104-11, at p,. 110; also his *Diakonia: Reinterpreting the Ancient Sources* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

¹¹ Warren Carter, "Getting Martha Out of the Kitchen: Luke 10:38-42 Again," In *A Feminist Companion to Luke*, edited by Amy-Jill Levine, 214-231 (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2001).

In verse 41 two very strong words describe Martha's worry. She is described as **merimna/j** and **qoruba , zh**. This vocabulary indicates that Martha is enduring a considerable and long-term state of emotional stress. This describes stronger stress than being temporarily overwhelmed with duties as a hostess. Martha's worry is stated in language more appropriate to greater distress than being left alone to do all the **diakoni , a**. More to the point, Martha may be worried about her sister's safety out in the countryside as a disciple.

Mary has physically left Martha and perhaps frequently leaves to pursue her own **diakoni , a**. She is involved in some discipleship that does not involve Martha, who is obliged for an undisclosed reason, to stay in the village for her own unspecified **diakoni , a**. Martha assumes that Jesus knows where Mary is, because she asks Jesus, "Tell her therefore, that she may help me." She pleads with Jesus to speak to her sister that she will come back to give her a hand. Perhaps needing help is only a pretense; maybe Martha only wants her sister home under her supervision.

Jesus' reply to Martha is essentially the climatic teaching, yet his answer is puzzling and has been interpreted many ways. The oldest variant from the western tradition is also the simplest: "But one thing is necessary. For Mary has chosen good, and it will not be taken away from her." **Th . n angaqh . n meri , da** does not have to be taken comparatively to mean that Mary chose the "best portion," but can also mean she chose "a good thing."

The summary of immediate topics preceding Luke 10:38-42, hints at the reason that Mary had "left Martha alone." Mary is following Jesus as a traveling disciple and this pericope is an illustration of how followers of Jesus must leave their family behind. In Luke 8:1-3, Jesus is

noted to be traveling with the twelve as well as “some women.” This scene is followed closely by the sending of “the seventy” in Luke 10:1.

Martha assumes that Jesus knows where Mary is, and he does, because apparently it is in his power to convince her to return home. If Luke 10 gives Mary the space to be involved in “feet on the ground” itinerate ministry, does John 11 give any indication that this was indeed the reality?

Evidence from John

In the opening of John 11, Lazarus is introduced in relation to his sisters, Mary being mentioned first. In verse 2, is a prolepsis, apparently a referral to an event that has not occurred yet. The reader is reminded that this is the Mary who anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped them with her hair. Why would the audience be expected to know of this anointing scene, while the story of Lazarus was yet to be revealed? Mary seems to enjoy recognition from some prior activities attached to her. I think Mary had performed an anointing prior to this point of time, which had attracted much attention.

Moving forward in John 11:31, “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” 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? 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.

Following immediately after the revivification of Lazarus, John 11:45 appears to inadvertently 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." The few words, "who had come to visit Mary" could have been omitted with no loss to the sentence.

Research

How is it that Mary seems to enjoy recognition from some prior activities attached to her? Apparently, she had a history. Reasons for Mary's almost, but not quite concealed, prominence raise questions about information hidden just beneath the surface. The first source which drew me onto a path of uncovering the mystery of Mary of Bethany was Schüssler Fiorenza. Her suspicion is that in an earlier tradition, Mary may have had followers around her who were led to believe in Jesus.¹² In a later work of 2002 Yamaguchi is one of the few to notice and agree with this idea.¹³ She notes that Mary 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?

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

¹² Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "A Feminist Critical Interpretation for Liberation: Martha and Mary: Lk. 10:38-42." *Religion and Intellectual Life* 3 (1986): 21-36.

¹³ Satoko Yamaguchi, *Mary & Martha: Women in the World of Jesus* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002).

Lazarus.¹⁴ 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."¹⁵

The climax of narrative tension occurs in 11:42 when Jesus prays aloud, "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." This statement makes clear that the presence of the crowd is important to the total scene. 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.

Conclusion:

The foundation is laid in Luke 10 and John 11 to see how Mary of Bethany was recognized in the tradition as a figure with influence. Jesus took advantage of her leadership to bring a crowd of Judeans from Jerusalem to witness his final miracle and understand who he really was. If she had so many followers before the crucifixion, then she could have been more prominent than previously recognized as an early church leader.

In the Gnostic writings, *Gospel of Thomas*, *Pistis Sophia*, *Dialogue of the Savior*, *Sophia of Jesus Christ*, and *Gospel of Mary* an otherwise unidentified Mary is in a conversation with Jesus. I propose this could be Mary of Bethany. In the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Gospel of Mary*, a

¹⁴ Sandra M. Schneiders, "Death in the Community of Eternal Life: History, Theology, and Spirituality in John 11." *Interpretation* 41 (1987): 44-56.

¹⁵ Colleen M Conway, *Men and Women in the Fourth Gospel: Gender and Johannine Characterization* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999).

Mary is rebuked by a male disciple. This is more likely to be Mary of Bethany who was rebuked by Judas in John 12. In *Pistis Sophia* Jesus defends her right to speak. I conclude that many of the early Mary texts may be actually describing the activities of Mary of Bethany.