

Luke 10:38-42 is typically cited to illustrate the prioritizing of activities and making time for study. Traditional interpretations, which have been repeated for generations without serious re-evaluation, result in many unsolved quandaries. Mary is commended by Jesus for making study most important and Martha is mildly rebuked for being “too busy.” Yet Jesus in 10:5-7 extolls hospitality, especially to traveling disciples, and sets himself as the example of being a servant (Lk 22:27). It seems incongruous that Jesus would not welcome Martha’s service as exemplary. In no other text of Luke-Acts is *diakone*, *w* assessed critically.<sup>1</sup> Luke describes discipleship as both hearing and doing the word in 6:47, 8:15, 8:21, and 11:28.

Origen wrote the first recorded homily on Luke 10:38-42, which set the pace for centuries: Martha symbolized action, and Mary, contemplation. He also suggested that Martha represented the Jews in the synagogue who were observers of the law, and Mary the Christian Church and the new spiritual law.<sup>2</sup> Gregory the Great used Mary as an example to promote monasticism, which set the precedence throughout the Middle Ages. Calvin represents a shift of balance during the Reformation by noting: “Christ was far from intending that his disciples should devote themselves to idle and frigid speculations.”<sup>3</sup> More recently, Caird in 1963 noted: “Few stories in the Gospels have been as consistently mishandled as this one.”<sup>4</sup> Craddock summarizes the conundrum: “If we censure Martha too harshly, she may abandon serving altogether, and if we commend Mary too profusely, she may sit there forever.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Anni Hentschel, *Diakonia im Neuen Testament: Studien zur Semantik unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Rolle von Frauen* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007) 238.

<sup>2</sup> Diane E. Peters, *The Many Faces of Martha of Bethany* (Ottawa: Novalis, 2008), 13.

<sup>3</sup> Calvin is quoted in David Lyle Jeffrey, *Luke: Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2012), 153.

<sup>4</sup> G. B. Caird, *The Gospel of St. Luke* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1963), 149.

<sup>5</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *Luke: Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 152.

The writers of many commentaries, sermons, and devotions have creatively found numerous ways to tame the dissonance of the Mary and Martha story. Witherington is frequently quoted to point out that Jesus affirms Mary's listening at his feet against the Jewish rabbi tradition of not teaching women.<sup>6</sup> Thereby the story is rescued to empower women's study at the feet of Jesus, but at the expense of alienating Martha's activity. Many interpretations of the text suggest ways to lessen Jesus' scolding of Martha and leave room for conditional approval of her activity. Frequently, attempts are made to portray Jesus as "lending a hand" and showing more sympathy to the hard-working Martha.<sup>7</sup> Rehabilitations of the text that attempt to portray the sisters more equally fall flat, as well as making the story into something that it is not.<sup>8</sup> Instincts correctly determine that something is wrong with the inescapable conclusion that Mary's activity of learning at-the-feet is "worth more," and Martha's activity of serving is "worth-less."<sup>9</sup>

Recent commentaries continue the tradition that a balance must be maintained between active and contemplative service, even if stated in ever more creative ways. Jeffrey sees Luke 10:38-42 as purposefully following the Good Samaritan: "Active service of the Lord cannot be long practiced without sitting at the feet of the Lord."<sup>10</sup> Gonzales also sees significance in the juxtaposition of the two passages. He asks, "What would have been Martha's reaction if she had heard the Good Samaritan parable?"<sup>11</sup> The emphasis on Martha's attitude instead of her activity is pointed out by Garland who says "She (Martha) is scolded not for hustling and bustling but for

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<sup>6</sup> Ben Witherington, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 101.

<sup>7</sup> "I wish I could say that Jesus asked the disciples to do the washing up," quoted from Rosemary King, "Martha and Mary," *The Expository Times* 121 (2010): 459-461.

<sup>8</sup> Barbara E. Reid, *Choosing the Better Part? Women in the Gospel of Luke* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1996), 160.

<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *The Women Around Jesus* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 21.

<sup>10</sup> Jeffrey, *Luke*, 153.

<sup>11</sup> "Had Martha been present when Jesus told the parable, and the point of the parable was that one should serve those in need, she would have more than sufficient reason to be angry!" Justo L. Gonzales, *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible, Luke* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 141.

fretting and fussing.”<sup>12</sup>

Considering the long list of esteemed commentaries on this text, it seems to be bucking an overwhelming trend to get Mary out of the house and Martha out of the kitchen. This paper concludes that drawing a positive and negative dichotomy between the two women is unnecessary. The whole discussion of whether one reads with or against the text of Luke 10:38-42 can be also laid to rest.<sup>13</sup> With accurate exegetical and hermeneutical study, a much broader horizon can be opened with new applications of this text for both men and women.

At the beginning of Luke 10:38, Jesus is traveling with an unidentified plural group that is grammatically masculine, but could be intended inclusively to include females. By 10:38b, the subject pronoun with the verb is suddenly singular (αὐτοῦ· ἰεῖν/ἴεν). A certain woman named Martha receives αὐτοῦ, which is again singular. The rest of the traveling group has literarily, if not literally, disappeared. As Luke writes the scene some forty years later, if Jesus has traveling companions upon meeting Martha, Luke does not consider them essential to the story. This leaves Martha and Jesus alone in the spotlight. The location is only indicated by τινὶ κωμῶν, “a certain village,” and does not necessarily need to be Bethany near Jerusalem.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Also, “She is in danger of majoring in minors and passing over what is of chief importance.” David E. Garland, *Luke, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 455.

<sup>13</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 215.

<sup>14</sup> Bargil Pixner O.S.B., *Paths and Sites of the Early Church from Galilee to Jerusalem* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), 173. Eusebius AD 263-339 quotes Julius Africanus of Emmaus who wrote about AD 200 that relatives of the family of Jesus had kept genealogies to preserve the proof of their Davidic ancestry. They originated from the Jewish villages of Nazara (Nazareth) and Kochabe (Kochabe) in Batanea (or Bashan), a Jewish settlement to the east of the Sea of Galilee. Natzozeans were still living there generations later. Traditionally this story is firmly set in Bethany near Jerusalem because according to John 11:1 and 12:1 this is the home of Mary and Martha. It has long puzzled commentators that in the Lucan travel narrative Jesus would not be located near Jerusalem at this time in his ministry. In John 1:28, Jesus’ ministry starts in Bethany across the Jordan following that of John the Baptist. In 1:37-39 John and two of his disciples ask, “Where are you staying?” Jesus answers, “Come and you will see.” Jesus may have had relatives in the area and “many believed in him there” (John 10:42). This paper will propose that this scene takes place north-east of the Sea of Galilee in what is today the Golan Heights.

Luke also does not describe the exact setting where Martha greets Jesus, whether it is her house, on a road, public or private. The words “into her house” are included in the TNIV, KJV, and NASB translations. Textual evidence for  $\alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron, \nu \epsilon\iota\upsilon\eta \theta\eta. \nu \omicron\iota\upsilon\kappa\iota, \alpha\eta$ , “him into the house,” in the manuscripts is mixed. Another variant adds a possessive genitive “her,”  $\alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron, \nu \epsilon\iota\upsilon\eta \theta\eta. \nu \omicron\iota\upsilon\kappa\iota, \alpha\eta \alpha\upsilon\upsilon\theta/\eta$ , “him into her house.” The UBS stops with  $\upsilon\`{\rho}\epsilon\delta\epsilon, \chi\alpha\tau\omicron \alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron, \nu$ , “she received him.” This reading is supported in the p<sup>45</sup>, p<sup>75</sup> and B, where  $\alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron, \nu$ , “him,” stands alone.

Several commentaries note the omission  $\epsilon\iota\upsilon\eta \theta\eta. \nu \omicron\iota\upsilon\kappa\iota, \alpha\eta$ , but still go on to include it in the translation. Nolland includes the phrase and notes, “The full phrase could be a scribal completion, but is probably original as part of the terms that evoke the mission materials of Luke 9:1-6.”<sup>15</sup> Green also includes the phrase in his translation and admits it is omitted in the early parchments; he says, “Even if, as seems probable, variant forms were introduced to draw out the meaning of  $\upsilon\`{\rho}\epsilon\delta\epsilon, \chi\alpha\tau\omicron \alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron, \nu$ , this phrase is already implicit in the Lukan use of “to welcome” or “to extend hospitality.”<sup>16</sup> Bock does not include it in his translation, but he sees a domestic scene in a house “vividly.”<sup>17</sup> He notes: “that many manuscripts include the longer phrase in different forms speaks against either of the longer options being original. The reading chosen does not affect the general meaning, only its specificity.” Bock goes on to say he prefers the shorter reading.<sup>18</sup> The conclusion from this discussion is that the earliest parchment, p<sup>75</sup>, from the early third century, omits mention of a house, and it is the shortest reading. Therefore, for purposes of this paper, the “house” is omitted. The location could be Martha’s house, but does not have to be. The physical location of this scene will eventually be proven

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<sup>15</sup> John Nolland, *Luke 9:21-18:34*, WBC (Dallas: Word Books, 1999), 600, n c.

<sup>16</sup> Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 433.

<sup>17</sup> Darrell Bock, *Luke Vol. 2: 9:51-24:53*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 1039.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 1043.

unimportant; a domestic scene is not essential and was apparently not mentioned in the earliest parchment.

The nature of Martha's reception of Jesus warrants exploration. Luke starts the action between Martha and Jesus with  $\epsilon\upsilon\kappa\epsilon\iota\tau\epsilon, \chi\alpha\tau\omicron \alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron, \nu$ , which generally means to offer hospitality as a guest, but can also mean to simply "to receive someone."<sup>19</sup> Other Lukan uses of the verb include the same phrase in Luke 19:6 where Jesus looks up in the tree to see Zacchaeus and says, "I must stay in your house today." Zacchaeus  $\epsilon\upsilon\kappa\epsilon\iota\tau\epsilon, \chi\alpha\tau\omicron \alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron, \nu$ . In this case, Jesus clearly invites himself to Zacchaeus's house. The use in Acts 17:7 also clearly involves Jason's house. The root verb  $\delta\epsilon, \sigma\omicron\mu\alpha\iota$  can indicate approval or conviction by accepting, and is used positively six times prior to chapter ten as in 8:13: "Those on the rock are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it . . ." <sup>20</sup> This sense also occurs in 9:53, and 10:10 in instances where Jesus is not accepted. Jesus poses two possible scenarios to "the seventy" upon entering a town (10:7): they may or may not be welcomed. In 9:53, Jesus was not "welcomed" ( $\epsilon. \delta\epsilon, \chi\alpha\tau\omicron$ ) by the Samaritans because he was headed to Jerusalem. Therefore, by 10:38 Luke has used  $\delta\epsilon, \sigma\omicron\mu\alpha\iota$ -related verbs to indicate (non) acceptance of Jesus and his mission.

Martha's greeting is an illustration of a favorable reception as opposed to those who do not receive Jesus in Luke 10:10.<sup>21</sup> Beyond food and housing, the most vital aspect of "receiving" is the acceptance of the mission and call of Jesus, which Martha and Mary both exemplify.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> W. Bauer, F.W. Danker, W.F. Arndt, and F.W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000), 1037, abbreviated BDAG hereafter.

<sup>20</sup> BDAG, 221.

<sup>21</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said*, 66.

<sup>22</sup> Warren Carter, "Getting Martha out of the Kitchen: Luke 10:38-42 Again," in *A Feminist Companion to Luke*, ed., Amy-Jill Levine (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2001), 165-166.

When Jesus sent out “the seventy,” he advised, “When you enter a town and are welcomed, eat what is set before you” (Lk 10:7). Martha’s “receiving” of Jesus in faith was more likely in line with Jesus’ modest expectations rather than elaborate preparations often imagined in recreations of this scene. He would be a gracious guest by accepting modest accommodations, and was much less concerned about elaborate hospitality than being received as “the Christ, the Son of God, the one coming into the world” (John 11:27). Martha must have been aware of his first preference of being received in faith, followed by simple hospitality. The conclusion is that if “house” is not included, then *u`pede, xato* can be a more general “welcome” or better, “received” as Martha received Jesus and his message thereby becoming a disciple.

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 . . .” *Kai . .* can be translated “and, but” or “also.” If it is translated as “also,” then both Mary and Martha are equally identified as disciples.<sup>23</sup> 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 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.<sup>24</sup> By translating the *kai . .* and using this important variant, the transition is completed as: “And this woman has a sister called Mary, who also. . .” In addition, with this relative pronoun *h [* as the subject, the participle *parakaqesqei/sa* can be read

<sup>23</sup> Mary Rose D’Angelo “Women in Luke-Acts: A Redactional View,” *JBL* 109 (1990): 454-455.

<sup>24</sup> The *h [* (who) is omitted by *p*<sup>45</sup>, *p*<sup>75</sup>, *⋈*, and *L*, it is found in *A, B, C, D, W, Θ, Ψ*. This geographic distribution speaks for its originality, its presence indicates that the first use of *kai* should be translated “also.” In Bock, *Luke*, 1043.

substantively, “a person who sat herself.” Nolland notes that if the  $\eta\lambda\iota$  is accepted then it should be linked to the following  $\kappa\alpha\iota$  . with the result that whatever Mary is doing, Martha has also done.<sup>25</sup> This results in two possible ways of understanding the phrase. The more familiar describes Mary as presently sitting at the feet of Jesus. The option proposed for this paper is that the participle could also name her as one who is “a sitter.” “Sitting at the feet” is an idiomatic way of saying that a person is a disciple.<sup>26</sup> In Luke 8:35, the Gerasene man, after being exorcised of many demons, sat at Jesus’ feet. In Acts 22:3, Paul trained “at the feet of Gamaliel.”

This passage could be describing Mary as also being “a sitter” at the feet of Jesus, in the same manner as Martha has sat at the feet of the Lord. An additional grammatical point is that Luke chose the imperfect,  $\eta\gamma\kappa\omicron\upsilon\epsilon\iota$ , which indicates that the sisters have been hearing the words of Jesus over a period of time. D’Angelo agrees with this interpretation and notes, “Once it is recognized that sitting at Jesus’ feet and hearing his word indicates discipleship, the meaning should be clear: Martha who received Jesus, has a sister who like Martha herself, was a disciple.”<sup>27</sup> The translation of 10:39 now stands: “She had a sister called Mary, who also was one who regularly sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to what he said.” Both, over a period of time, have enjoyed learning from Jesus as his disciples. One cannot generalize from this finding that Mary is the “studied” sister and Martha the “practical” sister.

“But Martha was distracted” (10:40). What is distracting Martha? The imperfect phrase  $\text{periespa/to peri. pollh.n}$  literally means, “was constantly being pulled concerning much.”  $\text{Periespa/w}$  is a NT *hapax legomenon* and indicates “being pulled away” by something and can refer not only to distraction and busyness, but also to being overburdened.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Nolland, *Luke*, 600, n. d.

<sup>26</sup> Witherington III, *Women*, 101.

<sup>27</sup> D’Angelo, “Women,” 454.

<sup>28</sup> BDAG, 804.

The Greek imperfect tense indicates that this was not a one-time event, but was ongoing. The narrator uses the verb to state an objective fact: Martha was worried and it was not neurotic obsessiveness on her part.<sup>29</sup> The reader is given no visual cues; the narrator does not inform how he knows of her distress, and does not describe how her distress could be observed. Luke is not following the writer's dictum: "Show, do not tell." The text does not contain a koine Greek word for "kitchen" nor does it describe any frantic activity on her part that would indicate distress. An observer would not easily know that Martha is worried and would certainly not know the cause of her worry.

What was the cause of Martha's distraction? Before we smell wonderful cooking fragrances wafting through Martha's house, reconsider the possible "service" Martha was practicing. Extensive study has been done on the meaning of *diakonia*, a starting with J.N. Collins in 1990, who worked from classical Greek texts to expand the semantic field of *diakonia*, a from lowly house service to "a go-between or emissary," such as an ambassador or curior.<sup>30</sup> The Jewish understanding of "service" has always been assumed, but Collins raised the possibility that NT writers may have also taken *diakonia*, a in the classic Greek sense of one who is a messenger, spokesperson, or agent.<sup>31</sup> Of the thirty-four uses in the NT, fourteen times it is translated as "ministry."<sup>32</sup> It can mean many different kinds of service on the behalf of another, including but not necessarily restricted to serving a meal.<sup>33</sup> Warren Carter makes a convincing argument that Martha is distracted by her responsibilities of leadership and house

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<sup>29</sup> L. T. Johnson, *Luke: Sacra Pagina* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 173.

<sup>30</sup> J. N. Collins, *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 77 ff.

<sup>31</sup> Ismo Dunderberg, "Vermittlung statt karitativer Tätigkeit? Überlegungen zu John N. Collins' Interpretation von Diakonia," in *Diakonische Konturen: Theologie im Kontext sozialer Arbeit*, ed., Volker Herrmann, Rainer Merz, Heinz Schmidt (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag, 20003), 175-176.

<sup>32</sup> John R. Kohlenberger III, Edward W. Goodrick and James A. Swanson, *The Greek English Concordance to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 154.

<sup>33</sup> Reid, *Choosing*, 147.

ministry.<sup>34</sup> In contrast, Tannehill maintains that *diakonia*, a in this setting refers to hospitality, especially through providing a meal.<sup>35</sup> More recently in 2007, Anni Hentschel continues the work on *diakonia*, a and notes that the subject can be a man or woman, and indicates ministry in hospitality or in the broader sense, Phoebe being an example in Romans 16:1.<sup>36</sup> She concludes that the understanding of *diakonia*, a in Luke 10:38-42 is determined by context.<sup>37</sup> She does not find such a strong contrast as Collins; one meaning does not necessarily preempt the other. Bringing food to the table or serving in the community in a more official capacity, are not so different.<sup>38</sup> Important for this paper is the realization that the main point of this pericope is not Martha's duties as hostess, although modest food service when Jesus and Martha meet is not necessarily ruled out.

Acts 6:1-6 illustrates the range of meanings for *diakonia*, a in Luke-Acts. Seven Hellenists are appointed to devote themselves to *diakonia*, a "service at the table" so the apostles could be free to do *diakonia*, a "service of the word." It is revealing that no further record exists that anyone from the seven ever actually practiced service at the table. At least some in this group, Phillip and Stephen, practiced word-service and were preachers of the early Christian church.<sup>39</sup> Overall, there is enough evidence that Martha's activity does not have to be restricted to a narrow definition of service. For purposes of this paper, a broader understanding of Martha's *diakonia*, a is helpful, as will be demonstrated below, but as the situation is developed, she likely is involved with some combination of ministries.

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<sup>34</sup> Carter, "Getting Martha," 223.

<sup>35</sup> Robert C. Tannehill, *Luke*, ANTC (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 185.

<sup>36</sup> Anni Hentschel, *Diakonia im Neuen Testament: Studien zur Semantik unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Rolle von Frauen* (Tübingen: Morhr Siebeck, 2007), 436.

<sup>37</sup> Hentschel, *Diakonia*, 257

<sup>38</sup> Hentschel, *Diakonia*, 239.

<sup>39</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 65.

She “appears” (*evfi, sthmi*) to Jesus and asks him to prevail upon Mary to give her a hand with her *diakoni, a*. The use of *evfi, sthmi* may indicate a lapse of time and change of location from Martha’s initial receiving of Jesus between 40a and 40b. In other occurrences of the verb in Luke-Acts, it often describes an encounter with a divine presence. In 2:9 the angel appeared in Bethlehem to the sheperds, as just one of eighteen examples.<sup>40</sup>

Martha could be seen as “pulled in many directions” by whatever obligations and concerns she had as a leader of an early community of Christ-followers. She may very well be a leader of an assembly place for early followers of Christ, instead of, or in addition to, providing as hostess the comforts of a temporary home for Jesus. Later, several women will open their houses and lead churches as Tabitha (Acts 9:36-42), Mary, mother of John Mark (Acts 12:12), and Lydia (Acts 16:15-40).

In addition, Martha could also have substantial family responsibilities. Her (younger?) sister Mary does not seem to either stay on the premises, or be willing to take responsibility for household management, or Martha could already be caring for the sick brother introduced in John 11:1. Since no parents are mentioned, the responsibility of caring for elderly parents until their death could have recently fallen on Martha, or perhaps she was widowed with the associated mourning and cares. Whatever her life history, she appears to carry multiple responsibilities.

Overriding all of the earthly responsibilities, Martha no doubt sensed that opposition to Jesus was coming to a head and her friend was in danger. They would have known about the beheading of John the Baptist, and now Herod is asking about Jesus in 9:9. Jesus himself in 9:22 says that “The son of Man must suffer many things . . . and he must be killed and on the third

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<sup>40</sup> Kohlenberger III, *Concordance*, 328.

day be raised to life.” By this point in Luke, Jesus has already resolutely set himself toward Jerusalem (9:51). These scenarios are admittedly conjecture, but so too is the speculation that she was overwhelmed by preparing food for unexpected guests.

The next item is Martha’s question, “Do you not care that my sister (regularly) leaves me to serve alone?” On another occasion Jesus was confronted with the rhetorical question, “Do you not care?” In Mark 4:38 the disciples wake Jesus in the boat on the Sea of Galilee and ask him, “Do you not care that we drown?” Of course Jesus is aware of a problem, but he wants the disciples to bring it up. Perhaps that is the case here. The word *katalei, pw* means “to leave without help,”<sup>41</sup> but another meaning is “to depart from a place with implication of finality.”<sup>42</sup> Several variants replace the aorist *kate, lipen* for the imperfect *kate, leipen*.<sup>43</sup> If the imperfect verb is considered, then Mary has regularly deserted Martha over a period of time. *Katalei, pw* is also used in Acts 6 where the apostles do not wish to “leave” the “ministry of the word” (*diakoni, a tou/ lo, gou*) in order to wait on tables (*diakone, w*).<sup>44</sup> 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.

Instead, Jesus shows deep emotion and concern when he answers with the double vocative, “Martha, Martha.” Jesus knows Martha better than Martha knows herself and identifies her real problem. It was not that her sister has left her alone to do all the housework; it is her worry. In other passages of Luke, Jesus has similarly repeated a name twice as in “Jerusalem, Jerusalem,” (13:34), and “Simon, Simon,” (22:31).<sup>45</sup> Similar to these examples, Jesus is not

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<sup>41</sup> BDAG, 521 §6b.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 520 §2.

<sup>43</sup> A B C L Θ Ξ Nolland, *Luke*, 600, n. i.

<sup>44</sup> Kathleen E. Corley, *Private Women Public Meals: Social Conflict in the Synoptic Tradition* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993), 136.

<sup>45</sup> See Luke 6:46, “Why do you call me Lord, Lord,” Acts 9:4, Acts 22:7, Acts 26:14, “Saul, Saul.”

reprimanding Martha harshly but he intervenes to calm her and turn the situation around. Jesus acknowledges Martha's distress by affirming her feelings, "You are worried and upset about many things."

The vocabulary used by Luke indicates that Martha has obligations that reach beyond her duties as hostess on that day. The term for "worried," (*merimna/j*), "to be apprehensive, be anxious, be unduly concerned," is used in other NT passages to refer to worldly entanglements as in Jesus' words, "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink," (Matt 6:25-34).<sup>46</sup> Jesus says in Luke 12:25-26, "Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life? Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest?" Paul uses the word positively in I Corinthians 7:32-34 where an unmarried woman is *merimna/j* "anxious" about the things of the Lord.

In addition, the second adjective for being "upset," (*qoruba, zh*), is a *hapax legomenon* in the NT. Cognates *qorube, w* and *qo, ruboj* are used eleven times and refer to the disturbance of a crowd of people. The first meaning is "disorder of a city close to riot";<sup>47</sup> the second meaning is "to cause emotional disturbance, disturb, or agitate."<sup>48</sup> These two words indicate that Martha is enduring a considerable and long-term state of emotional stress, which is stronger than being temporarily overwhelmed with duties as a hostess.

At this point, it is interesting to note who is getting the most attention grammatically. Traditionally, the story is understood to concern two equal sisters, one who will be eventually vindicated and the other censored. Yet grammatically the sisters are not equal: Martha is the subject of three verbs and one participle, which is even more grammatical attention than Jesus

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<sup>46</sup> BDAG, 632 §1.

<sup>47</sup> BDAG, 458 §1.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 458 §2.

receives. The two verbs that Mary receives in verse 39 are subordinate to “she had a sister.”<sup>49</sup> Here is the place to pause with recognition of several new pieces of information. Martha receives the most grammatical attention, imperfect verbs are used indicating ongoing action, the vocabulary that describes Martha’s inner turmoil is strong, and no hint of the source of this turmoil is given. The description of Martha’s worry is stated in language more appropriate to greater distress than being left alone to do all the *diakoni, a*.

An ongoing question is the reason for Mary’s silence. Why is she not given any speech? The conclusion for this paper is that Mary does not speak because there is no conclusive evidence that she is even on the scene. 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” (10:40b). This would account for Martha’s ongoing and acute sense of distress, which in Greek seems greater than if her sister had just left her alone in the kitchen.

She pleads with Jesus to speak to her sister that she will come back to “help her” (*sunantila, bhtai*).<sup>50</sup> The only other occurrence of this verb is in Romans 8:26, “The Spirit helps us in our weakness.”<sup>51</sup> Martha wants Jesus to ask Mary to come back to their home or village to take on some of the *diakoni, a* burden for which Martha is responsible, or at least that is her pretence. Maybe Martha just wants Mary home.

What exactly is Jesus’ intervention and what is “the good portion” (*th . n avgaqh . n*

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<sup>49</sup> Loveday C. Alexander, “Sisters in Adversity: Retelling Martha’s Story” in *A Feminist Companion to Luke*, ed., Amy-Jill Levine (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2001), 206.

<sup>50</sup> BDAG, 965.

<sup>51</sup> Kohlenberger III, *Concordance*, 706.

meri, da) that meets Jesus' approval? Jesus' reply to Martha is essentially the climatic teaching, yet his answer is puzzling and has been interpreted many ways. The text is filled with textual variants, it is a clue that tampering has taken place over the centuries by scribes who found the verses difficult to understand.<sup>52</sup>

The translations include: "but only one thing is needed" (RSV, KJV) or "but only a few things are necessary, really only one" (NIV, NASB, JB). The former version requires a spiritualized sense as in 18:22: "You lack one thing. Sell everything . . . Then come, follow me."<sup>53</sup> The latter variant is advocated by proponents of the scenario that Jesus is recommending that Martha simplify her meal preparations by saying one dish or maybe a few is all that is necessary.<sup>54</sup> As we have already established, it is not at all clear that the conversation is about meal preparation. A viable translation advocated for this paper is: "But one thing is necessary. For Mary has chosen good, and it will not be taken away from her." Th . n avgaqh . n meri, da does not have to taken comparatively to mean that Mary chose the "best portion," but can also mean she chose "a good thing." It is notable that Luke uses avgaqoj rather than kaloj which indicates a moral dimension to her choice.<sup>55</sup> Avgaqoj in Luke-Acts can refer to many different kinds of "good" as gifts, a person's character, and good works (11:13, 23:50, and Acts 9:39).<sup>56</sup> Caring for physical needs is pronounced as "good" by Luke as well as "hearing the word." Jesus says, to whomever is present, and to all of Luke's readers in the generations since, that Mary has made a good choice. This is not to imply that Martha is not doing good, and

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<sup>52</sup> Corley, *Private Women*, 138.

<sup>53</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 454.

<sup>54</sup> Gordon Fee, "One Thing is Needful? Luke 10:42," in *New Testament Textual Criticism: Essays in Honour of Bruce M. Metzger*, eds. E.J. Epp and G. D. Fee (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 61-75.

<sup>55</sup> L.T. Johnson, *Luke* (Collegeville: Sacra Pagina, 1991), 174 n 42.

<sup>56</sup> Christopher R. Hutson, "Martha's Choice: A Pastorally Sensitive Reading of Luke 10:38-42," *Restoration Quarterly* 45 (2003): 139-150.

Jesus also does not say that Martha should be doing the same as Mary. Jesus approves and supports Mary's decision for her; he is not necessarily defending her against Martha's mode of service.

The summary of immediate topics preceding the Luke 10:38-42 pericope, hints at the reason that Mary had "left Martha alone." Maybe Mary is following Jesus as a traveling disciple and this pericope is an illustration of how followers of Jesus must leave their family behind (9:57-62). 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's question does not become so rhetorical if she is asking Jesus if he does not care that she is left alone to manage affairs by herself while her sister is away, perhaps even facing danger.

Pulling this all together, it is not Martha's *diakoni*, a with which Jesus has concern, but her being "worried and upset about much." In addition, with the knowledge Jesus' life is under increasing threat by those opposed to his message, Martha is possibly worried about Jesus' safety. Similar to Mark 14:7 and John 12:8, Jesus is saying: "Support my ministry while I am here. Let the future take care of itself." One way of practicing his word is manifested by how disciples handle stress and worry. The next chapter in Luke begins with prayer; there may be a connection.

Many new applications result from this new perspective on Luke 10:38-42. Mary and Martha are both known to be "sitters at the feet of Jesus, listening to his words." No longer is one sister setting an example to be emulated and the other stands to be corrected. Most remarkable is the realization that Mary is away, gone from Martha. She is not on the premises at the time of this conversation; she does not speak, and is only spoken of in the third person. Mary's absence is the reason for Martha's overwhelming worry; she wants her sister back with

her to help, which is much less silly than if she is just prevailing upon Jesus to help her get Mary back into the kitchen. That would be a small matter which the sisters could presumably settle on their own. Martha assumes that Jesus knows where Mary is, and he probably does, because apparently it is in his power to convince her to return home. At Luke 10:1, Jesus sent out “the seventy,” and at 8:2 women were following Jesus; Mary could have been included in that number. With the multitudes of people following Jesus in his ministry, there were many families faced with the absence of loved ones leaving home to evangelize.

What has changed in the application of this passage as a result of these findings? The sisters are not pitted against each in such a way that one has correct priorities and the other is misdirected. A choice does not have to be made between contemplative and active discipleship. Both woman have permission to study and with evidence they indeed both have a history of study at the feet of Jesus. Jesus does not appear to be contradicting himself by advocating selfless service in earlier passages, but then in the presence of Martha undermining her service. Martha’s exact *diakoni*, a is unspecified and could be a variety of activities. The final dictum of Jesus can follow the oldest and most valid reading of verse 42; the conundrum of using a later variant to spare Martha invalidation is avoided.

What hasn’t changed is that the story is still about Martha and she still is the one that comes to a new realization. Now the learning is at a much deeper level; Martha is no longer fretting over serving duties, but is worried about the absence of her sister which is much more understandable. Jesus is still mediating a message between the sisters, but the message and urgency has increased. Instead of a message, “Don’t you care that my sister has left me alone in another area of the house?” Martha asks Jesus, “Don’t you care that my sister has left me alone to go to an unknown location in your service, leaving me to cope with many responsibilities

alone?" Martha shows much more depth of character if her great weakness is wanting her family member nearby, instead of getting over-involved with hostess duties.

Considering the close proximity of a previous passage, Luke 9:57-62, where Jesus describes the personal cost to be a disciple, leave family and to follow him, it is possible 10:38-42 is an illustration of this cost from the point of view of the family members left behind. Luke 8:19-21 is about forming a new family, "My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice." It is a lesson of discipleship and the many forms it takes and following at whatever the cost (Luke 18:29). Sometimes disciples minister within their familiar surroundings and this is a valid and demanding call, not all are called to leave, but others are called to serve in new locations.

A familiar theme is repeated, frequently taught by Jesus, that worry is never helpful and prayer is, whether or not the connection to the next chapter is intended or not. Mary and Martha have new lessons to teach and it is no longer about getting priorities right and the danger of getting caught up in superfluous housework. Suddenly, the old familiar Martha and Mary story has a whole new look, and doesn't seem like a silly spat between sisters.

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