

Martha, the Hostess, and Mary, the Listener. A Discussion with the Feminist Interpretation of Luke 10:38–42

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Abstract: This article examines the pericope of Luke 10:38–42 following the gender approach. It presents the contributions of E. Schüssler Fiorenza and of M. Perroni who have interpreted the passage according to a feminist approach. The former has developed some hermeneutical criteria while the latter has insisted on female discipleship, claiming that, for Luke, the women are believers but not missionaries. The article turns critically on the essential points of the two contributions, showing that a careful philological and contextual analysis does not allow the episode to be read as a representation of ministry in the Church. Instead, Mary's behaviour appears alienating, for, placing herself the Lord's feet, she performs an action which is surprising and not inscribed in the social canons. The episode lays stress on precisely this difference, showing that the two poles are not "service" and "listening" but "distracting preoccupations" and a "disciple's attitude." The behaviour of the two sisters thus functions as a mirror in which the reader is invited to discern different attitudes towards Jesus.

Keywords: Luke 10:38–42, feminist criticism, gender approach

The Lucan episode of Martha and Mary (cf. Luke 10:38–42) does not cease to raise questions among scholars. It intrigues historians of the Early Church¹ who find themselves faced with the depiction of two female characters who are siblings. With the addition of their brother, Lazarus, they are also mentioned in the Fourth Gospel (cf. John 11:1–12:8). What is the relationship between Luke's account and that of John?² What tradition lies behind the two narratives? Is it possible to establish, through rigorous criteria, the underlying historical nucleus? The pericope has also attracted the attention of Lucan specialists because the encounter between the two sisters and Jesus belongs to the Third Evangelist's *Sondergut*³ and has been analysed according to the perspective of *Redaktionsgeschichte*.⁴ For some years now, it has been subjected to feminist criticism which has chosen it as a typical example to

¹ Cf. Ernst, *Martha from the Margins*.

² Cf. Koet – North, "The Image of Martha," 47–66. Walker, "Martha and Mary," 129–147.

³ I refer to Crimella, *Marta, Marta*, 135–234.

⁴ Cf. Brutscheck, *Die Maria-Marta-Erzählung*.

demonstrate the clear conflict between the patriarchal and matriarchal elements.⁵ It is precisely this perspective we have chosen for our article. First of all, we shall present a brief *status quaestionis* of the subject. Then, we shall offer our own point of view. We do not intend to provide a detailed exegetical analysis of the episode; simply to underline those elements that are fundamental for a reading according to the perspective of *gender*.

1. Feminist Approach

Although the *gender* perspective already boasts a good exegetical tradition, we are taking as our starting point a paper by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, standard-bearer of feminist interpretation. She has raised a series of typically methodological questions about the exegesis of the Lucan episode.⁶ She lays down four hermeneutical models: the *hermeneutics of suspicion* rather than that of acceptance; the *hermeneutics of critical remembrance*; the *hermeneutics of proclamation*; and the *hermeneutics of actualization and ritualization*. These heuristic criteria, distinct in theory, can interact reciprocally in the interpretative process.

First of all, Schüssler Fiorenza points out that the traditional reading of the pericope has operated according to an *abstractionist* process which has reduced the two sisters to theological principles and types, namely, “action” (Martha) and “contemplation” (Mary): in the Catholic tradition, this corresponds to two styles of life (active and contemplative), while, in the Protestant tradition, Martha is the model of hospitality and Mary the one who learns from Jesus. By contrast, the apologetic feminist interpretation counterposes Jesus’ readiness to include a woman among the disciples and the rabbinic regulations which excluded women. However – notes Schüssler Fiorenza – in this way there is a falling back into the classic opposition between Judaism and Christianity. The real problem is that, by placing in the centre the Lord portrayed in masculine terms, the event “is clearly androcentric, i.e. male centered. Moreover, Mary who receives positive approval is the silent woman, whereas Martha who argues for her interest is silenced.”⁷

The *hermeneutics of remembrance* focus on the place of women in the life of the historical Jesus rather than in the Lucan writings. The threefold presence of the title κύριος is a very strong clue with which to orient the reader: here we are not looking at the historical Jesus but rather at the glorious Christ. This perspective

⁵ I refer only to the recent summary works of Satoko Yamaguchi (*Mary and Martha*) and Jennifer S. Wyant (*Beyond Mary or Martha*).

⁶ Cf. Schüssler Fiorenza, “Theological Criteria,” 1–12.

⁷ Schüssler Fiorenza, “Theological Criteria,” 7.

considers the missionary movement of the primitive Church and the so-called house churches. The stress on *διακονία* implies the thought that there was already a clear separation of roles. The women act within the domestic walls while the men act in the public sphere. Moreover, a comparison with Acts 6:1–6 reveals a common vocabulary and the same opposition between “word” and “service”: “Luke not only divides the diakonia of the word from that at tables and assigns each to different groups, but also subordinates one to the other in Acts 6:1–6.”⁸ It follows, therefore, that the evangelical witness, at the end of the first century, is already showing a series of patriarchal restrictions with regard to female leadership within the Christian community. To be direct: “Luke 10:38–42 pits the apostolic women of the Jesus movement against each other and appeals to a revelatory word of the resurrected One in order to restrict women’s ministry and authority.”⁹

At the conclusion of her analysis, Schüssler Fiorenza looks for a biblical interpretation which takes up the feminist criticism in a radical way so as to demonstrate the androgynous and oppressive structures that are already operating in the text.

Schüssler Fiorenza’s analysis risks being a *petitio principii*: the hermeneutics of suspicion encourages distrust of the texts in order to seek clues which reveal something different. Moreover, the objective is to rediscover the forgotten story of the role of women in the primitive Church. However, that leads to a short circuit because it actually rejects the content of the inspired texts in favour of an hypothetical historical reconstruction in which there is absolute equality between the genders. What are lacking, however, are serious, historically probative clues.

2. Disciples Who Are Believers but Not Missionaries

Still within the feminist perspective, Marinella Perroni pays greater attention to the text and to the context of the Lucan episode.¹⁰ Her cogent article focuses on three problems: the *critica textus*, the parallelism between Luke 10:38–42 and Acts 6:1–7, and the meaning of words with the root *διακον*-.

A first series of observations concerns the textual criticism. Perroni concentrates on the expression *ὑπεδέξατο αὐτόν* (Luke 10:38) which knows three readings: a shorter one, which makes no mention of the place where Martha entertained Jesus, whereas the detail concerning the “house” returns in different ways in other, longer

⁸ Schüssler Fiorenza, “Theological Criteria,” 8.

⁹ Schüssler Fiorenza, “Theological Criteria,” 8.

¹⁰ Marinella Perroni (“Il Cristo maestro,” 57–78; “Discepoli di Gesù,” 197–240, especially 231–240; “Discepoli, ma non apostole,” 177–214, especially 182–189) has returned to the episode of Martha and Mary several times.

versions.¹¹ Despite the uncertainty of the external evidence, Perroni goes for the long variant εἰς τὸν οἶκον αὐτῆς, recalling that, for Luke, the *motif* of the house has a strong ecclesiological importance so that it can be a precise characterisation of the life of the Christian communities.

Moreover, for v. 39, Perroni prefers the reading with the proper name (παρακαθίσασα παρὰ τοὺς πόδας τοῦ Ἰησοῦ) to that with the title (παρακαθίσασα παρὰ τοὺς πόδας τοῦ κυρίου). The manuscript tradition is tangled and not at all easy to decide. Perroni chooses the proper name – favouring the important papyrus \mathfrak{P}^{75} – maintaining that Luke represents a stage in the process of Christological intensification which leads to the replacement of the proper name with the Christological title so as to resolve the conflict within the community on the basis of an authoritative sentence of the Risen Lord.

The third variant studied concerns the complex question of vv. 41–42. The manuscript tradition has transmitted four forms:

1. The first form omits the entire phrase in vv. 41b–42a and reads: Μάρθα Μάρθα, Μαριάμ. This reading is attested by some witnesses of the *Vetus latina*, by the *Vetus syra*, and by Ambrose and Possidius. We can also include in this form some manuscripts (among them, the *codex Bezae*) which read Μάρθα Μάρθα θορυβάζῃ, Μαριάμ...
2. The second form plays on the opposition between πολλά and ὀλίγων. It runs: Μάρθα Μάρθα, μεριμνᾷς καὶ θορυβάζῃ περὶ πολλά, ὀλίγων δέ ἐστιν χρεία. This reading is attested by Θ, by the *Peshitta*, by some *Bohairic* manuscripts, by the Armenian and Georgian versions, and by Origen.
3. The third form is attested by the more important uncials. It goes thus: Μάρθα Μάρθα, μεριμνᾷς καὶ θορυβάζῃ περὶ πολλά, ὀλίγων δέ ἐστιν χρεία ἢ ἐνός. We find this form in \mathfrak{P}^3 (of the VI–VII cents.), in κ (where χρεία is a later addition), B (with the inversion χρεία ἐστιν), in Origen, Basil, Jerome, *et alii*.
4. Finally, the fourth form is attested by two ancient and important papyri: \mathfrak{P}^{45} (3rd cent.) and Bodmer XIV [\mathfrak{P}^{75}] (dated between 175 and 225); also in W, Θ*, in some witnesses of the *Vetus latina*, of the *Sahidic* and the *Bohairic*. It says: Μάρθα Μάρθα, μεριμνᾷς καὶ θορυβάζῃ περὶ πολλά, ἐνός δέ ἐστιν χρεία.

Perroni chooses the third form (ὀλίγων δέ ἐστιν χρεία), claiming that it is very plausible; rather, that such an expression fits in fully with Jesus but could no longer be satisfactory for a later generation which intervened to change ὀλίγων into ἐνός.

The second series of observations concerns the similarity between Luke 10:38–42 and Acts 6:1–7. Between the episode of the Third Gospel and that of Acts there are not a few similarities of vocabulary as all the commentators observe. Perroni underlines the formal difference between an historical aetiology (the account of Acts) and a foundational parabolic story (the episode of Martha and Mary). Assuming some of

¹¹ There are two forms: εἰς τὴν οἰκίαν (\mathfrak{P}^{3vid} κ* C L Ξ 33. 579) + αὐτῆς (κ^{1a} C²) and εἰς τὸν οἶκον αὐτῆς (A D K P W Γ Δ Θ Ψ 070 *et al.*).

the events really happened, the account of the choosing of the Seven is reinterpreting the Christian story and depicting the first division of functions within the Early Church in terms of a conflict of leadership; the possible real details of the gospel episode are very secondary and the importance of the text is wholly in the way in which Jesus interprets the exercise of discipleship by Martha and Mary. Reading the gospel pericope in the light of that of Acts, Perroni asks why Marta's *διακονία* has to be focused on domestic chores, and why the discipleship of women is praised only when it is silent. In other words, the Lord's warning would not be about their discipleship but rather their leadership, that is, it would concern their ecclesial role.

At the basis of this second group of observations, there is, however, a third clarification: according to Perroni, within the Christian community, the terms with the root *διακον-* had already acquired a specific meaning. In other words, the substantive *διακονία* would not indicate "service" and, in particular, "table service," but would have a sense similar to Acts 6:2, referring to a ministry, that ministry instituted within the community and indicating internal leadership. That is, Luke would be concerned to affirm the centrality of the Word and, above all, of the Word as an apostolic ministry. In Acts 6, however, the conflict leads to an enlargement of the apostolic ministry whereas, in Luke 10, it is placed under his control.¹²

The conclusion of the article points the finger at Luke. Despite the tradition (also exegetical) which has described him as the evangelist of women, he portrays a feminine discipleship which is very far from the activity of evangelisation. For the Lucan church, the silence of women in the assembly would be a given: within the ecclesial groups, they are no longer dispensers of the Word insofar as theirs is a discipleship exclusively of listening. They are believers but not missionaries.

3. A Parable on Roles in the Church?

The debate that we have briefly summarised calls to be assessed. There are many elements in play: the *critica textus*, philology and social customs.

3.1. Critica Textus

We begin with textual criticism. Perroni insist¹³ on reconstructing a text which prefers some variants. However, we must question the arguments adduced. In connection

¹² The same idea is maintained by Barbara E. Reid (*Choosing the Better Part*, 144–162). A valuable overview is provided by Veronica Koperski ("Luke 10,38–42 and Acts 6,1–7," 517–544), where the author gives a critical review of the positions of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Adele Reinhartz, Turid Karlsen Seim, Barbara E. Reid, and Robert M. Price.

¹³ Cf. Perroni, "Il Cristo maestro," 60–74; Perroni, "Discepolo, ma non apostolo," 185–186.

with the *lectio longa* of v. 38 (εἰς τὸν οἶκον αὐτῆς), the reasons produced do not appear to be convincing. In the subject of textual criticism, it is necessary to proceed by sticking rigorously to the basic principles of the method: in addition to the external criteria (weight of manuscripts), the internal criteria have to be considered, and these can be summarised in two basic principles: *lectio brevior* and *lectio difficilior*, without forgetting that the reading held to be the oldest (and, therefore, original) must be able to explain the others. The bifurcation (εἰς τὸν οἶκον αὐτῆς and εἰς τὴν οἰκίαν [αὐτῆς]) appears to be a gloss of some zealous scribe.¹⁴

Much more uncertain, on the other hand, is the decision over the second variant, that of v. 39: how do we choose between the proper name Ἰησοῦ and the title κυρίου? Important witnesses read the proper name Ἰησοῦ (among these, $\mathfrak{P}^{45.75}$ A *et alii*), others read κυρίου (x D L *et alii*), B has been made a mess of (the codex was revised in the medieval period and the so-called *nomina sacra* abbreviated which makes it still more difficult to distinguish clearly). Naturally, the difference is not insignificant because the title gives the whole page a notably Christological stamp. We note two arguments different from those maintained by Perroni. The first is the evidence of the *codex Bezae* which has a certain tendency to replace the title κύριος with the name Ἰησοῦς (in Luke alone, we have observed the following cases: 7:13; 10:41; 13:15; 22:61). In our text, however, D offers us κυρίου, probably attesting a more ancient and original reading, whereas, in v. 41, it changes the title into the proper name. The second argument is that the title corresponds to the *lectio difficilior* in that the name of the person is more widespread. At any rate, the choice is delicate, and we have to reckon with a high level of uncertainty.

Equally thorny is the question regarding v. 42. We limit ourselves to discussing the two most important forms: ὀλίγων δέ ἐστιν χρεία ἢ ἐνός ἀνδ ἐνός δέ ἐστιν χρεία. The form with ὀλίγων is supported – as seen above – by important uncials and also by Origen who, in his *Fragmentum 171 in Lucam*, declares: “[Mary] has chosen in the Law the few things useful or has reduced them all to the single: “you shall love.” And concerning [the expression] “there is need of one thing only” (ἐνός δέ ἐστιν χρεία), it is necessary to interpret: “you shall love your neighbour as yourself.” On the other hand, concerning [the expression] “there is [need] of little” (ὀλίγων ἐστίν) through “you know the commandments: do not commit adultery, do not kill” and the rest.” Gordon D. Fee has tried to maintain the original nature of this *lectio*¹⁵ through an argument which could be summarised thus: he explains the agreement of the different versions (Armenian, Georgian, Syriac and *Bohairic*) around the formula ὀλίγων δέ ἐστιν χρεία as an “accidental agreement with regard to the variant”

¹⁴ As finely noted by Carlo M. Martini (*Il problema della recensionalità*, 81): “La lezione lunga, che appare in due modi diversi nella tradizione, fa pensare ad una glossa riverenziale del tipo di quella presente in Gs 2,3.”

¹⁵ Cf. Fee, “One Thing Is Needful,” 61–75. It is interesting to observe how almost all the commentaries that appeared before 1961 (year of the publication of \mathfrak{P}^{75}) follow this form.

among various manuscripts, and he interprets it as evidence of a clear misunderstanding of the more extended reading. Thus, the originality of this form is clear. How, then, do we explain the other reading? Fee's view is that the origin of this reading can be ascribed to the very subtle meaning of the form with ὀλίγων, something incomprehensible to many interpreters. Hence the conclusion that the longer reading is to be considered *lectio difficilior potior* and to be understood thus: "Martha, Martha, you are concerned and worried about *many* things. However, *few* things are really necessary or, if you wish, *one alone*; therefore, Mary has really chosen the good part." Finally, the fact that, at this point, P^{75} marks a bifurcation with respect to B is explained by Fee as the sign of a more ancient witness (lost today) which came between the papyrus and the uncial.

Fee's arguments are certainly not to be minimised; however, they do not appear to be wholly compelling. We believe that the weakness in Fee's demonstration lies in the insufficient consideration he gives to the important P^{75} . The text of the papyrus is shorter. In textual criticism, it is a good rule to recognise that a brachylogous reading could have been expanded precisely because it was difficult. This seems a perfect match to our case. Naturally, it is codex B and the whole of the tradition that maintains the form with ὀλίγων which pays the price.

It remains to say a few words about this form which presents itself as the *lectio difficilior*, or as the reading whose difficulty enables us to understand the origin of the easier readings. In fact, its very brevity could have been the cause of the successive explanatory interventions attested by the manuscript tradition. To justify this *lectio*, beyond the external reasons (P^{75} and other codices), it is essential to refer to the context.¹⁶ On the one hand, Martha is occupied with many things to do (πολλήν διακονίαν), on the other hand, she is on her own (μόνην) in serving (διακονεῖν). It seems quite natural to imagine that Jesus' response to Martha's question takes up this opposition. The contrast between πολλήν and μόνην (v. 40) prepares for the contrast between πολλά and ἐνός (vv. 41–42). Structural parallelism characterises both what the narrator says about Martha, as well as the word of Jesus. If we then consider more closely the response of the κύριος, and especially the expression ἐστιν χρεῖα, we can say with Jacques Dupont that "il ne s'agit pas de ce dont Jésus a besoin [...] mais du jugement à porter sur la tâche qui s'impose en ce moment: qu'est-ce qui est vraiment nécessaire?"¹⁷ At this point, it is not clear what sense the expression ὀλίγων could have: "cette leçon, qui s'intéresse aux besoins de Jésus, ne correspond pas au problème réellement posé."¹⁸

¹⁶ We follow here the lucid study of Jacques Dupont, "De quoi est-il besoin," 115–120, especially 118–119.

¹⁷ Dupont, "De quoi est-il besoin," 119.

¹⁸ Dupont, "De quoi est-il besoin," 119. This is the same reason adopted by the editorial committee of the *Greek New Testament* and summarised by Bruce M. Metzger (*A Textual Commentary*, 129): "Most of the other variations seem to have arisen from understanding ἐνός to refer merely to the provisions that Martha was preparing for the meal; the absoluteness of ἐνός was softened by replacing it with ὀλίγων."

It is pointless hiding that the readings discussed are complex and that a definitive decision is difficult to take. However, Perroni's arguments do not seem convincing for reasons that are essentially methodological. Thus, we prefer to support the standard text, sharing the reasons leading the editors to those choices.

3.2. The Debate About *διακονία*

The positions of the feminist exegetes have been extensively reviewed. Beyond the questions bound up with the hermeneutical assumptions of feminist exegesis, it is the philological detail that interests us. In fact, the whole construction has its cornerstone in the interpretation of the word *διακονία*, understood in the sense of "ecclesial ministry."

In 1990, John N. Collins published an essay devoted precisely to this subject.¹⁹ Collins takes his cue from the analysis of the New Testament. Then he searches the non-Christian sources, ending up with an investigation of the oldest patristic documents. His research leads to the understanding that the words with the root *διακον-* have, substantially, three contexts of usage. A first area is connected with the "message": thus, the substantive means "intermediary, spokesman, messenger (or courier)," the verb, "to be an intermediary, to carry out a commission, to deliver"; a second area is connected with "agency": the substantive means "representative, agent, go-between," the verb "to officiate, mediate"; a third area is connected with "service" (*attendance*): the substantive renders the idea of "attending," the verb, "to carry out a commission for someone, to go out to do something." Collins concedes that these meanings are approximate, for modern languages do not have an equivalent. Instead of the words, "*servant, to serve*," he prefers "*minister, ministry, to administer*."²⁰ From these considerations it follows that the Christian designation "deacon" to indicate one who exercises the ministry of the diaconate does not derive its meaning from table service but, rather, from service to people.²¹ Moreover, Collins emphasises that the use of the terms with this root focuses on the mode rather than on the status of a person who carries out the activity. Nor can it be said that these words express the notion of humility or servitude. On the contrary, they are

However, in view of the difficulties recalled above, the same editors gave this reading a grade C (considerable doubt), well expressing the labour of escaping from the problem.

¹⁹ Cf. Collins, *Diakonia. Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources*. This thesis was written at the beginning of the nineteen-seventies and had its viva in 1976. However, for various reasons, it appeared in print only 14 years later (cf. *Ibidem*, vii–xi). In the first part (pp. 3–72), he corrects what has been said and constantly repeated, namely, that the fundamental significance of the term *διακονία* is "table service." Collins thus takes his distance from Hermann W. Beyer's article of 1935 ("*διακονία*," 87–88) in which this meaning appeared to be the basic one. In 2014, John N. Collins updated his dossier with another publication: cf. Collins, *Diakonia Studies. Critical Issues in Ministry*.

²⁰ Cf. Collins, *Diakonia. Re-interpreting*, 335.

²¹ Cf. Collins, *Diakonia. Re-interpreting*, 243–244.

often applied to people who have roles of authority and prestige. From this analysis, it is clear that the edifice of feminist exegesis is built on sand. As Collins puts it: “feminist scholarship has been disparaging the Lukan *diakonia* of Martha as typically oppressive of a woman in a Christian community at a time when the scholarly indications are that *diakonia* needs to be read more subtly than this.”²²

The fundamental principle of interpretation is to read the words in their context. Since the words with the *διακον-* root do not have a determined or constant reference, the referent can be clarified only within each particular context. If we come to our text, the reader recognises that, in the story of Martha and Mary, the narrator is portraying the scene of a guest in the house of two women, one of whom is completely occupied in providing something, and the other is seated at the guest’s feet listening to what he is saying. Luke’s words are clear. It is the scene that has to be interpreted, not the words. To use Collins’s words again: “The scene is not and never was about ecclesial ministry.”²³ The *διακονία* is not an ecclesial office suppressed by Luke, as Schüssler Fiorenza and Perroni argue. Instead, it emphasises the need to listen to the word of the Lord, an attitude exemplified by Mary.

In the context of Luke 10:40, therefore, the term *διακονία* has to be understood as “table service.”²⁴ To the objection of those who would like to give to this lemma too a polysemic value we oppose the reasons expressed magisterially by Collins concerning the context of the episode. The introduction of a new semantic field regarding the ministry would require an allegorical reading which presents more problems than those which it intends to resolve. We, therefore, believe that the meaning of the term is clear.

3.3. Social Customs

We now pose ourselves some critical questions about the actions performed by the women: Martha’s welcome of the guest and Mary’s listening. Hence, in order to avoid reading these choices in the light of criteria foreign to Luke’s *Sitz-im-Leben*, it is necessary to make some details clear.

The verb *ὑποδέχομαι* (v. 39) indicates the warm welcome of someone within the space of one’s own house.²⁵ In connection with this hospitable act, there is a precise instruction of Jesus: in sharp contrast with the disciples’ discussion over who was the greatest, he reminds them that to welcome a little child corresponds to

²² Collins, “Did Luke Intend,” 109.

²³ Collins, “Did Luke Intend,” 110.

²⁴ Very similar conclusions are also reached by Anni Hentschel (*Diakonia im Neuen Testament*, 236–258 and 294–297).

²⁵ In the New Testament, only in Luke 10:38; 19:6; Acts 17:7; Jas 2:25 to indicate the entertainment of a guest. Cf. the memorable translation of Franz Zorell (*Lexicon graecum Novi Testamenti*, 1372): “sub (protectionem meam aut) tectum meum recipio, hospitem suscipio.”

welcoming him himself, and, in turn, the one who sent him (cf. Luke 9:48). Then, in the so-called missionary discourses, two different situations are evoked. Speaking to the Twelve, whom he has commissioned to proclaim the Kingdom of God, Jesus foresees the possibility that some may not receive his messengers (cf. Luke 9:5). The same scenario is repeated for the Seventy Two (cf. Luke 10:10) who are ordered to eat anything (as a sign of communion) in the cities where they have been welcomed (cf. Luke 10:8). Particularly significant, however, is the shared vocabulary between our text and the narrative of the beginning of the journey towards Jerusalem: as well as the indications about the road (cf. Luke 9:51.52.53.56) and the village (cf. Luke 9:52), there is also a reference to hospitality but with an inversion of significance. If, in fact, the Samaritan village did not receive Jesus (οὐκ ἐδέξαντο αὐτόν [Luke 9:53]), Martha, on the contrary, welcomed him as a guest: the counterpoint is clear. Thus, Martha's hospitality contrasts with the Samaritans' refusal and is in line with the indications given to the disciples: in welcoming Jesus, the woman is also creating space for his mission.

In the face of these comparisons, Martha's hospitable welcome appears to be entirely positive. However, we have to ask how the ancient world and society in the time of Jesus regarded the fact that a woman received a man within the walls of her house, and, moreover, a man on his own. More precisely: what is the personal encyclopaedia of the reader in the face of such an action? Does it arouse approval, scandal, surprise, suspicion? For example, François Bovon writes: "On voit mal, dans le judaïsme, une femme gérer ses biens, diriger sa maison et surtout y accueillir un homme."²⁶ This observation is of the greatest importance and has notable consequences. If, indeed, the woman's action were in contradiction to the social customs of the time, then the reader would take a certain distance from Martha, although asking about the meaning of Jesus' action. We have to ask, however, if Bovon's claim is true or not. First of all, the text is silent about some details: for example, it does not

²⁶ Bovon, *L'Évangile selon saint Luc*, 101. Unfortunately, François Bovon does not support his statement with texts. The only citation he makes (4 *Macc* 18:7) does not refer so much to a man's visit as to virginity. Pierre Grelot (*La condition de la femme*, 112) also asks if the entertainment of Jesus can be considered entirely natural in a society in which the meeting of men and women was severely regulated. Grelot refers explicitly to the work of Joachim Jeremias but he paints a picture that is much more nuanced and variegated. Jeremias (cf. *Jerusalem zur Zeit Jesu*, 232–250) distinguishes, first of all, between cities (where the rules were stricter) and the country (where life was simpler and economic conditions less comfortable). There is nothing strange about Jesus' welcome by Martha (pp. 29 and 235), by contrast with the detail, absolutely unparalleled, that some women followed him (cf. Luke 8:2–3) (p. 250). Jeremias (and others in his wake) quotes a passage of Philo of Alexandria: "The domestic life and diligence at the hearth is appropriate for women. [...] Therefore, a woman should concern herself only with the management of the house (οἰκονομία)" (Philo, *De specialibus legibus* 3,170–171). The question arises as to whether there is not a sexual background to the scene (a man with two women competing for his attention). The exclusion of this horizon seems to be the preoccupation of some manuscripts which have introduced some glosses (εἰς τὴν οἰκίαν [αὐτῆς] or εἰς τὸν οἶκον αὐτῆς).

speak of another male character.²⁷ Further, Martha's state is not made clear: was she unmarried? A widow? Did the two sisters live together on their own? The pericope does not satisfy this curiosity.

Investigation of the book of Acts sheds light on our expression: for a few days, Peter is the guest of Simon, the tanner, at Jaffa (cf. Acts 9:43; 10:32), then of Cornelius (cf. Acts 10:48). At Philippi, by the river, Paul and Luke meet a woman called Lydia who invites the two of them to go to her house, pressing them to accept her invitation (cf. Acts 16:14–15). At Thessalonica, Paul and Silas are guests in the house of Jason (cf. Acts 17:7). At Corinth, the apostle settles in the house of Aquila and Priscilla (cf. Acts 18:3). At Caesarea, Paul and Luke repair to the house of Philip, one of the Seven (cf. Acts 21:8). This brief review reveals that the hosts are often men; however, there are also some women. In particular, the episode at Philippi (cf. Acts 16:15) contains expressions which retrace the instructions to the Seventy Two (cf. Luke 10:5–7). Lydia invites Paul and Luke to stay (μένετε) with her, exactly as Jesus commanded the disciples to stay (μένετε) in the houses (Luke 10:7); the woman of Philippi bade the itinerant preachers enter her dwelling (εἰσελθόντες εἰς τὸν οἶκον), just as Jesus laid down for the preachers (Luke 10:5). There is, however, a problem of interpretation: the text of Acts records that Lydia was baptised with all her family (καὶ ὁ οἶκος αὐτῆς). If the metaphorical function of the term οἶκος is quite clear (it refers, that is, to the family), it is more difficult to understand why Luke speaks of *her* (αὐτῆς) house.²⁸ What is the juridical position of this woman to be entitled thus? In all probability, she is a widow who, after her husband's death, has become the usufructuary of his property and so mistress of the house and head of the family.²⁹ These details (particularly the last) show that Bovon's observation is floating in mid-air. Even if we are not aware of Martha's juridical position, we cannot conclude that the reader considers Jesus' welcome by the woman as something suspect. On the contrary, such hospitality is consistent with and part of the social customs of the time and of the surrounding culture.

What, then, is the position of Mary, sitting at the feet of one whom the narrator calls "Lord"? The verb employed (παρακαθεσθῆισα) is a *hapax legomenon* that indicates an action with a decided reflexive sense which can render: "she put herself to sit near, she sat herself down,"³⁰ close to Jesus' feet. According to the information available to us, it was normal to sit on the ground (cf. Luke 7:32; 18:35; 22:55); teachers were seated (cf. Matt 26:55) as were those learning lessons from a master

²⁷ Luke's silence is particularly striking in the light of the Fourth Gospel which speaks of Lazarus, the brother of Martha and Mary (John 11:2.5).

²⁸ In fact, he always refers to the house (and, therefore, to the family) in relation to the man: cf. Acts 10:2; 11:14 (Cornelius); 16:31 (the jailer); 18:8 (Crispus).

²⁹ Cf. the discussion with references to studies and papyrus documents in Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts*, 783.

³⁰ Blass – Debrunner – Rehkopf, *Grammatik*, § 101, n. 37 translates: "die sich daneben gesetzt hatte."

(cf. Luke 2:46); the judge and the sovereign sat on a chair or a raised throne as a symbol of their authority; this is also how God is pictured who “sits on the cherubim” (Ps 79:2^{LXX}). If, then, the expression is polyvalent and employed in different contexts, it is the explanation of Mary’s position “at the feet” which serves as a key for the understanding. The feet are a symbol of a person’s authority or power³¹: one prostrates oneself before the healer in order to express a prayer (cf. Luke 8:35.41; 17:16), and people offer their property, placing it at the disposition of the community led by the apostles (cf. Acts 4:35.37; 5:2.10). There is, however, an expression that illuminates our text: during his speech before the Jews of Jerusalem, Paul says that he was educated “at the feet of Gamaliel” (παρὰ τοὺς πόδας Γαμαλιήλ) in the strictest provisions of the Law (Acts 22:3). The apologetic context makes explicit reference to the time of Saul’s formation and so to his apprenticeship as a Pharisee. The sitting position does not only describe the posture of the pupil at the feet of his master; more profoundly, it expresses the veneration for the Torah which impels the student to adopt this attitude. The parallel clarifies our passage: we understand that Luke does not intend just to communicate information about Mary’s posture; by means of that, the evangelist informs us about the woman’s devotion to her Master and shows her attention to Jesus’ teaching. In brief: Mary has the posture of the disciple.

If, then, the expression employed by Luke describes Mary’s behaviour quite precisely, we must ask how such an action was perceived. In the texts, the disciple-relationship is always established between a teacher and a student, that is, between two persons of the male sex. Here, instead, it is a woman who is assuming the disciple’s posture.³² Although it is not at all easy, around this question, to reconstruct exactly the social context of that time, on account of the scant documentation available to us, we can bring to light some elements.³³ The most interesting text appears to us to be the tractate of the *Sifre Devarim*:

“«And you shall teach these things to your sons» (Dt 11,19); to your sons and not to your daughters” are the words of Rabbi Jose ben Aqiba (46,1).

³¹ Cf. Bergmeier, “πούς,” 343–345.

³² Dupont (“Marta e Maria,” 220) writes: “Siamo in un ambiente giudaico: mai un rabbino avrebbe accettato che una donna prendesse davanti a lui l’atteggiamento di un discepolo. Un rabbino non insegna ad una donna.”

³³ Leaving Luke’s text, we find the testimony of the Fourth Gospel; the detail about the amazement of the disciples before Jesus who is speaking with the Samaritan woman expresses well the current climate (cf. John 4:27). Moreover, Paul, whose *milieu* is certainly different, witnesses to a similar position (cf. 1 Cor 14:35) which makes clear the position of women at that time. A passage of *m.Avot* attests the same sensibility: “Yose ben Johanan of Jerusalem said: «Let your house be open to all; let the poor be like children in your house and do not have much conversation with women»” (1,5). For the condition of women in the time of Jesus, cf. the study of Tal Ilan, (*Jewish Women in Greco-Roman Palestine*, 190–204) on whom we are depending in great measure.

This clarification is interesting in that it refers to Deut 11:19, the second of the three texts of the prayer of the *shema*. The reference to sons is also present in the first text cited (Deut 6:7), but it is the second (Deut 11:19) which is interpreted by the *Sifre Devarim* with an explicit reference to the distinction between young men and young women. There is also a discussion among two famous teachers of the Tannaitic period concerning the appropriateness of teaching the Torah to one's own daughters. On the one hand, Ben Hazzai maintains the need, rather, the obligation to pass on the Torah to young women. He says:

A man is obliged to teach his own daughter the Torah so that if she drinks she knows that her merit is suspended (*m.Sota* 3,4).

He was opposed by Rabbi Eliezer who maintained the opposite:

One who teaches his own daughter the Torah is like one who teaches her an obscenity (*m.Sota* 3,4).

We must not forget that the discussion concerns daughters without specifying their age. However, it is reasonable to suppose it refers to young girls who have not yet reached the age of puberty (which usually coincided with marriage). Furthermore, the setting is clearly domestic, relating to the transmission of the tradition of faith typical of Judaism. From these texts, we cannot conclude that women were excluded from all forms of instruction or that they were ignorant of the Torah and of the laws that they themselves had to keep. Rather, we have indications that there was an instruction of daughters in the family environment, probably by the parents, in particular the mother. Otherwise, the place of women was within the walls of the home, concerned with everyday tasks and the education of the children. In fact, in the Jewish writings, there is no suggestion that women took part in the masters' schools or discussed with them. The numerous examples we have always and only record male figures. No contemporary text reveals that women took part in schools or were in the *entourage* of famous masters as disciples.

In the face of this information, we understand that the detail provided by Luke about Mary turns out to be suspicious to say the least. The woman's behaviour is alienating, contravening the rules imposed by the culture of the time. Richard A. Culpepper's assessment is to the point: "By sitting at Jesus' feet, Mary is acting like a male. She neglects her duty to assist her sister in the preparation of the meal, and by violating a clear social boundary she is bringing shame upon her house."³⁴ In narrative terms, we can speak of defamiliarisation and alienation: the information about Martha's

³⁴ Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke," 231.

hospitable welcome and the explanation of Mary's *status* (she too a woman, and sister into the bargain) have given rise to an expectation which is met with a surprise.

We must add another clarification.³⁵ With regard to Martha, Luke introduces an enigmatic term which increases the tension: the verb *περισπάζομαι* (Luke 10:40) is a *hapax legomenon*, used in the imperfect with the clear sense of duration. It has a double value: on the one hand, it signifies "to be completely occupied, to be heavily overburdened," on the other hand, "to be distracted, diverted." The difference between the two meanings is fine but decisive. Luke is playing on the subtle ambivalence, creating a polysemic effect. There are two consequences of this rhetorical artifice: either the ambiguity is later removed during the account or else the ambivalence remains. If the reader is forced to choose (between the two meanings), he retains the memory of the interpretation which he has discarded but remains possible. In our case, if, on the one hand, the narrator states that Martha "is very occupied," on the other, he means to suggest that this occupation takes the form of "distraction." On the intradiegetic level, the alienation caused by Mary's behaviour points in the direction of choosing the first meaning (to be occupied) and rejecting the second (to be distracted) as inappropriate. However, on the extradiegetic level, the effect is much more variegated: Martha is characterised as a person occupied and/or distracted without the reader's being able to opt for one or the other meaning. The ambiguity remains.

Conclusion

Our brief analysis has been limited to a review of the studies and a clarification of some particulars essential for the interpretation of the pericope according to the perspective of gender.

On the level of the story, everything hangs on the difference between the behaviour of Martha and that of Mary. Martha welcomes the guest and behaves according to the social rules of the time. Mary, on the other hand, breaks these same rules, thus creating an alienating situation which provokes Martha's reaction and her intervention with Jesus. The reader, however, is let in on a series of data of which the characters are unaware. He understands that Mary's posture and attitude are appropriate precisely because they correspond to the attitude of a disciple. Undoubtedly, what we have here is an alienation with respect to the rules of the time, but, precisely for this reason, the reader is invited to think and discern, placing the social customs represented by hospitality on one side of the balance and, on the other, the listening to the word. Moreover, by means of the polysemic verb *περιεσπάζω*, the reader

³⁵ I refer to Crimella, "À propos de *περισπάζομαι* en Luc 10, 40."

grasps the subtle irony of the description of Martha as well as the paradoxical nature of her request.

Jesus' response to Martha leaves no room for doubt as to the choice to be made, but, at the same time, indicates that a welcome in the name of (socially appropriate) cultural codes is inadequate and must, therefore, evolve towards a dimension more suited to discipleship. Then, the open finale, frustrating the reader's desire to know how things ended up, obliges him to focus on the behaviour of the two women, to recognise their difference and so to decide where to place himself. The reader can only find himself mirrored in these opposed dynamics with regard to the one whom the narrator calls ὁ κύριος. This identification has traditionally taken place through standardisation on an allegorising base: the two sisters have probably become the proverbial figures of action and contemplation in a radical opposition which has imposed on the text a set of problems and a language foreign to it. Instead, what appears more substantial and important is the difference between careful listening, the sign of a disciple's attitude, and a whole series of distractions which impede a real welcome. The episode lays stress on precisely this difference, showing that the two poles are not "service" and "listening" but "distracting preoccupations" and a "disciple's attitude." The behaviour of the two sisters thus functions as a mirror in which the reader is invited to discern different attitudes towards Jesus. The women's social rules of behaviour are opened to debate in the name of authentic welcome or listening to the Lord.

Translated by Michael Tait

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