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There Was an Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe: Was it Martha?

Jane A. Terlesky

In her book *A New Perspective on Mary and Martha*, Mary Stromer Hanson titles her first chapter, “Why Mary and Martha? Again?” and asks the question: “Frankly, is there anything new to say about the sisters?” The sisters, she writes, have become cliché. The vision of them “squabbling over the kitchen work” has relegated them “to a sort of women’s ghetto from which men prefer to excuse themselves.”¹ Warren Carter (a man who does not excuse himself from the story and who, in any case, releases Martha from the kitchen) titles his article, “Getting Martha Out of the Kitchen: Luke 10:38-42 *Again*.”² Perhaps we have to return to the story of Martha and Mary in Luke 10:38-42 “again and again” because not only do the “tensions embedded in this story raise more questions and interpretive problems than any other Lukan text involving women,”³ but also because we still simply need to listen more to Martha herself. This “again and again” exegesis responds to the discomfort perpetually caused by this story and, it can be argued, is inspired by Martha’s continued calling out to us, like the child in Musa Dube’s *Fifty Years of Bleeding* who “sings out from her grave, telling her story.”⁴ This paper asks the question: even now, after centuries of interpretation, have we still not heard Martha?

Feminist interpretations of this pericope have gone through stages, each endeavoring to hear, or at least recover, a positive message for women. Early feminist exegesis saw this text as liberating for women, a sort of “feminist manifesto of the rights of women to theological education,”⁵ as Jesus seems to be sanctioning Mary to leave the domestic realm and join the men at his feet. Later interpretations acknowledged that celebrating Mary’s apparent release from

¹ Mary Stromer Hanson, *A New Perspective on Mary and Martha: Do Not Preach Mary and Martha Again Until You Read This!* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2013), 3-4.

Loveday Alexander also refers to a ghetto when she writes, “To insist that this is a story ‘about women’ is to risk confining it to the ghetto: ‘women’s stories,’ notoriously, are felt to have nothing to teach men,” in “Sisters in Adversity: Retelling Martha’s Story,” *A Feminist Companion to Luke*, eds. Amy-Jill Levine with Marianne Blickenstaff (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 213.

² Warren Carter, “Getting Martha Out of the Kitchen: Luke 10:38-42. Again,” *The Catholic Bible Quarterly* 58 (1996), 264. (*italics mine*)

³ Barbara Reid, *Choosing the Better Part? Women in the Gospel of Luke* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 144.

⁴ Musa W. Dube, “Fifty Years of Bleeding,” in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*, ed. Musa W. Dube (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature and Geneva: WCC Publications, 2001), 11.

⁵ Jane D. Schaberg and Sharon H. Ringe, “The Gospel of Luke,” in *Women’s Bible Commentary, 3rd Edition*, eds. Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 507.

domestic prison ended up throwing Martha and her hospitality under the bus. These interpretations seek to resurrect Martha from her kitchen duties and show her more accurately as not “just” a domestic server but also as a proclaimer of the word and leader of a movement.

Elizabeth Shüssler Fiorenza takes an imaginative journey to reconstruct the text from Martha’s point of view. In order to do this, she abandons the text altogether and creates a monologue for Martha. In this “creative actualization,” Martha is not anxious and Jesus says nothing about Mary. Martha is a leader, just as good as all the men. But does the question of androcentric dualism remain? Can Fiorenza only rescue Martha by defining Martha as successful in patriarchal terms? Fiorenza criticizes feminist interpretations that aim at a positive view of women in this pericope as unknowingly perpetuating “the androcentric dualism and patriarchal prejudice inherent in the original story.”⁶ But has Fiorenza done the same thing? Has she rescued Martha the leader from patriarchal prejudice against “women’s work” only to still throw that part of Martha, and the population of women who serve, under the bus again? This interpretation, and those like it, are vitally important for women. They argue successfully that women were, are, and can be leaders in a patriarchal world. But we ask the question again: whether-or-not she frets, whether-or-not she serves an ordinary meal or the Eucharistic meal, have we fully heard Martha?⁷

There is much contemporary scholarship that gets Martha out of the kitchen. Warren Carter writes that, “conventional analyses see Martha as the harried hostess performing her kitchen duties without help from Mary. Several indicators in the context and in the presentation of the scene indicate this to be an unlikely reading which misconstrues the whole pericope.”⁸ For Carter, Martha is complaining that Mary has left her to *minister* alone, not to serve a Sunday supper alone.⁹ Carter’s point is that this pericope not only shows us that women were leaders in the early Christian communities, but tells us, more importantly, how to approach leadership – *as partners*.¹⁰ Anxiety is a problem for *all* disciples – we must be focused on the one thing. Jesus is not rebuking Martha but is *answering her prayer*, when he instructs her to listen like Mary. But the text itself doesn’t say that. The text admonishes Martha. So we ask again, have we heard Martha?

Loveday Alexander writes:

Jesus’ final words, however we read the text, implicitly denigrate Martha’s activities. If Mary has chosen the ‘good’ portion, Martha’s must be at least ‘not good’, if not downright ‘bad’; if only ‘one thing is needful’ (v. 42), then by implication what Martha is doing is, perhaps even more devastatingly, unnecessary...the story encapsulates an all-too-familiar double-think, whereby a dominant social group simultaneously assigns certain necessary but unpopular tasks to a helot class and denigrates their importance.¹¹

⁶ Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “A Feminist Critical Interpretation for Liberation: Martha and Mary: Lk. 10:38-42,” *Religion and Intellectual Life* 3 no. 2 (Winter 1986), 33.

⁷ Jane D. Schaberg and Sharon H. Ringe agree with Fiorenza, writing that Luke is a dangerous gospel for women – there is an agenda here to silence women (*Women’s Bible Commentary*, 493-516).

⁸ Carter, “Getting Martha Out,” 266.

⁹ *Ibid*, 275.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 276.

¹¹ Loveday C. Alexander, “Sisters in Adversity: Retelling Martha’s Story,” in *A Feminist Companion to Luke*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine with Marianne Blickenstaff (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 199.

Alexander argues that any attempt to admire Martha’s work in this story “founders on the structure of the story itself” because Jesus clearly approves Mary, not Martha, in the actual text.¹² Alexander understands that women cannot buy into “the traditional male devaluation of ‘women’s work’ as inferior or unnecessary.” She writes that Martha needs practical help.¹³ But she wonders if we can help Martha without abandoning the text. Agreeing with Fiorenza and Carter, Alexander argues that Martha’s service is certainly not the thing that is the problem, it is her *anxiety* that is the problem. Martha is not single-minded. Hers is the story of the hostess who misses the point of her service. When Jesus comes to dinner, we must pay attention. Alexander honors Martha and women’s work. She sets out to give Martha practical help. But has she succeeded? Is telling anxious Martha she just needs to pray or focus like telling someone who is starving they just need to eat? What if the patriarchal system itself is the problem? And what if all these arguments spring specifically from it?

One recent interpretation that offers a new look at the geography of the text and the location of the sisters within it offers an interesting new perspective on the pericope. Mary Stromer Hanson suggests that interpreters’ imaginations regarding this story may have been constricted by preconceptions about women: “of course Mary and Martha had to be bickering over kitchen work. What else do women do?”¹⁴ But the Greek doesn’t support this view. For Hanson, the Greek text supports the interpretation that Martha and Jesus are alone - the identification of Martha as having a sister named Mary who also sat does not necessarily mean Mary is sitting there now. No house is necessarily implied – Martha could be meeting Jesus on the road or in any public or private place. Agreeing with exegetes cited above, Martha’s receiving of Jesus implies receiving both his person and his mission, not necessarily only welcoming him to serve a meal in her home. Her service implies involvement in a “combination of ministries.” Martha is being pulled apart over many things – she is overburdened. And she is not overburdened just at this moment, she is in a “long-term state of emotional stress caused by many responsibilities.”¹⁵ And this is where Hanson’s biggest departure from previous interpretations happens: in this pericope, Mary does not speak because Mary is not there!¹⁶ Hanson claims that Mary “has regularly deserted Martha over a period of time.”¹⁷ Mary is an evangelist who is traveling, perhaps with the 72 referred to in Luke 10:1-23. Martha assumes Jesus knows where Mary is and can therefore tell her to come home to help her. The verb for help used here is used only one other time, in Romans 8:26, when “the Spirit *helps* us in our weakness.” Clearly, Martha is not asking for help to finish a quick kitchen task.

Hanson echoes Barbara Reid when she points out that Mary is doing what is good for Mary, and Martha what is right for Martha. In *Choosing the Better Part*, Barbara Reid makes just this point: what service we perform in our Christian communities should be decided on the basis of our gifts, not our gender.¹⁸ Understanding, like Fiorenza, that if we “teach and preach Luke’s stories uncritically” they will continue “to reinforce patriarchal role divisions,” Reid engages in

¹² Alexander, “Sisters in Adversity,” 201-202.

¹³ Alexander, “Sisters in Adversity,” 202.

¹⁴ Hanson, *A New Perspective*, 25.

¹⁵ Hanson, *A New Perspective*, 35.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 36.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 30.

¹⁸ Reid, *Choosing the Better Part*, 162.

what she calls “the difficult task of reinterpreting the text from a feminist perspective, reading against Luke’s intent” to silence women.”¹⁹ It is interesting to note here that where Hanson found manuscripts that did not include the words “into her house” as liberating for Martha, Reid finds manuscripts that omit these words as having the motive of “downplaying Martha’s role as host of a house church.”²⁰ In Reid’s understanding, Martha is not burdened *by* her many ministerial duties, but *about* them. And her distress is caused by those who believe she should be leaving her ministerial duties to men. She is being “pulled away from her diaconal ministry by those who disapprove.”²¹ Martha’s sister Mary, and, by inference, her sisters in the community, have left her to minister alone, not because they have gone out on missionary travels of their own, as Hanson suggests, but because they have given in to pressure to conform and be silent.²²

All interpreters of this pericope take some license with their interpretation. The pericope is, after all, only 5 short verses and in it, Jesus seems to be turning his teaching about service on its head. These departures from the text serve as a warrant for the present writer to take a journey of her own, using the scholarship and insight provided by the many exegetes cited above. It is taken as a given that women are as capable of serving as leaders in the church as are men and that Martha was a leader in the early church. It is taken as a given that serving in a state of anxiety is not helpful or healthful, either for the person serving or for those who are being served.²³ It is taken as a given that “Jesus came to give life in all its fullness.”²⁴ What is not taken as a given in this interpretation is that the problem of Martha’s anxiety is Martha’s alone.

Perhaps Luke didn’t, or couldn’t, hear the rest of the story. “Women have a distinctive way of viewing reality that is different from men’s and unique to them,” writes Teresa Okure.²⁵ And so perhaps Luke, intentionally or not, simply left something out of this story that features women. In a patriarchal world that does not value the “menial” tasks it assigns to women or even take seriously the position women are sometimes put in as mothers (or servers like Martha), we have funny Mother Goose rhymes like this:

*There was an old woman who lived in a shoe.
She had so many children, she didn't know what to do.
She gave them some broth without any bread;
And whipped them all soundly and put them to bed.*

¹⁹ Barbara Reid, “The Gospel of Luke: Friend or Foe of Women Proclaimers of the Word?,” *The Catholic Bible Commentary* 78 no. 1 (2016), 1. In this 2016 article, Reid pulls back somewhat from her interpretation of women in Luke as silenced, finding that “once Jesus begins his public ministry....both male and female followers have little to say until the final chapters.”

²⁰ Reid, *Choosing the Better Part*, 156.

²¹ Reid, *Choosing the Better Part*, 157.

²² *Ibid*, 158.

²³ Koperski, “Women and Discipleship,” 196. Koperski writes, “Anxiety, even when it seems understandable, is not a healthy condition in which to live one’s life.” It should be noted that the only women Koperski sites as not being bothered by this pericope are young undergraduates and nuns – women who have not yet carried or who do not carry traditional female responsibilities in a domestic setting. (In other words, women who are not the population for whom this pericope typically “gets under the skin.”)

²⁴ Teresa Okure, S.H.C.J., “Reading from this Place: Some Problems and Prospects,” in *Reading from this Place, Vol. 2: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective*, eds. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 65.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 59.

We recite this rhyme, and ones like it, while bouncing children on our knee. The image of a harried woman who has grown old before her time (truly old women do not have little children of their own still at home) and who is living alone in a room the size of a shoe with too many children to feed is...fun. The story of sisters squabbling is...typical. Do we hear the woman in the shoe? Do we listen to Martha?

It can be argued that Jesus *does* listen to Martha. Jesus says, “*Martha, Martha.*” The double vocative stops us. It would stop Martha. It indicates an intimacy and focus on Martha and on whatever state she is in emotionally. An intimate double vocative like this is not dismissive. It is, instead, a gripping connector between two people – one who is saying, by employing the double vocative, “I’m listening. I am focused at this moment only on you,” and one who is the recipient of this focus. Mary and the other disciples, if they are there, can wait, just as Jairus and his dying daughter waited while Jesus spoke with and healed the hemorrhaging woman in all three of the synoptic Gospels (Mark 5:25-34; Matthew 9:18-22; Luke 8:41-48). With just these two words, Jesus communicates to Martha, “I hear you, I *see* you, I’m with you.”²⁶ The text confirms this when Jesus *names* her condition: you are troubled, distracted, anxious.

Hanson made an important point when she argued that Martha’s emotional state is one that is intense and ongoing. Martha’s burdens have been piling up to the point where she appeals to Jesus himself. The text gives us the clue that no one else has heard Martha, just as no one bothers to understand why a prematurely aged mother would beat her starving children in the Mother Goose rhyme. Unlike the male disciples (if they are there) and even Mary herself (if she is there), Jesus stops and listens. Could it be that we do not have to add any more dialogue or action to the biblical text in order to understand it in a life-giving way for *all*? Could it be that all we need to do is hold the camera on Jesus and Martha for just a little longer instead of cutting the scene right after Jesus’ remarks to Martha about Mary? (As effective as that literary device is.) Can it be imagined that Jesus makes a point just by forcing everyone to finally stop what they are doing and focus on Martha? And focus, in the end, on themselves and the part they may have played in driving her to such a state of distress? In the Gospel of John, Jesus does just this when he “bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground” in silence, forcing the scribes and Pharisees who brought the woman caught in adultery to focus on themselves and understand that they, too, are not without sin.²⁷ If what Martha is doing needs to get done and if what she is doing cannot be done alone, then there is reason for her to be anxious. Is Martha’s state of distress perhaps the consequence of a system that traditionally has not heard women? And in not hearing, has not helped?

This is a different interpretation from Fiorenza’s and other feminist interpretations that rightly aim to celebrate women’s leadership and that accurately accuse a patriarchal system for attempting to suppress it. But even though this accusation is well founded, Luke’s trying to silence women *then* does not explain fully why the story still gets under our skin *today*. We do

²⁶ Barbara Reid, “Do You See this Woman?: A Liberative Look at Luke 7:36-50 and Strategies for Reading Other Lukan Stories Against the Grain,” in *A Feminist Companion to Luke*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine with Marianne Blickenstaff (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 106-120. Reid’s argument on *seeing* is taken from this essay.

²⁷ Gospel of John 8:1-11, *NRSV*.

not rescue the symbolic Martha who even now calls out to us by making her successful in male terms, insisting that she too can do a man’s job.²⁸ This, we hope by now, is self-evident. We rescue that symbolic Martha by *abandoning* the paradigm of patriarchy.²⁹ We shouldn’t *have* to make her into a leader in order to rescue her. We need to rescue her *specifically as a woman in a patriarchal world*, an identity that inevitably invites the expectation that she will serve others in tasks that world defines as *menial*. We rescue her by honoring her where she is and by honoring the jobs that she performs, *especially* the “menial” jobs. And, in hearing and honoring her where she is, we change the world.

Martha continues to call out to us because, unlike Jesus himself, we do not hear her. We are part of Martha’s problem. Whether we are privileged women who work for pay, privileged women who do not work for pay, or especially, severely underprivileged women who are trying to scrape together a meal for their family in a slum or a shoe, that part of us that is expected in a patriarchal system to perform what *it* labels “menial” tasks, will call out, begging to be heard. And it will call out to re-define what is valuable.³⁰ The call is for a balanced world in which the community, not just Martha alone, needs to make an adjustment. It does not help us to “blame” Martha entirely for her anxiety, just as it does not help us to blame any marginalized group entirely for the problems it faces as a result of a system that marginalizes it.³¹ Perhaps we can rescue the old lady in the shoe, and those aspects of a woman’s life that conform, to a greater or lesser degree depending on social location, to gendered roles that are neither helped nor heard in a patriarchal society. Perhaps Mother Goose, in 2017, could re-write her rhyme like this:

*There was an old woman who lived in a shoe.
She had more on her plate than one woman could do.
She pointed this out in a bit of a huff,
And everyone ceded enough was enough.*

²⁸ It is understood that Martha’s story does not typically disturb those women who have not yet or do not “serve” in a domestic setting. Young undergraduate women and vowed religious do not complain about the Lukan story. See footnote #23.

²⁹ Mary Ann Tolbert, “Reading for Liberation,” in *Reading from this Place, Vol. 1: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States*, eds. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Press, 1995), 263-276. The concept of “reading for liberation” against the patriarchal paradigm is taken from Tolbert’s article.

³⁰ Okure, “Reading from this Place,” 58. Okure writes that, “patriarchy is a sin against God and humanity” for the very reason that it devalues women, who are equal in God’s eyes.

³¹ Tolbert, “Reading for Liberation,” 271.

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