

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Scripture* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_scripture-01.php

Books and Periodicals Received

From Burns Oates and Washbourne, Ltd. :

Knox, *Old Testament*, Vol. I, *Genesis-Esther*. 1949.

Lebreton, S.J., *The Life and Teaching of Jesus Christ*, 2 Vols. in one, Reprint, 1949.

Knox, *On Englishing the Bible*

From the Catholic University of America :

Heidt, *Angelology of the Old Testament*.

From St. Pierre de Sion, Jerusalem :

Evangelium secundum Matthaeum in a Hebrew translation, edited by Père Banchet, O.C.D.

From Messrs. Delachaux et Niestlé, Neuchatel and Paris :

Fischer, *La Loi ou Les Cinq Livres de Moïse*.

From the Tyndale Press :

Aalders, *The Problem of the Book of Jonah*.

Analecta Lovaniensia Biblica et Orientalia :

Jacquemin, *La portée de la troisième demande du "Pater."*

Massaux, *L'Influence littéraire de l'Évangile de Saint Matthieu, sur la Didache*.

Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Washington, D.C., U.S.A.

Verbum Domini, Biblical Institute, Rome, Italy.

Estudios Bíblicos, Madrid, Spain.

Cultura Bíblica, Segovia, Spain.

Pax, Prinknash Abbey, Gloucester.

Melita Theologica, Royal University, Malta.

Collationes Brugenses, Episcopal Seminary, Bruges, Belgium.

Theologisch-praktische Quartal Schrift, Linz, Austria.

THE TWO SISTERS

TEXT

ST. LUKE x, 38-42

³⁸ While they were on a journey, He entered a certain village. And a woman named Martha welcomed Him into her house.

³⁹ She had a sister called Mary who, sitting at the Lord's feet, kept listening to what He was saying.

⁴⁰ But Martha was worried with the many tasks of service. So she came up and said: "Lord, do You not mind that my sister has been leaving me to do the work of serving by myself? Please tell her to help me."

and anxious about too many things, ⁴² whereas there is need of but few, or even of one. Mary has chosen the better portion, and it must not be taken away from her."

³⁹ Who: *he kai*, generally translated "who also," with the implication that only after having worked did Mary sit down. But *kai* after a relative pronoun is a Graecism which should not be translated *also* or *even*. So elsewhere in St. Luke: whom (*hous kai*) He called Apostles vi, 13; who (*hos kai*) forgives sins vii, 49; who (*hoi kai*) despoiled him x, 30.

⁴⁰ Worried. The same verb occurs in a papyrus of B.C.² (OP 743, 36): "owing to my worries."

Has been leaving: *kateleipen* (imperfect). This denotes durative action in the recent past: She has for some time been leaving me alone.

Please tell: *eipon oun*. The force of *oun* is best rendered by our "please."

⁴¹ Too many: the *too* is not expressed, but it is implied.

⁴² Few or one. There are variant readings. (1) One: so P⁴⁵ ACW and many others. Also Vulgate: *unum est necessarium*. (2) Few or one: so B and S, etc. (3) Few: this is feebly supported. The clause is omitted in D and a few Old Latin MSS. We see how (2) can have given rise to (1) and (3). The purely spiritual meaning would have favoured (1)

The better portion. Greek: *ten agathen merida* (the good portion). Vulgate has *optimam partem* (the best part). Hebrew and Aramaic have no form for the comparative. The context shows that there is a comparison between the sisters' "parts." So Luke v, 39: The old wine is *chrestos* (lit. excellent), i.e. better.

The word *meris* is common in the meaning of an individual's helping or portion at a meal. "It is unseemly to choose the largest portion at a banquet"—Epictetus, *Manual* xxxvi. "When you might have chosen the better portion, you chose the worse."—Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. Rom.* viii, 30.

STUDY

(1) *The Incident*

This is a charming little vignette; there is nothing else quite like it in the Gospels. It gives us a passing glimpse into what we may call Our Lord's unofficial life. There would be nothing irreverent in calling it "afternoon tea at Bethany." This would shock only those who do not like finding Christ attending an apparently boisterous wedding party at Cana. The sisters are evidently quite at home; it is clear that they have been friends and followers for some time. Without encroaching on due respect, they can dispense with formalities and they need not conceal little domestic differences.

This is the first mention of Martha, whose name means lady or mistress: the feminine of *mar*, lord or master. St. John alone speaks of her again: at the raising of Lazarus and at the supper in Bethany. There is a striking agreement concerning the characteristics of the two sisters on all three occasions. Here Martha is generous and fussy, anxious to provide a good meal; later on she served at His farewell banquet. Here Mary prefers to squat at the Master's feet; after the death of her brother we

find Mary sitting quietly in the house and then throwing herself at the feet of Jesus; while even at the moment of crisis the practical Martha reminds Our Lord of the condition of the corpse. As for Mary she seems to be continually in need of Christ's defence against critics!

St. Luke in his inquiries found a record of this scene and has preserved it for us. But apparently the record did not contain the name of the village. In any case, as already pointed out, the catechetical plan of the Synoptists—unlike the more chronological order of St. John—included no explicit reference to Our Lord's visits to the capital until Passion Week. We may take the village to be Bethany,¹ for we know that it was here that Martha had her house. This is one of the several indications in the Synoptists that Christ visited Jerusalem before His last week. On this occasion we get the impression that no others were present. Perhaps the Apostles were in the city, while He was resting in this friendly home. Nowhere else since He left Nazareth did He find a warmer welcome. It was here that He stayed for the last nights before the Crucifixion.

(2) *Martha's Complaint*

It seems likely that Mary too has helped at first. But after seeing to "one or a few" dishes, she slipped quietly to where Jesus was reclining, and crouched at His feet in order to listen to Him. Martha, the busy housewife, was determined to entertain Him royally. Having an active extrovert mind, being a good caterer, she naturally thought that this service was the best expression of her devotion. But she felt hampered by her divided attention, she was trying both to work and to listen. Finally she decided to get some help from her sister. Saints are not always easy to live with; especially those that are emotional or mystic, as many good religious can testify! One gets the impression from this scene and from the banquet in Bethany that the distribution of functions between the two sisters was a little unbalanced: Mary always at her devotions and Martha always at the housework. So we must not be too hard on Martha for occasionally seeking a readjustment. But this time she did not directly approach Mary. It looks as if she knew from past experience that such an appeal would not be effective. Now, she thinks, she will enlist the Master's aid. She makes a sudden decision. Stopping her work—presumably culinary operations—she strode up to Christ and pointed to Mary crouched in rapt attention at His feet. "Lord—she asked—are You not concerned at my sister leaving me to do all the work? Please tell her to lend me a hand."

Did it not seem to be a reasonable request? Says St. Teresa:

Believe me, Martha and Mary must unite to entertain the Lord,

¹ Immediately after recounting this incident, St. Luke proceeds to tell us of Christ's teaching the Our Father, which tradition has located on the slope of the Mount of Olives. And immediately before this he has given us the story of the Good Samaritan, which suggests the neighbourhood of Jericho or Jerusalem. Cf. also John xi, 1.

to have Him always with them, and not to lodge Him badly by giving Him nothing to eat. Always seated at His feet, how shall Mary provide for Him, placed as she is, if her sister do not help her?—*Interior Castle*, vii, 4.

Our Lord did not condemn Martha for working; He did not bid her to come and sit at His feet. Nor, on the other hand, did He proclaim that Mary should do nothing in the house except sit and meditate. Mary had already done something before sitting down; Martha wanted her to do more. It was a delicate domestic problem that Our Lord was called upon to solve! Many times hostile interlocutors had brought Him problems. And He gave answers which, when heard, seemed luminously obvious but which, when pondered, showed a deep inner meaning. So it happened here.

(3) *Christ's Defence of Mary*

"Martha, Martha," He began, playfully repeating her name and taking the sting out of His gentle rebuke. "You fuss too much, you are anxious about too many things. Only a few are required—or even only one." The immediate meaning of this seems clear: Our Lord wants no such elaborate entertainment as Martha is preparing. A few dishes—even only one—are enough. There are other things in the feast besides eating and drinking, as Mary realizes. This direct reference to courses or dishes has been dubbed "an interpretation that is well-nigh trivial."¹ Such a criticism appears to be based on a complete misunderstanding of Our Lord's beautifully human method of pedagogy. One might as well say that an inspection of the image on the tribute-coin was trivial and irrelevant. Yet on this commonplace foundation a great principle was erected. He loved to take the things about Him—leaven, bread, water, the harvest, the flowers, the temple—and to make them vehicles for spiritual lessons.

From a request for a drink and a discussion about spring-water He led the woman of Samaria to consider religious issues. He told the woman of Syria that food should not be wasted on dogs; and He was delighted with her ready retort that the pet-dogs got the crumbs. So with this woman of Bethany. He starts with her pre-occupation of catering; and He tells her frankly that He is content with simple fare. What is derogatory in such a remark? Does it not tell us how easy He was to entertain, how considerate He was for His hostess? Unless we are trying to dehumanize Our Lord altogether, we cannot, on the ground of triviality, reject a reply which is not only thoughtful and polite but most appropriate to the occasion. With delightful simplicity and trust,

¹ L. C. Fillion, *Life of Christ*, 1929 iii, 37. On the other hand Fr. C. Lattey, S.J., rightly interprets: "Our Lord is not out for a spread. Few things, He says, are needed—or only one. . . . Mary has chosen the best helping, and it is not to be taken from her."—*Clergy Review*, 29 (1948) 171f.

Martha brings her little domestic difficulty to His notice ; probably this was not the first occasion on which she had asked His help and advice. It would be most unnatural to interpret His answer as expressing complete indifference concerning the affairs of this household. It would contravene His perfect humanity to depict Him as brushing brusquely aside the worry of His friend and as launching out into spiritual generalities. Such pedantry, injected into ordinary social intercourse, should not be attributed to Our Lord. His answer was relevant and appropriate, it was exquisitely balanced. He did not condemn Martha for attending to the household tasks, but He told her that she was overdoing it. She was doing too much, she was unnecessarily elaborate, she was worried and anxious about too many preparations. Doubtless this lesson of simplicity is also applicable to the spiritual life ; but the immediate historical reference is a deprecation of "much serving." It is from this concrete context that Christ, as was His wont, proceeded, gently and even playfully, to convey the proper sense of values. Smilingly He intimated to Martha that it was her sister who had chosen the better part of the entertainment.

There is no doubt that the word "part" was deliberately meant to have a double meaning ; we might almost call it a divine pun. He uses the same word at the Last Supper. On the surface, He tells Peter that if he wished to partake of the meal, he must allow his feet to be washed (John xiii, 9). But Peter's vehement reply shows that he understood the deeper meaning of having a part or a share with Christ.¹ So here with Mary's portion or helping. Perhaps Martha had just brought in a dish to set before Him, and pointing to Mary He said : She has the better helping. That this was a spiritual dish, a portion with Him, must have been obvious to both sisters. They saw the joke.

In his rule St. Basil allows quiet smiles to his monks, but not laughter, for Christ is never recorded as having laughed. But there are so many things not recorded at all, especially the little details of daily life. Only once are we told of His being asleep ; and that happened in a boat. Once we are told that He cried ; and once that He loudly lamented the fate of Jerusalem. An infant that never crowed or laughed would be abnormal ; it would be an unnatural boy that refrained from laughing and playing. What right have we to assume that Our Lord never joined in laughter when He attended a wedding-feast, was entertained by customs officers and people lax about the ceremonial laws, or heard a pleasantry or a repartee ? So, unless we are obsessed by a false idea of decorous solemnity as alone compatible with sanctity, we can easily imagine a quiet ripple of laughter at this Bethany *tête-à-tête* when the Master turned the tables on Martha by declaring that it was Mary who had picked out for herself the best portion, a nicer bit than her sister

¹ There is a Talmudic phrase : having a part (*chelek*) in the world to come. Cf. Apoc. xxii, 19.

had selected. It was a humorous way of conveying a moral.

And is it fanciful to think that they learnt the lesson? Surely Martha did not continue to be monopolized by exterior activities. It was with her that, before raising Lazarus, He had a theological conversation; and it was she who made the great confession: "I believe that You are the Messiah, the Son of God." And if we identify Mary with her of Magdala we can indeed see her still at the feet of Jesus—on Calvary—but also the first afoot on Easter morning, searching for the body of her Lord, offering to carry it herself, and then speeding to the Apostles with a strange message. Martha has become more spiritual, and Mary more active.

(4) *Lessons*

Many Fathers and theologians have taken Martha and Mary to be the representatives respectively of the active and of the contemplative life. "Let Martha be active but let her not disturb Magdalen," says St. Francis de Sales.¹ "Let Magdalen be contemplative but let her not despise Martha; for Our Lord will take the part of her who is censured." The doctrine is excellent; but this emphatic dichotomy between the sisters can hardly be found in this Gospel scene. Suarez makes a distinction in favour of the apostolic mixed life:

Observe that Christ placed contemplation not higher than any action but only higher than action consisting exclusively in exterior occupation and service, yet not higher than preaching, teaching and the conversion of sinners.—*De varietate religionum* i, 6, 22.

Once more, good theology; but rather heavy-handed treatment of this simple scene. St. Teresa was better inspired when she defended the importance of Martha's domestic service—a point which will be appreciated by housewives as well as by lay-sisters:

Martha was a saint, though she is not said to be contemplative. Now what do you desire more than to be able to resemble this blessed woman who deserved so often to entertain Christ Our Lord in her house? Had she been like Blessed Magdalen always absorbed, there would have been no one to provide food for the divine Guest. Imagine then that this community is the House of St. Martha, which must have something of everything. And let not those who have been led along the active way envy those who are engulfed in contemplation.—*Way of Perfection*, ch. 17.

Long before this, St. Augustine had taken a similar view and had applied it in a way which is appropriate to seculars as well as to religious.

Do we think [he asks] that there was a reprehension of the ministry of Martha who was occupied in hospitality, who received and entertained the Lord Himself? How could she be rightly reprehended who rejoiced to receive such a Guest? If this be true, let men give up

¹ *Spiritual Conferences*, tr. Gasquet and Mackey, 1906, p. 14.

ministering to the poor . . . let them not care what traveller comes, who is lacking food or clothes, who is to be visited or redeemed or buried.—*Sermones inediti*, ed. Morin, 1917, p. 119.

It is not so, he goes on to say; there is no such condemnation of social service. Martha and Mary represent two different aspects of life.

In these two women—both dear to the Lord, both lovable, both disciples—you see that two lives are figured: present and future, laborious and peaceful, anxious and happy, temporal and eternal.—*Ibid.*, p. 121.

Or, as he says elsewhere (*Sermo* 104, 5), to help the poor and the suffering is necessary in this life because these evils occur. "Work for the poor is good . . . We are exhorted to do it . . . Yet what Mary chose is better . . . One day the work of need will be taken away from you, but the sweetness of truth is eternal." So he concludes that there is a hierarchy of values in human work and that Mary's function of adoring contemplation will outlast this present life. *Non auferetur ab ea in aeternum*: words which the Church applies to Our Lady on the feast of the Assumption.

This lesson is useful today when there is danger not of too many Marys but of too many Marthas. Absorption in externals—even in the cause of Christ—is detrimental to higher values. Part of Our Lord's originality was in His divinely human care for unlettered women whom He called to the highest spiritual life. In particular, "Jesus loved Martha and her sister" (John xi, 5). And because he loved her, He wished to wean her from obsession with household drudgery; He taught her to have a right concept of work and to cultivate her soul. He did not repudiate service to Himself, He did not depreciate social work. When He was gone, the poor would be with us; and whatever was done for the lowliest of His brothers and sisters would be taken as done for Himself. But the provision of material needs must not be to the exclusion of higher values, either in the servers or in the served. Social services must not be employed to rob men of Christ. The privilege of Mary must not be taken from them. Even the humblest soul has the right, as well as the need, to sit sometimes at the feet of Jesus.

Inspired by this scene, we Catholics must nowadays strengthen ourselves against the prevalent exclusiveness of naturalistic activism, which refuses to recognize spiritual works of mercy and denies the reality of the supernatural. It is true that for many centuries, say down to the Renaissance, the dominant view was transcendental; the vertical movement of the soul towards God, concentration on the *unum necessarium*, was developed in a too exclusive and unbalanced form. This was almost inevitable and even beneficial in an environment of pagan naturalism and humanism. It is curious to observe a similar phenomenon—almost a secular version of monasticism—in certain non-Christian thinkers of today, such as Aldous Huxley and Gerald Heard, who, in

despair of having an immediate influence on current affairs, think they and their kind can best serve humanity by deepening the interior life of contemplation and providing power-houses for an ultimate spiritual resurgence.

But nowadays the world as a whole has adopted the ideal of self-contained immanentism, the horizontal movement towards human interests and natural knowledge in denial of the supra-human. This may be illustrated from the post-Reformation development of English law, which has developed an artificial concept of "charity" to suit the theological prejudices of the judiciary. Formerly, a bequest for Masses was adjudged null and void, as the testator could not be helped by such superstitious practices which could not be construed as "charity." Later such a bequest was admitted as valid simply and solely on the ground that it provided alms for the celebrant. Legal textbooks admit that a bequest for a home for lost dogs is a valid charity, since an institution for domestic animals benefits mankind. But the great central act of Christian worship, the application of Christ's redemptive Sacrifice, is not admitted by British judges to be a tenable belief sanctioned by law. In other words, a secular court presumes to define theological dogma.

There have been several cases in which English courts have declared that a gift to a community of contemplative religious is not "charitable." This was reaffirmed in 1949 by a unanimous decision of the British House of Lords. It was based chiefly on an Elizabethan Statute of 1603, which enumerated as charitable purposes such objects as "relief of aged, impotent and poor people, the maintenance of sick and maimed soldiers and mariners, schools of learning, free schools and scholars in universities, marriages of poor maids, aid and help of young tradesmen, repair of bridges, ports, churches." The plea of edification was not admitted; in defiance of the experience of Catholics, it was held that piety in a convent does not even indirectly edify the public. Apparently a Carmelite's life of study and prayer is not regarded as a "school of learning" —not even if it produces a St. John of the Cross or a St. Teresa of Avila! Above all, there is implicit in this British legal attitude a denial of the efficacy of prayer and penance, a repudiation of the Communion of Saints.

In English law a valid charity must be a "public benefit" provable by tangible evidence of material advantage. Martha is justified solely because she provided a meal for a needy traveller. Her petulant and soon-forgotten complaint has been erected into a permanent principle of social utilitarianism. Mary, the contemplative, is bidden to go and help her, to serve soup in a canteen or to make bandages in a hospital. Thus the whole idea of charity is despiritualized.

Apart from the fact that the civil court is invading the domain of

theology and proscribing the creed of a section of the community,¹ there are two serious considerations which deserve attention. Logically developed, this reduction of legally favoured human activities to social service must lead to Communism. If service to God is not recognized, the State will be led to direct and to control all service. The only "Martha" tolerated will be of the type of the Russian woman who, glorifying the ideal of women becoming soulless robots, wrote:

If you count how many hours in the year were spent in praying and carrying out all sorts of religious rites, you get a monstrous total. What enormous and splendid things could have been given to productive and generally useful work!—A Stakhanovite woman in *Pravda*, 27th March, 1940: cited in Rosalind Murray, *Life of Faith*, 1943, p. 94.

Failing to see Him who is present, this modern Martha times Mary's quiescent moments with a stop-watch. The next stage is obviously to have Mary "directed" to report at the nearest Labour Exchange.

Furthermore, a false dichotomy is introduced into human nature. "The worship of God," we are told,² "is replaced by the service of Man." It is assumed, in other words, that the spiritual motives required for social service are self-generating independently of religion. It is taken for granted not only that Mary has chosen the worse part, but that Martha will continue to serve when she is deprived of intercourse with Christ, when she is not allowed to see Him in the person of those she serves. Or rather, such an apparatus of compulsion is nowadays available that Martha can be drafted willy-nilly into a canteen or a factory.

Unfortunately these are the disquieting reflections which force themselves on us of today when we meditate upon this idyllic scene at Bethany, so far-off and peaceful, yet so living in its lessons.

University College, Cork.

A. O'RAHILLY.

The above article will appear later as Chapter II in a volume of Gospel Studies entitled *The Family of Bethany* to be published by Cork University Press, and is here printed by permission.

THE SECTARIAN DOCUMENT

Translation by J.-M. P. BAUCHET, O.C.D., with Introduction, etc., by E. F. SUTCLIFFE, S.J.

The Sectarian Document is one of those discovered by Arabs in a cave near the N.W. end of the Dead Sea and about which Father R. T. O'Callaghan, S.J., wrote in the April issue of this periodical. It consists of eleven columns on parchment, the whole scroll being just over 6 feet long and 9½ inches in height. It is well preserved considering its great

¹ Strangely enough in the Bowman case (14th May 1917) the House of Lords declared the anti-Christian Rationalist Press Association capable of inheriting a bequest.

² S. and B. Webb, *Soviet Communism* p. 1138.