



*Martha Defeating the Dragon. Church of St. Laurence, Nuremberg. Mary Altar, 1512.*

## from kitchen scold to dragon slayer: The gospel according to Martha

*By Cynthia Westerbeck*

**P**oor Martha. She works diligently to be a proper hostess, only to be chastised by the Lord she wants so much to serve. Even worse, she is upstaged by a sister who has done nothing but sit and look pretty. Whenever I read this story, I feel her pain—that combination of indignation and shame that comes when our own self-righteousness is unexpectedly exposed and found wanting. So we usually leave Martha in the kitchen, licking her wounds and trying to figure out which of her many duties to neglect in order to find time for contemplation.

This encounter represents just one moment in what was apparently a long-lasting and close friendship between Jesus and this family. Unfortunately for Martha, this is one of the few clear pictures we have of her in Scripture, so there is little opportunity for her to redeem her image. There is, however, a medieval tradition regarding Martha's life that allows us finally to see her not as a domestic victim, but as a victorious evangelist and even a dragon slayer.

Before we turn to legend to rescue Martha, however, we must first look at what we do



know about her from Scripture and examine how she has been treated by theological and artistic traditions.

The brief story of Jesus' visit to Martha's home in Luke 10:38-42 seems to be included in the Gospel solely to teach a lesson about priorities—at Martha's expense. As she hurries to prepare a meal for her guests, Martha needs help and asks Jesus to send her sister into the kitchen. Jesus replies, "Martha, Martha . . . you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:41-42).<sup>1</sup>

Many biblical scholars have tried to soften the blow by looking to the Greek to clarify whether Jesus said Mary had chosen the "better" thing or the "best" thing or even the "good" thing. Still other Martha sympathizers find comfort by hearing in Jesus' voice affection rather than criticism: "Martha, Martha."

Regardless of linguistic subtlety, Martha ends up looking like a scold, in part because she attempts to chastise her sister publicly through Jesus rather than privately asking Mary for help. In her book, *Choosing the Better Part? Women in the Gospel of Luke*, Barbara Reid describes the dilemma for harried women who read this passage and sympathize with Martha:



From such a stance, there is no good news from a Jesus who not only seems indifferent to the burden of the unrealistic demands, but even reproaches one who pours out her life in service. Since Jesus is not supposed to be unfair, the resentment that one feels from the position of Martha is directed at those sisters who are approved for luxuriating in contemplative sitting. Consequently, interpretations abound that try to rescue the text, or rescue Jesus from being unfairly critical of hard-working women.<sup>2</sup>

Whether or not Martha seems justified in her actions, this story sets up an important dichotomy between contemplation and action that becomes the defining difference between the two sisters.

This contrast between action and contemplation can also be seen in John 11 when Martha runs out to meet Jesus after Lazarus' death while Mary remains behind. Here we learn that "Jesus loved Martha and



*Prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane*, by Fra Angelico, (1387-1455) Museo di San Marco, Florence.

her sister and Lazarus," yet still he delays his visit to Bethany. When he finally does arrive, Martha characteristically speaks her mind: "Lord . . . if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (John 11:21). But when Jesus challenges her faith, she eagerly declares, "Yes, Lord . . . I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world" (John 11:27).

Despite this profession of faith, her practical nature still asserts itself at the tomb when she protests that there will be a bad odor if the stone is rolled away. She seems simultaneously eager to believe yet unable to subdue those domestic impulses that serve her so well under most circumstances.

The third and final mention of Martha in Scripture comes in the next chapter of John, where Jesus is being honored at a dinner for having raised Lazarus from the dead. Again, we see Martha hard at work and being upstaged by her siblings:

Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with Him. Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet



with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. (John 12:2-3)

Martha served. Period. This time the complaining is left to Judas, who argues that the money spent on perfume should have been spent on the poor. We aren't told what Martha thought of her sister's gift; she might have been just biting her tongue to keep from agreeing with Judas. I prefer to think, however, that in a lovely irony she was generously pouring on Jesus the gift of that same domestic service for which she had earlier been chastised.

Much has been made of the differences between these two sisters, despite the very limited amount of space devoted to them in Scripture. To complicate the debate, the identity of Mary of Bethany has been traditionally conflated with that of Mary Magdalene and even the "sinful woman" who anoints Jesus' feet at the house of Simon the Pharisee in Luke 7.

Although these women share a passion for Jesus' teachings and visibly demonstrate their love through acts of anointing, there is no evidence to suggest that Martha's sister Mary had ever "fallen" (like the woman in Luke 7) or been cleansed of demons like Mary Magdalene. Nevertheless, the historical confusion over these biblical women has added yet another dimension to the historical treatment of Mary and Martha. Mary becomes not just a figure of contemplation, but also a figure of intrigue and seductive beauty in contrast to the hard working, dispassionate Martha.<sup>3</sup>

The medieval church viewed these two sisters as symbols of the important dualities of the Christian life: action/contemplation, doing/hearing, preaching/silence, practical/spiritual, serving/being served. These contrasts could be seen most dramatically in the decision between whether to serve God as a working lay person or as a contemplative monk.

Early church leaders alternated between these two poles, sometimes idealizing the contemplative, monastic life, and other times calling for a more active Christianity. Pope Innocent III, for example, had political reasons for upholding Martha's active spirituality as a model,

arguing that although Mary's part was sweeter, Martha's was more useful. In his sermons, he makes Mary appear almost selfish and safe in her choice, not productive and courageous like Martha.<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, Martha's story was used frequently by those who wanted to keep women silent in church. The image of Martha as scold fit beautifully with the stereotype of the shrewish wife that appears so frequently in medieval literature. The primary tendency, however, was to argue that neither sister is perfect on her own. In an interesting linking of the characters of Martha and Mary with the Old Testament figures of Leah and Rachel, Walter of Chatillon (d. 1179) writes:

Now Martha and Leah are busier than they should be.  
Rachel and Mary exert themselves less than they should;  
Neither chooses the better part because  
They falter equally unproductively on the way.<sup>5</sup>



The astute reader was to learn a lesson of balance, recognizing that there is a time to speak and a time to remain silent. Some argued, in fact, that Martha's mistake was not working when she should have been listening, but instead speaking when she should not have spoken. She should have continued in her work and not interfered with Mary's role as listener.

The strong contrast between Martha and Mary can be seen in most artistic representations of the sisters, as well. *The Gospels of Henry the Lion*, published in 1188, includes in one panel the scene of Mary anointing Jesus' feet. The scroll unfolding from Christ's hand reads: "Your sins are forgiven, go in peace," clearly associating Mary of Bethany with the "fallen woman" from Luke 7.

In the lower panel we see the two sisters in their traditional roles: Mary sits at the feet of Jesus with her hands uplifted in the traditional orans positions, echoing the position of Christ's hands. Martha is off to the side with a scowl on her face, wagging her finger in a gesture of disapproval. Her scroll expresses her request





for help, whereas Christ's scrolls say, "Martha thou art careful and troubled" and "Mary hath chosen the best part which shall not be taken away from her."<sup>6</sup>

The traditional distance between the sisters vanishes in an unusual mid-fifteenth century painting by an assistant to Fra Angelico entitled "The Prayer of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane." Here the artist shows both Martha and Mary in contemplation in the foreground of the picture, keeping watch while Peter, James, and John are seen fast asleep in the middle distance.

Because their names are inscribed in their halos, we know that Mary is the character absorbed in a book. Meanwhile, Martha gazes intently at Mary with her hands in a position of active prayer, mirroring the hands of Christ as he prays in the upper left-hand corner. Here the wakeful contemplation of both women stands in striking contrast to the sleeping disciples. Not surprisingly, Martha appears even more active in her meditation than her sister, who is absorbed in her book.

"Christ in the House of Mary and Martha" is the subject of several later paintings, including works by Tintoretto (1567), Jan Bruegel the Younger, Peter Paul Rubens (1628), and Jan Vermeer (1654-55). For the most part, these paintings show the sisters in their traditional roles, one serving while the other listens.

A unique painting by Caravaggio entitled "The Conversion of Mary Magdalen" (ca. 1600) emphasizes the role of Mary as the converted sinner, needing to renounce her wealth and jewels. According to this version of the story as told in "The Golden Legend," Mary's conversion is brought about in part by Martha's pleading.<sup>7</sup>

In Caravaggio's painting, Mary is dressed in magnificent clothing, with her arm resting on a mirror. On the table is a well-used comb and cosmetic dish with a sponge, indicating her concern with outward appearances. While light shines on Mary's face and chest, Martha's face is in shadows and turned toward Mary. The light shines instead on Martha's hands, symbols of her domestic work as well as her spiritual efforts on behalf of her sister.

Although there are many images of Mary as the fallen woman (generally very voluptuous and sensual), it is difficult to find any images of Martha alone, as if she is not worthy of attention except as a complement to her sister.<sup>8</sup> In one striking exception, however, we find an image of Martha transformed from kitchen scold to dragon slayer. The Church of St. Laurence, Nuremberg, houses a 1517 depiction of "Martha Defeating the Dragon," based on a medieval legend that traces Martha's

journey following Jesus' death.<sup>9</sup>

Medieval parishes often competed over claims to holy relics in order to add prestige (and money) to their churches. As a result, many stories began to circulate that attempted to explain how it was that the bones of various apostles could end up buried in churches throughout Europe. *The Life of Saint Mary Magdalene and of her Sister Saint Martha* is one such medieval biography.<sup>10</sup>

According to this legend, after the deaths of many apostles, such as Paul, James, and Peter, some of the remaining seventy-two apostles (who according to this legend were all at Martha's house on the day she got grumpy) decided to become missionaries to Europe rather than risk martyrdom. The Bishop Maximinus—along with Mary, Martha, Lazarus, and an archdeacon named Parmenas—sailed to Rome, then made the arduous journey across the Alps to Marseilles. In order to spread the gospel more efficiently, Maximinus and Mary stayed in Aix while Martha traveled with Parmenas to Avignon.

Both sisters are described as working tirelessly to spread the gospel and were reputed to have the power to perform miracles. The descriptions of them, however, continue to emphasize the traditional duality between contemplation and action, except that in this legend Mary's contemplative nature evolves into a form of spiritual ecstasy:

Mary hungered in spirit for the Word of God, which, in a wonderful manner, excited her desire again and again. Drawn by the sweetness of her beloved, she became drunk on the cup of heavenly desire, composing herself and raising herself up so that, dissolved at last in the heat of a most chaste love, she drank in interior joy. (95)

Following the traditions of ecstatic meditation later embraced and popularized by Loyola in his *Spiritual Exercises*, Mary evangelized by sharing the full sensory experience of her spiritual love:

She showed to them those eyes which in weeping had dampened the feet of Christ and which saw for the first time the Christ who had risen from the dead; she showed also the hair which a first time she dried the drops of her tears from his feet and a second time, at the feast, she wiped off the precious nard she had poured over those feet; also the mouth together with the lips, by which his feet were kissed thousands and thousands of times. (96)



## The medieval church viewed these two sisters as symbols of the important dualities of the Christian life.

Martha, not surprisingly, is depicted as sharing a much more active and less sensual gospel. Rather than hungering after the spirit, Martha “preached about divine power, and performed miracles herself” (97). In imitation of Christ’s own ministry, Martha was actively involved in meeting people’s needs—whether spiritual or physical:

The gift of healing came to her, so that when occasion demanded, by prayer and by the sign of the cross, she healed lepers, cured paralytics, revived the dead, and bestowed her aid on the blind, the mute, the deaf, the lame, the invalid, and the sick. *Thus did Martha do.* (97, emphasis supplied)

It is this reputation for “doing” that gets Martha tangled up with a dragon. One day as Martha preaches the gospel in a region between Arles and Avignon, she finds her audience distracted by talk of a “terrible dragon of unbelievable length and great bulk”:

It breathed out poisonous fumes, shot sulfurous flames from its eyes, and emitted fierce hissings with its mouth and horrible noises with its curved teeth. With its talons and teeth it tore to pieces anyone who crossed its path; with its poisonous breath it killed anyone who came too near. (99)

The people test Martha by claiming that if she truly is of Christ, she ought to be able to defend them against the dragon. Undaunted by their descriptions of the ferocious beast, Martha responds in words similar to those Jesus spoke to her after Lazarus’ death: “[I can,] if you are ready to believe, for all things are possible to those who believe” (99).

She then marches “with confidence” to the dragon’s lair and immediately subdues the dragon and leads it out of the cave with her girdle, which she has tied around its neck. When she sees that the people are still frightened, she chastises them for their “scant faith” and urges the people to kill the beast.

It is interesting to note that Martha does not kill the beast herself; rather, she tames it and asks the townspeople to complete the victory. This stands in striking contrast to the traditional images of St. George defeating the dragon. St. George is often depicted in the midst of active battle, with his sword thrust deeply into the

dragon’s throat, whereas in images of Martha fighting the dragon she holds up her skirt as if not needing to even touch the beast that lies at her feet. Legend grants this woman victory over the dragon, but does not allow her to get her hands dirty in the process.

She doesn’t seem to mind getting her hands dirty in other endeavors, however. After her encounter with the dragon, Martha continues to serve actively those in her mission field:

All of the poisonous reptiles having been chased out of the wilderness of Tarascon by the power of God, the most holy Martha chose to make her home there, transforming a place that had before been hateful and detestable into a pleasant and agreeable habitation. (100)

Here again, we see Martha in her role as celebrated hostess, transforming the rough wilderness into a domestic paradise. She heals the sick, feeds the hungry, and clothes the poor. “Even the rich who streamed to her in great numbers, she did not send away empty: they always carried back something good for their souls or bodies” (101).

Although the legend celebrates Martha for her active service, the story of her death shows her finally in an act of contemplation. According to the medieval biography, Martha foresees her own death a year in advance and calls for her sister Mary to come visit her. Mary, however, dies before she can make the trip. Martha learns of her sister’s death through a vision in which she sees her sister carried to heaven by angels. In a final declaration of sibling rivalry Martha exclaims:

Oh most beautiful sister, what is it that you have done? Why have you not visited me as you promised and swore to do? Are you then going to enjoy without me the embraces of the Lord Jesus, whom we both love so much and who loves us so much? (108)





It is tempting to read into Martha's response latent jealousy over the image of Mary now sitting at Jesus' feet, just as she had done so long ago that day in Bethany. Just as Mary had stolen the spotlight in life (whether through costly ointments or being the "bad girl") so she appears to have upstaged Martha in death as well.

Martha pleads with God to let her join her sister in heaven, but it seems that she must first learn a lesson in patience. In a gesture of supreme irony, Martha is confined to her bed. She laments, "all my limbs have lost their motion, my nerves are paralyzed (110). Now that action is no longer an option, she turns finally to contemplation, spending her final days meditating on the story of Jesus' life and crucifixion:

When she heard read to her in her own language  
the sufferings of her well-beloved, she burst out  
in tears of compassion and began to weep,  
forgetting for the time being her own death in  
fixing all her attention on the passion story.  
When she heard how Christ had commended his  
spirit into the Father's hands and died, she  
sighed deeply and expired. (111)

In this moment, just before her death, she learns the lesson Jesus had tried to teach her in Bethany and she finds rest at last.

The Roman Catholic Church still honors Martha's death each year on July 29. Appropriately, she is celebrated as the patron saint of cooks, servants, dieticians, innkeepers, and sisters. Thanks to a poem by Rudyard Kipling entitled "The Sons of Martha," she has also become a patron saint for engineers, who, since 1964, have given out the annual "Sons of Martha" medal that recognizes outstanding contributions to the profession of engineering. The opening stanza of Kipling's 1907 poem reads:

The Sons of Mary seldom bother, for they have  
inherited that good part;  
But the Sons of Martha favour their Mother of  
the careful soul and the troubled heart.  
And because she lost her temper once, and  
because she was rude to the Lord her Guest,  
Her Sons must wait upon Mary's Sons, world  
without end, reprieve or rest.

The poem goes on to describe the heavy responsibility of engineers to protect humankind against the forces of nature. Like Martha, they must be vigilant in

their duties: "They do not preach that their God will rouse them a little before the nuts work loose." The poem ends almost bitterly with the lines,

And the Sons of Mary smile and are blessed—  
they know the angels are on their side.  
They know in them is the Grace Confessed, and  
for them are the Mercies multiplied.  
They sit at the Feet—they hear the Word—they  
see how truly the Promise runs.  
They have cast their burden upon the Lord,  
and—the Lord He lays it on Martha's Sons!

Poor Martha. It doesn't seem fair . . . or perhaps we are feeling sorry for the wrong character. Although Jesus has occasionally to remind the Marthas of the world to keep their priorities straight, he still trusts them to do his work. He needs dragon slayers to protect and serve those who need to sit at his feet.

Perhaps the most fitting tribute to Martha is the fact that when you search the Internet for "Martha of Bethany" you find places like St. Martha's Hall, a home in St. Louis that provides a safe environment for abused women and their dependent children. You also find St. Martha's Catholic Church, an inner city spiritual haven for people of a variety of ethnic backgrounds. In these namesakes I think even Martha has found "the better part," which to this day has not been taken from her.

## Notes and References

1. All biblical quotes are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.
2. Barbara Reid, *Choosing the Better Part? Women in the Gospel of Luke* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1996), 145.
3. For further discussion of the character of Mary, see Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor* (New York: Harcourt, 1993); and Giles Constable, "The Interpretation of Mary and Martha," in *Three Studies in Medieval Religious and Social Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
4. Constable, "Mary and Martha," 99.
5. Quoted in *ibid.*, 51.
6. See Constable for reproductions of this and other artistic representations of Mary and Martha. See also, Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *The Women Around Jesus* (New York: Crossroad, 1990).
7. Haskins, *Mary Magdalen*, 256-58.
8. For further illustrations, see *ibid.*
9. Reproduced in Moltmann-Wendel, *Women Around Jesus*, 16.
10. Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian, 1989; translated and annotated by David Mycoff.

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