

Action and/or contemplation? Allegory and liturgy in the reception of Luke 10:38–42*

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Abstract

The brief account of the hospitality offered by Martha and Mary to Jesus has been interpreted allegorically in at least three different ways. The majority tradition has identified the figure of Mary with contemplation, and considered this to be the 'one thing necessary' to Christian life. Meister Eckhart suggests, however, that Martha, representing action, has chosen the better part, and Aelred of Rievaulx that action and contemplation are both commended. Feminist and other recent interpretations continue, sometimes unconsciously, to draw on this allegorical tradition. The theological importance and significance of the passage has been due largely to its use as the gospel reading for the feast of the Assumption of Mary the mother of Jesus.

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.' But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her'.

In reflecting on this short text, I have two distinct sets of questions in mind. First, how might the account of the hospitality given by Martha and Mary to Jesus assist reflection on the nature of action and contemplation, their relative priority in Christian life, and their mutual relation? Theological considerations such as these need, however, to be set within the larger

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context of the relation of Bible and theology, which provides my second and related set of questions. Why have certain texts become the objects of seemingly interminable exposition, allegory and, at times, acrimony? To what extent have choices between variant readings of texts, including different manuscript sources, been determined by the theological agendas of expositors? What might contemporary debates provoked by, or focusing on, particular narratives gain from being situated within the tradition of reflection on those narratives? How does scripture, through being heard and read, become a source of theological authority, but equally point beyond itself and beyond words, to new modes of encounter with God?

The persistent influence exerted by Luke 10:38–42 on Christian theological imagination has been due largely to its institutionalisation in the eucharistic lectionary as the gospel reading for the feast of the Assumption of Mary the mother of Jesus. From at least the mid-seventh century until 1950, Latin translations of the passage therefore constituted the principal text, in the Western church, for the sermon which immediately followed it.¹ In most Eastern churches, the passage remains the principal gospel reading for the feast, which is frequently known in these churches as the Dormition. Most theologians who have been ordained, and many others who have delivered sermons – in other words, almost all of them – have thus been brought to reflect on the meaning for Christian faith of the hospitality given by Martha and Mary to Jesus.

The reading and hearing of the passage on the feast of the Assumption is, moreover, highly significant given the great dignity accorded to the feast. In the late seventh century, Pope Sergius I had identified it as one of the four principal Marian feasts, along with the Annunciation, Nativity and Purification. The feast acquired further importance around the middle of the ninth century. At a synod of 853, Pope Leo IV assigned to it a vigil and an octave. In an edict of 863, Pope Nicholas I declared the Assumption to possess as great a dignity as Easter and Christmas.² Although now fixed on 15 August, the feast has been observed during January, and later in the month

¹ Giles Constable, 'The Interpretation of Mary and Martha', in *Three Studies in Medieval Religious and Social Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 1–141, provides an impressive survey of the long tradition of liturgical exposition. For the plurality of Latin texts in use, see J. K. Elliott, 'The Translations of the New Testament into Latin: The Old Latin and the Vulgate', in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*, pt II, vol. 26.1, ed Wolfgang Haase (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1992), pp. 198–245, esp. pp. 199–203, 220–4.

² Pius XII, *Munificentissimus Deus*, in *The Papal Encyclicals*, ed Claudia Carlen, 5 vols (Ann Arbor: Pierian, 1990), vol. 4, §19.

of August.³ In fact, it was quite possibly characterised more by the readings prescribed for it than by a single date of observance.

The feast also assigns a decisive role to an apparently absent figure in determining the relations between the figures in the narrative. No reference to Mary the mother of Jesus is made in the text, which brings us to ask why it was chosen for this feast by the compilers of the lectionary. After all, there are at least four alternative episodes, not associated with the other three ancient Marian feasts in which Mary is a principal character, that could have been employed on this occasion.⁴ The answer lies in the importance accorded to the passage by the early church fathers, whose reflections on it I will now consider.⁵ Then, after discussing patristic and later medieval expositions, I will examine feminist readings of recent decades, whose chief concerns have been the place of women in Luke's gospel and today's churches.

The priority of contemplation

The earliest interpretive tradition establishes both the allegorical sense of the passage, and the first view of its theological significance. The figure of Mary, who sits at the feet of Jesus listening to his words, is identified with contemplation (θεωρία), whilst the person of Martha, distracted by her many tasks, represents action (πράξις). This first view of the relation of action and contemplation, put simply, commends the contemplation of Mary as superior to the action of Martha. Mary occupies the traditional posture of the disciple, whether literal or metaphorical, seated at the feet of the teacher,⁶ whilst Martha is worried (μεριμνήσας) and distracted (θορυβάζου) by practical tasks.⁷ Moreover, Jesus fails to accede to Martha's request that he tell Mary to help her sister with her work. In fact, he responds to Martha by asserting that Mary has chosen the better part.⁸ This interpretation not only is the earliest, but has been the majority view through subsequent Christian

³ See Frederick G. Holweck, 'The Feast of the Assumption', in *The Catholic Encyclopaedia*, 16 vols (New York: Robert Appleton, 1907–14), vol. 2, pp. 6–7 for the early diversity of practice in the observance of the feast.

⁴ Luke 1:26–56 and 2:41–51, John 2:1–5 and 19:25–7.

⁵ The principle survey of this period is Daniel A. Csányi, 'Optima pars. Die Auslegungsgeschichte von Lk 10, 38–42 bei den Kirchenvätern der ersten vier Jahrhunderte', *Studia Monastica* 2 (1960), pp. 5–78.

⁶ Robert R. Wall, 'Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38–42) in the Context of a Christian Deuteronomy', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 35 (1989), pp. 19–35, at p. 25.

⁷ Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St Luke*, 4th edn (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1910), p. 291.

⁸ Augustine, *Sermons on Selected Lessons of the New Testament*, ed. E. B. Pusey, 2 vols (Oxford: Henry John Parker, 1844–45), 53, pp. 413–17, §3; 54, pp. 417–21, §1.

theological history of the relation between action and contemplation that the hospitality suggests.

Although Origen prefers contemplation to action, he nonetheless finds a place for action in the human life alongside contemplation, even though its status is that of a poor relation. Action is, for Origen, a means to contemplation: 'The mystery of love is lost to the active life unless one directs his teaching, and his exhortation to action, toward contemplation.'⁹ Significantly, he uses a version of the words of Jesus to Martha which states that 'few (ὀλίγων) things are needful, or only one'.¹⁰ Although nothing explicitly tells us that a meal is taking place, or about to take place, the reader might reasonably assume so if Jesus is present as a guest. In this context, Jesus is not making a theological statement, but offering practical advice. This version is also embraced by Cassian and Jerome, though not in the Vulgate translation associated with the latter. It suggests a practical message, concerning the number of dishes needed at a meal.

The priority of contemplation over action is later stated even more clearly. Vulgate translations of the passage frequently employed ἐνός (one) in preference to ὀλίγων, thus translating Jesus' instruction to Martha as *unum est necessarium*: in other words, one thing is needful. Advice about the preparation of a meal is thus replaced by a much clearer theological assertion, whose implications are elucidated in a sermon attributed to Augustine:

For one thing is necessary, that celestial Oneness, the Oneness in which the Father, and the Son, and Holy Spirit are One. See how the praise of Unity is commended to us.¹¹

This divine unity contrasts starkly with the many things (*erga plurima*) that Martha is attempting to pursue. Neoplatonic ontology is prominent in Augustine's exposition: unity implies goodness and order, whilst multiplicity is disordered and estranged from the source of goodness. Augustine does not, however, exclude action completely from our present life. In company with Ambrose, he affirms that Mary has chosen the *melior* (better) *pars*, not the *optima* (good) *pars* to which the official Vulgate would much later refer. In drawing the distinction comparatively, rather than absolutely, they resist the

⁹ Fragment 171, in Origen, *Homilies on Luke. Fragments on Luke*, ed. Joseph T. Lienhard (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), pp. 192–3; cf. Constable, 'Interpretation', p. 22.

¹⁰ Aelred Baker, 'One Thing Necessary: [Lk 10:42]', *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 27 (1965), pp. 127–37, provides detailed discussion of the issue. J. Lionel North, 'ὀλίγων δέ ἐστιν χρεία ἡ ἐνός (Luke 10:42). Text, Subtext and Context', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 66 (1997), pp. 3–13, is a recent defence of this version of the text.

¹¹ Augustine, Sermon 53, §4.

outright rejection of action in present, earthly life. Nevertheless, in future existence, action will eventually be wholly excluded. Augustine states:

In Martha was the image of things present, in Mary of things to come. What Martha was doing, that we are now; what Mary was doing, that we hope for. Let us do the first well, that we may have the second fully.¹²

What makes contemplation the good part, and not just the better one, is the eschatological fact that it will not be taken away from its possessor.¹³

The priority of action

Another interpretative tradition preserves the representational scheme already described, but inverts its allegorical meaning. The action of Martha, according to this second view, is superior to the contemplation of Mary. Meister Eckhart provides the clearest exposition of this reversed priority. Although the reading by no means originates with Eckhart,¹⁴ his version of it is by far the most accessible. He observes of Martha:

She saw how Mary was possessed with a longing for her soul's satisfaction. Martha knew Mary better than Mary knew Martha, for she had lived long and well, and life gives the finest understanding.¹⁵

Martha, being the owner of a house, is probably a widow or an elder sister.¹⁶ In any case, she has already experienced the yearning of Mary, and knows that Mary will be unable to enter fully into the contemplative life until she has lived more of the active life. In the later medieval tradition of identifying Mary with Mary Magdalen, it is suggested moreover, that her initial motivation

¹² Augustine, Sermon 54, §4.

¹³ Turid Karlsen Seim, *The Double Message. Patterns of Gender in Luke–Acts* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994), pp. 97–107, at pp. 106–7.

¹⁴ Constable, 'Interpretation', pp. 90–2, discusses Marbod of Rennes and Simon of Tournai as precedents.

¹⁵ Meister Eckhart, *Sermons and Treatises*, ed. Maurice O'C. Walshe, 3 vols (Shaftesbury: Element, 1987), vol. 1, pp. 79–90, at p. 80. This sermon may also be found in Meister Eckhart, *Selected Writings*, ed. Oliver Davies (London: Penguin, 1994), pp. 193–202; Meister Eckhart: *Teacher and Preacher*, ed. Bernard McGinn with Frank Tobin and Elvira Borgstadt (New York: Paulist, 1986), pp. 338–45; C. de B. Evans, *Meister Eckhart*, 2 vols (London: Watkins, 1924–31), vol. 2, pp. 90–8.

¹⁶ One possibility is that Martha is the widow of Simon the Leper. The anointing of Jesus described in John 12:1–8, which appears to take place in the same house as the events of Luke 10:38–42, is referred to in Matthew 26:6 and Mark 14:3 as occurring in Simon's house.

for meeting Jesus is sensual and not spiritual.¹⁷ We can now hear Martha's question to Christ as an affectionate teasing of Mary and Christ's response as reassurance that Mary will, in time, attain the state that they all desire for her.

Christ's words are given a prophetic quality by Provençal legend, according to which the penitent Mary becomes a figure of action following the death of Christ. She crosses the Mediterranean Sea with Martha, Lazarus and others in a rudderless boat, following their expulsion from Palestine. Once in France, Mary converts pagans to faith in Christ, causes a princess to conceive a son miraculously, and restores her to life after drowning. Following these episodes, she baptises the princess and her husband, thereby converting Gaul to Christianity.¹⁸

In his sermon, Eckhart next discusses why Christ names Martha twice when addressing her, and suggests the following motive:

He meant that every good thing, temporal and eternal, that a creature could possess was fully possessed by Martha. The first mention of Martha showed her perfection in temporal works. When he said 'Martha' again, that showed that she lacked nothing pertaining to eternal bliss.¹⁹

Eckhart interprets Martha's care (*Sorge, sollicita*) in, literally, a positive light, explaining the words of Christ as follows:

Those who are careful are unhindered in their activity. They are unhindered who organise all their works guided by the eternal light. Such people are with things and not in them. They are very close, and yet have no less than if they were up yonder on the circle of eternity . . . For we are set down in time so that our sensible worldly activity may make us closer and more like to God.²⁰

Eckhart refers here to the performance of mundane outward acts, such as those attributed to Martha by the critics of action. If the organisation of these acts is 'guided by the eternal light', however, they bring union with Christ. This is because Christ is like such acts, also 'embraced by the eternal light'. At the beginning of his treatise 'On Detachment', Eckhart therefore

¹⁷ Constable, 'Interpretation', p. 129. The history of the transformation of Mary from a woman of devotion and witness into one of fallen sensuality, and frequently prostitution, is discussed in Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor* (London: HarperCollins, 1993), pp. 58–97.

¹⁸ Haskins, *Mary Magdalen*, pp. 222–8; cf. Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, 2 vols (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), vol. 1, pp. 374–83.

¹⁹ Eckhart, *Sermons and Treatises*, vol. 1, pp. 81–2.

²⁰ The 'circle of eternity' image is inspired by themes in Proclus's *Elements of Theology* and the creation myth in Plato's *Timaeus*.

makes clear that the one thing necessary is, precisely, detachment, and that its possessor is Martha.²¹ Her actions are detached because they are the product of contemplation. Eckhart is affirming the ‘need to sense the sacred within the secular’,²² but only by preserving the distinctiveness of the active and contemplative realms.

Legends attribute to Martha, and not just to Mary Magdalen, some heroic exploits.²³ She is said to have confronted the dragon Tarascus in a Provençal forest, subdued it with a cross and holy water, bound its neck with her girdle, and left it for the neighbouring inhabitants, whom it had been attacking, to slay. For both Martha and Mary, the legends become part of the exposition of the text, a mixture of history, testimony and imagination, motivated by theological concerns emerging from the text, but gradually assuming identities independent of it.²⁴

Before concluding the discussion of Eckhart, a brief explanation is needed of the special significance of this text for him. Being a Dominican vicar-general with oversight of many religious communities in south-western Germany, Eckhart was charged with maintaining the orthodoxy of, among others, German beguine women, who were suspected of holding antinomian views.²⁵ The Council of Vienne, convened in 1312, had directed two decrees, *Cum de quibusdam mulieribus* and *Ad nostrum*, against German beguine women.²⁶ It might appear that by prioritising action above contemplation, Eckhart was disseminating heretical opinions and therefore doing precisely the opposite. In fact, his appears to be an effort to dissuade the women from association

²¹ Eckhart, *Sermons and Treatises*, vol. 3, p. 117; and Meister Eckhart, *The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises and Defense*, ed. Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn (London: SPCK, 1981), pp. 285–94, at p. 285.

²² Blake R. Heffner, ‘Meister Eckhart and a Millennium with Mary and Martha’, in *Biblical Hermeneutics in Historical Perspective: Studies in Honor of Karlfried Froehlich on his Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. Mark S. Burrows and Paul Rorem (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), pp. 117–30, at p. 130.

²³ Diane E. Peters, ‘The Life of Martha of Bethany by Pseudo-Marcilia’, *Theological Studies* 58 (1997), pp. 441–60; *The Life of Saint Mary Magdalene and of Her Sister Saint Martha*, ed. David Mycoff, Cistercian Studies Series 108 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1989).

²⁴ *The Life of Saint Mary Magdalene and of Her Sister* draws a distinction between the true and the false legends that surround Mary and Martha (p. 98). Not simply any story could enter the canon of stories about them.

²⁵ Davies, *Eckhart*, p. xiii. Eckhart moved to Strasburg to become vicar-general in 1313. Davies argues (p. 289, n. 86) that the sermon is from this later period of his life, either Strasburg or Cologne. For background to these links, see *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics: Hadewijch of Brabant, Mechthild of Magdeburg and Marguerite Porete*, ed. Bernard McGinn (New York: Continuum, 1994).

²⁶ *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman P. Tanner, 2 vols (London: Sheed and Ward, 1990), vol. 1, pp. 374, 383–4.

with the 'free spirit' sect which privileged divine inspiration above the good works that characterised the mendicant orders.²⁷

Eckhart's exposition also needs to be seen in the context of the rise of monastic administration, and the associated awareness of the importance of good administrators. Abbesses and abbots were frequently cast in the role of Martha in this period, on the grounds that, whilst rooted in contemplation, they required equal gifts of practical administration. A clear example is given by Bernard of Clairvaux, who ponders: 'For to whom, I ask, are the words of the Lord, "Martha, Martha, you are careful", more appropriate than to religious superiors?' He identifies Martha, moreover, as a type for Paul of Tarsus, burdened with care for all the churches.²⁸ This portrayal of Martha makes sense if we suppose that, in the narrative, she was superintending a large meal or gathering at which other people were also serving: it cannot be inferred from the fact that other guests receive no mention that none are present. One *Life* states, by contrast, that at the feast 'there were with our Lord and Saviour the twelve apostles, and the seventy-two disciples, and a multitude of noble women'.²⁹ In any case, the name 'Martha' was frequently used by the beguines, in the later fourteenth-century and possibly earlier, as a generic title to denote the category of superior, suffixed to the name of each particular office.³⁰ Eckhart's sermon might well have been delivered at a gathering of such women or, at least, to a women's house.

The mutual indwelling of action and contemplation

The two views so far discussed have assigned different priorities to action and contemplation with neither being excluded. Even Augustine found a place for action in present, worldly life. A third view can be identified which emphasises the parity of action and contemplation. This has been assisted by the Vulgate identification of Martha's village (κώμη) as a *castellum*. The familiar metaphor of the soul as a castle is thus applied to the place where

²⁷ Martina Wehrli-Johns, 'Maria und Martha in der religiösen Frauenbewegung', in *Abendländische Mystik im Mittelalter*, ed. Kurt Ruh (Stuttgart: Metzlersche, 1986), pp. 354–67, especially pp. 360–2.

²⁸ Bernard of Clairvaux, 'On the Different Employments of Martha, Mary and Lazarus', in *St Bernard's Sermons on the Blessed Virgin Mary* (Chumleigh: Augustine, 1984), pp. 184–93, at p. 191; cf. 2 Cor 11:28.

²⁹ Martha's mother, Eucharia, is supposed to come from a royal line of Israel, and her Syrian father, Theophilus, to be a chief satrap of the province. 'They possessed by hereditary right a great patrimony and also many lands and slaves and much money.' Property attributed to them included Bethany and most of Jerusalem. *Life of Saint Mary Magdalene and of Her Sister*, pp. 28–9, 40–1.

³⁰ Constable, 'Interpretation', pp. 109, 125.

Martha lives: action and contemplation together need to reside in the soul. As Teresa of Avila affirms in her classic work whose title is inspired by this episode: ‘Both Martha and Mary must entertain our Lord and keep Him as their Guest, nor must they be so inhospitable as to offer Him no food. How can Mary do this while she sits at His feet, if her sister does not help her?’³¹ Aelred of Rievaulx, who promotes this third view, makes a similar point at greater length:

It is essential that Martha be present in our house – that is to say, that our soul attends to physical activities. For as long as we have a need to eat and drink, we have a need to labour. As long as we are tempted by physical delights, we have a need to subdue the flesh with vigils, fasts and manual labour. This is Martha’s part. Yet Mary ought to be present in our soul – that is, spiritual activity. For we should not always be intent on physical pursuits but sometimes we should be at leisure and see *how good and how sweet the Lord is*, [we should] sit at Jesus’ feet and listen to his word. By no means should you neglect Mary for the sake of Martha, nor again Martha for the sake of Mary. For, if you neglect Martha, who will feed Jesus? If you neglect Mary, what benefit will it be to you that Jesus entered your house since you will have tasted nothing of his sweetness? Realize, brothers, that never in this life should these two women be separated.³²

Aelred next praises Benedict of Nursia for correctly perceiving in his Rule the need to maintain the distinctiveness of each role, stating: ‘We must punctiliously keep to those times which Holy Spirit has determined for us.’³³ Aelred’s comments might even be directed against the practice of assigning some people to active roles and others to contemplative ones. This division was most clearly developed within his own Cistercian order, in which ‘lay’ brothers and sisters were placed under their own rule, the *Usus conversorum*, and charged with most of the manual labour. Aelred clearly states that contemplation needs to be combined with action, not only in the community but within the individual soul.

The mutuality of action and contemplation is exemplified by Mary the mother of Jesus, the figure absent from the house but made present by the liturgical context of the Assumption feast. Though human, she is considered

³¹ See Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1988), vol. 7, iv.17.

³² Aelred of Rievaulx, *The Liturgical Sermons*, ed. Theodore Berkeley and M. Basil Pennington, Cistercian Fathers Series 58 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 2001), pp. 263–74, at pp. 269–70.

³³ Aelred of Rievaulx, *Liturgical Sermons*, pp. 272–3; cf. *The Rule of St Benedict* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1989), §§47, 48.

to combine action with contemplation in perfect harmony. Bernard of Clairvaux suggests that the hospitality passage is chosen for the gospel in order to establish an analogy between the inestimable glory of the reception of the Son by his mother at his Incarnation, and the inestimable glory of the reception of Mary by her Son at her Assumption.³⁴ In another sermon, he considers in greater detail why Christ is received into this particular house and not some other. The answer is provided by the absence of Lazarus. Given his close friendship with his sisters, one would expect to find Lazarus also in the house, regardless of whether the events described take place before or after his death and resurrection. Bernard suggests that, whilst Martha and Mary represent action and passion respectively, Lazarus represents penitence.³⁵ Mary the mother of Jesus has no need of penitence, however, because she possesses absolute purity:

In the Virgin's home let none be found save the sisters Mary and Martha. For did she not act the part of Martha whilst for three months she humbly attended her aged cousin Elizabeth, who was about to become a Mother? And she fulfilled the role of Mary when she kept all the words that were said of the Son, 'pondering them in her heart'.

The apostolic constitution *Ineffabilis Deus* of Pius IX would, much later, consider this absolute purity to imply immaculate conception: that Mary, 'in the first instance of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God . . . was preserved free from all stain of original sin'.³⁶

Recent Lukan and feminist debates and allegorical interpretation

Contemporary readings of the hospitality given by Martha and Mary to Jesus have not, in all cases, adopted an allegorical interpretation. A more critical perspective on the passage has frequently emerged, with the place of women in Luke's gospel and, by extension, the contemporary church, providing the principal focus. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza argues that the hospitality episode forms the centrepiece of Luke's attempt to assign passive roles to women, contrary to the widespread practice of the church of his time. In her hermeneutics of suspicion, she regards both Mary and

³⁴ 'On the Reception of the Son by the Mother in the Incarnation and of the Mother by the Son in the Assumption', in *St Bernard's Sermons*, pp. 166–71.

³⁵ 'How the Spiritual House Has To Be Swept and Garnished for the Reception of Christ', in *St Bernard's Sermons*, pp. 172–83; cf. Luke 16:20–25.

³⁶ www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius09/p9ineff.htm, §29 [9 March 2006].

Martha as victims of a division of ecclesiastical labour by gender.³⁷ This claim is particularly suggestive, given the actual use of this text by Eckhart and many other male clerics to characterise the roles of members of women's religious communities.³⁸ Although she does not discuss this usage specifically, Schüssler Fiorenza notes that it is Mary, the silent woman, who gains the approval of Jesus, whilst the independent, outspoken Martha receives his rebuff. Moreover, Martha's service (*διακονία*) is restricted to menial household chores. Indeed, the inference that a meal is in progress could itself be motivated by a patriarchal requirement to interpret the *διακονία* of Martha in this restricted sense. In fact, Schüssler Fiorenza argues in her hermeneutics of remembrance, the term was being used in this period to denote ecclesial leadership whose dimensions included both eucharistic table service and proclamation of the Word.³⁹

Several responses have been offered to this critique. Warren Carter has sought to read the ecclesial sense of *διακονία* into the episode, and has argued that Martha is, in fact, engaged in house church ministry. He states of the older sister: 'Her distraction "with much serving" pertains to this mission and community and to her particular role in them'.⁴⁰ John Collins has, however, opposed this view, which utilises his own study of *διακονία* in Acts, arguing that the reading of Luke on which it depends is achieved more by 'force of transposition' from Acts to Luke's gospel than by attention to the latter text. Collins prefers to interpret the episode more conventionally, as being 'about the need to listen to the word of the Lord'.⁴¹ Adele Reinhartz, whilst desisting from offering a single interpretation of each sister, suggests that the christological focus of the passage, and the understanding of discipleship it conveys as comprising both hearing the Word and service (exemplified by the opportunity with which Mary provides Jesus to serve her), needs to govern any particular interpretation.⁴²

³⁷ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, 'Arachne: The Practice of Interpretation: Luke 10:38–42', in *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), pp. 51–76, at pp. 57–62.

³⁸ See Wehrli-Johns, 'Maria und Martha'.

³⁹ Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said*, pp. 62–8.

⁴⁰ Warren Carter, 'Getting Martha Out of the Kitchen: Luke 10:38–42', *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 58 (1996), pp. 264–80, at p. 269.

⁴¹ John N. Collins, 'Did Luke Intend a Disservice to Women in the Martha and Mary Story?', *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 28 (1998), pp. 104–11, at p. 110; cf. his *Diakonia: Rinterpreting the Ancient Sources* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

⁴² Adele Reinhartz, 'From Narrative to History: The Resurrection of Mary and Martha', in *Women Like This: New Perspectives on Jewish Women in the Greco-Roman World*, ed Amy-Jill Levine (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), pp. 161–84, at pp. 170–1.

By critiquing conventional literal readings of the passage, these readers reach similar conclusions to those suggested by the allegorical interpretations of Aelred and Bernard. In adopting their methods, however, they do not need to portray themselves as challenging scriptural authority.

Loveday Alexander is notable in discussing some of the Eckhartian insights, although she does not fully appropriate all of them, whether critically or sympathetically.⁴³ She also suggests, in Eckhartian mode, that in this episode, as in others, ‘the Lukan Jesus is more concerned with the reversal of existing value-systems than with the setting-up of new ones; and paradox plays an important part in this process’.⁴⁴ Although this insight could lead in several directions, Alexander regards Martha as the woman who the modern ‘popular exegete’ would be likely to regard as virtuous, but who has, nevertheless, made a mistake and as a result is subject to correction by Jesus.

More frequently, an allegorical reading of the hospitality passage has been refuted on the grounds that there is only one possible allegorical interpretation and that this interpretation cannot be true for theological reasons. Jean Calvin contends: ‘The monks are foolish to seize on this passage, as if Christ were comparing the speculative life with the active.’ A little later, he states that the passage ‘has been wickedly perverted to commend what is called the contemplative life’.⁴⁵ Calvin thus appears to regard the priority of contemplation over action to be intrinsic to the allegorical sense of the passage, and is unwilling to consider any other possibilities. More recently, Joseph Fitzmyer states in his commentary on Luke: ‘To read this episode as a commendation of contemplative life over against active life is to allegorize it beyond recognition and to introduce a distinction that was born only of later preoccupations. The episode is addressed to the Christian who is expected to be *contemplativus(a) in actione*’.⁴⁶ The opening part of this assessment could be challenged on two grounds. First, the priority of contemplation over action is not the only possible allegorical reading of the passage. Second, and more significantly, it is far from clear that an allegorical reading of this particular text is anachronistic. Boyo Ockinga identifies prior reflection on the distinction between action and contemplation in Rabbinic and Egyptian sources, such as Sirach 38:24–39:11, and the *Satire of Trades*. If this is true, then a reading of the hospitality episode as an allegory

⁴³ Loveday Alexander, ‘Sisters in Adversity: Retelling Martha’s Story’, in *Women in the Biblical Tradition*, ed George J. Brooke (Lewiston, ME: Mellen, 1992), pp. 167–86, at pp. 174–5.

⁴⁴ Alexander, ‘Sisters in Adversity’, p. 179.

⁴⁵ Jean Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke*, 3 vols (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), vol. 2, pp. 88–90.

⁴⁶ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X–XXIV* (New York: Doubleday, 1985), pp. 891–5, at pp. 892–3.

for the relation between action and contemplation, and their respective priority, cannot be regarded as a retrospective hellenisation of the text that is antithetical to the culture and period in which it was produced.⁴⁷ The prior sources suggest, by contrast, that these theological and philosophical agendas could quite possibly have motivated its composition. The parables are not the only parts of Luke's Gospel where symbolic intent may be identified.⁴⁸

Recent developments in liturgy and doctrine

In 1950, Pius XII promulgated his encyclical *Munificentissimus Deus*, which pronounced as dogma 'that the Immaculate Mother of God, the ever Virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory' (§44). In this year, Luke 10:38–42 ceased to be the gospel reading on the feast of the Assumption in the Western church, bringing to an end a tradition that had persisted for at least 1300 years.⁴⁹ The reading then assigned to the feast was Luke 1:41–50, in which Mary the mother of Jesus is the principal figure, and which makes more obvious dogmatic inferences about her than Luke 10:38–42. Elizabeth declares Mary to be 'blessed among women' and the mother of her Lord, and Mary, in turn, proclaims that all generations will call her blessed.

The Roman lectionary has now adopted for the feast Luke 1:39–56, which encompasses both the preceding passage and the Revised Common Lectionary gospel, Luke 1:46–55. It thus comprises the whole of the Magnificat but, more significantly, makes a concession to the allegorical tradition in its apparently insignificant opening and concluding verses. In verse 39, Mary departs with haste to the house of Zechariah and Elizabeth, and in verse 56 she remains with Elizabeth for about three months. As Bernard of Clairvaux asked of Mary: 'Did she not act the part of Martha whilst for three months she humbly attended her aged cousin Elizabeth, who was about to become a Mother?'⁵⁰

Throughout these changes, most Orthodox churches, including the Russian and the Greek, have preserved Luke 10:38–42 as the gospel reading

⁴⁷ B. G. Ockinga, 'The Tradition History of the Mary-Martha Pericope in Luke (10:38–42)', in *Ancient History in a Modern University*, ed. T. W. Hillard et al., 2 vols (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), vol. 2, pp. 93–7.

⁴⁸ Luke 5:1–11 and 9:12–17 are two other instances that occur prior to the Triumphal Entry. See also Dennis Hamm, 'Sight to the Blind: Vision as Metaphor in Luke', *Biblica* 67 (1986), pp. 457–77.

⁴⁹ Constable, 'Interpretation', p. 8; cf. *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 42 (1950), pp. 793–5.

⁵⁰ Bernard of Clairvaux, 'Spiritual House', p. 181.

for the liturgy.⁵¹ This is in keeping with the less dogmatic understanding of the Assumption characteristic of the Orthodox churches, in which liturgical exposition of doctrine plays a particularly important role.⁵² In these lectionaries, the passage is immediately followed by Luke 11:27–28, which provides the gospel for the third service in the Revised Common Lectionary, which is the vigil gospel in the Roman lectionary:

While he was saying this, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, 'Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!' But he said, 'Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it!'

It would be wrong, however, to assume this text to be entirely unconnected with Mary and Martha, as a Provençal tradition attributes the affirmation to Martha's maid-servant, named Marcella (or Marcilia).⁵³ The connection of the Assumption gospel reading with the house at Bethany has not, therefore, been entirely lost, even though that which remains is tenuous and obscure.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed a range of allegorical and literal interpretations of the account of the hospitality given by Martha and Mary to Jesus. In particular, it has shown that a hermeneutics of imagination that includes 'ritualization' and 'liturgical celebrations'⁵⁴ has, in fact, been applied to this text through many centuries, owing to its place in the commemoration of the Assumption of Mary. Allegorical interpretation that employs the imagination is not a new invention. This is because the presence in absence of Mary the mother of Jesus in the house of Mary and Martha captures perfectly her presence in absence in the liturgy. Feasts of a person usually originated, and were promoted, in his or her place of burial, but for the one woman with no body now on earth, this could not be possible.⁵⁵ As a result, the principal reading of

⁵¹ e.g. www.bombaxo.com/greek.html [9 March 2006].

⁵² An Orthodox theology of the Assumption is expounded in the collection of sermons and addresses of Alexander Schmemmann, *The Virgin Mary* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1991).

⁵³ *Life of Saint Mary Magdalene and Her Sister*, p. 43; Peters, 'Life of Martha of Bethany', p. 447.

⁵⁴ Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said*, p. 73.

⁵⁵ P. Rouillard and T. Krosnicki (eds), 'Marian Feasts', in *New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, 2nd edn, 15 vols (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 2003), vol. 9, pp. 157–9. Whilst identifying the present yet absent aspect of the commemoration, the authors make no connection with Luke 10:38–42, nor even mention it. The only gospel to which they refer is Luke 2:1–7, which is identified as the earliest on the grounds that it appears in the Old Armenian lectionary, modelled on that of Jerusalem.

this text has, until recently, been allegorical. The episode was, moreover, quite possibly recorded as an allegorical reflection on the relation of action and contemplation. Such a reading of the text suggests the importance of allowing both action and contemplation their mutual independence, as they are represented by separate persons. The intrinsic value of action must, in particular, be recognised, alongside that of contemplation, whether in churches or the individual soul. Both action and contemplation have been omnipresent in the composition, consolidation, translation, exposition and extrapolation of this text. Both will continue to be necessary.