

Book Review: *The New Perspective on Mary and Martha*

By Mary Stromer Hanson (*Wipf & Stock, 2013*)

REVIEWED BY JUDITH A. DIEHL

Recently, as I was listening to a Christian radio station, the female announcer shared that she was feeling guilty about her busy life. She made reference to the biblical “story of Mary and Martha,” typically feeling at fault because she was not taking ample time to “sit at Jesus’ feet” properly. She went on to say that Martha had it wrong because she was more concerned about her chores than she was about being in the presence of the Lord. These two sisters are examples, one positive and one negative.

I drew a deep breath. My first reaction was shock at the self-reproach expressed, and then I was horrified to realize that a multitude of women were listening to the radio station, as I was, and were exposed to this inadequate and potentially damaging interpretation of a “familiar” New Testament story.

Mary Stromer Hanson’s recent publication is written for pastors, teachers, church leaders, and interested laypeople. It is particularly enlightening for Christian women and proves to be a valuable teaching tool as well as a call to ministry for women. As a teaching tool, Hanson’s book demonstrates that we must learn to use good hermeneutical methods to understand biblical characters and their stories correctly. As a call to ministry, Hanson has challenged women to see *both* Mary and Martha as different role models than we have previously been taught.

Hanson is right: Mary and Martha “have become a cliché over the centuries. The mere mention of these two names brings up visions of sisters squabbling over the kitchen work” (3). Over the years, laypeople and biblical scholars alike have stereotyped the Bethany sisters into erroneous “role models” for Christian living—one sister is vilified while the other is complimented. Such interpretations have cast unnecessary burdens on women who carry around an armload of guilt because they have incredible responsibilities to attend to in this life and are unable to spend a great deal of time “sitting at the feet of Jesus.” Hanson’s book is a much-needed starting point in the process of unlearning what we thought we knew about Mary and Martha and a relearning process as it pertains to the New Testament narratives. Certainly, a fresh look and a new perspective on these characters are overdue.

Mary Hanson has employed both good history and good hermeneutics. She opens with a historical reflection on past Christian interpretations of several significant, recognizable narratives in the New Testament: Luke 7:36–50 and 10:38–42, and John 11:1–3 and 17–44. Since recorded exchanges between women and Jesus are unusual in the Gospels, these accounts serve as valuable paradigms. However rare these occasions may be, we also recognize that the name “Mary” occurs in the New Testament with such frequency that often we confuse or combine characters. It is not uncommon for Christian readers and interpreters to conflate various gospel stories, as with that of Mary and Martha. Hanson has investigated the historical and cultural background to help us understand the settings and characters. Of considerable interest is her investigation concerning the location of the community known as Bethany.

Hanson is thorough in her investigation of the New Testament texts, giving adequate consideration to literary features, including authors and intended audiences, motifs, dramatic elements, and character development within the plots of each story. While Hanson points out significant “nitty-gritty” Greek features found in Luke’s narratives, her conclusions and explanations are clear enough for the non-Greek reader to follow. We learn, in fact, that the Greek indicates that “she [Martha] had a sister being called Mary who *also*” (*kai*) sat at Jesus’s feet (Luke 10:39). This implies that both Martha *and* Mary were sitting at Jesus’s feet as disciples to “hear his word” (27). The discussion of the Greek word for “service,” *diakonia* (Luke 10:40), is meticulous and accurate. This word does not limit Martha to kitchen duties, but can refer to “service of the word.” In Acts 6:1, *diakonia* connotes the “daily serving” of food, while, in Acts 6:4, it references “ministry of the word” (29). It is completely unwarranted to say that Martha fusses at Jesus because she needs help in the kitchen, and only Mary is doing “the right thing” by learning from him.

This book serves as a reminder that, if we study the literary narratives of the Bible carefully, we gain better insight into major themes and emphases. Careful study of plots and character development gives us clues to an author’s intended purpose and focus. We may realize that an author can use a surprise ending or interesting disclosure by a character to drive home certain truths. Interpreters have wondered if we are looking at four women—or is it just one woman? In the two passages in Luke and two in John, we see images of women superimposed upon one another. It may be startling to consider the suggestion some posit that the well-behaved, angelic Mary in Luke 10:38–42 and the “woman who had lived a sinful life in that town” (NIV) of Luke 7:36–50 may be one and the same woman. Who is that cryptic character in John 11:2? Is she the same woman we see in Luke’s gospel, and/or the same woman who cries with Jesus in John 11:32–33?

Hanson takes on the challenge of straightening out the whole picture for us. More importantly, she has painted a new picture of the gospel characters to show real, living women who care and cry and serve and follow Jesus. Martha cares for the welfare of others; she opens her home as a ministry to outsiders while managing to minister to those within her own family. Mary has her own ministry: public evangelism and discipleship. The welcome “new perspective” of Mary and Martha is an encounter with women who are called to teach, to learn, to serve, and to minister in Jesus’s kingdom. In her own words, Hanson wants us to know that “There is so much more to Mary and Martha!” (133).

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