Some Eccentric Observations about Martha, Mary and Lazarus

When it comes to the Bible, I admit that I am not an expert, but I am an enthusiastic fan. Although I don't deny, reject, or contradict what I have learned from biblical scholars, I enjoy drawing conclusions, making connections, speculations and interpretations that are not limited by the harsh reality of scholarly research. Because I am not a scholar, I am free to use my imagination when I read the Bible. So here are some reflections on the stories of Martha and Mary. Some are "factual" and some are more imaginative.

First of all, here are the facts. The characters of Martha and Mary appear in only two of the four Gospels. Luke gives us the story of Martha doing the housework and Mary sitting at the feet of Jesus. In Luke's account, Martha complains about the lack of help she gets from her sister. When Luke writes about them, he doesn't mention their brother Lazarus. Luke does include a character named Lazarus in one of the stories that Jesus tells. In that story, which is unique to Luke, Lazarus is the beggar covered with sores who sits at the door of a rich man. I'll have more about that connection later.

John gives us more details about Martha and Mary, including the mention of their brother Lazarus. His Gospel contains two stories about this family from Bethany. The first is the most dramatic. It is the story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead. After Jesus delays His arrival in Bethany, He listens to Martha's plea at her house and then goes to the tomb where Mary voices a similar plea. The story concludes with Lazarus coming out of the tomb. The second story may be a variation on Luke's account. In this story Jesus attends a dinner at the home of Martha, Mary and Lazarus. John mentions that many people were there, not only to see Jesus, but also to see Lazarus who had been raised from the dead. John mentions that Martha waited on them (without complaining about her sister) and that Mary anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped them with her hair. The Gospels of Matthew and Mark tell of a similar anointing at Bethany, but in their accounts the woman is unnamed and the house belongs to "Simon the leper."

Now here's where the imagination takes over. In Luke's story it's easy to imagine Martha as the hard-working, no-nonsense "woman of the house." She appears to be conscientious, and capable. The common image of Mary from this story is the sweet, shy, demure woman, gazing starry-eyed at Jesus and hanging on His every word. I'd like to suggest an alternate image. Maybe Mary was something of a tomboy. After all, the crowd sitting around listening to Jesus was most likely all men. As a tomboy, Mary would have felt right at home with "the guys." And as a tomboy, she may have been clumsy and awkward when faced with cooking and cleaning duties. In that case, the "better part" may have been to keep her out of the kitchen so there would be no chance for her to mess things up.

On the other hand, the tomboy image of Mary is not supported in John's stories about the sisters. Mary appears to be more feminine, more sensitive and more emotional than her sister. Martha is still the practical one, taking care of serving the dinner and realizing that there would be a stench when her brother's tomb is opened. Jesus also calmly and "rationally" assures her about the resurrection. He doesn't respond that way to Mary. Mary's grief at the tomb elicits an emotional response from Jesus. He doesn't try to explain anything to her; He just weeps with her. Also, it's hard to imagine a tomboy engaging in the act of anointing the feet of Jesus and wiping them with her hair. So the tomboy explanation is merely an amusing diversion.

A more intriguing speculation concerns Lazarus. Of all the stories and parables Jesus tells in the Gospels, only one contains the proper name of one of the fictitious characters. All the other characters are simply described, e.g. "a sower," "a farmer," "a merchant," "a man," "a Levite," etc. Only in Luke's Gospel, do we find this story of the rich man and the beggar named Lazarus. Why is this story different? And why is Lazarus the only name used in this way? Recall the end of that story: the rich man asks "Father Abraham" to send Lazarus to warn his brothers because they would believe someone who comes back from the dead. Abraham responds that if the rich man's brothers "do not listen to Moses and the prophets; they will not be convinced even if one should rise from the dead." Aside from Jesus who is telling this story, the most well known person who returned from the grave was Martha and Mary's brother named Lazarus. Is it possible that Luke was aware of the incident with Martha and Mary's brother and chose to leave it out of his Gospel intending to use the name to prove the point of this story? Yet John's Gospel was written after Luke's so how did Luke know that John (or anyone else) will tell the story of Lazarus rising from the dead. And when John compiled his Gospel, was he aware that Lazarus was the one name that Luke would include in all the stories told by Jesus?

I'll add one more possible scenario to the speculation. Suppose Luke did not know about the Lazarus incident in Bethany. Suppose that by the time John got around to writing his Gospel, he realized that this story had not been told and so his Gospel has the only account of it. Now, since the story of the rich man and the beggar is being told by Jesus, suppose that it is Jesus who decides that the beggar needs a name and decides to use the name of His friend from Bethany. Jesus probably knew that His friend did not have long to live. Aware that He Himself was "the resurrection and the life," He anticipated His intervention in the fate of Lazarus. Luke simply records the story as Jesus told it. Luke, himself, may have even wondered why Jesus chose to name this one character in all His stories. If this is the case, then it is a scheme Jesus used to get people like us to spend more time thinking about Him, the stories He told, the stories He lived, and the life He offers to those who believe.

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