

Seeds of Faith for Women Discussion

Martha by Diana Wallis Taylor

What are your overall reactions to the book?

What parts of the story were believable? Why? Did you think there were any parts that were not?

What was the reaction to Jesus appearing in the temple with the money changers?

What were your thoughts about the aftermath of Lazarus being raised from the dead?

What Jewish traditions were presented? Any surprising?

What did you think of the doubting Thomas retelling?

What are your thoughts about the story line of Mary and Thomas?

Mark and Luke are the only gospels to mention Martha, Mary and Lazarus. Why do you think they were left out of the other two?

Compared to the books we have read how would you rate this one? And on a scale of 1-10? Look over the other stories.

Would you recommend this book to someone?

How would you rate this book?

Some background on Martha, Mary and Lazarus

Their names:

Martha means 'lady of the house'.

Mary means 'wise woman' or 'lady'; it is a Greek form of the Hebrew Miriam or Mariam. It was a popular name at the time of Jesus, perhaps because of the beautiful young Jewish princess Mariamme, married to King Herod the Great and murdered by him on a false charge of infidelity. Naming your child Mary or Miriam was a not-too-subtle protest against King Herod and what he had done.

Lazarus means 'God has given help'

His friendship with Martha, Mary and Lazarus was especially valuable since as Jerusalemites they provided not only hospitality but news and support as well.

The elite class consisted of only about 3% of the population. At least 70-80% of the people were peasants. Their main concern was whether there would be enough food to keep their family alive.

There was virtually no middle class, at least as we know it. The 3% elite were the only real consumers of luxury items, with their wealth coming from ownership of the land.

Main ideas in Martha's & Mary's story

The role of women in the Christian church. At the time the gospels were recorded, the early Christians were arguing about what women could and could not do in the early Church. Should they be ministers? Should they be allowed to speak in public meetings? Should the traditional Jewish custom be followed, with ministry held by men only? Or might the Christian communities have priests and priestesses, as other ancient religions did?

- The truth of the Resurrection. Stories about Martha, Mary and Lazarus suggest that women's testimony should be given equal weight with men's. This was vitally important in the Christian story, since the first witnesses to the Resurrection had been women. Could they be trusted?

Jesus visits the home of Martha and Mary: Luke 10:38-42

Martha and Mary are two sisters who offered hospitality to Jesus and the people traveling with him.

They had a brother, Lazarus, the three young people were friends of Jesus. They behaved with him in a natural way, speaking openly about what they thought. Jesus, who was quite capable of overwhelming people with his presence, was informal and easy in their company.

Who were Martha and Mary?

We know little about the background of Martha, Mary and Lazarus. They may have been well-to-do orphans who had the management of their own lives, since there is no mention of their parents. Moreover, the eldest of the three, Martha, appeared to be in control of the household.

They seemed to be affluent. They had a house large enough to accommodate many people, as their hospitality to Jesus and his group of friends shows. They appeared to have no occupation. Mary could afford to buy a very expensive perfume called nard. It was a special gift, not an everyday item, but it showed they were people of means.

None of the three appeared to be married. This was unusual in Jewish society, where people were usually married before the age of 20. It may mean that they were quite young, perhaps still in their teens, or that they were on the edge of society, and not acceptable in some way. In any case, they seem to have been young, comparatively well-off, independent, and intelligent.

- Mary 'sat and listened'. This was the usual posture of a disciple of any teacher in the ancient world. But disciples were usually male, so Mary must have been quietly breaking the rule that reserved study for males, not females.
- Her sister Martha was not merely asking for help. She was demanding that Mary keep to the traditional way of behaving.

Jesus was ignoring the traditional role of women and encouraging Mary to think and learn. He upheld her right to listen, think about ideas, and to develop her mind. She should not be limited to the tasks that society laid down for her, but be allowed access to ideas, as Jewish men were.

- Jesus had previously encouraged the idea of service among his followers, so he did not say that Martha's role of service was unimportant. This would have gone against all his other teaching. What he did say was that being a disciple, and learning about the ideas he was explaining, was even more important

Why is this story so important?

John inserted the story into his gospel to possibly stifle the argument that was raging in the Christian community. Since the day of Pentecost, when the Christian church began, women had been acting as deacons, preaching about Jesus and presiding over eucharistic meals.

But opposition had arisen because this did not mirror the position that women held in society at the time. By telling the stories about Martha and Mary, John showed that Jesus treated women as the equal of men, and implied that Christian practice should do the same.

Why is the anointing with oil so important?

The story of the dinner, as told by John, is set on a Sunday evening, when members of the early Christian communities met to share a eucharistic celebration. This was no accident. John, writing circa 100AD, used several levels of meaning in the story.

- At the first level, Martha 'served' at the meal.
- But on a second level of meaning Martha was acting as a deacon at a eucharistic celebration. The word 'served' in Greek was *diakonein*; it was the term used for deacons in the early Christian church. This word was used in both stories about Martha and Mary, in Luke's and John's gospels.

Anointing with oil has always had deep religious significance.

- It is performed at the coronation of a monarch.
- In the Jewish world, it was a symbolic action which announced that the person anointed was especially favored by God.
- In the Old Testament, prophets anointed future kings, for example, Samuel anointed the future king David.

Question: "Were any of the disciples married?"

Answer: We know for certain that Peter was married because he had a mother-in-law ([Matthew 8:14](#)). The apostle Paul, who was not married, asked the Corinthians whether he also did not have the right to take a believing wife ([1 Corinthians 9:5](#)), as did "the other apostles and the Lord's brothers and Cephas [Peter]." From this, we can assume that Peter was not the only one to have a wife.

Thomas' Later Life

Church tradition and history tells us that Thomas traveled outside of the Roman Empire as a missionary, possibly as far away as India to preach the gospel, which is yet another indication of Thomas' boldness. He may have reached Muziris, India where he baptized several believers and was possibly the first to bring the gospel to the Far East. This might explain why he is considered the Patron Saint of India. His name in the Indian language, "Thoma," remains quite popular to this day in India.

Not very much is known about the method of Thomas' execution but that maybe due to the fact that he was a missionary in faraway India. Church tradition says that while he was establishing a church there, he was stabbed with a spear, dying from the wound. The irony here is that Jesus told Thomas to touch his side and his hands where the wounds from the cross were still visible ([John 10:27](#)). There are so few historical facts that are available beyond this account that we cannot add much more to this account and do so with absolute certainty.