

Extracts from **Jesus and Women in the Gospel of John**

Karen Heidebrecht Thiessen

Jesus and Martha of Bethany

The second great conversation Jesus has with a woman is with Martha of Bethany (John 11). While the climactic miracle in this story is the raising of Lazarus, John gives great prominence to Mary and Martha throughout the narrative. Rather than attempt a detailed examination of the entire passage, this study will focus on the way the author portrays Martha.

John introduces the three characters involved in the narrative in verse 1. It is of note that he portrays Lazarus in terms of his relationship to Mary and Martha. It seems likely that in the eyes of the Evangelist, both Martha and Mary were more prominent than Lazarus. The author obviously expects the story of Mary's anointing of Jesus to be familiar to his readers since he refers to it in 11:2 but has not yet narrated the event itself (cf. 12:1-8). Jesus names Martha, Mary and Lazarus as objects of Jesus' love (v. 5). The only other individual in John of whom this is said is the Beloved Disciple. Witherington feels that this implies that Mary and Martha as well as Lazarus were disciples of Jesus (108).

Already in verse 3 the narrator encourages us to see Mary and Martha as persons of faith. The message they send to Jesus telling him of Lazarus' illness hints that they believe only Jesus can deal with their drastic situation (Witherington, 109). This impression is strengthened when Martha tells Jesus that if he had been there her brother would not have died. Martha's response to Jesus' assurance that her brother will rise again (verse 23) gives evidence of her theological awareness, expressing the belief of Pharisaic Judaism in the resurrection of the dead at the last judgement (Ellis, 186). It is at this point that Jesus attempts to move Martha from her affirmation of traditional eschatological expectations to a realization that he is the one who fulfills Jewish expectations.

Jesus addresses one of his "I am" sayings to a woman, and Martha responds with a climactic confession of Jesus as "the {58} Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world" (verse 27). Her confession is similar to Simon Peter's great confession in Matthew 16:15-19, which has often been viewed as related to his position of leadership. In fact, this is the closest parallel to Peter's confession found anywhere in the Gospels.