

Note A
On the "Woman" of Luke 7:37, and the Mary of John 11:2, and Mary Magdalene
"Martha, Mary, Lazarus"

by

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Introductory Comment: We have posted this note on Martha, Mary, and Lazarus because it is a detailed and very interesting chronological presentation of the events in the Gospels related to these characters who played such an important role in the life and ministry of Jesus. However, there are differences of opinion among scholars as to the correct sequence of events and the identity of the characters, especially the "Marys." G. H. Trench's careful analysis is one view. Others can be found in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*.

There were three feasts in the same house at Bethany, viz.--

1. Luke 7:36-50. (And to this one John alludes in 11:2.) *The first anointing.*
2. Luke 10:38-42. *No anointing.*
3. Matt. 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9; John 12:1-9. *The second anointing.*

Mary Magdalene is present on all three occasions. She is the same as the "woman who was in the city, a sinner" (Luke 7:37), and the same as Mary the sister of Martha.

Simon the Pharisee of Luke 7 is the same as "Simon the leper" of Matt. 26 and Mark 14. He is probably the husband of Martha.

(1) The first feast in this house is that of Luke 7:36-50. The occasion seems to be our Lord's visit to Jerusalem at the Feast of Pentecost (John 5:1). The house belongs to a Pharisee named Simon. The words "who was in the city, a sinner" must mean Jerusalem (τῇ πόλει). Therefore the scene of the feast is near Jerusalem and not in Galilee. This woman must have had the right of entry to the house, for ordinary public "sinners" had no open access to a Pharisee's house such as the story requires. Pharisees and "sinners" did not mix like that. So she evidently belongs to the house, [and] this would be natural if she was the sister of Martha, whom we suppose to be Simon's wife.

There is no reason to suppose that "the woman" was a public harlot, nor yet a notorious "gay" [having loose morals] lady. Quite the reverse. She is obviously one who had an illicit *liaison* known only to her immediate relatives, viz. her sister Martha, her brother-in-law Simon the host, and no doubt her brother Lazarus; for no one at the table but Simon

seems to know her secret, inasmuch as Simon's silent thought (v. 39) implies that while a Prophet by his divine intuition would recognize her character, still it would require a Prophet's intuition to do so. We gather therefore that she was not known to the public to be living an irregular life.

This "woman" (Mary Magdalene) hears that Jesus "is eating in the Pharisee's house," *i.e.* she learns beforehand that He has been asked to dine and has accepted to dine tonight in the house of Simon--her brother-in-law, as we suppose. Her sister Martha may have told her. She knows that this Guest is He who had recently (perhaps on this very day, when He was in Jerusalem at the Feast of Pentecost) cast out of her herself seven demons, and had stirred in her a desire for a holier life. Once free from their obsession she has made up her mind to make a clean break with her past. It has been the crisis of her life. Full of gratitude to Him, she will go and see Him again.

Simon, though he has asked Jesus to eat with him, has done Him no honor when He came. Jesus has been given no water for His feet, no kiss of welcome, nor yet the customary drops of fragrant oil on His head. Nor has He been given the seat of honor. He has been distinctly and openly slighted and has probably been given the lowest seat--the right-hand bottom corner of the *triclinium*, and nearest the door.

So good a right of entry to that house has "the woman" that she arrives there before the guests, before our Lord Himself (see v. 45: "but she from the time that I entered in," as is the true reading--not "from the time she entered in"). And there she waits, as we suppose, with her sister. She notices how He is received by Simon, marks the omission of all the common acts of courtesy from the host to his Guest. Doubtless she is not surprised; she knows her Pharisee brother-in-law. But she is hurt and distressed; and to the best of her ability, and so far as in her humility she dares, she remedies the rudeness by her tears upon His feet, her kiss upon His feet, her anointing of His feet.

It is clear that both Simon and "the woman" had had services rendered to them by our Lord. This is required by the parable (vv. 41-47). It seems probable that this Simon a Pharisee (being "Simon the leper" of Matt. 26 and Mark 14) had been cured of leprosy by our Lord, and the name hung to him in memory of the marvelous cure. Indeed he is the leper of Matt. 8:2-4, Mark 1:40-45, Luke 5:12-15. A certain gratitude had induced him to ask his Healer to his table on returning to his home at Bethany after his cure, on this the first opportunity he had of showing a little return of kindness. But the pride of the Pharisee was too strong in him to let him show honor.

The "woman," on the other hand (being Mary Magdalene), had had seven demons cast out of her (Luke 8:2) as we may suppose very recently--even that very morning, and has had the grace of contrition given to her. Her gratitude is contrasted with Simon's. He had been cured of bodily leprosy and was only a little grateful, for his Pharisaim hindered any spiritual life. She had been indeed in [a] worse plight, but of her soul's cure she was supremely conscious, and for her release from spiritual leprosy she was supremely

grateful.

It is clearly to the circumstances of this anointing by Mary that John alludes in 11:2: "it was Mary who anointed," etc., ἥν δὲ Μαρία ἡ ἀλείψασα, which might more accurately be rendered, "she who anointed, etc., was Mary," giving now for the first time in writing the name of the "sinner" of Luke 7. Now that she was dead and known to have died in sanctity, her name might be made known far and wide. Why should John in 11:2 tell us that Mary the sister of Martha and Lazarus was the Mary who in the next chapter anoints our Lord's feet when we have only to wait for his account of that incident to see that she was? Clearly he is, in 11:2, referring *back* to that crisis in her life in this very house some nine months ago when she came first to love our Lord, and as Luke in his gospel had said, "wiped His feet with her hair."

But John in 11:1,2 tells us much more than the English versions let out. He there says that Lazarus the brother was "of (ἀπὸ) Bethany," *i.e.* was resident there (as were Mary and Martha at the time, and earlier in Luke 10:38-42). But he adds he was "native of (ἐκ) the village, not named, of Mary and of Martha." What village? Some village in the township of Magdala of Galilee, which is why he names Mary first, whom everyone knew as Mary Magdalene, Mary of Magdala the notoriously beautiful woman. And he then goes on to identify this Mary of Magdala, this Mary sister of Lazarus and Martha, with the unnamed "sinner" whom Luke, writing while she (or her brother or sister) was yet alive, had purposely left unnamed.

The whole family--Lazarus, Martha, Mary--were natives of the township of Magdala in Galilee. We may suppose, (A) that Martha on marrying Simon settled at Bethany, close to Jerusalem; (B) that Mary was either living in Jerusalem with her paramour when we first hear of her (Luke 7:37) or else had recently come up for the Feast of Pentecost, late May, A.D. 28. But thereafter on reforming her life she followed our Lord into Galilee, ministering to Him of her wealth (Luke 8:2,3).

(2) The second time our Lord is recorded as eating in this house is Luke 10:38-42, which seems to be on the occasion of His coming up to Jerusalem from Perea at the time of the Feast of the Dedication, early December, A.D. 28. Here, while the procession of pilgrims to the feast goes on to Jerusalem (ἐν τῷ πορεύεσθαι αὐτους), He Himself (αὐτὸς, *i.e.* apart from the crowd, but accompanied by His immediate disciples), "entered into a certain village," doubtless Bethany, which was near the road from Jericho to Jerusalem. Here Martha received Him "into her house." The house is in all probability the same house as that in John 11 and 12, the house called in Matt. 26 and Mark 14 "the house of Simon the leper"--that same Simon the Pharisee whom we have already suspected to be the husband of Martha. Her sister Mary (Magdalene) is now living with her. Martha as hostess serves as is the Eastern custom, *i.e.* prepares the food and the table. Simon, Martha's husband, is conjectured to be no longer living.

It is six months since the crisis (end of May, A.D. 28) in Mary Magdalene's life in this same house. After that, as we saw, she had followed our Lord into Galilee "ministering to Him of her substance" (Luke 8:1-3). Subsequently, when He finally left Galilee (end of September, A.D. 28), she and the other women also left (Luke 23:55, cf. with 24:10), *i.e.* at the time of the Feast of Tabernacles. Thereafter, when our Lord went to Perea, Mary Magdalene seems to have stayed, living with her sister at Bethany, where we have just found her at the Feast of the Dedication, early December, A.D. 28.

(3) The third time He is recorded as eating in this house is on Saturday, March 19, A.D. 29, "six days before the Passover," (John 12:1-8). The occasion is the same as that of Matt. 26 and Mark 14, and is not mentioned by Luke. The house is described by Matthew and Mark as "the house of Simon the leper" (*i.e.* the Simon the Pharisee of Luke 7). It is the same house as that of Luke 10 where Martha receives Him "into her house," she being the wife (or possibly at that time widow) of Simon. And it is the same house as that in which Martha and Mary were living when Lazarus was raised to life, as told in chapter 11 of John's gospel.

Again on this occasion Martha as hostess serves (John 12:2). Lazarus is named by John alone as being present. His reason for naming him is to connect the supper with the recent raising of Lazarus, as though gratitude for that act had been an additional reason for the supper; hence the "therefore" which the correct reading has in verse 2, "There, *therefore*, they made Him a supper."

It has been supposed by many, that as Simon plays no part at this supper he was no longer living, though the house was still known by his name. For a similar reason he is supposed to have died in the interval between Luke 7:36 and Luke 10:38, *i.e.* between the Feast of Pentecost (May) of A.D. 28 and the Feast of Dedication (December) of the same year.

Matthew and Mark make no mention of Lazarus, he not being essential to the purpose for which they record the feast.

In the accounts of Matt. 26 and Mark 14, the woman appears with just the same right of entry to the house as she had in Luke 7. They do not name her for the same reason that Luke did not--she was living when Matthew and Mark and Luke wrote their gospels. Were it not for John's account (ch. 12) no one would have guessed from Matthew's or Mark's (or Luke's) accounts that the woman was Mary the sister of Martha.

According to Matthew and Mark, she poured the ointment upon His *head*, Mark adding that she first broke its alabaster vessel and that it was pure spikenard, very precious. According to John she took a pound (λίτρα, *i.e.* 8 or 12 oz. according as the word is understood strictly, or as commonly used) of very precious pure spikenard, and anointed

His *feet* and wiped His feet with her hair, *i.e.* after anointing them. The two accounts are obviously reconciled by supposing that she first anointed His head with a few drops of it and emptied the remaining, and much the greater, part on His feet. She clearly could not empty the whole on His head.

On this occasion our Lord was, of course, the Guest of the evening and had been received with all ceremony. As such, therefore, here His feet would have been already washed and needed no washing with tears and wiping with her hair, such as they had received in Luke 7:38 where He was a guest without honor. Therefore here she only wipes the *ointment* from His feet with her hair. Again on the former occasion (Luke's) she anointed only His feet (v. 46), as not daring to do more. Here (Matt., Mark) she anoints His head and (John 12) His feet. Here there was no neglect to remedy, but she knows His death and burial are near and she will do Him what little honor she still can.

It may be asked how could she on this occasion have reached His head if He were reclining at table. Take a typical *triclinium*.

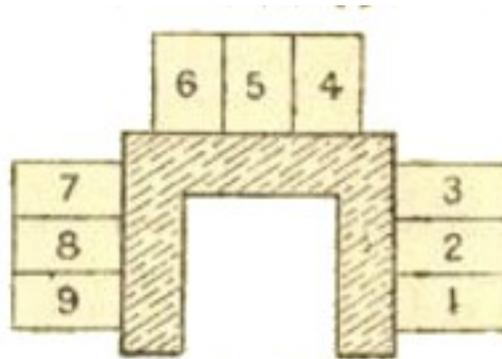


FIG. C.

It is at once evident she can reach the heads of only six people, no matter how many there may be at table, viz. Nos. 1 and those here marked 3, 4, 6, 7, 9. Of these, [the] No. 1 position was always the lowest--the place perhaps occupied by our Lord at the feast of Luke 7. The place of the most honored guest of the event was in the angle at the couch marked on [the] plan as No. 6--the place occupied by our Lord probably at the feast of Matt. 26, Mark 14, John 12.

If there were more than nine at table, the divan here marked 4, 5, 6, would be prolonged to the right accordingly), or more couches might be added below the present Nos. 1 and 9.

At a very great feast there would be several *triclinia*.

The Fathers of the Church East and West are practically unanimous in identifying Mary of Magdala with Mary the sister of Martha and with the "sinner" of Luke, at least so far as I know them.

There is a tradition (of no great authority) that Mary Magdalene had been divorced from her Jewish husband and had thereupon married or lived with a Roman (Gentile) officer. This would probably entitle her to the name *ἁμαρτωλός*, "sinner."

This is Note A from *A Study of St John's Gospel* by G. H. Trench (London: John Murray, 1918). **Note:** The text has not been modified, except that punctuation has been modernized.