

# A FRESH LOOK AT MARTHA

## NOT REBUKING BUT RHYMING

In Luke 10.38-42 and reflected in John 11.1 and 12.1-3 Martha is stressed with practical tasks and asks Our Lord to insist that her sister help her. We are accustomed to hearing sermons describe Christ's response as tough and almost disparaging of Martha. In fact, the Aramaic of this exchange gives an altogether different perspective. The Aramaic phrase Jesus uses is in poetic form which is His Rabbinic method of helping Martha and us to remember His words more easily. Its poetic rhythm and rhyming are playful, gentle, teasing. Jesus' manner in doing this conveys a loving and understanding alternative view to Martha. Read it from right to left.

Tab,t,a ܬܒܬܐ mnat,a ܡܢܬܐ ..... mart'a ܡܪܬܐ mart'a ܡܪܬܐ

I have put the Aramaic phrase with its phonetic transliteration where the memorable rhymes describe the most important words: 'Martha, Martha... the good part.' In other words, He is saying, 'Martha, Martha [you must choose] the good part...' That is: *What you are doing Martha is correct for you and for others but there is another aspect or part which is also true for you. See, Mary has chosen it and you must also do so at this moment.* He also said 'one thing is necessary' and I would like to look at that briefly because there is a nuanced reference to the first and great commandment, the Shema of Israel, running beneath the text we have in the Aramaic.

There are several places in the Gospels which are translated into English as 'necessary/needful'. At the finding of the Boy Jesus in the Temple, Our Lord said to His Mother, 'Why have you sought me (elsewhere)?<sup>1</sup> Do you not know/understand that it is necessary for me to be in My Father's House?' The Boy Jesus did not use the word *necessary* ܡܠܘܚܘܢܐ (D'MeT,B'aEYoA) in the text of Luke 2 as He does later in Luke 10.42 when

speaking to Martha, but the Aramaic of Luke 2.49 uses ܡܠܘܚܘܢܐ (wale) which is an adjective of place *necessary, right and proper* for Him to be there. In the Aramaic text for Luke 24.26 Christ uses ܡܠܘܚܘܢܐ (t,iyd, to the disciples on the way to Emmaus and although the Aramaic verb/passive participle means 'to prepare', the nuanced sense of it is that the preparation *was necessary*, therefore the English chooses this interpretation. The translation is primarily addressing the fulfilment of the prophecies of the Tanakh in relation to the destiny of the Messiah. St Irenaeus in his treatise against the heresies expresses how the Gospels, and the young Ecclesia did this: "...He [Mark] thus clearly says that the words of the holy prophets are the beginning of the Gospel... Mark, inspired by the prophetic Spirit coming down to men

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<sup>1</sup> Why have you sought me (elsewhere)?: Etheridge translation Luke 2:49 [dukhrana.org](http://dukhrana.org) (accessed 9/10/2024).

from on high, began with the words: *The beginning of the Gospel as it is written in the Prophet Isaias ...*<sup>2</sup> Further on in the same chapter in Luke 24.46 Christ says to the disciples that it is *necessary/ right/ fitting* זָדִיֻּק **zad,eq** for the Christ to suffer and by so doing it is possible to see that the use of this word encompasses both the Passion and the Love of the Godhead for fallen humanity. By using the word as theologically dense as זָדִיֻּק **zad,eq** which means the same in Hebrew צַדִּיק **tsaddiyq / righteous** the Lord is referring both to Himself, the *Righteous One*, and also to those who are made righteous through His innocent suffering. But it is translated as ‘*necessary*’ for the purposes of this passage in Luke’s Gospel.

Our Lord says to Martha in the conversation in which she complains that her sister Mary is not helping her, that one thing is *necessary/required* and that Mary has chosen the better part, to sit at His feet and listen to the Word. This response to Martha is an immensely economic way of describing the main thrust of this paper and I will illustrate this now.

In the rhyme which we examined above in Christ’s response to Martha, the first two words and the final two words of the response are those which rhyme.

Tab,t,a ܬܒܬܐ **mnat,a** ܡܢܬܐ ..... mart'a ܡܪܬܐ mart'a ܡܪܬܐ

‘*Martha, Martha..... the good part.*’ In between the rhyming words at the beginning and the end, the Magister uses the numinous word ‘one’ ܗܕܐ **Hd,a**) from ܗܕܐ Hd. ‘*One [thing] is necessary...*’. As a numeral it is just that, ‘one’. However, Etheridge has translated it as: *but (there) is the one that is needed...*<sup>3</sup> That translation shifts the meaning towards our theme. When ‘one’ ܗܕܐ **Hd,a**) is used theologically, Christologically, or spiritually in scriptural texts, it is a reference, sometimes very nuanced, to the Shema of Israel, that God is One, and to the First Commandment. The Judaic soul will always recognise this reference however veiled, and Martha was quintessentially Jewish. The Aramaic ܕܡܬܒܘܢܐ **d'met,b'a(ya** means ‘*to seek, request, ask, or require*’ and here it is translated as ‘*necessary*’, or ‘*required*’. The verbal root is ܒܘܢܐ **b()**. Here it means in its passive participle form, “*that which is necessary*”. It is in the Ethpeel (passive reflexive) conjugation.

The recognition of the Shema in this conversation between Martha and Our Lord would have been obvious to Jewish Christians well accustomed to Rabbinic methods. It was obvious to me as one who has worked with Hebrew and Aramaic for several decades. It may not be obvious to those who do not have these languages and the thought forms inherent to them. I suggest, therefore, a brief excursus before moving on.

<sup>2</sup> St Irenaeus *Against the Heresies* as used in *Lectionnaire Monastique* for Vigils of the Feast of St. Mark.

<sup>3</sup> J.W. Etheridge’s 1849 translation of the Aramaic Peshitta New Testament (*The Apostolical Acts and Epistles, From the Peschito, or Ancient Syriac*)



the Divinity of the Son, who is in the One of the Shema. She knows the One who is before her as she serves. So does her sister Mary who is at His feet.

In reality, when looking at these verbal details it becomes clear that Our Lord was saying something like this to Martha: “... *The One is seated before you.... one thing is necessary [which is the first commandment as shown in the Shema and which you know and follow with all your heart] but you, Martha, have become exhausted and stressed with the second commandment which is to love/serve, your neighbour. Both are necessary and are continuous with each, Mary has chosen the first at this point, to sit at the feet of the One. It shall not be taken from her. But your service, your love of neighbour springs, as it should, from the first commandment and is an expression in service, of your love for the One....*” He is acknowledging in this nuanced reference to the Shema, that both the sisters have recognised in

Him His union with the Father.... “I and my Father are *one*” **أحد** Had, as in John 10.30. ‘one’

**أحد** Had. John uses this word repeatedly in this sense and meaning, most notably in John 17 in the High Priestly Prayer. Both sisters love, serve and adore. Both do so because love is the resolution, the bond between contemplation and service. Christ’s response to Martha is far from being a simple castigation or confining of her to ‘active’ spirituality. It is many layered, as she would have understood immediately. She went on to be true to herself, serving, giving, working, loving, contemplating throughout, the One she loved.