

CHRIST IN THE HOUSE OF MARTHA AND MARY

by Alan Senior



In this early painting by Jan Vermeer we see Jesus in the Bethany house belonging to Martha. 'Martha' meant 'lady' and as such she was an owner of property. The story in Luke 10: 38-42 states that Martha was angry because, whilst she was busy preparing and serving some food for their visitor, Mary merely sat at his feet listening to the teachings. So she complained, saying: "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work? Ask her to help me." Jesus replied: "Martha, Martha – you worry about so many things, but only one thing matters, which Mary now knows and it will remain with her."

This almost seems like a rebuke and somewhat unfair but all spiritual teachers and mystics stress that only in complete quietude of body and mind can that 'still small voice' be heard. Mary is now someone 'with ears to hear', and is able to comprehend the mysteries.

In the Gnostic *Gospel of Mary* (see *The Nag Hammadi Library*, ed. James M. Robinson, Harper San Francisco 1990, p. 523 f.) Jesus imparts to her the Inner Mysteries and later she attempts to reveal these secret teachings to the other disciples in her role as 'apostle to the apostles'.

Also, we read in John 11: 20 that Martha had rushed out to meet Jesus when she learnt of his arrival at the house, but Mary remained indoors. This is an interesting detail because a strict code in Jewish law says that a *bride* is not allowed to leave the house and greet her husband until receiving his consent to do so. This was, perhaps, the reason why the episode was withheld in the earlier *Gospel of Mark* and it is often used as an argument to suggest that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were man and wife.

However, Vermeer has concentrated here on depicting the active and the contemplative life – what the Gnostics called the *psychic state* of activity (doing good works) and the *pneumatic state* of higher understanding or transcendence. Martha is unaware of her essential nature; that is, according to the Gnostics, 'realization of the Good'. We don't merely have to do good works to achieve this realization, because *being one with all that is* means that we no longer identify with the personality but with *the Good*. In this sense the character of Martha has some way to go on the path of self-realization.

Later in the same house, Lazarus, recently returned from the dead (which esoterically means being awakened to higher consciousness) joins the two women when Mary anoints Jesus with costly spikenard from an alabaster jar. This is another 'marriage' argument because such anointing was a commitment by the wife unto death, which is why Mary went to the tomb with the jar, as a wife, to anoint Jesus again after his death. Other arguments stem from the *Gospel of Philip*, where we read that Jesus often kissed her, leading to the other disciples taking exception, and the *Gospel of Thomas*, which calls her 'the companion of the Saviour', in Greek *koinonos*, meaning 'consort'; that is, a constant and intimate partner.

Martha, meanwhile, is not depicted anywhere as a regular disciple but she *does* feature in the Gnostic *Pistis Sophia* ('Faith-Wisdom') with Mary Magdalene, together with Jesus' mother Mary and another follower named Salome, all of whom take part in the Wisdom Discussions, whilst in a later legend she is a companion to Mary during their exile in Provence, France.