An Excerpt from Raised from Obscurity

Jesus’ pronouncement to Martha (10:38-42) accords with several other statements made in surrounding pericopes concerning hearing and doing the word. By implication, if Mary responds positively to what she hears from Jesus she is part of the blessed company of disciples (Luke 10:23–24; 11:28) and she becomes part of the true family of Jesus (8:19–21).

The final clause “which will not be taken away (ἀφορισθήσεται) from her” (Luke 10:42) is quite elusive in meaning. The point appears to be that the teaching of Jesus has eternal value, whereas the performance of domestic chores does not. Alternatively, Jesus may be stressing that in no way will Mary be asked to leave her position to assist Martha.

By means of this story, Luke expands the category of discipleship to include women as well as men. Clearly he is not drawing demarcation lines between male and female disciples in the sense that the women serve and the men are devoted to the word of God. Nor does the narrative allow us to interpret the passage, as do a number of feminist interpreters, not as descriptive of a historical event in the ministry of Jesus, but as prescriptive for leadership roles in the church of Luke’s day.

For example, Barbara Reid and Kathleen Corley, both following Elisabeth Schlüssler Fiorenza, read the account of Mary and Martha against a subtext of an ongoing squabble regarding women’s roles in the early church. In this scenario, Luke, through the words of Jesus, sides with those who wish to keep women in silent passive roles. Mary, in sitting Jesus’ feet, portrays submission to male leadership. Martha, on the other hand, represents those involved in ministerial service, who are ‘burdened’ by those who are opposed to women’s involvement in ministry.

Such proposals, however, not only rest on a number of questionable translations, they privilege a hypothetical subtext over Luke’s actual narrative, and questionably employ allegory as an interpretive approach for that narrative. Sadly, these views muzzle the narrative’s powerful message about Jesus’ regard for women and the nature of their membership in the kingdom of God.

This episode yields a powerful narratival proposition beyond its specific details. The proposal is informed by the convergence of three interests in the narrative. These interests, and the proposition that arises comes together as: Listening to the words of Jesus, full-fledged discipleship, and membership in his true family provide the coordinates for a new realm of life for women who believe in Jesus.