CHAPTER ONE

THE ANOINTING OF JESUS AND
THE MARY-MARTHA STORIES

Luke 7. 36-50 / John 12. 1-8

Both Luke (7. 36-50) and John (12. 1-8) contain accounts of the anointing of Jesus’ feet by a woman, accounts containing one striking parallel: in both the woman dries his feet with her hair. ¹ Moreover in John’s account the woman’s name is Mary, and Martha, identified in Jn. 11. 1 as her sister, is mentioned as serving—all of which is reminiscent of Lk. 10. 38 ff., where sisters with the same names dominate an incident in which Jesus is, as in Jn. 12. 1 ff., a guest, and where Martha also (v. 10) serves. Though these are not the first parallels which occur in the two gospels, we shall examine them first because they demonstrate the fact that John knew Luke’s gospel.

Is there evidence that the author of one of these accounts has drawn on the other? In themselves the verbal similarities (Lk.: ταῖς θριξίν τῆς κεφαλῆς αὐτῆς ἐξέμασσεν, Jn: ἔξωμαξεν ταῖς θριξίν αὐτῆς) do not ensure this, for the same action could hardly be otherwise described. ² Moreover, the contexts in which these words are found differ significantly. In Luke the anointing occurs in the house of Simon a Pharisee who has invited Jesus there as his guest,³ the woman is a prostitute the sign of whose repentence is that she bathes Jesus’ feet in her tears, wipes the feet with her hair, and kisses and anoints them. The anointing is integrally related ⁴ to a

¹ It may be assumed in the course of this monograph that the statement is made that a feature is common to Luke and John only when this feature is found neither in Mark nor Matthew—unless, of course, the opposite is explicitly stated.
² So, correctly, Schniewind, op. cit., p. 23.
³ Where the incident takes place isn’t clear. The position in the gospel points to Galilee, but as Bernard, Gospel according to St. John, p. 410, says, v. 34 makes it likely that the incident’s being narrated at this point is due solely to thematic considerations.
⁴ The passage is not free of difficulties, which have given rise to a number of surgical efforts, for which see the commentaries. We need not discuss them there. Suffice it to say that the vivid picture of the sinner’s weeping and anointing action does not, as Bultmann, Geschichte der synoptischen
short discourse by Jesus highlighted by a parable, the occasion of which is Simon’s reproach of Jesus. In John, on the other hand, the incident occurs in Bethany at the opening of the events of the final Passover, in the presence of Lazarus, with Mary anointing Jesus’ feet. But here, what she wipes from his feet with her hair is not as in Luke her tears, but the ointment; and the incident results in Jesus’ defending her action against Judas Iscariot, who has complained of the waste of the expensive ointment. In contrast to these sharp divergences are the extraordinary contacts between John’s account and that contained in Mk. 14. 3-9 (which Matthew follows closely): (a) the 300 denarii as the price of the ointment, (b) the location of the incident in Bethany, at the beginning of the passion account, (c) the reproach to Jesus about the woman’s extravagance, (d) Jesus’ statement about the poor made in defense of the woman, (e) the reference to the anointing of Jesus’ body after his death, above all (f) the occurrence of πιστικός, a word of uncertain meaning found nowhere else in Greek literature as early as this its sole use in the New Testament. 1 These similarities, especially the use of πιστικός, make it absolutely certain that John has here drawn on Mark, using Mark’s text directly as a source, and that he means to record the same event as Mark does.

But John has not only drawn heavily on Mark, he has taken two elements, the anointing of the feet and the drying with hair, from Luke’s account. The latter detail fits very badly in John’s account 2; it is inexplicable that the salve would be wiped off by Mary—the whole point is that it should remain on the feet. The fact that a very large amount of salve 3 was used cannot by Tradition, pp. 19 f. maintains, give the impression of having been composed by the third evangelist on the basis of the very different anointing account in Mark and added to what Bultmann sees as the original element, the parable. Rather Luke replaces the Marcan anointing account by another one familiar to him. Plummer’s exegesis, Gospel according to St. Luke, ad loc., whereby the whole incident, with the possible exception of vv. 48-50, forms an integral whole, is more convincing; and indeed the Lucan account represents a tradition as independent of the Marcan tradition as it is (see below) of the Johannine.

1 Matthew reads here instead of Mark’s and John’s νάρδου πιστικός simply βαρύτημον.
2 This, and the fact that the detail fits well in Luke, indicates that the borrowing was on John’s part, not Luke’s.
3 A λίτρα if equivalent to the Latin pound (libra) is about 12 ounces (327. 45 grams), though Strack-Billerbeck, Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch, II, ad loc., according to rabbinic reckoning arrives at the somewhat smaller amount 273 gr.