

# Rescuing Martha:

A RESPONSE TO  
ELIZABETH SCHRADER POLCZER

By Darrell Post



The Winter 2024 issue of *Biblical Archeology Review* (BAR) featured an article by Elizabeth Schrader Polczer titled “The Mystery of Mary and Martha,” in which the author proposes the existence of a *secret text* of John 11.<sup>1</sup> She claims editors in the second century rewrote the story of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus to hide the original secret story written about Lazarus and only *one* sister, Mary, who she claims is Mary Magdalene. The motive of the editors, according to Schrader Polczer, was to prevent Mary Magdalene’s legacy from eclipsing the apostle Peter’s in the early church.

One might rightly expect such a bold proposal to be well supported by newly discovered evidence. How else would such a claim find its way into the pages of *BAR*? But Schrader Polczer instead appeals to previously known evidence, presenting her theory as the result of her examination of nearly 300 manuscripts. She asserts that the character Martha presents enough unusual textual issues to demonstrate that she was *not* part of the story penned by John. This newly published article in *BAR* presents an abbreviated form of Schrader Polczer’s 2017 publication in *Harvard Theological Review*.<sup>2</sup>

Over the past six years I have completed my own research in John 11 where I have checked every word in the chapter against 2,221 Greek manuscripts. The evidence collected and soon to be published validates the overall textual integrity of the narrative, meaning John 11 lacks textual variants that are both difficult to resolve and detrimental to one’s ability to understand the apostle’s message. I will demonstrate below that the proposal of Schrader Polczer lacks a consistent pattern of evidence, and that the conclusions she draws from the evidence often prove complicated and speculative rather than simple and probable.

*The Raising of Lazarus*, tempera and gold on panel, by Duccio di Buoninsegna, 1310–1311. Kimbell Art Museum, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=7125641>.

The strongest research methodology seeks to embrace the simplest solution that most easily explains the data without creating additional problems. Here is where Schrader Polczer’s explanation of the data repeatedly falls short, as she attempts to explain a variety of seemingly unrelated textual anomalies as all illustrating one large historical theory. Her methodology has failed to win the support of leading New Testament textual critic Tommy Wasserman,<sup>3</sup> and Richard G. Fellows, who has shown a better explanation of the textual variants in John 11 that involve personal pronouns. Fellows argues that there was a scribal tendency to favor the masculine pronoun forms and to conform the text to relate characters to men instead of women.<sup>4</sup>

Schrader Polczer begins with the wording of John 11:1 in one of the oldest Greek manuscripts, P66 (ca. AD 200), where the scribe corrected his wording from “the village of Mary and of *Mary* his sister” to “the village of Mary and of *Martha* her sister.” Schrader Polczer sees the initial wording of P66 as evidence for an earlier form of the text, although she concedes that it could just be a scribal mistake. And in fact, a scribal mistake is the explanation that makes the most sense. P66 is known for many scribal errors and corrections, and we should expect that *Maria* and *Martha* would be easily confused since they differ in the Greek by only one letter (ι vs. θ).<sup>5</sup>

When the scribe creating P66 initially wrote “his [αυτου] sister” at the end of verse one instead of “her [αυτης] sister,” this may have been an example of the common scribal mistake of unconsciously writing the wrong pronoun form, resulting in the wrong gender. Alternatively, the copyist may have penned “his” as a conscious decision to relate Martha to her brother, as suggested by Fellows.

My research will show that in nearly every instance in John 11:1–12:2 where a personal pronoun is used, some scribes have accidentally written the wrong pronoun form, resulting in the wrong case, number, or gender, sometimes with comedic effect. John 11:2 records how Mary anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped off *his* feet with *her* hair. Five scribes wrote that Mary wiped off her own feet; another scribe wrote that it was the feet of two or more people. Another wrote that she wiped off his feet with *his* hair. One scribe wrote that she used the hair of two or more women, while five scribes wrote that it was the hair of two or more men.

Schrader Polczer also seems guilty of confirmation bias in her presentation of the data. In P66, the scribe first wrote in 11:3 that “Mar[?]a sent [singular form] to him, saying [singular form]. . .” The same hand then changed the parsing forms to plural, and the proper name to “the sisters,” matching the text we read today. The original proper name, except for the final alpha, was scratched away so that “the sisters” (αἱ ἀδελφαί) could be written over it. The only prior letter that is impossible to still see is the iota or theta that determines *Maria* or *Martha*.<sup>7</sup> Schrader Polczer concedes that “it is impossible to tell” which was written, and I agree, but she first says the name was “presumably ‘Maria.’” Why presume this when it cannot be known? Just because the scribe first wrote the nonsense reading “of Mary and of Mary his sister” in 11:1 does not mean Martha could not have been the erased name in 11:3. In fact, from 11:5 through 12:2, Martha was written correctly by the copyist of P66 in every instance. But if the scribe first wrote Martha in 11:3, then P66 argues *against* Schrader Polczer’s proposal, not for it. My own analysis of the manuscript image has found that the space between the removed rho (ρ) and the alpha (α) in 11:3 is greater than the space between these same letters in Maria’s name as found written in chapters 11 and 12 in P66. The theta (θ) is wider than the iota (ι), suggesting that *Martha* may have been written in 11:3, not *Maria*. But I would be guilty of irresponsible bias to affirm that what the scribe first wrote was “presumably Martha.”

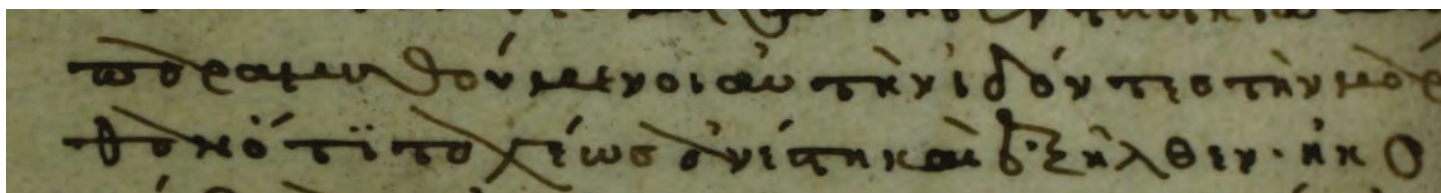
	Maria	Martha	
11:1	μαρια		
11:1	μαρθα	Corrected to Martha	
11:2	μαρια		
11:3	μαρθα	μαρθα	11:3
11:19	μαρια	μαρθα	11:5
11:20	Page Defective	μαρθα	11:19
11:28	μαρια	μαρθα	11:20
11:31	Split on 2 Lines	μαρθα	11:21
11:32	μαρια	μαρθα	11:24
11:45	μαρια	μαρθα	11:30
12:3	μαρια	μαρθα	11:39
		μαρθα	12:2

P66. Photo credit: Martin Bodmer Foundation, Geneva.

When the scribe of P66 wrote “his sister” in 11:1 before correcting it, the *least* likely explanation is that he was revealing the shadow of a previous version of the story that lacked Martha. In later manuscripts, especially those that belong to a particular manuscript family, such anomalies are even more easily explained. For instance, the 11th-century bishop Theophylact of Ohrid wrote a Gospels commentary including the full text of John’s Gospel. The earliest form of his text and over two-thirds of the more than 100 extant copies read “. . . the village of Mary and of Martha her sister” in 11:1. However, one scribe copying Theophylact’s text knowingly or unknowingly changed the pronoun form to “*his* sister” in *opposition* to the original Theophylact text, affecting 30 copies that followed. The scribe committed a common error or chose to relate Martha to Lazarus. The least likely explanation sees this scribe going against his exemplar because he recalled a 1,000-year-old secret and chose to reveal it in 11:1 but nowhere else in his new copy of John 11. But rather than embracing the *simplest* explanation for these kinds of variants, Schrader Polczer appeals to her study of 300 manuscripts out of which she cobbles together *individual* scribal anomalies found in *different* manuscripts as though each scribe was affirming her thesis in one place but copying the rest of the chapter as we have it today.<sup>6</sup>

P66: The gap between the removed rho and the alpha in 11:3 is wider than the space between these same letters in examples of Maria’s name in chapters 11–12, suggesting the possibility that *Martha* was originally written. Photos: Martin Bodmer Foundation, Geneva; graphics by Darrell Post.





The scribe in manuscript GA-537 demonstrated how easily the names of the sisters can be confused. In 11:31 he mistakenly wrote that the mourners noticed *Martha* got up quickly, instead of *Mary*, even though the same hand had just written that *Mary* heard from her sister and got up quickly and went to Jesus. Image credit: University of Michigan Library (Special Collections Research Center), Ms. 19, 128v.

Schrader Polczer also examined Codex Alexandrinus, another early witness, but one with scribal irregularities that are different from those of P66. But she asks the loaded question, “Could these scribes’ independent decisions to add a second sister reflect awareness of a different version of the Lazarus story?” Schrader Polczer presumes her own conclusion that Martha was *added* in these manuscripts against the simplest explanation that the scribes *corrected* errors they or their exemplars introduced.

Having asked the loaded question, Schrader Polczer continues her article by looking at later manuscripts and stringing together unrelated anomalies, especially around the sisters’ names, as though they might bear the same weight as her strongest arguments from P66 and Codex Alexandrinus. Every individual textual variant must be examined in its own context and resolved with the most probable explanation—for instance, scribal inattention, accidental omission, etc. But Schrader Polczer too quickly sees any anomaly in this narrative as evidence for her thesis. For example, she says, “Sometimes Mary does something that Martha is ‘supposed’ to do. Several later Greek manuscripts (10th–12th centuries) even state that Mary served the supper in John 12:2.” However, this example proves irrelevant toward confirming her thesis. Maria and Martha are each mentioned nine times in 11:1–12:3 and the story switches back and forth between the two, so one should expect scribes to sometimes wrongly write *Maria* for *Martha* or vice versa.

Manuscript family K<sup>r</sup> illustrates how easily any scribe could write the wrong name. This group of more than 200 manuscripts began to be produced ca. 1300 as an effort to create exact copies of a standardized Greek text.<sup>8</sup> The scribes conducted their work with considerable oversight and care, limiting the number of differences. But even under these conditions, some still penned *Martha* for *Maria* or *Maria* for *Martha*, including one who wrote that Maria served in 12:2. These are simply mistakes, not scribal memories of a long-lost secret text replaced by early church leaders.

In fact, *not one* manuscript consistently presents all, or even a trifling percentage of, the original readings Schrader Polczer believes once existed. This leaves her presentation without any specific pattern of manuscript evidence, but instead dependent on random anomalies scattered across different manuscripts that each present the overall narrative of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus as we have it today.

Careful readers of Schrader Polczer’s proposal might notice a heavy emphasis on her findings in the first five verses of John 11, to the near exclusion of the rest of the chapter. This is simply because the manuscript evidence for her proposal is weaker throughout the rest of the chapter. She offers no explanation for the lack of manuscript evidence in verse 19, where both Maria and Martha are named correctly in nearly every one of the 2,221 manuscripts checked.<sup>9</sup> She has also not explained how verse 20 would have

originally appeared, given that nearly all the manuscripts, including P66 and Codex Alexandrinus, read that Martha went to Jesus while Maria sat in the house.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, for Schrader Polczer’s theory to work, the later editors must have added verses 28–29, since they involve direct dialogue between the two sisters. Yet every manuscript I have checked includes these verses. All the manuscripts in my study also include verse 32, which presumably would have been added by the proposed second-century editors because it includes the second time one of the sisters confronts Jesus about His delay.

Then verse 39 records the objection uttered by Martha at the thought of opening the tomb, given the smell of decay. But Schrader Polczer’s theory requires that Mary be the original speaker, even though almost all manuscripts read *Martha*. Three scribes in the 12th century or later initially wrote *Maria* but corrected their mistakes to *Martha*, while one from the 11th century and one from the 14th century wrote the uncorrected *Maria*. Comparatively, in verse 45 the text describes the Jews as having come to Mary, meaning no change was needed to fit Schrader Polczer’s theory. Yet two scribes from the 11th century and one from the 12th century wrongly wrote *Martha* instead of *Maria*, illustrating how the confusion went both directions and that these were scribal mistakes, not memories of an original text replaced in the second century.<sup>11</sup>

Schrader Polczer understandably had to look *outside* the manuscripts for further support for her thesis. And she claims to have found support in ancient artwork of the raising of Lazarus. In her *BAR* article she includes a fifth-century depiction showing only one sister kneeling before Jesus instead of the usual two found in most Byzantine artwork. But the artwork she provides also lacks Christ’s disciples and the mourners in the background, illustrating the highly speculative nature of appealing to artwork. Other early artwork presents the story with a variety of characters, including no sisters at all.

Sixth-century mosaic lacking both Mary and Martha, from the Basilica of Sant’Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna, Italy. Photo credit: © José Luiz Bernardes Ribeiro, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=52650786>.

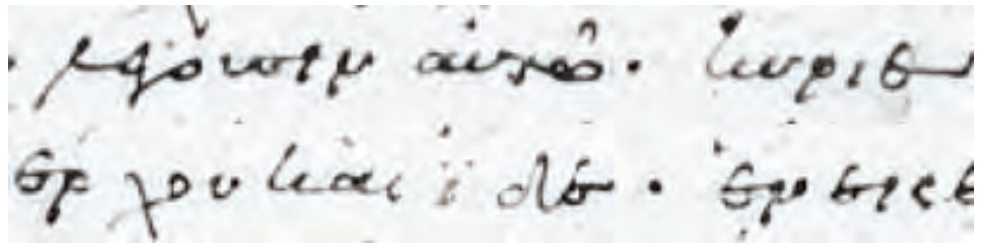




Schrader Polczer also appeals to the fourth-century preacher Chrysostom, who in *On the Gospel of John and the Resurrection of Lazarus* recorded 11:34 as reading “Mary said, ‘Come and see, Lord,’” instead of the reading of all 2,221 manuscripts checked, “They said . . .” Included in my research were nine copies of Chrysostom’s better-known work, his commentary on the Gospel of John. Every one of them reads “They said,” not “Mary said.” If Chrysostom believed Mary to be the lone speaker in verse 34, he passed on the opportunity to reveal this in his commentary. But this did not prevent Schrader Polczer from asserting that Chrysostom “seemed to have access to a different version of John 11,” even though his commentary on the Lazarus narrative presents the account with both sisters.

Finally, near the end of her article, Schrader Polczer explores why early editors might have overhauled the text of John 11 to add Martha to the story. Her theory presumes that Mary was *Mary Magdalene*, and that she became a controversial character in the early church. The confession in John 11:27, if spoken by Mary Magdalene, might have made her a rival to the apostle Peter, who made a similar confession (Mt 16:16). Allegedly, editors rewrote the chapter to resolve the tension with Peter’s legacy by diminishing Mary through the addition of Martha, a minor character, to say the confession.

But is this proposed historical sequence simple and probable, or is it unlikely and needlessly complex? If this conflict between the legacies of Mary Magdalene and Peter were true,<sup>12</sup> no evidence exists that a dispute escalated to the point where church leaders considered altering John 11 as a resolution. But if there was a desire to diminish Mary in a Martha-less original version of John



John 11:34 in Chrysostom’s commentary on the Gospel: λεγουσιν αυτω κυριε ερχου και ιδε. “They said to him, ‘Lord, come and see.’” Photo source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France, Grec 704, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b107226005?rk=21459;2>.

11, why do it the hard way by rewriting major parts of the story, introducing a new sister and dialogue between the sisters? The editors could have just added two words to verse one: “Now a certain man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany, the town of Mary, *not Magdalene*.” This addition would be parallel to other identifying phrases in the New Testament, like “Judas, not Iscariot.” With one easy addition, *not Magdalene*, the editors would have solved the entire problem proposed by Schrader Polczer. But what if these early church leaders were not so clever as to think of this easy work-around? They could have almost as easily just changed every instance of *Maria* to *Martha* and again followed a much simpler path than the one Schrader Polczer alleges they took.

Schrader Polczer has presented a theory built on the speculative idea that there was a serious conflict between the legacies of Peter and Mary Magdalene. The manuscript data she collected does not consistently show any pattern of evidence that supports her assertion that second-century editors added Martha to an earlier version of John 11 already circulating in the early church. Instead, Schrader Polczer’s theory requires appealing to the less likely explanation of the textual data, and proposes a needlessly complicated editorial scheme as the means by which the alleged early scribes would have suppressed the stature of Mary Magdalene. §



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