

THE MOTHER OF THE SON IN THE FOURTH GOSPEL

JUDITH M. LIEU

Macquarie University, Sydney, NSW 2109, Australia

A study of the mother of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel needs no justification. Within the broader engagement with the roles of women in the New Testament and the early church, John's apparent particular interest in them has received repeated acknowledgment.¹ For some this interest points to the significance of women within the life of the Johannine community, a community that on other grounds also appears distinctively egalitarian; for others what we are witnessing is the evangelist's desire to counter attempts to restrict women's role, attempts epitomized by the disciples' amazement in 4:27 that Jesus was speaking to a woman.² However, it is also a characteristic of this Gospel, far more than of any of the other three, to focus on individuals in their encounter with Jesus, and, despite some attempts, it would be wrong to argue that in every case behind each individual stands a particular group or concern in the life of the community. It is probable, then, that individual women are a subset of John's literary interest in individual characters and not simply representatives of "women in the Johannine community." Thus, in chap. 20 Mary Magdalene becomes the sole focus of the visit to the empty tomb, which earlier tradition ascribed to a number of women, a tradition possibly still reflected in 20:2: "We do not know where they have placed him."

Studies of the women in the Fourth Gospel have themselves focused on particular individuals, on the Samaritan woman of chap. 4,³ on Mary and

¹ Publications have multiplied since R. E. Brown's study *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist, 1979) 183–98.

² See M. de Boer, "John 4:27—Women (and Men) in the Gospel and Community of John," in *Women in the Biblical Tradition* (ed. G. Brooke; Studies in Women and Religion 31; Dyfed: Mellen, 1992) 208–30. In this section I am indebted to discussion with my former research student Ms Julie Harris.

³ De Boer, "John 4:27"; J. E. Botha, *Jesus and the Samaritan Woman: A Speech Act Reading of John 4:1–42* (NovTSup 65; Leiden: Brill, 1991); S. D. Moore, "Are There Impurities in the Liv-

Martha in chap. 11,⁴ and on Mary Magdalene in chap. 20.⁵ The mother of Jesus seems to have fared slightly less well. This may be partly a matter of compensation—in earlier scholarship she far outshines the other women; it must also be a matter of reserve toward that earlier scholarship with its mariological interests, still evident in some studies of “the mother of Jesus” and in their treatment of the Fourth Gospel.⁶ This Gospel has made a substantial contribution to the ambivalent role—ambivalent for women—that Mary has been given in subsequent Christian discourse. The tendency for an implicit or explicit debate with such mariological interests to dominate studies of the Gospel presentation and of the passages involved has not encouraged studies of the mother of Jesus as part of the evangelist’s concern with women.

One of the most striking features of the Fourth Gospel’s picture is the evangelist’s avoidance of the personal name of the mother of Jesus. She is, throughout, precisely that: the mother of Jesus (2:1, 3) or his mother (2:4, 12; 19:25)—a silence not always maintained by those who comment on it. The complete consensus of the early church that her name was Mary might suggest that the evangelist and his community would have known it: it would have been part of the world of the reader. However, other early traditions present a rather more ambivalent or nuanced situation. Mark knows her personal name only on the mouth of Jesus’ detractors (6:3); when his family comes seeking Jesus, Mark speaks only of “his mother” (and brothers) (3:31–34). This anonymity is retained by both Matthew and Luke at this point; similarly, the noncanonical parallels to the scene in the fragment of the *Gospel of the Ebionites* reported by Epiphanius (*Pan.* 30.14.5) and in the *Gospel of Thomas* (§99) speak only of “your/ my mother.”⁷ The narrative peculiar to Luke of Jesus’ visit to Jerusalem as a young boy (2:41–52) similarly speaks only of “his mother” (2:48, 51), some-

ing Water that the Johannine Jesus Dispenses? Deconstruction, Feminism and the Samaritan Woman,” *Biblical Interpretation* 1 (1993) 207–27; S. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (New York: Harper, 1991) 180–99.

⁴ A. Reinhartz, “From Narrative to History: The Resurrection of Mary and Martha,” in Amy-Jill Levine, *Women Like This: New Perspectives on Jewish Women in the Greco-Roman World* (Early Judaism and Its Literature 1; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991) 161–84.

⁵ I. R. Kirzberger, “Mary of Bethany and Mary of Magdala—Two Female Characters in the Johannine Passion Narrative: A Feminist Narrative-Critical Reader-Response,” *NTS* 41 (1995) 564–85; J. Lieu, “The Women’s Resurrection Testimony,” in *Resurrection: Essays in Honour of Leslie Houlden* (ed. S. Barton and G. Stanton; London: SCM, 1994) 34–44.

⁶ E.g., J. McHugh, *The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1975) 351–404.

⁷ See also *Gos. Thom.* §101; in this Gospel “Mary” is always Mary Magdalene (§§21, 114). See also F. J. Moloney, *Belief in the Word: Reading the Fourth Gospel, John 1–4* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 81: “It is on the basis of her experience as a woman and a mother that the early church first spoke of her”—although perhaps the former should be seen as a consequence of the latter!

thing underlined by the contrast between the otherwise parallel verses 2:19 and 2:51 (“Mary guarded all these things”/“His mother kept all these things”). This suggests a firm tradition of stories about the relationship between Jesus and his mother, and perhaps other members of his family, which spoke of them only in terms of kinship and did not use their names. Such a tradition may have come to John, who cannot therefore be assumed to have known or deliberately suppressed her personal name.

Yet this anonymity in a Gospel that tends to focus on individuals and to give them names remains arresting. The anonymous woman of Samaria in chap. 4, and the unnamed beneficiaries of Jesus’ healing power in chaps. 4, 5, and 9 are not comparable because they are not defined in terms of a relationship with Jesus, although scholars have rightly drawn a contrast between the named male, Nicodemus, in chap. 3 and the unnamed woman of Samaria in chap. 4. Instead, “his mother” is torn between being raised to a unique position as alone “his mother” and being swallowed up among the scores of women in the Bible who are known and defined only by their male “possessor.” As regards the former, the closest parallel within the Gospel is the other player who is uniquely characterized by his relationship with Jesus, the disciple whom Jesus loved; yet even there we may note the contrast between the role of Jesus in each case—subject in his, passive (objective genitive) in hers.⁸ Still, it should occasion no surprise when these two figures meet and are set in a new relationship by Jesus in chap. 19.

That, however, is to anticipate the outcome of the story, for first we meet the mother of Jesus in chap. 2, at the wedding in Cana. In this narrative she occupies a leading role. Even before we hear of Jesus’ presence in v. 2, we have been told that “the mother of Jesus was there.”⁹ This formula, with ἡν followed by the person concerned, is John’s regular way of introducing a focal character (ἡν δὲ ἄνθρωπος [3:1, Nicodemus]; ἡν τις [4:46; 5:5; 11:1; 12:20 (pl.)]). Since this is John’s technique, we need not assume that we are expected to be able to identify his mother from alternative sources of knowledge, any more than we are expected already to know who Nicodemus is. We have, of course, already met Jesus in the previous chapter, and there we were told that he was the son of Joseph (1:45). That information, however, comes on the mouth of Philip, the disciple who will later say, “Show us the father” (14:8), and so, perhaps, we are intended to question its truth: we have already learned from the prologue that Jesus is son of *the* father (1:14). However, nothing would make us doubt the validity of his mother’s claim to that title even if nothing has prepared us for it;

⁸ It has been suggested to me that a closer parallel would therefore be “my father,” also a “passive” genitive; however, this form is not used in the third person by the narrator.

⁹ A priority not noted by J. L. Staley, *The Print’s First Kiss: A Rhetorical Investigation of the Implied Reader in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988) 83.

on each occasion it appears on the narrator's lips—although we may want to ask whether Jesus can contradict the narrator in this Gospel.¹⁰

The introductory formula does, however, focus our attention on the mother of Jesus; John generally uses the formula “there was . . .” to introduce an individual who plays a significant role in the ensuing scene, although not all make the journey of faith themselves. In chap. 11 that journey is made by Martha and Mary rather than by Lazarus, who has been so introduced, and in 12:20–26 the Greeks disappear from the scene although their presence is essential for what follows. Therefore we should expect the mother of Jesus to fulfill an indispensable role in the drama that follows.

In general terms this expectation is fulfilled. It is she who reports to Jesus the shortage of wine, and she who instructs the servants to carry out Jesus' instructions. Without either of these interventions nothing would have ensued. She is, then, essential to the action. In contrast to her decisive acts, the other events within the narrative are blurred. We are told only what Jesus says to the servants, in conformity with his mother's expectations, not what he does. The chief steward remains in the dark about the source of what he tastes, and there may be irony in the fact that he holds the bridegroom responsible—by the end of the following chapter Jesus is identified as *the* bridegroom (3:29).¹¹ J. L. Staley, whose analysis is more on rhetorical effect than characterization, usefully points out how, unusually in a miracle account, we discover the miracle only through the words of someone, the steward, who does not himself know that something extraordinary has taken place. He knows that he tastes wine, remarkably good wine; the servants know that they have drawn water—it is still τὸ ὕδωρ in v. 9b. We alone are privy to both sides of the equation and must draw our conclusions.

In the light of the story as here sketched, it will come as no surprise when in v. 12 Jesus' mother is at the head of those who go with him to Capernaum. Verse 11, which refers only to his disciples as believing in him, is not therefore a negative judgment on his mother. The disciples have been passive in what took place; she had an active part. At the same time it is equally inappropriate to ask whether she believed in him, whether her faith was adequate, or whether her mere request was proof of prior trust, issues debated by many commentaries and studies.¹² This is to introduce our priorities. For this narrative faith is the response to Jesus' act, not that which prompts the request.

¹⁰ This may support the omission of καὶ τὴν μητέρα in 6:42 with $\aleph^* W b sy$. Thus the identification of Joseph as father, but not of his mother, would be found on the lips of the Jews, inviting the reader's suspicion.

¹¹ Staley, *Print's First Kiss*, 90, with reference to v. 9: “It is addressed to both the bridegroom and the Bridegroom.”

¹² Contra Moloney, *Belief in the Word*, 83; and B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel according to St John* (London: John Murray, 1889) 84.

This reading of the narrative is, of course, interrupted by Jesus' reply to his mother in v. 4. Each phrase has been discussed at length, but the salient points are clear enough. In addressing his mother as "woman" (γύναι), Jesus is not being rude, for it is an acceptable form of address; he addresses both the woman of Samaria and Mary Magdalene in the same terms.¹³ Yet neither is he following convention, for the external parallels would suggest that γύναι would not normally be used in speaking to one's mother. It may imply an element of distancing, although perhaps only if what follows also does so. This does seem to be the case. The epigrammatic τί ἐμοὶ καὶ σοὶ does implicitly deny either community of interest or mutual obligation between Jesus and his mother. With these words (LXX) David rejects the "trigger-happy" loyalty of Abishai in 2 Sam 16:10 and 19:22, while for the widow of Zarephath they are a reproach against the prophet Elijah whom she saved, only to have her only son die (1 Kgs 17:18). Of course, Abishai and his brothers could have replied, "We are your cousins and have stayed loyal to you," just as Elijah could have recounted his provision of the inexhaustible provisions in response to her generosity. The force of the rebuke comes from the natural assumption that there were mutual obligations, and it implies too that these have been violated by the person addressed.¹⁴ In these cases the words do not signal the end of the relationship, although in others they reject it as an empty claim (Josh 22:24; 2 Chr 35:21).¹⁵ There is little support here for those optimistic interpretations that take the words as uniting the two in faith and insight over against the material demands of "the world," "What has this to do with me and you?"¹⁶ Yet the ambiguity that is created by the tension between the context and the words is surely deliberate and is part of the wider play of irony in the Gospel.¹⁷

Yet if Jesus' words do imply rejection, at least at this point, we naturally expect an explanation of this enigma and instinctively take it from the following "my hour has not yet come," despite the absence of any linking explanatory γάρ. This is the first that we have heard of "the hour" of Jesus; we shall be told again that it has not yet come (ἐληλύθει) in 7:30 and 8:20, when attempts to seize Jesus fail. Only in 13:1 and again, in Jesus' words, in 17:1 is it finally said to have

¹³ So also, in Matt 15:28, the Canaanite woman, but with ὁ prefixed.

¹⁴ Similarly 2 Kgs 3:13 and in a different way Jer 2:18; Josh 22:24; but Judg 11:12 and 2 Chr 35:21 use the phrase in a hostile setting.

¹⁵ The formula is also used by those possessed with unclean spirits or demoniacs in the Synoptic traditions (Matt 8:29; Mark 1:24; 5:7; Luke 4:34; 8:28). Although this implies a far greater degree of hostility, it may also acknowledge an (unwanted) relationship between Jesus as Son of God and these representatives of a spiritual world whose destiny will be determined by him. I am grateful to the anonymous reader for drawing my attention to these passages.

¹⁶ Contra McHugh, *Mother of Jesus*, 394.

¹⁷ Thus, Staley sees the contradiction between the positive interpretation encouraged by the immediate context and the more negative one that is the evangelist's ultimate intention as part of the "victimization of the reader" effected in this Gospel (*Print's First Kiss*, 86).

come. All these point to the hour of Jesus' death; in Jesus' own words it is equally the hour of his glory (12:23: "the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified"; so 12:27; 17:1). This theme too is anticipated in 2:11 in the notice that in this sign Jesus manifested his glory; the reader has been led to expect this glory ever since the affirmation of the prologue, "we beheld his glory" (1:14), but after this verse (2:11) it disappears again only to reemerge as a central theme in the final chapters before Jesus' death. In the interim "glory" is a matter of contention (5:41, 44; 7:18; 8:50, 54) until, perhaps because of its anticipation of Jesus' death, Lazarus's sickness is declared "for the glory of God" (11:4).

Therefore, at this point it is not at all clear what sense Jesus' words make as an explanation of his rebuke to his mother. There is no hint that by taking action he will bring violence upon himself, and in fact he does display the glory usually associated with his hour; it is not at all obvious why his mother's request should invite this particular mark of hesitancy. Thus, each element of Jesus' response creates bafflement; its meaning is not yet clear and an element of suspense is introduced as we are led to look for a deeper meaning that has yet to be revealed. There is unfinished business.

The sense of bafflement is only increased by the failure of Jesus' mother to share in it. This does not mean that Jesus' words should after all be taken positively against all parallels, or that, "like any mother," she knew her son and his penchant for petulant comments before doing what she asked him to. Instead we are left reading the story, at once both recognizing the mother's focal role in it and feeling uncomfortable, or being made to feel uncomfortable, about it.

This is not the only time that this will happen in John's narrative. Chapter 7 starts with Jesus' brothers inviting him to join the festal crowds in Jerusalem to "manifest himself" for his disciples to see, just as he had "manifested his glory" at Cana: *φανερώω*, which links these two incidents, has not been used in the interim. Again Jesus responds negatively in words redolent of and yet different from those to his mother: "my time is not yet present" (7:6, 8). Again Jesus did apparently accede to their request. Here, however, there is a stronger sense of distancing: he went up in secret and not "manifestly" as they had demanded. Moreover, attention is drawn to the failure of even his brothers to believe in him (7:5). The "not even" sets them alongside the disciples who fell back at the end of the previous chapter (6:60, 66); it does not indicate an active hostility but it does lead to a separation. What about his mother? In contrast to the Synoptics, who present Jesus' mother and brothers as a single group in their anxieties or uncertainties about Jesus, John is silent at this point—a significant omission if he is working with Synoptic-like traditions. As readers we are left wondering at her absence, for when we last met her she was with them and Jesus and his disciples in Galilee.

There is a similar tension with expectations at the beginning of chap. 11,

where Jesus refuses to respond to the sisters' summons for him to come to the aid of their ailing brother Lazarus. Again Jesus eventually does come but, as in chap. 7, in his own time. Here nothing is said about his hour or time not yet having come, but the theme of glory reappears. Each of these refusals followed by concession is linked by familial or near familial obligation. Is their intention merely to present a Jesus who refuses to act under such obligation and does only what *his* father directs him? But if that is the case, why does he not say so more clearly?

Yet despite these hints, the narrative of Cana does not speak of Jesus disengaging himself from his mother's parental authority, which is how many commentators have taken it.¹⁸ Here there has been a tendency to read the story in the light of Luke 2:41–52, which is expressly quoted by many commentators, and perhaps to assume a historical nucleus behind both. Neither does the narrative present a tension between the physical family and the family of faith. With 2:12 the leading role played by the physical family, and preeminently by the mother of Jesus, remains intact. There is nothing here of the Synoptic tradition of Jesus recognizing only those who listen and obey as his true family.

For a source-critical approach this is important, particularly if, as we have suggested, John is working with traditions similar to the Synoptic ones. The absence of Jesus' mother from the withdrawal of his brothers in chap. 7 underlines this contrast as well as maintaining the sense that the narrative of the wedding at Cana has not yet reached a resolution. It is a sense that is confirmed by the narrator's declaration that Jesus manifested his glory, although nowhere in the world of the narrative itself is he seen or known to be the central actor. We expect a moment of revelation but get none.

This resolution comes only in 19:25–27 in the scene at the cross. The link between the two narratives has often been noted and needs no careful demonstration; it is evident in the reappearance of "the mother of Jesus," again in a leading position, in Jesus' address to her as *γύναι*, and in the final appearance of *ἡ μήτηρ* (v. 27; 2:4 was the first distinctive use).¹⁹ Once again the evangelist's skill in reworking an earlier tradition is apparent. The motif of the women "at the cross" is fixed in the Synoptic tradition, although it does not seem that Jesus' mother is included among their number.²⁰ Again John's use of the tradition is markedly different, and its interpretation should not be colored by Synoptic themes. With perhaps less probability than their distant viewpoint in Mark (15:40), John has them close to the cross, both to allow the conversation that ensues and perhaps to underline the contrast with the gambling soldiers. In

¹⁸ B. Witherington, *Women in the Earliest Churches* (SNTSMS 58; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) 175; E. C. Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel* (ed. F. N. Davey; London: Faber, 1940) 186.

¹⁹ A number of commentators note the links.

²⁰ Some scholars have found her in Mark 15:40, but it is unlikely that John so read Mark.

Mark the women offer a point of continuity with Jesus' earlier ministry and particularly with Galilee. This is absent from John; we have not met these women before, except for the mother of Jesus. There is, however, although less pointed than in Mark, a continuity with what follows; as in all the Gospels, another of the standing women is Mary Magdalene, and it is to her that Jesus will appear following his resurrection in chap. 20. Indeed, it is significant that he will initially address her also as γύναι, but he will go beyond this to address her by name (20:15, 16). Thus, this scene (19:25–27) is a meeting point between the two women, the mother of Jesus, whom he addressed as γύναι before, and Mary, whom he will so address and will also name in his resurrection power.

How many women are pictured at the cross remains unclear. That four are intended—the mother of Jesus, the sister of his mother, Mary (the mother or wife) of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene—has been suggested as preserving both the internal parallelism and the contrast with the soldiers who divide Jesus' garments into four parts (v. 23). If this contrast is intended, which is not obvious since we are only left to deduce that there were four soldiers, it could also be retained by picturing three women, the fourth person being the Beloved Disciple. They would then be the mother of Jesus; her sister, identified as Mary of Clopas; and Mary Magdalene—three Marys, at least for those aware of the wider tradition, which might be seen as an argument either for or against this solution. This indeed is probably how it is taken in the *Gospel of Philip*: “His (her?) sister, his mother, and his companion were each a Mary.”²¹ In this case the first two would be physical kin; the last two (including the Beloved Disciple) would also belong to chap. 20. That there were two women, the mother of Jesus now identified as Mary of Clopas, and her sister, Mary Magdalene, has a certain attraction as eliminating the other, redundant women and heightening the contrast between the roles of the two, but probably should be rejected on the grounds that it would be strange for John to name Jesus' mother at this point, particularly in terms of a relationship that is at odds with any framework in which we have met her so far. There does not seem to be any obvious solution to the dilemma here.

It is difficult to avoid the dramatic impact of the scene. Again the mother of Jesus is there in first place, but the contrast with the scene at Cana is marked. This time Jesus takes the initiative; his mother is passive, neither saying nor doing anything. This passivity is even stronger than in Mark, where the women at least watch; here they only stand. As Jesus intervenes in the scene, she becomes no longer “his mother” as in v. 25 but only “the mother” (v. 26). By her stands the disciple whom Jesus loved, the two characters who are defined in

²¹ *Gospel of Philip* 59.10–11 (N.H. II.3); line 8 identifies the first as “her [i.e., Jesus' mother's] sister”; although H.-M. Schenke suggests emending to “his” (*Nag Hammadi Codex II.2–7, I* [ed. B. Layton; The Coptic Gnostic Library; Leiden: Brill, 1989] 158–59 and n. 8), it is perhaps more likely that line 10 should read “her sister.”

terms of their relationship with Jesus. This disciple was introduced for the first time at Jesus' last meal with his disciples (13:23), and has not explicitly appeared since. His anonymity has also invited speculation, but the narrative so far has done nothing to encourage a solution. As before, Jesus says to "the mother"—again there is no personal pronoun—"γύναι," but now he adds "behold your son." The question of 2:4, τί ἐμοὶ καὶ σοί, has now been answered. She is no longer the mother of Jesus but the mother of the disciple whom he loved; Jesus himself reaffirms this with the parallel words, "Behold *your* mother"—the personal pronoun reappears and thus effects the transformation.²² We already know that Jesus' hour has now come, and it is from that hour that the disciple takes her "to his own." Jesus too had "his own," those to whom he came and who failed to accept him (1:11), but more significantly his own whom he loved (13:1; cf. 10:3, 4, 12). Is the mother now no longer *his* own?

It comes as no surprise, then, that "after this, Jesus, knowing that everything had now been completed, in order that scripture might be completed, said, 'I thirst'" (19:28). John's use of μετά may not allow us to read too much into that initial "after this" (μετὰ τοῦτο) as if there were a causal link between the two,²³ but that does not detract from the climactic position of the preceding scene. The mother of Jesus, therefore, marks the ending of the earthly story of Jesus, as she had also marked its beginning. In other words, the scene at the cross effects a closure in several ways to what was initiated by the first scene at Cana. The one gives meaning to the other, and together they signal the completion, perhaps the boundaries of the drama.

This suggests that we should treat with extreme skepticism interpretations that see 19:25–27 as establishing a new relationship between Jesus and his mother. This has been the line taken by those mariological interpretations that see here the basis for "Mary's" future intercession with Jesus—especially now that his hour has come. Yet it is also implied by interpretations that see here the new family for the children of God. So, for example, Alan Culpepper in his generally perceptive *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* speaks of "the man and 'woman,' the ideal disciple and the mother he is called to receive, standing under the cross of the giver of life," and describes this new relationship as making all believers children of God.²⁴ Yet such a meaning would require the disci-

²² See now B. Gaventa, who suggests that even Jesus' words "Behold your son" maintain the ambiguity since they could be a self-reference (*Mary: Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus* [Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995] 93). I was able to see Gaventa's sensitive study only after completing this paper, but found I had echoed some of her insights while differing on others.

²³ Thus in 2:12; 11:7, 11 "after this" probably indicates only a temporal and not a causal link.

²⁴ A. Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 133–34, 122. Culpepper does acknowledge that there are other women in the Fourth Gospel better suited to represent the ideal female disciple.

ple to be addressed as “man,” and them to be given to each other as brother and sister, not as mother and son. In this Gospel the children of God are such only by God’s gift in response to their acceptance of Jesus (1:13). Similarly, to suggest that “beneath the cross the family of faith and the physical family can be reconciled”²⁵ is to draw on a Synoptic idea that, as we have already seen, is not part of the Johannine use of the mother of Jesus. To see them as the archetypal disciples, male and female, is to introduce elements into the scene that are nowhere present, and also to introduce a concern for gender matching that is not apparent elsewhere in this Gospel.

When, in the following chapter, Jesus instructs Mary Magdalene to give the message to “my brothers . . . I am ascending to my father and your father, to my God and your God” (20:17), it is clear that the disciples and not Jesus’ physical brothers are to be understood; yet equally clearly this new relationship has been established not by the scene beneath the cross but by the new relationship effected by Jesus’ return to God.

It is not to his mother that the risen Jesus appears and says “γύναι” but to Mary Magdalene (20:15). The Beloved Disciple also appears in this new scene, and it is only now that he also believes. Despite 19:27 there is no suggestion that “his mother” is brought with him into this new stage;²⁶ her real function has been to bracket the earthly ministry of Jesus and in some sense to mediate it. This bracketing, however, works in both directions. The familiar reader who goes back to the beginning, to 2:1–11, will find as its opening words καὶ τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῇ τρίτῃ. The reader who knows only the Fourth Gospel will not recognize this as a reference to the resurrection, since John nowhere uses the formula “on the third day,” but the reader whose world is more widely informed may do so. Cana-and-cross/cross-and-resurrection are bound together in a continually moving relationship. Cross must precede resurrection—Jesus’ hour must first come; but resurrection provides the context for cross and establishes it as a means of manifesting his glory.

Indeed, this gives the key to the real meaning of the miracle. Conventionally it is known as “the changing of the water into wine,” which is how it is referred to in 4:46 when Jesus returns to Cana. Yet it has already been noted that the actual “changing” is implicit and not explicit and that Jesus is remarkably passive, in sharp contrast to John’s focus on his actions or words in the other miracles. The steward’s surprised words (2:10) draw attention rather to the quality of the wine. The central role of the mother of Jesus and of her initial intervention suggests that the contrast is not, as is so often drawn, between

²⁵ Witherington, *Earliest Churches*, 175, T. K. Seim also moves in this direction despite her otherwise careful avoidance of oversymbolizing Jesus’ mother (“Roles of Women in the Gospel of John,” in *Aspects on the Johannine Literature* [ed. L. Hartman and B. Olsson, ConBNT 18, Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1987] 56–73, 65)

²⁶ See also Gaventa, *Mary*, 95

water for purification and full-bodied wine—both present in excess—but between dearth or absence and abundance, a contrast also found in the feeding of the five thousand, where again the moment of miracle is left unmarked. This abundance is impossible without Jesus' hour,²⁷ which binds both death and resurrection.

This analysis effectively excludes the common reading that sees in "his mother" Judaism or, better, faithful Israel awaiting the Messiah and finding him in the crucified lord, and so finding a home in the Christian community,²⁸ a reading that in any case is probably too optimistic for John's attitude to the Jews and again seems to betray contamination from the Lukan infancy narratives, where Jesus is born among faithful Israel. Yet a reading of the commentaries and literature shows how persistent has been the impulse to assign her a symbolic meaning.²⁹ The first incident in which she is involved is replete with symbolism: the third day, the six water jars, the wedding. It is a common and significant experience of students of this Gospel that the readers it implies are not naïve readers but Johannine readers, those who know the code—even if the creation of that image is a device by which the author creates a dependency that is a model of faith.³⁰ So into what code does "his mother" fit, one that does justice both to her pivotal presence at these key moments of inauguration/anticipation and closure, and also to the defining "γύναι," which sets her as an individual alongside the other women so addressed in this Gospel?³¹

We may for the moment leave this question and turn to one more "mother of the son" in the Gospel, although neither μήτηρ nor υἱός appears here. This is the woman of the little parable in John 16:21. Jesus, anticipating his coming departure, speaks of the joy it will bring to the world and the grief it will bring to the disciples. Yet their grief will be transformed to joy. There follows a mini-parable, a rarity in this Gospel: "The woman when she is in labour has grief, because her hour has come. When she gives birth to the child, she no longer remembers the tribulation because of the joy that a human has been born into the world." The language is so heavy with Johannine echoes that she must be more than a random illustration. She too has her hour which has now come; she

²⁷ Just as the bread that Jesus gives is his flesh.

²⁸ So R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John* (New York: Crossroad, 1982) 3.278–79, accepted by A. Hanson, *The Prophetic Gospel* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1991) 210.

²⁹ Other suggestions have included Jewish Christianity reconciled through the cross with Gentile Christianity, the church, and the spiritual mother of all true believers.

³⁰ It has often been observed that John's language both presupposes and confirms an "in-group" of those who understand; yet it also challenges the reader to appropriate the alternative world of meaning it presents by acceptance of Jesus as the sole source of truth. See G. O'Day, "Narrative Mode and Theological Claim: A Study in the Fourth Gospel," *JBL* 105 (1986) 657–68.

³¹ As rightly recognized by Seim ("Roles of Women," 60, 62) with reference to H. Räisänen, *Die Mutter Jesu im Neuen Testament* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1969), which I have not seen.

too is a (or *the*) woman, γυνή; thus she stands between the mother addressed as “woman” at 2:4, who had to be told that the hour had not yet come, and that same mother, again “woman,” at the cross, which for John is the moment when the hour has come (12:23; 13:1; 19:27)—although here her hour brings only grief, not glory. What follows for her is joy that ἐγεννήθη ἄνθρωπος εἰς τὸν κόσμον: there is a double move—the object of the earlier clause has become the subject, no longer the child (τὸ παιδίον) but ἄνθρωπος. To this unexpected ἄνθρωπος we shall return; the εἰς τὸν κόσμον, however, cannot but recall the one who is repeatedly described as coming “into the world” (1:9; 6:14; 11:27; etc.)³²—indeed, this more than any other is the Johannine Jesus’ most significant epithet, affirmed by Jesus himself (9:39; 16:28; 18:37).

Here again, then, beginning and ending merge, one into the other. At face value the woman’s experience is a parable of the experience of the disciples, devastated by the loss of Jesus at his death, soon to rejoice at his resurrection: so v. 22, “For now you have grief [λύπη here is more natural than when used of the woman’s physical pain] but again I shall see you [not “you will see me”—Jesus is ever the subject] and your hearts will rejoice, and none shall take your joy from you.” But all is not so simple; when is this *now*? Verse 33 promises, “In the world you have tribulation [θλίψις, that which the woman forgets] but be encouraged, I have conquered the world.” θλίψις and therefore also λύπη belong not to the short time between Friday and Sunday, cross and resurrection, but to being “in the world.” Yet it is the world into which Jesus has *already* come and into which the ἄνθρωπος was born, and equally the world which he has *already* conquered: the perfect of v. 28, ἐλήλυθα εἰς τὸν κόσμον, does not precede but is coterminous with the parallel perfect of v. 33, ἐγὼ νενίκηκα τὸν κόσμον. Similarly, the χαρά that she (and they) will experience is the χαρά that John the Baptist already has experienced in its fullness at *the coming* of Jesus in 3:29.³³ Therefore this woman too mediates a beginning that is also an ending/an ending that is also a beginning in the merging of times and experiences that characterizes these chapters.

We may explore now further how she anticipates the woman by the cross. That woman as a (the) mother acquires a son—ἰδεὶς ὁ υἱὸς σου (19:26). She acquires a son without childbirth and knows no grief—contrary to the popular image of the *stabat mater dolorosa*: there is no weeping at the cross.³⁴ The woman of 16:21—γυνή throughout and not μήτηρ—gives birth, but not to a son: an ἄνθρωπος is born into the world. At the turning point of the trial, Pilate displays Jesus and says in a parallel declaratory or revelatory formula, ἰδοὺ ὁ

³² Already recognized by A. Feuillet, “L’heure de la femme (Jn 16, 21) et l’heure de la Mère de Jésus (Jn 19, 25–27),” *Bib* 47 (1966) 169–84, 361–80, 557–73.

³³ χαρά comes only in 3:29 and then in 15:11 and chaps. 16 and 17.

³⁴ Even R. E. Brown speaks of the “sorrowful scene at the cross” (*The Gospel according to John* [AB 29, 29A; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966, 1970] 2.925.

ἄνθρωπος (19:5). This woman, moreover, does know grief; her λύπη, as we shall see, is not the pain of childbirth but the mental anguish of loss at death, as it is for the disciples (16:22). So is this a birthing or a dying?³⁵ John's Gospel has no infancy narratives, although it knows the "mother of Jesus" and may have known some birth traditions (8:41);³⁶ we meet birth here only when we encounter death. Indeed, the birth, which is not narrated in this Gospel, becomes through 16:21 a death, or is the death a birth?

When expressed in this way, the dynamic between the "parable" and cross may invite misinterpretation. It has proved too easy to transfer the pain from mother to child, as when R. E. Brown quotes with approval A. Feuillet's reference to "the painful birth of the Messiah [as] referring to the death and resurrection of Jesus."³⁷ Yet the reality behind the image would be only too familiar in the first-century world, without contraception or anesthetics, without anti-septic maternity wards withdrawn from normal living, but where homes, often with but one room, were closely packed together. The anguish of birth and the threat of death belong to the mother.

Like all John's parables or symbols, that of 16:21 evokes a number of biblical echoes: the one indisputable feature in the world of the Johannine readers is some familiarity with the scriptures. The pain of a woman in labor and the birth of a child as a sign of hope or new life come more than once, and, as with other Johannine allusions (chaps. 10; 15), it would be wrong to limit the echo to a single passage. The Nestle-Aland margin refers only to Isa 26:17–19, "Like a woman with child who writhes and cries out in her pangs, when she is near her time, so were we because of thee, O Lord; we were with child, we writhed"—which, with the following hope of resurrection, "the dead shall live, their bodies shall rise," loosely fits the Johannine context. Yet the MT, which is obscure, seems rather to stress the failure to produce anything of substance; the LXX introduces a more positive note, but there are no verbal links with the Johannine passage and nothing is made of the contrast between pain and joy.

The apparent allusion—not quite a quotation—to Isa 66:14 in John 16:22 makes a reference in v. 21 to Isa 66:7 attractive: "Before she was in labor she gave birth; before her pain (πόνος τῶν ὀδίνων) came upon her she was delivered of a son." The woman here is Zion, and the image is one of restoration and renewal for a nation in despair. In the Isaianic context birth anticipates and pre-empt the pain, and the emphasis falls more on the children to be born. However, the targum to this passage and an ambiguous passage in the Qumran hymns (1QH 3:7–12) that probably alludes to it suggest a messianic interpreta-

³⁵ This is perhaps a question that might be asked of all birthings/dyings, and the association of women with the conjunction between them is fundamental to art, myth, literature, and experience.

³⁶ John 8:41 may reflect Jewish slanders about the illegitimacy of Jesus.

³⁷ Brown, *Gospel*, 2.730. Feuillet initially referred to Revelation 12, but Brown seems to accept a transference to the Gospel.

tion: 1QH 3:10 describes the child in terms taken from Isa 9:4. Thus, in a number of discussions the combination of messianic fulfillment and of “mother Zion” imagery has been readily applied to John 16:21 and through it to the vignette by the cross.³⁸ That “sorrowful scene” now becomes the birth pangs, so that in the hour of Jesus’ death and resurrection “men are recreated as God’s children” with Mary [*sic*] as, like Zion, the mother of all Christians/the Beloved Disciple.³⁹ However, this interpretation involves a number of unwarranted exegetical moves: it transfers the birth pangs from mother to child, while also ascribing to the mother of Jesus a role toward all believers. Both these steps have already been excluded for John. In fact 1QH 3 also resists such an interpretation, for there too the pains remain unequivocally those of the mother, and Zion’s children have been lost from the image. Yet in 1QH 3 those pains are the “waves of death” and the “pangs of Sheol,” from which emerges the “man” (גבר).⁴⁰ The womb can sometimes be viewed as a grave, and the woman as the mediator of birth through death, birth and death, provides the proper context for the Johannine image.

More directly, however, the woman of 16:21 mirrors Eve.⁴¹ Throughout Genesis 3 Eve is simply ἡ γυνή, although in the LXX Adam is already Ἀδὰμ; in Gen 2:23 Ἀδὰμ says αὐτή κληθήσεται γυνή. In Gen 3:16 ἡ γυνή is promised grief, λύπη, in childbearing (Hebrew צב). This term is not otherwise used of physical or birth pain but usually applies to mental anguish. It does not, for example, appear in the two Isaiah passages, which use the more usual and technical terms for the pains of childbirth. As we have seen, it is λύπη which the woman of John 16:21 also experiences. In Gen 4:1, on the birth of Cain, Eve (now so named) declares that through the Lord she has obtained not a child but, unexpectedly, ἄνθρωπον (שׂר in the MT, where the verse is a notorious crux)—although whether she rejoices is left to the imagination! So too this woman experiences the joy that an ἄνθρωπος is born into the world. Finally, when Adam names his γυνή in 3:20, it is Ζωή (life) in the LXX, because “she is mother of all living things” (αὐτή μήτηρ πάντων τῶν ζώντων).⁴²

That the woman of 16:21 recalls in particular Eve accords with John’s repeated use of motifs from the opening chapters of Genesis. Genesis 1 is

³⁸ See Hanson, *Prophetic Gospel*, 185–86; Brown appeals to the Qumran passage, recognizing its obscurity but apparently relying on it (*Gospel*, 2.731).

³⁹ Brown, *Gospel*, 2.925–27; see also pp. 721–22, 733 (“the combined death and resurrection of Jesus is represented by the messianic birth of a child”—Brown uses the proper name Mary throughout his discussion).

⁴⁰ 1QH 3:8–9, “waves of death” (מַשְׁבַּרֵי מוֹת, although translated as coming from מַשְׁבַּר, may be a play on מַשְׁבַּר, the mouth of the womb).

⁴¹ For this see A. Feuillet, “L’heure de la femme.”

⁴² The church fathers made a link with John 19:34; see Tertullian, *De Anima* 43; M. Alexandre, *La Commencement du livre Genesis I–V: La version grecque de la septante et sa réception* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1988) 325–26.

echoed by the prologue; in John 20:22 Jesus will breathe into his disciples as God did into Adam to give him life (Gen 2:7). The Cain narratives of Genesis 4 lie behind the picture of the Jews in John 8:44.⁴³ What is perhaps most pertinent, it seems likely that the garden, which links betrayal, cross, burial, and resurrection in this Gospel alone, is intended to recall the garden of Genesis 2–3.⁴⁴ Thus, the relationship between beginning and ending mediated by this woman reaches yet deeper. She experiences again the *λύπη* of the woman of Gen 3:16, but the pattern is now broken in the *ἄνθρωπος* who is born. This does not, however, make her a new Eve;⁴⁵ in the christological focus of this Gospel only Jesus represents the new, and even he is not the new Moses⁴⁶ or Adam, but the one from heaven, while the children are not a new humanity born from Eve but are born of God (1:13).

This will lead us to explore one more mother of the son in the Gospel, the mother of John 3:4. “How can a man (*ἄνθρωπον*) be born when he is old?” asks Nicodemus. “Surely he cannot enter the womb (*κοιλία*) of his mother a second time and be born!” The argument and the irony of the conversation are well known: Jesus has spoken of the need for “a person to be born ‘from above/again’” (*τις γεννηθῆναι ἄνωθεν*). Nicodemus misunderstands, as Johannine characters are wont to do when the author wishes to drive an argument forward, to stress that understanding comes only by a divinely given revolution in perception and not by logical reasoning, and perhaps to bind the reader into an inner circle of those who understand the code (again!). Yet the Johannine irony operates at a deeper level here than is usually recognized; the success of that irony is in fact seen when those who recognize Nicodemus’s obtuseness move on with superior familiarity.

Nicodemus had begun by acknowledging Jesus as one “who could not do these signs which you do, unless God were with him.” Jesus’ words in v. 3 not only prepare for the double entendre to follow, as if dismissing Nicodemus’s opening pleasantries, but are rather equally a correction of them. By v. 7 “a person” (*τις*) of v. 3 will become “you” (*ὑμεῖς*), and so the whole conversation is normally read as if this were so from the start. But by v. 31 we will be reminded that “*the one* who comes ‘from above’ (*ἄνωθεν*) is above all”: Jesus himself is the paradigm, just as he is the paradigm of the one of whom they “do not know

⁴³ J. Lieu, “What Was from the Beginning: Scripture and Tradition in the Johannine Epistles,” *NTS* 39 (1993) 458–77.

⁴⁴ J. Lieu, “Scripture and the Feminine in John,” in *A Feminist Companion to the Hebrew Bible in the New Testament* (ed. A. Brenner; The Feminist Companion to the Bible 10; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996) 225–40, esp. 235–37.

⁴⁵ Contra Brown, *Gospel*, 2.926, 927: “Mary . . . is most truly his mother in this ‘hour’ when she brings forth Christian children in the image of her Son.”

⁴⁶ Even if he outdoes Moses in giving himself as the true bread from heaven and in descending from heaven.

whence he comes or whither he goes" (v. 8; cf. 7:27–29, 33–36). So understood, v. 3 is also an answer to and a correction of Nicodemus's inadequate affirmation that God must be with him. Jesus not only came "from above" (ἔρχεσθαι ἄνωθεν) but was born "from above" (γεννηθῆναι ἄνωθεν): therefore in 18:37 Jesus declares, "for this reason I was born and for this I came into the world" (εἰς τοῦτο γεγέννημαι καὶ εἰς τοῦτο ἐλήλυθα εἰς τὸν κόσμον). Yet in the light of this, what significance did the womb of his mother have?⁴⁷

As often noted, the background of the image of birth from above is notoriously elusive. The pagan parallels claimed by earlier scholarship fail by date and by dissimilarity of language and concept. It might be better, therefore, to start not from the composite "birth *from above*" but from "birth" (cf. 1:13), and not from the pagan world but from the Hebrew scriptures, which inform so much of John's thought. The description of Israel or of individuals as child(ren) or son(s) of God (Exod 4:22; Deut 32:5–6; Wis 12:19–20) is clearly inadequate. The passage that comes closest is Deut 32:18, "You were unmindful of the rock that bore you, you forgot the God who gave you birth" (MT), (LXX: θεὸν τὸν γεννήσαντά σε ἐγκατέλιπες καὶ ἐπελάθου θεοῦ τοῦ τρέφοντός σε), a passage that belongs to the tradition of the maternal God of prophecy and psalmody (Hos 11:1–4; Isa 42:14; Ps 139:13). So understood, God is already the one who has carried you "from the womb" (κοιλία: Isa 46:3; see also Ps 22:9), and is already the one who has given birth to those who are called to recognize it.

Yet if John shows few signs of recognizing such implications of his own imagery, his language may also be understood on another level. Perhaps Nicodemus is not totally deluded when he asks whether ἄνθρωπος can or must again enter the mother's womb: Johannine irony usually works not through total misunderstanding but through partial misunderstanding or through a level of truth that the speaker does not intend (as in John 11:49–52; 7:41–42). For John, too, earthly experience is a "sign" that points to and enfleshes divine truth but does not encompass it, something well expressed by the multilevel reinterpretation that "it was not Moses who gave you bread from heaven but God who gives you the true bread from heaven" (6:32). So in this case we should not think of a dualism in which that birth again/from above is alien to and contrasted with the "mundane" birth from a mother. On the contrary, the latter enfleshes; it is a sign of and a carrier of the former.

So what of Jesus and his mother? What does it mean for him to be the ἄνθρωπος who is γεννηθῆναι? That question, of course, has been well rehearsed in Johannine scholarship, and we need not and cannot repeat here the debate as to how successfully John engages with Jesus' humanity. Yet what we have seen so far suggests that the mother of Jesus and his death are part of

⁴⁷ If it were better attested, the textual variant at 1:13 might be seen as providing a partial answer.

the problem and not of the solution.⁴⁸ In this John may not be alone; the infancy narratives of both Matthew and Luke, with their developing idea of virginal conception, likewise make the relationship between Jesus and his mother problematic for his humanity. But John, as we have seen, whether or not he knows those traditions, takes a different route from them. The mother of the son forces us to ask, but does not answer, how the son both is bound by his story and transcends it, both is restrained by the story of humanity and transcends it, his birthing a dying, his dying a birth.

⁴⁸ Contra M. M. Thompson, who sees Jesus' earthly origins as an important counter to arguments for docetism in the Gospel, and as part of the "offense" of his person (*The Humanity of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988] 3, 8, 13–16, 29).



Copyright and Use:

As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.

No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.