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The Role of Jesus' Mother in John's Gospel: A Reappraisal

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THE STUDY OF JESUS' MOTHER in John's Gospel has given rise to an enormous amount of literature, both in books and in articles.¹ The sense of a very wide range of interpretation arises from an examination of these studies. On one extreme, Mary has been described as practically an alternative to God;² on the other end of the spectrum, her place has been considered nominal and almost accidental. An addition to all this literature can only be justified if a fresh avenue of investigation is opened. Our reappraisal will be based on a study of Mary's role within a suggested restructuring of the principal sign-narratives of the Fourth Gospel.

The Interrelation between the Wedding at Cana and the Other Signs

It is almost universally recognized that Mary's role at Cana cannot be understood by itself, but only in relationship to the coming hour of Jesus' death and glorification, of which he spoke (2:4). However, relatively little

¹ A survey of sixty-four books and periodical literature is found in A. M. Serra, *Maria a Cana e presso la croce* (Rome: Centro di Cultura Mariana, 1978). This has been translated into French under the title *Marie à Cana, Marie près de la croix* (Paris: Cerf, 1983). A broad survey of literature is also found in R. E. Brown, K. P. Donfried, J. A. Fitzmyer, J. Reumann (eds.), *Mary in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).

² E.g., in J. Alfaro, "The Mariology of the Fourth Gospel: Mary and the Struggle for Liberation," *BTB* 10 (1980) 3-16.

attention has been given to the links between the first sign at Cana of Galilee (2:1-12) and the other signs that follow. Moreover, the principal signs in John have usually been considered to be found in the first twelve chapters, with 12:37-50 as a summary proclamation, beginning with the statement, "Though he had done so many signs before them, they did not believe in him." It has often been accepted³ that there are seven principal signs in these chapters: (1) the wedding at Cana (2:1-12); (2) the restoration of the dying son of the royal official (4:46-54); (3) the Sabbath healing at the pool of Bethesda (5:1-16); (4) the multiplication of the loaves (6:1-15); (5) Jesus' walking on the water (6:16-22); (6) the Sabbath healing of the blind man (9:1-40); and (7) the restoration of Lazarus to life (11:1-54).

Nevertheless, M. Girard⁴ has brought forward persuasive arguments that this is not the arrangement intended by the evangelist. The following is a summary of these arguments. First of all, he accepts R. E. Brown's⁵ definition of a sign: a prodigious deed with strong symbolic possibility that illustrates Jesus' salvific message. In this regard, sign five (Jesus' walking on the water) does not appear to fit in this category. It seems rather a part of the loaves' total message and meaning, perhaps bringing out a Passover context.⁶ Secondly, the actual use of the word "sign" in the stories is another indicator. It is found regarding all the narratives above, with the exception of Jesus' walking on the water. The passages are as follows: 2:11; 4:54; 6:1 (referring to the previous healing at Bethesda); 6:14; 9:16; 12:18 (referring to Lazarus).

The problem is, this leaves us with only six signs. Where is the seventh, if there is one? It would seem strange for the evangelist to leave us with six signs, like the six incomplete water jars at Cana! In our search for the seventh sign, we should realize that there is no compelling reason to conclude the signs with the so-called end of the book of signs in 12:37-50. In fact, the author concludes his Gospel (if we regard chap. 21 as an appendix) by mentioning signs after the whole work of Jesus' death and glorification is complete: "Now Jesus performed many other signs before his disciples, which are not written in this book . . ." (20:30). M. Girard suggests that the seventh sign consists of Jesus' death and the accompanying issue of water and blood

³ E.g., this is assumed as almost not needing explanation by B. Vawter, "The Gospel According to John," *JBC* 2, 446. They are so listed by R. E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John* (AB 29; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 1. cxxxix.

⁴ M. Girard, "La composition structurelle des sept signes dans le quatrième évangile," *SR* 9 (1980) 315-24.

⁵ *John*, 1, 527-30.

⁶ Jesus passes over the water as God made his people Israel pass over the Red Sea at the time of the exodus, with a possible relation to Pss 77:20; 78:13.

from Jesus' side, an event the disciple finds so extraordinary that he emphasizes that there was (or he was) an eyewitness and that he tells the story so that others may believe as well (19:35). Thus the first six signs are incomplete and look forward to the seventh at Jesus' great hour of death and glorification, when he will be lifted up and draw everyone to himself (12:33). While the word "sign" is not used here, the writer may have considered it appropriate to save it for the conclusion of all these events in 20:30.

A further confirmation of this new seven-signs series is found in M. Girard's suggested chiasmic structure of the seven signs:

- (1) The wedding feast at Cana (2:1-12)
- (2) The restoration of the dying son (4:46-54)
- (3) The Sabbath healing at Bethesda (5:1-16)
- (4) The multiplication of loaves (6:1-71)⁷
- (5) The Sabbath healing of the blind man (9:1-41)
- (6) The restoration of Lazarus to life (11:1-44)
- (7) The great hour of Jesus: his mother, the cross, and the issue of blood and water from Jesus' side (19:25-37)⁸

In this structure, we notice immediately some general correspondences: (3) and (5) as Sabbath-healing signs; (2) and (6) as death-to-life themes; (1) and (7) complement each other as beginning and end. In both (1) and (7) Jesus' mother is associated with the same or similar themes: Jesus' hour (2:4; 19:27), the Cana wine and the bitter wine on the cross (19:29,30), the imperfect Cana water and the water/blood/spirit from Christ's side. The sign of the loaves appears in the central part of the Gospel. All the signs may contribute to its meaning, especially (1) and (7). Perhaps symbolic numbers—five loaves and two fish, with seven as a total yielding twelve left-over loaves—hint at the central place among the seven signs held by the loaves-sign. Peter's confession at the end of the sign and discourse also supports the central place of (4), the loaves-sign, in John's Gospel. If it has this central place, we would expect common elements with (1) and (7). Examples are the common mention of Jesus' mother (6:42 in most MSS); Jesus' blood (6:52,54; 19:34; and the wine, the "blood of the grape," at Cana); the connection with Passover (6:4; 19:31; 2:12,13); and the hour of Jesus' glorification (6:62; 2:4; 19:27).

⁷ The ending is placed at v 71 because there seems to be a fitting conclusion of the sign in the confession of faith on the part of Peter, followed by the counterexample of Judas as unbeliever.

⁸ The list of the witnesses in 19:25 would be a fitting beginning, followed by the sign itself (the issue of bloody water from Jesus' side), then the faith-confession of the beloved disciple and the Scripture citations, ending with the looking on the one who was pierced as a possible inclusion.

These structural interconnections can also serve as an important vehicle of meaning in the Fourth Gospel. The reason for this is that the writer often refers to a later event within an earlier one in order to complete its meaning. For example, at the feast of booths, Jesus announced that anyone who thirsted should come to him and drink, and that, according to the Scriptures, rivers of living water would flow from him (7:37). In the next verse, the writer mentions that this will only happen in the future outpouring of the Spirit at Jesus' glorification. In the loaves-discourse, the evangelist has Jesus say that his flesh and blood are real food and drink (6:55-56); yet this will be understood only at the future ascension of the Son of Man to where he came from (6:62-63). Moreover, the writer brings out that the resurrection of Lazarus is made possible only by the resurrection of Jesus as the source of resurrection and life (11:26). When this present-future link is developed within the structural interconnections of the seven signs, it becomes easier for the writer to complete the meaning of Jesus' words and actions in reference to their future fulfillment.

Consequently, if the first and last signs are so closely interconnected with each other and with the loaves-sign, we would expect that they might shed meaning on the loaves-sign and perhaps answer some questions or misunderstandings found in it. First of all, many people misunderstood the sign and thought it indicated the arrival of a prophet-like Moses into the world. Jesus had to retreat to a mountain because he feared that they would try to make him a liberator and king (6:13-14). Thus, in terms of bread, some people probably thought of Jesus as a miracle-/sign-worker like Moses, who provided Israel with a "wonder bread" (Exod 16:1-31). In response, Jesus pointed out that Moses did not give them real bread from heaven; it is the Son of Man who will give that to them (6:27). A second question flows from this. If Jesus will give them a heavenly bread as Son of Man, how can this be reconciled with his humanity and his obvious family ties with his mother and father (6:41-42)? In other words, can he really have a divine or heavenly origin if his earthly origin is so evident? So "the Jews" rightly ask, "How does he then say, 'I have come down from heaven'?"

A third dispute, a rather heated one, springs up in the audience in response to Jesus' words, "The bread I will give is my flesh for the life of the world" (6:51). If we follow the view that 6:51-58 specifically pertains to the Eucharist,⁹ the audience's reaction would seem to reflect a division¹⁰ in regard

⁹ Here I follow Brown, *John*, 1. 284-89. He points out that this section begins with a description of a bread that will be Jesus' flesh for the life of the world. This seems to be built on Jesus' words at the Last Supper in the synoptic tradition, that he would give his bread/life/body/blood for others. Verses 51-58 would be a later stage and rethinking of vv 35-50, with the introduction of more precise eucharistic terminology.

¹⁰ This is suggested by Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York:

to understanding the meaning of the Eucharist in the early church. Some of the people ask, "How can this man give us [his] flesh to eat?" (6:52). Connected with the previous verse, the question would mean, "How can this mere man, flesh and blood, give bread to eat that will be a source of life for the world?" In other words, the humanity of Jesus is the real stumbling block. The problem is so acute that it is presented first as a violent dispute (6:52) and finally as a cause of schism among Jesus' disciples, many of whom abandon him in view of this teaching (6:60,66). Jesus replies for the third time that it is the bread of the Son of Man (6:27,53,62). However, he adds the explanation that to understand his words they must see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before, so that they will know that his words are spirit and life, not flesh alone (6:62-63). The promised bread, therefore, is connected with the reality of Jesus' death and glorification, with his ensuing gift of the spirit.

We can sum up the questions proposed in the fourth sign of the loaves, questions that may possibly be answered in the seventh and first signs: (1) Are the loaves a miraculous wonder bread provided by Jesus, a second Moses and wonder-worker? (2) If the bread is a "bread from heaven," is the Jesus behind this bread really divine, come down from heaven? (3) If so, can he really be human? And connected with this, did he really die? Is his death connected to the spirit and life associated with the bread fellowship?

The Mother of Jesus in the Seventh Sign (19:25-37)

First of all, we should note that the presence of the mother of Jesus is not incidental, but central in the first and last signs. Her name and presence open and close the first sign at Cana, as well as the last¹¹ sign at the cross. In the first sign, the word "mother" is used four times, and "woman" once; in the seventh sign, "mother" is likewise found four times and "woman" once (19:25,26,27).

The seventh sign (19:25-37) begins with the simple statement that the mother of Jesus stood by the cross along with other women. At face value, she would be a most important witness of these central events. The question of historicity (since Mary is not at the cross in the other Gospels) need not detain us: the evangelist uses the words "see" and "know" in deeper senses. Even the blind can "see" if they are open to Jesus' words (9:39). By the time John's Gospel was written, the mother of Jesus had probably been dead for

Paulist, 1979) 74. Specifically, these would be Jewish Christians who do not hold John's view of the Eucharist.

¹¹ In view of n. 8, she would be in the inclusion of witnesses at the beginning and among those looking upon the pierced one at the end.

many years, yet the author wrote as if the events described were of present significance to his audience (19:35). Perhaps the evangelist understood the scene at the cross not as an event in the past but as a timeless drama. The risen Jesus always bears the marks of the cross and the spear (20:20,24). This view is reflected elsewhere in the NT. For example, Paul portrayed Jesus to the Galatians as crucified, although years after the event (3:1).

The words of Jesus to his mother, "Woman, behold your son," and to the beloved disciple, "Behold your mother," are capable of bearing a wide range of meanings, especially in the area of symbolism. In this study, we will limit ourselves to what *she actually does*¹² as a mother in these signs, while recognizing that a wider range of symbolism is possible. It does appear that her role is especially important for the author and his audience; it is not just a sentimental memory from the past. M. De Goedt¹³ has suggested that the words "behold your mother" are a revelatory formula introducing a special new role as a mother, a role she will exercise in regard to the beloved disciple. The words cannot be simply a last command on Jesus' part that a favorite disciple take care of his mother upon his death. They must be understood within the meaning that "the disciple whom Jesus loved" has for this Gospel and its audience.

The last word on the identity and meaning of this beloved disciple has not been spoken and perhaps never will be. The group of twelve scholars whose study and discussions led to the book *Mary in the New Testament*¹⁴ accepted the following as a working hypothesis: (1) that he was a real person thought to have been a companion of Jesus; (2) that he had real significance for the Johannine community, whether or not he was their founder; (3) that he is presented as the ideal or model disciple; (4) that he is a very special witness (19:35; 21:24), guaranteeing the community's understanding of Jesus and his teaching. This is very similar to the view held by Brown in *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*.¹⁵ However, a description of Mary's role in the seventh sign is not contingent on an exact identification of the beloved disciple.

It was very important for the author of the Fourth Gospel to obtain credibility for his views by establishing a direct link with Jesus. No doubt

¹² By what *she actually does*, I do not necessarily mean a physical, photographic, or journalistic sense, but rather her understanding of Jesus' death. This understanding is presented by the evangelist in terms of fulfillment of the Scriptures, with Jesus' mother and the beloved disciple as witnesses.

¹³ M. De Goedt, "Un schème de révélation dans le quatrième évangile," *NTS* 8 (1962) 142-50. He does this by comparing the seeing, behold, and announcement sequence in the scenes in 1:29-34; 1:35-39; 1:47-51.

¹⁴ *Mary in the New Testament*, 211.

¹⁵ *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*, 31.

many Jewish Christians also did so by referring to James, their Jerusalem leader, as the "brother of the Lord." A line of succession in authentic teaching could be established only by making as close a connection as possible to Jesus. Consequently, a word of Jesus just before death confirming a relationship between his mother and the beloved disciple would be extremely important. It would establish him as a "brother of the Lord" with authority like that of James, Jesus' blood relative, and other disciples of Jesus, even Peter. Thus R. E. Brown writes: "By stressing not only that his mother has become the mother of the beloved disciple, but also that the disciple has become her son, the Johannine Jesus is logically claiming the disciple as his true brother."¹⁶ P. Minear's study¹⁷ of the beloved disciple, however, has brought out the important OT parallel of Benjamin as the beloved son of Israel. This invites us to think of the beloved disciple as a favorite son or protégé of Jesus, a son who then continues on as "adopted" by Mary. The image of sonship would seem confirmed by the parallel between Jesus in the Father's bosom (1:18) and the beloved disciple reclining on Jesus' bosom (13:25). However, whether in terms of son or of brother, the succession motif would be very important for the author.

Together, the beloved disciple and Jesus' mother are associated in witnessing the meaning of the key event in Jesus' life, sign seven, which culminates in the unusual prodigy of the issue of watery blood from Jesus' side. It is a prodigy to which the evangelist gives special attention. It is important to note *what* Jesus' mother actually observes (according to the author's portrayal), and in *what way* she would act as a mother. First and foremost, she would be the most important witness of the utter reality of Jesus' death. The popular perception of the indelible memory of a mother for her child is found in Isa 49:15. This would be especially true of a child's death. Mary would be a mother to the community of the beloved disciple as a carrier of tradition, as one who remembers, which is one of the greatest functions of a mother. Her association with Jesus in an explanation of his person or mission would be a continual reminder of his death and its meaning.

As noted, the question of Jesus' humanity and death would be very important for understanding the central sign of the loaves. The joint witness of Jesus' mother and the beloved disciple would be necessary to answer questions about the flesh-and-blood reality of Jesus in the sign of the loaves, and to explain that it is a bread which the *Son of Man* gives (6:27,53,62). This Son of Man in the Eucharistic discourse is portrayed especially in the aspect of exaltation and triumph (6:62). This would go along with the predominant

¹⁶ Ibid., 197.

¹⁷ P. S. Minear, "The Beloved Disciple in the Gospel of John. Some Clues and Conjectures," *NovT* 19 (1977) 105-23.

place of the lifting up on the cross in the Son of Man texts (3:14; 8:28; 12:23,24). It should also be mentioned that, in the Fourth Gospel, *blood* is found only in sign four (6:53,54,55,56) and in sign seven (19:34). (The blood in 1:13 has another sense in reference to the manner of Jesus' birth.) In addition, the mother's witness to the humanity of her son in the events of his birth would also be very significant. This is alluded to in the sign of the loaves (6:42), where the people's knowledge regarding Jesus' father and mother (in most texts) seems contrary to a statement that Jesus has come down from heaven. However, we will point out shortly the possibility of a double meaning in the statement about Jesus' father and mother. It is interesting to note that Mary is also seen to be a witness to the reality of Jesus' humanity in the early second century, in a letter by Ignatius to the Trallians concerning some who seem to deny this reality (*Trall.* 9:1).

Beyond the reality of his death, the Gospel has a very special interest in *how Jesus died*. Here is where both the beloved disciple and Jesus' mother are unique witnesses. In the Gospel's presentation of this, Jesus' obedience to God's plan as found in the Scriptures is a dominant theme (19:24,28,30). Special focus is placed on Ps 69:21, "In my thirst they gave me bitter wine to drink." The evangelist pictures Jesus very consciously saying, "I thirst," and taking the wine in order to fulfill the Scriptures. In addition, as Brown¹⁸ points out, Jesus obediently accepts the cup of suffering and death in accord with the words at his arrest, "Shall I not drink the cup which the Father has given me?" (18:11). There is special emphasis on this *oxos*, or bitter wine of Ps 69:21, which is here repeated three times (19:28-30). It is this wine that Jesus takes in obedience. Later we will see in the first sign that Mary will direct the "waiters" to do everything that Jesus says (2:5). The "good wine" will be made possible through obedience to Jesus' word, just as he has been obedient to the Father on the cross.

In addition to this obedience motif, the writer seems to give special attention to Jesus' supreme control over his death. He knows exactly when he is going to die (19:28); then he says that it is all finished (19:30); and finally he seems deliberately to bow his head and expire. This was anticipated in 10:18, where Jesus said that no one takes away his life from him; he dies by his own choice. He has the power to give (or lay down) his life and to take it up again in accord with the command of his Father. This sign points to something *supra*-human in Jesus' death. It is surely a real death, yet no human being has the power to determine when life will come and when it will go. In the Prologue, the author pointed out that the Word came into the world to be born in the flesh by his own choice; now he dies in the same way. All of this

¹⁸ Brown, *The Gospel according to John* (AB 29A; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970) 2. 930.

points to a divine element in Jesus. Jesus' mother would be a witness to this, as is brought out in the manner Jesus died. For the Gospel, this would provide an answer to the question in the sign of the loaves, "How does he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?" (6:41). It is significant that immediately after this, in the next verse, Jesus' mother is mentioned. As we noted, there is a possible double meaning or irony in the statement that the audience of Jesus knows about his human origin. It is possible that Jesus' mother does know of his real, though mysterious, origin.

Another area of meaning concerns the effects of Jesus' death as bringing the promised spirit to his followers. Of Jesus' death the evangelist simply writes, "He bowed his head and gave up the spirit" (19:30). By itself, the phrase means nothing more than that he expired or died. However, in view of the next incident, and of Jesus' whole work, the phrase may be proleptic and symbolic of the gift of the spirit to others. The climactic moment of the seventh sign is the piercing of Jesus' side and the unusual flow of blood and water from it. The evangelist attaches great import to this; he cites the words of an eyewitness who relates the event so that others may also believe (19:35). What does the author see in this event? He does not tell us directly, but we can surmise that it must be connected with some word of Jesus, with the Scriptures, or with both. In regard to the first possibility, Jesus had promised on the last day of the feast of Tabernacles, "If anyone thirst, let him come [to me (in most texts)] and let him drink who believes in me. As the Scripture says, 'From within him shall flow rivers of living water'" (7:37-38). This is the translation adopted by R. E. Brown in his commentary on John,¹⁹ where he details his reasons for understanding the second half as referring to Jesus rather than to the believer. Regardless of which way it is to be translated, the evangelist in the next verse notes that Jesus was speaking of the spirit that those who believed in him were to receive, and that this spirit would only come at Jesus' glorification. So the surprising flow of bloody water from Jesus' side could be understood as a confirmation of Jesus' words that his glorification on the cross would bring the gift of the spirit/water as a result of his bloody sacrifice.

A second basis for interpreting this unusual occurrence could be the fulfillment of the Scriptures. The piercing of Jesus' side by the soldiers brought to the evangelist's mind the text (along with its context), "They shall look on him whom they have pierced" (disagreement with some Hebrew mss of Zech 12:10). Immediately preceding this in Zechariah we have, "I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and petition." A few verses later we read, "On that day there shall be

¹⁹ *John*, I, 320-21.

open to the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a fountain to purify from sin and uncleanness" (MT Zech 13:1). Blood was considered especially necessary for purification from sin. So the presence of blood in the flow from Jesus' side would strengthen the application of the text. P. Ellis²⁰ draws special attention to the actual *flow* of blood, which was considered so important in Jewish law.

Once again, the links to the fourth sign of the loaves can be noted. In that scene, many disciples refused to accept Jesus' statement about the necessity of eating his flesh and drinking his blood (6:53,54,60). As already noted,²¹ this may refer to Jewish Christians who do not share John's view of the Eucharist. However, Jesus replies that their understanding will be complete when they see the Son of Man ascending and realize that his words are spirit and life (6:62-63). Jesus then openly states that some of them do not believe. The witness of Jesus' mother and the beloved disciple seems to be the fulfillment of Jesus' words: they both see that the exalted Son of Man does indeed provide spirit and life through his death, and thus through the Eucharist. The beloved disciple as a witness sees and believes this along with Jesus' mother (19:35).

The meaning of Passover, and especially the sacrifice of the Passover lamb, is also found within the symbolism of the seventh sign. The first words of the Baptist about Jesus addressed to his disciples (one of whom was probably the beloved disciple, see 1:35) were, "Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (1:29). Among the last words about Jesus before his burial, there is a reference to the Passover ritual in the words, "Not a bone of him shall be broken" (Exod 12:46). This scriptural citation was prompted by another unusual "occurrence," which the evangelist considers part of a divine plan: the soldiers decided not to break Jesus' bones, as was ordinarily expected. In not doing so, they allowed Jesus to parallel perfectly the Passover lamb. Because Jesus drank the bitter "blood of the grape" in obedience, his life/blood became a sacrifice, a prayer-offering to God for forgiveness, just as the blood of the Passover lambs sprinkled on Jewish homes saved the people from destruction at the time of the Exodus (Exod 12:23). This Passover atmosphere is one more link between signs one, four, and seven.

Finally, in regard to *how Jesus died*, the role of his mother reached its highest peak in the area of the motivation of his death. This motivation was love for those entrusted to him by his Father. The texts we noted stress his obedience to his Father's will in taking up the cup of suffering. However, this

²⁰ P. Ellis, *The Genius of John. A Composition-Critical Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1984) 275.

²¹ See n. 10.

will of the Father is prompted by his loving desire to save the human family. Thus Jesus says, "It is the will of him who sent me that I should lose nothing of what he has given me; rather I should raise it up on the last day" (6:39; also 17:12). Before the final supper, the evangelist notes that Jesus loved his disciples "to the end" (13:1). This may simply mean to the fullest extent, but it is hard to exclude the meaning referring to the end or completion on the cross, when Jesus said that it was finished (19:30). This motivation is confirmed in the sixth sign, the raising of Lazarus. When Jesus resolved to go to Lazarus in Judea, his disciples were alarmed because they knew the Master's life was in danger (11:8). However, Jesus decided to go, knowing this would mean his own death. Thus, the writer brings out symbolically (the raising of Lazarus being the sign of the raising of Christians) that Jesus died out of love, in order to make others live. For this reason, the author stresses that Jesus loved Lazarus, Martha, and Mary (11:5).

Jesus' mother at the cross was the most important witness of this motivating love. When Jesus gave her to the beloved disciple and his community, she became also a remembering mother and bearer of the tradition of Jesus' motivation of love. She well understood that the complete meaning of Jesus' death was found in this loving gift of himself for his disciples. In addition, the words of Jesus to his mother, "Woman, behold your son" (19:26), indicate that Mary is to continue Jesus' own loving concern for the beloved disciple/community. Thus, Mary's role as a mother is a double one. First of all, she is a most important bearer of the tradition of the reality of Jesus' death, how he died, and, in a connected manner, who he really was. Secondly, she embodies this tradition in a living way by her maternal continuation of Jesus' love for his disciples. How she does both of these in the full life of the community will be partly illustrated in the first sign at Cana.

Jesus' Mother in the First Sign, Cana of Galilee (2:1-12)

Because of the chiastic arrangement of the seven signs, we would expect the first and last signs to have a very close relationship: the first is included in the last, and the last completes the first. On the surface, there are common elements in both: Jesus' mother, the "hour," the thirst or lack of wine, the obedience motif, the wine/blood/water. The Cana story opens with the mother of Jesus present at the wedding, and with Jesus and his disciples also invited. Of course, a wedding feast is a well-known symbol of the messianic days (Isa 54:4-8; 62:4-5). The wedding and the banquet are symbols used elsewhere by Jesus (Matt 8:11; 9:15; 22:1-14). Abundant wine is the main ingredient of such festivities. To run short on such an occasion would be a long-remembered public embarrassment for any married couple.

On her own initiative, or at the behest of the guests or family, Mary brings up the matter to Jesus and says, "They have no wine." Jesus responds (literally), "What is it to me and to you, woman? My hour has not yet come" (2:4). This statement seems to have a negative nuance. However, C. H. Giblin²² has pointed out through Johannine parallels that the words do not necessarily mean a refusal to act. They imply that, if Jesus acts, it will be in accord with *his* own conscious purpose and design, not that of others. Therefore, at Cana he will not act according to the expectations of Mary or the people, but in line with his *hour*, a time that will show his true relationship with the Father and with his people. What Jesus wants to accomplish at Cana will be shown only through the seventh and last sign at the cross. This may mean that the initial wonder or miracle requested by Mary/the people is not in Jesus' design. This seems to parallel the interconnected fourth sign of the loaves. There the people misinterpret the sign and understand it in the sense that Jesus will be another Moses, another wonder-worker, bringing miraculous bread like that provided by Moses in the desert. Jesus refused to accept this definition of his role. He withdrew from the crowd, fearing that they would try to make him king (6:14). In the situation of the Johannine community, this might refer to Jewish Christians whose view of Jesus was limited to that of a Messiah and sign-worker.²³ If the purpose of Jesus' mother in the narrative reflects this, then Jesus refuses to act out of this motive, but only in view of the approaching hour on the cross and the meaning of the seventh sign. Other symbolic elements may be present,²⁴ but we wish to deal primarily with what Mary actually does in the text.

Following the statement about Jesus' hour, his mother tells the waiters, "Do whatever he tells you" (2:5). Jesus' mother now acts toward the waiters (and the community) in accord with the maternal remembering role emphasized in the seventh sign. The emphasis is on perfect obedience to Jesus' word. This is noted three times: by Mary's word, by the waiters filling the jars as Jesus directed, and by their obedience to his command to bring the jars to the chief steward. We note the parallel to the seventh sign, where Jesus obeys the Scriptures and God's plan by taking the imperfect bitter wine as the cup

²² "Suggestion, Negative Response, and Positive Action in St John's Portrayal of Jesus," *NTS* 26 (1980) 197-211. This format is found in 2:1-11; 4:46-54; 7:2-14; 11:1-44.

²³ Brown describes one of the groups in the Johannine Community in this manner, but does not connect them with this text; see his *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*, 169.

²⁴ Other accessory areas of symbolism, such as Mary as a representative image of the church or as the new Eve, have been suggested both in the Cana story and at the foot of the cross. Descriptions and basis for these are given by Brown, *John*, 1. 107-9; 2. 923-27. However, since we suggest in this study that Mary's primary role is that of a maternal rememberer and bearer of tradition, we will not enter into a discussion about accessory symbolism.

of suffering prepared by his Father (19:28-30). Thus Mary directs the community to obey Jesus' words, just as he has obeyed his Father's.

The episode at Cana may then mean that the choice wine of the new age can be prepared only in obedience to Jesus' words, just as the parallel blood/water/spirit from Jesus' side was made possible only by his acceptance of the imperfect, bitter "blood of the grape" in obedience to his Father. The community must participate in Jesus' hour and its meaning if they wish to receive the choice wine and spirit made possible by his death. Jesus' mother has witnessed this death and acts in her remembering role by pointing to imitation and duplication of her son's obedience.

In addition, we noted in the seventh sign that Jesus' mother also became a true mother of the beloved disciple/community by her understanding of the meaning of Jesus' death in terms of his love for those entrusted to him by the Father. We observed that Jesus' gift of his mother to the community included a transfer of this love in the person who most appreciated what his death stood for. Is this aspect also found at Cana? If the sign is interpreted in accord with Jesus' final hour, there are some indications that this is present also. Jesus' mother does take the initiative to present the community's need of wine to her son. Trusting an answer to her request, Mary gives directions to the waiters. This seems to indicate that she is an important person at the banquet. The role of responsibility for hospitality, food, and wine usually fell upon a mother, and here she seems to act according to that model.

In what way could her continuing role within the community be explained? One way could be through her symbolic identity with the church.²⁵ At Cana, she could represent the church as a concerned mother asking for the new wine of the spirit and presenting obedience to Jesus' word understood in light of his death as a means to obtain it. A second possible way is that of Mary as a heavenly intercessor. This is not found in the Fourth Gospel by any kind of direct evidence. However, it would fit in with the Gospel and be in no way contradictory to it; it would also be supported by acceptable biblical models. There can be nothing of course similar to Jesus' continual prayer for his disciples and for all believers, a prayer that goes far beyond his earthly life (chap. 17). Mary cannot be placed in this category with Jesus, and yet she cannot be separated from him either.

However, in connection with Jesus' prayer and Mary's permanent association with him in his hour, we can look to some biblical models outside the Fourth Gospel that indicate the importance of accessory mediator roles. These do not indicate proof that Mary was considered in such a role, but at least they show that it would by no means be considered unlikely. The Second Book of Maccabees records the belief that the dead Onias, a former

²⁵ See n. 24.

high priest, “prayed with outstretched hands for the whole Jewish community,” and that the venerable Jeremiah, prompted by love of his brothers, fervently prayed for the people and their city (15:11-16). In the NT Book of Revelation, the twenty-four presbyters around the throne of God have special bowls of incense which are described as the “prayers of God’s holy people” (5:8). While their identity is uncertain—they may be a heavenly council, angelic beings, or the saints of the OT and NT—they present the prayers of the faithful to God. In addition, this function of offering the faithful’s prayers to God is also found in 8:3, where an angel comes, stands before the altar with a golden censer, and is given much incense to mingle with the prayers of all God’s people. In line with these models, perhaps the Johannine community considered Mary as continuing her function as a loving mother by offering their petitions to her son. If so, the petition of Jesus’ mother at Cana, and her initiative in making the petition, would hint at this function.

Summary

A chiastic structure for the seven signs in John, with the seventh sign at the cross in 19:25-37, offers a more complete source for appraising the role of Jesus’ mother at Cana and in the Gospel as a whole. In this model, the first and seventh signs complement each other, with the fourth sign of the loaves at the center of the chiasm and of the Gospel. Mary’s part and witness in these signs are a key to her role as mother, as well as a key to understanding the beloved disciple as a legitimate successor to Jesus and a model for both believer and community. As a remembering mother and carrier of tradition, Jesus’ mother is the preeminent witness of who Jesus is, how Jesus died, and the effects of his death. The first and seventh signs carry the common elements of the presence of Jesus’ mother, the centrality of the “hour,” and the focus on obedience as well as the interconnection of water/wine/spirit. Their meaning sheds light on the central sign, i.e., the fourth sign of the loaves, to which both first and seventh point. The first sign at Cana appears to bring Mary’s role into the community’s life and worship, in view of the meaning of Jesus’ hour. Jesus’ mother directs the community to obey Jesus as he obeyed his Father on the cross. Thus a new wine, prepared under obedience to Jesus and in the same spirit that Jesus revealed on the cross, can become a reality.