

8 The Mother of Jesus – A Catalyst in His Ministry

'Catalyst: a person or thing that precipitates an event' – Oxford English Dictionary

In the Gospel of John, Jesus' mother is an anonymous character, married to Joseph (6:42), and she has, besides Jesus, other sons (2:12; 7:3).¹ She has an unnamed sister, and probably knows Mary the wife of Clopas, Mary Magdalene and the Beloved Disciple (19:25). Jesus' family lives in Nazareth (1:45; 18:5; 19:19) but Jesus' mother seems to accompany her son at various points during his ministry – in Cana (2:1–5), Capernaum (2:12) and Jerusalem (19:25–27). This coheres with the Synoptic accounts which show that various Galilean women accompanied and provided for Jesus during his ministry, who were also present during his passion – including Mary Magdalene and Jesus' mother herself (Matt. 27:55–56; Mark 15:40–41; Luke 8:1–3; 23:49). In John's account, Jesus' mother has a noticeable presence only on two occasions – in Cana, at the beginning of Jesus' ministry (2:3–5), and at the foot of the cross towards the end of Jesus' ministry (19:25–27).

At the Wedding in Cana

The story of the wedding at Cana is found in 2:1–11. Most scholars struggle with the enigmatic exchange between Jesus and his mother in 2:3–5 but Ritva Williams's insightful analysis helps us make sense of this conversation. She draws attention to three social conventions of first-century Mediterranean culture. First, men were associated with open, public space, while women were limited to domestic, private space. A first-century Mediterranean wedding took place in the public realm since it formalized the union of two households and their honour rather than two individuals. Second, while the father operated in the public realm, the mother's task was to raise the children in the private space, until, in case of a male child, the boy would join the father in the public space at the age of seven or eight.

¹ T.W. Martin finds that ancient authors most often use the epithet 'mother of X' when the name of a mother is well known to the readers. Martin thus concludes that Jesus' mother is anonymous in John's gospel *precisely* because the community was familiar with her name ('Assessing the Johannine Epithet "the Mother of Jesus"', *CBQ* 60 [1998]: 63–73).

The bond between mother and son, however, was the closest of Mediterranean relationships, and when the son grew up he became her supporter and defender. Third, honour served as a kind of indicator of a person's social status within the community, and came with corresponding rights and obligations. The male head of the family was responsible for representing, defending and if possible enhancing the family's honour in the public space, sometimes by establishing a patron-client relationship through a broker.² Williams then suggests reading 2:1–12 as 'a story about a widowed mother at a wedding who brokers from her son a favor that preserves the honor of the groom's family and enhances her son's honor in an unexpected way.'³

Jesus' mother's statement in 2:3, 'they have no wine', reveals that she is observant and practical. Running out of wine would mean a loss of honour – not only does the groom's family lack an adequate supply of wine but also the necessary social connections to preserve the family's honour.⁴ The statement of Jesus' mother is actually a request for Jesus to do something about the situation. Williams explains that Jesus' mother probably sees the embarrassing situation as an opportunity to enhance the honour of her family and extend the family's web of reciprocal relationships. Jesus' mother thus takes on the role of a broker, providing the groom's family privileged access to her son as the patron.⁵ The text provides no information how much Jesus' mother understands about her son's identity and mission at this stage, but it would be unlikely that she expected him to perform a miracle.⁶ Besides, within the story world of John's gospel, the first miracle is only about to happen now (2:11). Nevertheless, she believes her son can do something and her request may be an implicit reminder to him of his family obligations.⁷

Jesus' reply in 2:4 is puzzling and complex. First, in addressing his mother as 'woman' (he does so again in 19:26) Jesus is not rude but seems to use an acceptable form of address – he speaks similarly to other women (4:21; 8:10; 20:15; cf. 20:13).⁸ Nevertheless, Jesus' use of this impersonal address for his biological mother may suggest that he distances himself from her

² R.H. Williams, 'The Mother of Jesus at Cana: A Social-Science Interpretation of John 2:1–12', *CBQ* 59 (1997): 680–84.

³ Williams, 'Mother', 680. Independent of Williams, Fehribach provides a similar analysis of 2:1–11 (*Women*, ch. 2). While Williams does not explain why Jesus' mother is a widow, Fehribach contends that her request to Jesus (rather than her husband) to meet the need (2:3) suggests widowhood (*Women*, 38). Cf. R.E. Brown et al., *Mary in the New Testament: A Collaborative Assessment by Protestant and Roman Catholic Scholars* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 64, 195.

⁴ Williams, 'Mother', 684.

⁵ Williams, 'Mother', 685. Cf. Fehribach, *Women*, 28.

⁶ Cf. Williams, 'Mother', 686; B.R. Gaventa, *Mary: Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 83. Contra Collins, 'Figures', 31; Maccini, *Testimony*, 99–100.

⁷ Williams, 'Mother', 686.

⁸ J.M. Lieu, 'The Mother of the Son in the Fourth Gospel', *JBL* 117 (1998): 65; cf. Williams, 'Mother', 688.

and rejects any claim she might make on him because of her family relationship.⁹

The second issue is Jesus' question, 'What has this to do with us?' Williams explains that Jesus' mother acts as the broker on behalf of the groom's family (whether they have asked her or not), which is in need of patronage – a share in someone else's honour. By doing so, however, she has made someone else's problem her own and intrudes Jesus' social space. Jesus' question should read something like: What concern is that (the shortage of wine) to us? It is the groom's problem. Why should we get involved?¹⁰ Jesus thus dissociates himself from his mother's interests.¹¹

Third, Jesus' statement that his 'hour' has not yet come is also enigmatic.¹² We have argued elsewhere that Jesus' hour has two separate referents in John's gospel – the hour of Jesus' messianic ministry (2:4; 4:23; 5:25) and the hour of his passion or glorification (7:30; 8:20; 12:23; 13:1; 17:1).¹³ Although Jesus indicates in 2:4b that the time of the messianic age, i.e. the new age of justice and peace ('salvation') that God would initiate through his Messiah, has not yet begun, his subsequent action of turning water into wine serves to lift the 'not yet' from the messianic hour. The events at the wedding at Cana thus marks Jesus' inauguration of the messianic age (cf. the phrase 'an hour is coming, and is now' in 4:23 and 5:25).¹⁴

Williams correctly observes that Jesus and his mother appear to be at cross-purposes. Jesus' mother uses her privileged access to her son, seeking to broker a favour from him and reminding him of his obligations as

⁹ Brown et al., *Mary*, 188–9. Cf. E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (London: SCM, 1983), 327; Carson, *Gospel*, 170; Beck, *Discipleship*, 55; M. Scott, *Sophia and the Johannine Jesus* (JSNTS 71; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), 180; O'Day, *Gospel*, 536; Maccini, *Testimony*, 102; Lieu, 'Mother', 65; Fehribach, *Women*, 29, 37; Keener, *Gospel*, 505.

¹⁰ Williams, 'Mother', 687–8. Contra Conway, who argues that Jesus' mother pushes Jesus before his time, trying to force a miracle, and Jesus' sharp response complicates the characterization of his mother ('Ambiguity', 337–8).

¹¹ Brown et al., *Mary*, 191. Cf. Köstenberger, *John*, 95.

¹² It seems inappropriate to take 2:4b as a question, 'Has not my time come?', as Williams suggests ('Mother', 689). For a critique, see Brown et al., *Mary*, 191–2.

¹³ Bennema, *John's Gospel*, 38–9. In contrast, Maccini contends that the 'hour' in 2:4 refers to Jesus' death (*Testimony*, 104–6). While Fehribach also perceives 2:4 as a reference to the messianic hour, she does not recognize that there is another hour too (*Women*, 30–31). Although we differentiate between these two uses of 'hour', we should not dichotomize Jesus' ministry and his glorification as if the former was devoid of glory. On the contrary, Jesus' miracle at Cana reveals his glory (2:11); the resurrection of Lazarus results in glorification (11:4, 40); Jesus glorifies his Father during his ministry (17:4) and Jesus receives glory through his disciples (17:10). Hence, Jesus' earthly ministry is one of glory and glorification, but, in a narrower sense, his glorification refers specifically to his death, resurrection and ascension.

¹⁴ For an explanation how the miracle signifies the start of Jesus' messianic ministry, see Carson, *Gospel*, 172–5; Stibbe, *John*, 43–6; Fehribach, *Women*, 29–30; Bennema, *John's Gospel*, 39–40. Williams points out that although the wedding occurred in the public space, only Jesus' private circle realizes that Jesus' honour is enhanced (but different from what Jesus' mother intended), and consequently believes in him (2:11) ('Mother', 690).

head of her family, thereby enhancing the family's honour and reciprocal networks. Jesus' answer in 2:4 shows that he realizes his mother is drawing him into the local game of honour and patronage, whereas his concern is the mission that God had given him.¹⁵ Jesus' reply should thus be seen as a mild rebuke that his mother's 'earthly' motivations do not correspond to his 'heavenly' mandate.¹⁶

We can hardly assume that Jesus' mother grasped the significance of what her son was saying in 2:4, and hence her reaction in 2:5 should be evaluated with caution. According to Williams, she may have viewed her son's reply as typical male grumbling, while expecting him to do what was necessary because it was a question of honour – a confidence that came from her privileged relationship with her son.¹⁷ Beck, however, contends that her response shows that she has re-evaluated her relationship with him, accepting the newly revealed hierarchy in which Jesus' role is defined exclusively in terms of his Father's sovereignty, with no place for human familial obligation.¹⁸ Be that as it may, when she tells the servants to do whatever Jesus says, it is in fact a directive to obey Jesus' word, and it is possible that she has accepted (and perhaps understood something of) Jesus' correction.¹⁹ In the Johannine narrative, people are encouraged to trust Jesus' word (above miraculous signs) (4:48–50; 6:68; cf. 20:29), as well as to adhere continually to his word (15:7). Thus, while Jesus' mother may not have understood the mission of her son and hence the true meaning of his reply in 2:4, her directive in 2:5 is a true Johannine command.²⁰

In sum, at a wedding celebration, Jesus' mother witnesses the symbolic inauguration of her son's messianic ministry. In fact, she plays an active role in precipitating this important event because of her powers of observation, her implicit request to Jesus and her instruction to the servants to obey Jesus' word.²¹ Many scholars connect the wedding at Cana with the scene at the foot of the cross, and diminish the significance of the part of Jesus' mother in the former event. They argue that she had no role in Jesus' ministry because his hour had not yet come (2:4) and only gains significance

¹⁵ Williams, 'Mother', 689. Cf. Fehribach, *Women*, 31–6; Scott, *Sophia*, 180.

¹⁶ Contra Williams, who contends that 2:4, rather than a rebuke or rebuff, is merely a signal that Jesus recognizes what his mother is asking of him ('Mother', 689).

¹⁷ Williams, 'Mother', 689–90. Cf. Fehribach, *Women*, 31–2.

¹⁸ Beck, *Discipleship*, 57. Cf. Brown, *Gospel*, 1:109; Bultmann, *Gospel*, 117.

¹⁹ Cf. Beck, *Discipleship*, 61; Moloney, *Gospel*, 67–8; Beirne, *Women*, 57.

²⁰ Williams thus misses the significance of the command of Jesus' mother in the light of John's theology. However, to treat her action in 2:5 as a belief-response (so J.A. Grassi, 'The Role of Jesus' Mother in John's Gospel', *CBQ* 48 [1986]: 78; Howard, 'Significance', 67–8; Beirne, *Women*, 57–9; cf. Scott, *Sophia*, 181–2; Beck, 'Function', 150; *idem*, *Discipleship*, 58, 61; Moloney, *Gospel*, 68) concludes more than the text warrants. Conway's reading that it is Jesus' mother rather than Jesus who is attuned to the Father's will (*Men and Women*, 77–8) is unconvincing.

²¹ Cf. Fehribach, *Women*, 37; Keener, *Gospel*, 501; Beirne, *Women*, 52–3, 61; Howard, 'Significance', 66.

when that hour comes (19:26–27).²² However, that Jesus' mother makes only two appearances in the Johannine narrative does not mean that the two events interpret one another. Besides, the 'hour' in 2:4 and 19:27 do not have the same referent. The 'hour' in 2:4 denotes the messianic hour whose 'not yet' aspect is removed in the subsequent miracle, whereas the 'hour' in 19:27 lacks theological significance and simply means 'from that moment' (cf. 'hour' in 5:35; 16:2). Jesus' mother did not have to wait till 19:27 to experience the messianic blessings or be assigned a role; she was a catalyst for Jesus' messianic ministry in John 2.

At the Foot of the Cross

Standing at the foot of the cross and watching Jesus being crucified, were, among others, four women – Jesus' mother, her sister, Mary (the wife or mother) of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene – and the Beloved Disciple (19:25–26).²³ When Jesus sees his mother and the Beloved Disciple standing together, he says to her, 'Woman, see, your son', and to the Beloved Disciple, 'See, your mother' (19:26–27a). From that 'hour', the Beloved Disciple takes Jesus' mother into his own home (19:27b). How must we interpret this incident? Most Johannine scholars interpret 19:26–27 symbolically as the constitution of the church or the community of believers, in which Jesus' mother represents Judaism,²⁴ Jewish Christianity finding a home in Gentile Christianity,²⁵ faithful Israel finding a home in the Christian community,²⁶ or the spiritual mother or new Eve of all believers.²⁷ Brown later modified his position (see n. 27), arguing that Jesus reinterprets who his mother and his brothers are in terms of discipleship: Jesus' mother and the Beloved Disciple (who is now Jesus' brother) become models for Jesus' true family of disciples.²⁸

²² R.E. Brown, 'Roles of Women in the Fourth Gospel', *TS* 36 (1975): 697; Collins, 'Figures', 32–3; Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 133; Beck *Discipleship*, 62; M.L. Coloe, *Dwelling in the Household of God: Johannine Ecclesiology and Spirituality* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2007), 54–5. Cf. those who connect the 'hour' in 2:4 and 19:27 (Davies, *Rhetoric*, 340; Lieu, 'Mother', 67; Gaventa, *Mary*, 89; Conway, *Men and Women*, 73, 79).

²³ For a discussion about the exact number of women in 19:25, see Lieu, 'Mother', 68; Maccini, *Testimony*, 185–6.

²⁴ Krafft, 'Personen', 18–9; Waetjen, *Gospel*, 116, 397.

²⁵ Bultmann, *Gospel*, 673.

²⁶ Schnackenburg, *Gospel*, 3:278–9.

²⁷ Brown, *Gospel*, 1:107–9; 2:926–7; Grassi, 'Role', 73. Cf. Lieu, 'Mother', 71–6. Fehribach also interprets 19:25–27 symbolically as the constitution of the believing community but she gives pre-eminence to the Beloved Disciple; Jesus' mother is merely the exchange object to accomplish this spiritual transaction (*Women*, ch. 5). For a detailed (but older) review of the various interpretations, see R.F. Collins, 'Mary in the Fourth Gospel: A Decade of Johannine Studies', *LS* 3 (1970): 99–142.

²⁸ Brown, 'Roles', 698–9; *idem*, *Mary*, 213–4; *idem*, 'The "Mother of Jesus" in the Fourth Gospel', in *L'Évangile de Jean: Sources, redaction, théologie* (ed. M. de Jonge; BETL 44; Leuven: Leuven

Many of these symbolic interpretations seem speculative and far-fetched.²⁹ Moreover, the obvious lack of consensus amongst scholars who interpret the scene at the foot of the cross symbolically makes us question the validity of this approach.³⁰ There are several problems with a symbolic understanding of 19:25–27 as the inception of the church or family of believers. First, such understanding would require the Beloved Disciple to be addressed as ‘man’, and them to be given to each other as brother and sister, not as mother and son.³¹ Second, Jesus dissociates himself from this new relationship – the woman is no longer *his* mother but the Beloved Disciple’s. Third, the Beloved Disciple takes Jesus’ mother into *his* home rather than together becoming part of *Jesus’* home (which would fit a symbolic interpretation).³² Fourth, Jesus has already begun to constitute a spiritual family during his ministry when people believed in and remained with him.³³

This leads us to an alternative interpretation. I suggest that Jesus fulfils his filial obligations with a practical solution: he constitutes a new earthly family consisting of his mother and his most intimate disciple. Knowing that he will no longer be able to care for his mother, he provides a home for her with the disciple he was closest to.³⁴ Jesus’ command suggests that his father Joseph had died – perhaps before the wedding at Cana took place (see n. 3) –

University Press, 1987), 310. Cf. Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 134; Scott, *Sophia*, 219–20; Beirne, *Women*, 170–94; Coloe, *Household*, 55–6, 112–3, 145.

²⁹ E.g. Grassi concludes that Jesus’ mother ‘could represent the church as a concerned mother asking for the new wine of the spirit and presenting obedience to Jesus’ word understood in the light of his death as a means to obtain it’ (‘Role’, 79).

³⁰ Cf. Conway, *Men and Women*, 81.

³¹ Lieu, ‘Mother’, 69–70. Beirne’s assertion that the particular role of Jesus’ mother as ‘mother’ is ‘to give birth to and nourish this new family of the children of God’, and that the Beloved Disciple’s role is to model a sonship of total obedience to Jesus’ mother’s advice ‘Do whatever he tells you’ (2:5) (*Women*, 180), is difficult to understand, especially since it is the Spirit that provides new birth and true nourishment in his teaching role. Besides, Beirne’s claim that Jesus pours out the Spirit upon his newly constituted family (*Women*, 184, 191–2) is unwarranted by the text (see C. Bennema, ‘The Giving of the Spirit in John’s Gospel – A New Proposal?’, *EvQ* 74 [2002]: 200–201).

³² Hence, the argument that by implication the Beloved Disciple becomes Jesus’ brother is not sufficiently persuasive. Only in 20:17 and 21:23 we can safely interpret ‘brothers’ as the community of faith (including male and female believers).

³³ A more suitable Johannine picture of the church or family of believers is the one flock, made up of Jews and Gentiles who have responded to the voice of the good shepherd (10:2–4, 16), or the vine with the branches (15:1–5). This flock has already been constituted during Jesus’ ministry and included sheep such as the Twelve, the Samaritan woman and her fellow-villagers, the royal official and his household, the man born blind and the Lazarus family. For a critical assessment of the symbolic interpretations, see Martin, ‘Epithet’, 64–6; Lieu, ‘Mother’, 71; Gaventa, *Mary*, 90–91; J.G. van der Watt, *Family of the King: Dynamics of Metaphor in the Gospel according to John* (BIS 47; Leiden: Brill, 2000), 333–5.

³⁴ Cf. Barrett, *Gospel*, 350; Williams, ‘Mother’, 690; Edwards, *John*, 109. Van Tilborg relates Jesus’ act to a son’s obligations to support his parents, prescribed in the Mishnah and Talmud (based on Exod. 20:12; Lev. 19:3) (*Love*, 9–12). Besides, Jesus puts his mother in the care of the Beloved Disciple rather than of his brothers because there was a distance between them (7:1–9) (Williams, ‘Mother’, 690–91; Keener, *Gospel*, 1145).

and hence someone would have to provide for his mother. This incident illustrates how the community of believers that Jesus had already constituted during his lifetime (namely those who adequately responded to him and followed him) should function – with practical care for one another's needs. There is one more dimension: Jesus' address of his mother as 'woman' is possibly meant to create some distance between them (cf. 2:4). Being in the process of returning to his Father (starting with the cross and culminating in the ascension), Jesus can no longer maintain links with this world or his biological family.³⁵

Conclusion

Jesus' mother figures as a witness to two important events. First, she is present at the launch of her son's messianic ministry; and later, she witnesses the climax of her son's mission at the cross. She appears to be practical, observant, caring, shows initiative and plays (perhaps unknowingly) an important role in Jesus' ministry. In the first instance, she precipitates the inauguration of Jesus' messianic ministry by her request in 2:3, and the resulting first sign elicits belief from the disciples. Besides, in keeping with the thrust of John's gospel, she directs people to obey Jesus' word in 2:5. The mother of Jesus thus functions as a catalyst in leading people to an authentic belief-response in Jesus. At the end of his life, Jesus makes of his mother (and the Beloved Disciple) an example of how the community of believers should care for one another. Besides, the phrase 'After this, when Jesus knew that everything was now finished' (19:28) indicates that, *inter alia*, 19:26–27 was vital or contributed to the completion of Jesus' mission.³⁶ She thus functions (largely unknowingly) as a catalyst for both the beginning and end of Jesus' ministry, and while she initially tries to draw her son into her plans, she is ultimately drawn into his.³⁷ Although John does not record an explicit belief-response from her, it would not be too wide of the mark to suggest that she was on Jesus' side.³⁸

The connection between 2:3–5 and 19:25–27 is not the occurrence of the 'hour' but the issue of filial obligations. Jesus' addressing his mother as 'woman' on both occasions indicates that his loyalty lies primarily with his family 'from above'. At the wedding in Cana, Jesus distances himself from his mother's plans because his primary concern is his Father's mission – though he implicitly fulfils his filial obligations to his mother. At the cross,

³⁵ Gaventa, *Mary*, 91; Resseguie, *Strange Gospel*, 159. Cf. Lieu, 'Mother', 69–70.

³⁶ Cf. Lieu, 'Mother', 69; Conway, *Men and Women*, 84.

³⁷ Scott's evaluation of Jesus' mother as 'a symbol of true discipleship in her service and faithfulness' is overrated (*Sophia*, 220).

³⁸ Contra Maccini, who only attributes a miracle faith to Jesus' mother because she requests a miracle from Jesus in 2:3 (an interpretation we denied) (*Testimony*, 113, 199).

Jesus fulfils his filial obligations to his mother but once again distances himself from his family below in order to return to his Father above.³⁹

The Mother of Jesus		
Appearances	References	2:1, 3, 5, 12; 6:42; 19:25 (2x), 26 (2x), 27
Identity	Titles given	–
	Gender	female
	Age	–
	Marital status	married (perhaps widowed)
	Occupation	–
	Socio-economic status	–
	Place of residence/operation	Nazareth (but travelled in Galilee), Jerusalem
	Relatives	various sons, including Jesus
	Group affiliation	her family, her sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, Mary Magdalene, the Beloved Disciple
Speech and actions	In interaction with Jesus	she initially tries to rope Jesus into her plans but eventually finds herself part of his plan
	In interaction with others	directs people to obey Jesus' word
Character classification	Complexity	uncomplicated; multiple traits: practical, caring, observant, showing initiative, being a witness
	Development	none
	Inner life	none
Degree of characterization		type
Response to Jesus		no belief-response is recorded, but her attitude and catalysing role indicates that she is on Jesus' side

³⁹ Cf. Jesus' emphasis on the family 'from above' (3:3–5 [elaborating 1:12–13]; 8:39–47; 20:17; 21:23) over his family 'from below' (in 7:1–9, Jesus distances himself from his disbelieving, biological brothers). Williams misses the theological dimension of Jesus' twofold distancing himself from his mother ('Mother', 692). Conway dismisses the 'distancing' theory for an interpretation that Jesus' address of his mother as 'woman' points to the significant role that women play in this gospel (*Men and Women*, 78, 83).