

# THE MOTHER OF JESUS IN THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN: A NARRATIVE-CRITICAL AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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This study attempts to analyse the narrative function and the theological significance of Jesus' mother for the overall theology of the fourth gospel, mainly based on the exegetical method of narrative criticism. In the first part, the problem of the anonymity of Jesus' mother in juxtaposition with the anonymity of the beloved disciple is dealt with. The second part consists of a detailed exegetical approach to the narrative of Jesus' first sign in Cana within the Johannine narrative context as a whole. On this basis, in the third part a response to further relevant questions about the significance of Jesus' mother according to the overall fourth gospel's witness is attempted. The article is concluded with a summary of exegetical and theological positions, including a hypothesis about a possible Johannine background of the current Orthodox understanding of *Theotokos*.

The fourth evangelist presents the mother of Jesus quite differently from the synoptic gospels. Specifically, he never mentions her name, and omits the nativity stories altogether, although apparently having some knowledge of at least parts of the synoptic tradition.<sup>1</sup> Instead, he refers to her in two incidents that are unknown to the synoptic gospels, namely the miraculous change of water into wine at Cana of Galilee (John 2:1-11), and her presence along with the beloved disciple at the foot of the cross (John 19:26-27). Through these two stories the fourth evangelist apparently complements the synoptic tradition and at the same time interprets it anew. The obvious question arising from these observations regards the particular significance of the 'mother of Jesus' in the Johannine narration and theology.

In my attempt to answer to this question, I will base my analysis on a relatively new method in New Testament studies, namely narrative criticism.<sup>2</sup> Using the tools

<sup>1</sup> For the problem of John's knowledge of the synoptic tradition, see for instance Ian D. Mackay, *John's Relationship with Mark: An Analysis of John 6 in the Light of Mark 6-8*, WUNT 2/182 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004); John Amedee Bailey, *The Traditions Common to the Gospels of Luke and John* (Leiden: Brill, 1963); Andrew Gregory, 'The Third Gospel? The Relationship of John and Luke Reconsidered' in *Challenging Perspectives on the Gospel of John*, WUNT 2/219, ed. John Lierman (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 109-134.

<sup>2</sup> On the use of narrative criticism in New Testament studies, see for instance James L. Resseguie,

of this method I will try to understand the narrative function and the theological significance of Jesus' mother for the overall theology of the fourth gospel.

I hope that my approach will shed some more light on the origins of the significance of *Theotokos* in Orthodox theology, worship and spirituality,<sup>3</sup> thus contributing to the general question about whether Mary's veneration in the Orthodox, as well as in the Roman-Catholic tradition, is indeed based upon the New Testament witness or whether it reflects a much later theological development.<sup>4</sup>

In the first part of the article at hand, I will deal with the problem of the anonymity of Jesus' mother in conjunction with that of the beloved disciple. In the second part, I will attempt a detailed exegetical approach to the narrative of Jesus' first sign in Cana in light of John's gospel as a whole. On this basis, in the third part I will try to respond to some further relevant questions about the significance of Jesus' mother according to the fourth gospel's witness. I will close my considerations with a summary of my exegetical and theological conclusions, including my view on a possible Johannine background of the current Orthodox understanding of *Theotokos*.

## I

The Johannine narrative mentions several anonymous individual characters. However, reference to them is usually limited to only one specific narrative context. The following narrative characters belong to this category: the bridegroom and the steward (John 2:8-10), the Samaritan woman (John 4:7-42), the royal official (John 4:46-53), the lame man (John 5:5-15), the man born blind (John 9:1-38), and the sister of Jesus' mother (John 19:25).<sup>5</sup>

On the contrary, although also anonymous, the mother of Jesus appears in two different narrative contexts, namely in John 2:1-5 and in 19:26-27. In addition to her, one more anonymous character appears repeatedly in different narrative occasions, namely the 'other disciple' or 'the disciple whom Jesus loved', referred to in John 1:37-40, 13:23-25, 18:15-16, 19:26-27, 20:2-8, 21:7-24.

Both the mother of Jesus and the so-called beloved disciple appear in the first and last narrative parts of the Johannine narrative. Concretely, the mother of Jesus appears at the beginning of Jesus' activity, namely in the story of Jesus' first sign at

*Narrative Criticism of the New Testament. An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Press, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. for instance Sergius Bulgakov, *The Burning Bush: On the Orthodox Veneration of the Mother of God*, trans. Thomas Allan Smith (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> The latter position is often supported by Protestant exegetes, cf. for instance the monograph of Heikki Räisänen, *Die Mutter Jesu im Neuen Testament* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1969), esp. 156-186, in relation to the Johannine image of Jesus' mother.

<sup>5</sup> I do not take into consideration any collective anonymous characters because they simply bear the name of their group, thus belonging to an altogether different category. Such characters are the Jews, the Pharisees, the high priests, the disciples, the brothers and sisters of Jesus, etc.

Cana, while the beloved disciple appears even earlier than that as one of Jesus' first two disciples alongside Andrew.<sup>6</sup>

In the final part of the narrative, the beloved disciple appears again in the last supper enjoying, as it seems, a special relationship with Jesus since Peter uses him as a mediator to their master. Apart from that, the beloved disciple follows Jesus to his trial by entering the house of the high priest, he follows Jesus to his very crucifixion and death, and he witnesses the events of his resurrection and post-Easter appearances. The mother of Jesus is also present beneath the cross. Jesus connects his beloved disciple with his mother by proclaiming that from now on his disciple will be the son of his mother, and she will be the mother of his disciple. The gospel ends with an indirect reference to the disciple's death and a note of the narrator providing an explanation of the unexpected death of the disciple before the second coming of Jesus.

According to the above mentioned, while at the beginning of the narrative the mother of Jesus and the beloved disciple are presented separately from each other,<sup>7</sup> toward the end of the narrative they are connected with each other most closely as mother and son. What is more, they appear at the most crucial points of the gospel narrative, namely at the very outset of Jesus' public appearance and activity, as well as at the culminating end of his earthly presence, namely at the foot of the cross just before his death, thus forming a narrative *inclusio*.<sup>8</sup> The way both of these particular narrative characters are positioned in the Johannine text adds to their significance compared to all other important narrative characters, who are absent at Jesus' crucifixion, the most crucial moment of his earthly presence and salvific work.<sup>9</sup>

The actual names of these two most important narrative characters are certainly known to the Johannine community.<sup>10</sup> The beloved disciple cannot just be an archetypal, symbolic and even a non-historical personality because there is clear reference to the frustration experienced by his community due to his death, since the community members had been under the impression that he would not die until

<sup>6</sup> In my study, Christos Karakolis, 'The Sons of Zebedee and Two Other Disciples: Two Pairs of Puzzling Acquaintances in the Johannine Dénouement' in *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Approaches to Seventy Figures in John*, WUNT 314, eds. Steven A. Hunt, Francois D. Tolmie and Ruben Zimmermann (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 663–676, at 663–671, I have argued in favour of the identification of John the Baptist's anonymous disciple who followed Jesus, with the beloved disciple of the last part of the gospel.

<sup>7</sup> Although, of course, it is implied that the beloved disciple is also present at the wedding of Cana, cf. John 2:1, 2:11.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Colleen M. Conway, *Men and Women in the Fourth Gospel: Gender and Johannine Characterization* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1997), 70; Jean Zumstein, 'Johannes 19,25–27' in *Kreative Erinnerung: Relecture und Auslegung im Johannesevangelium* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 2004), 253–275, at 271.

<sup>9</sup> On the theological importance of Jesus' crucifixion in the fourth gospel, see Robert Kysar, *John, The Maverick Gospel*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 53.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Räisänen, *Die Mutter Jesu im Neuen Testament*, 185–186; Ulrich Busse, *Das Johannesevangelium: Bildlichkeit, Diskurs und Ritual* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2002), 88n95.

Jesus' second coming (John 21:21-23).<sup>11</sup> Also the disciple's personal testimony (John 19:35, 21:24) would have had a very limited effect (if at all) on the gospel's historical recipients had he not been a historical person himself.<sup>12</sup>

Since this particular disciple accepts the mother of Jesus as his own mother and takes her to his house, we have to assume that the mother of Jesus had also somehow been known to the Johannine community members. Because of the fact that she is linked to the beloved disciple who is crucial for the formation of the community's identity, his 'mother' could not but be well known to its members and probably even highly revered by them.<sup>13</sup> Even if one does not accept a direct historical connection of the fourth evangelist and his community to the historical events that the gospel refers to, one has to at least accept that traditions about the mother of Jesus were broadly known whether directly from one or more of the synoptic gospels or indirectly from the fluid Christian tradition of the first century.

Of course other named protagonists in the history of Jesus are definitely also known to the community. Therefore, the anonymity of Jesus' mother and his beloved disciple is a trait that betrays or even constitutes a possible qualitative differentiation of them in relation to all the other characters of the Johannine narrative.

Furthermore, it is important that the way these two narrative figures are referred to is based on their special relationship with Jesus, a unique feature of anonymous individual characters (Jesus' brothers and sisters are a collective character and are therefore not taken into consideration here). It is characteristic that the fourth evangelist does not even enter into any details about the significance of the name Peter that was attributed by Jesus to the most prominent disciple in the fourth gospel right after the beloved one (John 1:42).<sup>14</sup>

Since in biblical thought names (either proper or descriptive ones) express actual individual identities, both the mother of Jesus and the beloved disciple are presented as being entirely defined by their relationship with Jesus and not by their proper names. In other words, their identity is based on their relationship with Jesus while their individual traits are of secondary importance, if at all.<sup>15</sup> It is indicative of the importance of the relationship with Jesus, which overshadows every other relationship or personal traits, that Andrew's name is mentioned in connection with the

<sup>11</sup> Cf. R. Alan Culpepper, *John the Son of Zebedee: The Life of a Legend* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994), 84–85.

<sup>12</sup> Many scholars see in the beloved disciple the founder and/or leader of the Johannine community, see for instance Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 358–411.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Celestino G. Lingad, Jr., *The Problems of Jewish Christians in the Johannine Community* (Roma: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 2001), 150–155.

<sup>14</sup> Quite possibly, even in the fourth gospel the name Peter goes back etymologically and theologically to the rock of Peter's confession, expressly mentioned in Matt 16:18; cf. the relevant discussion Bradford B. Blaine, Jr., *Peter in the Gospel of John: The Making of an Authentic Disciple* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 186–190.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Mary: Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 96.

name of his brother, Simon Peter, and not of his father (John 1:40) because of Peter's historical and narrative significance. Furthermore, the 'sister of Jesus' mother' is identified by reference to her sister and not to her husband or her father (in the case that she is unmarried). Even more importantly, the mother of Jesus is herself determined by her son and not by her husband Joseph (see John 1:45, 6:42).

The fourth evangelist tends to conceal what is sacred in view of his obvious expectation for his gospel also to be read by non-believers as well (*disciplina arcani*).<sup>16</sup> Such a case is the omission *par excellence* of any reference whatsoever to the Eucharist during the last supper (John 13-17). In this case, the fourth evangelist conceals the identity of both the beloved disciple and Jesus' mother, resulting in the failure of his unknowledgeable readers to identify them. It is then perhaps not too far-fetched to assume that both the fourth evangelist and his community might consider these persons as being sacred in an analogous way to the sacredness of the Eucharist, to which only indirect references are made in the fourth gospel (see esp. John 6:48-58).

In the gospel of John there are also references to other persons bearing the names of Mary and John, which were common for Palestinian Jews of the New Testament era. *Maria* is also the name of the sister of Lazarus (John 11:1-2), of Mary Magdalene and of Mary of Klopas (John 19:25), while *Ioannes* is also the name of the father of Peter (John 1:42), and of John the Baptist (John 1:6). By avoiding any mention of the actual names of Jesus' mother and the beloved disciple, the fourth evangelist also avoids any case of confusion or misconception with regard to their importance. The anonymity of these two particular narrative characters can draw the knowledgeable reader to the conclusion that there may be other narrative characters bearing their names, but only one disciple who is loved by Jesus in a special way, and only one Mary as important as Jesus' mother.

Furthermore, the non-disclosure of these two characters' names indicates that the attribute given to them is fully sufficient. In the fourth gospel, a corresponding example would be the reference to Caesar only by his title and not by his proper name (John 19:12, 19:15). This is a practice that has been, and still is widely followed in the political, social, and not least the ecclesiastical field, when referring to persons with significant and/or unique positions, such as the king, the president of the republic, or the patriarch.<sup>17</sup>

On the basis of the above, it should be clear that the designations 'mother of Jesus' and 'beloved disciple' are not simple attributes, but indeed high titles of rever-

<sup>16</sup> See the argumentation in my study, Christos Karakolis, 'The Logos-Concept and Dramatic Irony in the Johannine Prologue and Narrative' in *The Prologue of the Gospel of John: Its Literary, Theological, and Philosophical Contexts: Papers read at the Colloquium Ioanneum 2013*, WUNT 359, eds. Jan van der Watt, R. Alan Culpepper, and Udo Schnelle (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 134-154, at 137-138n3, and 150n66.

<sup>17</sup> Such titles need further attributes when used by outsiders with regard to the respective community of the title-holders (e.g. the King of England, the President of the French Republic, or the Patriarch of Constantinople).

ence.<sup>18</sup> It would then seem that these two characters' special relationships with Jesus stand on the highest level from a narrative-critical and a theological point of view. Conversely put, usage of their proper names would lower them to a similar level with the other important narrative characters. Indeed, assuming that the gospel's readers are *a priori* aware of the superiority of these two particular persons, the mere use of their names instead of their titles could well signify a relative depreciation, in a similar way that it would be depreciating for a leading political or religious personality to be publicly addressed by his/her proper name and not by his/her title.

At this point an objection could be raised with regard to John the Baptist, who, although being God's envoy, is usually referred to simply by his own proper name. However, John the Baptist rejects any prophetic title whatsoever (John 1:19-23), and declares himself unworthy of even unbinding the strap of Jesus' shoes (John 1:27). It is then clear that the fourth evangelist deliberately downplays John the Baptist compared to the relevant synoptic tradition,<sup>19</sup> obviously having in view some of the latter's followers, who even at the time of the fourth gospel's composition apparently believed that their own master excelled compared to Jesus (cf. John 3:26-36).<sup>20</sup> This explains the omission of any honorary title in connection with John the Baptist apart from the 'man sent from God'<sup>21</sup> and the 'friend of the bridegroom', who stands aside and rejoices with the bridegroom's joy (John 3:29).

In the case of Jesus himself, his name should also be understood as one of his titles. The Hebrew name *Yeshua* means 'God saves'<sup>22</sup> and, as is evident, the fourth evangelist knows the etymologies of words derived from Hebrew or Aramaic.<sup>23</sup> Jesus is the incarnate God himself (John 1:18, 20:28), who saves the world in the name of God the Father (John 3:16-17, 5:43), and is therefore the living and real presence of God in the world (John 14:9). Thus, the name 'Jesus' does not fall under the rules of any other common name.<sup>24</sup> Besides, the name 'Jesus' has to be explicitly mentioned to avoid any possible misunderstanding about the actual identity of the saviour of the world (cf. John 3:17, 20:30-31). It is important in this regard that the fourth evangelist not only refers to those who believe in Jesus, but also to those who believe 'in his name' (John

<sup>18</sup> Cf. *The Gospel according to John I-XII* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 98; Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 196; Margaret M. Beirne, *Women and Men in the Fourth Gospel: A Genuine Discipleship of Equals*, JSNTSup 242 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 186.

<sup>19</sup> Matt 11:9-14, 17:12-13; Mark 9:11-13; Luke 1:17, 7:26-28.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Walter Wink, *John the Baptist in the Gospel Tradition*, SNTSMS 7 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 98-106.

<sup>21</sup> See John 1:6, as opposed to the *Logos* who is God himself, cf. John 1:1, 1:18; furthermore John 20:28.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Philo, *Mut.*, 121.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. John 1:38, 1:41, 1:42; 9:7; 19:13, 19:17; 20:16. On the issue cf. for instance C.H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 424-432.

<sup>24</sup> It is rather telling that the name 'Jesus' belongs to the earliest *nomina sacra* of the New Testament. For this issue, see Philip Comfort, *Encountering the Manuscripts: An Introduction to New Testament Paleography & Textual Criticism* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005), 199-254.



1:12, 2:23). Since not only the person, but also the name of Jesus is sacred its appeal in faith, combined with all other christological titles, leads to salvation (John 20:31).

## II

Focusing now again on the mother of Jesus, the quality of her relationship with Jesus on a narrative level and the way her narrative character is developed appear most clearly in the narrative of the first miracle at Cana.

The mother of Jesus appears in the scene of the marriage feast before Jesus and his disciples (John 2:1-2), as is evident by the use of the verbs ἦν and ἐκλήθη. In the continuation of the story, the mother of Jesus perceives the problem of the shortage of wine even before the steward and the bridegroom (cf. John 2:3, 2:9-10). She also possesses the authority to command the servants of the house (John 2:5). Therefore, it is clear that one way or another she is related to the family of the bridegroom,<sup>25</sup> and that she has an organizational role of responsibility.<sup>26</sup>

Interestingly enough, when the mother of Jesus perceives the problem of the lack of wine—a serious problem that could destroy the celebration and damage the social image of the bridegroom<sup>27</sup>—she does not communicate the problem to those responsible, namely the steward and the bridegroom, but only to Jesus, although he is just a simple guest.

Consequently, she knows in advance that, although being a simple guest, Jesus can provide a solution to this particular problem that even those responsible could not.<sup>28</sup> This implies that Jesus' mother knows that her son is capable of solving problems that are insurmountable from an exclusively human point of view. This in itself seems like a paradox. But it is not the only paradoxical feature of the story under consideration.

At a second step, the mother of Jesus notifies him about the problem in a seemingly neutral way, as if merely transferring some casual piece of information, and not as submitting a request for a specific action on his part.<sup>29</sup> This behaviour is not typical of a mother towards her son. In line with the decalogue commandment

<sup>25</sup> Normally, wedding feasts took place in the house of the bridegroom, cf. Ernst Haenchen, *Das Johannevangelium: Ein Kommentar* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1980), 187; Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to John: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 177–178.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, PNTC (Leicester: Apollos, 1991), 169.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel Code: Novel Claims about Jesus, Mary Magdalene and da Vinci* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 28–29.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Räsänen, *Die Mutter Jesu im Neuen Testament*, 160; Haenchen, *Das Johannevangelium*, 188; Conway, *Men and Women*, 71. This proves that the mother of Jesus does not need to 'redefine her understanding of his (Jesus') identity', as David R. Beck, *The Discipleship Paradigm: Readers and Anonymous Characters in the Fourth Gospel* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 58, claims.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Mary L. Coloe, 'The Mother of Jesus: A Woman Possessed', in *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Approaches to Seventy Figures in John*, WUNT 314, eds. Steven A. Hunt, Francois D. Tolle and Ruben Zimmermann (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 203–213, at 205.

to honour one's own parents (Exod 20:12; Deut 5:16), Jewish mothers obviously did not lack the authority to directly ask their sons for any favour.

However, Jesus' mother does not merely make Jesus aware of the problem of the lack of wine matter-of-factly, but her statement implies an indirect request on her part.<sup>30</sup> This is obvious from the ensuing reaction by Jesus, who recognises this request and responds to it accordingly, as well as from his mother's subsequent command to the servants to follow Jesus' orders.<sup>31</sup>

Normally the implied readers of the gospel are supposed to know more than most of its narrative characters since they have already read the prologue (John 1:1-18), a key to understanding the gospel's plot and theology,<sup>32</sup> while they also continue to read the evangelist's enlightening comments on the narrated events.<sup>33</sup> At this point, though, the mother of Jesus definitely knows more than the gospel's readers. Even John the Baptist does not reach this level of knowledge. He has to see the Holy Spirit descending in the form of a dove and remaining in Jesus in order to identify Jesus as the one God told him about (John 1:32-34). On the other hand, Jesus' mother does not need to see any sign in order to understand or to be convinced of anything.<sup>34</sup> On the contrary, she seems to possess solid knowledge in advance, either from the time of Jesus' conception and birth<sup>35</sup> or in any case before the start of the narrative time of John's gospel.<sup>36</sup>

Therefore, the mother of Jesus is not preoccupied with the problem of Jesus' true identity and the nature and meaning of his work, as is the case with both John the Baptist (John 1:19-36, 3:25-36) and all other important characters of the narrative, even including his own brothers and sisters (7:3-5). Instead, she perceives the indirect signals of Jesus' attitude, signals so subtle that the evangelist does not or even cannot portray them. No other narrative character in John's gospel has this kind of access to Jesus' personality. Even Jesus' disciples, who have the most stable and close relationship with him (with the obvious exception of his mother), repeatedly misinterpret or fail to understand their master's words and actions.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Euthymius Zigabenus, *Interpr. Jo.* 2.79 (PG 129:1148B); Christian Dietzfelbinger, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes: Teilband 1: Johannes 1–12*, ZBK NT 4 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 2001), 66; Coloe, 'Mother of Jesus', 205; contra Xavier Léon-Dufour, *Lecture de l'évangile selon Jean I: chapitres 1–4* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1988), 226.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Raymond E. Brown et al., eds., *Maria im Neuen Testament: Eine ökumenische Untersuchung – eine Gemeinschaftsstudie von protestantischen und römisch-katholischen Gelehrten* (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1981), 149–150.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. the relevant analysis in my study Karakolis, 'The Logos-Concept', 140–145.

<sup>33</sup> See among others John 2:21, 2:25; 4:44; 6:23, 6:71; 7:5, 7:30, 7:39; 11:51–52; 12:4, 12:6, 12:16, 12:37–43; 13:2; 19:35; 20:9, 20:30–31; 21:19, 21:23–25.

<sup>34</sup> Contra Jerome H. Neyrey, *The Gospel of John* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 68, who maintains that the faith of Jesus' mother is wanting.

<sup>35</sup> According to the relevant traditions of Matt 1–2 and Luke 1–3, cf. Theophylact, *Enarr. Jo.* 2.532 (PG 123:1188D–1189A).

<sup>36</sup> Cf. John Chrysostom, *Hom. Jo.* 21.122 (PG 59:130).

<sup>37</sup> See for instance John 2:22; 4:27, 4:31–33; 6:7–9, 6:20–21, 6:60–66; 11:8–16; 13:6–10, 13:36–38; 14:7–10, 14:22; 16:18–19, 16:30–32; 18:10–11, 18:25–27; 20:8–9, 20:25–28; 21:21–22.



In Jesus' response to his mother's indirect request, the phrase 'τί ἐμοὶ καὶ σοί' is a Semitism, meaning 'what may be the relationship between me and you',<sup>38</sup> and is therefore an expression of intense distancing, differentiation, and detachment.<sup>39</sup> Of course, Jesus does not deny his relationship with his mother per se. Had this been the case, the fourth evangelist would not designate the mother of Jesus as such in the first place. However, at this point Jesus' mother intervenes into the very core of Jesus' salvific work, because if Jesus would indeed perform a miracle according to his mother's wish, he would set into motion the events that would eventually lead him to the cross, hence the reference to Jesus' 'hour', which in the fourth gospel hints at his passion.<sup>40</sup> Jesus stresses that his hour has not yet come, and in any case it is not for his mother, but for his heavenly Father to determine when his hour will actually come.<sup>41</sup> The mother of Jesus then indeed intervenes indirectly, and probably also unintentionally and inadvertently, into Jesus' salvific work. The problem here is not whether Jesus should perform a miracle or not,<sup>42</sup> but performing a miracle at an inopportune time in view of the realisation of God's salvific plan through his earthly activity.

Jesus also distances himself from his mother by calling her *γύναι* (woman). This way of addressing her is not pejorative in and of itself, since it was the normal way of addressing a woman in New Testament times.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, it was certainly not the proper address of a son to his mother.<sup>44</sup>

According to the above mentioned, the expressions 'what is it between me and you' and 'woman' express Jesus' distancing himself not just from his mother's specific request, but even from her as a person.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, they are certainly not the usual and expected words of a son who is supposed to honour his mother. As crucial as the impact of the lack of wine on the social status of the bridegroom and on the wedding feast may be, it is totally unimportant when compared to the significance of

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Judg 11:12; 2 Kgs 16:10; 19:23; 3 Kgdms 17:18; 4 Kgdms 3:13; 2 Chr 35:21; Matt 8:29; Mark 1:24; 5:7; Luke 4:34; 8:28. The translation of John McHugh, *The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1975), 394, 'of what concern is it to me or to you' does not do justice to the continuation of Jesus' saying. There is no convincing reason for Jesus to connect the coming of his hour with a matter so trivial that he does not even care to deal with. Therefore, the great majority of exegetes insist on the obvious Old Testament and Jewish semantic background of the phrase.

<sup>39</sup> See Beck, *The Discipleship Paradigm*, 56.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (London: SPCK, 1978), 191.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. mainly John 7:30; 8:20; 12:23, 12:27; 13:1; 17:1.

<sup>42</sup> According to the fourth gospel, Jesus performed so many signs that even the whole world could not contain the books about them, if all of them would be written down (John 21:25).

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Matt 15:28; Luke 13:12; John 4:21; 8:10; 20:13. See also Beck, *The Discipleship Paradigm*, 55.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Conway, *Men and Women*, 73; Coloe, 'Mother of Jesus', 212.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Michael Theobald, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes: Kapitel 1–12*, RNT (Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 2009), 212. From now on, Jesus' mother will have no say whatsoever over his actions and path towards the fulfillment of his Father's salvific plan. Thus, Jesus' relationship to his mother seems to be entering an altogether new phase. In the Johannine narrative, this is probably signified by the fact that Jesus' mother disappears and only appears again at the foot of the cross in order to be bound to the beloved disciple (John 19:25–26).

Jesus' 'hour' that is to come. Jesus does not yet want to reveal himself, nor manifest his glory (cf. John 2:11). Therefore, he does not want to initiate his path to the cross and his final glorification by means of a premature sign. Of course, as we have already seen, even before his distancing from his mother, she had already distanced herself from him, as can be deduced by her indirect way of submitting her request.

However, Jesus does not actually refuse the request of his mother since there is no actual denial in his words. Although the first impression of the readers might be that Jesus will not respond to the request of his mother in a positive manner, he merely expresses his dissatisfaction with her involvement in matters concerning the salvation of the world. On a symbolic level, Jesus' dissatisfaction could be paralleled to that of a king, who in the face of very important strategic decisions receives a request from his mother with regard to some trivial issue that could, nevertheless, affect his planning.

As already mentioned, it is clear that the mother of Jesus indeed realises that her son will respond in a positive manner to her request since, without waiting or asking for any clarifications on his part, she commands the servants to follow his instructions.<sup>46</sup> This confirms that here indeed a non-verbal communication between Jesus and his mother does take place, which is implied clearly enough, although not explicitly mentioned.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, the fact that the mother of Jesus tells the servants to follow her son's instructions means that not only does she know that Jesus will fulfill her request, but also that he will do so by giving specific instructions to them.<sup>48</sup>

The unique quality of this non-verbal communication between Jesus and his mother can be exemplified by comparing it to Jesus' communication with the royal official, who in John 4:47-49 asks him to come to his house in order to heal his dying son. It has been observed that the two narratives of the wedding at Cana (John 2:1-11) and of the healing of the royal official's son (John 4:46-54) parallel each other with regard to both their structure and content, as is evident by several common elements.<sup>49</sup> However, there are also some notable differences between these two stories. As we have seen, Jesus' mother avoids submitting a direct request to her son, but merely indicates the problem while completely leaving in his hands the decision

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Brown, *The Gospel according to John I–XII*, 100; Conway, *Men and Women*, 74; Coloe, 'Mother of Jesus', 206; cf. however also Brown et al. (eds.), *Maria im Neuen Testament*, 154, where the editors maintain that the reaction of Jesus' mother betrays her actual misunderstanding of his response, although they do not convincingly explain in which way such a clear response can be misunderstood, and secondly why Jesus indeed performs the miracle as requested by his mother.

<sup>47</sup> Contra Sief van Tilborg, *Imaginative Love in John* (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 6, who claims that 'communicatively, the mother is presented as someone who does not listen to what Jesus says'.

<sup>48</sup> Contra Beck, *The Discipleship Paradigm*, 58.

<sup>49</sup> Such parallel elements are the following: the similar length of the narratives, the counting of the two miracles at their last verse, the location of both in Cana of Galilee, the request to Jesus followed by his distancing with sharp words, the subsequent meeting of the request, the presence of objective witnesses who certify the realisation of the miracle, and finally the coming to faith of some of the narratives' protagonists. See the comparison of the two narratives in my monograph Christos K. Karakolis, *Ἡ θεολογικὴ σημασία τῶν θαυμάτων στοῦ κατὰ Ἰωάννην Εὐαγγέλιον* (Thessaloniki: Pournaras, 1997), esp. 120–121.

and the way of handling the problem (John 2:3-5). On the contrary, the royal official dictates to Jesus not only what to do but also how to do it (4:47-49). Furthermore, the mother of Jesus does not repeat her request because she already knows from Jesus' initial response that her request will be met, despite his seeming refusal and his distancing himself from her. On the contrary, the royal official perceives the answer of Jesus as a refusal to meet his request or, at least, he is unable to understand its meaning, which leads him to submit his request once more. Only when he hears Jesus explicitly saying that his son lives, does he trust Jesus and believe that his request has been satisfied (John 4:50). Finally, the royal official certifies the miracle by asking about the exact time of his son's healing (John 4:52). It is only in this way that he is able to reach the final stage of faith towards Jesus (John 4:53). Conversely, the mother of Jesus does not need to verify anything. She merely commands the servants to follow Jesus' instructions (John 2:5) and subsequently disappears from the Johannine narrative's front stage until Jesus' crucifixion (John 19:25-26). In the end, those who indeed reach a higher level of faith than they already had are Jesus' disciples, not his mother (John 2:11).

Jesus confirms his mother's command to the servants by giving them specific instructions, and letting them play a certain role in his changing the water into wine (John 2:7-8). Furthermore, Jesus handles it in such a way that only his own disciples and the servants are able to perceive his miracle, while the wedding's hosts and guests remain ignorant of it (John 2:9-11). Consequently, Jesus manages to actually maintain his incognito. The transformation miracle does not after all initiate his public activity,<sup>50</sup> and hence his 'hour' does not yet come. The servants play the role of the objective witnesses to the fact that the new wine presented to the bridegroom was indeed produced miraculously by Jesus and did not come from the bridegroom's store, as was the steward's impression.<sup>51</sup>

From a different point of view, however, Jesus is presented as indeed giving in and doing his mother the favour she asked him.<sup>52</sup> This is the only case in the fourth gospel in which Jesus gives in unwillingly<sup>53</sup> to somebody's request, thus not maintaining the initiative of his actions. The case of the royal official in ch. 4 is different, as he does not ask Jesus to change his 'hour', but simply to perform one more miracle after the miracles he had already performed in public while being in Jerusalem for the Pesach (John 2:23, 4:45). Moreover, Jesus' rebuke refers to the unbelief toward himself (cf. John 2:24-25, 4:44-45), and not to the requested healing as such. Since the royal official indirectly proclaims his faith by repeating his request despite Jesus'

<sup>50</sup> Jesus' public activity is actually initiated through the programmatic cleansing of the temple in John 2:13-22, cf. Jean Zumstein, *L'évangile selon saint Jean (1,1-12,50)*, CNT 4a (Genève: Labor et Fides, 2014), 101-102. Quite differently, the first sign in Cana is performed incognito.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Das Johannesevangelium I: Einleitung und Kommentar zu Kap. 1-4*, HThKNT 4.1 (Freiburg: Herder, 1965), 337.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Cyril of Alexandria, *Comm. Jo.* 2.1.135 (PG 73:225C).

<sup>53</sup> Cf. *ibid.* 2.1.134 (PG 73:223D).

dismissive words, Jesus performs the healing without any further objections. In other words, the difficulty in the case of the royal official lies in his lack of faith, not in some involvement of his with God's salvific plan. On the other hand, Jesus' exchange with his mother demonstrates that meeting her request could potentially affect his path to the cross. This has no parallel in John, as no other narrative character comes so close to making Jesus deviate from his planned course of action.<sup>54</sup> Even in the extreme case of the Jews who attempt to seize or stone him, Jesus is not in the least worried because his time has not yet come.<sup>55</sup>

### III

After examining some relevant Johannine texts, there are still issues that need some clarification, which I will attempt in this third and final part of the present article.

The Johannine Jesus is presented as loving all his disciples (John 13:1, 13:34), his Father (14:31), his friend Lazarus and Lazarus' sisters Martha and Maria (11:5), and finally in a particular way also the anonymous beloved disciple (13:23, 21:7, 21:20). In the latter case, being loved by Jesus is the most dominant trait of this disciple, which even replaces his proper name. On the other hand, Jesus' relationship with his mother is much more complex. To begin with, Jesus' love towards his mother is not expressly mentioned. However, according to the above reading of John 2:1-11, Jesus is obedient, and therefore also respectful and loving toward his mother.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, in the story of the first Cana-miracle Jesus and his mother mutually understand each other not only through verbal communication, but also on a non-verbal level. Finally, Jesus, even at his very last moments on the cross expresses his deep care and provides for his mother.<sup>57</sup> Besides, love is naturally expected within every family, so it should be considered as self-evident in the relationship between Jesus and his mother.<sup>58</sup>

It is also very much telling that the mother of Jesus is never said to believe, although faith is one of the most fundamental theological themes of the fourth gospel.<sup>59</sup> It is through faith that people are led to eternal life (John 3:16, 11:25-26),

<sup>54</sup> Cf. *ibid.* 2.1.136 (PG 73:225D).

<sup>55</sup> John 7:30; 8:20, 8:59; 10:31-33; 11:8-10; cf. 12:27; 13:1.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. John Chrysostom, *Hom. Jo.* 22.126-127 (PG 59:134). On the other hand, the fourth evangelist explicitly states that God the Father loves the Son (John 3:35; 10:17; 15:9; 17:23, 17:24, 17:26; cf. 1:1, 1:18) and the Son loves the Father (John 14:31). However, there is good reason for this differentiation. The love between the Father and the Son needs to be stressed, because it is on this very love that Jesus' salvific work is founded, cf. John 3:35; 10:17; 15:9; 17:23, 17:26.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Tom Thatcher, "I Have Conquered the World": The Death of Jesus and the End of Empire in the Gospel of John' in *Empire in the New Testament*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Cynthia Long Westfall (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 140-163, at 152 and 159.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Cyril of Alexandria, *Comm. Jo.* 12.1065-1066 (PG 74:664C-665A).

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Karakolis, *Ἡ θεολογικὴ σημασία τῶν θαυμάτων*, 471-515.

while through unbelief to eternal damnation (John 8:24). Quite differently from the mother of Jesus, the beloved disciple reaches the final stage of faith in Jesus upon entering the empty tomb (John 20:8). It would then seem that the mother of Jesus does not need to believe in the first place because she already knows what nobody else seems to know,<sup>60</sup> namely that Jesus can provide solutions to urgent and serious problems that are impossible to resolve.<sup>61</sup> Consequently, she also knows Jesus' actual identity (cf. John 10:38).<sup>62</sup> From the point of view of faith, the mother of Jesus definitely stands on a higher level than the beloved disciple.<sup>63</sup>

As the incarnate *Logos* and pre-existing Son of God, the earthly Jesus is the moving force of the history of salvation. Both his mother and the beloved disciple are presented as playing some role in the fulfilment of God's salvific plan.<sup>64</sup> The role of the latter is simply to give an authentic witness about the salvific significance of Jesus' presence and work in the world.<sup>65</sup> Quite differently, the role of Jesus' mother is to introduce him to the world not only by enabling his incarnation (cf. John 1:14) through his birth, but even by bringing him up. John's emphasis on the incarnation of the *Logos* right from the start of the gospel clearly implies the irreplaceable importance of Jesus' mother therein, and hence her crucial part in the realisation of his salvific work for the world.<sup>66</sup>

There is a certain correlation between the expression 'my Father' that Jesus repeatedly uses in the gospel,<sup>67</sup> and the expression 'the mother of Jesus', which may not be used by Jesus himself, but is the way the evangelist refers to her. On the other hand, never in the gospel narrative is God referred to as the 'Father of Jesus'. It would then appear that the fourth evangelist discerns between the *Logos'* heavenly descent exclusively from his divine Father, and his earthly descent exclusively from his human mother.<sup>68</sup> The uniqueness of Jesus' mother makes her crucially important

<sup>60</sup> As Conway, *Men and Women*, 71, correctly puts it, 'the mother of Jesus is constructed as a uniquely knowledgeable character. Unlike any other character in the narrative, apart from Jesus, she shares insight with the narrator.'

<sup>61</sup> Characteristically, in John 6:5-9 Andrew and Philip are presented as lacking this kind of insight into Jesus' real capabilities.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. Cyril of Alexandria, *Comm. Jo.* 2.1.135 (PG 73:225B).

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Coloe, 'Mother of Jesus', 209.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Alan R. Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 134, who, however, sees the roles of both characters as complementary to each other. This even applies potentially to all believers, especially after Jesus' departure to his Father, cf. John 4:34-38; 14:12.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. John 19:35; 21:24; see also 15:27 for the witness of the disciples as a whole, and 1:7-8, 1:15, 1:32, 1:34; 3:26 for the witness of John the Baptist.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Gaventa, *Mary*, 89.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. mainly John 2:16; 5:17, 5:43; 6:32, 6:40; 8:19, 8:49, 8:54; 10:18, 10:25, 10:29, 10:37; 14:2, 14:7, 14:20, 14:21, 14:23; 15:1, 15:8, 15:10, 15:15, 15:23, 15:24; 20:17. This expression corresponds with the explicit or implicit use of the title 'Son of God', cf. mainly John 1:14, 1:18, 1:34; 3:16-18, 3:35, 3:36; 5:19-27; 6:40; 8:35-36; 10:36; 11:4, 11:27; 14:13; 17:1; 19:7; 20:31.

<sup>68</sup> The two references to Joseph as Jesus' father come from Philip (John 1:45) and the Jews (John 6:42). Philip proclaims Jesus' messianity to Nathanael, without however having any idea about Jesus' divinity. This stage of belief is reached in the fourth gospel only after Jesus' resurrection (John 20:28). Therefore

not just with regard to her motherly function, but also as a person, since her function and personality are inseparably connected with each other by the replacement of her proper name through the title *μήτηρ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ*.

On the other hand, while the beloved disciple is indeed the one with whom Jesus is more closely related compared to any other disciple, he lacks the particular uniqueness of Jesus' mother: Though being the beloved disciple, he still belongs to the group of the disciples, being one of them. It is in this sense that he is also referred to as *ὁ ἄλλος μαθητής*.

From a different perspective, it is significant that in the last part of the Johannine narrative the beloved disciple becomes the son of Jesus' mother, and thus Jesus' brother.<sup>69</sup> At a later stage, this kind of upgrade in his relationship with Jesus applies to all disciples (John 20:17), as well as to all believers (John 1:12-13).<sup>70</sup> This could well mean that the mother of Jesus also becomes the mother of all disciples and believers.<sup>71</sup> In other words, as believers become Jesus' brothers and sisters through their spiritual rebirth (John 1:13) after Jesus' resurrection, and thus share his heavenly Father with him (John 20:17), they may be implicitly sharing his earthly mother as well. According to this reading, the newly established relationship of Jesus' beloved disciple with Jesus' mother functions as an exemplary story that could be understood as spiritually applying to all believers as well.<sup>72</sup>

Lastly, it is noteworthy that Jesus entrusts his mother to the beloved disciple, and not to his brothers and sisters in the flesh.<sup>73</sup> On a symbolic level, this means that the relation with Jesus surpasses any kind of earthly kinship and blood-ties according to the prologue of the Gospel (cf. John 1:12-13).

Philip's witness about Jesus' apparent earthly father is not yet reliable since Philip does not possess vital information about Jesus' real identity. The same principle also applies to the Johannine Jews, who notoriously and habitually misunderstand Jesus (John 6:42) and should therefore not be considered as reliable witnesses about his origin. The fourth evangelist may not speak expressly of Jesus' virgin-birth, but he also does not challenge it. Although we are not able to draw any secure conclusions based on the *argumentum e silentio*, it is telling that Joseph is fully absent from the gospel as a narrative character, that he is only mentioned once by one of Jesus' novices and not yet knowledgeable and fully believing disciples, and once by the unbelieving Jews. In my opinion, John 1:45 and 6:42 should not be understood as a neutral reference to Joseph's paternity (according to Brown et al., eds., *Maria im Neuen Testament*, 156–158), but rather as an indirect critique aimed at the notion that Joseph was indeed Jesus' earthly father.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Coloe, 'Mother of Jesus', 213.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

<sup>71</sup> Conway, *Men and Women*, 84, correctly remarks that the mother of Jesus enables the creation of the new family of God, without however specifying what her actual role in this new family is; cf. also the relevant analysis in Turid Karlsen Seim, 'Roles of Women in the Gospel of John' in *Aspects on the Johannine Literature: Papers Presented at a Conference of Scandinavian New Testament Exegetes at Uppsala, June 16–19, 1986*, ed. Lars Hartman and Birger Olsson (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1987), 56–73, at 62–66. On the other hand, already McHugh, *The Mother of Jesus*, 377, 402–403, sees the motherhood of Jesus' mother in a way extended to all disciples through her new motherhood-relationship with the beloved disciple.

<sup>72</sup> It is impossible to prove beyond any doubt that the fourth evangelist indeed implies an extension of the motherhood-relationship between Jesus' mother and the beloved disciple to all believers. There are, however, indications strong enough to make such a reading at least plausible.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St John*, 552.



## IV

On the basis of the above analysis it should be beyond any doubt that in John's Gospel the mother of Jesus occupies a uniquely significant position. Her anonymity makes way for her title of reverence since her name is replaced by a designation that clearly indicates her maternal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, the eternal and incarnate *Logos*. In the Johannine narrative she is presented as being able to understand Jesus in a unique way that differentiates her from all other narrative characters. She does not need to believe in Jesus because she is already aware of his capabilities, and therefore also of his true identity.<sup>74</sup> In the brief references to her person, she is presented as approaching Jesus with unusual respect and discretion for a mother communicating with her son. She seems indeed to know not only that as a rule Jesus can provide solutions to otherwise insurmountable problems, but also that he will indeed act in this particular case too. She even knows in advance that he will engage the servants.

In the narrative characters' implicit ranking with regard to their faith in Jesus, his mother is clearly on a superior level compared to his beloved disciple, who only reaches the last stage of true faith upon entering the empty tomb. Furthermore, she is superior to John the Baptist, not only because she is the mother of the 'Lord Jesus Christ', as opposed to being his friend or someone who is not even worthy of unbinding the strap of his shoes, but also because she is familiar with Jesus on a much deeper level than him.

Most importantly, the mother of Jesus intervenes indirectly even in relation to Jesus' hour, causing him to deviate slightly from his planned course of action in order to satisfy her request. This is a unique occurrence in the Johannine narrative.

Finally, the unique position of being the mother of Jesus seems to make her also the mother of all believers, who through their faith in her son become his brothers and sisters, and thus children of God. This development is exemplified when the crucified Jesus proclaims his mother as the mother of his beloved disciple and vice versa.

It would of course exceed the boundaries of this study if I were to attempt to present the Orthodox perception of Jesus' mother, the *Theotokos*, according to her historically most established and well-known ecclesiastical title. What should be clear from the above analysis is that the Orthodox understanding of the unique position of Jesus' mother in relation to her Son, the eternal and incarnate *Logos*, her capacity to exert influence on the realisation of his salvific plan, her willingness to interfere with this plan by mediating in favour of those in need, as well as her motherly love and care towards them, are clearly compatible with the narrative and theology of John's gospel and have even perhaps, at least partly, derived from it.

<sup>74</sup> Contra Beck, *The Discipleship Paradigm*, 58.

