

Our Lord's Relationship With His Mother¹

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Introduction

Does the Blessed Virgin Mary have a motherly influence in heaven?² If we are to consider the possibility of such an influential position we should start by assuming that it would be an expansion of, or be capable of being deduced from, what we know of the relationship and influence which Mary had with our Lord during his earthly ministry. For this reason we shall look at all that the gospels have to say about our Lord's mother during Christ's ministry. The idea of a motherly influence in heaven also assumes that the family relationships of this life with rights and obligations are carried into the next.³ We shall consider this as well.

I. What The Gospels Say

A. Mary's last words

After our Lord's baptism we first meet Mary and Jesus together at a marriage feast. The miracle of turning water into wine is the only one in which Mary has a rôle: there is no other direct conversation between mother and son recorded during his ministry; and the last known words of Mary are spoken when the public ministry of Jesus has not really begun properly.

Mary informed Jesus that wine was needed and from our Lord's reply it appears that Jesus understood her to be asking for two things: not merely that the wine problem be solved but also that in doing this he would at least enhance his reputation to all present.⁴ In his reply Jesus addressed her as 'woman' which, no matter how respectful, can apply to any woman and so is most unusual for a son to use to his mother.⁵ Indeed the contrast in two verses is striking: '*The mother of Jesus said . . . Jesus said to her "O woman"*'.

'O woman, what have you to do with me?' Whatever these words mean an objection and refusal are implied, with 'woman' showing a gentle distancing from mere home and family.⁶ By the addition of 'My hour has not yet come' Mary felt that he would, at least in part, do as she asked. We have suggested that our Lord's reply shows that he felt that the request involved more than merely solving the wine problem. A miracle was performed but Jesus was careful to show that he was not to be pushed in his work which involved revealing himself to people. Christ did manifest his glory but for the sake of the

disciples only. With this we can compare the request of his brothers (John 7:1–10) to go to Jerusalem and show himself to the world. Jesus told his brothers that he would not go but later he did go up, not publicly but in private.

The last recorded words of our Lord's mother were spoken to servants, but we should ask, since they were written down for our benefit, why we hear no further advice from her. There could be no better guide for daily life than her words, 'Do whatever he (Jesus) tells you.' But by making her *last* words to be those spoken at the *beginning* of Christ's ministry, the gospel writer makes Mary say in effect: 'My part in preparing Jesus for his great work is over, and now that he has entered upon his ministry you should forget about me and pay attention only to him.'⁷

B. Who are my relatives?

Mark in his gospel tells how our Lord's family heard reports that he was in an unhealthy state of mind and that while he was teaching in a house they came and sent in a message asking for him. Jesus was told, 'Your mother and your brothers are outside asking for you' and he replied, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' And looking at his listeners he said, 'Here are my mother and *my brothers!* Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.'⁸ Mark makes it clear that his relatives are not on the outside of a crowd seeking to hear him but outside the house where he was and instead of seeking admission, they send a message asking him to come out. If Jesus were to meet his mother and brothers it would mean discontinuing his teaching, which explains the apparently harsh reply in asking, 'Who is my mother . . .?' And if he were to continue, his words would have to assert his freedom from the restraints of earthly relationships.⁹ That Matthew's view of the incident is similar to Mark's is seen in his placing it among illustrations of misunderstanding of and opposition to Christ's ministry.¹⁰ Matthew has also just told us that our Lord's influence and wisdom are greater than those of Jonah or Solomon, so it must have been hurtful to be misunderstood at home and both Matthew and Mark tell us that this was the case.¹¹ In his reply Jesus does not separate his mother from his brothers, but mentioning her gives his words greater emphasis. His followers will have to learn that there are closer bonds than those of blood relationship. This is not to suggest that Jesus thought little of his relatives; indeed the fact that he compared the relationship between himself and those who do God's will to the connexion between himself and his mother and brothers and sisters, implies that his blood relatives held a high place in his mind. But calling him away from his teaching ministry gives the impression that there is more urgent business, or people with superior claims, to be attended to. Jesus is anxious to correct this possible interpretation of his relatives' action.

What light does this incident throw on the thought that Mary now has great intercessory power? It is natural to assume that Mary and the brothers saw Jesus when he finished speaking, but the fact is that the gospels do not tell us this. If Jesus did grant the requested interview the silence about it is remarkable when compared with encouragement to seek her intercession. Instead of hearing of an influential motherly relationship, we are told that the favourable relationship is determined not by ties of blood but by readiness to do the Father's will: a believer is a mother of Jesus.

C. Blessed rather are those who hear and keep

In the context where Mark has the relatives seeking to speak to Jesus, Luke¹² has a woman calling out, 'Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that you sucked.' To which Jesus replied, 'Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it.'

By her words this woman intended to praise Christ for she had probably never even met his mother. Her words may have been a common expression but Christ felt he had to respond in the same way that he did when told that his mother and brothers were looking for him. In both cases Jesus points away from his mere person and human relationships to his work and mission. Through this woman Jesus says to us: 'Blessed are those who rightly hear, so concentrate on what was spoken not on the mother of him who spoke.' In speaking like this Jesus is not rejecting his mother but showing that being mother would have been of no avail 'had she not been very good and faithful'.¹³

In her Magnificat the Blessed Virgin said that all generations would call her blessed and the praise of this woman is the first direct fulfilment of Mary's prophecy. The reply of Jesus saying that there is an even greater blessing, contains a thought similar to one seen in words spoken of John the Baptist: 'Among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.'¹⁴ Because of John's connexion with Jesus he was the greatest of the prophets and yet, according to Jesus, that close, external and official connexion paled into insignificance when compared with the connexion open to all through faith. There was only one prophet immediately before Jesus and only one woman could be his mother, but a superior blessedness is open to all who fulfil the spiritual qualifications.

D. At the cross

When Jesus saw his mother and the apostle John standing near his cross he said to his mother, 'Woman, behold, your son!' and to John, 'Behold, your mother!' And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.

Mary, who was about 50 years of age, might have had a hope that Jesus could be saved from dying, but his last words to her would indicate that she was to lose him. A chief element in the suffering of

death can be concern for those left behind. Jesus was not worried about the strong youthful John: his concern was for his mother about to be bereaved. He asked John to look after her, at least until the crisis was over,¹⁵ for it is our Lord's brothers who are with her on the day of Pentecost. It is sometimes said that Jesus by his words made Mary mother of the church (represented by John). But Jesus was not asking Mary to look after John; he was asking John to take care of her—to mother her. It was John who led her away from the cross, not vice versa.¹⁶

When Jesus spoke to John he said 'mother' but when speaking directly to his mother he said 'woman'. Various reasons are put forward as to why he said 'woman' such as: it would have hurt Mary more to say 'mother'; it would have marked her out as related to him and so exposed her to ill-treatment to say 'mother'; to say 'mother' would have caused a flood of emotions within himself. But the view of Westcott is worthy of consideration: Jesus said 'woman' because the special earthly relationships were now at an end.¹⁷

The possibility of Mary having a motherly influence in heaven needs to be considered when examining Christ's final words. There is nothing in his words about the relationship between mother and son being continued or reknit in the heavenly realms. When speaking to disciples who were about to be bereaved Jesus said, 'I go to prepare a place . . . and I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.'¹⁸ Why are the parting words to his mother so very different if in the next life she is to be with him in a place of influence? If she were to continue being his mother in the next life and to be bodily assumed into that position, would it not have been a comfort to say so just as he spoke about the future to the disciples? The last words of Jesus to his mother directed her attention, as regards family relationships, away from himself and by carrying out our Lord's wishes in taking her away, John was underlining this: perhaps his action made Mary consider that when the crucifixion had done its worst Jesus would be her son no more. Death ends all earthly relationships and this is hardly less true in the case of One with extra eternal relationships such as Son of God and husband of the church.

We have looked at every recorded incident during our Lord's ministry where Jesus speaks to or about his mother and we did not see Mary having a special influence which would lead us to think that she should occupy an influential place in heaven. But we did see that whenever emphasis was laid upon the natural family relationship that Jesus did not encourage this but took the opportunity to emphasise the spiritual relationship open to all his true followers.

II Are Family Rights And Obligations Eternal?

The clearest teaching about relationships in heaven was given when

Sadducees asked what husband a woman would have in the next life if she had had seven in this life.¹⁹ Jesus replied saying that in the resurrection there is no marriage and no death, for those who take part in that age are like angels. 'They are God's children, since they are children of the resurrection.' So, according to Jesus, the risen dead, as regards the rights and obligations of relationship, are like angels who are separate creations of God with no partners or parents or children. Earthly relationships are necessary because of death, but the children of the resurrection are God's children. The first human relationship spoken of in the Bible and the strongest and closest, from which all others spring, is that of husband and wife. If, as Jesus makes clear, there is no husband and wife in heaven, there is, as regards continuing relationship, no mother and son either.

That Augustine was of this opinion is seen when commenting on the instruction to hate relatives. 'Whoever wishes here and now to aim after the life of that kingdom should hate not the persons themselves, but those temporal relationships by which this life of ours is upheld; because he who does not hate them, does not yet love that life where there is no condition of being born and dying, which unites parties in earthly wedlock . . . This is to be understood both of father and of mother and the other ties of blood, that we hate in them what has fallen to the lot of the human race by being born and dying, but that we love what can be carried along with us to those realms where no one says, my father; but all say to God, our Father and no one says, my mother, but all say to that other Jerusalem, our mother.'²⁰

Has Mary a motherly influence in heaven? In the absence of scriptural teaching making that relationship an exception to what we have just considered, the answer would appear to be in the negative.

Conclusion

The words of a former archbishop of Armagh²¹ can be regarded as expressing the conclusion of this paper.

'We owe her reverence and gratitude. But that is in return for what she was, not for what she is—for what she once did, not for what she does . . . The obvious teaching of the Bible is that the office of mother to the Lord carried with it no permanent prerogatives. It is not without reason that Scripture is silent about her later life and its close. We are led to see that once her special work is done, nothing more of importance hinges upon her personality . . . We affirm that, putting aside the honour and gratitude due to the Blessed Virgin, there is no authoritative teaching anywhere to show that she stands today in any relation towards God in heaven and man on earth different from that in which any other departed saint stands.'

NOTES

- 1 This paper was read at the Chichester congress of the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary in September 1986. It will also appear in the congress volume. It has been the policy of the society, since its first conference, not to exclude papers critical of Marian devotion.
- 2 For statements about Mary's influence in heaven see: Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* 62. Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Paul VI *Marialis Cultus* 6 and 57. Pope John Paul II has said that Mary is *omnipotentia supplex* (the omnipotence of intercession) which, says Archbishop McNamara, (The Teaching of Pope John Paul II *Mary, the Mother of God* CTS Do 540 London 1982 p.11) emphasises 'the unfailling efficacy with her divine Son of her Mother's prayers.'
- 3 Mary is united to her Son 'by a close and indissoluble tie, she is endowed with the high office and dignity of being the Mother of the Son of God . . .' Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* 54.
- 4 Chrysostom sees more than a mere request to do something about the wine shortage and his words give us an insight into his views about our Lord's mother. 'She desired both to do them a favour, and through her Son to render herself more conspicuous; perhaps too she had some human feelings like his brethren, when they said, "Show yourself to the world", desiring to gain credit from his miracles. Therefore he answered somewhat vehemently.' Alfred Plummer *The Humanity of Christ* p.135 says that Christ's reply 'implies that she has taken too much upon her; that she has interfered without sufficient reason and without right.'
- 5 The note in the Jerusalem Bible says that 'woman' is an unusual address from son to mother. 'There is no precedent in Hebrew or, to the best of our knowledge, in Greek for a son to address his mother thus' *Mary in the New Testament* A collaborative assessment by Protestant and Roman Catholic scholars edited by Raymond E. Brown, Karl P. Donfried, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and John Reumann. London 1978, p.188.
John McHugh *The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament* London 1975 'When a Jew addressed his mother he said *imma* ('mother'). Jesus was therefore drawing attention away from Mary's blood-relationship with him by addressing her as "Woman".'
- 6 "'What have you to do with me?'" shows that what Mary is asking, or the aspect under which she is speaking to Jesus does not belong to Jesus' understanding of the work his Father has given him to do' *Mary in the New Testament* p.191. 'Jesus dissociates himself from his mother, who does not realize that the work which the Father has given him takes precedence over the claims and interest of his natural family.' *ibid.* p.287.
- 7 This point is made by Alfred Plummer, *op. cit.* p.139.
- 8 Mark 3:31-35; Matthew 12:46-50; Luke 8:19-21.
- 9 Commenting on the verb 'to seek' in Mark, R.P. Martin *Mark: Evangelist and Theologian*, Exeter 1972 points out that it is always used with either a hostile reference or in the bad sense of distracting from his mission. Calvin says that 'the words "Who is my mother?" were unquestionably intended to reprove Mary's eagerness, and she certainly acted improperly in attempting to interrupt the progress of his discourse.' Chrysostom says that Jesus did not insult Mary by asking 'Who is my mother?' for he wanted her, as others, to have a proper opinion of himself and that he spoke to her through others in order to be more convincing. 'She expected that she should always be honoured by him as by a son, and not that he should come as her master.'
- 10 Matthew 11:2-12, 50. Luke places the incident after our Lord's first parables and is not interested in the relatives themselves, but merely uses the story to press home the teaching about hearing the word of God and doing it.
- 11 Matthew 13:57; Mark 6:4.

- 12 Luke 11:27,28.
- 13 Chrysostom on John 2:4.
- 14 Matthew 11:11; Luke 7:28, cf. Luke 10:19,20 where a place in heaven is worth more than authority over demons.
- 15 The fourth gospel does not say (cf. John Wenham *Easter Enigma*, Paternoster, Exeter 1984 p.138) that John looked after Mary for the rest of her life. Our Lord's chief aim may simply have been to have his mother taken away from the cross to spare her and himself.
- 16 There is no evidence that Mary had any influence in the early church which could have given rise to belief in a spiritual motherhood in relation to the church. The impression given by the only subsequent reference to her (Acts 1:14) is that of a modest praying believer. If Mary had been given such a position it would be hard to explain how Luke doesn't even mention her presence at the cross if he knew she were there (Luke 23:49).
- 17 *Speaker's Commentary*, London 1880.
- 18 John 14:3.
- 19 Matthew 22; Mark 12; Luke 20.
- 20 *On our Lord's sermon on the mount* Book 1 ch. 15.
- 21 J.A.F. Gregg *The Primitive Faith and Roman Catholic Developments*, Dublin 1928.