

## BEHOLD, YOUR MOTHER: JOHN 19:5-27, REDEFINITION OF THE MOTHERHOOD OF MARY

### INTRODUCTION

Mary, the mother of Jesus, played a significant role in the life and ministry of her son. Although powerful, the moments in which she comes to the fore are few. She often remains, in a supportive role, in the background of the Gospel events. This type of role is “entirely in accord with Jewish life and with Biblical history in general, in which women play a minor role, most frequently limited to their feminine functions as wife and mother”.<sup>1</sup> In the Ancient Near East women were subordinate to men and wives were seen as property. Women were responsible for “the milling, the baking, the procuring of fuel and water, spinning weaving, sewing, [and] the care of the house . . . the care of the children”. However, unlike in other regions, Jewish women were allowed “freedom of movement which she enjoyed within the community”.<sup>2</sup> Although men played a more prominent role in society’s eyes, the women and mothers played an essential supportive role and provided a foundational structure to the family.

In Israel, the family unit was seen to be “of pivotal importance to Israel’s relationship with YHWH. . . The social, economic, and theological realms were thus bound together and converged on the focal point of the family”.<sup>3</sup> With such importance, the “authority of both parents” is a powerful and recurring theme throughout both Testaments.<sup>4</sup> This is typified by the commandment to honor one’s father and mother as this connected to life in the land given by God. The family unit acts as an individual, personifying, link or conduit between the national elements of Covenant and God.

From this connection an image and role of Mary will take shape. As a woman and, later, as a mother, she was to embody the strong and silent support for family which was expected of all women. Recognizing this role, scholars have often pointed out that her words are few. Therefore, she is defined by her actions, responses, and acceptance of that which is tasked to her. In her life, she was asked to endure and accept many things regarding her son, Jesus. In her acceptance of her role she embodied the many of women of the Old Testament who responded generously to the call of God.

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<sup>1</sup> J.L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible* (Chicago: Bruce, 1965) 552.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 936.

<sup>3</sup> C.J.H. Wright, “Family”, *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 6 vols (NY: Doubleday, 1992 2: 765.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 2: 766.

However, we would argue, that coming forward and in standing at the foot of the Cross and bearing witness to the brutal execution of her son she went beyond the previous women and completed their responses. Roman crucifixion was a brutal method of executing prisoners. Recent research into the process and physiology of the condemned man has suggested that the ordeal was unrelentingly torturous and the condemned man had no place of respite on the cross. Crucifixion was designed to illustrate the power of Rome, be a deterring force, and to humiliate the one being executed. The places of crucifixion, usually on the outskirts of a major city, were always heavy with intense emotions and the drama of the last moments of life. All four Gospels reflect these aspects in their accounts of the crucifixion of Jesus. The Gospels give few details regarding the agony of Jesus. Perhaps they were not willing to recount them or the process was so familiar to the residents of the Roman Empire that they did not feel the need to narrate the graphic details. However, the Gospel of John, 19: 25-27, places a particular focus on Mary, the mother of Jesus and the "Beloved Disciple". In his last moments, Jesus speaks a powerful couplet of phrases; to Mary, "Woman, behold your son", and to the Beloved Disciple, Behold your mother".<sup>5</sup> E. Julian points out that this is "the only Marian scene in the Book of Glory". It is here, "in the middle of the account of the crucifixion that we meet Mary".<sup>6</sup> Building upon Julian, it is here, at the foot of the Cross, that we see the motherhood of Mary fully revealed and redefined through the words of Jesus. This fully defined figure and model of faith is who we "meet" at the foot of the Cross.

In other words, her presence at the foot of the Cross and reception of the words of her son, Jesus, culminate her responses to God and begin a new, redefined, motherly role. In Jesus' last words we encounter a mother whose authority was defined by the culture of the Ancient Near East, Scripture, and a theological role now introduced by Jesus.

From the Cross, Jesus places Mary in a transitional, lynchpin, position in looking to both the history of Israel and the New Israel, or Zion, which is to come. He does not abolish the role of mother that was lived by Mary, but redefines it in terms of Biblical imagery and his perduring ministry of establishing the Kingdom of God.

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<sup>5</sup> The Greek literally reads; "Woman, behold the son of you" and "Behold the mother of you".

<sup>6</sup> E. Julian, "Mary of Nazareth as a Disciple: A Developing Biblical Portrait", *Stimulus* 14, #4 (2006) 28. It must be observed that already encounter Mary, briefly, during the Wedding at Cana (John 2). But that episode focuses on the relationship between Mary and Jesus. The role of Mary, in which we "meet" her is the focus in John 19.

## THE SPOKEN WORD IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

When Jesus spoke these words to the “Beloved Disciple” and to his mother, Mary, he knew that death was imminent. On a practical level, Jesus’ words ensure the care of his mother to a disciple whom he loved and felt had the means to care for Mary.<sup>7</sup> This can be interpreted as an act of filial love, even in tremendous agony and at the moment of death, for his mother. However, the ancient beliefs surrounding the spoken word and the cultural setting give this couplet a special power.

In antiquity, unlike today, the spoken word was given a great deal of authority and credibility. J. Lauterbach argues;

“The belief in the effectiveness of the uttered word is common among primitive peoples and was widespread among ancient civilized peoples. The Jewish people were, in this respect, not different from other peoples. According to this belief, whatever is spoken . . . comes true and actually happens . . . the word becomes fact”.<sup>8</sup>

In Hebrew, the term for “word” is *dabar* (דָּבָר). The term, *dabar*, has a wide semantic and connotative field. E. Kalland points out that all aspects “have some sense of thought processes, of communication, or of subjects or means of communication”. The word can refer to a thing or a matter and can take on the meaning of act or event.<sup>9</sup> G. Gerleman has commented that the word stands not just the “linguistic carrier of meaning, but also for the content itself”.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, J.L. McKenzie points to the dynamic quality of the *dabar*. McKenzie argues that “the reality and power of the word are rooted in the personality” of the one who utters it. Furthermore, when the word is uttered with power it posits the reality which it represents or signifies”.<sup>11</sup>

McKenzie, in discussing the “Blessing of Jacob”, states that “ancient conceptions regarded the dying man as granted peculiar insight into the future”. The words of a dying

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<sup>7</sup> We follow the scholarly argument that the “Beloved Disciple” was the original Gospel writer, John, who seemed to have been a young man of means and status.

<sup>8</sup> J. Lauterbach, “The Belief in the Power of the Word”, *Hebrew Union College Annual* 14 (1939) 287.

<sup>9</sup> E. Kalland, “dabar”, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* 2 vols (Chicago: Moody, 1980) 1:179-180

<sup>10</sup> G. Gerleman, “word”, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* 3 vols (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997) 1:329.

<sup>11</sup> McKenzie, *Dictionary*, 938. McKenzie’s argument illustrates the point made by Lauterbach, in that the word becomes fact. The idea that the word reflects the power of the speaker, or rooted in his personality, is illustrated in the Creation account, Genesis 1. God spoke and creation came into being and it was good. This means that creation is good, therefore the word which generated it is good, and therefore, the one who uttered the word, God, is good.

man, especially a blessing or a curse, were regarded as having greater power than an ordinary blessing or curse.<sup>12</sup>

Based on McKenzie's argument regarding Jacob, it can be concluded that any statement, testimony, or designation of a dying man would have greater import than words spoken under normal conditions. These beliefs were known to Jesus; He knew the significance of the circumstance and his words to the Disciple and Mary. He knew that coming from the Cross, in his last moments of life, his designations of the Beloved Disciple and Mary would be viewed to have tremendous authority. If this were simply an act of filial devotion, Jesus could have arranged the care of Mary at any time during the last stages of his ministry with the Disciple, as He knew his mission was to end on the Cross. Therefore, Jesus' dying words, in a cultural context, begins to redefine the motherhood of Mary.

### **MOTHERHOOD IN THE OLD TESTAMENT**

Jesus entrusting Mary to the Disciple is an action which rests on the status and importance of motherhood in Israelite and Jewish history. According to R.J. Meade, the role of the mother was "one of the most important roles a woman could fulfill in ancient Israelite society". The role was a primary source of prestige within her community.<sup>13</sup> Motherhood was a "social construction", not simply a biological circumstance, and as such was "constrained and redefined by time and place".<sup>14</sup> In Mary's case, the time and place of the redefinition of her motherhood, the Cross of Jesus, was a major factor in establishing her future role and authority. Meade also argues that motherhood was a method by which women were able to increase their relative status within society.<sup>15</sup>

L. Bonner expands upon the argument of Meade. She emphasizes the authority of the mother, and explains;

"The mother in the Bible is a figure of power. She influences the course of life in her home and, in some case, wider society. The Biblical mother is a force to be reckoned with in social, political, and religious spheres. Her power stems in part from her role as wife, but far more so from the nurturing and influential relationship she has with her children . . . As the mother of the Bible cares for her

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid. , 410.

<sup>13</sup> R.J. Meade, *The Status and Role of Motherhood in Ancient Israelite Narratives: The Barren Wife Stories and the Book of Ruth* (Thesis: University of Alberta, 1998) Abstract.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 7.

clan, she does so with wisdom and purpose, acquiring authority and position within the household and beyond”.<sup>16</sup>

Bonner also introduces a concept which she calls the “Metaphorical Mother”. This term refers to a woman who nurtures, or “mothers”, a population of symbolic children, although biological ties are not precluded. These are women who contribute to the birth and growth of a budding nation and the advancement of their people. They are administrators of God’s plans, protectors of the community, and givers of wise and much needed counsel at momentous points in Israel’s history.<sup>17</sup>

Mary fulfills these traditions and, through the words of Jesus, is depicted as moving beyond and culminating them. Jesus is giving Mary a special motherly role at the beginning moment of his glorification, which finds completion in the Resurrection. This is the great saving action of God, according to the Gospels. It signals a new era of faith and a new relationship, or Covenant, with God. God’s glory made manifest in such a way may be understood as pointing to a new Jerusalem (Revelation 21:9-11). Therefore the words of Jesus places Mary in a foundational role to this Covenant of faith, a budding nation or community, and vital to its growth.<sup>18</sup> By creating this bond with the “Beloved Disciple”, Jesus is allowing Mary to intensify and move beyond the traditions of the great maternal figures of the Old Testament. Furthermore, there is no evidence in the Gospel that Jesus’ words were symbolic or parabolic. Therefore, this motherhood to which Jesus is assigning Mary is not simply metaphorical or representational of the powerful maternal figures in ancient Israel. The motherhood to which Jesus is entrusting Mary is, undoubtedly, based on these maternal figures of Israel’s history. However, because of his personal ties to the Beloved Disciple, Mary’s motherhood is to go beyond archetypes and models of the past and be real and intimate. With Jesus’ words, Mary’s motherhood is being defined not as symbolic or distant, but personal and loving.

### **Old Testament Imagery and Prophecy**

The words of Jesus from the Cross to Mary and the Beloved Disciple culminate many Old Testament traditions. J. McHugh argues that the passage, part of the larger account of John 19:17-42, “is composed of details which show the fulfillment of prophecy”. He makes the following parallels:

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<sup>16</sup> L. Bonner, *Stories of Biblical Mothers: Maternal Power in the Bible* (NY: University Press of America 2004) IX.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 78. Bonner cites and discusses Miriam, Deborah, and Esther as models of this kind of mother. We would include the mother of Samson, as portrayed in Judges 13 as also being part of this model.

<sup>18</sup> As history has convincingly demonstrated, as the Christian community of followers grew into a Christian nation. By virtue of Jesus’ words, Mary’s role was to grow accordingly.

Vv. 17-18 and Isaiah 53:12; vv. 19-22 and Zechariah 10:9; vv. 23-24 and Psalm 22:9; vv. 28-30 and Psalm 69:22; vv. 31-37 and Exodus 12:36, Numbers 9:12 Psalm 34:21, Zechariah 12:10; vv. 38-42 and Isaiah 53:9.<sup>19</sup>

Specifically, regarding John 19:25-27, McHugh sees a parallel to Genesis 3:15, as the victory over sin through which the Cross invokes the image of the victory over the serpent in Eden. In the LXX, the Genesis account is understood as saying that not the woman's offspring as a whole, but an individual offspring will be victorious over the serpent.<sup>20</sup> McHugh continues, according to Genesis 3:15 the woman is also at war with the serpent and will share in the victory of her offspring over the serpent. This means that Mary's physical presence at the foot of the Cross, and the words of Jesus, "associates her forever with the triumph of Jesus: For in John the Cross is never a gibbet, but always a royal throne".<sup>21</sup>

While the victory of the offspring, in Genesis 3:15, is promised by the words of God, John 19: 25-27 presents an "apostolic exegesis" according to McHugh. The evangelist, through the presence of Mary and the words of Jesus, gives a "new and deeper sense to the words of the Old Testament".<sup>22</sup> Therefore, according to McHugh's argument, Mary is the new Eve. However, unlike Eve, Mary is a model of faith and obedience to the word of God.<sup>23</sup> Also, unlike Eve, who was expelled from Eden where the victory was foretold, Mary is prominent at the place of victory- The Cross of Jesus. Because Mary's motherhood was defined from the Cross, the place of victory and glory, her motherhood is entwined with Jesus' victory and glory.

While the image of Eve, the "mother of all life", provides a strong backdrop for John's depiction of the redefining of Mary's motherhood, he also uses Old Testament imagery to present her as the mother of Zion. John's intent was made clear by the focus he builds in the scene of 19:25-27. In the midst of the suffering and intensity which is attendant to the crucifixion of Jesus, John draws our attention to Mary and the Beloved Disciple. The key to understanding this Zionist image of Mary is the presence of the Beloved Disciple.<sup>24</sup> The presence of the Beloved Disciple at the foot of the Cross suggests that he was not

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<sup>19</sup> J. McHugh, *The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament* (NY: Doubleday, 1975) 371. We purposely omitted vv. 25-27 because we will deal with these verses at length below.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 374.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 375.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 376. This new sense is often called *sensus plenior* by Biblical interpreters.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Luke 1:38.

<sup>24</sup> Scholars have long debated over the identity of the Beloved Disciple and a full discussion of this issue would take us far from the scope of the present work. However, we feel the weight of scholarship favors the conclusion that the Beloved Disciple was John, the author of the Gospel or an author of an early edition of the Gospel.

recognized as one of the “twelve” or as a Galilean by anyone. However, he enjoyed a very close relationship to Jesus (John 13:23). The fact that the Gospel notes his presence signifies that he was to have an important role; as such details were never superfluous. It seems the most likely explanation of his presence is that he was to embody, or represent, the community of those who believed in Jesus. Depicting the Beloved Disciple as being representational of the community of believers rests on a Biblical mindset, called “corporate personality”.<sup>25</sup> According to J. Rogerson, there are two main ways Biblical authors implemented this concept; Corporate Responsibility, wherein a group was culpable even if only one member commits an offence, or Corporate Representation, wherein one person could embody an entire group (Psalm 44:5-9).<sup>26</sup> The Gospel depicts the Beloved Disciple as the Corporate Representation of the community of believers, the New Israel, or Zion.

If the Gospel casts the Beloved Disciple, the embodiment of Zion, as the new son of Mary it follows that the Gospel casts Mary as the mother of Zion. This argument is typified by R.E. Brown, in which he states;

“The sorrowful scene at the foot of the Cross represents the birth pangs by which the Spirit of Salvation is brought forth (Isaiah 26: 17-18) and handed over (John 29:30). In becoming the mother of the Beloved Disciple (the Christian) Mary is symbolically evocative of Lady Zion who, after birth pangs, brings forth a new people in joy”.<sup>27</sup>

The image of Zion is significant. Originally, Zion seems to have referred to a fortress in the Jebusite city of Jerusalem. Once David captured the city, he changed the name of the “stronghold of Zion” to the “City of David” (2 Samuel 5: 7, 9). Solomon, the son and successor of David, expanded the city to the Northwest and built his temple to YHWH upon a hill that became known as “Mount Zion” (Psalm 78: 68-69). The term “Zion” also came to designate the Temple Mount. This meaning was expanded, through the process of metonymy, and “Zion” came to refer to Jerusalem itself, the Temple city. Also through metonymy, “Zion” came to refer to the people of Israel.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> This is a scholarly term first used by Wheeler Robinson in 1907. In 1911, Robinson used the term to explain the punishment of the House of Achan in Joshua 7, and other passages which strongly connect an individual to an entire group. The concept emerges in the New Testament as well; cf romans 5:12 and 1 Corinthians 15:21.

<sup>26</sup> J. Rogerson, “Corporate Personality”, *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 6 vols (NY: Doubleday, 1992) 1:1156.

<sup>27</sup> R.E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John XII-XXI* (NY: Doubleday, 1970) 925.

<sup>28</sup> J. Levenson, “Zion traditions”, *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 6 vols (NY: Doubleday, 1992) 6:1098. Metonymy is a figure of speech in which one name or noun is used instead of another, to which it stands in a certain relation. In other words, the names of persons or places can be used to represent something which stands in special connection to them. This is why the place-name, Zion, is tied tightly to Jerusalem and the Temple.

Zion became a powerful theological symbol. Zion was the holy mountain of God upon which He has set His king (Psalm 2:6). Zion was the place of the presence of YHWH and, after its destruction, the restoration of Zion became the focus of the messianic kingdom. According to McKenzie, Zion, or Jerusalem, was the symbol of contact between God and man and the “point from which salvation radiates”.<sup>29</sup> From the Cross, Jesus now makes Mary integral to the dynamism of Zion.

Also, Mary at the foot of the Cross fulfills key prophecies in Isaiah.

#### ISAIAH 49:21

In this text, Jerusalem is depicted as a woman. Her conditions of widowhood and barrenness make it impossible to bear children. Yet, despite of her condition, children surround her. McKenzie suggests that this foretells of an ingathering of Israel that is so great and sudden that no one can see it happen.<sup>30</sup>

Zion is not destined to grieve, according to P. Hanson, because of the loss which she has endured. Instead, she will be able to compare her former desolation with the “bustling activity of returnees filling her towns and cities”. In astonishment she proclaims her questions.<sup>31</sup>

The answer to her questions is YHWH. D. Jones points out that there are three conditions described in v. 21; widowhood, divorced, and barrenness. These are all descriptive of the exile. However, the three-fold references to the children represent the repopulated Zion. The same images will occur in Isaiah 54: 1-3, 4, 6. C. Stuhlmueller argues that v. 21, when read with Isaiah 54: 1-3, offers a clue to the meaning of the Emmanuel passage; Isaiah 7:14.<sup>32</sup> To expand the argument, Mary is to be the maternal figure that welcomes back the faithful who return to Zion.

#### ISAIAH 54:1-3

D. Jones argues for a purposeful placement of this text, as it completes the message of Isaiah 53. He contends;

“The issue of the servant’s sacrifice shall be justification of “the many” (53:1b), but also he himself shall live again to witness the fulfillment of the

<sup>29</sup> McKenzie, *Dictionary*, 431

<sup>30</sup> J.L. McKenzie, *Second Isaiah* (NY: Doubleday, 1968) 113.

<sup>31</sup> P. Hanson, *Isaiah 40-66* (Louisville: John Knox, 1995) 134.

<sup>32</sup> C. Stuhlmueller, “Deuteron-Isaiah”, *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* 2 vols. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-hall, 1968) 1:376.

promise of the ‘seed’ (53: 10b) and to receive a ‘portion’ (53:12) as one of the great nations of the earth. This portion is now defined. Isaiah 54 describes the portion or heritage of the servant . . . with a repeated emphasis on the *permanence* of this of this heritage as founded in the indestructible love of God”.<sup>33</sup>

The “barren one” (53:1) is an echo of Sarah (Genesis 11:30). The tent of the mother of Israel is the sign of her station (Genesis 24:67). As the barren Sarah became the mother of Israel, so too will this childless, bereft, and bereaved woman- an image of the punished Israel- become the mother of the new Israel.<sup>34</sup>

The barren woman, according to Hanson, has received God’s promise that her desolation will be transformed into blessing. Therefore, the childless woman will be rejoicing; an image that echoes Hannah (1 Samuel 2:5b). Hanson contends that the depiction is that in which the “God who was able to bless the barren matriarch of old surely is able to do so again”. By using the figures of the Old Testament, the Isaian author is presenting the promise of restoration as part of Israel’s history, not as a new or unique occurrence. Restoration is a “renewal” of God’s original intention for his people. Hanson concludes that desolation and destruction represent the deviation from Israel’s true destiny, a people of promise.<sup>35</sup>

McKenzie agrees that there is a probable allusion to Sarah in the background of the text, the historic nomad wife from whom Israel first sprang. However, the primary image is that of the wife, hitherto barren or childless, who must now act quickly to enlarge her tent for her astonishingly numerous children.<sup>36</sup> The promises to Zion point to YHWH establishing a lasting city of his “good pleasure”, according to McKenzie. It is not a city of material reality of walls and buildings. Instead, it is a community of the redeemed, instructed by YHWH, and established in his righteousness.<sup>37</sup>

Stuhlmüller sees this passage, with 49:21, as an authentic interpretation of Isaiah 7:14. Throughout the Old Testament, the childless woman all bore their offspring through God’s special power of favor (cf. Genesis 15:2, 16:1, 29:31, Judges 13:2, 1 Samuel 1:2). The new Zion, or Jerusalem, will be “peopled” if she shares the faith with the earlier figures. Through faith, Zion’s tent is enlarged into a house, which can include all of “the

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<sup>33</sup> D. Jones, “Isaiah II-III”, *Peake’s Commentary on the Bible* (Nashville: Nelson, 1981) 528.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 528.

<sup>35</sup> Hanson, 171.

<sup>36</sup> McKenzie, *Second Isaiah*, 139

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

nations” in the new family.<sup>38</sup> The repopulation of Zion is the sign which is foretold in Isaiah 7:14.

### ISAIAH 66:7-11

Isaiah 66 culminates the theme which has recurred throughout the second half of the book. Verses 7-11 tell of the birth of the new age, according to Jones, but without birth pangs, “so unexpected and swift will salvation be”. The new Israel will be eschatological in that it involves the end of the old dispensation and a new creation. However, it remains still within history and does not yet signal the end of history.<sup>39</sup> McKenzie compares the sudden nature of the saving act to conception and birth in a single day. The saving act means the sudden appearance of a large number of true Israelites, children of the New Jerusalem.<sup>40</sup>

J. Blenkinsopp argues that this image is part of the summons to those who now mourn to rejoice. Zion is depicted as a mother whose children have been lost, but the children are now returning from far away. Mother Zion rejoices in having a new family.<sup>41</sup>

### ISAIAH AND MARY

These passages in Isaiah have a common theme; Mother Zion, in the midst of her grief and sorrow over the loss of her children, suddenly has been given a new and larger family which is the occasion for rejoicing. Mary culminates these themes and, therefore, these prophecies. Standing at the foot of the Cross, watching Jesus as he endures horrific agony in his last moments, Mary had to feel the intense sorrow of the impending loss of her son. She also knew well the lost people of the Sinai Covenant who this death was to redeem and reconcile to YHWH. Certainly, she knew of and understood his mission; to establish the Kingdom of God. She also knew the integral role the Cross was to play. While Jesus was the Messiah, the son of God, bringing about salvation through a redeeming death, he was also her beloved son who was about to die in a torturous manner. Her grief, anticipating the moment of his death and when he released his spirit, would be palpable. She is losing her child, as Mother Zion, for the sake of others. To deny her this moment of sorrow and grief is to deny her humanity and love for Jesus. Yet, in the midst of her heart-rending sorrow the words of Jesus entrusts with a new family- the new Zion. There is no time for sorrow, which will be replaced by a glorious

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<sup>38</sup> Stuhlmueller, 379.

<sup>39</sup> Jones, 535.

<sup>40</sup> McKenzie, *Second Isaiah*, 209.

<sup>41</sup> J. Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 56-66* (NY: Doubleday, 2003) 304-305.

triumph and much rejoicing. With this, Mary will have to make room in her tent and heart for her new children- the community of believers.

## MARY'S MOTHERHOOD IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Mary fulfills many of the archetypes from Israel's history; such as Sarah, Samson's mother, and Hannah. In this way, she opens the Old Testament, a canon the First Century Jews thought to have been closed, and shows how it points to Jesus. It is a role similar to that of John the Baptist. Yet, the New Testament also has a strong forward orientation and Jesus now places her in a foundational role to the Kingdom which he is to bring about.

## GOSPEL FORESHADOWING

The phrase "Behold, your mother", occurs in Mark 3:32 and Matthew 12:47, both of which are part of larger texts which deal with the "brethren" of Jesus and with theological content that is very similar to the Johannine passage.<sup>42</sup> It is a theological irony that these words should be said *to* Jesus during his ministry when these same words, spoken *by* him, completed his ministry. The point of these passages is that the ties of common obedience to God take precedence over those of blood kinship.<sup>43</sup> E. Mally continues this line of thought. He states that while Jesus does not deny the importance of "natural kinship", he radically subordinates it to a "higher bond of brotherhood". Mally argues that "the reign of God makes demands on the personal commitment of a disciple, which must transcend at times all natural bonds of family or ethnic grouping".<sup>44</sup> J. Marcus argues that the entire depiction of the scene in Mark indicated its message. He notes that the family of Jesus was standing outside. This is contrasted to the crowd of listeners that was sitting around him, forming a new family circle. This picture of a new family takes on an eschatological aspect as Old Testament, Jewish, and Christian traditions saw the restoration of the family as a sign of the end-time (Isaiah 49: 18-21, 60:4; Malachi 4:6; Sirach 48: 10; and Luke 1:17).<sup>45</sup>

McKenzie, regarding the Matthean passage, argues the Jesus' response is forming a "new unity" about himself. To this unity other bonds, including that of kinship, are sublimated.

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<sup>42</sup> We are not going to rehearse the arguments about the relationship of Jesus to these persons. We will only contend that the weight of scholarship does not support the conclusion that they were other children born of Mary.

<sup>43</sup> R. Wilson, "Mark", *Peake's Commentary on the Bible* (Nashville: Nelson, 1981) 803.

<sup>44</sup> E. Mally, "The Gospel According to Mark", *Jerome*, 2:29.

<sup>45</sup> J. Marcus, *Mark 1-8* (NY: Doubleday, 2000) 286. It should be observed that listeners sitting around Jesus echoes images of a father and his children or a rabbi teaching his students, both of which were common in Jewish traditions.

In forming this unity, Jesus is raising all who believe in him to an intimacy of kinship.<sup>46</sup> J.D. Kingsbury suggests that Jesus' response indicates that only his disciples remain as those who are his real relatives, the ones who do the will of his heavenly father.<sup>47</sup> W.F. Albright and C.S. Mann point out that "mere affiliation does not determine membership of Israel or the messianic community. The only criterion is obedience to the Father's will, which is completely consistent with the Israelite prophetic message."<sup>48</sup>

B. Vawter summarizes the meaning of these passages succinctly. Jesus "has come to establish a family of faith and they make up his family who do the will of God as he does it". This is part of New Testament theology, according to Vawter, and we know from the book of Acts and the Pauline epistles that 'brother' became a customary title by which early Christians recognized each other".<sup>49</sup> In establishing this family of faith, Jesus begins to redefine Israel, or Zion, placing it under the maternal care of Mary. No longer will Israel be defined by national boundaries or birthright. The new Zion will be defined by faith, as is proper for the people of God.

#### "BEHOLD YOUR MOTHER . . . "

In John 19:26-27 we see Jesus, from the Cross, speaking to Mary and the Beloved Disciple in the following words;

"Woman, behold your son; behold, your mother".

This phrase is stark and abrupt, but each word adds to the overall power of the phrase. The first word, "woman", thrusts the focus of the scene onto Mary.<sup>50</sup> This is not a derogatory address, rather is an echo of Eve, the first woman and the mother of life. If Jesus is establishing a new order, a new Jerusalem, and a new Zion then Mary is being cast as the new Eve. She is the mother of the new life under the New Covenant established by Jesus. It has been argued by many that the word used, *gynai*, is a title of respect in the Ancient Near East. English does not have a sufficient rendering that avoids the abrupt sound of the address. Mary is now the focus and prime object of Jesus' words. The full attention of the witnesses and later audiences is now guided to Mary.

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<sup>46</sup> McKenzie, "Matthew", *Jerome*, 2:86.

<sup>47</sup> J.D. Kingsbury, *Matthew* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 50.

<sup>48</sup> W.F. Albright/C.S. Mann, *Matthew* (NY: Doubleday, 1971) 162.

<sup>49</sup> B. Vawter, *The Four Gospels: An Introduction*, 2 vols (NY: Image 1969) 1:220.

<sup>50</sup> We see a similar address in John 2:4, the Wedding feast.

The key to understanding the significance of Jesus' words lies in the term, "behold". The term connotes more than Jesus simply commanding Mary and the Disciple to look upon one another in the simple mother-son union he has just formed. The construction of this couplet is built on the linguistic significance of the term, "behold". Moreover, the function it serves is to add authority to the redefined motherhood of Mary. Interestingly, the term, "behold", carries a similar linguistic authority in both Semitic and Greek usages.

In Hebrew the term is *hinnēh* ( הנה ) and comparable interjections and particles are attested to in almost all Semitic languages, including Aramaic. There are over 1000 occurrences of this term in the Old Testament. According to D. Vetter, the term can still be recognized a "a component of a primitive command, presenting the substance of the command". Vetter continues;

"In the dual function of an address or exclamation as well as the temporal characterization of an event or circumstance, the interjections refer to a person or thing. Followed by a noun they form a clause, they precede a complete nominal clause, or they replace a clause".<sup>51</sup>

Often, the term was used as an introduction to the prophetic announcement of judgement indicating God's intervention and frequently stood in the immediate context of the messenger formula (Jeremiah 6:21, 9:6, 10:18).<sup>52</sup>

According to C. Weber *hinnēh* is sometimes used as a "predicate of existence", something that looks to a new state of being. The *hinnēh* clauses emphasize the immediacy and "here-and-now-ness" of the situation. The term may be used to point things out, but more frequently it used to point out people (Genesis 30:3). Significantly, most *hinnēh* clauses occur in direct speech. They introduce a fact upon which a following statement or command is based.<sup>53</sup> The Gospel account fits this pattern precisely. After Jesus entrusts Mary and the Beloved to one another (the fact), the text makes a specific reference to the Disciple taking Mary into his care (statement).

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<sup>51</sup> D. Vetter, "Behold", *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* 3 vols (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997) 1:379.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:380.

<sup>53</sup> C. Weber, "behold", *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* 2 vols (Chicago: Moody, 1980) 1:221.

In Greek, *idōu* (ἰδοῦ) is a demonstrative particle, with no exact English equivalent. Like *hinnēh*, the term *idōu* often serves to enliven a narrative by introducing something new or extraordinary. The term is often used to emphasize the importance of something.<sup>54</sup>

Therefore, based on the meanings attached to the term “behold”, Jesus’ words represent a new role for Mary, that was to begin immediately. This sudden change, which redefines her role as mother, is perfectly congruous with the images of Mother Zion throughout the Old Testament. Both the Zion imagery and the term, “behold”, combine to a sudden and dramatic change, in which Mary will be foundational. The authority attendant to this type of change is brought about by the words of Jesus from the Cross.

### MARY’S MOTHERHOOD REDEFINED

From the Cross, Jesus expands and, therefore, redefines Mary’s motherhood. He does not renounce his own filial bond with her, but creates a new dimension for her role as mother. Brown, *et al*, argues that scene at the foot of the Cross brings together two people for whom the Gospel writer never gives personal names; the names John or Mary are never specifically written, only the “mother of Jesus” and the “Beloved Disciple”. This suggests that their significance is found in their respective roles. J. McHugh states that the title of “mother” is a term of respect. In the Ancient Near East, the status of “mother” was a place of high regard, especially if her son was a famous man. Therefore the use of the title, and not her name, signifies the importance of Mary in the Gospel as she is the mother of the “Word Incarnate”.<sup>55</sup> Brown continues the argument by suggesting that Mary’s role, given at the hour of death by Jesus, may not pertain to his earthly ministry but looks to the era of community after Jesus’ glorification.<sup>56</sup>

From a strict Old Testament perspective, we have seen how Mary and the Disciple embody the Zion traditions. However, from a Christian, or New Testament, perspective the Zion imagery must be redefined. As Brown, *et al*, suggests, there are symbolic possibilities of Mary being depicted in a maternal role to the new Christian community. This supports the idea that the Beloved Disciple is the symbol, or embodiment, of

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<sup>54</sup> W. Bauer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, trans Arndt/Gingrich (Chicago: University Press, 1979) 370-371.

<sup>55</sup> J. McHugh, *The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament* (NY: Doubleday, 1975) 362.

<sup>56</sup> R. Brown/K. Donfried/J. Fitzmyer/ J. Reumann, eds. *Mary in the New Testament* (Philadelphia; Fortress, 1978) 212.

Johannine Christianity. This leads the reader to the conclusion that Israel, as personified in Mary or Mother Zion, is the mother of Jewish Christianity.<sup>57</sup>

McHugh argues that in the scene at the foot of the Cross, the Beloved disciple is representative of all disciples who love and follow Jesus. In turn, Mary is now cast as the mother of all these disciples. This is why, according to the Zion imagery, she must now enlarge her tent, and heart. She must now be the maternal figure of this sudden increase of children. She must now make ready for an enlarged family, because through the Beloved Disciple all disciples of Jesus are charged to view her as their mother.<sup>58</sup>

The text narrates that the Disciple took Mary into his care from that moment onward. This action is also rooted in Israel's traditions. It was common that a mother would take up residence with her son. Based on Old Testament inheritance laws, only the male offspring would inherit anything. Daughters would usually inherit nothing, because the property would pass outside of the family, upon marriage, to the husband. Therefore, the son would be the one with the resources to care for the mother in a way which daughters were not able.<sup>59</sup>

While based on ancient traditions and practices, the Disciple's immediate and selfless response to the words of Jesus serves as a model for future followers of Jesus. The Greek word that is rendered "took" is *lambanō* (λαμβάνω). This term connotes "take in hand" or "take hold of, grasp". It also encompasses the meaning to take away, take up, receive, or remove, without the use of force. The term also has mental or spiritual aspects when it is translated "make one's own", "apprehend", or "comprehend".<sup>60</sup> McHugh builds upon the spiritual connotation of the word. He argues that the Disciple accepted Mary as his mother and as part of the "spiritual legacy bequeathed to him by his Lord".<sup>61</sup>

The use of the term *lambanō* indicates an importance that moves beyond the death scene being played out on the Cross. First, one must observe that the Disciple received Mary without question or hesitation as his mother. Likewise, Mary offered no reluctance or hesitation to be entrusted into the care of the Disciple. Second, as the spiritual connotation and McHugh indicate, there seems to be an unspoken understanding that occurs between the Disciple, Mary, and Jesus. The Disciple now comprehends that this is

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 216-217.

<sup>58</sup> McHugh, 377.

<sup>59</sup> Meade, 13; McKenzie, *Dictionary*, 388.

<sup>60</sup> Bauer, 464-465.

<sup>61</sup> McHugh, 378.

a beginning, the start of something new.<sup>62</sup> It might be overstating his understanding, at this point, to attribute to him the connections between Mary, himself, and the restored Zion or new Christian community. However, in light of his acceptance of the powerful words of Jesus and his immediate response to them it seems likely that the Disciple realized that a special role was being assigned to him and Mary by Jesus.

Vawter comments on this passage extensively. He argues that this is a “sign” of the “spiritual motherhood of Mary, the new Eve, the mother of the faithful”. The representational character of the Beloved Disciple is very clear in this passage. He states;

“In a historical sense, this expression signifies that from this moment the disciple accepted Jesus’ mother as his own. In the spiritual sense, which John also intends, we understand that the glorification on the cross has enacted the relationship that has just been signified”.<sup>63</sup>

Regarding the Beloved Disciple, Vawter states that he “bears the character of every true Christian who is in the heart of Christ as Christ is in the heart of God (John 1:18, 13:23). It is altogether fitting that this proclamation be made at the moment of Jesus’ expiration, the beginning of the saving work of the Church through the power of the Spirit”.<sup>64</sup>

R.E. Brown states that the Johannine passage brings together two great symbolic figures of the Gospel. Although there is little reason to doubt their historical validity, as noted, their names are never used. Their primary importance was the symbolism which they embodied for discipleship. Regarding Mary, the Gospel was presenting an interpretation about what constituted her true motherhood.<sup>65</sup> By assigning the Beloved Disciple the role of Mary’s son, Jesus is claiming him as his brother. The Beloved Disciple is depicted as the ideal of discipleship. Mary is now intimately involved and connected to him and, as his mother, now claims an equal share in the true family of Jesus. Therefore, the Beloved Disciple and Mary stood at the foot of the Cross as models for Jesus’ true family of disciples.<sup>66</sup>

Julian argues in a similar way, stating that “in John, Mary is brought into the family of discipleship in a highly significant way. She is now the mother of the most perfect

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<sup>62</sup> This comprehension might be seen as foundational to the account in John 20:8, wherein the Disciple ran to the tomb, looked in, and “believed”. It is at that moment all of Jesus’ teachings, signs and wonders, words from the Cross, are cast in light of the Resurrection combine to form in the Disciple a new and powerful faith.

<sup>63</sup> B. Vawter, “The Gospel According to John”, *Jerome*, 2:462. The term sign, (*simeia*) is a term used throughout John’s Gospel to denote works of power done by Jesus.

<sup>64</sup> Vawter, *Four Gospels*, 2:258.

<sup>65</sup> R.E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (NY: Paulist, 1979) 196.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

disciple, the Beloved disciple, who becomes Jesus' brother".<sup>67</sup> On Calvary, John puts the themes of "motherhood and discipleship together". Mary and the Beloved Disciple are now related to each other, although not biologically. Julian continues, "by entrusting Mary and the Beloved Disciple to each other Jesus has inaugurated a new community of believing disciples to continue his mission".<sup>68</sup>

The Johannine scene fulfills the foreshadowed message found in the Mark and Matthew Gospels. Mark and Matthew are concerned with the new Israel, or Zion, which is in agreement with the overall focus of their Gospels; the establishment of the Kingdom of God. John focuses on the identity of Jesus. Matthew and Mark argue that national boundaries and geography are no longer the only keys to salvation. John argues that bloodlines, while not stripped of worth, are no longer the main bonds of Jesus' family. The synoptic and Johannine theologies complement each other. National ties and blood kinship are subordinated to faith and obedience, the true keys to salvation and the new Zion- the Kingdom of God.

## **CONCLUSION: MARY'S MOTHERHOOD, A BIBLICAL FULFILLMENT**

Throughout the Gospel traditions, Mary has always been identified as the "mother of Jesus". This definition of Mary's motherhood is without question and, on its most basic level, suggests a powerful relationship between Mary and Jesus, and his ministry. However, in John 19:25-27, Mary's role is suddenly and dramatically redefined in terms of the Messianic reign. Furthermore, this new definition, or redefinition, of Mary's motherhood rests on cultural, scriptural, and linguistic authority.

The setting of Jesus' words, the Cross, which redefines Mary's motherhood, establishes the cultural authority for her new role. The Cross was the place of death of Jesus, and could be seen as a deathbed of sorts, and his death was seen by official Roman witnesses, countless onlookers, and personal relations. In the Ancient Near East, the words of a dying man were given great authority. Therefore, any words spoken by Jesus from the Cross would be ascribed a special significance. On the surface, Jesus' words could be interpreted as a final detail of a devoted son entrusting the care of and provision for his mother to a close and trusted friend. That Jesus, in the moments before his death and in tremendous agony, thought to care for his mother reflects the love he had for her. It was also consistent with the Biblical view of family. The family was a religious unit and the

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<sup>67</sup> Julian, 26-28.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 28.

sense of solidarity was extremely close, as the individual depended on the family for support and protection. Life was not conceived as possible outside of the family institution<sup>69</sup> Therefore, Jesus established a core network of support and protection for the Beloved Disciple and Mary when he entrusted them to each other that was wholly consistent with the cultural dictates of his people. Moreover, they provided the standards of faith for which the followers of Jesus should aim and they provided the foundational structure for the future community.

Also, in the Ancient Near East the words of a dying man took on a particular forward orientation. The words were seen as, perhaps, akin to prophetic speech and would be expected to find fulfillment. In this instance, Jesus is uttering words which would change the course of the lives of the Beloved Disciple and Mary, along with innumerable followers, and therein find fulfillment. It is in this moment, when Jesus establishes the maternal bond between Mary and the Beloved Disciple, that we see the beginning of the expansive scope of Mary's redefined motherhood.

In this scene, at the foot of the Cross, the Gospel juxtaposes two opposite emotional images; grief and joy. Mary, undoubtedly, was filled with grief and sorrows watching the son of her body die on the gibbet of the Cross. Yet, in this horrific moment she is given another son, a son who represents all the followers and disciples of Jesus. Her grief will now be turned to joy. This juxtaposition echoes the Mother Zion traditions of the Old Testament. Zion, in her deep heartache and sorrow, must make room for a sudden increase and return of children. The sorrowful pain, once felt, is gone and replaced with exuberance and rejoicing. Therefore, with Jesus' words, particularly at this moment of intense sorrow, Mary's role as mother is redefined in terms of Old Testament traditions and imagery.

Many scholars, as has this work, argued for the representational aspect of the Beloved Disciple, and of Mary, in regards to the Christian community. Many of these masterful works are forward oriented, or beginning with the Cross and moving into the "Age of the Church". We take no issue with this argument, but we also suggest that the representational nature of the Beloved disciple and of Mary is paralleled in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew in their accounts of Jesus's "family". As the family of faith sat around, or encircled, Jesus in Mark and Matthew, now the Beloved Disciple and Mary are at the feet of Jesus, at the foot of the Cross. Now, the Disciple and Mary form the paralleled inner circle around Jesus and they are now the core of Jesus' family of faith. Mary is a model for this family not simply because of her blood ties to Jesus, but because

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<sup>69</sup> McKenzie, *Dictionary*, 273.

of her obedience to God's will and her faith which she had shown throughout her life. Therefore, Mary is now deemed the mother of all the followers of Jesus and her motherhood is redefined in terms of discipleship.

Mary's redefined motherhood, or assumption of a new motherly role, is supported by the linguistic construction of the couplet; "Woman, behold your son/Behold your mother". The term, "behold", signifies something new and emphasizes its importance. The phrase, used by Jesus is stark and powerful, and the construction serves the same function in both Semitic and Greek languages. The construction was not mere chance or a simple result of Jesus's dying breaths. The construction of the phrase, based on the term "behold (*hinnēh/ idōu*) allows the words, and their full impact, to be understood by Jew and Gentile throughout the Roman Empire, and into the modern era.

Overall, the Beloved disciple is depicted as the ideal and representational disciple the Fourth Gospel. His actions and response to Jesus in faith secures his position in the new family of Jesus. Mary is not only a disciple but is Jesus' mother, with all the attendant images of love and nurturing. From the Cross she is made mother of all Christians, tasked to be always ready to enlarge her tent – and heart- to accommodate her new children, given and entrusted to her through faith in her son, Jesus Christ.

## **APPENDIX:**

### **THE CROSS AND THE MIRACULOUS MEDAL**

Mary standing at the foot of the Cross seems to find a powerful expression in the Catholic devotion of the "Miraculous Medal". With its famous image of the Immaculate Heart set alongside of the Sacred Heart of Jesus on its reverse side, it is a powerful reminder of the way the Bible depicts the relationship between Jesus and Mary. Above the two images is depiction of a cross, unadorned, and a horizontal line portraying the ground. The letter "M" is entwined in the line; one leg stands behind the "ground line", the adjoining diagonal arm comes in front of the ground line, the second diagonal stands behind the ground line, and the remaining leg stands in front of the ground line. That the cross and the "M" are not separate is significant. It portrays the Gospel depiction of Mary being part of, albeit subordinate to, the life and mission of Jesus. It is commonly accepted it is designed to invoke the image of Mary standing at the foot of the Cross.

We would focus on an overlooked aspect; the design shows Mary's foundational role to Jesus, while always enmeshed in His ministry. The images of the great Old Testament women and mothers, along with the voices of the Prophets, provide the structure of this

foundation; women such as Sarah, Samson's mother, Hannah, and Elizabeth who bore the Baptist.<sup>70</sup> Mary also echoes the Charismatic Leaders of the Old Testament; the delivering Judges and Kings Saul and David. Perhaps most importantly, it is Mary who fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14.

That Mary is cast in light of the Old Testament, and given this new role as mother of the New Jerusalem, is perfectly consistent with the words of Jesus regarding his relationship to the Old Testament; "I have not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets. . . I have come to fulfill them" (Matthew 5:17). From the Cross, Jesus is placing Mary in the role of fulfilling the Law and prophecies which she has embodied throughout her life. For this reason, it is proper that the designation of Mary is beneath, foundational to, the Cross; as it is only through the Cross that such fulfillment can take place.

The text of Hebrews 11-12 adds yet another dimension to the dynamic roles of Jesus and Mary. In Hebrews 12:2, we are told that Jesus "perfects our faith" and the faith of those who went before; the great "Heroes of Faith" recounted in Hebrews 11. The women of the Old Testament quietly, but strongly, supported the "heroes". Consequently, it seems that Jesus is giving Mary to be the model, inspiration, and the one who completes and perfects the faith of the powerful women of Israel's past and the New Israel about to be established. This New Israel, this New Zion, provides Mary with the salvific stage for her newly redefined motherhood.

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<sup>70</sup> Admittedly, Elizabeth emerges in the NT. However, the Gospels cast John in light of the OT, particularly Elijah and, therefore, he was seen as part of the OT .

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