Between the Crèche and the Cross

Another Look at the Mother of Jesus in the New Testament

Jean-Pierre Ruiz

The portraits of Mary in popular devotion and visual art are numerous and diverse. What portraits of Mary do we find in the gospels, where she is mentioned fewer than twenty times?

I wonder what the neighbors thought last August 15 as they saw it and heard it coming down Hollis Avenue. Even in Queens Village, where people have become accustomed to the seeing the parishioners of Sts. Joachim and Anne processing through the streets for Good Friday and for Corpus Christi, this was a real eye-opener. On that sunny Saturday afternoon, they heard a brass band enthusiastically playing Marian hymns as the musicians accompanied a float atop of which was enthroned the statue of La Virgen del Cisne. Crafted as a replica of the 1742 Basilica of El Cisne in Ecuador, the float was followed by hundreds of the Virgin’s Ecuadorean devotees, not to mention the many Puerto Rican, Colombian, Salvadoran, Guatemalan, Dominican, Argentinian, and Mexican parishioners who joined in the celebration of the parish’s burgeoning Ecuadorean community. As is customary in the southern Andes of Ecuador, the day’s festivities began with the Mass of the Solemnity of the Assumption, during which the people listened attentively

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to the words of the Revelation to John: “A great sign appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. . . . She gave birth to a son, a male child, destined to rule all the nations with an iron rod. Her child was caught up to God and his throne. The woman herself fled into the desert where she had a place prepared by God” (Revelation 12:1, 5-6, NAB).

While John’s apocalypse never explicitly identifies the “woman clothed with the sun” as Mary of Nazareth, the mother of Jesus, interpreters of Revelation 12 have been quick to make the connection. In sixteenth-century colonial Mexico, the Oratorian priest Miguel Sánchez correlated Revelation 12 with the apparitions of Our Lady of Guadalupe at Tepeyac to the Nahua neophyte Juan Diego in his 1548 book, *Image of the Virgin Mary, Mother of God, of Guadalupe, Honored in her History by the Prophecy of Chapter Twelve of Revelation*. Sánchez’s book was the first written narrative of the apparitions that took place in 1531 and of the image that testifies to the apparitions. Explaining his decision to use Revelation 12 as the interpretive key to the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Sánchez explained:

I chose the revelation of the Apocalypse because in it I discovered the foundation of my subject, which presents as though in code the original, the drawing, the retouching, the painting and the dedication of the sacred image; and also because it comes from the Apocalypse, to which my talents are inclined, bringing divine blessings to those who read it and to those who hear it: “Blessed is the one who reads and who hears the words of this prophecy” (Revelation 1). (in Ruiz, 106)

Patricia Harrington suggests that Sánchez’s choice of Revelation 12 was probably not a matter of purely personal inspiration. Pointing out that the aesthetics of the Catholic counter-reformation recognized the value of the visual arts for the instruction of the faithful in Christian doctrine, she explains that artists were instructed to take their cue from Revelation 12 in their paintings of the Immaculate Conception (Harrington 36–37). Visual art as biblical commentary, and *vice versa*, biblical commentary as visual art: an eyebrow-raising notion for biblical exegetes more accustomed to poring over page after page of scholarly commentary, but no news at all to the devotees of *La Virgen del Cisne*, who have not the least bit of difficulty in identifying Mary as the woman of the Apocalypse, “clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet.” What’s more, it is absolutely clear to them that this image, sumptuously clothed and enthroned in a gold-colored niche on their procession float, represents none other than Mary of Nazareth, the mother of Jesus. There is no end to the images of Mary! She is everywhere, from reproductions of medieval paintings of the Annunciation that show up on greeting cards, to parish celebrations where children bravely take their parts in Christmas pageants, from the murals of *la Virgencita de Guadalupe* that adorn buildings all across East Los Angeles to the bronze statue of Mary Seat of Wisdom on the
campus of the Catholic University of Puerto Rico in Ponce with a coqui—the characteristic Puerto Rican tree frog that is more often heard than seen—poised reverently at her feet! (On murals of Our Lady of Guadalupe in East Los Angeles, see Sánchez 2008).

So integral is she to Catholic imagination and Catholic devotion that Protestant Christians have regarded her with no small amount of suspicion, to the extent that in the preface to a recent book of Protestant perspectives on Mary, Kathleen Norris writes, “I think that many Protestants, if they think about Mary at all, get hung up on what they are supposed to believe about her” (Gaventa and Rigby, ix). For their part in their introduction to the book, Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Cynthia L. Rigby explain: “So fearful have we been of what seems to us excessive attention to Mary in Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions that Mary is virtually absent among us.” Yet they insist, “The time has come for Protestants to join in the blessing of Mary” (Gaventa and Rigby, 1).

What sort of portrait(s) of Mary do we find in the gospels? Some may be surprised to know that the mother of Jesus is mentioned by name fewer than twenty times. She appears most often in Luke’s gospel, identified by name twelve times, all of these in the infancy narrative (Luke 1:27, 30, 34, 38, 39, 41, 46, 56; 2:5, 16, 19, 34). In Matthew’s gospel she is mentioned by name five times, four of these (Matt 1:16, 18, 20; 2:11) in the infancy narrative and only once (13:55) outside the infancy narrative. In Mark’s gospel, Mary is named only once (Mark 6:3) and mentioned
as Jesus’ mother (without being named) in Mark 3:31, while in John’s gospel she is not mentioned by name at all. Identified as mother of Jesus without being named, she makes two appearances in John’s gospel, first at the wedding at Cana of Galilee (John 2:1-12, a scene exclusive to the fourth gospel), and then, in another scene only found in John, the mother of Jesus standing near the cross of her son together with the (also unnamed) “disciple whom Jesus loved” (John 19:25-26). (Mark 15:50 mentions “Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses” while Matthew 27:56 mentions “Mary the mother of James and Joseph” among those who were present at the crucifixion of Jesus. Neither mentions the mother of Jesus. (See Brown et al., 68–72.) In Acts, the second volume of Luke’s work, Mary and the brothers of Jesus are mentioned in the company of the eleven who are gathered in the upper room after the ascension (Acts 1:14).

While the portraits of Mary presented in the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke are relatively familiar (see Gaventa 1995, 29–78; Green and Sakenfeld), less attention has been focused on the very few instances where the mother of Jesus is mentioned during the ministry of Jesus. The important book on Mary by Beverly Roberts Gaventa in the Studies on Personalities of the New Testament series does not even include a chapter on Mary in Mark’s gospel, so faint are her footprints in the earliest of the canonical gospels! What can be said of Mary between the creche and the cross? In what follows I would invite us to consider two such texts. First, I will consider Mark 3:20-35, in which the mother of Jesus is seen but not heard. Next I will consider John 2:1-12, the only text in the canonical gospels in which Mary speaks to (and about) the adult Jesus.

**Family Matters:**

*Another Look at Mark 3:20-35*

The first mention of Jesus’ family in Mark’s gospel is hardly a flattering one. After appointing the twelve (Mark 3:13-19), Jesus goes home, where a crowd gathers around him, as it did during his earlier return home to Capernaum (see Mark 2:1). This time, the crowd is so large that “they could not even eat” (Mark 3:20). How we read what follows in verse 21 depends on what translation we use, and on the textual variants in the manuscript tradition of that verse. The New American Bible (NAB) renders verse 21 as, “When his relatives heard of this they set out to seize him, for they said, ‘He is out of his mind.’” The Contemporary English Version (CEV) reads, “When Jesus’ family heard what he was doing, they thought he was crazy and went to get him under control.” The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) offers an equally plausible take: “When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, ‘He has gone out of his mind.’” Just who was saying Jesus had gone out of his mind is not completely clear in the Greek text, so while the NAB and the CEV attribute the diagnosis to Jesus’
relatives, the NRSV suggests that Jesus’ family has heard the buzz about him and has set out to attempt some damage control. Some Greek manuscripts read, “when the scribes and the rest heard about him,” preferring to attribute the disparaging remarks about Jesus to the usual suspects and not to Jesus’ own family. In fact, the “scribes who came down from Jerusalem” have more than enough to say about Jesus in the very next verse: “He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons” (Mark 3:21).

Mark’s narrative about the relatives of Jesus in 3:20, 31-35 is interrupted by this accusation on the part of the scribes, and by Jesus’ parabolic rebuttal in verses 23-30. This arrangement of the narrative gives Jesus’ relatives sufficient time to reach his location:

Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers [and sisters] are outside, asking for you.” And he replied, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.” (Mark 3:31-35 NRSV)

The narrative emphasizes the distance—physical and otherwise—between Jesus and his family. As they stand outside, the size of the crowd keeps them from having direct access to him, so that they have no choice but to send word inside and call him. Addressing himself to the crowd that delivers their message and not to his relatives, Jesus’ pronouncement establishes that doing God’s will is the basis for authentic kinship with him (see Johnson, 217). Whether or not this saying ever circulated independently of the framework into which it is said in Mark’s gospel (Schüssler Fiorenza 147), that narrative framework casts Jesus’ relatives in an unfavorable light, for they have come “to restrain him,” to minimize the shame that his reputation has brought on them and to keep him from getting into more trouble. While Matthew and Luke also offer their own versions of Mark 3:31-35 (Matt 12:46-50; Luke 8:19-21), both omit Mark 3:21. Whether or not “if you can’t say something nice, don’t say anything at all” is a recognized principle of redaction criticism, it seems likely that this was at work in the Matthean and Lukan reworking of the Markan text. Mark 3:21 makes it clear that in 13:31-35 Jesus is at odds with his family, for in suggesting that “he is out of his mind” they fail to realize that it is the Spirit of God that moves him to act as he does (see Mark 1:10, 12). It is this misunderstanding about Jesus’ state of mind (made explicit in Mark 3:30, “He has an unclean spirit”) that prompts Jesus to speak about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Mark 3:29).

Matthew and Luke likewise tweak their versions of Jesus’ response to the news that his mother and his brothers were asking for him. On learning that they are outside “waiting to speak to him” Matthew’s Jesus asks, “Who is my mother, and
who are my brothers? ’ And pointing to his disciples, he said, ‘ Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother ’ ” (Matt 12:47-50). Matthew’s Jesus expands the circle of those who are identified as his kin, including the disciples within that intimate circle. Like Matthew, Luke gives no reason for the appearance of Jesus’ mother and brothers on the scene. Yet Luke’s Jesus takes this a step further by omitting the question posed by the Markan Jesus (and echoed by the Matthean Jesus), “ Who are my mother and my brothers? ” (Mark 3:31; and see Matt 12:48). On being told that his mother and brothers want to see him, Jesus explains, “ My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it ” (Luke 8:21), without pointing to his disciples and without excluding his relatives. After all, Luke’s infancy narrative established the mother of Jesus as a hearer and doer of the word of God par excellence. Mary consents to the angelic announcement that she will conceive by the power of the Holy Spirit by saying “ Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word ” (Luke 1:38), and her relative Elizabeth declares, “ Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled ” (Luke 1:45).

This characterization of Jesus’ mother is in an episode that is exclusive to Luke’s gospel: “ A woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, ‘ Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you! ’ But he said, ‘ Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it! ’ ” (Luke 11:27-28). Answering blessing for blessing, Jesus deflects praise that is indirectly addressed to him and in so doing re-echoes the characterization of his mother that is found in the infancy narrative. It is not by virtue of having given birth to Jesus and having nursed him in infancy that his mother is blessed, nor is she blessed by the reflected glory of his fame as though the woman in the crowd had said, “ Your mother must be so proud of you! ” Rather, his mother is included among those who are blessed by hearing and heeding the word of God. For Luke, the explicit mention of Mary among the eleven who are gathered in the upper room after the ascension (Acts 1:14) underscores her abiding place among those who are truly Jesus’ family.

You Said What to Your Mother? 
Mary and Her Son in John 2:1-12

Outside of Luke’s gospel, where Mary has an important speaking role in the infancy narrative (including the Magnificat in Luke 1:46-55), Mary’s role in the gospels is scripted without any words of her own except for those she speaks in John 2 at the wedding in Cana of Galilee, first to her son and then to the servants. As the narrative begins, we are told first that “ the mother of Jesus was there ” (John 2:1). We then learn that “ Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding ” (John 2:2). When the wine runs out, it is Mary who brings this to the attention
of her son, telling him very simply, “They have no wine” (John 2:3). The first words of Jesus’ reply to Mary in verse 4 have inspired no small amount of commentary, for the Greek phrase with which it begins—literally translated—is all but incomprehensible: *ti soi kai emoi gynai*, “what to you and me, woman?” The NAB translation, “Woman, how does your concern affect me?” has Jesus deflect Mary’s worry away from himself, while according to the NRSV’s “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?” he suggests that it should not matter to either of them.

In their *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh cite the Talmudic saying, “There is no rejoicing save with wine” (*b. Pes.* 109a) to support their suggestion: “The fact that the family hosting the wedding has run out of wine threatens a serious loss of honor” (Malina and Rohrbaugh, 66). They also point out that Mary’s awareness of this unfortunate situation may have been the result of her involvement in cooking and serving the food for the festivities. While Mary’s words to her son imply a request that he do something about the lack of wine, there is no indication in her words that anything extraordinary is expected of him. While the second part of Jesus’ reply, “My hour has not yet come,” indicates that Jesus thinks otherwise, it is the first part of his answer to his mother that calls for further attention.

The wedding at Cana in Galilee is not the first mention of a member of Jesus’ family in the Fourth Gospel. In John 1:45, Philip tells Nathanael, “We have found him of whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.” This conventional way of identifying Jesus in relation to his father and to his hometown elicits surprise from Nathanael who wonders out loud, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:46). The reference to Jesus as “son of Joseph” just a few verses before the episode of the wedding at Cana makes what follows that much more surprising.

It seems shocking that Jesus addresses his own mother simply as “woman,” without any affectionate or respectful reference whatsoever to the relationship that they share. Malina and Rohrbaugh reassure readers of their commentary that even though this “sounds harsh to modern ears . . . the bond between mother and son is the closest interpersonal relation known in the Middle East. It is generally much closer than that of husband and wife” (Malina and Rohrbaugh, 67). Jesus addresses his mother in the same way from the cross in his words to her and to the disciple whom he loved: “Woman, behold your son” (John 19:26). Elsewhere in John’s gospel, though, Jesus uses this form of address in speaking to women who are not his relatives, women whom he encounters only once. In 4:21 he tells the Samaritan, “Believe me, woman, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither
on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.” In 8:11 he addresses the woman accused of adultery, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” Yet this is not the only way that John’s Jesus addresses women. In John 20:15 the risen Jesus, unrecognized by Mary Magdalene, asks her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” When she fails to recognize Jesus, mistaking him for the gardener, he addresses her by her proper name, “Mary.” She then recognizes him and responds respectfully, “Rabbouni! (which means Teacher)” (John 20:16).

Neither Jesus’ mother nor the readers of John’s narrative know what to make of the second part of Jesus’ reply in 2:4, “My hour has not yet come.” The “hour” of Jesus becomes a central motif in John’s gospel, announced by Jesus in 4:21, 23; 5:25, 28 as an hour that is coming, while in John 12:23 he announces that “the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” While readers already familiar with the language of the Fourth Gospel recognize the implications of what Jesus says about his “hour” in 2:4, nothing in the narrative itself makes it clear what it means. As a response to Mary’s observation that the wine has run out, it could be taken to imply very simply that Jesus is not inclined to remedy the problem and prefers not to get involved. At the same time, Mary’s instructions to the servants in verse 5, “Do whatever he tells you,” neither imply any special insight on her part into what Jesus means by his “hour,” nor do they suppose that Jesus will supply wine for the feast in anything other than an ordinary way. Following her advice to “do whatever he tells you” might have been understood to call for no more than a discrete but hurried visit to the local wine merchant. Yet when it comes to the Word-made-flesh, words are never just words, and there is always much more happening than casually meets the eye. Whoever else may or may not have been watching, Jesus’ disciples were there, and we learn that on witnessing this, the first of his signs, “his disciples believed in him” (2:11). Whatever else she may have known or might have intuited beforehand, when the mother of Jesus leaves the wedding, headed for Capernaum in the company of her son, “his brothers, and his disciples,” she too must know that her son came through in no ordinary way, providing the wedding guests with no ordinary wine. We hear nothing further from her in John’s gospel, and we do not see her again until she stands at the cross where her son hangs dying, the hour of paradoxical glory at hand. Unnamed here too and unspeaking, “She remains unnamed because what makes her important is solely the fact that she is Jesus’ mother. In this respect, she is like all the characters in John’s story: they exist in the narrative to reveal something about Jesus rather than something about themselves” (Gaventa 2002, 50).

**Seeking Mary, Finding Jesus**

*Dime con quién andas y te dire quién eres:* Tell me who you walk with, and I will tell you who you are. It is through the words of this popular saying that
Miguel H. Díaz explores the significance of Our Lady of Charity and her story for Cuban Americans (158–160). *Ad Iesum per Mariam,* “To Jesus through Mary,” goes the old Catholic saying. Carmen Nanko-Fernández might add, *Ad Spiritum Sanctum per Mariam,* “To the Holy Spirit through Mary” (18–23). This is a logic well known to the devotees of *La Virgen del Cisne* as they walk with her through the streets of Queens Village on the Solemnity of the Assumption. Through the streets or through the pages of the New Testament, to seek Mary is to find Jesus, her son. From the crèche to the cross, and all along the road that led from Bethlehem to Calvary and to Pentecost, both mother and son invite those who accompany them to hear and do the will of God, welcoming us into their Spirit-filled family.

**References**


