

Descent and Divine Paternity in the Gospel of John: Does the Mother Matter?*

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The role of the mother of Jesus is explored in view of ancient constructions of paternity especially as expressed in the Aristotelian theory of epigenesis. It concludes that beyond framing Jesus' life in the flesh, she is present under the cross as his kin in a group uniquely composed of family and friends together. As Jesus entrusts her and the beloved disciple to each other, a process is begun whereby a *familia dei* comes into being – in which the matter provided by the mother is superfluous. These children are begotten/born from above 'not of blood(s) or of the will of flesh or of the will of man but of God' – alone.

'The mother of what is called her child is not its parent but only the nurse of the swelling new-sown seed. The man who mounts and impregnates brings it into the world, whereas she, as a stranger for a stranger, does but keep the sprout alive unless god hurts its root. And I will offer you a sure proof of what I say: fatherhood there may be, when mother there is none. Here at hand is a witness, the child of Olympian Zeus – and not so much as nursed in the darkness of the womb, but such a scion as no goddess could bring forth.'¹

This is the famous strophe by Aeschylus where Apollo in the presence of the presiding Athena and over against the Furies speaks in defence of Orestes, who is accused of having murdered his mother, Clytemnestra. It is an extreme but nevertheless a representative expression of how a main stream in Greek tradition ideally conceived of the division of labour between a father and a mother in reproduction and, indeed, dreamed of a world where women might be superfluous.²

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1 Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 658–65, written 458 BCE.

2 Cf. Marilyn B. Arthur, 'The Dream of a World without Women: Poetics and the Circles of Order in the Theogony Proemium', *Arethusa* 16 (1983) 97–110; Nicole Loureaux, *The Children of Athena: Athenian Ideas about Citizenship and the Division Between the Sexes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1993); and Vigdis Songe-Møller, *Den greske drømmen om kvinnens overflødighet: Essays om myter og filosofi i antikkens Hellas* (Oslo: Cappelen Akademiske, 1999) – the expression itself having been coined by J. P. Vernant.

In a patriarchal social universe continuity and connection are defined through symbolic generative relations between men. The male ability of genesis provides the right of legitimate affiliation. The *dilemma* is that in the reality of human life as different from myth, where parturition might well be within the powers of the supreme male deity, male incorporation can only occur by way of women. The *irony* is that whereas motherhood manifests itself bodily and unmistakably, fatherhood is not visible and evident in the same compelling manner; it is in fact fragile and vulnerable. Before the discovery of DNA and the technology of verification now available, it was difficult, if not impossible, to observe and prove paternity beyond dispute. Paternity was not so much discovered as it was created or symbolically constructed.³ A twofold strategy resolved this conflict of interest. On the one hand one would constantly seek to under-communicate or in various ways disown the role of woman in procreation. On the other, paternity and the father's *potestas* were reinforced by cosmogony, by medical (scientific) discourse and by post-natal rites.

Adele Reinhartz has shown how the 'father-son' language used to describe the relationship between God and Jesus in the Fourth Gospel is impregnated with the Aristotelian theory of epigenesis.⁴ According to this theory, both animals and human beings grow organically from the sperm of the male as set within the medium of growth provided by the female. The male semen determines the form of the embryo as well as the process by which it reaches maturity. The woman's menstrual blood provides the substance from which the embryo is made. So the mother does matter; in fact, that is what she does: she provides matter. Her excess of blood finally fulfils its purpose in becoming the matter and the nourishment of the foetus. She is the receptacle and the nurturer. Integral to the form as supplied by the male seed is the sentient soul, which resides in the πνεῦμα, and the sperm is viewed as the vehicle for the λόγος and the πνεῦμα of the father, who alone provides the form and the essence of the offspring. According to Reinhartz, Aristotle's discussion implies 'that in ideal circumstances, which rarely if ever exist in nature, a man will father a son who is identical to the father in all respects'. In John this ideal circumstance is present: the male principal has fathered a son who is identical to himself in all respects – indeed, the polemical claim of the Ἰουδαῖοι in 5.18,

3 This has been a recurrent topic in several studies by the cultural anthropologist Carol Delaney, *i.a.* in 'The Meaning of Paternity and the Virgin Birth Debate', *MAN* 21 (1986) 494–513; *The Seed and the Soil: Gender and Cosmology in Turkish Village Society* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1991). Cf. also Nancy Jay, *Throughout your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion and Paternity* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago, 1992).

4 A. Reinhartz, 'And the Word Was Begotten: Divine Epigenesis in the Gospel of John', *Semeia* 85 (1999) 83–103. Cf. also M. Theobald, *Fleischwerdung des Logos: Studien zum Verhältnis des Johannesprologs zum Corpus des Evangeliums und zu 1 Joh* (Neutestamentliche Abhandlungen NF 30; Münster: Aschendorff, 1988) 243.

that by calling God his own father Jesus is making himself to be like God, is right on target.

In John there are two apparently competing claims regarding the origin of Jesus. The Prologue (1.1–18) introduces Jesus as the Logos who always existed and whose origin is in God; he is ‘from above’, a heavenly divine figure, having descended and become flesh. There is little indication as to how this happened, even if the observations of John the Baptist in 1.32–4 may be taken to offer a possibility. However, no account is given of miraculous events similar to those in the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke. Scattered in the narrative are also references to an earthly and ordinary familial affiliation that is seemingly not distinguished by any extraordinary circumstance. He is the son of Joseph from Nazareth (1.45; 6.42); he has siblings (2.12; 7.1–9); and there is a mother (2.1–12; 6.42; 19.25–6). It may be difficult to determine what the evangelist affirms as opposed to what he presents as falsely held assumptions.⁵ Some see it primarily as an example of John’s ironical use of traditional material, in this case to underscore the mistake of the Jews in discerning the true origin of Jesus. Others hold that it is not a matter of either/or but of both/and: he who is the son of Joseph from Nazareth is also the Son of God descended from above. One’s physical or earthly origin is not irrelevant, insignificant or an impediment, but it is not the ultimate or true definition of identity.⁶

Both modes of origin respond to the question of *πόθεν*, as the language of procreation intimately intertwines with spatial language. Thus *ἐξέρχομαι* may refer to leaving a certain location, but can also have a generative sense.⁷ Indeed, the two

5 M. M. Thompson, *The Humanity of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (Philadelphia, PN: Fortress, 1988) 13. The knowledge of Jesus’ geographical place of origin is also offered as an objection against his heavenly origin, so that these also become competing sets of statements (6.41–2; 7.27, 41).

6 For a survey of positions, see Thompson, *The Humanity of Jesus*, 23–5. Thompson herself follows C. H. Dodd in holding the both–and position. Thus the evangelist does not dispute Jesus’ Galilean origin or his earthly parentage. Nor is there any anti-docetic insistence: Jesus’ humanity does not need to be established, it is simply presupposed throughout. It does not, however, explain Jesus’ true identity. In Thompson’s interpretation the predominant tension is not, as Udo Schnelle, *Antidoketische Christologie im Johannesevangelium: Eine Untersuchung zur Stellung des vierten Evangeliums in der johanneischen Schule* (FRLANT 144; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987) insists, with docetism but with the synagogue, and what needs to be established is therefore that Jesus is more than just a human being. Questions about Jesus’ humanity arose in the Johannine community after and probably as a result of the Gospel. This is clearly described and observed with agreement by M. J. J. Menken in his ‘The Christology of the Fourth Gospel: A Survey of Recent Research’, *From Jesus to John: Essays on Jesus and New Testament Christology in Honour of Marinus de Jonge* (ed. M. C. de Boer; JSNTSup 84; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993) 292–320, here 308–9. In similar terms, ‘the Jews’ may be descendants from Abraham and yet have the devil for a father (8.31–47).

7 Reinhartz, ‘Word was Begotten’, 85.

strains of discourse become entangled or blurred and are made even more competitive by the fact that his divine origin, his being from above or his being sent, is also explained in terms of procreation and kinship. Jesus is the Son sent by the Father, and he is the *μονογενής παρὰ πατρός* (v.14), the *μονογενής θεός* (1.18), or later in 3.16, *ὁ υἱὸς μονογενής* and in v.18 *το ὄνομα τοῦ μονογενοῦς τοῦ θεοῦ*. The possible connotations of *μονογενής* are hardly ever subject to discussion beyond a choice between ‘only begotten’⁸ and the less graphic ‘unique, un-exampled’.⁹ In either case he is the one for whom the privileged term Son (*υἱός*) is reserved, whereas everyone else does not attain sonship but may become God’s child (*τέκνον*) – whatever difference that may make.¹⁰

As readers well acquainted with the birth narratives of Matthew and especially Luke, we further tend to regard Jesus’ mother, his virgin mother, as a mediating link in explaining his divine and his human being. She helps reconcile two claims to origin that might otherwise become competitive, and it seems that many interpreters find it difficult to approach John leaving behind this knowledge – despite the fact that it is external to this Gospel. However, the question may still be posed as to whether the mention of Jesus’ mother in John accommodates the fatherhood of God in ways similar to those found in the birth narratives. Does she, differently from the other family members, have a place also in the discourse of divine origin and begetting/birth from above?

The limitations of an article do not allow for a detailed assessment of the two versions of the text of 1.13, that is, whether the verb should be read as plural or singular and whether the relative pronoun should be omitted or not. The known textual evidence in Greek unanimously supports the plural version while the singular seems to be attested by some of the early fathers, most certainly in the Latin West by Tertullian and Irenaeus.¹¹ Tertullian uses it to refute as false the interpretations of the Valentinians, who assume the plural form, and the role of 1.13 in such controversies has made it all the more difficult to discern which version may be pri-

8 Cf. Luke 7.12; 8.42, see also Heb 11.17, where *monogenes* seems to render or replace the *agapetos* of Gen 22.12. Wolfgang Schenk, *Kommentiertes Lexikon zum vierten Evangelium: Seine Textkonstituenten in ihren Syntagmen und Wordfeldern* (Lewiston/Quinston/Lampeter: Mellen Biblical, 1993) 194, draws on the Lukan usage as well as Heb 11.7.

9 M. M. Thompson, ‘The Living Father’, *Semeia* 85 (1999) 19–31, 26. Thompson tends to be vague and evasive with regard to the procreational language in John and prefers social and legal understandings of the father–son relationship.

10 M. M. Thompson, *The God in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2001) 58, 71–2; 78–80 explains the difference in terms of non-mediated and mediated life and, persuasive as this may be, the terms themselves simply become markers of this difference without any semantic charge beyond that. Thus she does not discuss whether *tekna* is being used for inclusive reasons.

11 In terms of dating, the quotations or allusions by the fathers are of about the same age as the early papyri.

mary.¹² Positively, the singular is taken to attest the virgin birth: Jesus was begotten without the involvement of a human father. However, in defence of an original singular, Michael Theobald explains the introduction of the plural as being due to problems that the singular might cause in view of the virgin birth. The procreative factors which are listed in 1.13 as not being present in this particular divine process of generation – that is, blood, will of the flesh and will of man – do in fact exclude not just a human father but any human participation or contribution, since the plural *αἷματα* most likely includes also the female part.¹³ Possibly, this might correlate with an ambiguous meaning of the term *ὁ υἱὸς μονογενής*, implying that this Son is not just ‘only-begotten’ but ‘begotten by one only’.¹⁴ Fairly

12 This corresponds to the citations from Heracleon’s commentary on John, known from Origen; cf. Michael Mees, *Die frühe Rezeptionsgeschichte des Johannesevangeliums: Am Beispiel von Textüberlieferung und Väterexegese* (Forschung zur Bibel Band 72; Würzburg: Echter, 1994) 203. Mees himself still concludes by maintaining the plural, not denying the fact that the plural version easily lends itself to a Gnostic reading, and the notion of fixed origins. It is therefore hardly surprising that Jeffrey Trumbower, *Born from Above: The Anthropology of the Gospel of John* (Hermeneutische Untersuchungen zur Theologie 29; Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1992) 68–9 necessarily prefers the plural reading. He sees vv. 12c–13 as an intrusion by ‘the principal evangelist’ who thereby comments on the pre-existing hymn with its ‘racial solidarity of all human beings’. The singular is a later christological change, whose purpose is to connect the verse with Jesus’ virgin birth or ‘to take away a major weapon in the Valentinians’ arsenal’.

13 This is today recognised by many interpreters, among them Theobald, *Fleischwerdung des Logos*, 242–3, with the acknowledgement that Cadbury has given decisive evidence: Wisd 7.2; Philo *De Opif. Mundi* 45,132; 4 Macc 13,19ff; *Gr. Henoch* 15,4, so that ‘nach hellenistische und biblischer Auffassung “Blut” das genitale Blut der Frau als Zeugungsmaterial bezeichnen kann, wobei er für den Plural neben Euripides Ion 693, auf Lev 12 und 15 hinweist’. Some, among them Hofrichter, *Nicht aus Blut, sondern monogen aus Gott geboren: Textkritische, dogmengeschichtliche und exegetische Untersuchungen zu Joh. 1.13–14* (FzB 31; Würzburg: Echter, 1978) 92, explains the plural from Hebrew *damim*, but the plural is rarely used in the context of sexuality and birth. Theobald is, however, one of the few who makes the observation that the singular form – which he accepts as more original than the plural – probably also excluded any notion of the virgin birth, *Fleischwerdung des Logos*, 172–3, 239–45.

On an entirely different note, Dorothy Lee in *Flesh and Glory: Symbolism, Gender and Theology in the Gospel of John* (New York: Crossroad, 2002) 14–42 claims that ‘the language is metaphorical and does not evince a dualistic anthropology. Flesh . . . does not contrast with the human soul or spirit. Rather, what is contrasted are human generativity and divine generativity: the one unable to effect new birth . . . and the other which can and does bring about transformation and new life, just as it produced creation at the beginning.’ At the same time, almost ironically, ‘the eternal God enters the temporality of time and submits to the processes of human generation and birth’.

14 Theobald, *Fleischwerdung des Logos*, 250–4. Schenk, *Kommentiertes Lexikon*, 194, appears to support this connotation, seeing as its background ‘das alte Gottesepitheton aus sich selbst/allein existierend’, which is found in Plato (*Tim.* 31b, 91c) and also in the orphic hymns used of Demeter, Persephone, Artemis and Athena as well as by Catullus of divine siblings by one common parent. ‘Monogenes’ is ‘Einzig seiner Art’, but ‘einzigartig’ in its modern usage is not an equivalent term.

soon this became an untenable position as it was exposed to docetic views, and it was also in conflict with the gospel narrative, which repeatedly assumes that Jesus had a biological family.

The tension between Jesus' divine origin and his life in the flesh is embedded in the narrative of the Gospel of John in a manner that makes it constantly re-emerge. The role of the mother of Jesus has not least for this reason been subject to a history of interpretation of great complexity. This is the more surprising as she only appears twice.¹⁵ Gail Corrington holds that she appears to be the means by which the word became flesh and that it is acknowledged that Jesus has an earthly, physical mother. The embarrassment caused by this fact renders the two scenes in which the mother appears to be deliberately designed to dissociate Jesus not only from the act of physical birth, but as far as possible also from his biological mother.¹⁶ However, all the more striking is the fact, not addressed by Carrington, that his mother is never named in this Gospel. She is characterised solely by her relationship to Jesus as ἡ μήτηρ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ.¹⁷

Independently of each other, Beverly Gaventa and Judith Lieu observe that the two stories where the mother appears – in John 2, at the beginning of Jesus' public mission, and in John 19, at the end – constitute an eclipse or inclusio. The mother is being employed to frame the earthly story of Jesus to which she belongs, and she has no role beyond that. As Jesus departs to return to his Father and heavenly existence, he separates himself from those relationships that have characterised his earthly existence. 'No longer a son of this woman, he may depart to be with his heavenly Father.'¹⁸

The mother of Jesus appears for the first time rather abruptly at a wedding in 2.1–12. She is there, and so are Jesus and his disciples. When the wine gives out, she says to him that they have no wine. Jesus' retort in 2.4 is puzzling: 'Woman, what is there between you and me?' It has the taste of a rebuke, saying that she has not as his mother any particular claim on him, even refuting that there is a relation.¹⁹

15 Adele Reinhartz speaks of the relative absence of Jesus' mother from the body of the Johannine narrative, and how that contrasts starkly with the ever-presence of his father ('Word Was Begotten', 94).

16 Gail Corrington, *Her Image of Salvation: Female Saviors and Formative Christianity* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1992) 165–6, 169.

17 Judith Lieu, 'The Mother of the Son in the Fourth Gospel', *JBL* 117/1 (1998) 61–77, 63, makes the intriguing observation that there seems to have been 'a firm tradition about stories about the relationship between Jesus and his mother, and perhaps other members of his family, which spoke of them only in terms of kinship and did not use their names'. This would then simply be how the tradition came to John.

18 B. Gaventa, *Mary: Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, 1995) 95; and Lieu, 'Mother of the Son', 69.

19 Gaventa, *Mary*, 83–5, provides an illuminating list of various translations struggling to make sense of Jesus' question. They all see in Jesus' words a denial of his mother's request, but the

The absurdity of his question requires an explanation, and what follows may be taken to serve as such: ‘My hour has not yet come’. There is a general agreement that within the context of the Gospel this is a prolepsis, an anticipatory reference to the hour of his glorification/crucifixion.²⁰ At this stage it refers in almost coded language to the task ahead, the way he has to go towards the hour when Father and Son will be mutually glorified. The mother must give way to the Father (cf. 6.42); the Son’s unity is with his Father, and it is the Father’s will that governs the will and the acts of the Son. His mother is remarkably unembarrassed by this harsh response. She appears still to expect that he will act on her indirect request – without thereby becoming, as some have insisted, a heroine of faith.²¹

Jesus’ form of address to his mother may also be seen as a rejection, and again there is an almost excessive discussion among interpreters about the degree of rudeness or dismissiveness implied.²² Many would again like to soften the blow, and this becomes all the more urgent since it is repeated a second time in 19.26 at the moment of Jesus’ death. On both occasions Jesus addresses his mother as γύναι – ‘woman’. Elsewhere he does the same: it is simply his manner in most encounters with women in this Gospel.²³ The form of address is on the one side not hostile and on the other not an endearment, but seems to mark a distance, however polite. There is no doubt that γύναι without any further intimation is a

force of the denial varies greatly. Gaventa also looks at biblical parallels such as 1 Kgs 17.8; Judg 11.12; 1 Esdr 1.26; 2 Sam 16.10; etc. Her conclusion is that the precise meaning of his rejection remains ambiguous, but it reveals the request implicit in his mother’s words, and its literary function is to increase the tension in the incident.

²⁰ In line with her insistence that Jesus in John is cast as the messianic bridegroom, Adeline Fehribach, *The Women in the Life of the Bridegroom: A Feminist Historical-Literary Analysis of the Female Characters in the Fourth Gospel* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1998) 31, suggests that it might mean something like ‘this is not my wedding’. The suggestion is original and as such thought-provoking but not persuasive. This applies also to her main thesis despite many interesting observations. In this particular case, her suggestion could be considered as adding to the ambiguity of Jesus’ response at a surface level. Lieu, ‘Mother of the Son’, 65–6, makes much of a missing *gar*, and claims that it is not clear how the two elements of Jesus’ response are connected.

²¹ Lee, *Flesh and Glory*, 144–5, as well as Francis Moloney, *Belief in the Word: Reading John 1–4* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 83, claim that it is an expression or a testing of her faith, but this is probably an overstatement. Lieu, ‘Mother of the Son’, 64, rightly states that this is to introduce our priorities. Lieu instead makes the literary observation that the sense of bafflement evoked in the reader is being increased by the failure of Jesus’ mother to share in it. She simply behaves ‘like any mother’ (66).

²² Cf. Reinhartz’s comment: ‘While Jesus frequently calls God his Father, he calls his mother only “Woman”’ (‘Word Was Begotten’, 94).

²³ In 4.21, he says to the Samaritan woman, ‘Woman, believe me, the hour is coming . . .’, and in 20.13 and 15 to Mary of Magdala, ‘Woman, why are you weeping?’ In the Synoptic Gospels it is found in Matt 15.28 and Luke 13.12.

rather cool way of addressing one's mother, even taking into account the customs of the time.²⁴

The point of the exchange between Jesus and his mother at the wedding is not primarily to portray Jesus as reluctant to follow up her request. The sign will indeed take place so that his glory may be revealed. A similar discrepancy between request and response occurs also on other occasions, cf. 4.47 and 11.2–6. It underlines that it is God's will that is decisive to Jesus' acts and not human initiative. The brief dialogue is rather aimed at clarifying that Jesus' relationship to his mother is not special; she is to him like any woman.²⁵ This corresponds to the remarkable fact that their presence at the wedding is accounted for separately: his mother is there, while Jesus is invited with his disciples (vv.1–2).

The two scenes in which the mother of Jesus appears constitute a pattern that is a special Johannine version of how the *familia dei* takes the place of a family relationship defined by the flesh.²⁶ An analysis of the transformation that takes place within the various codes in 2.1–11 indicates that the change of the alimentary code and the ritual code corresponds to a development in the genetic code. When Jesus through the transformation of water to wine manifests the $\delta\acute{o}\xi\alpha$ by which he is qualified as the Son of the divine Father, another transformation is involved towards his ultimate manifestation as divine. The dialogue between Jesus and his mother is the surface expression of this development of the genetic code. Jesus'

24 This is not altered by the context that in the latter case (19.26) may be interpreted as a situation otherwise determined by care and fond consideration. However, interpretations are often tainted by the interpreter's own sentiments as to how a dying son ought to relate to his mother. Heikki Räisänen, *Die Mutter Jesu im Neuen Testament* (AASF B 158; Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1969) 162, is indeed right in saying: 'Das Wort gynai betont, dass Maria keine Sonderstellung einnimmt, sie wird den anderen Frauen des Evangelium an der Seite gestellt.' It is a slip of the pen when Räisänen here uses the name Maria. Räisänen argues forcefully against symbolic implications and sees them as based on a heavy over-interpretation of the passage in 19.25–6. They also ignore the use of $\gamma\upsilon\upsilon\eta$ elsewhere in the Gospel. He rejects the idea that the figure of Jesus' mother, or the scenes in which she appears, have any symbolic – that is, ecclesiological – implications at all.

25 Thus I am not convinced by Lee's suggestion that this makes his mother an example of faith being tested by Jesus, nor by her insistence that Jesus does not dissociate himself from her motherhood (*Flesh and Glory*, 144–7). In this she agrees with Gaventa, *Mary*, 89 – the assumption being that the motherhood of Mary plays a vital role in confirming the humanity of the incarnate Logos. She evades the fact that no human parent is mentioned in the Prologue by claiming that the wedding at Cana parallels the birth narratives in disclosing the faith of Jesus' mother at the beginning not of his earthly life but of his ministry. Lieu, 'Mother of the Son,' 67, does not go this far but agrees that Jesus does not at this point 'disengage himself from his mother's parental authority'. Such claims she dismisses as being under the undue influence of Luke 2.41–52.

26 For this and the following, see T. K. Seim, 'Roles of Women in the Gospel of John', *Aspects on the Johannine Literature* (ed. Lars Hartmann and Birger Olsson; Coniectanea Biblica, New Test. Ser 18; Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1987) 56–73.

answer establishes a distance between him and his mother and maintains the intimate relationship between him and the Father.

However, no negative judgement is passed on his mother. In 2.12 both she and his brothers, or perhaps siblings, are said to have come with him – together with the disciples but still apart from them. Again, as in 2.1–2 they are marked off as distinctly separate groups. When the siblings reappear in 7.3ff., they do not believe in him, and by tempting him they act as his opponents. His mother, however, is not mentioned until she reappears at the cross in 19.25–7 – not together with her other children, but in a group that comprises representatives both of family and of the disciples – without any indication of separate allegiances.

The women at the cross belong to a fixed part of the tradition, but the Gospels differ as to who they were.²⁷ John gives an extraordinary preference to kinship: Jesus' mother and her sister, neither of whom are mentioned by any of the Synoptic Gospels, are here listed before Mary, wife of Clopas (if she is not identical with his aunt), and Mary Magdalene, who is always first in the Synoptic accounts. In the Synoptic tradition the presence of the women disciples at the cross introduces their continuous role as witnesses – at the crucifixion, at the burial and at the empty tomb. In John this aspect of witness is almost lacking.²⁸ Only the risen Christ and his stigmata bear witness to the continuity between the crucified Jesus and the resurrected Christ. So why are the women there?

In his structuring of the crucifixion sequence, Raymond Brown has shown what has been widely acknowledged since, that 19.25–7 constitutes the central scene, the pivot of the surrounding material.²⁹ The mother–son language is peculiar. Apparently, the mother is having her departing son replaced. The beloved disciple is provided with a mother beyond the one who bore him – this further implying that she is no longer to be regarded as the mother of Jesus, but as the

27 The number of women present is subject to discussion, cf. Richard Bauckham, *Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2002) 297–302; Lieu, 'Mother of the Son', 68; and Lee, *Flesh and Glory*, 261 n. 70. For the variation of names, see T. K. Seim, *The Double Message: Patterns of Gender in Luke–Acts* (Edinburgh/Nashville, TN: T. & T. Clark/Abingdon, 1994/2004) 31–2. The number is less important than the names since it does not affect the mixed representativity of family and disciples. It is, however, odd that the beloved disciple is not explicitly mentioned until v. 26.

28 The women and the beloved disciple are mentioned before Jesus dies and not after, and there is no point in discussing whether they remained to witness his death or not.

29 R. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I–II* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966–70) 2: 911. This means it is not simply an aetiological note explaining that after his death the mother of Jesus stayed with the beloved disciple, who took care of her. Neither is it adequately explained as an ultimate legitimating of the beloved disciple and an enhancement of his authority by relating him to the mother of Jesus, making him the kin of Jesus. In fact, the movement is to the contrary. The mother of Jesus is transferred to another son in whose care she is left.

disciple's mother.³⁰ He takes her to his own. Whereas he reappears in the story, as does Mary Magdalene, the mother does not. Does this mean, as Judith Lieu and Beverly Gaventa maintain, that she is past history? Or are the two characters who have in common that their names are not revealed assigned a symbolic role or meaning?³¹ This seems to represent the crux of the question and a starting point for many creative attempts at conferring on each of the two a particular symbolic meaning.

There is, however, no agreement when it comes to what the two may symbolise, and the suggestions are manifold and often elaborate. Raymond Brown held that Jesus' refusal in 2.1–11 to act upon his mother's implicit request means that she has no role in his earthly ministry, which stems entirely from the will of the Father. Only when his hour has come, at the cross, does Jesus grant her the guardianship of the prototypical disciple. The mother of Jesus is thus the new Eve, the symbol of the Church, the mother of all living.³² The Church has no role during the ministry of Jesus but only after his departure through resurrection and ascension.³³ Thus, for some she symbolizes the Church, for others the new Eve, and for some both. As the new Eve she is the fulfilment of the promise in Gen 3.15 that the seed of the woman shall bruise the head of the serpent and undo the effects of the fall. Just as Eve was called 'the mother of all living' (Gen 3.10), so the mother of Jesus becomes the mother of the Church, that is, of all believers, those born to eternal life, represented by the disciple whom he loved. Those who perceive a symbolic connection between the mother of Jesus and the Church through the portrayal of Eve in Gen 3 and the woman in Rev 12 have assigned positive signifi-

30 This is not dissimilar from the Gospel of Luke, where Mary's maternal role is converted prototypically to a motherhood constituted exclusively by the fruitful reception of the word of God and thereby becomes a possibility for all women who hear God's word and maintain it. Motherhood is dissociated from actual birth and the role of women in reproduction; but at the same time the reproductive role is being metaphorically exploited as God is cast as the male agent sowing the seed of the word in her heart, cf. T. K. Seim, 'The Virgin Mother: Mary and Ascetic Discipleship in Luke', *A Feminist Companion to Luke* (ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marianne Blickenstaff; London/New York: Sheffield Academic, 2002) 89–105.

31 It has been argued that whereas named characters take on an exclusive individual specificity, characters whose names remain unrevealed serve as models of discipleship with which the reader can more easily be enticed to identify. Others see this form of reference as belonging to the traditional custom of referring to women who have been blessed by bearing a son. I am intrigued by Judith Lieu's suggestion that there may have been a firm tradition of stories about the relationship between Jesus and his mother, and perhaps also with other members of his family, which spoke of them only in terms of kinship and did not use their names. More commonly, however, her anonymity is taken to indicate that she is a representational or symbolic figure similar to that of the beloved disciple.

32 This is indeed the position of Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 133.

33 Brown, *The Gospel According to John I–II*, 1:108–9.

cance to the otherwise rather embarrassing address γύναι.³⁴ Those for whom she represents the Lady Zion or Jewish Christianity, or even Judaism, also emphasise the symbolic interrelatedness established in 19.25–7 between her and the beloved disciple. Over against, or in complementary relationship to, her Jewishness, he is seen to represent the Christian community or the church of Gentiles.³⁵

34 A prominent and influential representative of this view is Raymond Brown in his commentary on the Gospel of John (II: 922–7) the woman (γυνή) in Rev 12 is clothed with the sun, has the moon under her feet, and is crowned with 12 stars. She gives birth to a son, a messianic figure, who is snatched away from her and taken to God; a great red dragon unable to seize and devour the child battles against the woman and her other children. This woman is thought to symbolise the people of God, from whom the people of God is born, and who as the Church persists in protecting her persecuted children. Brown sees in the words of the woman (LXX γυνή) in Gen 3.15 the resonance of the woman in Rev 12, and finds in both passages connections with the mother of Jesus in the Gospel of John, also by Jesus called γυνή. This usage in 2.4 and 19.26 is understandable if Jesus' mother is regarded in terms of Eve in Gen 3.15, drawing more generally on the echo of the early chapters of Genesis elsewhere in the Gospel and the blended metaphor about a woman giving birth to a man in 16.21. The sorrowful scene at the cross now becomes the birth pangs, so that in the hour of Jesus' death and resurrection 'men are recreated as God's children with Mary like Zion as the mother of all Christians in the figure of the beloved disciple'. Lieu rightly maintains that this interpretation involves a number of unwarranted exegetical moves: it transfers the birth pangs from mother to child, while also ascribing to the mother of Jesus a role towards all believers – which she does not find in John ('Mother of the Son', 74). It is, however, worth noting that in his later years Brown modified his position considerably so that the scene at the cross rather shows how one related to Jesus by the flesh (his mother, who is part of his natural family) becomes related to him by the Spirit (a member of the ideal discipleship) (Raymond Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave. A Commentary of the Passion Narrative in the Four Gospels I–II* [New York: Doubleday, 1994] 2:1024). This is probably representative of a more general shift in current scholarship partly towards more literary perspectives, but also with a far more critical assessment of mariologically convenient conjectures. However, very few leave it completely behind. Sandra Schneiders, 'Women in the Fourth Gospel and the Role of Women in the Contemporary Church', *BTB* 12 (1982) 35–45, still assumes that whatever role Mary is assigned in the Fourth Gospel, it is either unique to her or universal, in neither of which cases is it more significant for women than for men. John does seem to imply that 'the Mother of Jesus had some special role in relation to the salvific work of Jesus . . .' (37). One might also include even Judith Lieu, who in her otherwise very clear and sober analysis rather reluctantly cannot but attempt to explore whether there may still be a Johannine 'code' into which Jesus' mother may fit. She finds this code in the parable in 16.21, the language of which 'is so heavy with Johannine echoes and biblical allusions (to Is 26.17–19; 66.7, 14; 1QH 3.712) that it must be more than a random illustration'. The parable applies to Jesus, who is the *anthropos* having come into the world. According to Lieu, the mother of Jesus and his death are part of the problem and not of the solution. 'The mother of the son forces us to ask, but does not answer, how the son is bound by his story and transcends it, how he is restrained by the story of his humanity and transcends it.' Lieu stops short of seeing the mother as a new Eve, since only Jesus represents the new and even he is not the new Moses or Adam but the one from heaven, while the children are not a new humanity born from Eve but are born of God ('Mother of the Son', 71–2).

35 Rudolf Bultmann, *Das Evangelium des Johannes* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1964) 521.

In an earlier study I characterised theories such as these as a jungle growth of exegetical conjectures and catchword combinations.³⁶ Even if today it might rather take on the guise of intertextuality, the density of the jungle growth has not become less. More recently, Dorothy Lee has modified the notion that the mother of Jesus becomes the mother of the Christian community, which is represented by the beloved disciple.³⁷ According to Lee, the Johannine Jesus, by assuming features of Wisdom tradition, had in his earthly ministry been the ‘mother’ of the beloved disciple. Now, at his hour of death, his mother represents this maternal, birth-giving and nurturing role of Jesus. The mother of Jesus and the beloved disciple are most likely founding figures of the community, but they are employed by John to symbolise the community as it contains within itself both filiation and maternity in relationship to God as Father. This resonates with the Israel–Jerusalem–Zion symbolism prevalent in other sources at the time.

The strength of Lee’s position is that the annotation as mother is made effective in her symbolic significance. The weakness is that the symbols of motherhood/mother imagery³⁸ become an overruling and common denominator conflating Jesus, the Spirit and the mother of Jesus. The mother is made to merge with Jesus in his maternal dimension or capacity as nurturer; they become symbiotic. The mother of Jesus is submerged into symbolism, and is no longer a character in the plot of the narrative. Why is she there at all? Would not Jesus’ birth-giving and nurturing maternity as Lady Wisdom be sufficient? In this interpretation the other women present at the cross are insignificant. Furthermore, while addressing the fact that it is not the mother but Mary Magdalene who meets the risen Christ, Lee takes refuge behind a smoke screen of making the two complement each other.³⁹

36 Seim, ‘Roles of Women’, 60–2.

37 Lee, *Flesh and Glory*, 155–7, 165. Lee claims that, unlike the image of fatherhood in John, motherhood crosses the divide between divine and human. She is thereby able to assemble a whole bundle into a neat package: ‘In the iconography of the scene, the mother of Jesus functions both as a maternal figure within the new family and as representative of the community’s motherhood, bequeathed by the dying Jesus, pointing the reader to Old Testament imagery of Jerusalem as mother.’

38 Lee seems to use these terms interchangeably.

39 Lee, *Flesh and Glory*, 158. Nor is there any persuasive reflection as to why the explanatory note by the narrator appears at this stage. Contrary to Lee’s model of motherhood, the note assumes that the beloved disciple did take care of her, not she of him. Within the narrative this seeming sidetrack of a comment is odd, and it upsets the chronology. It has the hint of alluding to something well known to the readers. It is, however, noteworthy that whereas stories are developed to cover the period prior to the birth narratives in order to support the purity and virginity of Mary, references to or stories about Mary’s life after the period covered by the canonical Gospels and Acts are so far not known until the 9th century CE, even if Epiphanius airs some ideas in relation to John 19.27 – ideas that Epiphanius himself considers to be doubtful, cf. Stephen J. Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary’s Dormition and Assumption* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University, 2002).

My earlier attempt to assign to the mother of Jesus the symbolic role of an ideal (woman) disciple has been rightly criticised for interpreting John's mother of Jesus too much in the light of the Lukan portrayal of Mary.⁴⁰ In reconsidering the role of Jesus' mother in the Gospel of John I still remain convinced that a *familia dei* is somehow initiated by this ceremonial act of mutual entrustment and that Jesus, both exalted on the cross and later as he appears to disciples, is in the process of giving birth from above to children begotten of God. Thus the monumental scene at the cross resumes and accomplishes the negotiations of the kinship theme: the genetic transformation is being implemented. Kinship by blood (a human father and mother) and the will of flesh and the will of man are all made irrelevant. Jesus' distancing from his mother becomes complete and her presence in this scene does mark an inclusio. She remains a reminder of his earthly corporality and his story in the flesh. At the moment when his hour has come, Jesus sees 'the mother' (v. 26), not 'his mother' (v. 25),⁴¹ and she remains to him γυνή.

At the same time, kinship terms are brought to the foreground by the narrator. The group assembled at the cross represents within the narrative of John a unique blend of family and friends, and this time they are not marked off as separate groups as on earlier occasions. Within this blended group relationships are requalified – again between Jesus and his mother but also between the mother and the beloved disciple.⁴² This is why the question raised by many interpreters as to why Jesus would make sure his mother was provided for by the beloved disciple when there were clearly other biological sons around⁴³ is irrelevant. Nor is she finally reborn as a disciple or enrolled as such. The suggestion that Jesus on the cross, at the hour of his return to his Father, divests himself of all that is associated with his earthly life, his mother included,⁴⁴ is not mistaken but is yet too limited.

The mother's function at the cross – together with her sister – is to represent kinship. Jesus' siblings have become his opponents; Joseph seems eventually to go missing in the entire Gospel tradition. This means that of those to whom kinship terms in the narrative have been exclusively attached until this very moment, Jesus' mother is the one available and most likely to be present. She represents the kinship that was by the flesh; indeed, as a mother that is what she provided and nurtured. The beloved disciple represents discipleship, those who, according to 15.12–17, are no longer δούλοι but φίλοι, those whom Jesus loves. Under Jesus

40 See esp. Lieu, 'Mother of the Son', 70.

41 Lieu, 'Mother of the Son', 68 observes this.

42 Many, such as Alan Culpepper, *The Gospel and Letters of John* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1998), speak of a new relationship. But this is too abruptly given the rather step-wise redefinition of Jesus' relations to his disciples in the narrative.

43 See Jan van der Watt, *Family of the King: Dynamics of Metaphor in the Gospel according to John* (Biblical Interpretation Series 47; Leiden/Boston/Köln: Brill, 2000) 334.

44 Gaventa, *Mary*, 92–6.

exalted on the cross, kinship and discipleship meet and interchange. As Jesus transfers her motherhood to someone whose matter did not come from her blood and whom she never nurtured, and as he provides the beloved disciple with a mother of whose matter the disciple has none and by whose milk he was never nurtured, kinship is redefined and requalified. This is rebirth or birth from above in which the mother provides no flesh; she is in fact superfluous. Thus the mother of Jesus is not – in analogy to Eve – cast as the mother of all believers symbolically present in the beloved disciple. These children are both begotten and born ‘not of blood(s) or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God’.

Neither is the mother cast, as is Mary in Luke, as the ideal example of discipleship, and nor does she more particularly represent women or women disciples. That role is taken partly by Martha and Mary of Bethany and finally by Mary of Magdala, who is also present at the cross and who accordingly, in contrast to the mother, has a leading part in the following account.⁴⁵ In the resurrection narratives, when the risen Lord has made himself known to Mary Magdalene as they meet in the garden, he thus tells her to go to ἀδελφούς μου, using for the first time kinship language as a shared frame of reference. He also speaks in an unprecedented manner of ‘my father and your father’, marking a distinction but more remarkably also a commonality. There is no further mention of a mother, only of a father whose children they now become. The friends that Jesus loves have become his ‘brothers and sisters’. In the case of Mary Magdalene this is further expressed in the change of terms of address from γυναίκα to Μαριάμ; she is one of his own – those whom he knows by name (10.3–4). They are the children of God upon whom the risen Christ confers the Spirit, as he breathes (ἐνεφύσησεν) on them like God made the earth creature come to life in the Garden of Eden by breathing life into it. In 1 John 3.9 this transmission of spirit is expressed in procreational language: the children of God have his σπέρμα in them.

Feminist theologians have tended to regard birth as integral to female identity. The emphasis on the giving and nurturing of life as a particularly female property has reinforced motherhood as the role in which a specific feminine quality proves itself. When God is described as giving birth and nourishing, this has been

45 Interestingly and characteristically, they are all named characters. There appears, however, to have existed a textual tradition, perhaps represented by Tatian’s *Diatessaron* and Aphrahat the Persian, according to which the woman at the empty tomb and in the garden was Mary the mother of Jesus (T. Baarda, *Essays on the Diatessaron* [Kampen: Kok-Pharos, 1994] 46, with further references in n. 101). Baarda sees this as an intentional replacement in order to avoid a criticism assigned to Celsus (Origen *Contra Celsum* II.55 and 59) that Christians base their faith in the resurrection on the testimony of a woman who was known to be maudlin. Even if it is less probably, one cannot theoretically exclude the possibility that the text originally only said Mary, without any further identification of which Mary was meant, and that this eventually led to two different traditions, one claiming Mary Magdalene and the other, Mary the mother of Jesus.

used to gender-bend God the Father or to renegotiate the maleness of Jesus as expressing itself also in a maternal role.⁴⁶ However, as the complexities referred to above show, in antiquity giving birth was not necessarily giving life. Women gave birth, but not life – even less so within the framework of the Aristotelian theory of epigenesis. The father was ideally and ritually cast as the giver of life. A male, human or divine, who was portrayed as giving birth in antiquity – and that did happen – was therefore not necessarily bent towards a feminine quality or represented in androgynous terms: he might equally well express male completion and omnipotence, having consumed the female.

In the Gospel of John, women may be positively, even affirmatively, portrayed in their role as disciples. But there is no female principle involved in the divine begetting and birth-giving. The mother does not matter because matter is what she provides. The only begotten God/Son who is in the *κόλπος* of the Father (John 1.18) bears the children of God, in whom the *σπέρμα*, that is, the *πνεῦμα* of God, abides. They are begotten as well as born not of bloods, not of the will of flesh or of the will of man, but of God, that is of Father and Son – one in their will and purpose and both with the exclusive quality of having life in themselves.

46 See J. Massynbaerde Ford, *Redeemer – Friend and Mother: Salvation in Antiquity and in the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997) 164–7, 190–201, drawing on Nancy Clark Hill, 'Jesus' Death in Childbirth', *Cross Currents* 11 (1953) 1–9. Lee, *Flesh and Glory*, frequently leans on Massynbaerde Ford. See also Kathleen Rushton, 'The (Pro)creative Parables of Labour and Childbirth (Jn 3.1–10 and 16.21–22)', *The Lost Coin: Parables of Women, Work and Wisdom* (ed. Mary Ann Beavis; London/New York: Sheffield Academic/Continuum, 2002) 206–29. On the other hand, Deborah Sawyer, 'John 19.34: From Crucifixion to Birth, or Creation?', *A Feminist Companion to John, Volume II* (ed. Amy-Jill Levine; London/New York: Sheffield Academic, 2003) 130–9, shares my position that 'the unique nature of female experience' is subsumed into maleness, but shifts the focus from procreation to creation and salvation.