Biblical Perspectives on Marian Mediation

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Apart from the infancy narratives, the New Testament reports only one instance—and that in the public life of Christ—of the mediation of Mary. This was the intervention made in favor of the newly-married couple at the wedding of Cana, John 2:3-5. Acts 1:14 records that Mary prayed with the apostles, but, since nothing is said about the content of Mary’s prayer, it would be best not to conjecture about it. It could, for example, be asserted that, at that moment, Mary prayed for herself, and that would not be mediation on behalf of another individual.

At the wedding of Cana, even though Jesus may have been aware of the newly married couple’s predicament, Mary intervened. She placed herself between her son and the couple, asking him to deal with the situation in which the wine had just given out. Mary intervened in favor of a third party with her word to someone she could not compel. Understood in this way, the intervention of Mary was an intercession.¹

In the Scriptures, the mediation of Mary does not stop with her unique and indispensable participation in the birth and the education of Christ. After the events associated with the Incarnation of the Word-made-flesh, Mary continued her mediation in the Gospels and this mediation is an intercession. Her mediation

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¹ For a definition, see F. Rossier, *L’intercession entre les hommes dans la Bible hébraïque. L’intercession entre les hommes aux origines de l’intercession auprès de Dieu* (Fribourg: Göttingen, 1996), 12-15.
was unique and should not be underestimated. Even those who minimize the Marian significance of John's Gospel recognize that the presence of Mary is found at key moments of that Gospel, namely, at the beginning and at the end of the public ministry of Jesus.\(^2\) Also, to affirm that Mary's mediation—after the Annunciation and birth of the Savior—was essentially intercession is not a reductionist view or a way of undervaluing her influence.\(^3\) There were a great number of intercessors in the history of salvation before the Virgin Mary, as recorded in the Scriptures, especially in the Old Testament. A close study of the role which the prayer of intercession played in this history, and, in particular, in the establishment and vocation of God's people, will make clear that the prayer of intercession—a request made in favor of another person—is one of the highest and most efficacious forms of mediation that a creature can make with God. Unfortunately, few biblical scholars have studied this theme.\(^4\)

The few scholars who have written on intercession in the Old Testament usually dismiss it or minimize its importance.\(^5\) They accurately report on it and acknowledge that it played a significant role in the Old Testament, but they maintain that this role was specific and limited to a particular situation or locale. They appear to consider intercession as a remnant of a primitive or atavistic rite, smacking of magic and superstition, which


\(^3\) The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* views the mediation of Mary in the today of salvation history as an intercession, affirming that "after her Assumption in heaven, her role as mediator has not ceased: by her repeated intercession, she continues to obtain the gifts which assure our eternal salvation." Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, no. 59, and *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 969. This truth, from tradition and the *sensus fidei*, is well expressed in the Hail Mary, since the only plea that the faithful have, for many centuries, addressed to Mary is that she pray for them.

\(^4\) Intercession is a theme which has been notably neglected. Cf. L. Alonso Schökel and J. L. Sicre Días, *I Profeti. Traduzione e commento* (Roma, 1996), 83.

religion, once come to maturity, should disavow. By excluding the prayer of intercession because of its supposed origins, these scholars deny it any permanent value as a form of prayer. Such critiques are the reason for the meager interest in biblical prayers of intercession. This exclusion from scholarly consideration of the prayer of intercession, it should be noted, is predominantly from exegeses of the churches of the Reformation. The author of this article, a Catholic, maintains that study of the Scriptural origins may contribute to a rehabilitation of the prayer of intercession.

**Intercession as a Major Type of Mediation in the History of Salvation**

Examples of the prayer of intercession, while not overly conspicuous, are present at key moments in Israel’s history. Intercession is present in the Exodus, when, liberated from Egypt and before entering the Promised Land, the Hebrew people become the people of Yahweh; it is also present when Israel becomes a kingdom and before the fall of the Kingdom of the Israel (in the north), as also later, before the fall of the kingdom of Judah (in the south). In each instance, there is a prophet present who intercedes: Moses, Samuel, Amos, and Jeremiah.

Deuteronomy 34:10 states that the greatest prophet who ever existed, the prophet *par excellence*, was Moses.6 Similarly, Jeremiah 15:1, Psalms 99:6 and 106:23 present Moses as being the intercessor *par excellence*. Moses interceded several times in favor of the people of Israel or for certain individuals,7 and these successive interventions occurred at crucial moments: for example, the time when Yahweh entered into an alliance with the people of Israel after their departure from Egypt. In the establishment and continuation of the People of Israel as the People of Yahweh, the intercession of

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6 This was applicable also to Samuel and Aaron. Cf. J. P. Hyatt, *Commentary on Exodus* (London: Oliphants, 1971), 306.

Moses played a decisive role, comparable to the other two great events of the Exodus, the departure from Egypt and the establishment of the alliance. These prayers of intercession belong to the founding moments of the people of God.

An examination of the most decisive of these events, that which is found in Exodus 32:11-13, is helpful. Chapter 31 of the Book of Exodus concludes with verse 18 recounting that, on the mountain, Yahweh gave Moses two stone tablets, the tablets of witness. Chapter 32 contains the account of the Golden Calf. At the moment when Yahweh was about to conclude the alliance with his people through his mediator Moses, the people turned away from God to worship an idol. This action broke or ruptured the relationship between God and his people. This break was indicated by the words Yahweh addressed to Moses: “Go down,” which came in the middle of a long discourse on the construction of the tabernacle (begun in Exodus 25:1) and which continued without interruption to that point. Examination of a vocabulary detail (the possessive suffix) highlights this rejection; in Exodus 32:7, Yahweh, in a conversation with Moses, referred to Israel as “your” [Moses’] people: “Go down to your people whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt, for they have become depraved.” Yahweh no longer considered them as “his own.” The people’s idolatry was the cause of the alienation from Yahweh. In verse 10, Yahweh declared to Moses his intention of destroying this sinful people.

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8 The two stone tablets which replace the first two given to Moses (Ex 32:19), broken in reaction to the worship of the Golden Calf, are called “the tables of the alliance” (Ex 34:27-28).


Intercessions Willed and Encouraged by God

However, when Yahweh referred to the people of Israel as "your" [Moses'] people, this use of the possessive suffix, second person singular, served as a call to Moses to assume his responsibility for the people. Something similar can be seen in Yahweh's communicating to Moses his intention to destroy the people. This could be a way of reminding the prophet of his responsibilities by confiding to him information which he alone possessed, but which was most important for the future of the entire people. Clearer are the words which, in Exodus 32:10, Yahweh addresses to Moses. After denouncing the abomination of the sinful people, Yahweh announces his intention to destroy the people. This time, he says to Moses, "And now, let me alone, that my wrath may blaze up against them to consume them." "And now" introduces in the Hebrew syntax the main point of the discourse—"let me alone." We can see in "let me alone" that Yahweh has set aside and suspended the punishment announced due to Moses' reaction. The divine decision had not yet reached the point of no-return, and Moses still had a word to say. Yahweh associated the mediator with the decision. In a way, God consulted with Moses to decide whether the history of the people should continue or not.

Moses would consequently use the opportunity to lead Yahweh away from his plans of destruction. The way in which Moses went about this entreaty is also significant. Contrary to what certain authors might suppose, the "why" which began the intercession, did not indicate, on the part of Moses, an attempt to minimize or dismiss the sin of Israel: the reaction of Moses when faced with...

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12 Cf. A. Weiser, Das zweite Buch Mose. Exodus (Göttingen, 1959), 204.
the Golden Calf (in 32:19-28) remained unchanged. The “Why, O Lord, should your anger blaze up” expressed surprise because, in the eyes of Moses, it was a well-nigh impossible reaction of Yahweh. The divine reaction is surprising, not because of the sin of the people, but because of Yahweh himself, his honor, his deeds, and his promises.

Moses’ argument refers, successively verse-by-verse, to the liberation of Israel from the land of Egypt (v. 11), to Yahweh’s reputation among the Egyptians, which would have fallen in low esteem if the Israelites had been destroyed (v. 12), and, finally, to the promise of descendants and of land made by Yahweh to the patriarchs (v. 13). Moses does not understand, because he remembers the commitment made by Yahweh, which is the reason he cried out, “Why?” Yahweh is committed to Israel and responsible for its fate; if Israel goes astray, it is the reputation and honor of Yahweh which will suffer. The promises made to the patriarchs involve the credibility of Yahweh: if Yahweh does not keep these promises, any further word from Yahweh will be doubted and disregarded. This intention then on the part of Yahweh to destroy the people clashes with a double impossibility in God himself. Moses experiences this profound contradiction in the words of Yahweh to the point that it appears to put Yahweh at odds with himself. This intercession then is made on behalf of Yahweh.

19 One of the purposes for the series of plagues was to establish the reputation of Yahweh among the Egyptians; cf. Ex 7:17, 8:6, 8:15, 8:18, 9:14, 10:2.
20 The destruction of Israel would be interpreted as Yahweh’s inability to deliver his people, and consequently Yahweh would be considered a false god. Cf. J. Weiss, Das Buch Exodus. Übersetzt und erklärt (Graz—Wien: Styria, 1911), 298.
21 Cf. A. Schenker, L’Eucaristia nell’Antico Testamento (Milano, 1977), 164.
22 B. Baentsch, Numeri (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1903), 526, who notes that the intercession in Nm 14:13-16 indicates that in Yahweh person and honor are united.
23 Cf. E. Zenger, Das Buch Exodus (Düsseldorf: Patmos-Verlag, 1978), 231. Zenger appears to interpret the text as a debate which occurs within God and is expressed in literature as intercession.
Through the experience, Moses also learned a lesson. The awareness of this contradiction within God brought the intercessor to a more profound knowledge of God. Moses came to understand the price that Yahweh would have to pay if he continued in his resolve to destroy Israel. Yahweh would lose his reputation and would be shown to be unfaithful to his promise. Moses discovered that the desire to destroy Israel was opposed to Yahweh's commitment to Israel. He learned in this way that the deepest desire of Yahweh was not to see the people of Israel destroyed, but just the opposite.

So, the "leave me" which Yahweh spoke to Moses was really an opening of the door for intercession. God even appeared to anticipate such an intercession. He seemed ready to have Moses intercede on behalf of the people. The "leave me" is really an invitation to intercede. Moses did not allow Yahweh time to repeat himself; he immediately began to intercede, without Yahweh saying for the second time, "Leave me." So, from that point on, Moses interpreted an expression of the divine anger as an invitation to intercede.

Samuel, the prophet chosen by the Lord and the last of the judges, exercised a two-fold ministry during the development of the monarchy, another crucial moment in Israel's history (1 Sm 8). There are several examples of Samuel's intercession for the people (1 Sm 7:5-9, 8:6). The actual words of the intercession are not recorded. It is clear that Samuel understood that intercession

References:

27 See respectively, 1 Sm 3:20 and 1 Sm 7:17.

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was part of his mission. He was remembered as a great intercessor, comparable to Moses, who intervened to save the people.\textsuperscript{28}

Amos was another prophet, who, similar to Moses, would interpret the expression of divine anger as an invitation to intercede. Several centuries after Moses,\textsuperscript{29} Amos announced to Samaria that God had decided on a punishment which was imminent.\textsuperscript{30} In response to dangers which threatened Israel, Amos intervened on two occasions (Am 7:2, 7:5): to beseech that Israel not be destroyed, and that Yahweh avert the plagues which the prophet saw in a vision. To intervene to avert the punishment threatening Israel, Amos, like Moses, had to be aware of the punishments which God would inflict on his people. “Yahweh does nothing without [first] revealing his secrets to his servants, the prophets” (Am 7:3). Even if the message communicated in the visions dealt with the fate of whole people, it was to the prophet alone that it was communicated.\textsuperscript{31} Yahweh wished to evoke a reaction from the prophet.

Faced with the imminent destruction of Israel, Amos could not remain a mute spectator.\textsuperscript{32} After the vision of the cloud of grasshoppers (Am 7:1) and of the devouring fire (Am 7:4), Amos immediately began his intercession (Am 7:2, 7:5): “Forgive, O Lord God! How can Jacob stand? He is so small!” Amos’s argument consisted in a rhetorical question followed by a causal clause. The use of the rhetorical question was intended to touch Yahweh.\textsuperscript{33} No one in Jacob could withstand the plagues. Amos then gave Yahweh the reason he should renounce the plagues intended for Jacob: “He is so small.”\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{28}Cf. Ps 99:6 and Jer 15:1.
\textsuperscript{29}According to Am 1:1 and 7:10, Amos lived at the time of Ozias, king of Judah, and Jeroboam, son of Joas, king of Israel. The Jeroboam in question is the second by that name, who reigned over Samaria and the surrounding area from 780 to 740 B.C.
\textsuperscript{30}Cf. Am 2-6.
\textsuperscript{34}In Hebrew, the word “little” is emphasized in the original; the adjective is placed before the personal pronoun.
Jacob was weak, without any defenses. Because Jacob is small, no inhabitant in the land could survive the scourges revealed in the first visions. There is also a type of reproach in the plea which Amos addressed to God, similar to denouncing a bully about to pounce upon a weak person. The language indicates the boldness of the intercessor.

Amos’s designation of Jacob as “small” indicates on his part a familiarity with the one to whom he is addressing his plea. Amos knows that God can have only compassion, that he is passionate in defense of the “little.”

As he invokes the divine mercy, Amos touches Yahweh in an area where he is most sensitive—compassion and pity. In this way, Amos evoked within Yahweh the same feelings which unite the prophet to those who are threatened with punishments. As a defense of the one for whom he interceded, Amos’s pleading gave no other reason to Yahweh other than that Jacob was “little.” So, like Moses, Amos did not make any reference to the merit of Jacob or of Israel.

The Success of the Prayer of Intercession

As with Moses’ intercession in Exodus 32:14—where there was no previous repentance on the part of those who would be the beneficiaries of the intercession, the favorable outcomes of the two intercessions on the part of Amos (Am 7:3, 7:6) were brought about through the repentance of Yahweh (Hebrew: nqm). Such a reaction indicates an emotional change on the part of the subject; the divine response to the intervention of Amos was motivated

[Notes]

36 Cf. Brueggeman, “Amos’ Intercessory Formula,” 392, where he speaks of the same veiled accusation.
37 In which case, one does generally ask who is right or who is wrong.
by compassion. In other words, Amos succeeded in touching Yahweh where he was particularly vulnerable. Even more than Moses, Amos succeeded, and he was the only prophet who by this means succeeded in obtaining a favorable response to his intercession. Jeremiah is the other prophet with whom the word nwh (repent), applicable to God, is used in reference to intercession (Jer 15:6). But there, Yahweh says that he is weary of repentance. Earlier, Yahweh had just indicated to Jeremiah that from now on all intercession would be useless, including even that of Moses and of Samuel (Jer 15:1). This turn illustrates even more the success of the two intercessions made by Amos.

After the third and the fourth vision, recorded in Amos 7:7 and 8:1, the prophet ceased to intercede. This was not because the intercessions which had been made after the first two visions were failures, but, on the contrary, because the intercessions had succeeded. That which Amos wished to avoid was that divine judgments, as seen in the first two visions, would destroy Jacob and make impossible even the survival of a faithful remnant. The punishments announced in the succeeding visions would not totally destroy the people, and so, since Amos was aware of the people’s sins and the necessity for some punishment, he did not intercede (after the two later visions). The two earlier visions showed events whose destructive power was evident. Aware of the consequences, Amos acted immediately, whereas the two succeeding visions dealt with objects which were not harmful, such as the leaden line in 7:7 and the basket of fruit in 8:1—both of which required further explanation. Such explanation could only come from Yahweh himself. After the third and fourth visions, the initiative


for entering dialogue came from Yahweh himself. It was not that Amos, sensing himself trapped, simply kept quiet and passed up the occasion to intercede. That would have been equivalent to a prohibition on intercession, and, in that case, Amos could not be compared to Moses, but rather to Jeremiah, the prophet, who appears in several instances to be under a command from God not to intercede.

By asking that Moses intercede, and by allowing an opportunity during which Amos could intercede, God appears to recognize that the intercession of the prophet could restrain the implementation of the divine plan. We now understand better how the prohibition on intercession which was given to Jeremiah was unavoidable. Contrasted with the “leave me” which Yahweh said to Moses, the prohibition given to Jeremiah was explicit and unequivocal. The need to repeat the prohibition is all the more poignant because it indicates that Jeremiah had a strong desire to intercede. The prophet nevertheless tried (Jer 14:3), by recalling extenuating circumstances favoring those whom Yahweh had decided to punish, and Jeremiah (Jer 18:20) recounted that he was intervening with Yahweh even for those who persecuted him.

If, in the book of Jeremiah, intercession is no longer an instrument to save the people, this is in no way due to the person of the intercessor. Jeremiah (15:1) indicated that neither Moses nor Samuel would have been able to do better. It is because of the changed historical situation in which Jeremiah lived from about 626 to 585 B.C—the end of the kingdom of Judah, the last of the royal kingdoms after Samaria’s destruction in 722. Nabuchadonosar took possession of Jerusalem in 586, after which the Temple would

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45 Ibid., 226.
46 Cf. Andersen and Freedman, Amos . . . , 615.
49 Cf. P. Volz, Der Prophet Jeremia. Übersetzt und erklärt (Leipzig, 1928), 165.
be destroyed and the monarchy fall. This catastrophe was announced by Jeremiah (Jer 7:24-26) as a divine chastisement of a people who continually turned away from God, and toward whom Yahweh was weary of repenting. This prohibition to intercede clearly showed how serious the situation was to the contemporaries of Jeremiah. It was so serious that intercession, the ultimate recourse, would henceforth be ineffective. This forbidding of intercession became the most radical and definitive expression of the collapse of the alliance and of Yahweh's condemnation of the people. As long as intercession was possible, there was not an irrevocable divine judgment against the people. If God forbade intercession, it was because he knew the power of intercession, and he knew that he would be vulnerable to change as a result of such intercession.

There were cases where God asked explicitly that intercession be presented, as in Genesis 20:7 and Job 42:8. What is more, God made this known to the beneficiaries of intercession, that is, people who were in direct contact with God and who theoretically would be able to plead their own case directly. The fact that God was vulnerable to the prayer addressed to him in favor of another person was known to the people of Israel, because they several times asked the prophets to intervene for them (Nm 21:7; 1 Sm 12:19; Jer 37:3 and even Jer 42:2).

The Qualities of the Intercessor

The reason for the success and the efficacy of intercession and consequently for its importance is that it manifests, on the part of the intercessor, qualities of the highest type: compassion and solidarity with those who will benefit from the intercession, the desire for reconciliation, dedication, audacity, perspicacity, knowledge of God. The intercession of Moses clearly reveals his

50 Cf. H. G. Reventlow, Liturgie und prophetisches Ich bei Jeremia (Gütersloh, 1963), 168.
51 Not the less direct approach taken by Moses and Amos.
nobility and his grandeur. Not only was he willing to risk a privileged position with Yahweh in order to improve the lot of a people who are guilty, he also did not allow himself to be tempted when Yahweh wished to make of him the founder of the new people of the alliance. Not only did the intercessor display boldness, but he also did not wish to derive any personal benefit from the pitiful situation in which those for whom he was interceding found themselves. Moses was not interested in any personal gain. He went even further: he asked God (Ex 32:32) to withdraw his name from the book in which the names of the faithful are listed. He insisted (Nm 16:21) that he not be separated from the sinful people.

The use and value of intercession can also be seen by its presence within human society. In the Old Testament, there are several instances of intercessions directed not to God, but to another individual. As contrasted with intercession with the divine, these are intercessions addressed to another person; there are those of Judah (Gn 44:18-34), Rahab (Jos 1:12-12), Jonathan (1 Sm 19:4-5), Abigail (1 Sm 25:24-31), Joab (2 Sm 14:2-20), Betsabee (1 Kgs 2:20-21), the king of Aram (2 Kgs 5:6), Ebed-melech (Jer 38:9),

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52 Cf. J. G. Torralba, Éxodo. Texto y comentario (Salamanca-Madrid-Estella, 1992), 168
54 That Moses repeated his intercessory supplication is another instance of his boldness. Cf. R. W. L. Moberly, At the Mountain of God: Story and Theology in Exodus (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1983), 75.
56 Cf. Schenker, Leucharistia nell'Antico Testamento, 166.
57 If "the prayer of intercession" is reserved when speaking of God, "intercession" is applicable both to a request directed to God or to another human being. There is always a request on behalf of another person. The word "prayer" indicates that the request is made to God.
and Esther (Est 7:3-4, 6). In these cases, the one who intercedes gives evidence of human and relational qualities of the highest type.

Intercession is presented as a social act, in which the intercessor is moved by noble and altruistic sentiment—whether it be fraternal and filial love as seen in Judah, the sense of family responsibility as seen in Rahab, disinterested love as seen in Jonathan, the sense of responsibility as seen in Abigail, a concern for the public good as seen in Joab, friendship and fidelity as seen in the king of Aram, the compassion shown by Ebed-melech, or the concern and solicitude for her people as seen in Esther. All these examples express the solidarity of the intercessor with those for whom the intercession is made. The intercessor identifies with the plight of the individual or group for whom he or she is interceding. This may even entail personal peril, for example, putting his or her own life in jeopardy, as in the case of Judah. The intercessor also manifests respect for the one before whom he intervenes, and, as was the case for Abigail and Esther, shows a true concern.

In addition, the intercessor is revealed as acting in accord with God’s designs for persons and events. The intercession of Judah (Gn 44), makes possible the reconciliation of the sons of Jacob; the intervention of Rahab makes possible the conquest of the promised land; the intercession of Jonathan and Abigail delivers David, the anointed of the Lord, from death or assassination; the entreaty of Joab serves to keep the mercurial and dangerous Absalom under control; the action of the king of Aram has as purpose to

58 Judah intervened that his brother Benjamin not be taken as a slave to Egypt; Rahab sought to avoid that her family be exterminated in the taking of Jericho; Jonathan asked that David not be killed by Saul; Abigail wanted that David would kill of the house of Nabal, her husband; Joab requested that David would accept Absalom’s return to Jerusalem; Bathsheba sought to procure Abishag in marriage (the woman who cared for David in his old age) for Adonijah, the half-brother of Solomon; the king of Aram asked that his general Naaman would be cured of leprosy; Ebed-melech wanted to rescue Jeremiah from the cistern into which his enemies had lowered him; Esther sought to avoid the massacre of the Hebrews living in the empire of King Ahasuerus.

59 In this regard, see 1 Sm 25:33 and Est 7:4.
show to the eyes of all that there is only one God in Israel, and that Elias is his prophet; the compassion of Ebed-melech delivers the prophet Jeremiah from the grip of his enemies, who also resist the plan of God; the intercession of Esther assures the survival of her people. These intercessions in human affairs coincide with the direction in which God is guiding these events. By these intercessory actions, the intercessor is giving evidence of the qualities of discernment, of knowledge of God, of intuition into the divine plan. Finally, in the means which the intercessor uses to convince, it is evident that the intercessor is bold, insightful, and persuasive. Such qualities indicate that intercession could be viewed as a social and anthropological reality, and an integral way in which communication with God consists. In this context, intercession which occurs between individuals is representative of the intercession which occurs between God and humanity. 60 This also allows the possibility to view intercession on the human plane as a pattern or model of the prayer of intercession. 61

Intercession on a Human Level: An Image of Intercession with God

Since intercession is part of God’s design for social relations between individuals, it should not be surprising that examples of human intercession, especially all the elements relating to the person who is being implored, are applicable to God himself. There is an explicit case of this dimension of intercession in 2 Kings 5:16 where Elisha indicates that, behind him, it is God who is acting.

This identity, in a subtle way, invites the observer to discover God behind the person before whom intercession is made. In Genesis 44:18, Joseph is compared to Pharaoh, the

60 In a study devoted to the intercession of the Virgin Mary, A. George ("Les fondements scripturaires de l’intercession de Marie," in Bulletin de la Société Française d’Études Mariéales 23 [1966]: 20) comes to the same conclusion: "les relations religieuses avec Dieu ont été pensées à partir des relations humaines."

king to whom the Egyptians gave divine qualities; Joseph also (verse 15) appears to be familiar with God's designs, which leads him into an intrigue in which he becomes a type of *deus ex machina*. Joshua and his spies (Jos 2) assume the power to make an exception for the divinely decreed anathema intended for Jericho. By this action, they abrogate for themselves divine prerogatives. In 1 Samuel 19, at the moment when Saul spares David, the one chosen by God, he identifies himself with God's will—but only for the time of the intercession. In 1 Samuel 25:38, it is Yahweh himself who eliminates Nabal, apparently completing the project which David had taken upon himself. God continues the action of David, who had disregarded the divine law by breaking his promise. In 2 Samuel 14:17 and 20, David is compared to the angel of the Lord who "understands the good and the evil" and who knows "all that happens on the earth," and David dispenses the divine law by pardoning someone who should be put to death. The ceremonial which introduces the intercession and through which Bathsheba is seated at the right of Solomon (1 Kgs 2:19) has only one parallel in the Hebrew Bible, namely, Psalm 110:1, where the king is seated at God's right hand. In Jeremiah 38, it is the names of the persons which are significant. The king is Zedekiah, which means the "the justice of Yahweh," where the intercession of Ebed-melech leads to the king's decision to rescue Jeremiah. Ebed-melech, the intercessor may be either "servant of God" or "servant of the king," a name relating God and king. The cistern into which Jeremiah was lowered belonged to Malchiah, the name means "Yahweh is king." Finally, in Esther 7, there is a fast, which is normally accompanied by a prayer, even when the only prayer

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63 The law stipulated (Ex 21:12 and Nm 35:30-31) that a murderer should be put to death.

64 Cf. C. A. Moore, *Esther: Introduction, Translation and Notes* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971), 51, which cites as support 1 Sm 7:5; 2 Sm 12:16, 22; 1 Kgs 21:27; Ezr 8:21, 23; Neh 1:4 and 9:1; Jer 14:12; Jon 3:3-8; Jl 1:14 and 2:12; Dn 9:3.
which accompanies it is (in the Hebrew text) the intercession (Est 4:16); it is part of the supplication which Esther addresses to the king who stands in the place of God.

The Reasons for Failure of Intercession

In the examples of intercession on the human level reported in the Old Testament, there is, however, one failure. It is particularly significant because it will shed some light on the mediation of Mary in the light of the Old Testament precedents/antecedents. The failure is precisely the case where a mother wishes to intercede with her son. What is more, the son is the king, and the mother is the queen-mother. The text (1 Kgs 2) deals with Solomon and Bathsheba. Ordinarily, to ask a mother to intercede with her son is to request the intervention of the person who has the best access to the one to whom she makes her plea, since the bond between mother and son is among the closest.

However, not only does Adonijah, who asks Bathsheba to plead his cause with Solomon, not obtain what he wants, but his situation actually becomes worse. For having wished to take Abishag as wife, he is to be put to death (1 Kgs 2:25). There are several explanations for this failure at intercession. The absence of argument or of any persuasion on the part of Bathsheba indicates a failure of a relational nature. There is no solidarity, nothing in common between Bathsheba and Adonijah. This relation is a significant element in intercession.

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65 In the Septuagint (Est 4:17k-17z), the fast is accompanied by a long prayer which Esther addresses to Yahweh.


If Bathsheba (1Kgs 2:21), the queen-mother, simply presents her request without any convincing arguments (contrary to the case of the other intercessors), it is because she is not personally involved in the intercession. Bathsheba agrees to intercede, but she does not make the beneficiary's request something which she takes to her heart. What is more, she then places herself on the side of the one before whom she interceded. In no way has Bathsheba asked Solomon to give Abishag to Adonijah in marriage, as if she is concerned with Adonijah's marital bliss. It may even be that Bathsheba sees in the intercession a way of destroying Adonijah. Solomon will interpret the request for Abishag as an attempt coming from Adonijah to strengthen his claims to succeed David. In the other cases of intercession, the intercessors show a real concern and interest for those for whom they are interceding. In all cases of successful intervention, the intercessor is always altruistic, interested in the welfare of the one or ones for whom the intercession is made.

The intercession in 1 Kings 2 is the only example of intercession on the human level which seems to oppose God's plan. Thus, in the struggle for the successor of David, God favored Solomon, the son of David who was conscious of the theological mission of his kingdom and who would construct the Temple. So, inasmuch as the request of Adonijah was capable of weakening Solomon's monarchy, it was to be rejected as being contrary to God's plan.

The Question of Privileged Access

Bathsheba, mother of Solomon, enjoyed a privileged access to her son, the one with whom she made the intervention. The ceremony of 2 Kings 2:19—where, among other actions, Solomon prostrates himself before his mother—shows how much he honors and reveres her. One reason that Bathsheba was asked to

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70 See, among other citations, 2 Sm 12:24.
intercede was that she had a privileged access to the one who could grant the request, access which the petitioner [Adonijah] did not have. Simply put, some persons are more readily heard than others, and there are individuals who, because of their position, are better situated to obtain a request. The question of access plays a fundamental role in the question of intercession.

This rule is applicable both to prayers of intercession as well as to intercession on the human level. The purpose of Moses' intercession was to avert the impending doom which Yahweh threatened to carry out, and the first condition for making a successful intervention was to be aware of and familiar with the plan of God. We have already noted that “the Lord Yahweh never does anything without first revealing his secret to his servants, the prophets” (Am 3:7). As servants of Yahweh, the prophets are also his confidants. Placed in this position to communicate with God, they can dialogue with him, and, if need be, they can intercede with him. Chosen and called to be the special servants of God, the prophets have the ear of God. They enjoy his favor. Moses was the best example of a person favored by God. The biblical text emphasized that he found “grace in the eyes” of Yahweh. The phrase is repeated in Exodus 33:12-13 and 16. Moreover, in Exodus 33:11, it is said that Moses saw Yahweh “face to face,” or, according to Numbers 14:14, “eye to eye.” These expressions indicate that the relation between Moses and Yahweh was a very close one, intimate and personal. They even suggest a relation of equality. In Exodus 32:10, God appears to consult with Moses as to whether the people should continue to exist. That consultation shows the great esteem in which Yahweh regarded the mediator Moses. Moses enjoyed such great favor with God, because, in the episode of the Golden Calf, he was the only member of the Chosen People not to be involved in the act of idolatry.

In human interaction in the Bible, an intercessor with privileged access is indispensable, but the basis for the privileged access differs from case to case. It may be founded on a service which has been rendered (Jos 2), on a familial relation (1 Sm 19, 1 Kgs 2, Est 2), on political reasons (2 Sm 14, 2 Kgs 5), administrative position (Jer 38), or simply because of the physical proximity (Gn 44, Jos 2, 1 Sm 25).

And Mary?

This brief overview of intercession as it appears in the Old Testament permits us to draw certain conclusions as regards the prayer of intercession, specifically that of the Virgin Mary. In the first place, the prayer of intercession does not deal with some accessory or insignificant mediation on small matters; rather it belongs to the very foundation of the existence of the people of the covenant. If one takes into account the values involved, it deals with one of the highest forms of human cooperation with the divine plan of salvation. It is efficacious because it turns away the divine judgment against the people and even succeeds in obtaining the repentance of Yahweh, and reveals the vulnerability of God. To speak of Mary's mission in the history of salvation in terms of intercession is not an insignificant adjunct role. The prayer of intercession is not some relic of atavistic and outdated magical practice. Its origin and importance are derived from the relational bonds which manifest the highest and most noble service which one person can render to another person.

Secondly, contrary to a superficial view that the prayer of intercession is the clash of opposing viewpoints, it is rather a convergence of the will of Yahweh with that of the intercessor. It was not explicitly forbidden; rather it was expected, based on the divine initiative, in accord with God's will, even if it appeared to force the issue a bit. The success of intercession, whether it be addressed to God or to another human person, always appears in the Old Testament.

Testament as something which is in accord with God's will for human governing. So, Mary is not a figure of compassion who confronts an angry and implacable God. From the first moment, Mary's intercession is willed by God. That is what Christ demonstrated at the marriage feast of Cana when he acceded to Mary's request. If God raises up intercessors, it is, as was well expressed by Blaise Pascal, "to communicate to his creatures the dignity of being the actual cause of events." Neither should we conclude that if God raises up intercessors, it is only "to associate them in the work of salvation and to show them his love and confidence, without in any way changing his own disposition and his plan." The question is complex; the repentance, described in Exodus 32:14 and Amos 7:3, 6, indicates a real change in the dispositions of Yahweh. When Yahweh threatens to punish Israel, it is not simply to have a pretext to raise up an intercessor. The threat is real, otherwise it would deprive the intercession of any substantial import, and it would be an abuse of the notion of intercession. The initiative of the intercessor, even the boldness of someone like the Virgin Mary in John 2:5, would be unnecessary. If God raises up intercession, he does not restrain or limit its scope. Intercession is an authentic human initiative which is identified with the initiative of God, who takes the intercessors very seriously. God wishes to find in the intercessors true participants in his providence. That is why he wishes that intercession be explicit and manifest.

Third, as Mary intercedes, she remains a person of compassion, of solidarity with those on whose behalf she intercedes. The intercessor is motivated by sentiments which favor the welfare

75 Contrary to C. Richard, La prière d'intercession. Questions (Paris—Montreal, 1944), from which the quotation was taken, the author wishes to maintain the divine immutability. It appears that the Old Testament God who permits intercession is one who can have a change of mind.
of the other person. Another reason that God sanctions and wishes the prayer of intercession is that it brings about and manifests sentiments which create communion between and among persons. It is for that reason that the plea of Mary is heard.

At Cana, Mary's request was granted, not because Jesus was her son, but because of Mary's compassion for the newly married couple. In the case of Bathsheba, we saw that the mother might have had privileged access to her son, but that alone did not insure that the intercession would be successful. That is also a reason Jesus addressed his mother as "Woman" (Jn 2:4) at the moment she was presenting her plea.77

A similar avoidance of taking advantage of familial ties to achieve good for others is expressed by Jesus in Mark 3:35: "Whoever does the will of God, that one is my brother, my sister, and my mother."78 Again, in Mark 3, when Jesus underscores the relation of faith rather than the parental relationship, he is emphasizing that which motivates the intercessor rather than the privileged access which the intercessor has toward the one able to grant the request. In Mark 3:35, Jesus relegates the bonds of blood to a secondary consideration in one's relation with God; similarly, in John 2:4, he relegates to a secondary position the privileged access which a mother has to her son in favor of solidarity and compassion with one's neighbor.

Jesus also allowed all to take advantage of the prayer of intercession. In Matthew 15:21-28, there is the Canaanite women who (similar to Mary at Cana,79 succeeded, though not in the first attempt,80 in advancing Jesus' hour), forced Jesus to extend the

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77 Cf. J. Galot, Marie dans l'Évangile (Rome, 1985), 140.
80 Cf. P. Guilbert, Marie des écritures (Montrouge: Nouvelle Cité, 1995), 228. Compare Jn 2:4 and Mk 7:27. De la Potterie (in his Marie dans le mystère de l'alliance [Paris, 1985], 209), notes that there is no hostility in Jesus' response to Mary in John 2:4. This observation strengthens the position that the prayer of intercession is far from contrary to the divine will.
work of salvation to the non-Jewish people. Jesus addressed the Canaanite as "Woman" (Mt 15:28). From this example, Mary's intercession does not appear as an isolated instance of one who used her maternal relation to obtain a result, but as one who opens and shows others the way. That which distinguishes Mary is not a unique relation to her son, but the relation which unites her to all the disciples of Christ. On the Cross, in John 19:25-27, Jesus again calls Mary "Woman," extending to all the disciples the solidarity, compassion, and access exemplified by Mary in her concern for the newly married couple at the wedding of Cana. Jesus was aware of Mary's maternal love which accompanied him to the Cross. And, from the Cross, he made Mary the mother of his beloved disciple and John the son of Mary. As in Mark 3:35, familial relations are not disregarded but rather extended beyond the bonds of blood. These qualities were also displayed by the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15; they are not exclusive to Mary.

If Mary's prayer of intercession is efficacious, it is not primarily because of the privileged position which unites her to her Son, but because of the privileged position which unites her to those for whom she is making intercession, her children. That is the lesson to be retained from the failure of the intercession of Bathsheba. God does not hear Mary primarily because she is his mother, but because she is a mother. God does not hear Mary's plea because she is his Son's mother, but because she is a mother who is pleading for her children. The bond which unites Mary to her children, the disciples of Christ, was in a way ratified by Christ on the Cross. As a result, the disciples of Christ were from that moment assured of Mary's solidarity with them and of her maternal solicitude.

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81 This is in opposition to A. Maillot, Marie, ma soeur (p. 96), who thinks that the intention of John 19:25-27 is meant to show that Jesus did not want his mother to remain without care after his death. Such an interpretation completely misunderstands the profound import of the Johannine pericope. On this matter, see A. George, Marie dans le Nouveau Testament (Paris: Cahiers mariels, 1981), 132-133.
That which we can learn from the failure of the intercession of Bathsheba is that what is essential for the success of an intercession is the union between the intercessor and the one on whose behalf the intercession is made, and not the relation between intercessor and the one to whom the intercession is made—even if the relationship between the two be as strong and close as the relation between a mother and child. If God raises up intercessors, it is because he is vulnerable, and he is vulnerable because the prayer of intercession engages the whole person—the very gift of oneself—on behalf of another person. That is why Jesus heard both the plea of his Mother and of the Canaanite Woman (in Mt 15).

The intercession of Mary, even if it is ratified in John 19, cannot be presented as a unique case, something apart. It should be understood and experienced from within the larger context of the communion of saints. Understood in this way, Marian intercession would not be a line of demarcation between Catholics and Protestants. That is the position taken by the Group of Dombes, an ecumenical group of French theologians and pastors:

286. Protestants and Catholics agree that we must, with the scriptures, venerate, that is, love, respect and honor the Virgin Mary and praise God for her whom "all generations" are bound to called [sic] "blessed."

They also agree in saying that we ought to imitate her and regard her as an example, especially by uniting ourselves with her prayer and praise of the Father.

They disagree on the subject of invoking her: the Protestant tradition does not allow her any intercessory role, whereas Catholics entrust themselves to her maternal intercession and say to her every day: "Pray for us sinners."

287. Must we stop short at this statement of facts? Be content with this opposition? Cannot veneration include for Protestants the angel’s
words in the Hail Mary or the words of a sister, such as “Blessed are you among women,” both drawn solely from the scriptures?

On the other hand, can intercession be thought of as other than an integral element in the communion of saints in heaven and on earth, of human beings and the trinitarian God—an intercession that is united with the eternal intercession of the Son with the Father, and is matched by the intercession of the Spirit within those who are sinners and justified? Far from being an indication of distance and difference, is it not rather the sign of a communion and a sharing? Far from being private or exclusive, does it not rather open us to the world God so loved and to the entire creation, responsibility for which rests with those who have been chosen to serve before his face, beginning with the Mother of the Savior, the blessed Virgin Mary? Prayer to and through Mary will thus be a prayer like and with that of Mary. It will not erase distinctions, but neither will it become a cause of separation.

If this were the case, would not the contradiction and incompatibility between the Catholic and Protestant positions tend to diminish, while theological and pastoral vigilance would prevent both excess and narrowness? Then different types of piety could live side by side without suspicion or obligation, and not be the cause and effect of division.