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# MODELS OF REDEMPTION: EXPLORING THE ROLE OF JESUS' MOTHER IN NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGIES OF REDEMPTION

*Robert Garáfalo, Ph.D.\**

## Introduction

The word "redemption" has always been subject to different understandings,<sup>1</sup> its meaning shaped by scripture, tradition, culture, and the ongoing struggle with heterodoxy.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, since the first centuries of Christian history the Church has claimed to know what redemption is, and has suggested that Jesus was not entirely alone in implementing the Father's plan of redemption.<sup>3</sup>

To answer the question whether the New Testament portrays Mary, mother of Jesus, as cooperating in the Father's plan of redemption, we must first understand what "redemption" means in the New Testament as well as in the thought of individual biblical authors. We must then analyze how the New Testament portrays Mary in relation to Jesus' person and mission. Finally, we must evaluate the relationship between the biblical portrait(s)

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Avery Dulles, "The Death of Jesus as Sacrifice," *Josephinum Journal of Theology* 3 (1996): 1-11. Following the International Theological Commission, Dulles identifies at least six contemporary theologies of redemption.

<sup>2</sup> For an introduction to heterodoxies that shaped early Christian thought, cf. Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). As the author notes, much of early Christian theology evolved in response to movements such as Gnosticism and Docetism.

<sup>3</sup> To state that Jesus was not alone in implementing the Father's plan of redemption is not to question his unique role within that plan, but to recognize that others formed part of the same plan, if only in subsidiary and non-essential roles.

of Mary and the biblical understandings of redemption. This task is complicated by the fact that scripture and tradition reveal, not a unified understanding of redemption, but a persistent probing, through the use of symbols and symbolic language, of the mystery of what God has done for us in Christ. It is further complicated by the conventional wisdom that finds in the New Testament a negative portrait of Jesus' mother, which then becomes a stumbling-block in the path of objective analysis.<sup>4</sup> In the first section of this essay, we shall expose the symbols through which New Testament authors invite us to understand redemption. In the second section, we shall examine the New Testament portrait of Mary, paying special attention to the question whether that portrait is, in fact, negative. Finally, we shall evaluate the role of Mary within the New Testament understanding(s) of redemption in order to determine whether that role reflects cooperation by her in the Father's work of redemption.

### I. REDEMPTION IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament proclaims that in Jesus we have been redeemed, that is, restored to right relationship with the Father. Precisely how and when this restoration takes place, and what it means for us, were questions that met with widely divergent responses. "The gospel was a message of salvation; on this all Christian teachers agreed. But they did not agree about the meaning of the salvation proclaimed by this message."<sup>5</sup> There were, however, certain rather clearly defined tendencies.

In general, we may say that Paul, the first Christian author whose writings we possess, understood redemption in terms of the cross and that his understanding met with broad acceptance from the Synoptic authors. It was Jesus' extraordinary suffering and death that was redemptive for humankind; our salvation depends on believing in Christ crucified. John, on the other hand, understood redemption as a *process* that began with incarnation, continued at Calvary, and culminated in the

<sup>4</sup> For a summary view of this position, cf. *Mary in the New Testament*, ed. R. Brown et al. (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1978).

<sup>5</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 141.

resurrection ("divinization") of believers.<sup>6</sup> As the Cappadocians were quick to remind us, *quod non assumptum, non sanatum*.<sup>7</sup> These views, however, were neither mutually-exclusive nor all-encompassing. Paul and the Synoptics do not ignore the incarnation,<sup>8</sup> and John is acutely aware of the significance of Jesus' death.<sup>9</sup> We begin our investigation, then, with the observation that redemption was portrayed differently by different authors, and that the New Testament does not object to this diversity. At the same time, there are certain ideas that can provide the contours for a New Testament understanding of redemption.

First, redemption is understood as the work of the Father, the God of the Hebrew scriptures. Jesus is not a maverick redeemer who has taken it upon himself to save us from our sins. He is, instead, an agent of the Father's will, which is that all humankind be saved.<sup>10</sup> Second, redemption is understood as restoring a right relationship between humankind and the Father, making salvation possible for those who believe. Third, redemption is portrayed by means of complementary, tensive symbols,<sup>11</sup> that is, symbols that point beyond themselves to the mystery of the Father's loving justice, but whose meaning can never be exhausted by our interpretations. By means of these symbols, Jesus is portrayed as doing the will of the Father for our redemption, restoring us to a right relationship with the God who loves us. Fourth, the richness of New Testament redemption symbolism does not preclude further exploration by later authors whose writings did not find their way into the canon of Scripture, including especially the Fathers of the

<sup>6</sup> Pelikan, *Emergence*, 151.

<sup>7</sup> "Whatever has not been assumed has not been healed," a saying attributed to St. Gregory Nazianzen (d.389), meaning that if in the incarnation Christ has not become fully human, human beings have not been fully redeemed.

<sup>8</sup> Paul speaks of Jesus as emptying himself and taking the form of a servant in his Letter to the Philippians 2:6. Both Matthew and Luke begin their Gospels with elaborate accounts of Jesus' birth, which they clearly describe in terms of incarnation.

<sup>9</sup> The author of the Fourth Gospel portrays Jesus as saying "There is no greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends" (Jn 15:13).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. 1 Tim. 2:4.

<sup>11</sup> Tensive symbols are opposed to "steno symbols," which have specific and relatively defined referents.

Church.<sup>12</sup> Fifth, the symbolism that eventually achieved prominence in Catholic teaching, especially the liturgy, was that of redemption as expiatory sacrifice: Jesus offered himself as the acceptable sacrifice to the Father, which is renewed in every celebration of the Eucharist.<sup>13</sup> Finally, although the words "redemption" and "salvation" were originally used interchangeably, there evolved a distinction between what the Father has done for us in Jesus, that is, redemption, and our cooperation with that gift, that is, salvation.<sup>14</sup> Thus, when the Council of Nicaea says that "for us men and for our salvation, he came down from heaven," the Council Fathers are professing their faith that God's work in Jesus was not in vain, and that individuals are and have been free to appropriate that gift for their own personal salvation. Those of us who read the New Testament and profess the Nicene Creed are heirs to a rich tradition which symbolically proclaims that the Father has brought about our redemption in and through Jesus, and that we are now free to accept (or reject) that redemption for ourselves.

Any evaluation of Mary's role in the Father's work of redemption must begin with the question: How does the New Testament portray Mary—as one who collaborates in the Father's work of redemption, or as one who rejects Jesus' redemptive mission through misunderstanding?

## II. MARY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

During the latter half of the twentieth century, scholars increasingly explored the possibility that, contrary to the proactive, post-biblical portrait of Mary in the Church, the New Testament actually contains a negative portrait of Mary. This position became a virtual consensus with the 1978 publication of *Mary in the New Testament* (hereafter MNT),<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Pelikan identifies at least eight redemption theologies in the early Church Fathers. Cf. *Emergence*, 141-155.

<sup>13</sup> The notion of expiatory sacrifice is most clearly presented in the Letter to the Hebrews, chapters 9 to 11.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Letter to the Hebrews 10:12.

<sup>15</sup> The authors actually conclude that "we were able to trace some lines of development which were increasingly positive in portraying Mary as a disciple par excellence and as the virgin." Cf. *Mary in the NT*, ed. R. Brown et al., 294.

although the conclusions of that book's authors were consistently more nuanced. As a result, it has been taken for granted by scholars and students alike that the Church's pro-active portrait of Mary is grounded, not in history, but in non-canonical works of dubious historical value, such as the Protoevangelium of James.<sup>16</sup>

The texts relevant to our investigation are: Galatians 4:4; Mark 3:20-35 and 6:1ff. and parallels<sup>17</sup>; Matthew 1-2 and Luke 1-2; John 2:1-12, 7:5 and 19:25-27; and Acts 1:14. Of these, Galatians 4:4 and Acts 1:14 mention Jesus' mother only in passing, and John 7:5 mentions only Jesus' brothers. The so-called negative portrait of Mary is thought to begin in Mark 3:20-35 (and parallels), and to be supported by Mark 6:1-6 and John 7:5, as well as by the conspicuous paucity of Marian references in Paul and the gospels. We begin with the most recent (1991) *New American Bible* (hereafter NAB)<sup>18</sup> translation of Mark 3:20-35.

20 He came home. Again (the) crowd gathered, making it impossible for them even to eat. 21 When his relatives (*hoi par'autou*) heard of this they set out to seize him, for *they* said, "*He is out of his mind.*"

31 His mother and his brothers arrived. Standing outside they sent word to him and called him. 32 A crowd seated around him told him, "Your mother and your brothers (and your sisters) are outside asking for you." 33 But he said to them in reply, "Who are my mother and (my) brothers?" 34 And looking around at those seated in the circle he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. 35 (For) *whoever* does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

<sup>16</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (New updated ed.; New York: Doubleday, 1993), 33: "The . . . *Protoevangelium of James* is highly legendary, makes elementary mistakes about Temple procedure, and is more obviously folkloric than the canonical infancy narratives."

<sup>17</sup> The parallels of Mk. 3:20ff. are found in Mt. 12:24-32 and Lk. 11:15-22; the parallels for Mk. 6:1ff. are found in Mt. 13:54-58 and Lk. 4:16-30. Cf. R. Garófalo, "The Family of Jesus in Mark's Gospel," *Irish Theological Quarterly* (Spring, 1991): 196-206.

<sup>18</sup> *New American Bible* (Washington, D.C.: Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, 1991).

This passage is complex in structure, contains a number of textual variants,<sup>19</sup> and is therefore open to a variety of translations/interpretations, many of which are interdependent, so that the meaning of one phrase is influenced by the interpretation of another. The NAB introduction to Mark states: "His relatives think him 'out of his mind' (Mark 3:21). Jesus' kinship is with those who do the will of God, in a new eschatological family, not even with mother, brothers, or sisters by blood ties (Mark 3:31-35; cf. Mark 6:1-6)." The question thus becomes: how did the NAB translators arrive at the conclusion that Jesus' relatives think of him as "out of his mind"?

The Greek text of 3:21 reads: *hoi par'autou*, which NAB translates as "his relatives," but may be translated in a number of ways. In the most literal sense, *hoi par'autou* means simply "those around him," and has the sense of "those who were usually in his company," that is, friends and associates. The authors of MNT state: "In itself the term *hoi par'autou* is ambiguous and could mean simply those who were customarily around him. And if the unity of the present sequence is a Marcan creation, we would be very hard pressed to determine who were 'his own' when what is now v.21 was an isolated fragment of tradition."<sup>20</sup> But the NAB translators chose to translate the phrase as "his relatives" because, as we discover in 3:31, the people who eventually show up are his family: specifically, his mother and his brothers. The translation "his relatives" is based, therefore, not on a literal translation of *hoi par'autou*, but on the conclusion that *hoi par'autou* refers to the people who show up in 3:31: a conclusion that is certainly possible, but one that is not *required* by the text, which may consist of originally independent traditions and is therefore open to several other possibilities.

First, if *hoi par'autou* refers to anyone but Jesus' mother and brothers, there is no a priori reason to attribute to them any misunderstanding of, or even opposition to his mission, since

<sup>19</sup> Mk. 3:21 includes the following variants: 1) *akousantes hoi par'autou* 2) *peri autou*; 3) *huper autou*; 4) *akousantes peri autou hoi grammateis kai hoi loipoi*; 5) *bote eikousan peri autou hoi grammateis kai hoi loipoi*. Aland classifies the first of these as probable, which explains why the translators of NAB chose it for their text.

<sup>20</sup> *Mary in the NT*, ed. R. Brown et al., 55.

all they actually do is show up and ask for him. Second, *hoi par'autou* could refer, not to Jesus' mother and brothers, or even to his relatives, but to certain scribes who were "usually in his company." The text of 3:21-22 seems to suggest a parallelism between those who say "he is out of his mind" and the scribes from Jerusalem who say "He is possessed by Beelzebul." The text would then read, "When the scribes who were customarily around him heard this, they came to take charge of him, saying 'He is out of his mind,' while the scribes who arrived from Jerusalem asserted, 'He is possessed by Beelzebul. . . .'" While this translation is by no means certain, it makes at least as much sense in the context of this pericope for certain scribes to say that Jesus is out of his mind than for his own relatives to do so, especially if those relatives include his own mother and brothers. It is also possible to read the text as "When his relatives heard this, they came to take charge of him, because *they* were saying 'He is out of his mind,'" the implication being that the family was not of this opinion, but were moved to act because they had heard *other people* saying that Jesus was out of his mind. There are, then, at least three possible translations of *hoi par'autou* (family/relatives, friends/associates, scribes) and a fourth possible speaker ("they"). The translators of NAB, however, conflated all these possibilities into one straightforward statement: Jesus' mother and brothers came to take charge of him, saying "he is out of his mind" and a negative portrait takes shape.

Whether or not it is Jesus' family, including perhaps his mother and brothers, who come to take charge of him, there is reason to doubt the NAB translation "he is out of his mind." The Greek word *exésthei* can, in fact, mean "out of his mind," but it can also mean "beside himself," "agitated," or "upset." Once again, the authors of MNT acknowledge this uncertainty: "even if it is probable that Mark understands the 'his own' as Jesus' family, the description of their reactions as described in v.21 is not without difficulty."<sup>21</sup> These same authors prefer the translation "he is beside himself" instead of "he is out of his mind."<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> *Mary in the NT*, ed. R. Brown et al., 56.

<sup>22</sup> *Mary in the NT*, ed. R. Brown et al., 60.



If the text should read "(they) came to take charge of him, saying 'he is upset' or even 'he is beside himself,'" it would not really matter who was doing the talking, since the statement would be neutral rather than negative. Furthermore, the text could also be read as "(they) came to take charge of him," saying the crowd is out of its mind (beside itself, excited, etc.), which would further remove the statement from both Jesus and his family. Here again, two possible translations have been combined to yield a negative portrait, but that portrait has been painted by the translators, not by Mark.

Finally, when Jesus' mother and brothers arrive in 3:31, they send for him to come out, only to have Jesus point to his disciples and announce that "whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." Many commentators have concluded that Jesus is here distancing himself from his biological family and linking himself to his eschatological family, that is, those who do the will of God, but this idea, though possible, is not required by the text. The use of *whoever* is grammatically inclusive, not exclusive, and has the effect of including Jesus' biological family in the list of those who can do the will of God. Had the author wanted to portray Jesus as excluding his mother and brothers from that group, he could easily have used exclusive language, such as "only those who" or "only these disciples," but instead he uses the inclusive term *whoever*, which leaves open the possibility that this story is meant to teach us a lesson about discipleship, and not to tell us who were or were not members of Jesus' true family.

Those who claim to find a negative portrait of Mary in Mark's gospel often point to 6:1ff. for validation. Here NAB reads: "When the sabbath came he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astonished . . . And they took offense at him. Jesus said to them, 'A prophet is not without honor except in his native place and among his own kin and in his own house.'"

The people who hear Jesus speak in his native place are astonished and wonder how he came to teach with such authority, since his apparently humble origins were well known to them and nothing in his background indicated such ability. As a result of their incredulity, Jesus is unable to work

miracles there. Mark portrays him as commenting that "a prophet is not without honor except in his native place and among his own kin and in his own house."

The people whose lack of faith disturbs and, in a certain sense, incapacitates Jesus are clearly not his relatives, and certainly not members of his immediate family, since they claim to know the family members by name. There is nothing in this story to indicate that Jesus' immediate family members did not believe in him; in fact, those who do not believe in Jesus refer to his family members as if they *might* believe in him, and are "offended" by their humble origins. Mark portrays Jesus as commenting that "a prophet is not without honor except in his native place, and among his own kin and in his own house," an observation that convinces many commentators Jesus felt misunderstood by his own family. The expression itself warrants a closer look.

First, the word "prophet" seems curiously out of place in Mark, where it appears only twice: here and in 1:2, where its use is required to quote from Isaiah. Thus, the word "prophet" is not typically Marcan, although it appears often in Matthew, Luke, and Q, and does not reflect the way Jesus typically speaks of himself. Second, the saying has the distinct ring of a proverb, which is the way it is known to us in English and other modern languages. The authors of MNT actually describe it as such: "most would agree that it is transmitted by the evangelist for the sake of the *proverb*." Indeed, no one today uses this expression except as a proverb, that is, to explain that someone is being underappreciated. In such cases, there is often no direct correspondence between the person being described and his or her actual status as a "prophet," and the metaphor is often strained. In this story, Mark portrays Jesus as being underappreciated by the very people who should have welcomed him and his ministry, and may simply be employing a well-known proverb to make the point that such things happen to people who surpass their peers. In that sense, Mark would be portraying certain people from Jesus' native place who were not his relatives as unwilling to accept him, and the words "among his kin and in his own house" may belong to the proverb instead of being a clue to the way Jesus' family treated him.

In any case, the word Mark uses here for "kin" is not *hoi par'autou*, as in 3:21, but *sungeneusin*, which leads us to suspect he is not describing Jesus' relatives in both passages. If, then, the people whose lack of faith disturbs Jesus are not his family members, as is sufficiently clear from the text, and if the saying in question is, in fact, a proverb instead of a personal commentary, there is no reason to turn to 6:1ff. to validate the conclusion that there is a negative portrait of Jesus' family in Mark's gospel.

Those who argue for such a negative portrait do not base their claims solely on Mark, however. Instead, they find their position reinforced by the Fourth Gospel's portrayal of Jesus' mother in 2:1-12 and his brothers in 7:5. Each of these pericopes deserves careful attention. The NAB translates the former passage as follows: "... the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine.' (And) Jesus said to her, 'Woman, how does your concern affect me? My hour has not yet come.' His mother said to the servers, 'Do whatever he tells you.'"

Those who suggest a negative portrait of Mary in the gospels point to John 2:3-5 as an "awkward exchange" that reflects the distance Jesus put between himself and those who did not understand or believe in him, including his own family. NAB reads "Woman, how does this concern of yours affect me?" But the Greek reads "*ti emoi kai soi*" and does not lend itself easily to such a translation. The Vulgate had translated this phrase word-for-word as "*Quid mihi et tibi est, mulier?*" ("What is that to me and to you, woman?"). On the basis of the Vulgate translation, Catholic tradition has consistently found these words no obstacle to its pro-active portrayal of Jesus' mother. When, however, scholars returned to the sources and read biblical texts in the original languages, it was discovered that the expression *ti emoi kai soi* had a number of precedents and parallels in which the exchange had a decidedly negative connotation, and concluded that it should have the same connotation in John 2:4-5, where Jesus should be understood as distancing himself from his mother because of her lack of understanding.<sup>23</sup> Once again,

<sup>23</sup> The Greek *ti emoi kai soi* renders the Hebrew *mab-li walak*, which is found in Judges 11:12, 2 Chronicles 35:21, and 1 Kings 17:18, always with a connotation of distance and/or opposition. Cf. J.-P. Michaud, *La signe de Cana dans son contexte johannique* (Montreal: Montfortaine, 1963).

this translation is possible, although there are three significant difficulties. First, it runs counter to the literal meaning of the text, which must be "what is that to me and to you" unless a compelling argument may be made for a different meaning. Second, it is apparently contradicted by internal evidence, for Jesus proceeds immediately to do precisely what his mother asks: an extraordinary turn of events if, as has been suggested, he has just chastised her for making the suggestion. Third, by complying with the mother's implied request, Jesus reveals his glory, which is one of the priorities of the Fourth Gospel, and his disciples come to believe in him. It may also be significant that the text does not say or imply that Jesus' *mother and brothers* came to believe in him at that point, and leaves open the possibility that, contrary to many authors, the mother and brothers already believed in him. In a later section, it will be argued that on the basis of internal evidence, the portrayal of Jesus' mother in the Fourth Gospel must be understood to be positive unless new and compelling evidence to the contrary is forthcoming.

The notion that Jesus' mother and brothers may be assumed to have already believed in him is often challenged on the basis of the NAB translation of John 7:1-5: "His brothers said to him, 'Leave here and go to Judea, so that your disciples also may see the works you are doing. No one works in secret if he wants to be known publicly. If you do these things, manifest yourself to the world.' For his brothers did not believe in him."

At no point does this story suggest that Jesus' *mother* did not believe in him. The text here refers only to Jesus' brothers and, although it is possible that these are not the same *brothers* mentioned in 2:1-12, there is no reason to believe otherwise. There is some evidence, however, that the *belief* mentioned in this pericope is different from that mentioned in 2:1-12 and, if the evidence is credible, such a distinction would be important for our discussion. Jesus' brothers are here portrayed as encouraging him to go to Judea and reveal himself, which would be a curious suggestion if they, in fact, did not already believe in him. Unless we are willing to ascribe ulterior motives to the brothers' suggestion—an ascription for which we have no evidence whatever—it seems reasonable to conclude that the brothers did, in fact, believe in Jesus, but that they had some

reservations about how he should go about his ministry. Even if these reservations were considerable, however, they do not necessarily preclude the kind of faith in Jesus described in 2:1-12 and do not lend themselves easily to a negative portrait of the brothers' relationship with him. We conclude, therefore, that there is insufficient evidence in either John 2 or 7 to validate an allegedly negative portrait of Mary in the gospels in general, or Mark in particular.

There remains the criticism put forth by some commentators, that is, that the Church's pro-active portrait of Mary derives, not from history, but from non-historical sources, and is therefore less reliable than the passages we have just mentioned.<sup>24</sup> This same criticism, of course, may be levied against the portraits of Jesus in the gospels in order to negate the extraordinary claims made about him by centuries of tradition. While the so-called Infancy Narratives clearly represent a different literary genre than the "gospels proper," there is no evidence that one genre necessarily yields a more historically reliable account than the other, and it is entirely possible that the details of Luke 1-2 are as historical as those contained in any other New Testament passage. Both genres tell of divine messengers, miracles and cures, as well as events that have a bearing on our salvation. In any case, the portrayal of Jesus' mother, though perhaps minimal by post-biblical standards, does not so conflict with the contents of the New Testament in general as to warrant a correction by later authors. In fact, Paul's reference to Jesus as having been born of a woman and Luke's mention of her as present in the post-resurrection community, clearly suggest that they knew of no reason why such references would not be considered appropriate. We conclude, then, that the New Testament portrait of Jesus' mother may not be considered negative unless new and compelling evidence to the contrary is forthcoming.

<sup>24</sup> *Mary in the NT*, ed. R. Brown et al., 293: "Although belief in the virginal conception was widespread, there is no second-century evidence of belief in Mary's remaining a virgin after the birth of Jesus, apart from the implications of the *Protoevangelium*."

### **III. REDEMPTION IN THE NEW TESTAMENT**

New Testament authors struggled to understand and describe their conviction that the Father had reconciled all things to himself in Christ. Writing first, Paul searched the Old Testament and his understanding of Jesus for symbols that would make sense of his own experience as one who had been clutched from the jaws of sin and death. In some of his earliest writings, Paul anticipated the imminent return of the Lord, and portrayed redemption as escaping the wrath to come. "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose, God will bring forth with him from the dead those also who have fallen asleep believing in him" (1 Thess. 4:14). As it became increasingly clear that the Lord would not soon return, Paul found himself faced with more theoretical questions, such as how God could have allowed his Son to suffer and die.

#### **A. Mary's Cooperation in Redemption: Paul**

"But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to ransom those under the law, so that we might receive adoption" (Gal. 4:4). Paul does not mention Mary or include her in his theology. His only reference to her is impersonal: she forms part of God's plan for our redemption. Jesus' work of redemption was not an accident of history, Paul tells us, but an integral part of God's plan. Thus, those who cooperated with Jesus were thought to have been part of the same divine plan. The phrase "born of a woman, born under the law" may be Paul's way of emphasizing Jesus' Jewish roots, but it also reminds us that he came to be a redeemer through the agency of the woman who gave him birth. This birth took place in "the fullness of time," that is, according to the Father's plan for us, which means it was God's plan that Jesus be born of a specific woman, a Jewish woman, who was ideally suited to provide him with the human qualities he would require to redeem us. In the words of Bernard Lonergan, "in the incarnation Christ became, not only human, but human at the time and in the way that suits him to be the mediator of our

redemption."<sup>25</sup> The human identity of Jesus was, therefore, anything but a generic human nature.

The perfection Christ acquired could have been quite different from the human perfection that, as a matter of fact, he did acquire ... Christ decided to perfect himself in the manner he did because of us ... thinking of what we needed for our redemption.<sup>26</sup>

The circumstances of Jesus' historical existence may not be assumed to have been an accident but, given the Scriptures' preoccupation with what is right and appropriate and acceptable and timely, his historical existence must be considered a freely and deliberately chosen pattern of actions, so that, in a very real sense, *Christ became what we needed our God to be*.

The idea that Christ came at the appointed time and with the humanity required for our salvation cannot reasonably be divorced from a consideration of his mother, who is the prior condition of his humanity. Whether or not we accept as historical the Lucan Birth Narrative, the mother of Jesus is necessarily the source of the human perfection that was, in Lonergan's words, required for our redemption. Since tradition maintains that Jesus' mother was *Theotokos* in a real, and not merely a figurative sense, she must have provided her child with the full spectrum of physical and psychological characteristics—including genetic coding—that are part of the gestation process. Therefore, the humanity of Jesus was the humanity that Mary, and she alone, could have provided him. Her attitude, diet, exercise, and especially her faith, all necessarily contributed to the process by which she related to her unborn child, and her child developed the humanity that was appropriate for our redemption. "Somewhere in the silence of her heart, this woman was convinced as only mothers can be that her child would live the life only she could give him. Mary of Nazareth was not a generic incubator for a generic savior,

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Robert Garáfalo, "Lonergan, Conversion, and Marian Theology," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 54:4 (1988): 292-3; idem, "Marian Symbols and Marian Doctrines: Lonergan's Contribution," *New Blackfriars* (1989): 216-225.

<sup>26</sup> Garáfalo, "Lonergan," 293.

but the one person in human history who could have mediated to Jesus the humanity that was required for the redemption of humankind."<sup>27</sup>

### **B. Mary's Cooperation in Redemption: Mark**

As the first of the evangelists, Mark had to sort through not only Pauline theology, but the theological motifs of the Old Testament and inter-testamental period. Like Paul, Mark was convinced that Jesus redeemed humankind through his extraordinary suffering and death. His theology, however, was skewed by the eschatological tension of the period in which he wrote, and led inevitably to a tangible urgency in his understanding of redemption.

Mark portrays Jesus as the Messiah, but not the Messiah the people had been expecting. "He began to teach them that the Son of man had to suffer much, be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, be put to death, and rise three days later" (8:31). Jesus' suffering was not a failure on his part, as his opponents surely argued, but the result of a deliberate decision to lay down his life: "The Son of Man has not come to be served, but to serve—to give his life in ransom for the many" (10:45). Mark borrows this notion of ransom from the Old Testament commandment to buy back one's first-born: "Every first-born son you must redeem" (Ex. 13:13). Perhaps what is most distinctive in Marcan theology appears in chapter 13, where Jesus is portrayed as an apocalyptic prophet of the end times, calling his listeners to prepare for the Lord's coming. "Indeed, had the Lord not shortened the period, not a person would be saved. But for the sake of those he has chosen, he has shortened the days" (13:20). Finally, Mark suggests that Jesus is the acceptable sacrifice of the covenant between God and humankind: "This is my blood, the blood of the covenant, to be poured out on behalf of many" (14:24). Mark's Christology reaches its apex in 15:38, where the centurion proclaims "Clearly this man was the Son of God!" Mark wants us to understand that it is precisely because Jesus was Son of God that his suffering and death were redemptive.

<sup>27</sup> Garófalo, "Lonergan," 294.



There is not the slightest hint of Mary's cooperation in Jesus' work of redemption, perhaps because, in Mark's view, those who should have understood Jesus and accompanied him to the fulfillment of his mission, failed to do so. Even the women who receive news of Jesus' resurrection fail to proclaim his victory over sin and death: "because of their great fear, they said nothing to anyone" (16:8). In Mark's generally pessimistic view of Jesus' disciples, there is little room for cooperation, and his portrayal of Jesus' mother is no exception. At the same time, as we have argued above, there is no incontrovertible evidence that Mark viewed Mary in a less favorable light than he did Jesus' disciples, or that his portrayal of her was inconsistent with the more favorable treatments found in Matthew, Luke, John, or later tradition.

### **C. Mary's Cooperation in Redemption: Matthew**

Many commentators, seeking the meaning "behind" the text, dedicate themselves to the pre-Matthaeian sources that have apparently been employed by the evangelist, attributing to these sources the historical meaning and value of the text.<sup>28</sup> In so doing, however, they ignore the fact that it is the text as received into the Church that is considered to be inspired, that is, revealed for our salvation, and not the plethora of sources employed by the author(s). There is not today, and has never been, a belief that the sources employed by Matthew had, in themselves and apart from their incorporation into the canonical gospel, any soteriological value, although the exhaustive and exhausting efforts of critical scholars appear to indicate a preference for the sources rather than the inspired text. In the words of Raymond Brown:

Whether or not the infancy narratives were historical . . . , Matthew and Luke thought they were appropriate introductions to the career and significance of Jesus. To give them less value than other parts of the Gospels is to misread the mind of the evangelists for whom the infancy narratives were fitting vehicles of the message they wanted to convey.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 225-232.

<sup>29</sup> Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 38.

In the theology of the evangelist, mother and child are conspicuously linked in the drama of redemption. There is no annunciation in this gospel, no Magnificat, no recognition by Elizabeth and her child. In fact, Mary neither speaks nor is spoken to, save by inference. The dreams/revelations belong to Joseph, and it is he who acts in obedience to the words of the angel. This shadowy presence, however, does not reduce the mother's significance, for she is taken into account at every step along the way, not only while she is carrying the child of the promise. Joseph is concerned for her reputation; the angel informs him she has conceived by the Holy Spirit and will bear the child foretold by Isaiah the prophet. Although the evangelist's primary concern may have been Christological, he is clearly interested in the figure of the woman who fulfills the role of mother of the redeemer. And yet, he appears to be interested in her primarily as a mother and not as an individual.

Matthew's narrative is conspicuously concerned to show that the events surrounding the birth of Jesus fulfill the prophecies concerning the Messiah, that is, the one who is to redeem Israel. In addition to the passages mentioned above, there is the genealogy, in which Jesus' heritage is traced back to David and Abraham, as well as the following prophecies. "They said to him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it has been written through the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; since from you shall come a ruler, who is to shepherd my people Israel'" (2:5-6). "Then was fulfilled what had been said through Jeremiah the prophet: 'A voice was heard in Ramah, sobbing and loud lamentation; Rachel weeping for her children, and she would not be consoled, since they were no more'" (2:18). "He went and dwelt in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, 'He shall be called a Nazorean'" (2:23).

Matthew's preoccupation with the fulfillment of prophecy is related to his portrayal of Jesus, Joseph, and Mary as completely obedient to the divine will. In the Infancy Narrative, Joseph is consistently portrayed as receiving divine instructions and obeying them wordlessly, taking mother and child with him as a matter of course. In the "gospel proper," Jesus is

intentionally portrayed as the New Moses, giver of the new and superior Law, who conforms himself completely to the divine will. Indeed, it is because he is obedient to the divine will that Jesus can, in the Sermon on the Mount, announce the replacement of the Old Law with the New. Although the mother of Jesus is not individually highlighted in the Matthaean narrative, she is present as the *conditio sine qua non* of the Jesus Story, and she is portrayed as one who silently cooperates with the Father's plan of redemption.

This view is reinforced by the fact that Matthew chose not to include in his narrative the aforementioned Marcan texts thought to reflect a negative portrait of Jesus' mother. In 12:46ff., there is no suggestion that the mother and brothers are concerned for his mental health; in 12:54ff., he omits the phrase "among his own kindred" from the proverb, which now reads: "No prophet is without honor except in his native place, indeed in his own house." Many commentators suggest Matthew has softened the Marcan story in order to harmonize it with his generally more favorable presentation of the mother in Chapters 1-2. Unless, however, we are willing to concede that everything in Mark is automatically more historical than in Matthew and Luke, it remains just as possible that Matthew is writing to correct what he perceived to be a misunderstanding in the Marcan narrative. Matthew wants his readers to understand that Jesus' mother was a silent partner in the story of redemption from the very beginning, and that her role, though not a speaking one, was both necessary and significant.

#### **D. Mary's Cooperation in Redemption: Luke**

Mary's silent cooperation in Matthew becomes quite vocal in Luke, where she asks questions, overcomes fear, and grants permission for the birth of the redeemer to take place through her. She is proclaimed to be blessed among women; all ages to come will call her blessed. Her child is recognized as Messiah and redeemer. She herself will be pierced by a sword (2:35). In Luke's theology, "already during the ministry of Jesus his mother was one of those who 'hear the word of God and do it,'" which qualified her to speak the words of a disciple at the

end of the annunciation scene: "Let it be done unto me according to your word" (1:38).

Luke understands redemption in terms of divine justice, which is wholly unlike human justice, since divine justice is oriented to the *anawim*—the lowly—and not to the great and mighty. "Luke, who esteems Mary as the first Christian disciple, has placed the hymn on her lips and thus given her the role as spokeswoman of the *Anawim*."<sup>30</sup> Jesus announces his messianic ministry with the words: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord" (4:9). In the typically Lucan parables, divine justice is repeatedly contrasted with the justice of this world, and divine justice is revealed as superior. The true neighbor is not a priest or a Levite, but a Samaritan (10:10ff.). The true son is not one who remains at home, but the one who returns to his father's house and asks for mercy (15:11ff.). The truly rich man is not the one who has been blessed in this life, but the beggar who was looked down upon in this life, only to find blessing in the next (16:12ff.). The true believer is not one who stands proudly before the Lord, demanding that his efforts be recognized, but he who stands humbly before his God, begging for forgiveness (18:10ff.). Within this context, Mary is portrayed as the true servant of the Lord (1:38), who proclaims, not her own greatness as the one chosen by God, but the greatness of the Lord. "If for Luke Mary is the first Christian disciple, it is fitting that he place on her lips sentiments that Jesus will make the hallmark of the disciple in the main Gospel story (Luke 14:27)."<sup>31</sup>

The Magnificat therefore portrays Mary as the ideal disciple, that is, one who exemplifies the virtues and values, not of this world, but of the Father's plan for our redemption. Mary, having received a Christological message from the angel sent to announce to her that the child she would bear would be Son

<sup>30</sup> Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 357.

<sup>31</sup> Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 364.

of David and Son of God, by her faith-filled response exemplified a reversal of values whereby the lowly would be exalted and the rich and powerful of this world would be brought low.<sup>32</sup> She is not portrayed as cooperating in Jesus' suffering, but as intimately cooperating in his incarnation and as one who has been redeemed by her willingness to become the mother of the Lord, and as cooperating in the redemption of humankind.

Once again, this view is supported by the fact that Luke, like Matthew, omits or alters those Marcan passages thought to reflect a negative portrayal of Mary. Once again, he does so, not merely to harmonize the Marcan material with his own favorable portrayal, but also to correct Mark's inadequate view of discipleship in general and the family of Jesus in particular.

### **E. Mary's Cooperation in Redemption: John**

Because the Fourth Gospel focuses attention on both incarnation and cross, the mother of Jesus is here more obviously related to the Father's plan of salvation than in Paul or the Synoptics. In the former understanding (incarnation), she is the vehicle by which he acquired the human nature appropriate for our redemption. In the latter understanding (the cross), she not only accompanies Jesus to Calvary, but is directed to participate in his ongoing work of redemption.

By all accounts, the Fourth Gospel is highly symbolic and written at several levels, including the historical, the theological, and the symbolic.<sup>33</sup> It is not, as X. Leon-Dufour has observed, that the evangelist has juxtaposed three formally-distinct meaning levels, but that history itself is fundamentally symbolic because it is experienced and perceived by symbolic, that is, human consciousness.<sup>34</sup> In this sense, history itself is

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, sections on the Annunciation and Visitation, esp. pp. 353-354; see also sections on the Annunciation and Visitation in *Mary in the New Testament*, ed. R. E. Brown et al., esp. pp. 141-143.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Garófalo, "History, Theology, and Symbol: The Mother of Jesus at Cana, 1950-2000" (Dayton, OH: International Marian Research Institute, 1993).

<sup>34</sup> X. Leon-Dufour, "Towards a Symbolic Reading of the Fourth Gospel," *New Testament Studies* 27 (1981): 439-56.

never objective, but reflects both the symbolic consciousness of the historian and the historical consciousness of the reader. In the final analysis, we will never discover whether, for example, Jesus' mother was actually present at a wedding in Cana of Galilee; all we can do is attempt to understand the message the author hoped to convey in telling the Cana story, as well as the meaning that message may have for us today.

The Fourth Evangelist consistently portrays Jesus' mother as associated with symbols which, in his theology, have a highly positive value, and dissociates her from symbols that have a negative value. Among the positive symbols with which Jesus' mother is intentionally associated are those of women and Galileans. Throughout the Fourth Gospel, women are consistently portrayed as open to believing in Jesus, while men are consistently portrayed as doubting him.<sup>35</sup> The first of these episodes is the Cana Narrative.

The narrative begins with an observation concerning time ("on the third day") and place ("at Cana in Galilee"). Thus the narrative shows certain common characteristics with other narratives in which women encounter Jesus in the Fourth Gospel. Furthermore, although such references are common, there are many instances in which one or the other is absent, for example, the story of Nicodemus and the man born blind. The references to both time and place are therefore to be seen as part of a general Johannine pattern which points to the possibility of further patterns within the Gospel.

The narrative also includes an awkward exchange between Jesus and his mother, generated by an apparent request by the mother, "They have no wine." Jesus responds by addressing her as "Woman," and proceeds to ask what business it is of his, since his hour has not yet come. The request by the woman is paralleled in the encounter with the Samaritan woman, with Martha and Mary (although not with Mary at Bethany), and with Mary Magdalene in the garden. The awkward exchange, however, is present in all these accounts, so that once more *we may speak of an emerging pattern, in which Jesus encounters women and engages in awkward conversations with them.*

<sup>35</sup> Garófalo, "History, Theology, Symbol," chap. 3.

The awkward exchange at Cana is followed by the mother's instructions to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you," a function paralleled in the witness of the Samaritan woman to Jesus as Messiah: "Come and see someone who told me everything I ever did! Could this not be the Messiah?" It is also paralleled in the words of Martha and Mary: "even now I am sure that God will give you whatever you ask of him," as well as in the report of Mary Magdalene, whose words cause the disciples to come to the tomb on Easter morning. In the anointing scene at Bethany, it is the woman's actions, rather than her words, that prompt a reaction from the disciples, to which Jesus replies, "Leave her alone. Let her keep it against the day they prepare me for burial" (12:7). In each of these instances, it is the words or actions of a woman that causes others to comply with Jesus' directives, that is, to do whatever he tells them.

The contrast between men and women is reinforced by the portrayal of Galileans, who are consistently revealed as believers in contrast to Judeans ("the Jews"), who are consistently portrayed as opposing Jesus and his mission. Already in 2:1, the mother of Jesus, whose status as a woman would have cast her in a favorable light according to the evangelist, is associated with the location: there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. In 2:11, we learn that Jesus performed the first of his signs at Cana in Galilee, which revealed his glory and evoked belief from his disciples. Each time Galilee is mentioned, therefore, we find a theme that has positive value in the Gospel: welcoming, woman, signs, believing. Within this charged symbolic context, there is the secondary symbolism of water, which is portrayed as positive and life-giving, as contrasted with stone, which is portrayed as negative and associated with death. In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus' mother is a woman, a Galilean, and one who is intentionally associated with life-giving water, and all three associations are clear in the Cana Narrative.

In the Cana narrative, Jesus addresses his mother as "Woman," which has the inevitable effect of calling attention to her gender. She is a woman attending a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and therefore both a woman and a Galilean: two groups that are highly positive in the Fourth Gospel. She is also

the one who calls attention to the lack of wine and occasions the first of Jesus' signs, which entails the transforming of water held in stone jars into a new and superior wine. More importantly, she is the one who mediates, not only the first of Jesus' signs, but the movement to faith on the part of Jesus' disciples. In this sense, the mother of Jesus, who is seen in a highly positive light in the Fourth Gospel, is portrayed as cooperating in the redemption of others, since only those who believe in the one sent by the Father are redeemed. This interpretation is reinforced by a careful analysis of 19:26-27.

Once again, Jesus addresses his mother as "Woman." Once again, there is a stark contrast between life and death. Once again, the presence of the mother moves Jesus to speak and act, entrusting mother and disciple to one another in a way that belies Jesus' physical distress. Even at the point of death, when the world views him as being powerless, Jesus retains redemptive power, that is, the power to give one person to another in love and transform their lives.

At both Cana and Calvary, the mother of Jesus is portrayed as cooperating in Jesus' work of redemption, first by initiating a dialogue that will end with the disciples coming to believe in her son, and then by becoming the instrument by which Jesus communicates to his beloved disciple—and through him to the community of believers—that it is both possible and necessary to believe in him in death as in life. As tradition demonstrates, it is precisely this invitation to believe in her Son in spite of his death that makes Mary a witness to his resurrection and, in a very real sense, one who continues to cooperate in the redemption of humankind.

#### **F. Mary's Cooperation in Redemption: Hebrews**

The anonymous Letter to the Hebrews contains the most conspicuously Catholic theology of redemption: Jesus is the acceptable sacrifice of the New Covenant, renewed in every celebration of the Eucharist.

But when Christ came as high priest . . . he entered once and for all into the sanctuary. . . . He entered, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, and achieved eternal redemption . . . This is why he is mediator of a new covenant. . . . (Heb. 9:11ff.)



In this view, Jesus is the victim whose blood seals the New Covenant between God and humankind. The prior condition of his blood sacrifice is his acceptance of the Father's will and agreement to play a unique role in the redemption of humankind. Just as the Old Covenant began, not with the ritual sacrifice described in Genesis 15:17ff., but with the Lord's promise and Abram's faith (15:6), so the New Covenant begins, not with the actual sacrifice of Jesus at Calvary, but with the Father's decision to redeem humankind and Jesus' acceptance of his role as redeemer. The Letter to the Hebrews invites us to reflect on this analogy: "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called, and went forth to the place he was to receive as a heritage . . . By faith he sojourned in the promised land as in a foreign land . . . As a result of this faith, there came forth from one man, who was himself as good as dead, descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sands of the seashore" (11:8-12).

By extension, therefore, the New Covenant has its roots in the Lord's words spoken through the angel: "You shall conceive and bear a son and give him the name Jesus," as well as Mary's faith response: "I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be done to me as you say" (Lk. 1:38). This faith response, which is analogous to that of Abram, is recognized in the words attributed to Elizabeth: "Blessed is she who trusted that the Lord's words to her would be fulfilled." Indeed, it is of the very essence of divine-human covenants that they are unequal: the divine "imposes" the covenant upon the human partner, in this case, Mary. Just as the word of the Lord came to Abram as the foundation of the Old Covenant, the word of the Lord to Mary became the foundation of the New Covenant, sealed in the blood of her Son. She should be understood, then, as part of that "cloud of witnesses" to God's plan of redemption (12:1), cooperating in the redemption of humankind in the same sense, and to the same degree, as Abram is understood as cooperating in the redemption of his people.

### **Conclusion**

It was neither the purpose nor the priority of New Testament authors to highlight the person and role of Jesus' mother.

Nevertheless, she is mentioned by Paul and appears in all four Gospels, as well as the Acts of the Apostles. The Letter to the Galatians mentions her as part of the Father's plan of redemption. Mark portrays her as one of those who, at least occasionally, accompanied Jesus and showed concern for his welfare. Matthew presents her as a silent partner in God's work of redemption. Luke portrays her as a major player in the drama of Jesus' early life, and includes her within the post-resurrection community. Indeed, the prominence of certain family members within the Jerusalem Church makes it difficult to imagine that Jesus' mother had in any way opposed his mission. John symbolically portrays her as Woman and Galilean, associates her with life-giving symbols, and links her both with Jesus' incarnation and suffering. Finally, the Letter to the Hebrews implies that her role as the one who assented to the New Covenant may have been analogous to that of Abraham in the Old Covenant. While all of this imagery and symbolism may leave room for questions, there can be little doubt that Mary's person and role were well-known during the early stages of Christian history, and that both awareness and appreciation of her role in redemption evolved in ways that are consistent with the Church's post-biblical, proactive understanding of her.