



# The Vision of Mary at the Cross

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**M**ary, the mother of Jesus, appears only two places in John's Gospel: at the beginning of Jesus's ministry and at the end. In this article I will focus on her presence at the cross, noting the cost in her historical setting; the theme of vision highlighted by John; and the theological meaning Christians have discovered in this brief encounter. John's Gospel gives readers a glimpse into a moment in that excruciatingly long death that none of the others communicate, bequeathing both historical insight and the seeds of a rich theological tradition. For an event that takes up only three verses, it wields incredibly generative power.

This scene at the cross (John 19:25–27) is yet another example of this evangelist presenting a very different perspective than the other three. No other Gospel writer records the presence of Jesus's supporters so close to his place of death. Mark and Matthew describe both those who mock Jesus (Mark 15:29–32; Matt 27:39–44) and those who misunderstand him (Mark 15:35; Matt 27:47) as close enough to

*The death of Jesus on the cross is a central trauma to the Christian story, one in which we gain personal entrance through the story of Mary. In the person of Mary, standing at the foot of the cross, we experience the full range of human reactions to such an overwhelming event, and through her, we too are present.*

interact with him; Luke describes all the acts as mockery (23:35–37). All three make note of a group of supporters who stand at a distance (Mark 15:40–41; Matt 27:55–56)—a group that, according to Luke, includes both men and women (Luke 23:49). Interpreters have noted a connection to the Righteous Sufferer Psalms (Psalm 27:11; 87:8 LXX), suggesting that the distance they keep from him contributes to his pain.<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, Mary Magdalene appears in both the far (Mark 15:40; Matt 27:55–56) and the near group (John 19:25), but given that the crucifixion takes several hours, it is quite plausible that she moved locations in that time frame.

In John's narrative, the conversation between Jesus, his mother, and the beloved disciple takes place fairly early in the description of the crucifixion. After stating that Jesus was crucified between two others (19:18), the evangelist describes the sign above Jesus (19:19–22). It is verse 25 that opens with a group standing near Jesus, but through the participial phrase the verse is joined to what comes directly before, when the soldiers divide up Jesus's clothing (vv. 23–25a). Jesus would have had several items of clothing, enough for each of them to have something, but instead of tearing the last, the tunic, and destroying its value and purpose, they cast lots for it. The proximity of the mother and friends of Jesus indicates that they would have had to overhear this process, to endure this taunt in addition to the tragedy of his crucifixion. This act indicates that his death was nothing more to the soldiers than the windfall of new items, suggesting that in their eyes Jewish lives held no value and demanded no respect. Commentators have wondered, given the frequency with which women made clothes, if Mary herself might have knit this garment. She would have had to watch the work of her hands falling into the hands of the oppressor.

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Miller, *Women in John's Gospel* (London: T&T Clark, 2023), 106; Marc S. Goodacre, "Scripturalization in Mark's Crucifixion Narrative," in *The Trial and Death of Jesus: Essays on the Passion Narrative in Mark*, ed. G. Van Oyen and T. Shepherd (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 33–47.

In sharp comparison with the four soldiers' actions stand this group of women.<sup>2</sup> The identity of the group has proven an irresistible puzzle for biblical exegetes, with suggestions ranging from two to four. The purpose of this essay is not to solve that debate, and thankfully, it is without question that Jesus's mother is there and that she is not alone. She has a sister, an intriguing detail that adds color to her life story, whose full details we can only imagine. A Mary of Clopas is there, and some think this might *be* her sister. Alternatively, given the confusion of two daughters with the same name, this woman might be distinct.<sup>3</sup> Finally, we learn that Mary Magdalene is proximate to the cross at this point. Except for the mother of Jesus, whom the evangelist has not mentioned since the second chapter, the other women appear here for the first (Mary Magdalene) or only time.

The first thing John says about them is that they are close to the cross. The preposition *para* is notoriously plastic, but when used with a dative noun, as it is here, it conveys the sense of being "near" or even "with." They are willing to stand near the cross—with the cross—and this could have come at some cost for them.<sup>4</sup> Records indicate that the families of crucifixion victims could stand near them during their deaths,<sup>5</sup> but it is notable that the majority of the male followers elected not to do so, as Peter's denial exemplifies (Matt 26:69–75; Mark 14:66–72; Luke 22:56–62; John 18:15–18, 25–27), out of a desire not to associate with him. He was being crucified as a brigand, a claimant to the throne, as Pilate's placard indicates (John 19:19–22). Indeed, Acts and the Epistles describe that imprisonment because of association with him occurred often (e.g., Acts 4:3; 5:18–25; 8:3; 12:4–17; 16:23–40; 2 Cor 6:5; 11:23; Phlm 1), a reality that embraced women as well (Rom 16:7). If arrest was not an immediate threat in this moment, without question shame was. Crucifixion was meant to be mortally embarrassing. There was no way a group of devotees could stand near Jesus's cross and proclaim their association with him and avoid that shame

<sup>2</sup> Miller suggests that the four soldiers make it likely that John balances them with four women in her *Women in John's Gospel*, 107.

<sup>3</sup> Note the popularity of the name Mary in Roman Palestine. See Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 89.

<sup>4</sup> L. Schottroff, *Let the Oppressed Go Free: Feminist Perspectives on the New Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 171–72.

<sup>5</sup> George Beasley-Murray, *John* (Waco: Word, 1987), 348.

being cast to them as well. Yet despite the potential threat and the realized shame, these followers stood with him.

In addition to the women, this group included one man. Mary is supported by her female family and friends, but given the constraints of the time, it is not surprising that Jesus establishes a new relationship for her complete care.<sup>6</sup> The disciple whom Jesus loved was previously mentioned at Jesus's final meal with his disciples (John 13:23): After Jesus has washed their feet, as they recline at the meal, Jesus talks about the one who will betray him. The beloved disciple is close to Jesus, so close that it seems Peter is jealous of him. He is named with this esteemed phrase again at the resurrection scene, when Mary runs to tell him and Peter the body is gone. He peers in the tomb first to see the linens, and then follows Peter inside, at which point he sees the tomb with no body but only linens and subsequently believes (20:1–8). He is named only one other time, in the final chapter, when he is fishing with Peter when the resurrected Jesus appears on the shore. The evangelist recalls Peter's inquiry about him possibly being the betrayer (21:20). Again, Peter is interested in his fate, but Jesus turns Peter's attention back to his own story. As a result, a rumor arose that the beloved disciple might live forever, but the author, who now reveals himself to be the beloved disciple (21:24) corrects that belief with the assertion that Jesus was only emphasizing that his will was sovereign for the beloved one, and not the disciple's eternity. The beloved disciple's presence with Jesus's mother before the cross is the only time he appears without Peter. The identity of the disciple remains debated, with John son of Zebedee or the next generation's John the Elder as leading options.<sup>7</sup> However the process of the written document unfolded, in a culture where writing was more communal than we tend to think of it today,<sup>8</sup> it seems plausible that this beloved disciple is one who provided eyewitness testimony to the life of Jesus

<sup>6</sup> Lynn H. Cohick discusses the important bond between mothers and their adult sons in her *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians: Illuminating Ancient Ways of Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 148.

<sup>7</sup> For a clear discussion with recommendations for sources that span a range of interpretations, see Karen H. Jobes, *John through Old Testament Eyes: A Background and Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2021), 19–23.

<sup>8</sup> John H. Walton and D. Brent Sandy, *The Lost World of Scripture: Ancient Literary Culture and Biblical Authority* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2013).

of Nazareth. It could be his and Mary's shared memory that led to the recounting of this conversation.<sup>9</sup>

These few details are enough to grant the basic outline of the scene, setting the stage for a focus on the theme of vision, which the evangelist emphasizes in multiple ways.

### THE EVANGELIST'S EMPHASIS ON VISION AT THE CROSS

Verse 26 begins with Jesus's vision. At this point he sees his mother, even though verse 25 indicates that she and the others have been standing there for some amount of time. He also sees the beloved disciple standing with her. It is curious that the evangelist had not chosen to mention his presence in verse 25, for he becomes vital to the conversation that unfolds. Possibly the author wants to highlight Jesus's own perception, which zeroes in on his mother and his beloved disciple at this point, leading the reader to do the same, especially since they are just learning of his presence in this verse.

In the company of this group Jesus sees his mother and addresses her as "Woman," a form of address he uses often in this Gospel. This is the second time he has thus addressed her—previously in his only other conversation with her, which takes place at the wedding of Cana (John 2:4). In both of these instances of address, Jesus's word achieves a distancing effect: first, when he is about to go on mission and, second, when he is about to die.<sup>10</sup> He talks to the Samaritan woman the same way (4:21), as well as to the woman caught in the act of adultery (8:10), and, after the resurrection, to Mary Magdalene (20:13, 15). Jesus uses this form of address once in Matthew, with the Canaanite woman (15:28), and once in Luke, with the disabled woman (13:12), indicating that this is a remembered form of Jesus's speech but especially frequent and therefore prominent in John. Although it might strike readers today as unusual or even abrasive, in the recounted conversation the term clearly displays no dismissiveness. Jesus's words are, first and foremost, concerned with the care of his mother and his friend, care expressed even when he is undergoing his darkest hour.

For the second time the evangelist employs the term for sight. Jesus commands his mother to look. The object of her vision should be

<sup>9</sup> Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 397.

<sup>10</sup> Miller, *Women in John's Gospel*, 110.

her son. Before moving on to what Jesus says to the beloved disciple, pausing here adds a poignant layer of meaning. Mary is brave enough to be near him, to risk repercussions and shame. She wants him to know she is with him to whatever degree she can be. She cannot bear his burden, but she can stand close. If the other evangelists offer a subtle critique of the men and women who stand at a distance as an echo of the Psalms, Mary and these women have avoided that charge. They are near, and yet, nearness does not mean visual attention. According to Levitical law, it would not have been appropriate for her to look upon the naked body of her adult son (Lev 18:6).<sup>11</sup>

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In my teaching of the Gospels, I have often included a section on Jesus in film. As a class we watch visual representations of the Gospels. No matter how many times I've seen the scenes, I feel compelled to look down during the crucifixion. It is too hard to watch. If this is the case for me as I observe Christian art, how much more so for Jesus's own mother, as she is present at the actual event. It seems quite likely that it would have been hard for her to look.

With this address, Jesus, likely grateful for the nearness of her body, now calls for her eyes. "Behold your son!" (John 19:26). Before he directs her attention elsewhere, to the beloved disciple, she would have focused on him. She would have had to take in the sight of her son, the one she carried, bore, nursed, raised, and followed, her son bleeding on the cross. She would have seen the sign above his head, mockingly proclaiming the truth Gabriel had promised to her (Luke 1:32–33). With blood from the thorns leaving a crown-like halo on his brow (John 19:2), she would have read the sign as a painfully ironic proclamation: "Here is your son on his throne." Had she known initially

<sup>11</sup> Later traditions record that she was moved by the shame of his nakedness and offered her veil as his loincloth. About this tradition, Richard Viladesau states, "[It is] a detail that may explain the diaphanous loincloth worn by Jesus in a number of late medieval depictions," in his *The Beauty of the Cross: The Passion of Christ in Theology and the Arts from the Catacombs to the Eve of the Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 119.

what she was witnessing now, would she have had the fortitude to say yes (Luke 1:38)? The sword that Simeon prophesied, in that moment, lodged in deep (2:35).

As Mary is looking at her son, he speaks again, this time to the disciple. He asks him to look as well, to begin to see Mary as his mother. Now the double meaning of the statement about her son becomes clear. Jesus will no longer be able to care for her, but he ensures that his friend will do that work. The words follow a pattern similar to an adoption motif, but this is the son making sure his mother is cared for.<sup>12</sup> She was surely thankful to have the disciple's care in a society in which it was good for women to have children to care for them, but surely she was sad that her son's death necessitated this transfer. Moreover, the exchange is not an equal one. The incarnate Lord had been her protector, and now it is his disciple. Because Jesus will soon be taken from them, they need to give their attention to one another.

Readers are invited to linger with Mary and the disciple's vision because the evangelist does not say they depart at this point. Instead, the narrative strings the next statements of Jesus close to this one. Given the likelihood of her presence, next Mary would hear him say, "I'm thirsty." Maybe not all mothers experience this, but since I had the privilege of nursing my children, I experience a guttural embodied reaction to their thirst. No matter how old they get, there is something somatic, outside of my control, that results in a bone-deep desire to assuage their thirst. It is certain that Mary would have nursed Jesus, given her time, culture, and economic status, so maybe she felt the same. John tells us that a vessel of sour wine stood by and "they" put it up to his lips (19:29). Earlier Jesus had rejected a wine mixed with myrrh (Matt 27:34; Mark 15:23). In this later offering, Matthew and Mark attribute this act to those who think he's calling for Elijah (Matt 27:48–49; Mark 15:36) and Luke to the soldiers (23:36), but in no instance does it say that he receives that wine. Conversely, for John's Gospel, the last "they" in the narrative is John and Mary. It is easy to see them working together to alleviate his need in whatever way they can, and this Gospel alone says that he receives what they give him (John 19:30). To take this drink would do Jesus little good since in just a moment he would give up his life, so possibly he takes it for her

<sup>12</sup> Miller cites Tobit 7:12 as a parallel, "From now on you are her brother, behold she is your sister," in *Women in John's Gospel*, 110.

sake. He receives the gift she gives him so she can know that even in his excruciating death, he did not die thirsty because, even as she had done in his infancy, she had made sure he got something to drink.

If Mary was still watching, and John gives no indication that she was not, she would have heard Jesus utter that last weighty theological statement: “It is finished” (John 19:30). She would have realized that he had died—if not at his last breath, then surely at the gruesome piercing of his side, a further insult to the body of her son. While this may have provided some relief that his suffering was finally over, death—the moment of death—inevitably brings the pain of finality. She was there at his first moment of life. When she said yes, his incarnate life had begun as the Spirit overshadowed her (Luke 1:38). Here she stood at the end of that same incarnate life, when he expelled his spirit. There is no disciple, no friend, no witness who can ever come close to her knowledge of Jesus the Messiah. She saw him, her son, in ways that no one else ever could, from beginning to end.

Mary’s pain does not end with his last breath. Because the beloved disciple stays (John 19:35), and she is in his care, it is likely that she does as well. They would have seen the soldier pierce his side, the blood and water flow out, evidence of the finality of death (19:34). No evangelists say what she does at this moment, but the gap has been amply filled by Christian art. In the form of poetry, Bernard of Clairvaux reflects on what this would have meant for her. He recognizes that since Jesus had already died, “the cruel lance did not touch his soul at all, though it opened his side. . . . No it pierced your soul instead. . . . I am sure that, for you, what you felt in sharing your son’s Passion was even worse than the sensation of physical suffering.”<sup>13</sup> In Christian visual art, the *Pietà*, Mary holding the dead body of her son, captures the tenderness and grief better than thousands of words could ever describe.

## THE THEOLOGICAL MEANING OF MARY AT THE CROSS

While this account of Mary at the cross is powerful, it is a brief one, and did not often capture the sustained attention of early commentators

<sup>13</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermo infra Octavam Assumptionis* 14, quoted in Luigi Gambero, *Mary in the Middle Ages: The Blessed Virgin Mary in the Thought of Medieval Latin Theologians*, trans. Thomas Buffer (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 141.



who, by virtue of the need to formulate christological doctrine, were much more interested in Mary's role in the Incarnation and, therefore, Matthew and Luke's recounting thereof. In the twelfth century, however, the focus pivoted to this moment at the cross.<sup>14</sup> The pain she must have experienced there in watching her son die was connected with the pains of childbirth as captured in Jesus's statement in John 16:21, "Whenever a woman gives birth, she has pain, because her hour has come." This connection provides a way to understand his calling her "Woman." While it might make more sense for Jesus to speak to unknown women in this way, to do so with his mother seems odd. John very well might be using it as a signpost to a deeper symbolism.

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The mention of "hour" immediately connects to John's use of this term for the cross and resurrection (John 2:4; 8:20; 12:27; 13:1; 17:1). This was Jesus's hour to be lifted up in death, but it was also the hour of pain for his mother. In this experience of intense grief, Jesus pronounced her the mother of the beloved disciple, who, as one unnamed, could easily symbolize all disciples. Hence, this moment of pain for her became interpreted as the moment in which she was giving spiritual birth to the faithful.

The terms "woman" and "mother" opened the door to several symbolic interpretations. Like the first "woman" Eve, she is present at the beginning of the new creation. The water she observes pouring from Jesus's side connects to John's theme of the water of life (4:14). Similarly, the blood from his side evokes his blood that gives life (6:53–56).<sup>15</sup> She plays a role in the formation of the community of her

<sup>14</sup> Gambero, *Mary in the Middle Ages*, 107–8.

<sup>15</sup> Miller, *Women in John's Gospel*, 115.

son, by being named as the mother of the beloved disciple in a way that evokes how she contributed to the formation of the physical body of her son as his mother.<sup>16</sup> The anonymity of the beloved disciple in the text provides an inviting space for readers, no matter their ethnicity, to imagine themselves as close to Jesus. In that place of proximity, the beloved disciple, proclaimed by Jesus as her son, represents all Christians, who can now think of Mary as their mother.

A piety of connecting with Mary as one's spiritual mother grew in prominence among medieval Christians. Eadmer of Canterbury states the logic in this way: "O Lady, if your Son became our Brother through you, have you not become our Mother through him?"<sup>17</sup> Because of her son's passion, Rupert of Deutz says, she gave birth to the salvation of us all. It is not necessary to assert that she is co-savior with her son, but the reason for which he came, the reason for which she gave birth to him, was fulfilled in the cross and resurrection. By giving birth to him she gave birth to the reality of salvation. Her presence at the cross being proclaimed as mother by Jesus solidifies her maternal relation to those who receive the benefit of his salvation.

In addition to the personal piety of imagining Mary as mother, some also saw her presence as an example of communal dynamics among her followers. Some interpreted the expiration of the spirit upon the moment of Jesus's death as the gift of the Holy Spirit to Mary and the beloved disciple just as he will breathe the Spirit upon the disciples in the upper room.<sup>18</sup> This suggested that her role as mother signified authority. Philip of Harveng imagined that as mother, Mary guided the apostles into truth and trained them in faithfulness.<sup>19</sup> Others have wondered if there was a role of "spiritual mother" in early Christian communities that was caused by or reflected in the recording of this event.<sup>20</sup>

None of us can experience what Mary did, but we can imagine what it might have been like to be present at the death of Jesus. Through that scriptural imagination, readers can utilize her example

<sup>16</sup> Colleen M. Conway, *Men and Women in the Fourth Gospel: Gender and the Johanne Characterization* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature Press, 1999), 83.

<sup>17</sup> Eadmer of Canterbury, *De conceptione*, quoted in Gambero, *Mary in the Middle Ages*, 123.

<sup>18</sup> Miller, *Women in John's Gospel*, 111.

<sup>19</sup> Gambero, *Mary in the Middle Ages*, 180.

<sup>20</sup> Miller, *Women in John's Gospel*, 115–118.

and join her in taking the risk of being near a crucified Lord, can respect the honor God paid to her for her faithfulness, and can find comfort in one who knows what it is to be present in the midst of unspeakable pain. ☩

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