

Anti- or Pro-Mary Passage? John 2:4: “What is it between you and me, o Woman?”

Bible-based Christians sometimes feel historical Christian churches (Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox) are always praising Mary but don't seem to have much helpful to explain troubling passages of Scripture, which to 20th century eyes, look to put Mary in her place for being – at the very least – less than perfect. It is rather foolish to dismiss *Sola Scriptura* or Bible-alone based Christianity on this score because sometimes historical Christianity does not really make any obvious efforts to engage the literal texts of the Scriptures verbatim or at least to try to show how Scripture interprets Scripture in favor of historical Christianity. This results in an understandable suspicion by Bible-alone Christians since a lot of “traditions” seems to be superadded onto Bible reading, but these same traditions don't seem to help much with the literal meaning of the text (even if for most Christians this is always in their modern-day-translation-alone reading, since Greek is a real challenge to learn!). Let's take a look at yet another passage where Mary seems, in 20th century English, to be possibly corrected for imprudence by the God-man Jesus:

When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, “They have no more wine.”

Woman, **what is it between you and me** (*ti emoi kai soi, o gynai*) ?” Jesus replied. “My hour has not yet come.” (John 2:3-4)

This article in the line with our previous article, on Luke 11:27-28, where Mary is sometimes thought by English-speaking Christians to get corrected by Jesus; whereas the real message for Bible-alone and historical Christians was demonstrated in that previous article: Mary was first to hear the word of God of completely keep it. Like other about 80-90 percent of John's citations are from the Greek Old Testament, but let us address some good instincts by English-speaking Bible-alone Christians that are spot-on that make their interpretation of this passage: “What is it between you and me?” entirely understandable. Doesn't this sound like a disagreement? In fact, in the Old Testament and the New Testament it *normally* is a fight, even if one big exception proves the rule that will be important for us to understand John 2:4. Let's start with what every Bible-alone Christian who knows this saying gets 80 percent of the time correct: This phrase is used for enemies! Let's list every known instance in the Greek language:

Then Jephthah sent messengers to the Ammonite king with the question: “**What is between you and me** (*ti emoi kai soi*) that you have attacked my country?” (LXX Judges 11:12).

But Necho sent messengers to him, saying, “**What [quarrel] is there, o king of Judah, between you and me** (*ti emoi kai soi*)? It is not you I am attacking at this time, but the house with which I am at war. God has told me to hurry; so stop opposing God, who is with me, or he will destroy you.” (LXX 2 Chronicles 35:21)

And after each act by Josiah of this kind, it happened that Pharaoh the king came to raise ware in Charkamu on the Euphrates, and he came out for a response to one under Josiah and the king of Egypt sent to that one someone; he said to him: “**What is it between you and me, o king of Judah** (*ti emoi kai soi, o Basileu Ioudaias*)?” (LXX Ezra 1:24)

He shouted at the top of his voice, “**What [is it] between you and me, o Jesus (ti emoi kai soi, o Iēsou)** Son of the Most High God? In God’s name don’t torture me!” (Mark 5:7)

So aren’t you yourself accustomed to say to a person: “**What is it between you and me, o man (τί ἐμοὶ καὶ σοί, ἄνθρωπε)**”? Are not my own evils enough for me?” And you speak well, for your own evils are enough for you [why concern yourself over those of others?]. (Epictetus, Dissertations, 2.19.19)¹

Notice, John 2:4 is one of the rare several passages in all of Greek literature with the phrase: “**What is it between you and me?**” Without yet looking at our key passage – the exception to the rule – it looks like Jesus and Mary did not have domestic bliss...In fact, Jesus appears rather miffed at mom and is using passages that in Hebrew or Greek (and presumably Aramaic), clearly mean: “**Why are you starting a fight between us?**” Also, notice that in almost always passages, the “**O x**” follows. First, I ask the question, then I address the person by name: “**o king,**” “**o man**” “**o Jesus.**” John 2:4 is the same: “**o woman.**”

Now, among my citations, why do I even care about Epictetus? Well, Paul cites the same exact rhetorician and his vocabulary as in Epictetus when composing Galatians and Romans! Paul was trained in rhetoric at the Stoic school of Tarsus. This school was founded by Athenodorus of Tarsus who also trained and inspired the court philosopher of Emperor Augustus in Rome, which connects St. Paul’s founder of his rhetorical school in Tarsus with Epictetus’s rhetoric teacher in Rome, since Athenodorus was the direct inspiration for both. However, elsewhere in his lectures, Epictetus admits to constantly conversing with Jewish philosophers and this saying – believe it or not – is exclusive to Jews in Greek! Epictetus is likely showing that he has absorbed Roman Jewish wisdom (possibly even Christian sayings since Epictetus mentions their use of baptism in his lectures!) in typical Stoic fashion whereby they adopt all wisdom that is true. Here, we have the closest saying to Jesus in New Testament. Matthew 6:34 is the very same saying the Jesus cites as Jewish wisdom: “Today’s evil is enough [why worry about another day with all we have to worry about today?].” However, Epictetus knows this Jesus/Jewish wisdom phrase combined with question: “**Why is there fight between you me...don’t we have enough evil without our fighting?**” Notice, Epictetus shouts: “o man.” This is key, for Jesus, likewise shouts: “o woman.” Wow! This looks grim for traditional or historical Christians who want to hold onto the idea that Mary is only honored and never rebuked for bad behavior in the New Testament. For now, I agree, every instance we’ve seen includes: (1.) **A disagreement between two persons**, (2.) **a subsequent fight**, (3.) **the invocation of the person’s name who is the adversary not a friend!**

The Real Source of John 2:4: Jesus as the New Elijah

Using the principle of Scripture interpreting Scripture, we must try to understand what Jesus’s experience at the wedding of Cana with his first public miracle is supposed to accomplish. What is he signifying, what is he teaching, what role does Mary play in the realization of Jesus’s

¹ This is the same saying as Jesus knew from the Jews: μή οὖν μεριμνήσητε εἰς τὴν αὔριον, ἢ γὰρ αὔριον μεριμνήσει αὐτῆς· ἀρκετὸν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ ἡ κακία αὐτῆς (Matthew 6:34).

prophetic, messianic, and divine mission? Well, let's take a look at what the author John is doing when he adjusts the Aramaic or (less likely) local Hebrew conversations and translates them by carefully referring to the language and type of Jesus in the Old Testament, Elijah:

(LXX =) 1 Kings 17:7-24	John 2:2-12
<p>7 Sometime later the brook dried up because there had been no rain in the land. 8 Then the word of the Lord came to him: 9 “Go at once to Zarephath in the region of Sidon and stay there. I have directed a widow there to supply you with food.” 10 So he went to Zarephath. When he came to the town gate, a widow was there gathering sticks. He called to her and asked, “Would you bring me a little water in a jar so I may have a drink?” 11 As she was going to get it, he called, “And bring me, please, a piece of bread.” 12 “As surely as the Lord your God lives,” she replied, “I don’t have any bread—only a handful of flour in a jar and a little olive oil in a jug. [...] we may eat it—and die.” 13 Elijah said to her, “Don’t be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small loaf of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son. 14 For this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the Lord sends rain on the land.’” 15 She went away and did as Elijah had told her. So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family. 16 For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the Lord spoken by Elijah. 17 Sometime later the son of the woman who owned the house became ill. He grew worse and worse, and finally stopped breathing. 18 She said to Elijah, “What [do you have against] me and you, o man (Τί ἐμοὶ καὶ σοί, ἄνθρωπε) of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?” 19 “Give me your son,” Elijah replied. He took him from her arms, carried him to the upper room where he was staying, and laid him on his bed. 20 Then he cried out to the Lord, “Lord my God, have you brought tragedy even on this widow I am staying with, by causing her son to die?” 21 Then he stretched himself out on the boy three times and cried out to the Lord, “Lord my God, let this boy’s life return to him!” 22 The Lord heard Elijah’s cry, and the boy’s life returned to him, and he lived. 23 Elijah picked up the child and carried him down from the room into the house. He gave him to his mother and said, “Look, your son is alive!” 24 Then the woman said to Elijah, “Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth.”</p>	<p>2 On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus’ mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding.³ When the wine was gone, Jesus’ mother said to him, “They have no more wine.” “Woman, why do you involve me, o woman (τι εμοι και σου, gynai)?” Jesus replied. “My hour has not yet come.”⁵ His mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.”⁶ Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons.⁷ Jesus said to the servants, “Fill the jars with water”; so they filled them to the brim.⁸ Then he told them, “Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet.” They did so,⁹ and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside¹⁰ and said, “Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now.”¹¹ What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.¹² After this he went down to Capernaum with his mother and brothers and his disciples. There they stayed for a few days.</p>

The mystery is solved! John writes his Gospel conscientious that Elijah (who was raised into heaven on God's chariot where only God typically drives) was meant to be an imperfect anticipation of Jesus. Both raised the dead, the miracle most symbolic of God's power to give life.

Notice the reasons why John the Evangelist is careful to quote 1 Kings 17: **Mary** is likely, by now a widow (since Joseph never is mentioned to follow him), while **the widow** known to Elijah also has many children she looks after. This is not dissimilar from the tradition that Joseph had a family or children prior to marrying Mary (even if this is ultimately not that important). The point is that **Mary and the widow** are the same and that both have a child who will die and who will be raised with the sacred number three: Jesus in three days, the widow's boy by three ceremonial acts. Both see the setting for the encounter with a person called: "**woman,**" to include some occasion **to drink water**. **However, in both cases, the real miracle is not the water** but occasioned by it. For Elijah, this is the moment where he multiplies **a container of oil (and flour)**, while for Jesus the water is the occasion to change its very essence or nature into something healthful and joy-filled for mankind; **namely, wine**. Elijah is in a situation of unbelief and unfaithfulness leading to the destruction of Israel, where only **a widow** is his ally; whereas Jesus is not in a funeral context but **a wedding** context where he is preparing to celebrate the restoration of true kingship to Israel. Elijah had to flee East of the Jordan to be served by the widow, while Jesus's wedding takes place within Israel's borders and is a sign of restoration and celebration. Elijah's miracle is private to one just **woman**, but the wedding feast miracle is public to manifest **by a public woman** the change in the fortunes of Israel back to faithfulness.

So, in this context, notice the exact nature of the just widow's **question**: "**What is it between you and me, o man (of God)?**" She is afraid that her son dying is first a punishment of sin that is delivered upon the head of her boy. Instead, Elijah demonstrates that **the opposite is true; she is not an unjust woman but the coming of Elijah has nonetheless seemingly brought tragedy to the household of the woman by her son dying. He prays that she see that this is not the case!** In the **old Testament type and the New Testament fulfillment, the woman** is the occasion for the man of God (whether Elijah or Jesus) to perform a miracle. The **woman** in both instances does not understand the larger picture of the holy man's destiny or prechosen lot by divine will; but in both cases the woman is only seemingly at odds with the holy man. In the first instance, Elijah shows her that she is not sinful and doesn't deserve a dead son, and in the second instance Jesus uses this very phrase and reverses it to illustrate a point. With Elijah, when the widow cried out "o man (of God)," it was adversarial but not indicative of the prophet being sinful but only problematic because the widow thought God punishing or having something against her; likewise, Jesus cries out "o woman (of God)," who is only apparently against the will of God by asking him to do his first public miracle on her own volition. Since "woman of God" is not biblical, we cannot expect John to use a phrase "woman of God." Typically "woman" is left to stand on its own since this is how God and Adam address the prototypical woman, Eve. Mary does not know that the wedding-miracle is coming and that it is not *primarily* due to her wishes but *primarily* divine intention, all along; to introduce Jesus publicly by a wedding feast as the savior of Israel (wedding not funeral!) to bring back faithfulness to God and to cause belief among Israelites in his divine mission. In both cases, the **woman widow** and the **woman Mary** are unwittingly and only superficially against the greater divine plan: the widow by her "**what is it...o man**" and Jesus by his "**what is it...o woman**". In reality, they are both occasions for God to manifest his real plan to demonstrate his greatness to the people he means to save from sin and from death. Jesus's "**o woman**" is reversing the widow's apparent disagreement with Elijah and showing that he and his mother **are only**

seemingly at odds but really both want what is according to God’s will. Jesus underlines that Mary and he seem on the surface (Like the widow and Elijah) to have different plans, but his subsequent obedience to Mary’s plan, like Elijah to the widow, demonstrates a deeper divine plan of two people being allies that lead to the glory of God unfolding in history. The result is that the disciples (in the Gospel) and the widow (in the Old Testament) are brought to believe more strongly in the mission of Jesus by Mary, just as Israel had with Elijah via the widow.

CONCLUSION

It is entirely understandable that Christians of whatever sort today find in John 2:4 a mystery and worry about Mary’s status. Even saints of the past were aware that only an attentive reader of both Old and New Testaments would be able to see the deeper meaning. The best summation of this is St. Romanos the hymnographer writing in his native Greek around 550 AD:

But Christ seeing His mother saying, “Grant me this request,”
At once said to her: “What do you wish, woman, my hour has not come.”
Certain men made use of this saying as a pretext for impiety;
They said that Christ, submitted to necessity,
They said that He was a slave to periods of time. . . .
“Now answer, my child,” said the all-holy mother of Christ,
“Thou who dost control with measurement the periods of time, how, my son and Lord, dost Thou await a time?
Thou who hast regulated the division of the seasons, how dost thou await a season?
Thou who art the creator of the visible and the invisible,
Thou who, as master, dost day and night regulate
The ceaseless revolutions, as Thou dost will them—
Thou who hast defined the years in beautifully ordered cycles—
How, then, dost Thou await a time for the miracle which I ask of Thee
Who hast in wisdom created all things?”
“I knew before you told me, revered Virgin, that the wine was just beginning to give out for them,”
The Ineffable and Merciful straightway answered His holy mother.
“I know all the concerns of your heart which you set in motion in this matter; For within yourself you reasoned as follows: ‘Necessity now summons my son to a miracle,
And He puts it off under the pretext of “the time.” ’
Holy mother, learn now the meaning of the delay,
For when you know it, I shall grant you this favor,
I, who in wisdom have created all things.²

And again the same Romanos writes:

“For if they had understood all these things at the time when they saw the awesome miracles,
They would understand that I am God before time, even though I have become man.
But now, contrary to order, before the teaching, you have asked for miracles;
And it is for this reason that I delayed a short time in answer to you:
If I was waiting for the time to perform miracles,
It was for this reason alone.
But, since it is necessary that parents be honored by their children,
I shall pay observance to you, Mother, for I am able to do all things,

² Romanos, (Poem) *Kontakion on the Marriage at Cana*, in *John 1-10*, ed. J. Elowsky (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 92-93 (7.10-12).

I, who have in wisdom created all things.”³

Jesus could have only obeyed his mother if there was no conflict, if her timely, earthly good intentions aligned with the divine intention or plan. Only if Mary ordered Jesus to do the will of the Father could Jesus have obeyed. The mystery is how Mary – with limited access to the divine cloud in the sky – was able to choose what had already been planned...this is the mystery of how grace can influence Mary’s choice even her knowledge of God’s providence is not complete, for she is a mere creature.

So what does John 2:4 prove? What is it that we *must believe* about Mary? Actually, the conclusion is modest: Neither does Jesus rebuke, nor does he grant her any special status that we can discern; rather, he acknowledges that – like her type in Elijah’s widow – she has an important historical role in pointing to the mission of her son. Jesus is teaching, however, in John’s Gospel that apparent contradictions are just that, the deeper meaning of the relationship between Jesus and his mother always needs to be read in light of the role that Mary plays in the history of salvation; namely, she is a complement and a help to Jesus’s ministry and she does not thwart or detract from it. Even if we cannot say that there is anything over the top in either a positive or negative direction of interpretation on this passage, we can conclude that it is a passage that shows the harmony of the Gospels; namely, just as Luke 1, Luke 11:28 clearly testify to the rather privileged life of grace and holiness of Mary and her promise of perpetual virginity and justification from before the annunciation, so too John 2:4 is very much concerned with supplementing another vignette of Mary’s life with her son Jesus to explain how what was apparently the topic of some interest, if not gossip, about the family of Jesus is rooted in Jesus fulfilling his type, Elijah, as the one worthy and divine to ride on the chariot throne of Yahweh and to raise the dead, no longer passively by the miracle of divine power, but rather by its active possession and exercise. In short, Mary’s role in John’s Gospel is entirely consistent with her role as a heroine in Luke so that a harmony, not cacophony, of witnesses speak about the mother of Jesus in the four Gospels.

³ Ibid., 7.12-16