



“Woman” and/or “Mother”? An Examination of the Address γύναι in John 2:4 and 19:26

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Abstract: The Johannine Jesus addresses his mother using the vocative γύναι/“woman” at the wedding at Cana (2:4) and at the Cross (19:26). Scholars are divided over the precise implications of a son addressing his mother as γύναι, since no clear parallels exist in Greek literature. This paper examines how the evangelist’s reference to Jesus’ mother as μήτηρ and Jesus’ own address to her as γύναι function within these narratives, suggesting that they construct a dual identity for Jesus’ mother. Examples drawn from 4 Maccabees help to illuminate the implications of γυνή and μήτηρ when used in reference to a mother. In addition, the study engages documentary papyri that attest to instances in which a mother is addressed as κυρία, thereby challenging the assumption that maternal address was restricted to the term μήτηρ alone.

Keywords: Gospel of John, Mother of Jesus, μήτηρ, γύναι, John 2:4, John 19:26

All four Gospels refer to Jesus’ mother, although the Gospel of John does so without explicitly naming her. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus’ mother does not engage in any dialogue. She appears together with Jesus’ brothers when they come to see him in the Synoptic parallel accounts (Mark 3:31–35 par. Matt 12:46–50 par. Luke 8:19–21). She is further referenced when people refer to Jesus, asking, “Is this not the carpenter, the son of Mary?” (Mark 6:3).

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus’ mother is identified by name as Mary (Matt 1:16, 18, 20). She appears in the genealogy (1:16) and plays a significant role in the infancy narrative: in the account of the birth of the Messiah (1:18–25), in the visit of the Magi (2:11), and in the flight to and return from Egypt (2:13–21). She also appears in the Synoptic parallel account mentioned above. Luke likewise names her Mary (Luke 1:27) and presents her as a prominent figure in the infancy narrative. She is addressed by the angel Gabriel, visits Elizabeth, and proclaims the Magnificat (1:26–56). She continues to play an active role throughout the narrative. She accompanies Joseph to Bethlehem for the census, gives birth to Jesus, witnesses the visit of the shepherds, and participates in the presentation in the Temple, where she encounters Simeon and Anna. She then returns to Nazareth and appears again in the episode of the boy Jesus in the Temple (2:1–52), and finally in the Synoptic parallel account mentioned earlier.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus' mother is not identified by name but is referred to as ἡ μήτηρ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ and ἡ μήτηρ αὐτοῦ by the narrator and addressed as γύναι by Jesus. She appears in two key episodes that have no parallels in the Synoptic Gospels: the wedding at Cana (John 2:1–12) and the specific account at the crucifixion (19:25–27). She is also mentioned when the Jews refer to Jesus as “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?” (John 6:42). Of all the Gospel accounts, only in John does Jesus address his mother with the vocative γύναι, doing so consistently in the two scenes in which she appears.¹

The vocative γύναι appears nine times² in the New Testament, excluding the text-critically uncertain passage of John 7:53–8:11.³ Of these, Jesus uses it seven times in the Gospels, with four occurrences in the Gospel of John. In two of these instances, he uses γύναι to address his mother (2:4; 19:26),⁴ which is the focus of this study. The tendency to compare Jesus' address to his mother as γύναι to that of the Samaritan woman (4:21) and Mary Magdalene (20:15), whom Jesus also addresses as γύναι, seems to overlook the difference between addressing one's own mother as γύναι and addressing a woman one does not know.⁵ Hence, this study seeks to examine why Jesus addresses his mother as γύναι in the Gospel of John. Scholars generally acknowledge the absence of a corresponding parallel in Greek literature in which a son addresses his mother as γύναι. This research is not undertaken with the expectation of reaching immediate results for the interpretation of 2:4 and 19:26. Instead, it aims to provide background information on one dimension of the potential world behind the Johannine text, with the hope that the results can at least serve to caution against certain overly facile and under-informed claims.

This paper analyses how the evangelist's reference to Jesus' mother as μήτηρ and Jesus' address to her as γύναι present a dual identity for Jesus' mother, with the discussion structured in five parts: (1) an overview of recent scholarship on Jesus' address to his mother as γύναι; (2) an examination of John 2:4 and 19:26; (3) an examination of the use of the vocative γύναι in 4 Maccabees; (4) an examination of the use of κυρία in the documentary papyri; and finally; (5) an examination of μήτηρ and γύναι at Cana and at the Cross.

¹ If not stated otherwise, the Greek quotations from the New Testament are taken from Aland et al., 2012. Unless indicated otherwise, the biblical quotations in English are taken from *The Holy Bible: Containing the Old and New Testaments with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*. New Revised Standard Version (1989).

² Cf. 1 Cor 7:16; Matt 15:28; Luke 13:12; 22:57; John 2:4, 6; 4:21; 19:26; 20:13, 15.

³ For a detailed discussion, see Knust 2006, 485–536; Knust and Wasserman, 2019, 15–344.

⁴ Gert M. Knepper (2015, 167) argues that “Under no circumstances should γύναι be translated with a term meaning ‘mother,’ for this is exactly what the text so strikingly avoids communicating.”

⁵ However, Materou Ashe (2024) does not distinguish between the Johannine women addressed by Jesus as γύναι. She treats them collectively as part of the Johannine motif of “Jesus' self-revelation.”

1. An Overview of Recent Theories on Jesus’ Address to His Mother as γυναίκα

There are four main theories in recent scholarship regarding Jesus’ address to his mother as γυναίκα. We characterise these theories as distancing, relativising, transitioning, and symbolising.

Proponents of the distancing theory argue that Jesus’ use of γυναίκα to address his mother is intentional, aiming to create distance between them. For instance, John McHugh (1975, 363) argues that “Jesus was drawing attention away from Mary’s blood relationship with him by addressing her as ‘woman.’”⁶ McHugh’s reference to Jesus’ mother as “Mary” and his claim that Jesus distances himself from his mother are not grounded in the Johannine text, since John neither names her nor explicitly states that Jesus distances himself from her. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza advances this line of argument further by stating that Jesus’ address γυναίκα “distances Jesus from his biological mother and rejects any claims she might have on him because of her family relationship to him.” (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983, 327) In her view, Jesus’ mother is presented on the same level as the Samaritan woman (John 4:21) and Mary Magdalene (20:13), thereby portraying her as a faithful and exemplary disciple (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983, 327).⁷ A similar perspective is offered by Alicia D. Myers, who contends that by calling her “woman,” Jesus distances her from the biological relationship, placing her on the same level as other women in the Gospel of John (Myers 2017, 1–3). Hartwig Thyen (2015, 153) situates Jesus’ distancing from his mother within a broader narrative framework, contending that Jesus’ use of γυναίκα when addressing his mother parallels Mark 3:34–35, where Jesus emphasises his true kindred, thereby shifting his priority from biological family ties to discipleship (cf. Beutler 2017, 153).⁸ In addition, several scholars argue that in these two scenes Jesus creates distance from his family, grounding their interpretations in his responses and actions rather than in the term γυναίκα itself.⁹ These interpretations share the view that Jesus’ use of the address γυναίκα and his responses to his mother

⁶ A similar perspective is offered by John Painter (1991, 50) who argues that Jesus refrains from acknowledging the conventional mother-son bond.

⁷ See also Ben III Witherington (1984, 85) who argues that as in the Gospel of John, Mary must navigate the tension between physical and spiritual family. In John 19:26, the evangelist portrays her as “woman,” rather than primarily as Jesus’ mother, when she is incorporated into the community of faith.

⁸ See also Williams 1997, 688.

⁹ For instance, Beverly Roberts Gaventa (1999, 88) argues that the Johannine Jesus distances himself from his biological family as seen in John 2:3–4, culminating in 19:25–27 where entrusting his mother to the beloved disciple signifies his final separation from his earthly family. Hans-Josef Klauck (2020, 22) likewise sees Jesus distancing himself from his mother, though he notes her eventual incorporation into the *familia Dei* in 19:25–27. Turid Karlsen Seim (2005, 369–73) interprets Jesus’ response in 2:4 as expressing distance that highlights his primary relationship with his heavenly Father. Similarly, Adele Reinhartz (1999, 94) suggests that Jesus’ deliberate distancing from his mother is evident in his reference to God as his “father” while addressing his mother as “woman.”

at Cana and at the Cross reflect his distancing himself from his biological family, especially his mother.

Scholars who propose a reading along the lines of a relativising theory hold that Jesus' address to his mother as *γύναι* aims to delineate the respective roles of his earthly mother and his heavenly Father (cf. Nalewaj 2010, 28).¹⁰ Herbert Preisker (1949, 212), for instance, posits that Jesus directs his attention toward heeding his Father, thereby refraining from an excessive emphasis on his mother. Similarly, Aleksandra Nalewaj (2010, 30) elaborates, "The author of the book was particularly careful not to overemphasise the importance of the mother of Jesus, but to present her true role in the historical-salvific work of her Son by means of the indicated titles." According to Nalewaj, the author of the Gospel of John intentionally refrained from placing excessive emphasis on the maternal role to prevent potential Christological errors. This is evidenced by the Johannine portrayal of Jesus addressing her simply as "Woman." As Nalewaj (2010, 28) interprets it, the use of the designation "Woman" serves to avoid presenting the maternal figure on a par with the heavenly Father.

Proponents of the transition theory suggest that Jesus' use of *γύναι* when addressing his mother typically signals a transition from an existing role within the narratives. Kenneth Mtata (2012, 1–12), for instance, identifies examples of such transitions in the narratives of the "Samaritan woman" (John 4:21) and "Mary Magdalene" (John 20:13, 15) (cf. Culpepper 1983, 10–11). Similarly, Jesus' address to his mother as *γύναι* (2:4; 19:26) is "neither a harsh nor a disrespectful retort," but rather denotes a transition from *γύναι* to *μήτηρ* within the narratives (Mtata 2012, 10–11).¹¹ For instance, following Jesus' address to his mother as *γύναι* in John 2:4, the text subsequently refers to her as *μήτηρ* in 2:5, and subsequent to Jesus' address to his mother as *γύναι*, she is depicted as the *μήτηρ* of the beloved disciple in 19:27 (Mtata 2012, 10). R. Alan Culpepper (1983, 133–34) proposes that Jesus' use of *γύναι* for his mother signifies a transition from one significant moment to another, namely, from standing by Jesus during the wedding at Cana (2:4)—when his hour was first mentioned—to standing by Jesus' hour at the Cross, as the mother associated with the giver of life (19:25–27).

Finally, scholars favouring a symbolising theory interpret Jesus' use of *γύναι* for his mother as symbolic of her role in salvation history. For example, Raymond E. Brown (1966, 109) contends that John portrays her as the mother of the Messiah who battles against the satanic serpent (Gen 3). The battle reaches its climax when she stands at the foot of the Cross and is entrusted with new offspring. Brown (1966, 109) concludes that "Mary is the new Eve." Although John does not

¹⁰ See also Preisker 1949, 211.

¹¹ Some scholars have argued that Jesus' use of *γύναι* conveys respect toward his mother, yet they offer little justification for this view, e.g., Quinn 2015, 155; Voinov 2018, 168.

name her, Brown consistently refers to Jesus’ mother as “Mary.” For Brown (1966, 107–9), Rev 12:17 reflects the backdrop of Gen 3:15, and these two texts provide a context for the Johannine Jesus’ address of his mother as “woman” (cf. Brown et al. 1978, 189–90; Kim 2004, 189). Similarly, Turid Karlsen Seim (1987, 61) emphasises Gen 3 and Rev 12 as the basis of Eve symbolism. Seim also argues that this symbolism positions Jesus’ mother not merely as a representative of women but as embodying a unique, universal role related to salvation (Ellis 1984, 271; Sloyan 1988, 34).

These interpretations fail to account for the literal use of the terms *γυνή* and *μητέρα* in the narratives of Cana and the Cross. The following discussion examines these terms and argues that they function as markers of a dual identity, illuminating the two roles of Jesus’ mother: as both woman and mother.

2. An Examination of the Use of *γύναι* in John 2:4 and 19:26

This section examines Jesus’ address to his mother as *γύναι* both at Cana and at the Cross. At Cana, when the wine ran out, Jesus’ mother informed him of the situation, saying, “They have no wine” (John 2:3). Jesus replied to her,

⁴τί ἐμοὶ καὶ σοί, *γύναι*; οὐπω ἤκει ἡ ὥρα μου.

⁴ ‘**Woman**, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.’

Jesus’ response reflects that the matter is not the concern of either of them but of the wedding family; in fact, Jesus includes her together with himself. Several scholars argue that Jesus’ response indicates a form of estrangement between Jesus and his mother.¹² Although Jesus reply indicates that his *ὥρα* had not yet come, the subsequent narrative shows that he nevertheless performs his first sign. In this regard, Judith M. Lieu’s argument that John parallels Jesus’ mother with the woman in labor in John 16:21, whose suffering marks the arrival of her “hour” seems overstated (Lieu 1998, 72–73). According to Lieu, Jesus’ mother is likewise called *γυνή* and is portrayed as having her own hour, positioned between Cana, where her hour has not yet come (2:4), and the cross, where that hour has arrived. Unlike the woman in 16:21, however, whose pain leads to joy, Jesus’ mother’s hour at the cross results

¹² Matthew S. Collins (1995, 104) states that an anti-kinship statement of Jesus can be seen in Jesus’ response to his mother at the wedding of Cana that reads *τί ἐμοὶ καὶ σοί, γύναι; οὐπω ἤκει ἡ ὥρα μου* (John 2:4). See also Seim (2005, 369–73) who argues that Jesus’ response to his mother *τί ἐμοὶ καὶ σοί, γύναι; οὐπω ἤκει ἡ ὥρα μου* (2:4) portrays the distance between him and his mother while portraying his intimate relationship with his heavenly Father.

in grief rather than glory (Lieu 1998, 72–73). Lieu’s attempt to parallel Jesus’ mother, addressed as “woman,” with the woman in labor does not adequately address the question of why Jesus calls his own mother “woman.”

Notably, Jesus addresses his mother only once using the vocative γύναι, while the narrator refers to her as ἡ μήτηρ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ (John 2:1, 3) and ἡ μήτηρ αὐτοῦ (2:5, 12). Jesus’ address as γύναι is an acknowledgment of his mother’s active involvement as a “woman” who attends to the needs of the Cana family. Her words to Jesus οἶνον οὐκ ἔχουσιν (2:3), and to the servants ὃ τι ἂν λέγη ὑμῖν ποιήσατε (2:5), emphasise her active involvement within the narrative. While the narrator emphasises her role as the “mother of Jesus,” Jesus emphasises her role as a “woman” attentive to the needs of the Cana family. This distinction in the use of the terms μήτηρ and γύναι can be seen in the scene at the Cross,

26 Ἰησοῦς οὖν ἰδὼν τὴν μητέρα καὶ τὸν μαθητὴν παρεστῶτα ὃν ἠγάπα, λέγει τῇ μητρὶ γύναι, ἴδε ὁ υἱός σου. 27 εἶτα λέγει τῷ μαθητῇ· ἴδε ἡ μήτηρ σου. καὶ ἀπ’ ἐκείνης τῆς ὥρας ἔλαβεν ὁ μαθητὴς αὐτὴν εἰς τὰ ἴδια.

26 When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, ‘**Woman**, here is your son.’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother.’ And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

At the Cross, just before his death, Jesus sees his mother and the beloved disciple standing near and addresses them saying to his mother γύναι, ἴδε ὁ υἱός σου and to the beloved disciple ἴδε ἡ μήτηρ σου (John 19:26–27). The narrative further states that the beloved disciple took her εἰς τὰ ἴδια (19:27). While her motherhood exists in relation to Jesus himself, in her womanhood she becomes a mother to the beloved disciple. As at Cana, Jesus addresses her using the vocative γύναι, while the narrator refers to her as ἡ μήτηρ αὐτοῦ (19:25, 26). He designates her as μήτηρ but in relationship to his beloved disciple (cf. ἴδε ἡ μήτηρ σου) (19:26). The implication in the narrator’s usage of μήτηρ is therefore different from Jesus’, as the former refers to a biological relationship, whereas the latter establishes a non-biological one. In other words, while the narrator highlights the biological relationship between Jesus and his mother, Jesus redirects her maternal role towards the beloved disciple.

The analysis of these scenes suggests that Jesus does not appear to distance himself from his mother. Rather, both the contexts and the terms μήτηρ and γύναι highlight distinct aspects of her identity: as mother and as woman. In what follows, we examine how scholars have distinguished between the dimensions of motherhood and womanhood.

For instance, Myers (2017, 1–3) argues that in the ancient context, masculinity was associated with perfection, while motherhood was regarded as the highest possible role for women, serving as a way to justify their presumed inferiority. However, as

Christianity emerged, instead of fully embracing literal motherhood, early Christian writings presented a range of ideals for women while still holding onto the idea of male superiority. Within their faith community, Christians used motherhood both as a theological concept and a debated ideal for female disciples. To establish this argument Myers examines the two passages in the Gospel of Luke that reference Jesus’ mother: Elizabeth’s blessing of Mary, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb” (Luke 1:42), and Jesus’ statement “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it” (Luke 11:28). Myers (2017, 1–3) critiques the tendency to conflate femininity and ideal womanhood with motherhood, a pattern that has been deeply embedded in Western societies and finds its origins in the Greco-Roman world. The pressure on both women and men to conform to traditional gender roles perpetuates a vision of masculinity as the standard of perfection, a perspective that was pervasive in the Mediterranean world. Within this framework, motherhood emerges as a primary path to perfection/salvation, reducing a woman’s worth to her reproductive capacity and marginalising those who are unable or unwilling to bear children. Myers’ discussion highlights the societal consciousness of the distinction between womanhood and motherhood.

From a psychological point of view, Adrienne Rich (1976, 12) elucidates how motherhood could affect womanhood. In her view, a woman who becomes a mother is considered to have undergone an irreversible change in her psyche, depending on the context and situation of her childbearing, fundamentally affecting her future as a woman. These experiences could be both positive and negative. While Myers emphasises the importance of motherhood in achieving societal/familial identity, Rich asserts that the experience of motherhood could shape the woman’s personal/emotional identity.

Notably, the distinction between motherhood and womanhood is exclusive to Jesus’ mother, setting her apart from the other Johannine women who are addressed simply as γυναίκα. The use of both terms, μήτηρ and γυναίκα, when referring to a mother, highlights two aspects of her identity. This argument is partially emphasised by Mary L. Coloe (2013, 213) who observes that Jesus’ mother plays an active role at Cana, by taking initiative, responding and directing the servants whereas at the Cross she is portrayed as passive, merely standing by and receiving directives. In this context, “Her presence, her being ‘woman and Mother’ is sufficient for the theological goal of the narrative to be completed as disciples become children of God (1:12).” (Coloe 2013, 213) Coloe notes that Jesus’ mother is presented simultaneously in her identity as a “woman” and in her role as a “mother,” but she does not elaborate on this distinction.¹³

¹³ Similarly, Francis J. Moloney (2009, 31–32) argues that these two terms are used to refer to Jesus’ mother at the outset of the Christian tradition as indicated in Gal 4:4; Mark 3:31–35; 6:3.

In the following discussion, we will consider several examples of the use of *γύναι* and *μήτηρ* in 4 Maccabees. These examples, although not spoken by a son or daughter, show how these terms can refer to a mother and help to illuminate the concept of dual identity.

3. An Examination of the Use of the Vocative *γύναι* in the Fourth Book of Maccabees

The scholarly consensus regarding the date of composition of 4 Maccabees varies: either the early 2nd century CE (deSilva 2006a, xiv) or 35 CE (Bickerman 2007, 271). In 4 Maccabees, two instances are noted where a mother is addressed as *γύναι*. Several scholars posit that 4 Maccabees provides background information to the Gospel of John.¹⁴ Significantly, the speakers and the mothers are not biologically related in these instances. However, a nuanced analysis of these examples offers insights into the dynamics of addressing a mother using the vocative *γύναι*. The following section examines 4 Macc 15:16–17, where the Maccabean mother is addressed as *μήτηρ* and *γυνή*.¹⁵

16 ὃ πικροτέρων νῦν πόνων πειρασθεῖσα *μήτηρ* ἤπερ τῶν ἐπ’ αὐτοῖς ὠδίνων

16 “O **mother**, tried now by more bitter pains than even the birth pangs you suffered for them!”

17 ὃ μόνη *γύναι* τὴν εὐσέβειαν ὀλόκληρον ἀποκύησασα

17 “O **woman**, who alone gave birth to such perfect piety!”

In 4 Macc 16 and 17, the narrator transitions from addressing the mother with ὃ *μήτηρ*¹⁶ to ὃ *γύναι*. The transition to the vocative ὃ *γύναι* in verse 17 redirects attention to her broader role in nurturing piety, symbolised by her designation as ὃ *μήτηρ* ἔθνους (15:29).¹⁷ David A. deSilva suggests that similar to the earlier pains of childbirth, the sufferings endured by the mother and her sons yield fruitful outcomes with political ramifications for the entire nation.¹⁸ In assuming the role of mother of the nation, she did not overlook the importance of love for her sons. Rather, she pursued its highest expression and complete realisation through her perfect

14 See VanderKam 2002, 145–56; Wheaton 2015, 166–82; Kalimi 2016, 284–314; Ripley 2020, 58–89.

15 David A. deSilva (2006a, 12) rejects the view of scholars who attribute 4 Maccabees to Josephus.

16 The mother is addressed as ὃ *μήτηρ* in the nominative singular, but used in the sense of the vocative, as indicated by the particle ὃ. Sometimes, nominative cases are employed in lieu of the vocative case to refer to the addressee. See also Wallace 1996, 56.

17 deSilva (2006b, 239) suggests that this address of ὃ *μήτηρ* ἔθνους refers to the mother for her “extended family.”

18 deSilva (2023, 127–35) makes a comparative analysis of the mother of Maccabean sons with Euripides.

piety (deSilva 2006b, 260). By fulfilling her responsibility towards them, she assumes the role of a symbolic maternal figure, unifying them into a cohesive familial unit and earning the epithet of “mother of the nations.” (deSilva 2023, 127) deSilva’s analysis focuses not only on the symbolic maternal figure of the mother, he also suggests that the linguistic shift from ὡ μήτηρ to ὡ γύναι highlights the dual dimension of the mother’s identity: her familial role in nurturing her sons and her broader influence in fostering piety within the nation (deSilva 2006b, 260).

We now turn to the subsequent narrative of 4 Macc 16:1, wherein the mother is denoted by the terms γυνή and μήτηρ in the nominative case.

¹ εἰ δὲ τοίνυν καὶ **γυνή** καὶ γεραῖα καὶ ἑπτὰ παίδων **μήτηρ** ὑπέμεινε τὰς μέχρι θανάτου βασάνους τῶν τέκνων ὁρῶσα ὁμολογουμένως αὐτοκράτωρ ἐστὶν τῶν παθῶν ὁ εὐσεβῆς λογισμός.

¹ If, then, **a woman**, advanced in years and **mother** of seven sons, endured seeing her children tortured to death, it must be admitted that devout reason is sovereign over the emotions.

By specifically designating the Maccabean mother as “woman, advanced in years,” the author highlights that she is weak and fragile; her being the “mother of seven sons” is a testament to her resilience in witnessing the torture and death of her children. As a mother, she would not normally be expected to endure such suffering, and the designation γυνή underscores how extraordinary her endurance is. These dual roles portray her intellectual and emotional endurance, characterising her motherhood and womanhood. Similarly, in 4 Macc 16:14, the mother is addressed with ὡ μήτηρ and γύναι.

¹⁴ ὡ **μήτηρ** δι’ εὐσέβειαν θεοῦ στρατιῶτι πρεσβῦτι καὶ **γύναι** διὰ καρτερίαν καὶ τύραννον ἐνίκησας καὶ ἔργοις δυνατωτέρα καὶ λόγοις εὐρέθης ἀνδρός.

¹⁴ O **mother**, soldier of God in the cause of piety, elder and **woman**! By steadfastness you have conquered even a tyrant, and in word and deed you have proved more powerful than a man.

The Maccabean mother is also bestowed with honorific titles used as vocatives such as στρατιῶτι, πρεσβῦτι,¹⁹ and γύναι. The ordering of these titles culminates in the use of γύναι. She is distinguished as a mother and as a woman. Scholarly interpretations of this portrayal often focus on the subversion of traditional gender roles and the depiction of the mother as embodying masculine virtues. Chris L. de Wet (2008, 51), for instance, classifies dedication to God and steadfast commitment as inherently masculine qualities, contrasting them with emotional aspects often associated with

¹⁹ See also Brooten 1982, 41–55.

femininity. Stephen D. Moore and Janice Capel Anderson (1998, 266) similarly note the depiction of the mother as possessing a “masculine heart” (cf. 4 Macc 15:23). In their view, she displays remarkable nobility surpassing that of men in terms of perseverance, and her endurance exceeds that of men (cf. 4 Macc 15:28–30). Their argument is reinforced when we consider 2 Macc 7:20–21, which states that the mother “combined womanly emotion with manly courage and spoke words of encouragement to each of her sons in their native language.” (Moore and Anderson 1998, 266)²⁰ Here, the narrator portrays emotion as feminine and courage as masculine, yet the mother embodies both, portraying motherhood as a fusion of these qualities. In all three text units of 4 Maccabees the use of *μητηρ/μήτηρ* refers to her role as a mother in relation to the seven sons, while the use of *γύναι/γυνή* refers to her as a woman who holds extraordinary qualities.

Although these examples are not parallel to the Johannine Jesus’ address of his mother as *γύναι*, they provide insight into the use of *μητηρ/μήτηρ* and *γύναι/γυνή* when addressing a mother. In what follows, we will examine a few examples from the documentary papyri in which the term *κυρία* is used to address one’s own mother, indicating that forms of maternal address other than *μήτηρ* were in use in the early centuries. While we do not have examples of a son or daughter addressing their mother as *γύναι*, a few examples from the Documentary Papyri show alternative forms of address used for a mother other than *μητηρ/μήτηρ*.

4. An Examination of the Use of *κυρία* in the Documentary Papyri

While the customary form of maternal address as seen in the documentary papyri is *μητηρ*, a few letters show the noun *κυρία* being employed alongside *μητηρ* in addressing one’s mother.²¹ Although *κυρία* is not presumed to be analogous to *γύναι*, the following examples serve to illustrate the different ways a mother could be addressed. This section examines three documentary papyri dating from the 2nd, 3rd and 4th centuries CE.

4.1. Sempronius to His Mother Saturnila and to His Brother Maximus

Two letters dating back to the 2nd century depict Sempronius’ correspondence with both his mother and brother (SB 3.6263).²² In the first letter, Sempronius appears to

²⁰ See also Vorster 2016, 39.

²¹ Several scholars use documentary papyri depicting the daily life in the New Testament, see Arzt-Grabner 2003, 45–56; Huebner 2019, 1–7.

²² See also Hunt and Edgar 1959, 319–20.

be away from home, presumably staying in Alexandria. As a son, he expresses his concern for his mother, Saturnila.

Σεμπρώνιος Σατουρνίλα, **τῇ μητρει καὶ κυρία** πλεῖστα χαίρειν. πρὸ τῶν ὄλων ἐρρῶσθέ σε εὐχομαι μετὰ καὶ τῶν ἀβασκάντων μου ἀδελφῶν. ἅμα δὲ καὶ τό προσκύνημα ὑμῶν ποιούμε ἡμερησίως παρὰ τῷ κυρίῳ Σεράπιδι. τοσαύτας ὑμῖν ἐπιστολάς διεπεμψάμην κούδεμείαν μοι ἀντεγράψαται, τοσοῦτων καταπλευσάντων. ἐρωτηθεῖς, **ἡ κυρία μου**, ἀνόκως μοι γράφειν περὶ σωτηρίας ὑμῶν ἵνα κἀγὼ ἀμεριμνότερα διάγω. τοῦτο μοι γὰρ εὐκτέον ἐστὶν διαπαντός. ἀσπάζομαι Μάξιμον καὶ τὴν σύμβιον αὐτοῦ καὶ Σατουρνίλον καὶ Γέμελλον καὶ Ἑλένην καὶ τοὺς αὐτῆς. μετὰδος αὐτῇ ὅτι ἐκομεισάμην Σεμπρωνίου ἐπιστολὴν ἀπὸ Καπποδοκίας. ἀσπάζομαι Ἰούλιον καὶ τοὺς αὐτοῦ κατ’ ὄνομα καὶ Σκυθικὸν καὶ Θερμοῦθιν καὶ τὰ πεδία αὐτῆς. ἀσπάζετε ὑμᾶς Γέμελλος. ἔρρωσὸ μοι. **ἡ κυρία μου**, διαπαντός. (SB 3.6263)²³

Sempronius to Saturnila, his **mother and lady**, very many greetings. Before everything I pray for your health and that of my brothers, unharmed by the evil eye, and withal I make supplication for you daily before the lord Serapis. How many letters have I sent you and not one has you written me in reply, though so many people have sailed down! I beg you, **my lady**, not be slow to write me news of your welfare that I may live in less anxiety; for your welfare is what I pray for always. Salutations to Maximus and his wife and Saturnilus and Gemellus and Helena and her family. Inform her that I received a letter from Sempronius from Cappadocia. Salutations to Julius and his family, each by name, and to Scythicus and Thermouthis and her children. Gemellus salutes you. Fare you well, **my lady**, always. (Hunt and Edgar 1959, 319–20)

The addressee of the letter, namely Saturnila is qualified by the apposition *τῇ μητρει καὶ κυρία*. This particular phrasing establishes the relationship between the sender and the addressee, who, in this instance, is addressed as the sender’s own mother (the correspondence predominantly concerns familial matters). Sempronius employs a dual designation, conveying a sense of deference and esteem towards his mother, whom he addresses both as “mother” and “lady.” The term *μήτηρ* (employed once) serves as a term for expressing her maternal role, while *κυρία* (employed three times) serves as a term for expressing respect for the maternal role (Deissmann 1927, 160). The letter functions as a conduit for his emotions regarding the mother’s lack of response to his previous letters. However, Sempronius effectively maintains the reverence owed to his mother. This recurrent rhetorical pattern is also evident in the following letter. The second letter addressed by Sempronius to his brother Maximus expresses his brotherly affection, but at the same time reproaches him for neglecting their mother’s well-being.²⁴

²³ See also Hunt and Edgar 1959, 319–20.

²⁴ See also Grenfell and Hunt 1914, 255–56.

Σεμπρόνιος Μαξιμῶι τῷ ἀδελφῷ πλ[ε]ῖστα χαίρειν. πρὸ τῶν ὄλων ἐρώσθῃ σε εὐχομαι. μετέλαβον ὅτι βαρέως δουλεύ[ου]ετε **τὴν κυρίαν ἡμῶν μητέρα**. ἐρωτηθεῖς, ἀδελφὸς γλυκύταται, ἐν μηδενεὶ αὐτὴν λύπει. εἰ δὲ εἷς τῶν ἀδελφῶν ἀντιλέγει αὐτῇ, σὺ ὀφείλεις αὐτοὺς κολαφίζει[ν]. ἤδη γὰρ πατὴρ ὀφίλεις καλεῖσθαι. ἐπεισταμε ὅτι χωρὶς τῶν γραμμάτων μου δυνατὸς εἶ αὐτῇ ἀρέσε. ἀλλὰ μὴ βαρέως ἔχε μου τὰ γράμματα νουθετοῦ[ν]τά σε. ὀφίλομεν γὰρ σέβεσθε τὴν τεκοῦσαν ὡς θε[ὸν] μάλειστα τοιαύτην οὖσαν ἀγαθὴν. ταῦτα σοι ἔγραψα, ἀδελφέ, ἐπειστάμενος τὴν γλυκασίαν τῶν κυ[ρί]ων γονέων. καλῶς π[ο]ιήσεις γράψας μοι περὶ τῆς σ[ω]τηρίας ὑμ[ῶ]ν. ἔρρωσὸ μοι, ἀδελφέ. (SB 3.6263)²⁵

Sempronius to his brother Maximus very many greetings. Before everything I pray that you are well. I have been informed that you serve **our mother lady** (τὴν κυρίαν ἡμῶν μητέρα) grudgingly. I beg you, sweetest brother, do not grieve her in anything; and if any of our brothers gainsays her, you ought to cuff them; for you ought now to take the name of father. I know that without my writing, you are able to humour her, but do not be offended by my letter of admonition; for we ought to revere our mother as a goddess, especially one so good as ours. This, I have written to you, brother, because I know how sweet a possession our revered parents are. Please write to me about your welfare. Goodbye, brother. (Hunt and Edgar 1959, 320)

In this letter, Sempronius uses τὴν κυρίαν μητέρα, denoting his biological relationship (cf. τὴν τεκοῦσαν) and additionally expressing his respect for her. Within this letter, Sempronius not only communicates his affection for his mother (cf. do not grieve her) but also expresses his reverence (cf. mother as θε[ὸν], and parents as τῶν κυ[ρί]ων γονέων). There is an undertone of implicit criticism while also upholding respect for his brother (cf. sweetest brother) and reminding him to honour their mother (cf. κυρία). The central theme revolves around the family relationship of the mother-son (μήτηρ) and the reverence he holds for his mother (κυρία).

4.2. Apia to Serapias

This letter, dating back to the 3rd century, is written by a woman named Apia to her mother Serapias. The letter commences with the formal salutation τῇ κυρίᾳ μ[η]τρὶ subsequently transitioning to the more concise κυρία in the subsequent references.

[Ἀπία ...] Σεραπιάδι **τῇ κυρία**
μ[η]τρὶ, χαίρειν.
πολλά σε ἀσπάζομαι, **κυρία**, εὐχο-
μένη σοι τὰ κάλλιστα. κόμισαι,

Apia to Serapias, her **lady**
mother, greetings.
I greet you warmly, **lady**, praying
for the best for you. Receive,

²⁵ See also Hunt and Edgar 1959, 320.

- 5 **κυρία**, ἡπαρὰ ἡπητριας ἄ τὰ κρόκινα ὀθονεΐδια τῆς
 θυγατρὸς σου, χιτοῶνα καὶ ἡρα-
 χιανον, καὶ Ἡρακλάμμωνι
 [χ[ι]τοῶνα. νομίζω δὲ ὅτι ἐπιγ ἄ ὠσει
 ποῖα. ἐστὶν τὰ
 τῆς θυγατρὸς σου.
- 10 αὐτὰ γὰρ εἰς ἀμφοτέρα εἴλιξα.
 ἡ ἡπήτρια μεταδώει σοι διὰ λόγων
 ὅσα αὐτῇ εἶπον. λείαν γὰρ ὄσαι σοι
 ταῦτα ἔγραψα. Ἄγαθος δὲ τῇ ἐνά-
 τη πρὸς σὲ γέινεται ἐνέγ-
- 15 καὶ σοὶ τινα πρὸς τὴν ἑορτὴν. ὦσ-
 τε, **κυρία**, μὴ μετεωρίζου, κα-
 λῶς διάγομεν. Σεργηνὸς ὁ υἱὸς
 σου πολλὰ σε ἀσπάζεται, καὶ
 Λούκις καὶ Τεχῶσις καὶ τὰ παιδία
- 20 καὶ Τάαμοις καὶ ὁ ἴ ἡμῶν πάντες.
 τοὺς ἡμ[ῶ]ν ἀσπάζομαι. Λουκάμ-
 μωνα τὸν ἀδελφὸν πολλὰ ἀσ-
 πάζομαι, οὗ δέομαι γράψαι
 ἡμεῖν ἡ ἐκομίσαστο τὸν χιτῶ-
 να αὐτοῦ παρὰ τοῦ Λεύκου, ἐπεὶ
 Βηρύλλος ἐπέλαθετο αὐτὸν ἄραι.
 Ἀλέξανδρον καὶ Κυριλλοῦν πολ-
 λὰ ἀσπάζομαι.
 ἐρρῶσθαί σε εὔχομαι.
 (Grenfell and Hunt 1920, 139–40)
- 5 my **lady**, from the seamstress the saffron-coloured
 clothes of your daughter, a tunic and a ...
 and for Heraklammon
 a tunic. I think that you will recognise
 which are
 those of your daughter.
- 10 For I rolled them up one another.
 The seamstress will transmit to you verbally
 what I told her, for very late
 I wrote this to you. Agathos, perhaps on the ninth,
 is coming to you to bring
- 15 you some things for the festival. So,
lady, do not be in suspense,
 we are fine. Serenos, your son
 greets you warmly, and
 Lucius and Techosis and the children
- 20 and Taamois and all our people.
 I greet your people. Loukammon
 my brother I greet warmly,
 whom I beg to write
 to us if he received the tunic
 from Leukos, since
 Beryllos forgot to take it.
 Alexandros and Kyryllous I warmly
 greet.
 I pray for your health.
 (Grenfell and Hunt 1920, 139–40)

In this letter, Apia addresses her mother as both τῇ κυρία μ[η]τρὶ as well as κυρία. The expression of the addressee of the letter as “lady mother” evinces Apia’s filial respect for her mother. While the letter is addressed to the mother, the primary subject of the letter pertains to the dispatch of saffron-hued garments for a person named Heraklammon.²⁶ Throughout the letter, Apia reassures her mother regarding their well-being, alleviating any concerns or apprehensions she might harbour. It conveys familial regards and felicitations from various members of their kinship circle, fostering a sense of familial solidarity and interconnectedness. The letter concludes with a benedictory invocation for her mother’s continued health and well-being.

²⁶ The garments must be belonging to the daughter who recently got married, as this is a preferred Roman royal color of bridal attire. See also Olson 2008, 25.

4.3. Allous to Faustina

In a letter from the 4th century, Allous addresses her mother Faustina requesting a favour from her.

<p>κυρία μου μητρ-ι- Φαυστίνα Ἄλλους ἐν κ(υρί)ῳ χαίρειν. καιρὸν εὐροῦσα τοῦ 5 γραμματηφόρο[υ] προσαγορεύω τὴν μητρικὴν σο[υ] διάθε- σιν, κυρία μ[ο]υ. ἐπεὶ τὰ γραφ[. . . .] μοι 10 δηλώση [. . .] εἰμην δυνατὸν [. . .]. ἐλ- θεῖν [.] διὰ [- ca.15 -]ι [- ca.15 -] 15 [- ca.15 -] [- ca.14 -] πω[- ca.13 -] τα τῶν ὀρφανῶν παί- δων τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ μου 20 μὴ δυνα[μ]ένη αὐτοῖς ἐπαρκεῖν γυνή οὖσα. εἰ μὲν οὖν εὐπορεῖς, ἀπόστειλόν μοι διὰ τοῦ γραμματηφόρου σίπ- 25 πης λίτρας δύο ἵνα νήσω καὶ δαπανήσω εἰς αὐτά. πολλὰ σε προσ- [αγορ]εῦω. ἀσπάζονται σε τὰ νήπια παιδιά. ἀσ- 30 πάζομαι Κυριακὴν τή[ν] μητέρα. [ἐρρ]ῶσθαί σε εὖχομαι. (SB 14.11881)</p>	<p>To lady my mother Faustina, Allous, greetings in the Lord. Having chanced to use the 5 letter-carrier I greet your motherly kind- liness, my mother.²⁷ Since it appears from your letter to me 10 that it was [not] possible to co- me because of . . . [For the . . .] 15 orphaned chil- dren of my brother 20 I cannot suffice, I being a woman. Therefore, if you have enough, send me via the letter-carrier 25 two pounds of tow, so that I can spin and sell it for them. I greet you fondly. The little children greet you. I gre- 30 et Kyriake, the mother. I pray for your good health. (SB 14.11881)²⁸</p>
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Allous uses the expressions *κυρία*, *κυρία μου μητρί*, and *κυριακὴν τή[ν] μητέρα* in reference to her mother Faustina. These expressions combine a respectful form

²⁷ Here, the translation for *κυρία* is mother and not as lady.

²⁸ See also Bagnall and Criore 2006, 357.

of address (κυρία) with an explicit acknowledgment of the maternal role (μήτηρ). The primary concern articulated in the letter pertains to the welfare of the writer’s brother’s orphaned children, suggesting a familial obligation and a sense of familial responsibility. The writer, recognising the limitations imposed by her gender in addressing the needs of the orphaned children, seeks assistance from her mother, Faustina. Expressions of familial affection and solidarity permeate the letter, culminating in a concluding prayer entreated for the mother’s well-being.

Examples from documentary papyri dating from different centuries offer insights into the historical usage of addressing one’s mother as both μήτηρ and κυρία. This interchangeability challenges the conventional perception of maternal address as being expressed solely through μήτηρ. It highlights the linguistic diversity and fluidity in familial address within ancient societies. Importantly, the use of κυρία in isolation does not inherently preclude motherhood; rather, the salutation “lady mother,” or the context of the address of κυρία, informs the reader about the degree of rapport between the speaker and the mother. Notably, these letters indicate a respectful and cordial relationship between the sender and the mother as the addressee.

5. An Examination of μήτηρ and γύναι at Cana and at the Cross

In 4 Maccabees and the Gospel of John, the address γύναι appears alongside the use of μήτηρ/μήτηρ. The use of γύναι in the Book of Maccabees acknowledges the broader identity of the mother as “woman,” while referring to her as μήτηρ highlights her identity within the mother-sons relationship.

This differentiation, between these two identities, is evident in the Gospel of John. For example, τί ἐμοὶ καὶ σοί, γύναι (John 2:4), carries a deeper implication that Jesus’ mother takes the initiative toward a common purpose within the wedding celebration. She stands not merely as the mother of Jesus, but as a “woman” who identifies the need of the Cana couple in what would have been an embarrassing situation. At the beginning of the Cana scene, there is no reference to Jesus’ ἀδελφοί. However, the scene concludes by noting that he (αὐτοῦ) and ἡ μήτηρ αὐτοῦ and οἱ ἀδελφοί [αὐτοῦ] and οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ together went down to Capernaum (2:12). Although the ἀδελφοί are not depicted as engaging in any conversation with Jesus,²⁹ their presence at the family event in Cana and their subsequent journey with him to Capernaum indicate no signs of estrangement from him. Furthermore, if the maternal role of Jesus’ mother were insignificant for the Johannine Jesus, she would not have commanded his attention at the hour of his death, nor would he have

²⁹ Scholars who argue from John 7:1–3 that the Johannine Jesus’ relationship with his ἀδελφοί was problematic, include, Thyen 2015, 385–86; Beutler 2017, 487.

intentionally entrusted her to the care of the beloved disciple. In fact, when Jesus addresses her as *γύναι* at the Cross, the term signals that her identity is no longer confined to the biological mother-son relationship. Rather, this form of address extends her maternal role to the beloved disciple, establishing a new, non-biological mother-son relationship. This scene at the Cross ends by stating that the beloved disciple took her *εἰς τὰ ἴδια* (19:27).³⁰

Scholarly interpretations of this new mother-son relationship vary. For instance, Xavier Léon-Dufour (1996, 281) and Jean Zumstein (2013, 641) argue that the relationship between Jesus' mother and the beloved disciple forms the "new family of Jesus." Herman N. Ridderbos (1997, 613–14) nuances this view by noting that Jesus transfers his biological relationship with his mother to the beloved disciple; however, this relationship is not familial but rather one of friendship. For Margaret M. Beirne (2003, 182), they form a gender pair of equals at the cross, described as "mother and brother." Colleen M. Conway (1999, 82), further develops this new relationship in terms of adoption, suggesting that Jesus' mother adopts the beloved disciple as her son. A similar perspective is offered by Mark W. G. Stibbe (1992, 153), who describes the beloved disciple both as "Jesus' earthly successor" and as his "adoptive brother."³¹

Regardless of these interpretations, the Johannine text foregrounds the nature of the relationship between Jesus' mother and the beloved disciple. Through the use of the familial terms *μήτηρ* and *υἱός*, Jesus establishes a new relational bond between his mother and the beloved disciple that functions as a mother-son relationship. Jesus' use of *γύναι* when addressing his mother at the Cross coheres with this new relationship, indicating that, as "woman," she becomes a "mother" in a non-biological form of motherhood.

Conclusion

This study has examined Jesus' use of *γύναι* in addressing his mother in John 2:4 and 19:26. The tendency to compare Jesus' address to his mother as *γύναι* to that of the Samaritan woman and Mary Magdalene who are addressed as *γύναι* seems to overlook the difference between addressing one's own mother as *γύναι* and addressing

³⁰ Several scholars have discussed the Johannine wording *εἰς τὰ ἴδια* in 19:27 suggesting that "from that hour the disciple took her to his home." See Neiryck 1979, 357–65; 1981, 83–106. However, Ignace de la Potterie (1974, 1–39) argues that the Johannine expression *εἰς τὰ ἴδια* can be understood as the beloved disciple's acceptance of Jesus' mother into a new relationship of personal intimacy and discipleship. Further, Dorothy A. Lee (2002, 156) contends that the expression *εἰς τὰ ἴδια* in 19:27 reveals the birth of the "new family" at the cross.

³¹ Several scholars suggest that John 19:25–27 reflects an adoption scenario, but they do not explain their reasoning. For instance, see Barrett 1960, 459; Carson 1991, 616.

a woman one does not know. Jesus’ use of γύναι when addressing his mother carries a unique significance, distinct from his address to other women in the Gospel. The evangelist’s emphasis on her as ἡ μήτηρ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ and ἡ μήτηρ αὐτοῦ, and Jesus’ own use of γύναι for his mother, reflect a distinction: while she is a “mother” to Jesus, she is a “woman” to all. We can, therefore, consider a dual identity corresponding to the two roles of Jesus’ mother.

Although examples from Greek literature lack any direct parallels of a son or daughter addressing their mother as γύναι,³² 4 Maccabees nonetheless illuminates the simultaneous use of γύναι and μήτηρ, highlighting the dual identity involved. The absence of such parallels further underscores the distinctiveness of the Johannine usage in addressing one’s mother. Additionally, references to κυρία are not intended to equate the term with γυνή, but rather to demonstrate that μήτηρ is not the only viable form of address in filial contexts. This study argues that the use of μήτηρ and γύναι within the narratives of John 2:1–12 and 19:25–27 highlights the distinct roles of Jesus’ mother. In other words, the Gospel of John consciously differentiates between “motherhood” and “womanhood,” emphasising the dual roles embodied by Jesus’ mother.

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³² An exception to a son addressing his mother as γύναι can be found in Greek literature. For example, in Euripides’ *Ion*, the son initially addresses his mother as γύναι because he is unaware of her identity. Upon realising that she is his mother, he then addresses her as μήτηρ. See Euripides 1999, 315–23.

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