

Q: Didn't Jesus show his mother disrespect by calling her "Woman" in John 2:4?

A: The title "Woman" is *not* a sign of disrespect, it is the opposite -- a title of dignity. It is a formal mode of speech equivalent to the English titles, "Lady" or "Madam."

The Protestant commentator William Barclay writes:

"The word *Woman* (*gynai*) is also misleading. It sounds to us very rough and abrupt. But it is the same word as Jesus used on the Cross to address Mary as he left her to the care of John (John 19:26). In Homer it is the title by which Odysseus addresses Penelope, his well-loved wife. It is the title by which Augustus, the Roman Emperor, addressed Cleopatra, the famous Egyptian queen. So far from being a rough and discourteous way of address, it was a title of respect. We have no way of speaking in English which exactly renders it; but it is better to translate it *Lady* which gives at least the courtesy in it" (*The Gospel of John*, revised edition, vol. 1, p. 98).

Similarly, the Protestant *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, published by Zondervan, states:

Jesus' reply to Mary was not so abrupt as it seems. 'Woman' (*gynai*) was a polite form of address. Jesus used it when he spoke to his mother from the cross (19:26) and also when he spoke to Mary Magdalene after the Resurrection (20:15)" (vol. 9, p. 42).

Even the Fundamentalist *Wycliff Bible Commentary* put out by Moody Press acknowledges in its comment on this verse, "In his reply, the use of 'Woman' does not involve disrespect (cf. 19:26)" (p. 1076).

The fact it is not a title of disrespect should be obvious from the fact that Jesus, as an obedient Son who fulfilled the Torah perfectly, would *never* have spoken irreverently to his mother. His perfect fulfillment of the Torah includes a perfect fulfillment of the command, "Honor your father and mother," which in the literal Hebrew is "Glorify your father and mother." This is why the *corban* custom was so wrong -- because it left one's parents scrounging for food and money and thus publicly humiliated, violating the command to glorify your father and mother by seeing that they are not publicly shamed by being reduced to begging. To publicly speak irreverently of his mother is something that Jesus would never have been able to countenance. Actually, the way Jesus is using the term -- at the two key junctures in John's Gospel where Mary appears -- is symbolic and emblematic of her role in redemptive history. Whereas Eve was the First Woman, Mary is the Second Woman, just as Adam was the First Man and Jesus was the Second Man (1 Cor. 15:47).