

Mary's Magnificat as a Prolegomena for Confrontational Christian Living

Abstract

Whether studied from the point of view of theology, spirituality, or culture, the Galilean woman called Mary, has been interpreted and explained, presented, and understood, imagined and rejected, loved and honored in many ways so diverse as to be impossible to codify. No doubt, thus, there has been a plasticity of her image that has encouraged us to create widely differing Marian signs, symbols, and theologies in relation to spiritual and social needs.

In the text of Luke's Gospel (1vv.43-55), we find Mary's proclamation of the Good News of God's redemptive justice-by anticipation. She does so as a woman whose consciousness is deep in the heritage and wisdom of the strong women of Israel. Knowledgeable about the liberating traditions of her own people and heralding them with tough authority, Mary is distinguished as a prophet of the coming age.

It is not just that God often chooses unconventional people for a mission, not just that Mary is among the inconsequential poor of the earth, like illiterate women in any poor village on this hemisphere. It is the combination of that is revolutionary: God has regarded her lowliness. Such that, though socially insignificant, Mary is highly favored; though endangered, yet God is with her; though impoverished, at times homeless, yet blessed; an unconventional woman, yet God did great things for her; though she knew sorrow enough to break a human spirit, yet she experiences the coming of God in the suffering of bringing life.

I. Introduction

The Magnificat of Mary remains an interpretative puzzle. The song is sure to be seen as a stereotypical reflection of Old Testament language vs of God's saving intervention, and this is especially so when one reads it in the light of Deuteronomy (10:21) [1, 2]. Its strong Old Testament background which contributes to its diversity of possible references, is at the same time a

hindrance to an agreed consensus on a hermeneutical note. The Magnificat said or sang toward the end of vespers, just before the intercessions; is one of the treasured prayers of the Catholic tradition.

It is treasured essentially because it discloses the richness in piety towards the God of Israel. It is a song weaved into a tapestry of joyous songs and hope for the downtrodden. As a narrative of how God is moving towards the fulfillment of his promises, the song identifies Mary as a vital character in the movement of this fulfillment down to all ages. It is one of the several songs in Luke's Gospel used to garnish critical moments in the birth narrative of Christ, to highlight the wonderful way God is going about fulfilling His promises.

In the Magnificat, Mary obviously speaking from her experience points to a reversal of reality that takes care of the marginalized and downtrodden, as a way of God among his people. Simply put, disregarding whatever demand modesty would make, Mary's hymn audaciously emboldened God's action as the builder who destroys to build, and uproots to plant. As such, in the Magnificat, a nail of certainty is put on the box of understanding that any preaching or living of the church and Christians must be liberative; setting people free to be empowered to walk and work freely.

Indeed, a major aspect of the nuggets of prophetic religion is that the dreams that spring from among the less privileged are not timid illusions but compelling clues to the nature of the real. As such, the rich need to dream with the poor the dream of God's future that their sufferings opens up, and consequently be transformed themselves. For both poor and rich, the Magnificat is a vehicle of that dream.

II. Mary's contexts and circumstances

Much as the controversies regarding the authorship of the Magnificat three positions are quite significant. While some scholars maintain that the song originated from Mary, others point to the author of Luke's Gospel as the composer; and others still see it like the Benedictus of Zachariah as an early Aramaic Jewish-Christian hymn that was later adapted and incorporated into Luke's infancy narratives [3,4,5]. The Magnificat shows us how Luke understood the Old Testament and how he sees it being fulfilled through Mary in the person of Christ.

Hence, the author of the Gospel of Luke putting Mary's visit to Elizabeth as an interval, creates a slow-tease in the movement of God's realization of his promises. This could be with the reason to give us the opportunity to look deeply at, and clearly understand the angle Gabriel's declaration and its essentials, or to provide the opportunity for the acknowledgement of Mary's superior-being-with child as compared to Elizabeth's; and consequently point out Mary's humility in spite of. Again the reason could be to define the opportunity for understanding God's faithfulness.

1. Mary's visit to Elizabeth

The author of the Gospel of Luke situates Mary's visit as occurring following the annunciation of the angel Gabriel, and Elizabeth was identified as Mary's elder cousin who has been barren; but is now with child. Mary's great visitation which constituted part of the church's joyful mysteries is an obedience of charity that characterizes the solidarity of Mary: a solidarity which the scene at the wedding at Cana would disclose as founding the basis of Mary's predilection as Mother of Mercy. This journey provided the background for Mary's expression of an obedient hope which her song so graciously indicated.

The name, "Elizabeth," means the house of the gift of the Lord, and as such foreshadows Jesus' arrival as a savior [6]. We, thus, see Mary's visit first as an act of obedient charity which God's gift necessitates; and which obedient faith seen in Mary's "Fiat" enforces. Mary visited Elizabeth to share and authenticate the good news, and given the presence of Christ among the meeting; that both can be said to be models of Christ's disciples; who through and with firm faith in God is realizing through is people and coming together as one people to testify and confirm each other's faith [7].

Significance of Mary's visit as a move in obedient charity spurred the gift obtained by an obedient faith is highlighted not just in "leaping for joy" that followed Mary's greeting, but more in the blessedness elicited in Elizabeth causing her to pronounce three blessing on Mary; and consequent opportunity it availed Mary to make an act of obedient hope evident in the Magnificat.

2. The nature and import of Elizabeth's rhetoric and blessings

Elizabeth's question, "Why should the mother of my Lord come to visit me"? (Luke 1:43) re-echoes David's rhetoric of 2Samuel 6:9 ("How can the Ark of the Covenant come to me?"), and thus situates Mary as the Ark of the new

covenant. Also the fact that Mary (Luke 1:56) stayed in Elizabeth's house in the Judean hill country for three months parallels the Ark's stay in the Judean hill country house of Obed-edon for three months (2 Sam. 6:11).

Again, Elizabeth's question gives a hint. On the strength of its own context, it is an early disclosure to the divinity of the child in Mary's womb. Just as when we enter God's presence with praise, he fills our circumstances with grace; Elizabeth's acknowledgement of her excellent experience with Mary's presence and greeting opened her to the unction of the Holy Spirit which had her proclaim what only heaven can decree: blessedness. She was not ashamed or jealous to confirm Mary's superiority; Elizabeth blessed Mary, blessed Jesus and blessed the faith God has given Mary.

Mary is blessed "among" women, and not "above" women; especially because she is the mother of Christ and so should be honored for the gift of faith she received from God to be the mother of Christ. She is not above women so as to elicit any form of worship. Thus, when in Luke 11:27, a woman trying to distract Jesus said: "blessed is the womb that bore you and the breast which nursed you," Jesus not only acknowledged his mother's blessedness, just as she predicted in the Magnificat, but he equally drew our attention to what is far more important- obedient faith to God's word.

Also, the blessing of Mary's obedient faith by Elizabeth contrasts Zachariah's unbelief. This, consequently, makes Mary the first Christian; her faith never failed during the time of Jesus' ministry, passion, and resurrection (Acts 1:13-14).

Elizabeth's pronouncement threw Mary beyond the difficult circumstances of the annunciation – the scandal of pregnancy before wedding, the unaccomplished wondrous birth, the suspicion of Joseph which only a revelation from God would assuage, the vulnerability she was exposed to – and the dangers of human praise, which the words of Elizabeth was sure to elicit; into a ballad of obedient hope; that was prophetic of the prophecies of prophet.

Disregarding whatever modesty would demand, and relying on obedient faith in him whom she has emptied herself for; and he who has changed her name from Mary to full of grace, and obedient faith matchless as it is, sustained Mary to see in her choice God fulfilling the content of her obedient hope – salvation

to Israel – Mary let loose a song, carnal reasoning would have kept in the cooler till the promises have come to fulfillment [8,9].

Yet, obedient faith has no need to be exchanged for fact before the Magnificat. Instead fact had to follow it to retain its validity such is the power of a faith that is obedient. Mary thus, making herself and her circumstances road maps to anyone and those facing the known and unknown potholes and storms of life; and situating herself as having a role in correcting the bias of marginalization and negativity which keeps women, the poor and downtrodden almost strangers in their tradition, with its claim to uniqueness and universalism, sang of God who liberates as he saves.

III. Mary's song as a revolutionary response

Surely, the Magnificat is a collage of scriptural allusions [10]; as there exists other songs of praise to God for his graciousness, or of intercessions of women like Miriam, Deborah, and mostly Hannah (cf. Exodus 15:19 – 21; Judges 5:1–31 & 1 Sam 2:1–10).

Mary Magnificat enjoys closest parallel with Hannah's song of thanksgiving. Both share similarities in being about gratitude for privileged pregnancy, notion of reversal, motif of the poor and God's promise to the faithful one; with the major characteristics of both being the presence of specific social groups [11].

My soul glorifies the Lord
My spirit rejoices in God, my savior
He looks on his servant in her loneliness
Henceforth all ages will call me blessed.

The almighty works marvels for me.
Holy his name!
His mercy is from age to age
On those who fear him.

He puts forth his arm in strength.
And scatters the proud-hearted.
He casts the mighty from their thrones
And raises the lowly.

He fills the starving with good things,
And sends the rich away empty.
He protects Israel, his servant
Remembering his mercy

The mercy promised to our father
To Abraham and his sons forever.

The Magnificat, three parts are distinguishable: Mary's praise for what God has done for her personally (vv. 46b-49); Mary's praise for God's mercy to the poor and disadvantaged (vv. 50-53) and Mary's praise for God's faithfulness to Abraham's descendants, the nation of Israel (vv. 54-55).

We become what we consume. Mary was filled with God's Word, which made her obedient in faith to trust God, and obedient in charity to share God's tidings. She became the word of God, who, she has so filled herself with, that when prompted to express herself, following Elizabeth's blessings, she began: "my soul glorifies the Lord", "my spirit rejoices in God, my Savior".

The use of "my soul", "my spirit", individual aspects not found in the "Benedictus" and "Nunc Dimittis", highlights the existential situation into which Mary, nay, the Lucan community encountered God's salvation [4]. Mary whole being was taken into her praise of God, God is magnified from the inner corners of her heart, he sees it, and knows who is who. He is not enchanted by the melody of songs, harmony of instruments. No it is what we are within that we really are before God.

Defining the humility that goes on to make her "full of grace", Mary declared the gradient reality of all flesh: I am a sinner. This she did by identifying God as "my Savior". Mary here recognizes the place of God as her Savior in all its prospective and retrospective imports. Prospectively, her Savior because the birth of her child will not only save the people of God from their current turmoil but also save her from despair to the consequent circumstances that would accompany not only being a savior who will revolutionize the status quo, but also the one who would have to live with the consequences of who He is. Retrospectively, her savior because she has been saved from the guilt of the original sin; God chose her and saved her before she was born.

Also Mary's acknowledgment of God as "My savior" shows an understanding that flamed her self-definition as a "willing" handmaid of God, who being saved is set on a mission to point salvation to others, as would be evident in Jesus' first miracle at Cana.

In pointing out her lowly state, Mary emphasized the radicality of God's choice. She is not using the self-characterization as a metaphor for spiritual humility. It is a marveling at the reality that, God's ways are not humans. Here Mary's emphasis of God's radical choice of her was on the fact of the social status and economic strength of her and the people; her choice was to save – Israel under Raman captivity. For Mary, with God, no thoughts, no words or fear of what people will say – matter, if God has said "yes" [12]. Mary calling God "The Almighty" (Zeph 3:17 & Isaiah 42:13) this gives Mary's song a messianic and future – dimensional tone. The Almighty God stooping so low to attend to Mary's poverty and oppression has Luke reminding us of an evangelizing mission that extends beyond merely delivering the good news of the poor, to a lending a practical hand that would place the poor in their rightful place of care and love.

Here we see Mary extolling God's three attributes: Mighty, holy and mercy. Mary's knowledge of God's attributes is a product of her immersion in God's word. God's word is powerful in the mind of those who know it, on the lips of those who speak it – any wonder why most prayers are not answered? Lack of God's word!

Mary was saturated with God's word; she knew these attributes; and was able to discern the ways of God in the events of her realities (2 Tim 2:15). Mary saw in her reality; the fulfillment of Gods promises to Israel. For her what God is doing is not for her alone but for others who fear him and would come to know him [10, 13]. This is the background of Gods mercy as not just gratuitous but also extensive. A mercy that is unmerited and unending. Evidently, "The Almighty", who is so powerful opposed to the earthly mighty would in showing them their place, reverse structures that encourage oppression and marginalization.

For Mary, he will begin by "scattering the proud hearted and casting down the mighty from their thrones". This understanding envisions a redemption which God fulfills through Mary is concerned with the social realities of daily living. There is no need, as most authors are tempted to [4, 7, 13] spiritualize the

socio-political undertone of this lines (vv. 52-53). Truth is, God is here to be understood as not exchanging the positions of the rich with poor, or the prayerful with the weak. It is one of a revaluation of all values, a revolutionary transformation of social relationships [14].

The redemption God brings is in the dual form of individual lives and social order. God's purpose is to dismantle the structure that encourages marginalization of people, the structure that encourages oppression, the culture that makes evil good, and good evil [12, 15]. This is radically in that it not only indicates a revolutionary call and invitation to all (rich and poor, strong and weak, high and low) to work towards relieving poverty and oppression by operationalizing the equalizing factors to dislodge the inequalities evident in societies; the structured systems that disadvantage and perpetuates the poor's poverty, it also beckons that the proclamation of Gods kingdom involves/should prompt a physical help for the poor, which is in continuity with the prophetic prophecies (Is. 107:9,22:26,104:28,34:10; Jer. 31:44;1 Sam 2:5; Job 22:9).

Also the reversal that Mary talks about describes the very nature of God to cross the expectation of men – keeping the evil longer may appear contrary, but he knows that number of years does not matter; but how they were spent. As such, scattering the proud in the imagination of their hearts to think that they have it all at their beck and call (Ps. 49). Again, making the mighty to think they have secured themselves, families and associates by might of their positions, he pulls them down, while simultaneously exalting those who are nothing.

Furthermore, for the proud, who are humbled; the rich, who are sent away empty; the rulers, who are dethroned, are to be understood to be on the path of salvation only if they could turn their gaze, their attention off themselves and their alone; and fix it on God, coming to know that is all in all; everything we have, enjoy and desire are God's – then there will be mercy for them, too. After all, while the purposive force is one of mercy, the plan is to re-order the structure that make oppression, pride, greed, sin, normal and operative.

Continuing in vv. 54-55, Mary sets the tempo for a covenant theology that meets a teleology. She in describing God's reversal of the structures that encourage the oppression of his people Israel Mary points us to God's fidelity and timeliness in timelessness. More than anything, Mary was pointing us to a

God that visits at the appointed time and situation, a God whose fulfillment of his promises requires us to remain steadfast in hope – not about a change of position, but a renewal of focus. Mary lowliness was attractive to God's choice of fulfilling his promise to Israel through her, because it was a lowliness [16, 17] that remained open to a renewal in God's words; thus drawing us to remember Genesis 12, 15, and 17 as she makes a connection between the God who was, who is and who is to come; Mary speaks of God fulfilling his promise to Abraham and his descendants forever.

The “second Exodus” which God's outstretched arms will do in the reversal of realities – is a pointer to God's faithfulness and to his eventual culminating of all things in himself (Is. 53:3,6; Ezek. 20:23,33,34; Matt. 24:29-31). It is a symbolizing of God's power, using dramatic anthropomorphism to provide a description of God's visible demonstration of His authority; and not a faded metaphor of God's power [18]. Thus, in Mary tying together the terms of “covenant” and “mercy” shows us the definitive relationship of God with Israel down to us [19].

In saying God “remembered his covenant”, Mary is not saying God has as a result of short-term memory forgotten, nor has he suddenly developed an Alzheimer's disease. No God is here understood as rejoicing in what he is doing as his mercy towards Abraham and his children's children (Gen. 12:1-3;13:14-18; 15:1–21; 17:4–8; Micah 7:20; Gal 3:16; Lk 1: 42). Thus Mary's Magnificat is about a praise of a covenant making – and – keeping God, who stoops to our level to embrace us all. This is not just a source for an awesomeness. It serves as a fulcrum of the amazing grace of God's mercy; no wonder Mary would magnify the Lord!

In the Magnificat, we see the truth that God who loves us as we are will not leave us as we are. The change of gaze from ourselves, our wealth, status, position, gender, tribe, race, and talent towards Jesus is the life realization of the Magnificat. Thus, in the Magnificat, Mary takes humanity to the reality Babel (Gen 11:4)

The revolution which Mary's Magnificat announces points out that the way of God, the way to God, the way in God and the way from God is humility. This is the reality which is begun in Christ chosen to become man so as to lead all to salvation. In her song therefore, Mary was indicating that the savior, her savior

who became her flesh is missioned for the exaltation of the downtrodden, the humiliated, the lowly, the poor – that is why he would become like them [20].

After all, any tangible earthiness of the gospel will disrupt our business as usual: “we believe Jesus claims to be present in the suffering and the neglected; we battle with the reality that God loves everyone equally while also seeing that God appears particularly concerned with the oppressed; we have invested with our own relative wealth while living in an impoverished community. We had wished that our neighbors had access to the same money and resources we have, but we know also that simply giving away every dime we have would not solve the problem; rather what we know is the sharing the vantage point of the poor and oppressed exposes many of the myths that externalize a system that plunders the poor and oppressed; we have seen bad things happen to the good, peaceful and innocent people bundled off to prisons, which makes us difficult to believe the myth that the government punishes only the guilty or that the government exist to protect us all.

We have known and seen, and have had friends who are suffering addictions, which makes it difficult to believe the narrative that those are morally inferior people who should be punished rather than receive care; we had neighbors who are more hardworking, dedicated, and industrious than we are, yet still remain trapped in poverty. This makes it almost impossible to believe that hard work and a can-do attitude is all one needs to achieve success in life. We have lives lost, friends becoming homeless and wretched because of the cost of medical care, thus making it difficult to believe that access to health care is a package one can deserve or not deserve as a result of how much more you have”

These are the myths and idols of systematic oppression that forms the part of Mary’s hope expressed in the Magnificat. It is a revolutionary song of obedient hope. Surely, people who are marginalized in every society would hear a blessing in the Magnificat of Mary. From the abused women, the single parents with no aid, food or shelter, immigrants and refugees driven away from their home lands and jobs, the young who seem not to be cared for to the old whose life no longer matter: all are contained in the hope Mary proclaims.

The evolution vibe of the hymn of Mary is so audible that when one considers that the words flowed from her being unpremeditated as spontaneous responses to God’s doings, and that in the larger context that it has a time of

great uncertainty for Mary (her), the future has every reason to seem bleak, we can carefully envision Mary as singing her song defiantly amidst tears and surrounding worries, thus, the song is one of a courageous radical outburst that seeks to connect with the holy amidst sufferings and life conflicts. It is a song, not just only of God's liberating transformation of the social order but like those in her song, Mary occupies a position of poverty and powerlessness in her society and does so with the added oppression that results from being a woman of little account. As such, her hymn puts her in solidarity with other women who strive for life and living [7]. It is a hymn about the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind, no wonder it horrifies those who are drunk in power; it unsettles and rightly so the demigods who live by oppressing others.

In Mary's Magnificat we discover a woman with fist in the air with an intent on reorienting unjust systems by proclaiming a time of liberation for the poor and oppressed and given her status as poor young unmarried yet pregnant makes all the more eloquent a revolution. Her song is a discomfort to white evangelicals who would not want to be reminded that "Black Lives Matters", that slavery and racism was and still is an invitation to God to show "his mighty arm", and so have not only devalued the role of Mary and her song, but also made her a silent factor in the nativity story or setting.

In Mary's Magnificat we see that despite her physical vulnerability she was courageous to share her own story. And so, differing from Hannah's song of praise which showed triumph over barrenness, Mary's Magnificat signifies a triumph of the erroneous association of a woman's status with an ability to bear children. Her song gave voice to the reality that women when it comes to self-interpretation of their faith experience, life, prospects, and aspirations they do and must have a voice.

Put simply, in this anthem of Mary, we come face to face with the often-neglected lesson in traditional theologies of Mary, the right to say no. Mary is not just a woman who knows how to say "yes", and whose "yes" represents a consent to an adventure that promotes passive subjugation of women. In fact, the "yes" of Mary in the annunciation event to the call of God's Spirit was a preparatory consent that activated her prophetic role and those of others burdened by the weight of oppressive and unjust structures.

Mary's Magnificat becomes a 'no', and even so rife with significance if understood as declaration that God is no longer to be sought in the clouds, or in the testimonies and testimonials of the those who grow fat at the expense of others, or in the oratories of murderers and liars, or in the philanthropic smiles of racists, and in the myth-sustained belief systems; but on earth, in this life, in the flesh,, in birth, and in the grave, no matter how surprisingly empty. God is to be looked for and seen in the daily experiences of suffering, on the faces of each human being, in our tears and laughter of the poor, in the lamentation of creation, and in the degrading consequence of our inhumanity to man.

In the Magnificat we encounter a song that is not just prophetic in character, eschatological in vocation, social in implication but also we see the association of discipleship with socio-economic responsibility of helping the poor. It is as such, not a hymn for the passive to remain passive. No. Of course, inverted numbers do not remain inactive in any mathematical equation. The inversion of the status quo, Mary's song announces, is the empowerment of the marginalized to get busy to bring about the needed change. This reversal is seen in the vocation of Christ and his followers, as well as the experience of believers. This understanding in its merits contradicts the Marxist notion of religion as the "opium of the people" [21].

IV. Conclusion

Spurred by the question of what the Lucan Magnificat meant, and giving it a just reading in its historical context; one sees in the song an oracle of the reversal of marginalization, a composition of Mary's gratitude to God's choice of her lowliness, of her privileged invitation to share in a divine process which God undertakes to fulfill his covenantal promises.

No doubt, Luke, in the Magnificat entertains us with the understanding the Jesus is the fulfilled promise of God's divine plan: for Israel and for the world over. Yet, settling for a pliable passage about a devoted woman and the mighty God she serves is not just enough to understand Mary and her role in our salvation.

To the typical Jew, Mary's song was a liberation song sang by a woman who represented the exploitation, oppression and poverty that reminds them of their Deutero-Isaiah God-their prayers have been answered, their hope disclosed,

their spirit restored and now a joyful song shall they sing. It was a powerful tool of counter-propaganda.

To us today, Mary's song is a roadmap to anyone facing the known and unknown potholes and storms of life. It is an invitation to discern God's activity in the experiences of our lives and circumstances. It is a clarion call to welcome the contradictions that question our conformity to myths and idols that threaten common good and common living. This makes Mary relevant to us today. This relevance will not be made by fitting her into our modern patterns but by seeing her as a sign of contradiction. Mary contradicts the neglect of the personal, the assertiveness and individualism of the modern world.

Therefore, just as the Spirit inspired Mary's joy and fortitude, so too the Spirit imbues us everyday with abundant grace to follow our own calling. The core issue is that Mary had confidence in God. So, we too should; that would be to sing a right Magnificat.

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