

COMMENTARY ON Mary's Magnificat (Luke 1: 51-53:)

⁵¹ *He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.* ⁵²

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;

⁵³ *he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.*

According to Bruce Larson,

Mary's hymn of response to the angel is the famous Magnificat, so named by the Roman Church for the key word in the Latin translation of the first line of this prayer of praise offered by Mary, ["*My soul magnifies the Lord*"]. In her true humility, she praised God that she was especially blessed.

There is a danger in trying to spiritualize the Magnificat. These are the most revolutionary words ever spoken. Through the Messiah, the mighty will be brought low; the humble, the lowly, will be exalted. William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury, warned his missionaries to India never to read the Magnificat in public. Chriwstians were already suspect in that country and they were cautioned against reading verses so inflammatory. Jesus, the ultimate revolutionary, completely reverses all human values. What Mary was prophesying about her unborn son is terrifying to the establishment, whoever and wherever they are. They cannot hear these words gladly. We may attempt instead to spiritualize these verses, but deep down we all know that Jesus has come to instigate the kind of revolution we need. ¹

According to Brueggemann,

The Magnificat of Mary (Luke 1:46-55) is a song about the reversal of destinies wrought by God, especially on behalf of the "unqualified," the "handmaiden of low estate" (v. 48), those of "low degree" (v. 52), the "hungry" (v. 53). It cannot be unimportant that the revolutionary statement of blessings beyond the normal provision ends, "as he promised to our fathers, to Abraham and his seed forever." ²

Where could she get such radical thinking?

Let us imagine where Mary is coming from and how she became so brave as to utter such strong statement in the context of the Roman Empire:

Economic background

First-century Palestine had basically two economic classes: upper and lower.

A small upper class accounted for ten percent or less of the population.

In peasant societies rooted in agriculture, ninety percent or more of the people are usually poor peasants. Mostly poor peasants living precariously, hand-to-mouth, they were at the mercy of weather, famine, pestilence, bandits, and war. Most were farmers. On the fringe of the lower class were 'unclean' occupations such as leather tanning. At the bottom of the bottom were the outcasts—peasants forced off their land, wandering vagabonds, beggars, and lepers. In Galilee, where much of Jesus' ministry took place, there existed both the extremely rich and the miserably poor. The *few* lived in luxury while the *many* lived in poverty. ³

¹ Bruce Larson. *The Communicator's Commentary on LUKE* (Waco, TX: Word Books Publisher, 1983), 39.

² Walter Brueggemann. *INTERPRETATION – A Bible Commentary on Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 120

³ Kraybill, *Upside-Down*, 72-73. Jesus challenged the three major social institutions: politics, religion, and economics. And as often happens, the three were woven together. The rich aristocrats, the chief priests and Sadducees in Jerusalem, owned large estates in Galilee, which trapped small tenant farmers. These ruling elite also controlled the mighty Jewish Supreme Court, the

Tax System

The Jewish people were powerless to affect either system of taxation. One was dictated by Roman policy, over which they had no control; the other was required by divine revelation. The Roman taxes were

enforced by police power, the Jewish taxes were not. One had no choice but to pay the Roman taxes, or lose one's land. Some Jewish farmers could not pay even the Roman taxes and thus lost their land, creating growing number of landless day laborers, widespread emigration, and a social class of robbers and beggars.⁴ Some peasant farmers owned small plots of land, but rising debt often pushed them off their land. They were forced to mortgage their property to pay taxes amounting sometimes to half of their harvest. Tax collectors and estate owners then snatched the land from indebted peasants, who couldn't pay their bills. In agrarian societies, such as Palestine, the ruler and the wealthiest five percent often control as much as sixty-five percent of the national wealth.⁵

The Oppressive Purity System

Marcus Borg has done extensive research on the social customs around the Purity System in Jesus' days. He notes, "It was the purity system that created a world with sharp social boundaries between pure and impure, righteous and sinner, whole and not whole, male and female, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile."⁶

In the Book of Leviticus laws forbid a disabled person from being a priest, brand lepers as unclean outcasts from the human community, and stigmatize a woman as unclean during her menstrual period or after giving birth.⁷

The Oppressive Patriarchy

The Feminist Dictionary defines patriarchy as "the rule of the father." Patriarchy refers to a system of legal, social, economic, and political relations that validate and enforce the sovereignty of male heads of families over dependent persons in the household. In classical patriarchal systems, as were found in Hebrew, Greek, and Roman societies, dependent persons included wives, unmarried daughters, dependent sons, and slaves.⁸

Civily, women were non-persons who were represented by their male guardians. The daughter or wife was in some sense property or chattel, regarded as being owned by her father or husband. Women's legal status was assimilated into that of children and slaves as dependents and quasi property, as persons who had no right to assert their own will but who were bound under a yoke of obedience and servitude to their lords. The term 'lord' was used simultaneously for God as LORD of the world, the aristocracy masters of the lower classes, and finally male head of household as lord of his wife, children and servants.⁹ A

Sanhedrin. This body, in turn, supervised the temple ritual and religious regulations. This same upper crust of Jerusalem was in cahoots with the Romans. The wealthy welcomed the Roman occupation because it protected them from bandits and supported the system that fed their wealth. These ruling Jewish elite cheered when the Romans crushed zealous freedom fighters. The religious leaders were likely part of the crowd that shouted, "Crucify him, and crucify him." They too considered Jesus more dangerous than the rebel leader Barabbas, 81-82.

⁴ Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 84-85.

⁵ Kraybill, *Upside-Down*, 76-77.

⁶ Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1995), 53.

⁷ Robert A. Chestnut, "To Bless the Whole Human Family," in *Renewing Vision*, ed. Cynthia M. Campbell, (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2000), 79.

⁸ Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, "Patriarchy," in *Dictionary of Feminist Theology*, eds. Russell & Clarkson, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1996), 205.

⁹ Rosemary Radford Ruether, "The Western Religious Tradition and Violence Against Women in the Home," in *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse*, eds. Carlson Brown & Carole R. Bohn (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989), 31. The oft-repeated metaphor, drawn from St. Paul, that the woman has no head of her own, but her husband is her head as she is his body, sums up the subjugated status of woman. Aristotle taught women were secondary biological species. The male contributed the form of the

woman's word was considered useless in court. It was better to burn a copy of the Torah than to allow a woman to touch it. Women were excluded from most parts of the temple. Nor were they counted in calculating the quorum needed for a meeting in the synagogue."¹⁰ Therefore, the life of young girls began in abuse and continued in oppression, that is, if they survive the abuse into adulthood.

- **This is the environment Mary was born and raised and grew as a young woman.**
- **As a young woman, she saw it, experienced, and lived through it at the time she conceived a baby Jesus.**
- **What did God do to her? God chose her to conceive the savior and be called "the most blessed in the world." Out of her own life and experience she cried out her songs:**

According to Deen,

The angel Gabriel and her cousin Elisabeth said of her: "Blessed are thou among women" (Luke 1:28, 42).¹¹ Yet her greatness had a humble beginning. She was an obscure peasant girl living in Nazareth twenty centuries ago. But her story has spread to the ends of the earth.¹²

Scholars have already pointed out that she was from a poor peasant family who knew the pain of poverty and oppression. On the cover of the book titled The Passion of the LORD is James Noel's art work of Mary, in a kneeling position beneath the cross of Jesus and in a posture of embracing all three dying men on the cross with her wide-open arms. Noel explains:

The painting I made for this book's cover is my attempt to capture this idea visually. . . . In my painting Mary's gesture beneath the cross and her central placement in the painting implies that she is lifting up her arms in grief over the cruel and violent deaths suffered by all three figures, not just Jesus. All three of the crucified are her boys, and because of her love for these boys, her sons, she also is undergoing crucifixion. Mary's gesture expresses her wish to take all her boys down from the cross or to die in their place. The sun will set, and she will be condemned to endure the weight of her grief. During the long days and nights that lie ahead, she will beseechingly lift up her arms to God in the same gesture.¹³

child in procreation. The woman was only an incubator who grew the child in her body. Every male seed would produce a perfect image of its maker, namely another male. . . . Female by nature, inferior in her capacity for thought, will, and physical activity. As women were natural slaves; it was their nature to be obedient servants in all things to their heads and masters. Scholastic theology adopted this theory and defined women as misbegotten males who have, by nature, a defective capacity for humanity. Theologically, this was expressed by Augustine's theory that women in themselves lacked the image of God. . . . Women also could not represent Christ, who is perfect humanity. Therefore, only men could be priests and represent Christ in the Christian community, as well as provide headship in secular society. According to Luther, Eve was originally equal to Adam in the original creation; but because of her sin she was punished by God, demoted to a far inferior creature and she must suffer subjugation to the male as a punishment for her sin. Carlson Brown & Bohn, eds, 31- 32.

¹⁰ Pedrito U. Maynard-Reid, *Complete Evangelism* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1997), 75.

¹¹ Edith Deen, *All of the women of the Bible* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1955), 157.

¹² Edith Deen, *All of the women of the Bible* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1955), 157.

¹³ James A. Noel, "Were You There," in *The Passion of the LORD*, ed. James A. Noel and Matthew V. Johnson (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 41-42. When my son died I too died that night and kept dying for many days, months, years and decades in an unbearable and inconsolable pain and grief. I am still crying and still dying with him.

According to Graddiok,

The Magnificat, so termed from the opening word in the Latin translation. In the song, Mary briefly praise God for the favor bestowed on a handmaiden of low estate (vv. 46-49)... What God has done for Mary anticipates and models what God will do for the poor, the powerless, and the oppressed of the world, the central theme of the second movement of the song, the triumph of God's purposes for all people everywhere (vv. 50-55).¹⁴

God is praised in terms of what he has done. To speak of what God has done is to announce what God will do; It is most striking that the lines that clearly refer to God's establishing justice and mercy in the future, in the end time, contain past tense verbs, not future tense verbs. This particular use of the past tense of the Greek language here expresses what is timelessly true: past, present, and future without differentiation. But we should also consider the past tense as a way of expressing the confidences and the certainty as though they already were. So sure is the singer that God will do what is promised that it is proclaimed as accomplished fact.¹⁵

In verses 52-53, Luke expresses in sharpest focus what has been called a classical statement of Gods' activity: the lowly are raised and the lofty are brought low. Mary sings of God who brings down the mighty and exalts those of low degree, who fills the hungry and sends the rich away empty, and through her, Luke introduces a theme prominent in both the Gospel and Acts. More is involved than the social message and ministry of Jesus in behalf of the oppressed and poor. That will follow, to be sure, but here we have a characteristic of the final judgment of God in which there is a complete reversal of fortunes: The powerful and rich will exchange places with the powerless and poor. And this eschatological reversal has already begun; God's choice of Mary is evidence of it.¹⁶

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¹⁴ Fred B. Craddock, Interpretation, A Bible Commentary on Luke (Louisville, KY. John Knox Pres, 1990), 29.
¹⁵ Fred B. Craddock, Interpretation, A Bible Commentary on Luke (Louisville, KY. John Knox Pres, 1990), 30.
¹⁶ Fred B. Craddock, Interpretation, A Bible Commentary on Luke (Louisville, KY. John Knox Pres, 1990), 30.