

*TEXTS IN DIALOGUE*

**MAGNIFICAT – A DANGEROUS REMINDER  
LUKE 1:46-55**

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This year I’m taking part for the fifth time in this Bible Week. Every year I greatly benefited. Thus the request to comment on the Magnificat this year was a joy for me. I accepted also so as to express in this way my appreciation of the week and of the people who contribute to its success. But the request also surprised me. After all, I’m an “ethicist” and not a “biblical scholar”. This might become clear in my commentary. But what is certainly clear in it is that it came about under the impression of the largest political demonstration in the more recent history of Switzerland, the second national women’s strike on June 14, in which several hundreds of thousands of people went to the street. This was also a factor that led to the fact that my contribution follows the trace drawn there and does not develop others, as for example the history of the anti-Jewish reading of the *Magnificat* in the context of Luke 1 and 2.

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It is well known that the Magnificat is one of three outstanding hymns which the author of the Gospel according to Luke worked into his first two chapters. These two chapters make up the Lukan childhood narrative and contain along with the Magnificat spoken by Mary also the *Benedictus* which Zechariah says and the *Nunc Dimittis* at the end of the second chapter, spoken by Simeon who could not die until he had seen the Christ. These hymns interrupt the narrative sequence in Luke 1 – 2, partly at the end of an episode, partly in the midst of the account. For Luke’s first two chapters contain a lot of material that has to be processed. A lot of narrative material, several persons and figures, various places and historicising indications of time.<sup>1</sup> By interrupting the text’s rhythm, the three hymns give the reader of this narrative a dynamic time to take a breath – a breath, mind you, that includes tension.

In these accounts, the Magnificat comes after the angel announces the birth of Jesus to Mary in Nazareth and tells her of her relative Elizabeth’s pregnancy as a sign that this annunciation is true. Immediately, Mary sets out on the journey to Judea, to the house of Elizabeth. After her arrival there, we have the well-known scene: the child in Elizabeth’s womb “leaps”, and Elizabeth blesses Mary. Mary answers with a song of praise, the Magnificat.

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<sup>1</sup> The announcement to the Temple priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth of the birth of John the Baptist, the announcement to Mary of the birth of Jesus, the encounter between Mary and Elizabeth, the birth of John the Baptist, the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, the circumcision of Jesus, the presentation of Jesus in the Temple, the witness of Simeon and Hannah, the 12-year old Jesus in the Temple.

Songs that are added to biblical accounts recapitulate what has happened and interpret it, as for example Moses' and Miriam's song of victory in Exodus 15. However, when they are placed at the beginning of the account like the Magnificat, they also let one look ahead. Among other things, this connects the Magnificat with Hannah's song of praise.<sup>2</sup> Here as there, the speaker integrates the saving action that she herself has experienced into what God does in universal history, into God's saving activity in general. The two women's prestige, created by God, thus gives grounds for hope in God's further saving activity for God's people.

As regards their structure, the two hymns have in common: following the best manner of the Psalms, they begin with Mary's or Hannah's feeling of joy which allows both women to sing a song of praise.<sup>3</sup> These songs of praise then consist of different parts in which there is mention of various persons for whom God has acted. In the first part, Mary (vv. 46-49) or Hannah themselves, then groups of people with specific characteristics that contrast with one another (vv. 50-53), and finally, Israel or the king / the anointed of Israel (vv. 54-55).

Precisely in its second part, the song of Hannah seems in its content to be a direct model for the Magnificat. It speaks of the reversal of societal conditions and the same themes are used. Thus hunger is overcome, the wealthy and satisfied suffer lack, God raises and lowers. If we start with the text's place, this theme of overthrow can now be followed in two directions: On the one hand by going to the end, so to the last lines of the hymn: the change brought about by God in favour of the powerless fulfils the promises. On the other hand, by going to the beginning, to the first lines of the hymn and thus to the speaker herself, since precisely this overthrow occurs in the biographies of Mary and Hannah: a person on the margin and in need – Hannah already speaks of *ταπεινωσις* (abasement, humiliation, lowliness; v. 48a) in her vow<sup>4</sup> – is raised by the hand of God. Let us begin with the last point and then at the end briefly look at the first one.

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Of course the childhood narratives are structured by the pair John the Baptist and Jesus. But Elizabeth and Mary are not just two pregnant women with the role of carrying the two later protagonists in the Gospel according to Luke. Elizabeth and Mary are more than blueprints for their sons who appear because people happen to be born of women. They have their own significance. Here, Luke draws an encounter between two real women with their own respective stories and not primarily an encounter between two unborn children. The two women meet in a space where there is no dominating male voice. In addition, Luke even lets Zechariah, the master of the house, become mute. And thus the two women address one another with their own words without being disturbed. It is just as noticeable that Mary's song of praise is addressed to God and does not mention Jesus. Thus the two women receive the confirmation of their significance through the person opposite them without any reference to a man.

Long enough, Catholic theology in particular drew a different picture of Mary. In the Church's dominant Mariology, Mary was a screen for projecting a "celibate male hierarchy of priests" and served to sharpen women's inferiority and dependence. Mary was the model for silence, subordination and selflessly taking the lower place. Perfidious men preached a male Church and society by referring to Mary, the model of a desexualised, humble mother-servant who was held before women to imitate, but who was at the same time to remain unattainable. I was not surprised to note that in this classical Mariology, the Magnificat hardly played a part. Feminist perspectives not only revealed its marginalised reception, they also open up richer women's traditions that develop a more positive image of Mary. Two examples:

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Sam 2.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Ps 35:9.

<sup>4</sup> 1 Sam 1:11.

In the debates around justice between genders in the Church, Katharina Ganz, the superior general of the Oberzell Franciscans, refers to the Magnificat and comes to the conclusion: “If Mary represents the whole Church, the Church cannot and may not manifest itself first of all as an institution or even as a clerical-hierarchical power structure.”<sup>5</sup> She thus denounces the dependence of women’s orders on consecrated men in pastoral ministries and liturgy, and she questions whether the Church can successfully contribute toward building the Kingdom of God on earth so long as there is no justice between genders. On the topic of women and the Church, the Church historian Ana María Bidegaín also refers to Mary’s Magnificat. Its perspective helps to query allegedly absolute realities. It shows liberating paths that are made possible precisely through participation, and thus makes a return to the Gospel possible.<sup>6</sup>

Contrary to the androcentric corset of classical Mariology, these two voices relate the content and the speaker of the Magnificat to one another as an example. When Mary prays the Magnificat, she manifests a particular sensitivity for the situation in which she and Elizabeth find themselves. And she has a sense of the social circumstances that lead to oppression and injustice. In her own fragile position, she recognises God’s creative sign and interprets it as a vision of a liberating future. In order to show clearly the fragility of Mary’s position, it would be helpful to shed light more precisely on the socio-cultural conditions in which she is speaking. Here it is perhaps enough to mention other persons who are connected with ταπεινώσις: for example, the ill-treated Hagar on her flight into the desert or the neglected Lea.<sup>7</sup> In spite of this fragility, Mary is not a maid for God or for the Holy Spirit. Rather, she is an active, independent figure who is prepared to contribute her part in the realisation of the Kingdom of God.

Such indications liberate the critical potential that is contained in Mary’s praise. With her, Luke writes a “truly dangerous reminder”<sup>8</sup> into the model of Christian institutions, according to which it hardly seems possible to legitimise any maintaining of power for the sake of the power itself. It has probably already been asked to what extent the Magnificat is not dangerously populist, since it calls for a violent revenge against the rich and powerful. If at all, this would be the case if it is used in a wrong way, and if there is no consideration of the fact that in it, God is acknowledged as the One who does the deeds and not some representative. With God as the subject of an overthrow, the judgment is made that one has to do with a just reversal, so that the mighty have deserved being knocked off their throne.

However, it does just as little justice to the Magnificat if political apathy that moves the realisation of the Kingdom of God to the end of time is deduced from it – and precisely the two contemporary voices that were just mentioned bear witness to this. The linking of the content and the speaker of the Magnificat contradicts such a way of reading. For the Magnificat points precisely to the lot that Mary experiences. The powerless young girl becomes the woman who is praised by everyone. With her, the conditions are turned around: not men decide over women. And above all: Mary has a say in the decision. She is asked, she herself weighs all the factors in a reasonable way, she asks questions, and she gives her consent. A woman decides over a man, and thereby *the* question of humanity here becomes a woman’s question. She decides as regards the arrival of Jesus, she decides “whether God receives a place in the history of humankind”<sup>9</sup>. Thus Mary as a figure of faith not only stands for a hope filled with promise, but is also very much an encouragement for people who are prepared to take concrete steps toward the realisation of the Kingdom of God. Mary shows that a change occurs when people say yes to this and enter into an encounter

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Katharina Ganz, *Ohne Geschlechter-Gerechtigkeit kein Reich Gottes!*, [www.feinschwarz.net](http://www.feinschwarz.net) on May 25, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. in Margit Eckholt, *Eine „Frauensynode“ einberufen? – ein Vorschlag der Päpstlichen Kommission für Lateinamerika*, [www.feinschwarz.net](http://www.feinschwarz.net) on May 14, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Gen 16:11; 29:32 LXX.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister*. Continuum, 2003, 209-324.

<sup>9</sup> Thus Rainer Bucher, *Versuche zu Maria*, [www.feinschwarz.net](http://www.feinschwarz.net) on January 1 and 2, 2016.

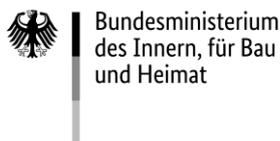
with God so that the history of liberation again begins to move. Luke makes this very explicit. When Elizabeth blesses Mary, she says what is essential: faith in the possibility of fulfilment.<sup>10</sup>

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So what is the connection between overthrow and promise to Israel? Mary sees in God's intervention in favour of the powerless the fulfilment of the promises to Abraham and his descendants. Just as earlier, God led Israel with a strong hand out of the slavery of Egypt, God will continue the history of liberation with her and with Jesus of Nazareth. The Beatitudes and the woes are discernible, with which Jesus promises the poor the Kingdom of God.<sup>11</sup> In the same way, the discussions in the early Christian community of believers in Jerusalem are discernible; according to the Lukan account,<sup>12</sup> this community realises the Deuteronomic promise ("There aren't really supposed to be any poor among you [Israel])"<sup>13</sup> and lives with a kind of communal property. Thus the Magnificat forms one element – if not even the most important one – in how Luke connects "the things that are being fulfilled among us"<sup>14</sup> in salvation history with the thousand-year old history of Israel. Through this hymn as well he holds fast to the uninterrupted continuation of the biblical history of the promise to Abraham and Sarah by way of Hannah even to Mary.

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<sup>10</sup> By the way, here the theme of virginity with which Luke plays in the childhood narrative is also re-interpreted in a way that does not agree with a patriarchal image of Church but rather gives it a kick in the shin. Surely the moment of the annunciation of Jesus to Mary by the angel stands for the strength of a faith that is open to God's wonderful deeds. But even more, in this encounter with God, Mary changes from being a little girl to being a strong woman: She remains a virgin, and this might mean that she is autonomous, not subject to the will of a man.

<sup>11</sup> Lk 6:20.

<sup>12</sup> Acts 4:32 – 5:11.

<sup>13</sup> Deut 15:4.

<sup>14</sup> Lk 1:1.