



## The Real Mary

By Scot McKnight

In countries whose citizens lack the basic liberties to say what they think, worship as they want, and to acquire basic needs, a bold plea for justice is an act of subversion. Mary made her bold plea in song. Not long after Mary sang this song, Magi from the East informed Herod, the cruel king of Israel, that a recent newborn would become king. Herod's response was to slaughter all the innocent children two years old and younger in the village of Bethlehem. If Herod thought the mere news of a baby boy in Bethlehem was subversive, what do you think he thought when he heard the words (or ideas) found in Mary's song? If we read Mary's song in Mary's real world, we will see that it is a song about turning injustices inside out and power upside down.

### Mary's Song (in Herod's world)

As soon as the angel Gabriel left Mary, she hurried down to the home of her older relative, Elizabeth, to share the good news. Mary knew that Elizabeth, an aging barren wife of a priest, also had been blessed by God, and that she, too, would give birth to a special son. As soon as Mary crossed the threshold, Elizabeth herself burst into a poetic blessing for Mary. Then Mary echoed back with what God was doing in her own womb. Here are the first lines of Mary's Magnificat, now found in Luke's first chapter. (We call this song the Magnificat because the first line in the Latin translation is *Magnificat anima mea Dominum*, or literally "Glorifies / my soul / the Lord.")

My Soul  
glorifies  
the  
Lord

Luke 1:46

*My soul glorifies the Lord  
And my spirit rejoices in God my Savior...*

Why does Mary break into song? Because not only is God giving to her a son, but also this miracle son will become the Davidic king and establish a new Davidic dynasty in Jerusalem that will last forever and ever. Remember that in Luke's first chapter when Gabriel visited Mary he told her that her son would be "great" and would be called the "Son of the Most High," and that his "kingdom would never end." Mary understood Gabriel's words as the fulfillment of God's promise to David generations before—recorded for us in 2 Samuel's seventh chapter.

Knowing that her son will be the Davidic king and knowing that God has chosen to bring that king into the world through her womb, Mary explains why she needs to "magnify"—why she needs to express her gratitude in song:

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*For he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.  
From now on all generations will call me blessed,  
for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name.*

Mary's next words form an announcement, a voice from the bottom of society that justice has finally arrived. This means the powers are being subverted. For others sitting with her at the margins of society, her words could only mean that Herod the Great, king of Israel, who had had his own family members assassinated and who had taxed Israel well beyond her means, would be overthrown. Read these words with one of your eyes on that petty tyrant Herod:

*[God's] mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.  
He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;  
He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.  
He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.  
He has filled the hungry with good things but he has sent the rich away empty.  
He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful  
to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors.*

...holy is  
his name.

Luke 1:49

When Mary declared that God “has brought down rulers from their thrones,” anyone listening at the time would have heard implications for Herod the Great and Rome. When she announced that God has “sent the rich away empty,” hearers would have immediately thought of Herod the Great and those benefiting from heavy taxation. When she proclaimed that God “has lifted up the humble” and “has filled the hungry with good things,” Mary's listeners would have turned their attention to poor people like Mary herself. Had Mary sung this song in Nazareth among the peasants they would have all hoisted a toast and shouted “Hallelujah!” and “Amen!”

Herod's days of taxing Israel, flaunting her laws, and dotting Israel's landscape with pagan shrines were numbered. Mary was already announcing justice as fact.

You can chant Mary's Song at Vespers or you can sing it aloud during Advent, but don't forget that its powerful words give one the sense of a rally and a revival more than the planned Scripture reading of the pious.



## Mary's Character

If this is what Mary's song was really like, the image we have of Mary needs an upgrade. We need a Real Mary 2.0. When we think of Mary, the first thing that should come to mind is the kind of courage we find among informed protesters—and, by reading the Magnificat in context, we can imagine Mary to be wiry and spirited and resolved and bold and gutsy. Maybe we should call her the Blessed Valorous Mary instead of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Some think of her as tender; we might instead think of her as tenacious. Some think of her song as a splendid piece

of spirituality that could be tucked away in a pew hymnal, but her song belongs instead on the shelf with socio-spiritual songs of protest against unjust rulers.

Mary was indeed holy and pious and humble—this all comes into play when Mary said “may it be.” And the Magnificat expresses a profound sense of God's work for God's glory. But that servant girl of God had more than simple exemplary personal piety. Mary, if we learn to see what she was like through the Magnificat in Herod's world, was a tiger waiting to pounce on the moment when God's Messiah would be set loose. This woman of faith longed for the day when Herod the Great would meet a just end and God would appoint a true Davidic king—as 2 Samuel 7 predicted—and reestablish forever the Davidic dynasty in Jerusalem. God's news through Gabriel, that her son would become the Davidic king, was the particular hope that she and many others most wanted.

“What took you so long?” Mary must have asked God.

## Mary's Vision, Isaiah's Vision

Mary's Magnificat, if we think of it being sung during Herod's political and social reign (which we usually don't do), can be summarized in words like these: “Herod dethroned and Jesus enthroned!” As the life of

Mary's faith unfolds in the Gospels, we will learn that these graphic hopes to dethrone Herod and enthrone Jesus will give way to a more refined understanding of what the title "Messiah" means. However, at this point in her life, Mary clearly envisioned an earthly Davidic dynasty with Jesus sitting on the throne in Jerusalem.

How could the real Mary not have thought like this at this point in her life? Isaiah's eleventh chapter was at the center of what Jews thought of the Messianic kingdom. Here are some of its earthly, graphic lines:

## The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him.

Isaiah 11:2

*A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse [a Davidic ancestor].*

*The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him.*

*With righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor.*

*With the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked..*

*The wolf will live with the lamb.*

*For all the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD.*

*The nations will rally to him.*

*He will ...gather the exiles of Israel.*

What words come to mind for the Davidic kingdom? Messiah, Spirit of God, justice for the needy and poor, judgment for the wicked, peace throughout all of creation, salvation for all, and Israel's lost tribes will find their way home.

This is what Mary thought. Her hopes were subversive.

Notice how similar Mary's words are to Isaiah's and notice also how concrete her images are:

*[God] is merciful to those who fear him.*

*He will scatter the proud. He will bring down rulers.*

*He will lift up the humble. He will fill the hungry.*

*He will send the rich away empty.*

If you were a first-century poor woman, if you were hungry and oppressed, if you had experienced the injustices of Herod the Great, and if you stood up in Jerusalem and announced that the proud and the rulers and the rich would be yanked down from their high places, it is likely you'd be tried for treason and put to death for disturbing the "peace."

If you were Herod or one of his twelve wives or one of his many sons with hopes of the throne, you would have heard these words as an act of protest, if not revolution or rebellion. Even if you, as Mary, were to argue with your accusers that these are words straight out of the Bible, you'd be accused of subversion, of wanting your son to become the next king. You just might end up crucified.

Which was exactly what did happen to her son, and the reason Jesus was crucified was that he took the same stands against similar oppressive leaders and that he promised the same kind of revolution to the poor and needy. The Spirit who inspired Jesus was the same Spirit who inspired Mary's Song of protest.

Now, if we look again at our Christmas crèches or at paintings and artwork of Mary, do those reminders of the first Christmas tell the real Mary's story? Do they tell us of a courageous woman who went toe-to-toe with Herod the Great over matters of everyday concern? Do these reminders suggest themes that when Jesus made them his own would get him crucified? Have we tamed Mary into the passive, pious mother of Jesus?

If we have, we need a real version of Mary.

Scot McKnight is an American New Testament scholar, historian of early Christianity, theologian, speaker, author and blogger. He is currently the Karl A. Olsson Professor in Religious Studies at North Park University.

*Excerpt taken from The Real Mary: Why Evangelical Christians Can Embrace the Mother of Jesus, ©2007 by Scot McKnight. Used by permission of Paraclete Press, (www.paracletepress.com).*





God bless you this Christmas!

We join Mary in proclaiming:

"He has done mighty deeds..." (Luke 1:51).

At Christmas we celebrate the mightiest deed and greatest gift of all: the birth of our Savior, the Prince of Peace. Holy is His name!

Throughout the year many of you told us of the mighty deeds in your life. We loved hearing how God brought healing to your body or soul; how He brought freedom to your family; how He provided for you; how He changed your life; how He brought a loved one back into the Family. Sharing these "mighty deeds" with each other encourages us to trust in the faithfulness of our God.

We pray that the Spirit will do many mighty deeds in you and through you during the coming year. May He grant you peace and joy as you trust in His goodness, kindness and mercy.

We are grateful for your prayers, your kind words, your testimonies, and gifts.

Rejoicing in Him,

The Lutheran Renewal Team and Board

*Thank you for giving an offering to us at this time. It is greatly appreciated.*

### *Arise! Encounter Rooms* (for women only)

**Date:** January 10, 2013

**Time:** 7:00-9:00 p.m.

**Place:** Redeemer Lutheran

61 Mississippi Way NE; Fridley, MN 55432

Including:

- Individual prophetic prayer appointments
- Individual physical healing appointments with trained teams from Healing Center, Int'l.
- Worship all evening
- Pre-registration not available. On-site reservations only.

(The December 6, 2012, date has been rescheduled and upgraded to the above event.)



### Plan Ahead!

April 19-20, 2013

St. Paul, MN

Arise! Women's Conference

*"Living the Difficult Life-Grace in the Wilderness"*

With Graham Cooke and others

Complete details in January

August 7-10, 2013

St. Paul, MN

Holy Spirit Conference

*"Come, Follow Me"*  
(Mark 10:21)

Complete details in May

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**Location:**

North Heights Lutheran Church  
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**Early-bird price:** \$50.

Pre-registration closes on January 21.  
On-site registration welcome.

Brochure and online registration: [www.LutheranRenewal.org](http://www.LutheranRenewal.org)  
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