

Applying the Significance of the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-52) to the Socio-Political and Economic Situation of Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The Magnificat, otherwise known as Mary song, not only focused on God's glorious mercy and deliverance but has been interpreted to speak of three of the revolutions of God namely moral, socio-political and economic revolution. The paper having singled out three themes, noted that Nigerians is in dire need of the words of the Magnificat . The paper observed that due to the level of selfishness, pride and injustice that characterize the actions of some individuals in the country, it became imperatives to highlight the importance of the Magnificat and apply same for overall welfare, security, progress and benefit of the nation and of its citizens. Hence for the purpose of clarity, the paper adopted descriptive and analytical forms to study and interpret the passage. The paper revealed that Mary's song of divine victory over the powerful becomes a song of warning, instructions and hope. Therefore, the paper recommended that Nigerian leaders should borrow a leaf from the message of the Magnificat in order to have good governance that would be value- based and ensures that political, social and economic priorities are based on broad based consensus in society and that the voices of the poorest and the most vulnerable are heard in decision – making .

INTRODUCTION

Over the years, the Nigerian nation has been ravaged by severe political and economic crises which have retarded her developments in spite of its enormous natural and human resources. It is with this understanding that the National Episcopal conference summarized the Nigerian experience and situation in the following way:

The nation is still in jeopardy. The evils that beset our country have remained and sometimes been aggravated. The economic conditions of the generality of our people have continued to deteriorate. The political climate

remains unclear; apprehensions and fears fill many hearts. The long entrenched social problems of the nation are still with us; violent crimes, endemic corruption at all levels blatant misuse of power and position, ethnic and religious disturbances, neglect and oppression of the poor and powerless³³⁵.

Be that as it may, it could be said that Nigeria is faced with myriad of challenges political, economic, social, moral and even religious. It is therefore against this background that this paper, through a contemporary interpretation of the Magnificat aimed at offering a vision of how to rebuild the nation. In the same way, a true application of the religious dimension is of vital importance. There is need, therefore for a more holistic understanding of what it is to be human if Nigerians are to find a way out of our present predicaments. This paper will single out three main themes namely socio- political moral and economic revolution that characterized the Magnificat . Each of these themes represents a fundamental attributes that could be explored to make Nigerian society a better place. It is the position of this paper that a sound understanding of the Magnificat can serve as a veritable theological framework for building a better nation.

Therefore for the purpose of clarity the presentation will be divided into three sections. First, an attempt will be made to establish the meaning of the Magnificat . Second, the paper will highlight the passage and the contextual interpretations given to it vis-à-vis the present socio-political, economic and moral climate of Nigeria; its emphasis on our leadership lifestyle in Nigeria. Lastly, an attempt will be made to establish the fact that the Magnificat can be used as a basis to bring about socio-economic and political change in Nigeria. It will be rounded off with recommendations and conclusion.

Magnificat

Magnificat is from the Latin, *mag-nifi-kaht*, meaning to magnify. It is a hymn of praise and a recital of God's covenant faithfulness. It is used in the Divine Offices of the Hours in the church.³³⁶ Equally, according to Advanced Learners Dictionary of Contemporary English, Magnificat is the

³³⁵ Catholic Bishops of Nigeria: Human Life is Sacred (Enugu): CID AP,1991,5.

³³⁶. Paul J. Achtemeier (Gen. Ed) Harper's Bible Dictionary, India, Bangalore Theological Publications, 1994, p.596.

liturgical canticle of Virgin Mary, song in Christian Churches taken from her reported words upon the occasion of her visitation to her cousin Elizabeth.³³⁷

Background to the Magnificat

In some early traditions of the text and from the witness of several of the early Church Fathers, Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist is reported to be the one who uttered this beautiful poem. Because the poem is modeled after the Song of Hannah, (1 Sam 2:1-10), many interpreters have argued that it was originally intended to be understood as Elizabeth's and it originated among the followers of John the Baptist.

In all of the extant Greek manuscripts, however, and in most of the traditions of the church, the poem has been understood to belong to Mary, the mother of Jesus. Within the setting of the Lucan structure, it appears most likely that Mary is the one to whom it should be attributed. Owing from the Lucan disposition to the poor, the marginalized, the downtrodden, it is very apt that it is ascribed to be the song of Mary. The poem consist basically of praise to God and it is a recital of God's faithfulness for selecting her to be a participant in the mighty divine act; for God's care for the lowly, poor and the powerless, (a strong Lucan theme and emphasis); and for God's bringing to fulfillment the promise made to Abraham in and through the coming of Mary's son. The poem is quite beautiful and has been used in various liturgical settings of the Christian Churches.³³⁸

The song also introduced the theme of God's mercy, (Luke 1:50&54). It is also imbued with themes and images from OT. It closely resembles the song of Hannah (1 Sam 2:1-10) while other passages such as Ps 89: 10&13; 98:3; 111:9; Sirach 33:12; Habb 3:18 illumined the background. Equally, it has been used since the time Caesarius of Aries, AD 540³³⁹

³³⁷ Advanced Learners Dictionary of Contemporary English

³³⁸. Paul J. Achtemeier, Harper's Bible Dictionary.

³³⁹.Rev. Fr. Marshall, The Gospel of Luke, Commentary, Notes and Study Questions, San Francisco: Ignatus Press 2001, p.20.

A Detailed Analysis of Luke 1:46-52: Mary's Song

A translation of Luke 1:46-52 in the New American reads as follows:

*.....My soul magnifies the Lord
 And my spirit rejoices in God my Savior;
 Because He has regarded the lowliness of His handmaid;
 For behold, henceforth all generations shall call me blessed;
 Because He who is mighty has done great things for me,
 and holy is His name;
 And His mercy is from generation to generation
 on those who fear Him.
 He has shown might with His arm,
 He has scattered the proud in the conceit of their heart.
 He has put down the mighty from their thrones,
 and has exalted the lowly.
 He has filled the hungry with good things,
 and the rich He has sent away empty.
 He has given help to Israel, his servant, mindful of His mercy
 Even as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his posterity
 forever*

The above passage is known as song of Mary. This song has many parallels with the Song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2, and indeed Mary is another member of the many woman who are selected by God to play a mighty role in the unfolding of His covenant. In fact, the *Magnificat* is “a virtual collage of biblical texts.” [Green, 101n] Indeed Mary's song bears some striking resemblances to the songs of Miriam (Ex. 15:19-21), Deborah (Judg. 5:1-

31), and especially of Hannah (1 Sam. 2:1-10) which, of course, Mary would have known well.³⁴⁰

As one can well imagine, many scholars are skeptical about the ability of a Jewish maid to compose a hymn so biblical in its nature, so powerful in its emotion, and so rich in its theology, a hymn that happens to fit so neatly into Luke's account, introducing as it does themes that will occur again and again in Luke-Acts. Could a country girl compose such a poem? But the thorough knowledge of the Bible, typical of the pious Jew in those days, renders their skepticism unnecessary. However, it is not necessary to hold that, given its place in chapter 1, Mary composed the hymn on the spot in response to Elizabeth's greeting, as the women met for the first time. It is quite possible, as J. Gresham Machen suggested that Mary's poem was her reflective response, worked out over hours or days, to the annunciation, to Elizabeth's greeting, and to the conception of a baby in her womb. It is likely because the hymn comes from Mary that it was cherished in the early Christian church. It's origin before the appearance of Lord Jesus is demonstrated by the fact that there is nothing in the poem that betrays knowledge of the Lord's ministry, teaching, crucifixion, or resurrection.³⁴¹

All the great biblical masters of the ages have affirmed that there are four parts to the Magnificat . In the first part, Mary expresses her gratitude to God; in the second, she praises God for his power, His holiness and His mercy; in the third, she compares how differently God deals with the proud and the humble; in the fourth, she recalls that all the ancient prophecies to the Jews are now being fulfilled in the Messiah, Who was at that moment present in her womb.

However, being a song of praise to God, it could be said that, God was the subject of Mary's song. Mary was not singing about herself; she was not praising herself but what she could accomplish. The Lord was the subject of her song, the subject of her praise and rejoicing. The word glorify (*Megalunei*) means to declare the greatness of. The idea is habitual; that is it was habit of Mary's soul to glorify the Lord for God's mercy to the oppressed. Apart from the above, there are other phenomenal attributes f

³⁴⁰ **Tannehill, Robert C.** The Magnificat as Poem. *Journal of Biblical Literature* , 1974, 93: 263-275.

³⁴¹ Tannehill, Robert C,

God proclaimed in the song which are God's holiness, mercy, sovereignty and finally his love to mankind with the birth of Jesus Christ through the virgin Mary and the deliverance of Israel. Mary in the song proclaimed God's holiness and mercy.

God's glorious mercy in finally sending the messiah (savior) to those who feared (reverenced) him. Luke 1:50 & 54 – speaks of the term *mercy*. The term mercy means *hesed*, a Hebrew word that is defined as *covenant fidelity*. In Greek, it means *eleos* (*Kyrie elesion* – “Lord have mercy”). *Covenant fidelity* is what God establishes with the Old Testament mediators (Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, the Prophets and David) when he forms a covenant with them. Jesus Christ would be the fulfillment of these covenants and then establish a NEW Covenant in Luke 22 at the Last Supper. A *covenant is extension of kinship by oath*. So when Mary says “And his mercy is on those who fear him” and “in remembrance of his mercy” she is really saying that God will remain faithful to the covenants he formed with Abraham and other mediators as well. (Read Zechariah's Prophecy – Luke 1:68-79 and Psalm 51 and insert the term *hesed – covenant fidelity* and watch how the whole scripture passage becomes clearer).³⁴²

What begins as praise for divine loving kindness toward a marginalized and oppressed woman grows to embrace all the poor of the world. The second part of the Magnificat articulates the great biblical theme of reversal, where lowly groups are defended by God while the arrogant end up losers. Another thing worth of note about the Magnificat is that, despite the fact that Mary was greatly blessed by God, she did not slip into the sin of pride, nor did she think that she was a favorite of God. The more we are blessed by God, the more dangerous the sin of pride becomes.

Also as noted by scholars, humility was displayed in the song of Mary. Mary in the song recognized where she had come from, just how lowly a person she was in the eyes of the world, she was a nobody, poor, obscure, unknown, insignificant, of little purpose and meaning in life. The very expression, “the humble state of His servant,” suggests that Mary was even considered the least among her household. This to a large extent shows that God usually chooses the last person to more clearly demonstrated His mercy

³⁴². Schweissinger, Magnificat un Lexicon Theologie in Lexicon Theologie und Kirche, 16: 786.

and power (see Gideon, Judges 6:15, Leah, Gen 29: 31, believers, 1Cor 1: 26-29).³⁴³

Also, it could be recalled that the sovereignty of God was brought to limelight in the song. There, she proclaimed how God had reversed the order of things in favor of the less privileged. This according to her was done by His arm, that is, not by love but by power. The lord, she noted had scattered the proud, The proud are prideful in their thoughts, “in their inmost thoughts”. They think themselves better..... by looks, person, position, wealth, ability, heritage, achievement, possessions. Mary predicted that at the end of time, the lord will have scattered all such pride. The lord, according to her had dethroned the mighty and exalted the humble. Who are the proud whom Mary praises God for scattering? Yes, they are the pagan tyrants (past, present, and future): the pharaohs, Sennecheribs, Salmanasars, Antiochuses, Herods, Neros, and Stalins, but they include also all those who work in any capacity against the kingdom of God. Then we can also give examples of Pharaoh (Ex, 15:1-11) Korah and company (Num, 16), Haman (Esther 6:6-14), Nebuchadnezzar (Dan, 4:24-37), Belshazzar (Dan, 5), Amaziah (2kg, 14:10), Uzziah (2Ch, 26:16), all proud (Ps 33: 10; 1Pet, 5:5, Jas, 3:44:6. Meanwhile the humbled exalted by God are Joseph (Gen 41: 1-44), David (1 Sam, 18; 2 Sam, 7), Mordecai (Esther 6: 6-14), Daniel (Dan, 1: 8-21), John (Mt 3: 4; 11:11), Mary (Lk, 1:48), Jesus (Phil, 2: 5-11), all humble (Jas 4:6; 1Pet, 5:3) and the likes.³⁴⁴

Of great importance is the reference she made to the hungry that the lord filled and emptied the rich. And the rich he hath sent empty away. Why hath the rich been sent away empty? The rich in this context are those who not only have worldly riches, but hoard them in avarice, and refuse to acknowledge their own poverty of soul. These are not hungry for justice, so they will wallow in vagrancy of mind, unsatiated, restless, and unhappy.

On final note, the song revealed how God had helped his people. “He hath received Israel His servant Mindful of His mercy. . .This verse introduces the last part of the *Magnificat* , which praises God for His fidelity to His

³⁴³. The Preacher’s Outline Sermon Bible, Chattanooga TN: Leadership Ministries Worldwide, Vol 1, 2000, p.964.

³⁴⁴. John L. Mckenzie, S.L . Dictionary of the Bible, New York Macmillian Publishing co.,. 1976, p. 100.

promises. *Suscepit* (translated *he hath received* in the Douay) can also mean to “lift up” or “rescue.” The Greek verb is *Antelabeto*, which also means to “lift up.” In this, God is always mindful of His mercy to Israel. The Church is the New Israel. She has been laid low as never before, more despised, more wounded, than ever before. But God is faithful. *Suscipiat, Domine, hanc ecclesiam tuam* Two specific helps were proclaimed which are:

1. God remembering His mercy. The people (Israel) desperately needed God’s mercy and deliverance. They were enslaved by the Romans, therefore, they were frantic in their search for deliverance, so frantic many were turning to false messiah’s and other answers to escape their plight. Some even finding their security in the Roman state and in humanistic answers instead of God.
2. God had remembered His promise of the messiah. He had promised to the fathers of Israel, to Abraham and to Abraham’s seed. Meanwhile, it should be noted that the promised had been fulfilled with the birth of Jesus.

So God will deal with the proud. His arm will be raised against them (Deut 4:34; Ps 44:3; 89:13; 118:15). The promise of God's judgment here recalls the exodus, when God exercised his power in total judgment (Ex 6:1, 6; Deut 3:24; 7:19). Whatever earthly authority exists, it is nothing before the mighty, decisive exercise of divine authority. He has brought down rulers (Ps 68:1; 89:10) but has lifted up the humble (1 Sam 2:7; Ps 147:6). He has filled the hungry with good things (1 Sam 2:5; Ps 107:9; 146:7) but has sent the rich away empty (1 Sam 2:5; Job 15:29; Jer 17:11). Here is God working on behalf of the pious downtrodden, a group the Old Testament called the 'anauim (Ps 9:11-12, 17-20; 10:1-4; 12:1-5; 18:25-29).³⁴⁵

Contextualizing the Magnificat : The Nigerian Socio- political and economic experience

To resolve socio- political and economic problems in contemporary Nigeria, the Magnificat offers a lot as many leaders and rulers will choose to study it. This is because the Magnificat speaks about three of the revolution of God which are; “the scattering of the proud in the plans of their hearts, casting

³⁴⁵. The Preachers Outline, p. 966.

down of the mighty and exaltation of the humble, filling of those who are hungry”. In other words, the song is about God reversing the order of things on earth. That is, it is a form of socio-political, economic and moral liberation of the less privileged.

Meanwhile, today we are faced with the task of developing and a theologically sound, ecumenically fruitful, spiritually empowering, ethically challenging, and socially liberating interpretation of Mary for the 21st century. What is her significance in the light of Christian faith in the gracious mystery of God? What difference does remembering her make in the life of church and particularly in Nigerian society? .Tracing the history of socio- political, moral and economic situation in Nigeria, one could say that there are many wrongs that need to put rights.

In the political terrain, our society is distorted by oppression and injustice. As rightly observed by Olawoyin, he says, “the governors and politicians are glaringly selfish and greedy for possession (cupidity) and power (libido dominandi)”.³⁴⁶ Equally Obiorah Mary noted that :

A person arriving for the first time in our country and observing the copious manifestations of our religious sentiments in every corner of our streets and homes, will expect corresponding good works in our daily activities unfortunately the reverse is the situation.³⁴⁷

In Nigeria today, evidences abound through the social media revealing the extent to which corruption is escalating. The politicians are getting very well paid, the masses are on the streets struggling, dying and fighting just to get their salaries paid.

People accumulate power and wealth at the expense of others. Suffering is rampant and the pattern persists through the generations. Our leaders are not only proud but they have turned themselves to semi gods that should be

³⁴⁶ , Olawoyin Olusegun Noah. *Governors and Robbers: St Augustine’s Political Philosophy in Nigerian Context*” in *Religion and Governanc*in Nigeria, Ayantayo, J.k et.al (eds), Ibadan, Samprints and Graphics Co., 2012, p. 135.

³⁴⁷ . Obiorah Mary Jerome. *Breaking down the Walls of division: An Exegesis of 1Cor 1: 10-17* Proceedings of the 25th Annual Conference of the Catholic Theological Association of Nigeria , Emeka Nwosuh, OP (eds), . 6-9 April, 2010 p.165.

worshipped. It is in the light of this that the statement of Fayemi concerning Abacha proud nature and domination of economy becomes relevant here:

The Nigerian economy did not escape Abacha's grip. He ran it as a personal fiefdom....., Abacha kept the spoils of office for himself and his family, a small coterie of his security apparatus and his small circle of foreign friends³⁴⁸.

The government is insensitive to the yearnings of the people and deaf to their cry of desperation. Those who are holding the reins of power believe too much in themselves, as if they know it all and they have everything in control. There is gross mismanagement of resources, lack of equity and perversion of justice and above all, lack of the political will to do the needful in taking the rightful step at the rightful time and in the rightful direction to move the country out of the mess and placing it on the path of justice. As rightly observed by Godwin Okeke,, many who are going into politics are not doing so because they want to serve the people. No, they are going into politics in order to go and share the country's wealth. They spend a lot of money to get elected. And when they get in there, they would want to recover the money they spent and of course make more money³⁴⁹. No wonder Mary said the proud will be scattered in the plans of their hearts. That is moral revolution.

Thus, it could be said that we are in dire need of the words of Mary in the Magnificat , Mary's song of divine victory over the powerful becomes a song of warning, instructions and hope. The *Magnificat* is a call to political action against capitalist and other reactionary forces that, so it was thought, were the chief instruments of the oppression of the poor. The lord in the song of Mary had dethroned the mighty and exalted the humble. The mighty are those who sit in positions of power, authority and influence over others. The picture concerns those who take their power and

³⁴⁸ Fayemi, J.k, Military hegemony and the transition Programme, " Issue" vol. 27, No 1, 1999.

³⁴⁹. Godwin Okeke. Justice and the Practice of Democracy in Nigeria, in " Church and Democracy in West Africa, Ferdinand Nwaigbo et.at (eds), Port Harcourt, Ciwa Publications, 2003.

p. 161.

seek their own ends
 fail to serve
 deprive others
 push others down
 abuse other
 enslave others
 bypass others
 misuse others³⁵⁰

The Magnificat is a message that we need to accept that other people's rights are our responsibilities. They have real meaning for the social order here and now. They surely mean we must learn to cater for the needy, the disabled, and the weak. The song of Mary reveal God's mercy which reads, "He has filled those who are hungry.....those who are rich he has sent empty away and equally shown might with his arm", in other words, our society should be one where no man dares to have too much while others have too little or are not bother about others. That is what William Barkley termed economic revolution.³⁵¹ To quote Solzhenitsyn again, "There are no internal affairs left on this globe of ours".³⁵² Nigerian leaders need then to feel the pain of those who suffer oppression. Government must be service oriented and promote effective delivery of public services so as to enhance local and small scale economic development aimed at improving the lot of the citizen in the society. The Magnificat is a revolutionary document of passionate conflict and vindication, calling all believers to a journey of solidarity with all oppressed peoples. Mary's Song is the great new Canticule of Liberation, praising a God who has promised "com-unity" with those who suffer from personal and systemic injustice, and more importantly has been "faith-full" to those sustaining promises.

Reading the Magnificat through women's eyes, Mary's song is a reminder of our responsibilities towards the less privileged in the society. If this is

³⁵⁰ The Preachers Outline, p. 966.

³⁵¹ William Berkley, The Daily Study Bible, The Gospel of Luke, Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, pp. 57-66.

³⁵²

applied to women's struggle for full participation in governance and ministry in the church, the reversals of the Magnificat become rife with significance. Mary's prophetic speech characterizes as nothing less than mercy, God's intervention into a patriarchal social order. Not only Mary, but the women disciples in Luke grasp that God is no longer to be sought in the clouds, as the men of Galilee once thought, but here on earth, in the flesh, in birth, and in a grave, however surprisingly empty. God is to be sought and found in daily encounters with suffering, in tears and in the laughter of the poor, and in the groaning of creation. Theologian Susan Ross' critique spells out the implications. In many ways in the church, the mighty still occupy their thrones; the lowly still await their exaltation. "Women's real lack of power in the church today stands as an indictment of the power structures as they exist. . . . The scandal of women's exclusion from power cannot be overlooked.

Therefore any discussion of the empowerment of women must be juxtaposed with our lack of political and symbolic power and the failure of the leadership of the church to rectify this scandal." In addition to hope against their dispossessed status, women glean from this song encouragement for their own creative behavior. Feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether sees in it an example of a woman becoming a theological agent in her own right, actively and cooperatively figuring out the direction of the Spirit. Poet and essayist Kathleen Norris treasures Mary as an original biblical interpreter, linking her people's hope to a new historical event. Noting the powerful proclamation of the Good News that issues from Mary's mouth, feminist theologian, Jane Schaberg writes, "Without an explicit commission to preach, she preaches as though she was commissioned," that is, with authority. In the struggle against sexism in the church, the great reversals roll on, their tone of judgment and promise resounding in the voices of prophetic women today.³⁵³ However, it should be noted that gender equality enhances greater productivity

Lastly, the song also affirms our human responsibility in terms of being morally upright. Mary in the song makes God her subject and need to be proclaimed. She noted that her greatness consists in the fact that she wants to magnify God, not herself. She is lowly, her only desire is to be the

³⁵³ G. Gutierrez. *A Theology of Liberation*, Maryknoll Orbis Books, 1973, pp. 207-208

handmaid of the lords (Lk 1:38, 48). She knows that she will only contribute to the salvation of the world rather than carrying out her own projects, she places herself completely at the disposal of God's initiatives.

In Nigeria today the reversal seems to be the case, the moral credentials of most at the helm of affairs seems to be questionable. Evidence abound that many just have bought their way into positions of leadership. Their true motive is not necessarily out of passion to serve the people of this country but to take advantage of the prevailing contradictions and economic distress for personal aggrandizement. Our moral responsibilities should be that the strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak. There is need to set good examples for others to follow especially the religious ones. Our society should be one where human dignity and equality are recognized, and people's responsibilities for one another is accepted, in which the rights of others are sought and never violated, in which there is no partiality, favoritism and discrimination.

Conclusion

When an individual and Nigerians as a body hearken to the wisdom in the words of the Magnificat and acknowledge the relevance of applying and making use of it in our daily interactions, our country will be a better place. As a song of thanksgiving, it reminds us that national development without God and fair play is vanity. Worshipping our efforts and achievements and deviating from the essence of our existence may likely lead to perdition. Our leaders and individual should note that available resources must be properly harnessed and used based on the principles of equity and equality, so that the impact is felt through the rank and file of the society.

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