

## The Magnificat and patriarchy

16 November 2025

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Ruth 3.6-14

Luke 1.39-56

He hath put down the mighty from their seat:  
and hath exalted the humble and meek.

Heart-stirring!

Yet, there is a deeply troubling element in the story of Mary – and of Ruth in the first reading. I am speaking of patriarchy. Two and a half thousand years later this remains a critical issue. Although in Britain we have come some way to redressing the balance between men and women – and I must emphasise how recent this is. In the very year I came up, 1972, Churchill, with Clare and Kings were the first male colleges to admit women undergrads – there is still so much further to go. Meanwhile, the scary rise of the far right, here and elsewhere in the world, is beginning to make the Me-Too movement look almost ancient history. These texts from the Iron Age, read conservatively, could bolster the patriarchal factions in our own society.

Women in the biblical period are expected to know their place vis-à-vis men in general and with their *pater familias* in particular. Mary and Ruth appear primarily as baby-producers. They are there to provide male heirs to continue the male line. This is clearly the case in the story of Ruth and the custom of Levirate marriage. This was that if a husband died without a son, in order to continue his line and his name, his close relatives had a duty to father a child by his widow. There were several other classes of what might be termed irregular women who were highly problematic socially. There were widows, who had no man to defend or provide for them (Naomi and Ruth). There were barren women (of course, we now know that infertility might just as likely to be the medical problem of the man as of the woman); they were failures as baby-makers and so carried deep shame and ignominy (Elizabeth). At the base of the shame scale were women who had conceived out of wedlock (Mary and Tamar, whom I shall shortly introduce to you). In the stories, the patriarchal structures, highly oppressive though they are to women, and not directly criticised; they are accepted as just how the way of the world is.

Or are they?

Mary is the last in a sequence of five challenging women in the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew's gospel. Midway is Ruth from today's first reading.

The first in the sequence is Tamar whose story is told in Genesis 38. Tamar is also a childless widow with no place in society; after she is widowed, she is sent back to a life of obscurity in her father's house. However, under Levirate law, she should be given in marriage to

one of her late husband's brothers, but they don't want her – one of them even goes so far as to spill his semen so as not to fertilise her! She conceives a desperate plan within the patriarchal framework of her society. It involves her father-in-law, Judah. Taking matters into her own hands, she learns Judah will be travelling along a certain road and so she dresses as a prostitute (conveniently, they were veiled, so Judah would not recognise her) and sits by the roadside. As he approaches, she entices him to have sex and bargains to be paid a kid. Not having a kid on him, she requires something as a pledge of future payment – his seal. The next day he sends a friend with a kid, but the prostitute cannot be found – she, of course, has resumed her lowly place in her father's household – and Judah leaves it at that. By three months it is obvious she is pregnant. Although living in her father's house, she is still under the authority of Judah as her *pater familias*. He is asked what her punishment is to be for being a sex worker. She is to be burnt to death. As she is led out, she produces the seal. "This is the man who has fathered my child!" Judah acknowledges his guilt – not in having sex with a prostitute! – but for failing to fulfil the Levirate duty. So she is saved. She is delivered of twin boys, and the first out is Perez, who becomes Judah's heir. Thus the line of inheritance is continued from Abraham and Judah, through Tamar's son Perez, down to David and beyond. Through her spunk and strategy she has earned her place as a critical link in the chain of God's dealing with his people, Israel.

Ruth is third in the sequence. She is also a childless widow. She also becomes a critical link in the chain. Rather like Tamar, she takes the initiative over the Levirate duty. Her next-of-kin who should redeem her is, bar one, Boaz, a direct descendent of Perez. (Her nearest kin refuses to redeem her, by the way.) Two weeks ago we heard how she initiated an encounter by gleaning barley in Boaz's field. Today, she makes an explicitly sexual advance by uncovering his feet and sleeping there. 'Uncovering feet' can mean just that, but it also means uncovering the penis, such as for urination. Boaz both welcomes her approach, but is also anxious. No one should get to know what has happened. Unsurprisingly, this catapults him into taking action to become her redeemer. The next phase in the story is his negotiation with her other kin before the tribal elders. This ends with the other man giving way for Boaz to redeem Ruth. Then, at the Advent carol service, we shall listen to the happy-ever-after ending: Ruth has a baby boy as the next heir in the line of descent to David.

And, lastly, Mary. She agrees to endure the shame of an extra-marital pregnancy. Somehow, without sex, she is to be impregnated by God. Make of that what you will for now. My attention this evening is on her place in this sequence of risky women that leads to the birth of Jesus, such that he can be called son of David and son of God.

I find that Mary and the others are presented as exemplar women. Within the patriarchal society of the Iron Age they take initiatives to win their place as crucial role-players in the story of God's dealing with his people. They are portrayed as strong and confident women. They may start out under the burdens of social opprobrium and the shame of their status – 'humble' gives the wrong impression here, I think. They may be lowly, but they are not cowed. And then they

turn this into a reversal of status. They become socially honoured for bearing heirs that will continue the line of King David. They become queen-mothers, if you will.

Now, although patriarchy as such is not named and shamed in these texts – that would be astoundingly anachronistic – the Magnificat demonstrates that these narratives are knowingly subversive and political. The women are to be understood as exemplars of the reversal of fortune praised in this song. This reversal is both true justice and the will of God. The Magnificat tells us, “Yes, you are right to realise that these are not cute girls in love stories.” They are written to inspire us.

The Magnificat also offers an explanation for the women’s success and implies a source of their determination: God. They are working with the grain of God’s will for justice, and so win through. Secondly, by implication, they set out on their campaigns with courage because they trusted God was on their side. And they certainly needed courage; to face social ostracism (Mary), the risk of rape in the fields (Ruth), or being burnt to death (Tamar).

In our own day, we may not have to believe in God to join the fight for justice. Yet, I suspect that we do have to believe in something, something much greater than expediency or self-interest, if we are to find the necessary courage and self-sacrifice. I am tempted to trot out my favourites, the transcendentals of goodness, truth and beauty as contemporary placeholders for the ultimate. They can take the place of God, which functioned similarly for the women in the tales. (I am tempted further to hint that the transcendentals point beyond themselves to ultimate being, for which the word ‘God’ might not be inappropriate. But that’s another story.)

We are emboldened by the transcendentals, because they relativise the power of the proud. Greed and megalomania only lead to flimsy, transient baubles. In contrast, the role models provided by these women can inspire us in our labours for a better world.

If so, I hope you can find the Magnificat to be a magnificent rallying song on behalf of justice. It is a bit like The March of the Women that the choir sang three weeks ago. Put your heart and soul into the drama of the music: put down the mighty from their thrones! Fill the hungry with good things! Catch the vision of society as it should be. Face down the mighty. They can only kill the body, not cast us into hell. Relish the true and lasting joys in life.

“Glory be to the fount of transcendence, to the transcendence that we see in our heroes like the women, and to the transcendentals, which are the motivating spirit behind our commitments for a just world. Amen.”