

Christmas is great, I love it. But I do have two minor Grinchy-sounding things to say about Christmas, for a good cause—interpreting Mary’s prophetic utterance in Luke chapter 1, when she’s visiting her relative Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, and busts into a prophecy that becomes known as the Magnificat. When it comes to interpreting Mary as a prophet, a couple of our Christmas lenses get in the way.

One is the domesticating lens of Christmas as a birthday celebration for Jesus. As far as I know there are only 2 examples in Scripture of a birthday celebration, and they were both bad: Pharoah and Herod. Herod’s birthday celebration, you might recall, involved the drunken birthday boy decapitating John the Baptist as a party favor. Maybe this is why the church didn’t start celebrating the birth of Jesus until the fifth century—in ancient Judaism, birthday celebrations were associated with villains not the heroes.

Second, is the portrayal of Mary as the paragon of a submissive woman. The proof texts for this are “let it be done to me according to your word” and “Mary treasured these things in her heart” But why is it when Abraham or Moses or Elijah or Isaiah submit to God it makes them fearless, but when Mary does it, it makes her quietly submissive? I think we know why.

Setting those lenses aside, we’ll look at Sarah Ruden’s rendering of the Magnificat [Feb. 13]
The Ruden translation begins,

And Mariam said:

Sarah Ruden sticks with the original rendering of names and places in her translation, which I found a little imposing at first because I couldn’t pronounce these words inside my head—like John is spelled *Ioannes*, with the line over the “o” and the “e”; or Jerusalem is *Hierosoluma*. Ruden has a reference guide “Unfamiliar Transliterations of Important Proper Names in the Greek Text” So though I felt stupid running into these words, I realized—actually, that’s helpful, because this wasn’t written to me, it was written to Greek-speaking ancient Jewish people. I’m entering a foreign-to-me culture, so I have to stop assuming I know stuff I don’t. That’s the beginning of wisdom for reading the Bible.

So “Mariam” for Mary, is the Greek transliteration of the Hebrew Miriam, which was her name! That opens up a new world of meaning! The original Miriam was the sister of Moses and known as one of the three great leaders of Israel in the time of the deliverance from Egypt. That’s from the Talmud: “Three great leaders led Israel: Moses, Aaron, and Miriam”

And it’s not just that the mother of Jesus shared Miriam’s name—their life stories mirror each other. Both were **powerful prophets**. The first Miriam was one of seven female prophets in the Hebrew Bible: Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah Huldah, Abigail, Esther—covering every major phase of Israel’s ancient history.

Both Miriams were powerful protectors. Miriam protected the infant Moses when he was left in a basket in the Nile. She arranged to have Moses' mother hired as his wet-nurse, when Pharaoh's daughter adopted Moses. In Christian tradition, Joseph is the protector of Jesus. But in Jewish tradition, Miriam is the protector of infant Moses, and by calling Mary by her real name, Miriam, we see her as the protector as much as Joseph. She's a mama bear who protected infant Jesus from Herod by fleeing as an immigrant to Egypt—just as in Exodus we first meet Miriam fleeing from Pharaoh.

Also both Miriams had significant **positive inter-faith relations**: Miriam, the sister of Moses, learned from her brother's father-in-law Joseph, a Midianite priest. Tziporah) and his wife, Tziporah, the Cushite (means dark skinned) was her sister-in-law. Miriam the mother of Jesus was influenced by the sages visiting from the East who were astrologer-philosophers. Contrary to conservative Christian mythology, Israel had a long history of positive inter-faith relations.

And, both Miriams had an **argumentative** side—one Miriam challenged Moses, another challenged the adult Jesus. So both had open conflict with their famous family members. Neither one practiced keep-your-mouth-shut submission.

Now we're ready for the Magnificat:

**And Mariam said,
All my being exalts the Lord,
And my life-breath has delighted in my rescuer,
For he's looked on his slave's lowliness,
So Look, from now on, all generations will call me happy,
Because the one with power had done great things for me,
And his name is holy.
And his mercy lasts from generation to generation,
Of those who hold him in awe. He's shown strength with his arm.
He's scattered those with an arrogant spirit in their hearts,
He's taken the rulers down from their thrones,
And lifted up the lowly.
He's filled the hungry with good things
And sent the rich away empty.
He's come to the aid of Israel his servant,
Keeping mercy in mind, Just as he promised to our fathers,
To Abraham and his seed for an endless age.**

The pietistic gospel of American Christianity is all about forgiveness of individuals sins, however small—as though forgiveness runs contrary to God's nature and Jesus had to pull it out of him like a dentist pulling teeth. But Miriam's gospel is about arrogant rulers being scattered, thrown off their thrones,

the lowly being exalted and the wealthy wicked getting their just deserts. This is echoed in the Zechariah's prophetic utterance right after this, as a kind of Midrash or interpretation of Miriam's prophecy. Zechariah's prophecy puts the focus on salvation as deliverance from the mob, from the violence and hostility of the powerful: *"rescue from our enemies and the hands of all who hate us"*

That's one thing, and another is Miriam's **full-throated embrace of her blessing**.

Remember the messenger had said to Miriam, *"blessed art thou among women"*

And here Miriam takes hold of her blessing and proclaims it:

So look, she begins—that's a rhetorical attention grabber—the old English conveys it better BEHOLD! Side bar: On cable news, the same guests are being interviewed over & over about the same things, and half the time, the guests answer these questions with observations made already by many others, and often, mind-numbingly often, the guest-expert leads with the attention grabber, "Look ... blah blah blah"

Miriam is not using "look" in that overused way. Miriam is a prophet, like her namesake was a prophet and her look, is the prophetic BEHOLD and [this is the part I like] she's **not submissively deflecting attention away from herself**. The feminine ideal of patriarchy is the woman who always deflects attention away from herself. But Miriam is drawing attention to herself. Miriam is embracing her blessing and owning it. *"So look, from now on all generations will call me blessed, because the one with power has done great things for me."* She's not even saying, "the angel told me all generations will call me blessed." That was a private revelation, for her ears only. In the Magnificat, she's owning it: *"from now on all generations will call me blessed"*

Miriam's version of the good news is one that she knows will not be universally welcomed. Because her version of good news is a threat to those who benefit from the corrupt ways any given society is structured—so any attempts to deal with the corruption are resisted fiercely.

Why is it that women in any position of power that involves speaking, come under intense scrutiny over how they look, how they dress, and how they talk? Because women embracing their blessing, taking their power, are a threat to the existing order and those who benefit from it.

I know there are things about the Roman Catholic vision of Mary that are problematic.

Mary as ever-virgin, like a founding nun. But I also wonder how much of the Protestant objection to the Catholic emphasis on Mary isn't just reaction to the elevation of a woman.

Corruption is always evidenced by fierce resistance to the elevation or the amplification of anyone who is muted or rendered invisible by the prevailing power distribution algorithm. BLM faces such fierce resistance, not only because of White Supremacy, but because its founders are black women—women embracing their divine power, their blessing, taking it, owning it, asserting it.

And this is what Miriam is doing right here—***So look, from now on all generations will call me blessed, because the one with powers has done great things for me.***

Personally, I think there's plenty of Christ in Christmas. Let's make some more room for Miriam.