

Co-existent Levels of Meaning in Mary's Magnificat

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Summary

Mary's Magnificat is a lyric miniature with an emphatically rich semantic scope consisting of numerous levels identified by the author as: 1) the hymnal and poetic level, 2) the actors and action level, 3) the religious and ecclesiological level, 4) the revolutionary and subversive level, 5) the feminist and gender level, and 6) the maternal and familial level. A co-existence and openness in the polysemic structure of the Magnificat is outlined in this article which highlights messages for contemporary readers, especially for families. From Mary's experience, which is spoken out in the Magnificat, as well as from the life of the holy family, one can separate special values: rapture through parenting, honor in the parent-child relationship, and awareness of the mission given to the child by God.

Key words: *Mary, Magnificat, family, mission, poetic structures*

Since Mary's Magnificat, or hymn, is sung in cathedrals and on musical stages, since it is recited impressively or whispered in the evening prayers, or analyzed in sermons from various pulpits, it is clear that even today it reveals new depths and fresh interpretations for all generations throughout time. So it is also said that Mary's Magnificat can be seen as a *tapestry*, as a *song* and as a *journey* (Casey, 1999).¹ This simple lyric miniature is an intersection of many levels of meaning,

1 *Tapestry* because it is made of "warp and woof", where the warp are the stories and songs of the Hebrew Scriptures, and the woof are the lived experiences and piety of the humble "poor ones" who gathered in the first Judeo-Christian house-churches. *Song* because it is patterned on the Old Testament hymns of praise, recomposed into a new expression of exultant thanksgiving because of God's positive and life transforming reversals in the lives of Mary and her contemporaries. *Journey* because in the Magnificat, Mary, as a teacher of liberation, calls for solidarity and support to be given to the deprived and the repressed.

especially biblical. The purpose of this paper is first to establish the possible levels of meaning of the Magnificat and their co-existence. In other words, to identify the multiple values of its semantic field and the ways of its interpretation. Second, it is to sketch their application and involvement in the present time in family and social spheres as an input to translators and editors of new Bible translations in the Croatian language.

In order to avoid being vague, it is good to point out what the intention of this article is *not*: (1) This is not an attempt to construe a new contribution to Mariology, (2) The subject matter is not to reveal a new pattern of Mary's character even though Mary, as a character and a protagonist, will be recognized and highlighted, (3) The article will not deal with a complete analysis of the Magnificat. Since the text is complex and has yet to be sufficiently studied, this article will, as already indicated, attempt to establish the contribution of the polyvalent semantic level to a comprehensive analysis and subsequently to a literary interpretation of the text of the Magnificat. Therefore, the scope is simultaneously modest, narrow and strictly defined.

Key Terms

To identify key terms, it is necessary to read the text in some of the older translations that have the authority of the original. The reader can, therefore, refer to Nestle's New Testament as one of the more reliable prints and also read Mary's Magnificat, found in Luke 1:46-55, in Greek or Latin to compare it. The Croatian reader can use the newer translations of the New Testament in Croatian – those of Rešetar/Vuk, Šarić, Rupčić, Duda/Fučak, Knežević, etc., to determine the basic meanings and values that originated from the translation process. At the get-go, the first word of the Magnificat in the original Greek, μεγαλύνει, requires a substantial amount of work to establish its meaning since it can mean “to enlarge”, “to extol”, and/or “to praise” (Kittel, 1964:543).

The first sentence in Latin, following the Greek original, says: “Magnificat anima mea Dominum” (Nestle, 1921:141). While the Duda/Fučak translation follows the original literally, on the lexicological as well as the syntactic levels, Rupčić chooses the word “celebrate” instead of the more equivalent “magnify”. *To magnify* means “to enlarge, to make something look important.” *To celebrate*, on the other hand, means “1. to show that a day or an event is important by doing something special on it, 2. to perform a religious ceremony, especially the Christian Communion service.” It is also noted that a birthday can be celebrated. Obviously the better choice for the translation is the verb *to magnify*, which opens the semantic field of the adjective *magnificent*, meaning extremely attractive and

impressive, deserving praise, splendid.² The equivalent *magnify* thus introduces the semantic level of emphatic and sublime praise with expressively aesthetic and emotional intensity. Mary's Magnificat so leads us to praise the Lord intensively, emphatically and with all our minds. These are the key terms in the "prelude" of the Magnificat. In this way, the reader can continue.

I. Hymnal and Poetic Level

Mary's Magnificat undoubtedly falls back on the Psalms. Together with Zachariah's *Benedictus*, the angelic song *Gloria in Excelsis* and Šimun's *Nunc Dimittis*, it is one of the first Christian-Jewish or Jewish-Christian hymns or poems, that have the same characteristics as the Psalms of the Old Testament: parallelism, continuous rhythm, accent, stanzas, turning point, contrast. What makes the Magnificat so hymnal is its persuasive orientation toward praising God and its personal arguments demonstrated on the rational ("My soul doth magnify the Lord... For he that is mighty hath done to me great things..." Luke 1:46b and 49a), and metaphorical levels ("He hath shewed strength with his arm..." Luke 1:51a). With this psalmist background, it is noted that Luke "must have found this hymn in the circle of "the poor ..." (*Jeruzalemska Biblija*, 1994:1461), which refers us to the second type of stylistic background: the folk style and popular song.³ Looking at Duda/Fučak's Magnificat, it can be seen that the translators were devoted to following the stylistic and hymn-like tone of the psalmist, and that they chose literary and bookish expressions very carefully, like the choice of the equivalent "rejoice" in the verse: "And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior." This onomatopoeically (in the Croatian translation, the word sounds like a bird) and rhythmically evokes the picture of nearly unrestrained and joyful rejoicing. They also employ particular adjectives (He hath put down the mighty from their seats /and exalted them of low degree. // He hath filled the hungry with good things, / and the rich he hath sent empty away), and thus come closer to the folk style of popular songs.³ On the other hand, with the sentence "...he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts," the translators come close to the style of folk satirical poems. Rupčić considerably enhances the folk characteristics by

- 2 In the Croatian version of this paper, all quoted word definitions are taken from *Veliki rječnik suvremenog hrvatskog jezika* by Vladimir Anić, Zgb, 2005:1722 and 1425. (*The Great Croatian Dictionary*) In the English translation, the explanations are taken from the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, 7th edition, and the equivalents used were, hopefully, as close to the original as possible.
- 3 Stylistically successful translations of the Bible in the Croatian language "have their patterns in folk telling of the "štokavski" dialect" (Pranjić, 1986:31).

saying, “He hath shewed strength with his arm” Luke 1:51a, which reminds us of heroic folk poems, or “He hath holpen his servant Israel” Luke 1:54a, which is a colloquial term that evokes the image of “primitive” communities of the past where neighbors would help each other in the case of fire or any other trouble. Therefore it can be concluded that this hymn has not only literary and bookish qualities, but also popular-folk characteristics in which common people are quietly but definitely present.

In order to understand the poetry of the Magnificat, it is necessary to understand other dichotomies issuing from the writer’s perspective and historical context: Hebrew and Greek style or Semitic and Greek style, as well as historical and eschatological context, and finally hymnal and dramatic context. The evangelist Luke, as stated in the *New International Commentary on the New Testament*, wrote a historical work which points to the sacred history, the history of the salvation of God’s people, or literally, “He therefore intended his Gospel as a historical work” (Geldenhuis, 1979:41). Moreover, the Gospel of Luke and Acts resemble historical works that were in circulation in the first century A.D. (Brown, 1978:107). Along with the historical and traditional dimensions, some authors (Gunkel) analyze the Magnificat as an exclusively eschatological work while others see it as a combination or a mixture (Nolland, 1989:64). With regard to the three characters found in the Magnificat, (who will be discussed later), and in light of the fact that their interaction is stormy and in mutual opposition, it is possible to identify a dramatic quality. The Magnificat is therefore a hymn with dramatic overtones, so much so that its poetry can also be described as such (Gaventa, 1995:22).

Despite the aforementioned dichotomies in the poetry of the Magnificat, most authors regard it as an authentic and unified literary unit (Bailey, NESTR 1, 1979:29-35; Tannehill, JBL 93: 1974:263-75; Dupont, NRT 102, 1980:321-43, u Nolland, 1989:64).

In keeping with the aforementioned dichotomies as well as those that have not been highlighted, it is possible to shape and describe the Magnificat, keeping in mind that there is an abundance of forceful opposing and broken lines which lead the reader to recall the world which awaits God’s judgment and salvation.

II. Actors and Action Level

Even though Mary’s Magnificat, or Mary’s hymn, is presented in four stanzas,⁴ it

4 *Stanza* is usually defined as *ottava rima*, i.e. “strophe with eight verses, with an ABABABCC rhyming pattern” (Ružić, 1985:757), but here the term is used to denote the archaic stanza, as in English poetry.

is possible to read it according to the three characters that are visible in the very first reading: 1) the Lord, 2) people of low degree, 3) the proud.⁵ In the following text, the description of each character is visible through the different printing styles – the Lord in **bold**, those of low degree in *italics*, and the proud in standard writing.

*“My soul doth magnify the Lord;
and my spirit hath rejoiced in God
my Savior,
For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden:
for, behold, from henceforth all generations
shall call me blessed.
For he that is mighty hath done to me great things;
and holy is his name.
And his mercy is on them that fear him
from generation to generation.
He hath shewed strength with his arm;
he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
He hath put down the mighty from their seats,
and exalted them of low degree.
He hath filled the hungry with good things;
and the rich he hath sent empty away.
He hath holpen his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy;
and he spake to our fathers, to Abraham,
and his seed forever.”*

The first and most dominant protagonist is the Lord. According to Mary (since the whole text is told by Mary, even if it was Luke who recorded her, then Lord is shown from her point of view, or from her experience), he is a personal Savior. He regarded the low estate of his handmaiden and had done her great things. The syntagm “great things” obviously refers to God’s idea to summon Mary for the unique role as the virgin mother of Christ, from which many blessings or gifts sprang. His name is sacred and his mercy is not limited by time or generations (“from generation to generation”), so God’s presence in the world is expressed (in the Croatian translation) with the imperfect verb aspect, which allows the possible interpretation of God’s mercy as an endlessly flowing river. At the same

5 Protagonists can be called characters as argued by Gaventa (1995:21), but in this article I have opted for the term protagonist because the primary focus will be on their activity.

time, though, he is a hero, almost a romantically agile and powerful one. His heroism and power are visible, first and foremost, in the fact that he scattered the proud, put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted those of low degree. He fed the hungry and made the rich go away empty, and he helped his servant Israel, keeping his promise. Seen in this light, the Lord is the one who carries out justice on earth, he reverses the wrongs of the past and balances the irregular scale of worldly values. He is an activist and a fighter – he is the active agent. The Lord provides hope through his emphasized activity, marked in the text with an intensity created with accumulated verbs: *scatter, put down, exalt, fill, send away, help*. The Lord does great deeds for people who are of no use to him. He intervenes and does so much – and loves so much, a psychological prerequisite for rich activity expressed with the finite verb aspect and in *vivo* rhythm. ”Jeruzalemska Biblija” by J. Fućak and B. Duda emphasizes the rich potential of knowing God in the Magnificat by putting the verbs first: *Shewed strength ... Scattered the proud ... and exalted ... hath holpen ...* These only show meaningful understanding of spiritual etymon in the text itself.

The second protagonist are *those of low degree*, amongst whom Mary includes herself.⁶ Her special distinction is the feeling of great joy and bliss. These are not some temporary, flighty feelings, but a state of being. She truly is blessed, which means completely fulfilled and happy, and she will – as she is certain of it – be known as blessed henceforth by all generations. According to all this, Mary is not just an ignorant vessel that the heavenly father used to send his son to earth. She is fully aware of the mercy given to her, and ecstatic because of it. She praises the Lord with all her being. The Croatian translation emphasizes her *enthusiasm* by saying, “this soul of mine,” instead of “my soul“ (as in KJV). Putting the possessive adjective after the noun is a well-known characteristic of the biblical style, but translators Duda and Fućak tend to avoid using it all the time by sometimes combining the adjective and noun, putting the noun first, and sometimes in their standard position, which can, in biblical context also be a matter of style.⁷ Without giving way to any kind of religious ecstasy, Mary, together with all her delight, makes a case for the Lord’s greatness and the reasons for her celebration. Not only does she rely on her own experience, but also looks upon all who respect

6 Mary is small and insignificant not only because of the way she feels (meek) and lives (in poor conditions), but also because of her literary role which is as a minor character due to the space given her in the Gospels. Minor characters serve as a supplement to primary characters (Gaventa, 1995:22). Mary exalts God whom she serves.

7 In Croatian biblical language, possessive adjectives regularly appear after the noun so they are no longer denoted as a matter of style, but are known as “petrified forms”. In the case that they are moved to the standard position in front of the noun, it can be considered a matter of style. (Mićanović, 2002:188).

the Lord, and all who are hungry and “of low degree.” She puts herself right by their side. Even Israel as a people, in Mary’s words, is insignificant and dependent upon the mercy of the Lord (or upon his “goodness” – D/F).⁸

Mary can therefore be perceived, as made obvious in the Magnificat, as Mary who sings and is not indifferent towards the first and dominant protagonist who “does great works,” the Lord. She can be construed as a protagonist and character according to her “direct speech,” as Gaventa writes about the characters, citing Mary Doyle Springer (Gaventa, 1995:22). Mary continues a succession of women in the OT who sing: Miriam (Ex 15:21), Deborah (Judges 5), Hannah (1Sam 2:1-10) as well as non-canonical Judith (Judith 16:1-17). Mary’s interest in the other, insignificant others in her environment, is also clear. She understands their suffering, a possible reflection of Luke’s interest, as a physician, in the downtrodden and sick who suffer. The literary construct of Jesus in Luke’s gospel is also reminiscent of a physician’s role. In other words, Jesus is “the Divine Physician” (Geldenhuys, 1979:43).

The third protagonist are the proud “in the imagination of their hearts.” They are rulers and people of power who tyrannize those of low degree, and the rich people who do not want for anything and who are not hungry. Together with the social and historical dimension of these anti-heroes, the spiritually rich people have to be noted; full of their own righteousness and pride, they slight other people and address them with contempt. Mary does not hide her satisfaction over God’s judgment on these unrepentant sinners, but according to the space allotted to them in the text and the number of words she uses to characterize them – in Croatian four words altogether, unlike the approximately 44 she uses to describe the Lord – it is obvious that she does not want to dwell on them, or gloat over their downfall. In the manner of the Psalm writers, she summarizes the overall Old Testament message.

III. Religious and Ecclesiological Level

Mary’s once-in-a-lifetime experience, of which she speaks in the Magnificat, charismatically involves other people all the way up to the present because everybody is either “of low degree” or proud, and can, as is suggested in the text, ask themselves: Do I have my own experience with the Lord for which my soul could praise him? Mary’s experience consists of total submission to the mission

8 Mary experienced God’s election even though she was “humiliated, poor, of low origin, inferior.” This begs the question why God elects insignificant persons. The answer is in God’s principle of creating something out of nothing (Malcolm, 2002:132).

that the Lord gave her. She discovered the complete meaning of her role. She realized that she had a special and unique task, that she would be the very one that the Lord wanted and needed in order to send his son to the world and save it. The virgin who could have fantasized about having a family in this world now realized that, along with the legitimate dream for a family, there is also a higher purpose to her life, a higher dream that would make her “blessed” in the eyes of all generations. Mary found full happiness, because to be “blessed” means “to be fulfilled with the feeling of happiness.” As to whether or not happiness lay in some man-made good, Thomas Aquinas, among other things, answers:

“It is out of the question that a man could find happiness in some man-made good. This is because happiness consists of a perfect value which completely soothes human ambition. Otherwise, happiness would not represent the final goal, but we would still have to look for something else. But human will, or aspiration, relates to the universal good (universale bonum) just as the human mind relates to universal truth (universale verum). It is therefore clear that only the overall good can soothe the human will. That good cannot be found in any man-made good, but only in God. All creatures possess goodness in limited measures. According to this, only God can fulfill man’s will as seen in Psalm 103:5, ‘. . .who satisfies your desires with good things. . .’ So, a man can find happiness in the Lord alone (underlined by the author) (Aquinas, 1981:222).

Mary’s aspirations were completely calmed by realizing her innermost desires, desires she may not have even been unaware of, but which were nobly discovered, and, at last, fulfilled. The answer to a person’s deep yearning for meaning, and desire to serve and need the Lord came to Mary in an incomprehensibly *magnificent* way. That is a religious experience – one of innumerable possibilities – which every individual of a Christian religious orientation re-lives repeatedly, not, of course, in actual detail, but with the same violent passion. In Christian circles, expressions like “Christ was born in our hearts” or “Christ is born into our lives” are already used colloquially, which signals to the similarity of Christ being born in Mary’s life. Mary was the first Jewish Christian who believed in Christ as Messiah and Savior and “the Lord is with us.” She was the first part of the life that the heavenly father was giving to his strayed children. The same mediation of life (i.e., I am the resurrection and the life – John 11:25) is made possible for Christ’s followers and disciples in all times and places. Christians “already” experience a taste of the immortality of God’s world and dwell in the kingdom of heaven where life has victory over death, justice presides over injustice and love conquers violence.

Having read the Magnificat, Kathleen Norris writes that one can hear and see a literary and theological treasury of the early church, and she points out, “Like Mary I am invited each day to bring Christ into the world in my prayers, thoughts, and

action.“ (Norris, 2002:XI) The Magnificat is therefore more than a prayer book or libretto; it is a portal where the faith experience of the early church is transferred.

One possible interpretation is also ecclesiological, according to which Mary's experience is the archetype of the experience of the church. If this is the case, the church would indeed have a reason to rejoice and speak argumentatively about the Lord who brought a wonderful turning point into the lives of lost people. This aspect is particularly highlighted by mariological authors who describe Mary as an ark or the ark of the covenant. Mary is also a role model of faith and grace as well as an “appropriate realization” or type of the church (Haffner, 2004:204).

IV. Revolutionary and Subversive Level

The level of meaning that some authors note, the revolutionary principle (Geldenhuys, 1979:86), highlights the raising of the poor and the weak in contrast to the humiliation of the rich and the powerful (Hawes, 1995). This subject has been substantially dealt with by, as Hawes calls them, enthusiastic authors throughout the whole history of literature to the present, and has been tackled by some of the most eminent writers – i.e., Tolstoy, Stendhal, Balzac, etc. In Croatian literature, this motif is probably most expressly stated in Gundulić's *Osman* in the famous verses:

“Kolo od sreće uokoli
Vrteći se ne pristaje:
Tko bi gori, eto je doli,
A tko doli, gori ustaje.

Sad vrh sablje kruna visi,
Sad vrh krune sablja pada,
Sad na carstvo rob se uzvisi,
A tko car bi, rob je sada.”
(Bogišić, 1975:91)

(A rough translation could be: The wheel of fortune never stops, and those who were on the top are now at the bottom. The sabre and the crown easily change positions, and those that were once slaves are now emperors, and emperors are slaves.)

It should be noted, of course, that Gundulić does not express the meaning of Mary's Magnificat in an accurate way. From today's perspective, the change that Gundulić describes as perpetual “change” seems like a product of sheer luck or luck that is *drawn* in the lottery by pure chance. While certain aspects, like

the crown, which is a symbol for kings and the powerful, and like the slaves, who represent all the deprived, are easily noticed, it seems to be bound by some blind fatality. All of this would have happened even without murders or battles. There is no revolutionary euphoria or revolutionary idealism in his theoretical hypothesis.

The text of the Magnificat describes radical change which is demonstrated with a crossing of motifs. A – the powerful (the mighty), B – those of low degree (the weak) / B – the hungry (the weak), A – the rich (the mighty):

“He hath put down the mighty from their seats
and exalted them of low degree.

He hath filled the hungry with good things,
And the rich he hath sent empty away.”

There is no political or revolutionary cry in the Magnificat. No one calls for war or bloodshed. Neither is there any gloating over the fall of the mighty, but there is much admiration towards the one who brings justice. The Lord's justice is on the side of the insignificant, just as the narrator is. The Lord takes the side of the inferior. Mary obviously evokes the memory of historic events told by her people, about victories over mighty nations who were violent and hostile towards God's people, but also the salvation of many hungry people. These stories were read about in the Holy Scriptures or heard by word of mouth, i.e., in the story of Ruth of Moab. The all-embracing admiration for the Lord, as a national or personal hero, knight, warrior, savior and judge is followed by an atmosphere of complete trust. Therefore, everything spoken of in the past tense is also seen in the context of today, i.e., as a piece of the past, but also of the present and the future. All those of low degree and the weak can, as is suggested in the Magnificat, rely upon the Almighty Protector and Redeemer. Thus Christ's feeding of the poor crowd was prophetically announced, both in a material and in a spiritual sense. It is a guideline to all disinherited people in today's nations who suffer from more powerful and more violent nations and/or individuals, authoritarian leaders, showing that the safest path to liberation and justice is through trust in God who does everything in his own time, indeed he specifically and mightily intercedes on behalf of the small and insignificant, especially if they recognize and follow his will. The exodus is just a model which could have saved many lives, and this is the message suggested by the Magnificat which can be proven by a more analytical reading.

V. Feminist or Gender Level

Feminist-orientated critics call the Magnificat a patriarchal confirmation of

the submission of women, since Mary, in her song, calls herself *of low degree* and *handmaiden*, and in some translations the word *servant* is even chosen (HBN, 2006:102). Obedience was what was asked of women, and the resulting perception was that a woman is an inferior being to a man, and that she is fit, unfortunately, only for pure biological motherhood and housework, and has to be totally submissive to the will and demands of her husband. The feminist movement, besides other factors, contributed to the rejection of Mary and to the perception of her as a representative of patriarchy.

What is easily noted in the Magnificat is Mary's joyful acceptance of her role; she finds the meaning of her life in it, moreover the higher meaning as previously mentioned. She also sings and talks publicly about her experience, thus putting herself in a position equal to men who spoke Psalms, and she cannot, in any case, be seen as inferior to a man. By evoking memories of the historical experience of her nation, Mary stands together with those from among her people who think about the "past, present, and future." Furthermore, Mary does not hide the fact that she is especially honored by God's choice, that he especially chose her, a woman, who was likely to be seen among her people as weak like all other women, but who was given a great chance to participate in God's giving of his son to the world. Of those of low degree that Christ exalted, women were most definitely a part. Christ talked to them, taught them, helped them to escape their humiliating situations, forgave them and straightforwardly saved them from death, like the one that was caught in adultery. He healed them, like the one having an issue of blood (Luke 8:43-48) – who today would most likely be diagnosed with a myoma, or even carcinoma – or the one bent and hunched (Luke 22:26) – whose diagnosis might be osteoporosis. It is precisely in the gospel of Luke, "like nowhere else," that a new approach to women is demonstrated (Geldenhuys, 1979:44).

Christ returned to women their lost dignity, cared for their self-respect and gave them freedom to approach the Lord who appreciates and loves them regardless of gender, looks, age or status. So it is not unusual that many women, from Mary onwards, became passionate Christians and felt liberated from the chains of those who would subdue them. It is the powerful who rule in this world, but in the Lord's kingdom, those who serve are the rulers, those who feel their insignificance, and "but he that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger" (Luke 22:26). There is no sign in the Magnificat that Mary would want to be any different than she is, that she would want to be rich and powerful, or that she would want to be a spokesperson of the world where (like in Gundulić's *Osman*) a slave will de-crown a king, and become one himself. She wants to serve the Lord and continue serving in the world where those of low degree will have their full dignity without joining the wheel of bloody "changes".

VI. Maternal and Familial Level

For Hegel, *pathos* and the *romantic form of art* are ideals that he presents in his aesthetic. Writing about love as a romantic ideal, he emphasized the importance of Mary's love, i.e., the love of a mother:

“In this area, the most accessible for art is Mary's love, *a love of a mother*, this most successful object of religious romantic fantasy. The most real, the most human, it is nevertheless completely spiritual, without interests and the need for desire, it is not fleshly but yet it is direct: absolutely calm blissful fervency – That is love without lust, but it is not friendship, because no matter how spiritual it is, it still needs some content, some essential thing as a uniting goal. But, motherly love, without any equalizing of goals and interests, has direct support in natural connection. Nevertheless, the love of a mother is not limited to the natural side only. In the child that she had been carrying under her heart and gave birth to in labor pains, Mary still has a notion and knowledge of herself. That child, blood of her blood, is positioned so high above her, and yet, this raising belongs to her and is something where she both forgets and sustains herself. Natural fervency is completely spiritualized, her real essence is divine, but natural unity and human feelings intertwine the divine magnificently, silently and unaware. This is the blissful love of a mother, and only one mother of a kind originally in that happiness” (underlined by the author) (Hegel, 1986:244).

The unique relationship between Mary and the Lord is truly a mystery and it cannot be explained how Mary, as the mother of Christ, managed to separate the biological, i.e., natural feelings of the motherly bond, from the spiritual, i.e., referring to Christ as “so high above her,” and also as her savior and Lord. Regardless of this romantic mystery, Mary is, by all means, somebody to look upon as an ideal mother. The Magnificat is not directly about parenting, but the contextual fact of the Annunciation of Christ's birth is a clear *spiritus movens* of the whole hymn. Mary speaks of the mighty one who has done her great things; of which, logically, the greatest one was Christ's embodiment in a miraculous way through the Holy Spirit.

Although Mary's relationship with the Lord is specific in Christ's birth, the model of God giving her a son can also be applied to all parents who experience the birth of a child with the help of God because “the breath of life” comes from the Lord, and he, according to Gen 2:7 and Ps 90, gives it, and can take it away. The birth of every child is not only a biological experience, but is also emotional and social, and if we know it as such, can be a spiritual experience with the Lord, who is a true parent, both a father and a mother.⁹ After she had given birth to

9 “Adonai/YHWH Elohim, the creator and uterus of all life, is a heavenly archetype of both father and mother” (Chouraqui, 2005:143).

Cain, Eve exclaimed, "I have gotten a man from the Lord!" (Gen 4:1). It is even possible that Eve really believed her son to be the Messiah because of the name she gave to Cain, and the probable connection to the curse the Lord had spoken to the serpent about her descendents ruling over the serpent, ". . . he (her seed) will crush your (the serpent's) head..." (Gen 3:15). Her rapture is interesting in our context because Eve realized that she and her husband Adam could not have created a child alone, but only with the help of the Lord. This element of awareness of the Lord's intervention and presence in bringing the child to life is an important feature of and need for true parenting. The question is, what happened that Cain, who came from the Lord and whose mother was aware of it, like Mary in the Magnificat, ended as a murderer, and worse, the murderer of his own brother, whereas Christ became a victim like Abel. This problem is indeed a complex one and is no longer a matter of interest in this paper, but is clearly linked to the function of sin and evil, and could, if analyzed, be a contribution toward thoughts about raising children. The fact remains that the Lord, of whose active presence Eve was aware, talked preventively to Cain in order to stop the fratricide, and after the murder that Cain nevertheless committed, saved him from retribution and further crimes. The Lord was present in Cain's life despite his sin.

Even though Christ made it clear several times that he does not submit to the will of his earthly mother, but to his heavenly father, Mary, in the Magnificat, undoubtedly speaks of the feeling of being honored. Even from conception, Mary, as Jesus' mother, felt honored according to the fifth commandment of the Decalogue, "Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee" (Ex 20:12). André Chouraqui, in his text on the fifth commandment (in the Croatian version), writes,

"In my translation of the Bible the verb "honour" is a translation from Hebrew *kaved* (or *kabed*). The root of this verb means "to give importance to," not speak lightly to whom we want to honour. Literally, the Commandment demands that we do not let our parents perish" (Chouraqui, 2005:143).

The birth of Jesus brought Mary a feeling of honor before "all generations." Later in her life, we come across situations where Mary felt honored because of Jesus, a feeling which never really left her despite undeniable temptations, family problems, and the confusion involved in dealing with a different type of person such as Jesus undisputedly was.¹⁰ At the wedding in Cana, Jesus, although he lets her know that he first and foremost obeys his heavenly father, still does what

10 Regarding the disorientation and reorientation of a family which is brought about by a Christian message, see Elizabeth Johnson, "Who is my mother?" in *Blessed one: Protestant Perspectives on Mary*, 2002.

she asks of him (John 2:1-12). The fact that he made the wine out of water must have filled Mary with a sense of honor. Even at the moment of his passion, Jesus takes care of his mother by leaving her his closest disciple, John, as a substitute son to be with her and ease her spiritual pain – since “a knife pierced her soul” (John 19:25-27) – even though John himself was also being abandoned. Even at that hour, Mary could feel honored because of the tender care of one truly extraordinary son.

The third evidence of parenting visible in the Magnificat, together with *rapture* and *honor*, is the awareness of the *mission* of a born or future child. A heavenly messenger notified Mary that her son, i.e., the Son of God, would sit on the throne of David and rule for all eternity. Christ’s role as Messiah was revealed to Mary. Parenting is fully completed and carried out when a son or a daughter is born for a special mission or role. It seems that all children have a God-given mission if their parents ask for it in prayer, and if the parents are aware that this child is a gift, and that they as parents are God’s servants, just as Mary says in the Magnificat. One example of this is certainly Hannah, mother of the prophet Samuel, who had asked the Lord to give her a child. He granted her fervent prayer, and gave her a son with a special prophetic role. Hannah’s praise from 1 Samuel 2:1-10 is inter-textually present in the Magnificat and has a messianic foreshadowing in Isaiah 11.

By comparative analysis, one can find many similarities between Mary’s Magnificat and Hannah’s hymn, so much so that the Magnificat can seem like a formulaic repetition of Hannah’s hymn. The similarities are, for example,

Hannah: “My heart rejoiceth in the Lord”
Mary: “My spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.”

Hannah: “They that were full have hired out themselves for bread;
And they that were hungry ceased.”
Mary: “He hath filled the hungry with good things;
And the rich he hath sent empty away.”

But it is also clear that the Magnificat is a special and original poem. One of the differences in the hymns is that in Hannah’s hymn, both a barren woman and a mother of many are mentioned, which is her family’s traumatic projection. There are also more opposites in Hannah’s hymn: heroes and the helpless, the full and the hungry, a barren woman and the one with many children, the poor and the rich, the weak and dukes, the faithful and the mean. It can be said that Mary’s Magnificat, as opposed to Hannah’s hymn, is less burdened with tension between opposites, and more concentrated on the power of the Lord, justice, and love. It is

also more serene, joyful, and ethereal.

The parents of John the Baptist also experienced a powerful sense of meaningfulness. Most commentators emphasize the link between the narratives about Jesus and John. Thus Brown's narrative structure shows that the Magnificat is the strongest link between these two texts. It is not surprising that some texts mention Mary whereas others cite Elizabeth as a female singer or narrator. The aforementioned structure (Brown 1978:108) looks as follows:

John the Baptist Annunciation of birth (1:57-58)	Jesus Annunciation of birth (1:26-38)
Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth (1:39-56) ("Magnificat", vv. 46-55)	
Birth of John (1:57-58)	Birth of Jesus (2:1-20) "Gloria in Excelsis", vv. 13-14.
Circumcision (1:59-79)	Circumcision (2:21)
Benedictus (vv. 67-79)	Purification at the Temple and blessing by Simeon/Anna (2:22-38) ("Nunc Dimittis", vv. 28-32)
Growth of child (1:80)	Return to Nazareth (2:39) Growth of the child (2:40) Finding Jesus as the age of twelve in the Temple (2:41-51) Growth of the child (2:52)

This structure makes it evident that poetic forms in the narratives played a significant role and that the Magnificat is truly a link between the parallel texts about John and Jesus.

Zacharias' praise is a poetical pair to the Magnificat, but from a father's perspective. In this praise, (Luke 1:68-79) Zacharias *blesses* the Lord, just as Mary *magnifies* him, but he does not speak of his feelings so directly or in the first person singular, but includes himself among "us", the nation of the Lord. He blesses the Lord for fulfilling his promise and sending the long-awaited and wished-for Savior to "the house of David," as was promised "by the mouth of his holy prophets." Zacharias remembers the fathers, moreover Abraham, to whom the Lord promised glory for his people, and the redemption that would come with the promised one. He also, in passing, mentions enemies, and says

how those who are “saved from our enemies” serve the Lord “without fear, in holiness and righteousness.” All this shows that John the Baptist originated from a God-fearing community, which can, even today, give children of a fiery spirit a readiness for a mission given by the Lord. At last, Zacharias turns to the child and prophetically announces his mission in Luke 1:76-79:

“And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest:
for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord
to prepare his ways;
To give knowledge of salvation unto his people
by the remission of their sins,
Through the tender mercy of our God,
whereby the dayspring from on high
hath visited us,
To give light to them that sit in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

Father Zacharias had a complete vision about his son’s prophetic role. He knew that he would be the forerunner of “the dayspring from on high,” or Jesus, the Messiah. By his own choice, (he could have forsaken his mission as Samson partly did), John the Baptist put God’s plan for his life to work and became one of the purest and strongest human characters known to the world. Even though he faced resistance and people who turned a deaf ear to the message he was delivering, and even though he died a martyr’s death, John the Baptist had much to live for. He paved the road for Jesus, reprimanded his contemporaries for their sins, and fulfilled his task. His character is a great inspiration for the arts. William Drummond (1585-1649)¹¹ emphasizes all the strength of his personality and his message in this poem:

Saint John Baptist

The last and greatest Herald of Heaven’s King
Girt with rough skins, hies to the deserts wild,
Among that savage brood the woods forth bring,
Which he more harmless found than man, and mild.
His food was locusts, and what there doth spring,

11 William Drummond of Hawthornden is known as “the Scottish Petrarca” because of his highly emotional lyric sonnets. His works include *Poems; Forth Feasting; Flowers of Sion; Cypress Grove*; etc.

With honey that from virgin hives distill'd;
Parch'd body, hollow eyes, some uncouth thing
Made him appear, long since from earth exiled.

There burst he forth: All ye whose hopes rely
On God, with me amidst these deserts mourn,
Repent, repent, and from old errors turn!
Who listen'd to his voice, obey'd his cry?

Only the echoes, which he made relent,
Rung from their flinty caves, Repent! Repent!

Drummond well understood the determination and greatness of John the Baptist. John was not shaken neither by the cruel hearts of the unrepentant, although he baptized plenty of converts, nor was he shaken later in prison while he waited to be executed. Despite undoubtedly difficult moments, uncertainties and discouragement, he never rejected his mission. The power of John's personality opens the question about the fragility of present generations of children, about moral indecisiveness and about the problem of being different. In the context of John's childhood, as well as Jesus', it is possible to notice, among others factors, the presence of a small, devout milieu of house churches which were undeniably one of the supporting elements in building strong personalities and preparing children for extraordinary and God-given tasks and missions.

Thus, on a parenting level, the Magnificat is a message about *rapture* because of the parenting itself, whether biological or not (as the apostle Paul was to young Timothy, a person can be a parent even if not biologically). It is also a message about the *honor* that a parent receives with the birth of their child and through their continued relationship. Finally, it is about the *mission* of a child that the Lord gives to his parents as his servants, just as the Lord was a servant in Christ. Together with a perspective on the past, the Magnificat also looks to the future in which the God of the Old Testament works through the Christ of the New Testament in quite a similar manner: feeding the hungry, watering the thirsty, raising up the poor and repressed, and scattering powerful tyrants and usurers.

Conclusion

Mary's Magnificat, as was seen, is an invaluable work with many levels or dimensions of meaning, not all of which have been treated in this research, and that can therefore be considered open for further discussion. All the levels of meaning co-exist side by side, in harmony, in an expressive and hymn-like way.

On the poetic or hymnal level, a co-existent dichotomy of styles are easily seen; it is bookishly-expressive and folk-like, Semitic and Greek, historical and eschatological, hymnal and dramatic. On the subject and action level, the dominant character is the Lord, with his romantic and chivalrous dimensions, i.e. his action as a savior, which is, in the Croatian translation, intensified by accumulated verbs which describe the Lord's work, the one who has powerful motives. On the religious and ecclesiological level, one can see Mary's model of a religious experience based on her relationship with the divine child. On the revolutionary and subversive level, God's justice is favored over luck, and over bloody transitions of the powerful and the repressed, thus offering guidelines to national movements which seek to realize their rights by war or violence. On the feminist and gender level, Mary is seen as an active participant in solving the problems of the world, and as a member of a new kingdom where service is not humiliating, but is exalted. Being a female does not make her submit, rather she is affirmed and highly regarded. On the maternal and familial level, meaning is found in the rapture of parenthood, in the honor of the parent-child relationship, and in the mission of the child. All this is seen as an outline for a happy and productive family.

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Sažetak

Marijin Magnificat je lirska minijatura izrazito bogatog semantičkog polja, s brojnim i višestrukim semantičkim razinama, koje autorica identificira i imenuje kao razinu 1. himničku i poetsku, 2. aktersku i akcijsku, 3. religijsku i ekleziološku, 4. revolucionarnu i prevratničku, 5. feminističku i rodnu, 6. maternističku i obiteljsku. Također se utvrđuje koegzistentnost i otvorenost polisemične poetske strukture Magnificata, s brojnim angažiranim porukama za suvremenog čitatelja, posebice za obitelj. Iz iskustva Marijina što ga izriče u Magnificatu, kao i iz života svete obitelji, daju se izdvojiti posebne vrijednosti: ushit zbog roditeljstva, čast u odnosima roditelj-dijete te visoka svijest o misiji od Boga darovana djeteta.

Ključne riječi: Marija, Magnificat, obitelj, misija, poetske strukture