



## Learning from the Line of Women

**Kathleen Rushton** situates the visit of Mary to Elizabeth, Luke 1:39–56, within the story of biblical foremothers and points to the similarities and differences of their relationships.

*Feast of Assumption  
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The actions and language of mercy permeate the opening chapter of the gospel according to Luke and surround the story of mercy known as The Visitation. Two women, Mary and Elizabeth, stand in the biblical tradition of mercy. Mary proclaims that God’s mercy (*eleos*) is from generation to generation (Lk 1:50) and that God’s care and faithfulness to Israel flow from God’s mercy (*eleos*) (Lk 1:54). Later in this infancy narrative, Zechariah declares that God “has shown the mercy (*eleos*) promised to our ancestors, and has remembered God’s holy covenant” (Lk 1:72).

### Songs of Mary’s Female Ancestors

The noun *eleos* meaning mercy, pity and compassion is used in relation to God. This Greek word is used frequently for the Hebrew word *hesed*, as for example, in Exodus 15:13: “In your steadfast love (*hesed*) you led the people whom you redeemed; you guided them by your strength to your holy abode.” This verse is from the song of Ex 1:1-18 which many biblical scholars understand to have been sung and led by Miriam. Luke’s Mary, *Miryam* in Hebrew, has the same name as Moses’s sister. Both women have significant roles in the biblical story and celebrate God’s faithfulness. The many parallels between their songs include recalling what God has done for them personally, naming the powerful deeds done by God’s right arm, exalting in the mercy and steadfast love of God, celebrating that God casts down those who oppose God’s ways, relating how God has helped Israel and understanding God’s reign as continuing forever.

Further, in the biblical mosaic of Mary’s song of praise almost every line is patterned on the canticle of praise Hannah sang after the conception and birth of Samuel (1 Sam 2:1-10). Hannah and Samuel’s story is woven throughout Luke’s infancy narrative. When Hannah brought Samuel to the sanctuary to present him to God, they were greeted by the aged Eli. When Mary presents Jesus at the sanctuary of the Temple the aged Simeon and Anna greet them. Both Samuel and Jesus are described as growing in divine and human favour.

### Mary’s Song

Mary’s reference to “generation after generation” and the promise God “made to our ancestors, to Abraham and his descendants” includes not only the promise of descendants but of the land. Mary walks on the very land promised to her ancestors.

Her pregnant body is sustained by the Earth pregnant, too, with life. Mary journeys southward from Nazareth in Galilee over hills, through valleys and varied landscapes to a southern village in Judea about 160 kilometres away. It would have taken a week or more to arrive at this village about eight kilometres west of Jerusalem. It was identified later in Christian tradition as Ain Karem. Mary's body was sustained by the food grown in fields through which she passed. Her thirst was quenched by the water from streams and wells. She breathed deeply the life-giving air.

Mary describes herself as God's servant (*doule*, literally a female slave). The image of one who responds like a slave or servant has been negative in reinforcing women as passive. On the other hand Mary's song of mercy proclaims a radical song of reversal. God has "looked with favour" on her lowliness. She is young in a world that values age, female in a world ruled by males, poor and from a remote village in a stratified society. God favours one from the margins not from the centre of power. God's action for the poor, wounded and vulnerable is proclaimed: God "has lifted up the lowly ... filled the hungry with good things ... helped God's child (*paidos* masculine, singular) Israel". In contrast God "scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts ... has brought down the powerful from their thrones and sent the rich away empty". Lucy D'Souza's painting of these women wearing colours of Earth and sky suggests the connection between the rejoicing Mary and Elizabeth and the abundant life-producing Earth and air. God's promise of mercy from generation to generation includes Earth and air, whose abundance and vitality are made poor through exploitation and pollution.

### Bodiliness

In a close reading of Lk 1:39-56 we will discover some surprises. The opening words of Mary's hymn are translated usually as: "My soul (*psychē*) magnifies the Lord, and my spirit (*pneuma*) rejoices in God my Saviour" (Lk 1:47-48). The Greek *psychē*, translated from the Hebrew word *nepes*, means the whole living person not just what we understand as "the soul". And *pneuma* suggests an aspect of the self that is able to receive the Spirit. The dualism of thinking of soul and body as separate was introduced by Greek thought after Jesus' time and it is prominent still in Western cultures. But that distinction was not known in Jewish thought or elsewhere at that time. The gospel meanings of *psychē* and *pneuma* are very close and scarcely distinguishable. Scripture scholar Barbara Reid says both terms cover all that is meant by the personal pronoun "I."

When the Spirit-filled Elizabeth hears Mary's greeting she offers the first of many blessings found in the gospel. She blesses Mary in her own person first, in her own right. She then blesses the fruit of Mary's womb, her childbearing (Lk 1:43). Both women recognise God's action in their bodiliness, conception and the new life growing within them. Unlike stories of their biblical foremothers who rival each other, for example, Sarah and Hagar (Gen 16, 21) or Leah and Rachel (Gen 29-31), Mary and Elizabeth are supportive and understanding of each other. In their encounter we find a rare happening in scripture – a conversation between two women and an example of the wisdom and care that older women can offer younger women.

### Recognising what God has Done for Her

Luke identifies the extraordinary character, Elizabeth, by her tribal origin. She is from the tribe of Aaron (Lk 1:5) and with her husband, Zachariah, is described as "righteous before God." After she becomes pregnant, her life-long relationship with God enables her to work out and know what God has done for her. Luke gives us access to her thoughts (Lk 1:24). In this she is singular among Luke's many characters who, having had a religious experience, do not reflect on it, or retell it inaccurately or without understanding (Lk 2:44; 3:15; 7:39; 11:17; 12:17; 12:19; 18:4; 19:11; 24:37).

Barbara Reid said of Mary and Elizabeth's meeting: "This scene invites those contemporary believers who mistrust women's ability to interpret God's word to accept that women as well as men know God's ways and reliably communicate them. It particularly encourages women to accept the companionship of other women as spiritual guides, theologians, confessors, retreat directors, teachers and preachers in their faith journeys." ■

Image: "Maria und Elisabeth" aus dem MISEREOR-Hungertuch "Biblische Frauengestalten – Wegweiser zum Reich Gottes" von Lucy D'Souza-Krone © MVG Medienproduktion, 1990



**Kathleen Rushton RSM** tends her vegetable garden, walks in the hope her feet will allow her to tramp again and delights in learning about Scripture.



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