

Luke's Gospel and Mary's **Justice** from the Womb: The role of Sirach in Luke's Translation of Mary's Witness to the Annunciation and her Hymn (*Magnificat*)

Luke is the first person in the history of the Greek language to quote the lonely term: “**full of grace**” or “**highly favored one**” from the (Greek version of the) book of Sirach. Only after Luke embraced this term uniquely attested by Ben Sira (Sirach) do Christians begin using it in the late-first and early-second centuries. The *Primer on Mary* and our article on Luke 1 have shown where much of Luke's Old Testament quotations come from. Basically there are five levels of Old Testament passages (or types) that we've mentioned:

- (1.) Tier one for the virgin birth are sections from Genesis from Abraham and Sarah's annunciations (Genesis 18)
- (2.) Tier two, for the virgin birth are passages from Samson's mother's annunciation (Judges 13)
- (3.) Tier three for Mary's perpetual virginity are from Jephthah and the dedication of his daughter to perpetual virginity as the result of the Holy Spirit inspiring a singular vow to Yahweh (Judges 11)
- (4.) Tier four for the virgin birth is Hanna's annunciation (1 Samuel 1)
- (5.) Tier five are references to Mary as the Ark of the Covenant (in a previous article) that are not emphasized here (1 Samuel 6ff)

There is one other piece to add to this discussion: Sirach! We've already discussed the dependence too of Luke 1:28 on Sirach. Maybe it is worthwhile reproducing that discussion. Then we can pick up from there?

*Now, I mentioned that the term “**highly favored/full of grace**” is mentioned only in Sirach and in Luke. The evangelist does seem to be aware of the fact, too, that no other text in the history of Greek uses this word outside the Bible. That's pretty significant. And, in fact, we can see hints of Sirach in Luke 1:29. This will help us understand the history of the term “full of grace” eventually meaning “immaculate.” Let's start with Sirach 18:15-17 (KJV 1611 –adapted spelling):*

*My son, blemish not thy good deeds, neither use uncomfortable words when thou givest anything. Shall not the dew assuage the heat? So is **a word** better than **a gift**. Lo, is not **a word** better than **a gift**? But both are with a **gracious (kecharitōménōi) man**.*

*First, I should mention that King James 1611 version of this passage had to use the Greek. The original Hebrew was only found in pieces in 1898 and again at the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Sadly, the Hebrew for Sirach 18:15-17 is missing in the Hebrew that survives. So, King James and we must rely on the Greek, as did St. Luke the Evangelist. (1.) Notice: “do not mix blemish (mōmon) with your good deeds.” This is not clearly typological but there comes a contrast: good deed & good word. If there is a good deed it can be ruined by a bad word or blemish. It is an interesting aside that one of Mary's traditional Greek names in the patristic period is *ámōmos* or unblemished that is translated usually as “immaculate.” We could just as well translate this as: “child, do not make maculate your good deeds.” (2.) Next, we read: “neither use uncomfortable*

(*lúpen lógōn*) words.” Here’s where early Christians will pick up the wordplay between Sirach and Luke and Genesis. First, Adam listened to both the bad words and followed the bad deed of Eve in Genesis (3:17). His punishment is to eat in uncomfortable/toilsome existence (*en lúpais*). Even, in the Protoevangelium (Genesis 3:15), or prediction of a child/seed of promise who will crush Satan’s head, Eve – by her explanation or word to God and her bad deed – will conceive children in discomforts (*téksêi tékna en lúpais*) (Genesis 3:16). The lesson here is that when God asks for an account of his command, Eve should say the proper and truthful responses or words and should have done the just deed so as to avoid what is uncomfortable in conceiving (for women). (3.) Next, Sirach assures his child that an immaculate/unblemished word is even better than a gift or work, but that both word and good deed/gifts happen with the “**gracious man**.” Per KJV 1611 in English, we could say that gracious means the “man who has been prior endued with **grace of justice** [unlike the rigor held for other people] to personally yield by power or by disposition obedience to the divine law.” (4.) Finally, Mary is the fulfillment of both word and deed: First, the word (*logos*) of the Lord comes to her and she responds immaculately to conceive an immaculate Christ. Secondly, she obeys the divine will by her power or disposition “Let it be done to me according to thy word” (Luke 1:38). (5.) However, Luke the Evangelist might not only play on “**full of grace**” due to Sirach (the only place where he could have learned the word in the Bible), but he is also probably playing on Genesis 3:16, which says that maculate speaking and doing by Eve will “conceive children (*tékna*) in discomfort,” whereas Sirach tells his “child (*téknon*)” to avoid words and deeds of “discomfort,” and Luke sums up both sources for Mary’s conception by saying that – unlike Eve – Mary is “**full of grace**” or obedient by word and deed to God’s command and therefore God says through Gabriel: “you will conceive (*téksêi hión*)” (Luke 1:31). You might be disappointed that Gabriel doesn’t clearly refer to the Protoevangelium & Sirach with the term *téknon*, but also remember that Luke is weaving in Genesis 18 and Judges 13 where “you will conceive a son” is messianic. So, this strikes a balance, perhaps. In the end, Mary was justified before the annunciation, and then, after the announcement of her word and her good deed, she sings the Magnificat upon the announcement of a child being conceived in her womb. So, unlike Eve, she conceives **in joy not in discomfort**. All in all, the Scriptures bear witness to what the Fathers poetically develop out of Luke 1:29–42, namely, Mary has **original justice** and **no curse or sin of Eve**, unlike all other people who are not “**gracious**” due to the rigor of divine justice.¹

Now that we’ve reviewed the more important points of our first article on Mary, we see the importance of Sirach to contextualize two sections of Luke (1:28; 1:46-52). We’ve already seen that the Angel Gabriel brings both a word (the **word** of the Lord) and **a gift** (the wonderful child Jesus). But, now, instead of Gabriel being the one “full of grace” he announces that before he

¹ See Christiaan Kappes and William Albrecht, *A Short Primer on Mary’s Immaculateness in the Bible and History leading to a description of the Immaculate Conception by St. Romanos Melodist (c. AD 555)*, [\[redacted\]](#).

ever arrived Mary was one who had both the divine **word** and a **divine gift**...what does this mean to convey?

<p>Sirach 18:17; 50:19-24:</p> <p>^{18:17} So is a word better than a gift [...] and both are for a gracious/full of grace (κεχαριτωμένω) man [...] ^{50:19-24} The people kept praying to the merciful Lord Most High until the service of worship had come to a close. Then, Simon finished (ἔτελείωσαν) his service, raised <i>his hands</i> over the whole assembly of Israel, and reverently pronounced the blessing (εὐλογία) from the Lord and from his lips to be proud in his name (ἐν ὀνόματι αὐτοῦ) while the people bowed a second time in worship to receive that blessing from the Most High (παρὰ ὑψίστου). Now then, give praise to the God of the universe, who has done great things everywhere (τὸν μεγάλα ποιῶντα πάντη), who raises up our days ***from our mother's womb (τὸν ὑψοῦντα ἡμέρας ἡμῶν ἐκ μήτρας) ****, and deals with us mercifully (κατὰ τὸ ἔλεος αὐτοῦ). May he give us happiness of heart (δόξη ἡμῖν εὐφροσύνην καρδίας) and allow us to have peace in Israel (Ἰσραὴλ) forever (τοῦ αἰῶνος) May he entrust (ἐμπιστεύσαι) to us his mercy (τὸ ἔλεος αὐτοῦ) and rescue us (λυτρωσάσθω ἡμᾶς) in our time of need.</p>	<p>Luke 1:</p> <p>²⁸ You have been full of grace (κεχαριτωμένη), the Lord is with ²⁹ Mary was troubled² with the word (τῷ λόγῳ) and wondered (διαλογίζετο; <small>compare footnote no. 3</small>) [...] [Jesus] this one will be great and will be called the son of the most high (Υψίστου) and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father. [...] And [Elizabeth] said: “Blessed are you (Εὐλογημένη σὺ)” [...] and “blessed (<small>μακαρία; compare Luke 11:28</small>),” is she who believed (ἡ πιστεύουσα) that there will be a completion (τελείωσις) for the things said to her by the Lord. ⁴⁶ And Mary said: ***My soul magnifies the Lord (Μεγαλύνει ἡ ψυχὴ μου)*** (1 Samuel 26:23)³, ⁴⁷ and he has made my spirit happy (ἠγαλλίασεν) with respect to God my savior (ἐπὶ τῷ θεῷ τῷ σωτήρί μου)⁴ ⁴⁸ and he has looked upon the humility of his slave, for behold from now on all generation will call me “blessed (<small>μακαριοῦσίν; confer Luke 11:28</small>),”⁴⁹ because the mighty did great things for me (ἐποίησέν μοι μεγάλα) and holy is “his name (τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ)” ⁵⁰ and his mercy (καὶ τὸ ἔλεος αὐτοῦ) is unto the generation and generation to those who fear him. ⁵¹ And his has done something powerful with <i>his arm</i> (ἐν βραχίονι), he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts (διεσκόρπισεν ὑπερηφάνους διανοία καρδίας αὐτῶν). ⁵² He put down the might from their thrones and ***has lifted up the humble (καὶ ὑψωσεν ταπεινοῦς),*** ⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.⁵ ⁵⁴ He has taken up Israel (Ἰσραὴλ) his child, mindful of his mercy (παιδὸς αὐτοῦ, μνησθήναι ἑλέους), ⁵⁵ Just as he spoke to our Father to Abraham and his seed</p>
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² Compare Ruth 3:8-9; Judith 14:7.

³ LXX = 1 Samuel 26:20-25:

And David responded and said [...] The Lord will return to each according to his justices (**τὰς δικαιοσύνας**) and his faith (**τὴν πίστιν**), as the Lord handed you over to me into my hands (*χειράς*) today and I did not wish to lay my hand against you, that is upon the Lord's christ (*ἐπὶ χριστὸν κυρίου*). And behold how your soul was (today) magnified in my eyes, in such a way ought **my soul to be magnified** (**μεγαλυνθεῖ ἡ ψυχὴ μου**) **before the Lord** [*David is passively magnified in front of God; Mary actively magnifies God!*] and (so) to cover me and to take away **from me all sorrow** (**ἐκ πάσης θλίψεως**) [*Mary is never in sorrow and then delivered, but delivered never to be in sorrow!*]. And Saul said to David: “**Blessed are you** (**Εὐλογημένος σὺ**) child, and while you do so powerfully, you shall be powerful. And each went away to his own house [*notice this is like the Ark and Mary going to their homes*].

⁴ LXX Psalm 139:7-9:

I said to the Lord, “mine God are you, give ear, o Lord, to the sound of my prayer·(**ἐνώπιαι, κύριε, τὴν φωνὴν τῆς δεήσεώς μου**; compare Luke 1:13 **εἰσηκούσθη ἡ δέησις σου**). Lord, Lord, the power of my salvation (*σωτηρίας*), who overshadowed (**ἐπεσκίασας**; compare Luke 1:35) upon my head on the day of war. Hand me not over, o Lord, from my desire to the sinner; they have planned against me (*διελογίσαντο*); don't abandon me; at now time let them be **raised up** (**ὑψωθῶσιν**).”

⁵ The link between “**greatness**” of God and Mary’s “**greatness of soul**” and her “**humility**” is already present in Proverbs. Proverbs propitiously combines divine “**greatness**” and “**humility**” thematically, which form a connection to Mary’s overshadowing at Luke 1:35 in virtue of her humble soul/heart resulting in being overshadowed by divine greatness. Clearly, Mary is a counter case of the proud man in Proverbs: “The name of the Lord is from **great power** (**μεγαλωσύνης**). **The just** (**δίκαιοι**) [...] **are exalted** (**ὑψοῦνται**) [...] the substance of a rich man is a **strong city** (**πόλις ὀχυρά**) and its glory overshadows (*ἐπισκιάζει*) mightily...**man’s heart is exalted** (**ὑψοῦται**) and **he is humbled** (**ταπεινοῦται**) before glory [...]”

Full of grace is uniquely vocabulary of Sirach until Luke reproduces this *hapax legomenon* or singular vocabulary in all Greek literature. A **word** and a **gift** (**grace** and/or **Incarnation**) come to Mary by the **Most High**. Like the “christ” who is David and who was Saul in their verbal exchange when warring against each other in the Old Testament, Mary is called – as Saul did David – “**blessed**” by God. She, like Jesus’s words in Luke 11:28, is one who heard and **believes**. The blessing is **completed** by the **Incarnation**. But Mary’s response is as one, **humble**, who has been lifted up as a **humble woman**, which Sirach – Mary’s source per Luke – supposes to be her reality **from her mother’s womb**. Notice the list in Mary’s hymn, as Luke adapted his translation of her hymn from the Septuagint (LXX) or Greek Old Testament nearly verbatim in some places:

- (1.) **Mary’s soul (like David) is magnified** as the “christ” or somehow messianic flesh like **David and Saul** (only by being the single donor of Jesus-flesh, we would say!)
- (2.) Her soul is happy since she’s been **saved from of all dangers** (saved). The LXX never uses “savior” from internal sin, but from external threats and dangers.
- (3.) She, like Luke 11:28, will be called “blessed” by everybody as the unique person to keep the word of God upon hearing it (not like Sarah, Zechariah, etc.).
- (4.) **God did great things (marvels)** which are typically creation of the heavens and saving one from enemies by miracles. **Thus the divine name is to be praised**. Since people in general who fear him are saved.
- (5.) **His arm has crushed proud people**, exemplified by **Mary’s child for she conceives in humility**; bearing a humble child who will do likewise to Herod, the Pharisees and the Romans.
- (6.) **God lifts up** – according to Sirach Luke’s source – **the humble who are in humility** from the time they are **in their mother’s wombs**. Sirach, as reformulated by Luke, implies **Mary referencing herself as someone chosen from the womb to possess humility**, and to have both the **word** and the **gift** or **justification**.
- (7.) She in her poverty has been given something to fill her, while the rich of the world are empty of **her gift**.
- (8.) **God has given a child to Israel for mercy from sin** and in fulfillment of the prophecy to Abraham.

This is clearly a play on the **greatness-humility** contrast that Luke develops from Sirach, where Mary represents **greatness-in-humility**; this gift, for Sirach is granted **from the maternal womb**. It would be natural to infer, from Mary’s source-text, that she embraces this statement as she speaks about **her gifts**, already recognized to be in her possession at twelve-year old by Archangel Gabriel. This supposes the only plausible source for “**My soul magnifies the Lord**”; namely, David’s own expression of about his vocation as “christ” or his “messianic” vocation of election, as one being anointed and called by God. Mary can only be parallel to this in that she grants the flesh or body to Jesus that makes him the Messiah or physical seed of David, so that like Saul and David he is one of the messiahs/christs. Mary is citing Sirach (per Luke) for her own “**greatness of soul**.” For this reason, **God must be her protective savior**, as a deliverer from past, present, and future danger like David. Notice, however, the editing of the original phraseology of Sirach, which refers to sons of Israel who have God as **their redeemer (from**

sin). Mary is the one who heard the word and believes in Luke (11:28) and therefore all generations call her blessed for being the first to hear and believe the word; so she is not like faithless Israel locked up under the law (Galatians 4). **The great things** done by God are preventive and anticipatory deliveries from danger by God. In Mary's case **this would apparently be saving her from danger and creating something pure in mercy or compassion.**⁶ **God's mercy (for sin)** is unto those *who fear him*, but Mary's command by Archangel Gabriel is "Don't fear (μη φόβου)." The blessing of *God's hand in Sirach* is the *blessing of God's strong arm* in Luke 1. **Israel is the physical child of Mary** referred to in type by Sirach and in fullness by Luke for Christ is the promise **of mercy** to God's children **forever**. The most interesting feature of this rearrangement of Sirach by Luke is to identify Mary as "**full of grace**" which is to say "**justice and faith**" who has been raised up in her lowliness as a creature *from her mother's womb*.

Conclusions

When we use the principle of interpreting Scripture by Scripture's own sources we come to intricate and convincing results. A theology guided by trusting the Evangelists selection of Scriptural passages and faithful to Luke's sources pays large dividends in what is often advertised as a poor economy for capitalizing on Marian doctrine. Quite the opposite, interpreting Scripture by Scripture or Luke by his own sources justifies early Christian readings of Mary's vocation and privileges. Everything in Luke's sources: (i.) Mary's role as the New Ark of the Covenant (compare 1 Samuel), (ii.) she as the only one to hear and to be believe as "blessed" (Luke 11:28), and (iii.) she as filled with grace at some time prior to Gabriel's announcement (Luke 1:35), altogether prepare us to read Sirach in a subordinate and interpretative role to fill in the last elements of who this Mary is and what her vocation is about. She is supposed to be filled with justice or justification even before the coming of the angel so that she immediately believes without need to be first justified *and then only to believe*, for she already possesses every gift of immaterial grace. Oddly, Sirach suggests that Mary's humility and her title full of grace should be thought to be a call from the womb. Luke himself unmistakably reworks Sirach 18 and 50. As an author he has the liberty of taking Mary's original Aramaic witness, which would have likely cited either an Aramaic Targum or even a dialectic of Hebrew known to Mary. Luke adjusted his translation of preexisting interviews to agree – as much as Mary's witness would conform to it – to the language of Scripture, including the book of Sirach. The net result is that Luke wants his reader not only to believe that Mary is the New Ark, the New Mother of Samson, the New Mother of Samuel, the New Daughter of Jephthah, but even the New Man Full of Grace (Sirach 18:17), who from her own Mother's womb possessed original justice or justification and nothing of Eve's curse in order to prepare her to hear the

⁶ See LXX Psalm 105:21 (deliverance from Egypt with "saving" from danger) and Ps. 135:3, 6 (making of heavens, and "the lights (sun/moon)" with "mercy"). Compare: Job 9:9 (rain/dew upon the earth); Daniel 4:37 (marvelous things on the earth).

word of God and believe it at the Annunciation and conceive it in both her heart and more literally in her womb.