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The True "New Eve": Ben Wildflower's Magnificat and the Second Creation Story

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ABSTRACT:

Images of the Virgin Mary have provided comfort to Christians for almost two thousand years. Many of these images have depicted the Mother of God as gentle, demure, pure, and obedient. Ben Wildflower's woodcut, *Magnificat*, imagines another side of Mary's story. This article considers the second creation story, "New Eve" typology, and church teaching about current social and environmental issues to demonstrate why *Magnificat* is an ideal portrait for the true "New Eve."

The True "New Eve"

Ben Wildflower's *Magnificat*
and the Second Creation Story

by Mary L. Parks

INTRODUCTION

The second creation story in the Book of Genesis presents God's plan for the earth as one of balance and harmony. It tells of the first man and woman, their responsibility to care for the earth's balance, and how, instead, they upset that balance through their actions. Christianity has often understood this story as the reason for "original sin" and has placed the blame for that sin on Eve, the woman in the story.

Images of the Virgin Mary have provided comfort to Christians, especially Catholics, for almost two thousand years. Many of these images have depicted the Mother of God as gentle, demure, pure, and obedient. As such, she has often



been considered a “New Eve,” selflessly accepting God’s will so that we might be saved from the original sin committed by the first woman. As a human being, however, Mary likely possessed the full range of feelings about her place in salvation history. Ben Wildflower’s woodcut, *Magnificat* imagines another side of Mary’s story.¹

This paper will use a hermeneutic of retrieval to demonstrate how the second creation story can be told without villainizing the first woman, and why Wildflower’s *Magnificat* is a timely icon

for this purpose. The second creation story will be told from a feminist perspective and then the iconography of *Magnificat* will be examined. The “New Eve” typology will then be considered, as well as church teaching about current social and environmental issues. Wildflower’s *Magnificat* depicts a Mary that makes us uncomfortable; this discomfort is what makes *Magnificat* an ideal portrait of true “New Eve.”

THE SECOND CREATION STORY

The second creation story in the Book of Genesis tells how God entrusted the first man and woman with stewardship of the garden of Eden.² In exchange for their care of creation, the couple are given everything they need in a perfectly balanced world. There is kinship between the first couple and the other inhabitants of the garden because God created them



Benjamin Wildflower, *Magnificat*, 2016, woodcut, 11 x 16 in. [Ben Wildflower Art](https://benwildflower.tumblr.com/image/168559341019)

1 Benjamin Wildflower, *Magnificat*, 2016, woodcut, 11 x 16 in. (27.94 x 40.64 cm.), Ben Wildflower Art, <https://benwildflower.tumblr.com/image/168559341019>.

2 Feminist Theologies Committee, “Ecological Justice...Embracing a Community of Creation” (presentation, Center for Spirituality and Enrichment, St. Scholastica Monastery, Duluth, MN, November 17, 2022).

all from the soil of the Earth. The responsibility to care for the garden is not as easy as it sounds, however; sacrifices will be required on the part of the man and the woman. These sacrifices are symbolized by one tree in the garden they are not allowed to touch. However, the man and woman experience the human characteristics of curiosity and desire. After the woman talks to a serpent in the garden, she and the man decide to eat from the one tree they were told to avoid. They place their own concerns above their responsibility for balance in the garden.

God discovers their decision and explains that things will be different now that they have abandoned their stewardship of the Garden. Life is going to be a lot harder for everyone: the woman will suffer giving birth to many children, and the man will have to toil for food in the world beyond the garden. There will also be hostility between the serpent and the woman, as well as between their offspring. In the words of Pope Francis, “the originally harmonious relationship between human beings and nature became conflictual.”³ The story concludes with an indication that this conflict will continue for generations: it is at this point in the story that the woman is named “Eve,” which means “the mother of all the living.”⁴

MAGNIFICAT BY BEN WILDFLOWER

Ben Wildflower’s woodcut, *Magnificat*, depicts Mary wearing combat boots and holding her right hand aloft in a fist. Her simple, light-colored garment is covered with a dark, hooded robe, and there is a circle of stars around her head. She stands on top of a snake, and her right foot balances on top of a skull. Two ovals of text, inspired by the Gospel of Luke (1:46-55), form a frame around the image. The outer oval states “Cast Down the Mighty – Send the Rich Away.” The inner oval states “Fill the Hungry – Lift the Lowly.” Like Wildflower’s other artwork, the image has been created in a bold and simple style, communicating a “grassroots Catholic Worker sensibility.”⁵

3 Francis, *Laudato si'*, (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2015), sec. 66.

4 Genesis 3:20 (New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition).

5 Lil Copan, “Mary 2018 (aka Mary at the Border Fence), by Benjamin Wildflower,” *Christian Century*, December 31, 2019. <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/art/mary-2018-aka-mary-border-fence-benjamin-wildflower>.

This is not the demure, submissive Mary we often see. Instead, this Mary is powerful and embraces her strength.⁶ She raises her fist to communicate “holy rage” at the imbalance in the world, and boldly rephrases the words of Luke’s Gospel as a call to action.⁷ The stars around her head are a reference to the woman in the Book of Revelation who conquered an ancient dragon.⁸ She stands atop a snake and a skull to indicate her control over what the artist describes as “evil and death as they were unleashed in the Book of Genesis.”⁹ This imagery reminds us that God is on the side of the poor, the powerless, the lowly, and the abused. If we find this image of Mary unsettling, Wildflower has achieved his goal. The image calls us to consider what sacrifices we are making to restore balance in the world: “Christian Life demands that all the hungry be fed, whatever the cost to the ruling class.”¹⁰

THE TRUE “NEW EVE”

Since the second century A.D., Christianity has viewed Mary as the “New Eve.”¹¹ Many considered the woman in the garden to be the cause of humanity’s first sin, so it seemed fitting that we had been redeemed through the child Mary bore. Yet the premise of this idea, placing blame on the first woman, has contributed to sexism within the church and to the world at large. We must remember that the man and the woman were equals in the garden of Eden. Yes, the woman was curious: “That is what makes the story. Eve, as she is named in 3:20, is the protagonist, not her husband. This is an important point, as is the realization that to

6 D. L. Mayfield, “Mary’s *Magnificat* in the Bible is Revolutionary. Some Evangelicals Silence Her,” *Washington Post*, December 20, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2018/12/20/marys-magnificat-bible-is-revolutionary-so-evangelicals-silence-it/?fbclid=IwAR0lvr3NWX1DyWobgc-CEkwtQWmxllw8xQScY-jt5V0rHAzknfjReOHlmzU>.

7 Benjamin Wildflower and Naomi Wildflower, “A Note on the Art,” *Empty Hands Expectant Heart* (blog), May 9, 2016, <https://emptyhandsexpectantheart.wordpress.com/2016/05/09/a-note-on-the-art/>.

8 Benjamin Wildflower, email message to the author, November 11, 2022

9 Benjamin Wildflower, email message to the author, November 11, 2022.

10 Benjamin Wildflower, “Bio,” *benwildflower.com*, Ben Wildflower Art, 2002, <https://benwildflower.com/>

11 Maja Weyerman, “The Typologies of Adam-Christ and Eve-Mary, and their Relationship to One Another,” *Anglican Theological Review* 84, no. 3 (2002): 616.

be the curious one, the seeker of knowledge, the tester of limits, is to be quintessentially human.”¹²

After the man and the woman both make the decision to eat the forbidden fruit, their eyes were opened. Yet they were not honest about what they had done. It was then that they suffered the consequences of their actions. This narrative sequence indicates that the sin is not in being curious, having desire, or making mistakes, but in refusing to acknowledge the costs of our actions. We are the descendants of the first couple; our eyes are also open. We know when we are causing harm to others and to our environment. And even if we hide from this knowledge, we feel the effects of our actions in our souls and in our world.

What was true in the garden of Eden is still true. We are created by God from the very substance of the earth, along with all the plants and the rest of the animals. God’s intention, as depicted in the second creation story, is for humanity to be the stewards of this family and our earthly home. But having lost sight of our interconnected nature, we place our own desires before the needs of the earth as a whole. In our anthropocentrism, we neglect our duty to creation. This neglect has resulted in pollution, waste, water scarcity, loss of biodiversity, decline in the quality of human life, and global inequality.¹³ Our relationship with nature is no longer harmonious.

Wildflower’s *Magnificat* is named for Mary’s song of praise in the Book of Luke which begins, “My soul proclaims the glory of the Lord.” This is the same sentiment Pope Francis uses to begin the 2015 encyclical, *Laudato si’*, “Praise be to you my Lord,” in which he calls us to consider the human and social dimensions of the earth’s ecology: “We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental.”¹⁴ It is through environmental and social justice that creation will be

12 Susan Niditch, “Genesis,” in *Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley, Third Edition: Revised and Updated (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 31.

13 See discussion in Francis, *Laudato si’*.

14 Francis, *Laudato si’*, sec. 139.

restored to God’s plan: a harmonious existence in which we honor our interconnectedness and care for all the world as family.

In *Magnificat*, we are given a chance to reimagine Mary’s role as the New Eve. With this Mary we are given an icon of a strong mother standing up for the wellbeing of her children. She is acting not to make up for the lack of an earlier, flawed woman, but in solidarity with every person who sees the wrongs that need to be made right for the sake of love. As the mother of us all, this Mary calls us to task. She demands that we acknowledge the effects of our actions. She knows we can do better. Her concern is rooted in love. She doesn’t want us to wallow in the idea that we are bad, flawed sinners and can’t help what we do. She refuses to allow one portion of humanity to cause misery and destruction for other people and for the planet. She expects us to use our skills and abilities to care for the earth and for each other. She knows this is God’s plan for humanity.

CONCLUSION

The second creation story teaches us that God intended creation to be balanced and harmonious. That original balance was disrupted when the first man and woman put their own concerns above the garden they were supposed to care for. Our current social and economic situation indicates that we are still putting our own needs above creation. Ben Wildflower’s *Magnificat* depicts Mary as someone who, like the first woman, is “the mother of all the living.” She is a proud, strong mother who is ready to stand up for the rights of her children: she is the true “New Eve.”



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