

Mary's grammar

By [Julie Clawson](#)

December 22, 2010



The final exam in my theology class surprised me. Instead of complex essay questions, there was one simple question: defend the grammar of the Magnificat.

How can Mary sing that the Lord *has done* great things for her? It's a little crazy: how can this young, lower-class girl who finds herself knocked up sing that God has already--in the past tense--ended injustice and oppression? All she has to do is look around her to find evidence to the contrary.

I answered the question, working in the requisite readings. But days later the question is still haunting me.

What intrigues me is the gap between what the song proclaims and how the song is commonly used. As the exam question implied, we tend to get confused about the song's verb tense. It isn't simply past tense, announcing the fulfillment of the eschatological vision in which rulers are brought down and the lowly are lifted up.

Nor is it simply a future hope for a time when all will be made right.

Instead it's both; it's the already and not yet. This can be hard to understand, in part because English lacks the [aorist tense](#). The Magnificat testifies to God's work to reconcile all creation, work that has already begun and will continue forever. Like Mary, we are invited to be intimately involved in this work.

Mary wasn't crazy. She was carrying the hope of the world inside her; she knew that God had entered the world in a dramatic way. This changed everything--but to accomplish the change, the hope had to be proclaimed with assurance. We don't just place our hope in a past event or a future reward; we live into it.

When God sent Jesus to the world to reconcile all things, his incarnation and work on the cross did the job. Salvation dealt with the world's injustices and oppressions. But as humans we could not be transformed all at once--that desire is what got Adam and Eve kicked out of Eden. God works gradually in our lives and world, helping us grow up into the hope that is already there.

Like Mary, we magnify the Lord for already overcoming injustice and oppression--and we also work to end such evils. Mary trusted so profoundly in the reality of the baby she carried that she asserted God's fulfillment of hope in the past, present and future. Her faith challenges me to join her in magnifying God by making this hope a reality.