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Mary's Magnificat: Sources and Themes

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MARY'S MAGNIFICAT: SOURCES AND THEMES

*Lawrence Frizzell**

In the 1961 meeting of this Society, the Basilian biblical scholar, James Terence Forestell, reflected upon the biblical background of the Magnificat. He declared that it is not merely a patchwork quilt of Old Testament texts. "The Magnificat is a new hymn with its own unity of inspiration, but the words do reflect a whole stream of O.T. piety, which is not to be isolated in a few texts."¹ He studied the background possibilities in the Jewish Scriptures for every significant term in the hymn.

I will stand with him against the assessment of the Jesuit Scripture scholar, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, who has called the Magnificat "a cento-like composition, a mosaic of O.T. expressions drawn from the LXX (the Septuagint)."² In his commentary he printed Old Testament sources in the margin of his translation, which is very useful for one searching for the roots of the various passages, but I hope to show that more can be said about the sources.

In *The Birth of the Messiah*, Raymond E. Brown offered a two-page table, listing O.T. and other Jewish parallels, to the canticle of Mary.³ He marked those that are closer to Luke when quoted from the Septuagint rather than from the Massoretic text

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¹James T. Forestell, "Old Testament Background of the Magnificat," *Marian Studies* 12 (1961): 205-244 at 205. For Christian literature using the hymn, see Phillip Rogers, "Magnificat," in *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature*, ed. David Lyle Jeffrey (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 473-474.

²Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1981), 259.

³Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1993: new updated ed.), 258-360.

of the Hebrew Bible. This summarized the work of those reviewing the issues related to the original language of the prayer.

Is this Luke's composition or does it derive from early tradition? Some scholars argue for Lucan authorship but many see a Jewish-Christian source or sources for the canticles in Luke 1-2, and a few consider the Magnificat to be a Jewish hymn transplanted into the New Testament.

I. Original: Greek or Hebrew?

Fitzmyer is categorical: "There is no evidence that this canticle ever existed in a Semitic language" (p. 366). Coming from one of the greatest Aramaic scholars of the past fifty years, this assessment cannot be taken lightly.

Brown surveyed the arguments carefully and concluded that the two sides have debated to a stalemate.⁴ He presented the Jerusalem Community of the infant Church as the likely setting for the hymns incorporated by Luke into the Infancy Narrative. He saw these disciples to be heirs to the "Poor of the Lord" (*anawim* in Hebrew), people whose economic and social limitations opened them to God as the unique source of security amid the vicissitudes of life. He might have noted that some early Jewish Christians were known as Ebionites, a name derived from *ebyon*, another Hebrew term for the "poor" which is used in Qumran literature as well.

Noting that these canticles might have been written in Greek, at least by the time Luke came to know them, Brown referred to Martin Dibelius, whose commentary on the Epistle of James pointed to this mentality of the *anawim* recorded in Greek. This spirituality may have had influence in the Greek

⁴Brown, op. cit., 644-645. Those arguing for a Hebrew original include Stephen Farris, *The Hymns of Luke's Infancy Narratives* (Sheffield: Journal for the Study of the New Testament, Supplement Series 9, 1985); Samuel Terrien, *The Magnificat: Musicians as Biblical Interpreters* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1995); and Randall Buth, "Hebrew Poetic Tenses and the Magnificat," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 21 (1984):67-83. Douglas Jones, "The Background and Character of the Lucan Psalms," *Journal of Theological Studies* 19 (1968):19-50, does not make a definite conclusion about language but finds the setting to be "the worship of the earliest community of Jewish Christians . . . , before a specifically Christian theological language had developed" (47-48).

Diaspora in churches not associated with the missionary journeys of St. Paul and his companions.

Did Mary pray the Magnificat? Or did Luke place these words upon her lips, having found them in an early Christian community? In an earlier essay, I pointed out that prayers of women are found in the Hebrew Bible (Deborah, Hannah, Miriam) and the Greek versions of Scripture (Mother of the seven martyrs, Esther, Judith, Susannah) and the Pseudepigrapha (Aseneth). A woman graced by God for deliverance of his people is always portrayed as a person of prayer, so in the early Church such a hymn would be well appreciated.⁵

Since Luke described the presence of Mary in the Jerusalem Church before and after Pentecost, we may conjecture with many theologians that she was active in guiding the disciples into ways of prayer. Would they not have wished to learn about the home practices of the days in Nazareth? Would her insights into the Paschal Mystery consummating her Son's life be ignored?

In 1965, Norman Habel described the form in which prophetic call narratives were written.⁶ In 1972, G. Meagher applied this six-point form to the Annunciation.⁷ Clearly, Luke is describing the mission of Mary so that it includes a prophetic or teaching role. Did he create this insight or learn it from the early eyewitnesses and sources that he sought out? Rather than credit some anonymous poet in the early Church, we will search for the Jewish background which may favor the attribution of the Magnificat to Mary herself.

Although Joseph Fitzmyer agrees with Raymond Brown that there is a Jewish-Christian source for the Magnificat, the Benedictus (Lk 1:68-79) and possibly the Nunc Dimittis (Lk 2:29-32), he declares: ". . . [T]here is no reason to think of Mary as the

⁵Lawrence E. Frizzell, "Mary and the Biblical Heritage," *Marian Studies* 46 (1995): 26-40 at 38. See Hans Klein, "Das Magnificat als jüdisches Frauengebet," *Kerygma und Dogma* 43 (1997):258-267; it is abridged in *Theology Digest* 46 (1999):43-47. He offers a helpful analysis of biblical texts, but I do not find convincing his suggestion that the Magnificat is the typical prayer of a new Jewish mother.

⁶N. Habel, "The Form and Significance of the Call Narrative," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 77 (1965):297-323.

⁷Gerard Meagher, "Studies in Scripture: The Prophetic Call Narrative," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 39 (1972):164-177.

one who composed it (the Magnificat). It has not been preserved by a family tradition" (p. 359).

Certainly, it strains the credulity of many scholars that a country teenager would proclaim a refined hymn of praise—unless one postulates a special inspiration of the Holy Spirit.⁸ However, the Magnificat weaves into a few verses the essence of the preaching of Jesus. Would not the prayer life of the Holy Family have left some insights that Mary would share with the disciples? No doubt she integrated the message of her Son into a response that would have included prayer, grounded in the Jewish Scriptures and the liturgy. Just as the Benedictus echoes the blessing of Aaron in the Temple, the Magnificat seems to draw on themes of the synagogue liturgy.⁹

The Eighteen Benedictions, known also as the *Tefillah* (the prayer of intercession) or the *Amidah* (standing position), constitute a text rooted in the Pharisaic tradition of educated laymen during the Second Temple period. Just as Luke records an adaptation of the priestly blessing for Zechariah (1:68-79, presented as an ascending blessing), so he offers a prayer consistent with village life centered on the synagogue as Mary's response to the Annunciation and Visitation.

II. The Amidah

Prayers of petition were associated with public worship from early in the First Temple period, usually placed within the context of thanksgiving for favors already received (see the prayer attributed to Solomon at the consecration of the Temple).¹⁰ In the Hebrew version of the Wisdom of Jesus ben Sira

⁸Mary is not said to be inspired by the Holy Spirit, in contrast to Elizabeth, Zechariah and Simeon. However, Mary has been imbued with the Holy Spirit *in a unique way* (Lk 1:35). William H. Shepherd, Jr., makes this point at length: "That Mary is a prophet is reinforced by her self-designation as [the maidservant of the Lord] . . ." in *The Narrative Function of the Holy Spirit as a Character in Luke-Acts* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 121.

⁹See my essay, "The Priestly Blessing and the Gift of Peace," *SIDIC* (Rome) 21 (#1-1988):15-17. At the end of this present study, Appendix I summarizes the Hebrew terms in prayer which have a pattern of divine gift and human response. These are designated "descending" and "ascending" uses of the given word.

¹⁰I Kings 8:22-53. See my essay, "The Prayer of Foreigners: Evidence of the Biblical Tradition," *SIDIC* 25 (#1-1992):11-17.

(Ecclesiasticus), a text at 51:12 preserves a litany that is similar to Psalm 136 (the last of the Hallel Psalms used in the Passover Seder). After celebrating God as Lord, God of glory, guardian of Israel, creator of the universe, redeemer of Israel, the prayer gives thanks for God who gathers the dispersed of Israel, builds his city and his sanctuary, makes a horn to sprout forth for the house of David (see Sira 36:10-13) and chooses for his priests the sons of Zadok. Then gratitude is expressed for the shield of Abraham, the rock of Isaac and the mighty one of Jacob.¹¹

Many of these titles were woven into the Eighteen Benedictions, which celebrate the many dimensions of God's redeeming work. As a comprehensive study concludes, "the latter sections of the Amidah advance from personal (4-7) through national (10-15) to universal redemption (18), each stage involving the progressive realization of divine sovereignty from self to nation to humanity."¹²

The texts of the Amidah can be found in several sources of the period after the destruction of Jerusalem (A.D. 70). The lack of uniformity among them is understandable for prayers from the oral tradition of previous centuries. However, the number of benedictions was set before the "blessing (i.e., curse) against the *minim* (heretics)" was added about the year 85.¹³ The number eighteen was used so commonly that it was

¹¹This text is given as a footnote in the New American Bible translation of Sira at 51:12 of the Greek text. See 2 Macc 1:27-29 for another such prayer.

¹²Reuven Kimmelman, "The Literary Structure of the Amidah and the Rhetoric of Redemption," in *The Echoes of Many Texts: Reflections on Jewish and Christian Traditions. Essays in Honor of Lou H. Silberman*, ed. by William G. Dever and J. Edward Wright (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 171-218, at 212. See also Carmine Di Santi, *Jewish Prayer: The Origins of Christian Liturgy* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1991), 78-112.

¹³William Horbury's study "The Benediction of the *Minim* and Early Jewish-Christian Controversy," *Journal of Theological Studies* 33 (1982):19-61, has been brought up to date in his volume *Jews and Christian in Contact and Controversy* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1998). He does not mention Asher Finkel's essay, "Yavneh's Liturgy and Early Christianity," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 18 (1981) 231-250. Finkel argues that the *birkhat haminim* was applied to Jewish-Christians only after the Bar Kochba revolt (132-135). Because Rabbi Akiba had proclaimed this leader to be "Son of the Star" (see Num 24:17), a Messianic figure, these Christians could not join in the revolt without compromising their faith in Jesus.

not corrected. This suggests that the list of petitions was established at an earlier date.

For our purpose, it will be sufficient to present the first three benedictions. The text, taken from the Orthodox Siddur, need not be from the first century in every word for the connections with the Magnificat to be made.¹⁴

Benediction 1

Blessed are you, Lord our God and God of our fathers, God of Abraham, God of Isaac and God of Jacob; the great, mighty and revered God, the most high God, who bestows loving kindness, and are Master of all things; who remembers the pious deeds of the patriarchs, and in love will bring a redeemer to their children's children for your Name's sake.

O King, Helper, Savior and Shield! Blessed are you, O Lord, Shield of Abraham.

By its nature as communal prayer, the thanks-and-praise of the ascending blessing addresses God in relation to "us." Continuity of God's plan is celebrated in the movement from the current generation to its ancestors and in a special way to the three great patriarchs, in the formula that echoes the divine revelation to Moses (Ex 3:6, 15, 16). The divine attributes are listed in a series of three; God is called "great (*gadol*), mighty (*gibbor*) and awe-inspiring (*nora*)" (see Dt 10:17; Neh 9:32).¹⁵ Then comes the title *El Elyon*, "God most high" (Gn 14:20; Ps 78:35), bestower of good (deeds of) mercy (*hasadim*), master of all (see Gn 14:19), who remembers the devout deeds (*hasadim*) of the fathers." Adapting the second title of Melchisedek's prayer from "Master of heaven and earth," the blessing recalls that God's protective presence overshadowing Abraham will benefit his descendants.

¹⁴Joseph Hertz, *The Authorised Daily Prayer Book* (New York: Bloch, 1948), 131 and 133. The second person singular has been changed to "you." For sources, see Joseph Heinemann, *Prayer in the Talmud: Forms and Patterns* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1997), 13-36; Asher Finkel, "Prayer of Early Rabbinic Tradition: Representative Texts," *Society of Biblical Literature 1993 Seminar Papers*, ed. Eugene H. Lovering, Jr. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), 799.

¹⁵Rabbinic tradition notes that Jeremiah removed *nora*' (10:6; 32:18-19) because God allowed aliens to destroy his Temple, and Daniel (9:4) removed *gibbor* because God's children were enslaved (Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 69b). I thank Asher Finkel for recalling this to me.

He brings a redeemer (*goel*) with love to their children's children because of his Name. Although God remembers the pious deeds of the patriarchs, the ultimate guarantee for divine fidelity is inherent to God himself (see Ez 36:22-23). Then God is addressed by four titles: as king he is ruler and judge; as helper, savior and shield (Dt 33:29), he is the protector of Israel. The first of the benedictions is unique in the series, beginning and ending with an ascending blessing; the title "Shield of Abraham (Gn 15:10)" refers to the unilateral covenant God made with the patriarch and his descendants. As in Isaiah 63:7-9, the recalling of God's mercies is both an act of thanks and an act of trust for the future.¹⁶

Benediction 2

Following this prayer which rejoices in God's might and magnificence through history, the second celebrates divine power over all creation, with a special emphasis on the mystery of sickness and death.

[You are powerful (*gibbor*) who brings low the haughty, mighty (*bazaq*) who punishes the tyrants.]¹⁷

You, O Lord, are mighty forever; you revive the dead; you are mighty to save. You cause the wind to blow and the rain to fall (in summer "you bring down dew").

You sustain the living with loving kindness, and revive the dead with great mercy; you support all the falling, and heal the sick; you set the captives free, and keep faith with those who sleep in the dust. Who is like you, Lord of mighty acts? Who resembles you, O King? You bring death and restore life, and cause salvation to spring forth.

You are faithful to revive the dead. Blessed are you, O Lord, who revive the dead.

According to the Pharisees, the omnipotence of God is the basic attribute both for creating the universe and effecting the

¹⁶See Kimmelman, 202.

¹⁷A. Finkel's translation of a text found in the Cairo Geniza and published by Solomon Schechter in the *Jewish Quarterly Review* (Old Series) 10 (1898):656-658. This is reprinted in *Contributions to the Scientific Study of the Jewish Liturgy*, ed. by Jakob J. Petuchowski (New York: Ktav, 1970), 375. Scholars argue that such texts represent the Palestinian version of the Amidah. If this bracketed version comes from the late Second Temple period, when Greek and Roman oppression in the Land caused great anguish, then it might be a background for Lk 1:51-53.

resurrection of the dead, which completes salvation.¹⁸ Already in the stories of Elijah and Elisha (I Kg 17-II Kg 4), God is shown to have the key to rain, the womb and the tomb. This prayer links the gifts of rain and dew (mentioned during the summer) with resurrection of the dead (see Is 26:19). Divine providence is the continuation of God's creative act, and the loving kindness (*hesed*) with which God works now is guarantee of his manifold deeds of compassion for the dead.

Drawing on Psalms 103:3, 145:14 and 146:7, the prayer proclaims that God sustains those whose only hope is in him. Being crushed by the burdens of life, being sick or in prison or exile may lead a person into proximity of death. So God's mercy toward the afflicted points to divine fidelity that triumphs even on behalf of those whose bodies rest in the earth (see Dn 12:2).

"Who is like you, *baal geburot* (Master of mighty deeds)?" The question begins with the phrase from the Song of Moses (Ex 15:11), used frequently in prayer. "And who can compare with you, O King? You bring death and restore life (see I Sam 2:6) and cause salvation to sprout forth." The title *baal* no longer evokes the Canaanite deities as it did in Hosea's time (Hos 2:16-17). Addressed as *gibbor* (the strong one, warrior) at the beginning of this prayer, God is now called the master of powerful deeds. The title "king" in the first blessing shows that the God of Israel can bring redemption; here, as ruler over life and death, he can assure resurrection. Everything in history and creation is under divine providence. Fidelity is attributed to God in terms of the covenant and its promise of redemption (see Dt 7:9; Is 49:7 and Ex 34:6-7).¹⁹

Benediction 3

Redemption and resurrection of human creatures constitute a preparation for eternal worship of the Lord. Even before the divine plan is completed, the covenanted people on earth are challenged to unite with the angels in praising God's holiness

¹⁸See Jesus' debate with the Sadducees on resurrection: "You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the *power of God*" (Mt 22:29).

¹⁹See Kimmelman, 206.

and glory (using Is 6:3, followed by Ez 3:12). This emphasizes the correspondence between heavenly and earthly worship.

You are holy and your Name is holy and the holy ones praise you daily, [the holy King].²⁰ Blessed are you, Lord, the holy God.

The attribute of holiness sets God apart from any taint or moral limitation associated with creatures alienated from their true purpose. For Hebrew speakers, the name shows forth the person, so the divine Name manifests the unique status of God. The holy ones (angels and perhaps the covenanted people as well, as in Dn 9:27) praise (*ballel*) God in rhythms of acknowledgment and thanksgiving.

This review of the initial blessings in the synagogue's great prayer of intercession has been limited to those points which will be useful for an application to the Magnificat. We conclude with a paragraph from Rabbi Kimmelman's thorough analysis:

In sum, the opening triad of blessings (1-3) presents a tripartite thesis: it argues for God bringing a redeemer, followed by the case for resurrection, and ends with Israel's acclamation of the kingship of God on earth. All three contain the affirmation that God is King. Perceiving of God as Lord over history, Lord over nature and death, and Lord over all, heightens our expectation that he will redeem us. The expectation of redemption triggered by divine kingship is articulated by Isaiah: "Since . . . the Lord is our King, He will deliver us" (33:22).²¹

III. Sources for the Magnificat

As with many other prayers in the New Testament, the ultimate sources for a great many of the phrases and images of the Lucan canticles are in the Jewish Scriptures. However, emphasis should be placed on the living context in which the Jewish community adapted the texts to its spiritual needs. It is important to list the biblical antecedents to the verses of these prayers as many scholars have done. In recent decades, many have sought

²⁰This title, found in the reader's prayer, is inserted into the congregation's blessing on the Sabbath and festivals. See Israel Brodies (ed), *The Authorised Daily Prayer Book of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth of Nations* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1962 revised edition), 47-48.

²¹Kimmelman, 209.

to locate the hymns with Jewish-Christian circles, perhaps of the Jerusalem community described in Acts or of Greek-speaking groups unaffected by the activities of Paul and his associates.²²

The first three benedictions of the Amidah will be reviewed at this point for possible contacts with the Magnificat. Will a convergence of probabilities emerge to substantiate the conjecture that prayers such as these stood in the background of the person who composed the Christian hymn and the community that preserved it?

Benediction 1 and the Magnificat

Scholars point to the beginning of Hannah's hymn of thanksgiving (I Sam 2:1-2) as a source or parallel; it reads: "My heart is strengthened in the Lord; my horn is exalted in the Lord" (the Tetragrammaton in both stichs). The first words of the Magnificat not only present "soul" and "spirit" in parallelism but the verbs and predicates fail to match except for the use of Kyrios (Lord) in the first stich. The parallel "in God my Savior" is found in Habakkuk 3:18, where, in the Septuagint, the same Greek verb is used as well, but in the first stich. "I will exult in the Lord; I will rejoice in God my savior." The early Christians saw a reference to Jesus in the term "savior," but here the title refers simply to God.

These prayers and certain psalms (35:9, LXX 34:9) record an individual celebration of God's beneficence, but none "proclaims the greatness of the Lord." Of course, this attribute is mentioned in biblical passages listed above, but likely the synagogue liturgy would be the context in which a pious Jew would recall it.

Because in the Douay-Rheims and King James versions the Latin verb "magnificat" was transposed into English, giving the simple reader an idea of aggrandizement by the person at prayer,

²²See Raymond E. Brown, op. cit., 350-355. On this community, see Daniel K. Falk, "Jewish Prayer Literature and the Jerusalem Church," in *The Book of Acts in Its Palestinian Setting*, ed. by Richard Bauckham (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 267-301. The comment of a senior French scholar, Pierre Grelot, is pertinent: "The archaism of the formulations concurs well with a composition of Mary herself, in the context of the infant Church where St. Luke shows her to be deep in prayer with the Twelve; meditating thus in her heart on the events she experienced, she could measure the import of God's promises (1:54-55) at the time when they were accomplished in fullness." "Marie," *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, vol. 10 (1977):417.

the profound biblical perspective was lost. Popular hymns in English have oversimplified the meaning of the verb or lost it entirely.²³ Recent translations allow people to capture the fact that the prayer acknowledges the eternal greatness or magnitude of God. This brings a corresponding sense of humility and joy because of the person's relationship with God. Mary refers to this attribute followed by the title *Kyrios* (the Lord), which is the usual Greek substitute (following the Hebrew *Adonai*) for the Name which God revealed to Moses (Ex 3:14) and interpreted by a series of attributes reflecting God's love (Ex 34:6-7). The entire prayer develops the implications of this divine Name as the revelation of divine loving-kindness and mercy.²⁴

The reason for the person's witness to divine magnitude is given: "He who is mighty (*dynatos*) has done great things for me" (Lk 1:49). The Greek version of Zephaniah 3:17 uses the same word to render *gibbor* as a divine title: "The Lord your God is in you; the Mighty One will save you." The image of the (right) arm as the manifestation of strength (Lk 1:51) develops the power of God in terms that would evoke the Exodus and other divine deeds of deliverance. Human efforts to assert power in a contrary direction will be defeated (1:52).²⁵

²³For example, Joseph Gelineau's "Canticle of Our Lady" begins "My soul glories the Lord;" the German "Mein' Seel', O Gott, muss loben dich," is translated "My soul gives glory to the Lord" by J. T. Mueller. See *Catholic Book of Worship II* (Ottawa: Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1980), #68 and 437. Certainly there is a long tradition of adapting biblical texts in prayer, especially when set to music; this is legitimate but people should also learn a translation which is close to the original.

²⁴My colleague, Rabbi Asher Finkel, develops this point with reference to Temple practice: "To magnify God with reference to *gadol* in Hebrew signifies to proclaim his unpronounced Name, the Tetragrammaton (YHWH=*Kyrios*). This pronouncement proclaims his transcendence, for the Name contains seventy-two combinations for the four letters, capturing past, present and future (*hayah, howeh, yihyeh*; see Rv 1:4 and the Babylonian Talmud Yoma 69b). Thus Mary addressed God's presence by the priestly magnification of the Name. This is a very dramatic opening for a prayer! The prayer of Hannah (I Sam 2:1-10) is structured to represent the very forms of the daily prayer to be used in the Second Temple period (see Midrash of the Amidah or Midrash Samuel). The masculine model of prayer is found by the Rabbis to be Daniel (9:4-19), while the feminine paradigm is offered by Hannah" (Private, written communication).

²⁵See Patrick W. Skehan, "The Hand of Judith," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 25 (1963):94-109.

The third attribute is evoked in the *response* of those who receive God's loving-kindness as Master of all creation. "And his mercy is from generation to generation on those who fear (stand in awe of) him" (Lk 1:50). Awe is the first response of creatures to the Creator. As covenant experience taught Israelites that they were God's children, they rejoiced in his mercy.

No mention of the good deeds of the patriarchs is found in the Magnificat, but divine promises to them bring assurance that the God of Israel will be their Helper, Savior and Shield, "bringing a redeemer with love to their children's children for the sake of his Name."

The accumulation of vocabulary and motifs shared by the blessing relating to "the Fathers" and the Magnificat is impressive. The theme of salvation in history for the individual in the covenanted community may be a major reason for this.

Benediction 2 and the Magnificat

The present form of the second blessing (*geburot*), celebrating the omnipotence of the Creator who can raise the dead, is less pertinent to the Magnificat, yet central to Gospel kerygma of the death-and-resurrection of Jesus. The version from the Cairo Geniza is very pertinent to the reversals of Luke 1:51-53. Resurrection is the ultimate reversal of human vulnerability, especially in favor of those who trust in God in spite of oppression or persecution.

In Psalm 89 [LXX 88]:11, the Davidic ruler is assured that, with the strength of his arm, God has scattered his enemies. The Magnificat declares that "God has scattered the arrogant in the conceit of their hearts" (1:51); these self-sufficient types are exemplified as "the mighty" with royal dignity, either inherited or usurped (1:52).

Reversal of lots comes as God's beneficent surprise in favor of the poor and downtrodden whose faith never fails. The series in Luke 1:51-53 is reminiscent of Hannah's prayer (I Sam 2:4-8). Ezekiel (21:26) warns the prince of Israel that things shall not remain as they are; "exalt that which is low and abase that which is high," the point which Jesus would develop in the parables. The divine intention on behalf of the fallen, the sick and the captives in the second blessing has some pertinence but is far less dramatic and challenging to the

social order. The point of contact with the Magnificat is rather in the divine attribute of omnipotence.

Benediction 3 and the Magnificat

The third blessing (*qedusot*) may be echoed in the Magnificat's link between God's might and the holiness of his Name. Revealed to Moses (Ex 3:14; 34:6-7) in the framework of the Covenant of Sinai, this special Name manifests that "God is love" (see I Jn 4:8, 16), especially in mercy toward those who revere ("fear") him.

The main points of contact between the Jewish prayers and the Magnificat may be summarized as follows, with special indicators for points (capitals, underlining, italics) that seem to be shared:

Benedictions 1-3

1. God of ABRAHAM The great, mighty and revered God who - bestows loving kindness . . . to their children's children. O King, *Helper*, Savior and Shield
2. You are mighty forever . . . Lord of mighty acts
[You are powerful (gibbor) who brings low the haughty, mighty (hazaq) who punishes the tyrants.]
3. You are holy and your Name is holy . . .

The Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55)

46. My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord
 49. The Mighty One has done great things and holy is his Name.
 50. His mercy is from age to age to those who revere him
 51. He has shown might with his arm, dispersed the arrogant of mind and heart
 52. He has thrown down the rulers . . . but lifted up the lowly
 - He has helped* Israel his servant remembering his mercy . . . to ABRAHAM and to his DESCENDANTS forever.
-

Tying the Magnificat to the "poor of the Lord" is certainly an attractive hypothesis regarding the preservation and use of the hymn, but it does not focus on questions concerning certain words and themes of the prayer. The type of community imbued with the psalms and other canticles of the Jewish Scriptures most likely had members who had frequented the synagogue from their youth. As Brown concludes: "Thus it is not impossible that, in the last third of the century when he was composing Luke/Acts, Luke came upon these canticles in

a Greek-speaking Jewish Christian community in an area influenced by Jerusalem Christianity.”²⁶ Allowing that there is a historical basis for the description of a praying community in the company of Mary (Acts 1:14), one might suggest that her contribution to these prayers included a version of the Magnificat. Would these Christians not have been interested to learn from her?²⁷

IV. Themes of the Magnificat

Liturgical Implications

As in the Amidah, the prayer of Mary moves from the individual experience of God as “my Savior” to an act of faith in the protection God brings to the poor and oppressed, especially as they acknowledge the vacuum in their lives that can be filled adequately by God alone. As they recognize that emptiness, they will receive abundant signs of divine omnipotence in loving-kindness and mercy towards them and in judgment against the cruel and arrogant. In the final stanza, Israel is addressed as God’s child/servant (*pais*), coming in worship to remember and to re-present the mystery of divine wisdom and power, goodness and mercy in the Passover meal and other feasts. Thus, the entire people descending from Abraham and Sarah become the priestly model of *abodah*, service in the ascending act of worship and, through the imitation of God’s mercy, in deeds of love toward their neighbors. This is experienced by a people called the “son of God” through the Covenant (see Ex 4:22; Hosea 11:1). Even if this hymn is rooted in a Jewish-Christian community, there should be no doubt that “Israel” is to be understood as the honorary term of the Jewish liturgy for God’s people as community (*am*). Mary’s prayer, taken up by the Church as the Gospel passage at the end of Vespers and in

²⁶Brown, 355; quoted in Fitzmyer, *Gospel According to Luke I-IX*, 362.

²⁷See I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978): “The lack of Christian coloring suggests that the present hymn fits no situation better than that of Mary herself, although this does not necessarily mean that Mary herself composed the hymn at the precise occasion in the text” (79). For a full discussion and bibliography, see Stefano M. Manelli, *All Generations Shall Call Me Blessed: Biblical Mariology* (New Bedford: Academy of the Immaculate, 1994), 166-173.

personal prayer, should celebrate the continuation of God's plan, which is rooted in the gifts to Abraham and Sarah, who knew that nothing is impossible for God (Gn 18:14).²⁸

The title Israel and the phrase "his children" are sometimes spiritualized by Christians and made to apply to the Church rather than being expanded from the historical Israel to *include* those baptized into Christ, who thereby become children of God and children of Abraham (Gal 3:26-29).²⁹ There is a poignancy in the fact that miniscule Catholic communities in Egypt and other Arab nations are said to fall silent at the last words of the Magnificat, so that they do not commemorate Israel as God's servant. Clearly, they understand the title in its original sense! May the time come when they and all Christians rejoice in sharing the dignity of Israel!³⁰

²⁸See Pope John Paul II, "Mother of the Redeemer: Encyclical letter . . .," *The Pope Speaks* 32 (1987):184 (no. 37).

²⁹This point is made by Alberto Valentine, *Il Magnificat: Genere letterario. Struttura. Esegese* (Bologna; Edizione Dehoniane, 1987), 194. "In the context of the Magnificat, which we hold to be a Jewish-Christian hymn, the term 'Israel' seems to constitute the self-designation characteristic of God's people. We can affirm that ['Israel his servant'] is composed of authentic descendants of Jacob-Israel (see Gn 32:29), objects of election, destined ones of the covenant and promise. It is the people oppressed by enemies, but aided and freed by the Lord, thanks to his love and fidelity. The Magnificat . . . probably comes from a community of (Jewish-Christian) origins which celebrates Messianic salvation as completed. Israel, servant of God according to 1:54, is always the people descended from the Patriarchs, but it is as well the community of the New Covenant in the salvation achieved by Christ the Lord."

See Jean Stern, "Le 'verus Israel' et l'Israël du Magnificat," in *Mater Fidei et Fidelium: Collected Essays to Honor Théodore Koebler on His Eightieth Birthday* (Marian Library Studies, n.s., 17-23 [1985-1991]:119-130). In an unpublished lecture during the 1960s, John M. Oesterreicher made this point at the end of a reflection on the Magnificat. "As Mary is the bond uniting the Israel of old and the Israel renewed, transformed in and through the word and blood of Christ, so she is a bond that binds Christians to the Jews today. It is unthinkable that a Christian loves her and shows contempt for those who are her brothers according to the flesh. Yet it is fact. May I paraphrase one of St. John's sayings in his first Epistle (4:20)? 'If one declares: I love Mary, the mother of the Lord and my mother' but feels nothing but disregard, antagonism, even hatred for her brothers and sisters, for her people, he is a liar.' The Jews, or rather the attitude of [the] Christians toward the Jews is a touchstone of his devotion, of his faith" ("Maria, Sign and Question." Unpublished lecture from the archives of Seton Hall University).

³⁰See the prayer after the reading from Exodus 14 and the Song of the Sea during the Easter Vigil: "Grant that the fullness of the whole world may come into the children of Abraham and dignity of Israel."

In prayer and deed, the Church can become an instrument of reconciliation between the Jewish people and their neighbors. May Mary, queen of patriarchs, prophets and apostles, intercede for all who are covenanted to the God of Israel!

Moral Implications

"The Church's *love of preference for the poor* is wonderfully inscribed in Mary's *Magnificat*. . . . Mary is deeply imbued with the spirit of 'the poor of Yahweh,' who in the prayer of the Psalms awaited from God their salvation Mary truly proclaims the coming of the 'Messiah of the poor' (cf. Is 11:4, 61:1)."³¹ Thus is "the preferential option for the poor" to be linked with the larger picture of salvation, for individuals in community and oriented beyond material and temporal realities to the fullness of life in union with the risen Christ. Emphasis on political and social ramifications of the Magnificat was popular among liberation theologians of recent decades.³² However, in my earlier essay, I quoted Henry Wadsworth Longfellow to show that this application is much older.³³ Now I draw attention to a poem by Wilfrid Meynell (1852-1948).

Joseph Mary Plunkett
(*who signed, only as Joseph Plunkett,*
the Declaration of the Irish Republic)

Because you left her name unnamed,
Lest some should surely think it shamed,
I, with a bolder pen in rhyme,
Link Joseph Mary all the time.

I think, although you were not due
She waited at the gate for you;
And wore a sweet celestial pout,
Because her name had been left out.

³¹Pope John Paul II, "Mother of the Redeemer," no. 37 (*The Pope Speaks* 32 [1987]:185).

³²Brown, *The Birth*, 650-652.

³³*Marian Studies* 46 (1995):40.

For this is very She who sings:
 "The poor, God filleth with good things,"
 And, Rebel She, who dares to say:
 "But empty sends the rich away."³⁴

Indeed, the Magnificat should stimulate reflection concerning Mary as an active participant in God's plan, articulated in the message of Jesus. "The Magnificat is neither a revolutionary song nor a tranquilizer, but a tremendous incentive to the promotion of justice in the world."³⁵ Of course, this must be in accord with the principles enunciated in the Gospel, using only nonviolent means to achieve goals of justice.

The magnitude and might of Israel's God are manifested in the care of his children. The favored among them are those whose inherent dignity is scorned by those in power. The Magnificat celebrates the surprises constituted by reversals in the uplifting of the lowly and the feeding of the hungry (1:52-53). Does this merely continue the insights of prophet, sage and psalmist? Scholars who focus attention on Mary's presence among the Jewish-Christian "poor," those who place all their trust in God, consider that the prayer points to Jesus, who in his death-and-resurrection offers the foundation and pattern for a specifically Christian hope. Those who read this hymn in the context of faith in and knowledge of the Paschal Mystery see in Jesus the great sign of God's might and the exaltation of the Poor One as Savior and Lord (see Acts 5:31; 13:23 and the use of Psalm 2 in Acts 4:26). He alone will rule over all.³⁶

Indeed the struggle on behalf of the righteous but poor or persecuted is part of the continuing challenge of the Gospel and this hymn. Mary is the type of all those whose emptiness becomes an occasion for them to place all their trust in God.

³⁴Sister M. Thérèse (ed), *I Sing of a Maiden: The Mary Book of Verse* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 195. Joseph Mary Plunkett (1887-1916) is one of the poet martyrs of the Easter Uprising in Ireland.

³⁵Edouard Hamel, "Le Magnificat et le renversement de la situation," *Gregorianum* 60 (1979):84 (summary). See Hamel, "Justice in the Vision of the Magnificat," in *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, ed. by René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 581-584.

³⁶Hamel, "Le Magnificat," *Gregorianum* 60 (1979):71

This rejection of created realities that can become idols may be considered in the following way:

<i>Potential Idols</i>	<i>Response</i>	<i>Strength provided by</i>
Possessions	Poverty	Faith
Pleasure—intellectual or sensual	Temperance	Hope
Power	Obedience	Charity

Those who are rich in this-worldly goods may not feel constrained to acknowledge God (see Prov 30:8–9), but eventually they will be sent away, aware too late that their values were totally misplaced. In contrast, the poor have faith in God alone as their source of strength.

The proud and arrogant may focus on their capacity to enjoy the pleasures of life, but eventually they will find their world in disarray. The poor hope for fuller life and greater happiness than creatures can offer. Mary acknowledges her lowliness in relation to her total commitment as servant of God (1:48).

Those who exercised power as brute force (military conquest) or by manipulation (political influence) will lose everything because the Lord casts down the mighty and arrogant who fail to worship and serve the one God. The people who are poor in spirit have learned to listen, first to God but also to the deepest needs of their fellow human beings. Thus will every exercise of authority be a service of others (see Mt 20:20–27).

In the Infancy Narrative, Luke portrays Mary and the holy people gathered in the Temple to be faithful adherents to God's will, hoping for the completion of his plan, listening for the command to serve the Messiah. These points are summed up in the following reflection: "Mary—she who has believed and hence is blessed—now lends her voice to all those who have hoped in the Redeemer, the Messiah, the consolation of Israel, and who re-read the events of their history with eyes turned to the present and toward the future of God's promise which is now becoming reality."³⁷ More precisely, Mary is seen

³⁷Ivone Gebara and Maria Clara Bingemer, *Mary: Mother of God and Mother of the Poor* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989), 166.

as the representative, the personification of Israel. The divine actions on her behalf are in continuity with the benefits given to God's chosen people. The divine titles celebrated in the Magnificat are applied to Jesus in Luke 1:43 (Lord) and 2:11 (Savior). He will carry the mystery of divine reversals into his own ministry and teaching.³⁸

The Magnificat celebrates the intimacy of God and the faithful, with the moral implications of life as people deal with wealth and possessions, fame and pleasure, power and authority. Is there any interest in the environment, the world of creatures being used by all, either those who serve God or others who strive only to satisfy themselves? Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889) thought so:³⁹

Ask of her, the mighty mother:
 Her reply put this other
 Question: What is Spring?—
 Growth in every thing—
 Flesh and fleece, fur and feather,
 Grass and greenworld all together;
 Star-eyed strawberry-breasted
 Thristle above her nested
 Cluster of bugle blue eggs thin
 Forms and warms the life within;
 And bird and blossom swell
 In sod or sheath or shell.
 All things rising, all things sizing
 Mary sees, sympathising
 With the world of good,
 Nature's motherhood.
 Their magnifying of each its kind
 With delight calls to mind
 How she did in her stored
 Magnify the Lord.

³⁸See Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 43-44.

³⁹"May Magnificat," in *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. by Robert Bridges (New York: Oxford University Press, 1930), 37-38. The beginning and end of the poem have been omitted.

As in Psalm 148 and Daniel (LXX Hymn of the Three Youths), Hopkins rejoices that all creatures, each in its own way, render a response to the magnitude and might of the creator.⁴⁰ Of course, the human order, imbued with faith, has the capacity to celebrate the creator as the Lord of history. If that worship were to become universal, all abuse or misuse of other creatures would cease. Then the gifts of land, sea and space would redound to the creator's glory in a new way.

APPENDIX

Hebrew Terms behind Lucan Prayers

The four canticles of Luke's Infancy Narrative fit within the traditions of worship and intercession recorded in the Jewish Bible and liturgy. A number of the terms have been rendered into the vernacular of ancient Christian communities. They retain the peculiarity of the same word being used in two ways; for example, we notice the different meanings of "glory" in "God's glory fills heaven and earth" (Is 6:3) and "Glory to God in the highest" (Lk 2:14). Rather than a "slippery" use of words, each example shows two aspects of the same concept: one originating from God and the second being a human response in faith. These aspects are designated succinctly as "descending" and "ascending." Sometimes, to ensure theological accuracy, different words are used in English to convey the complementary meanings. Hebrew terms are transliterated with capital letters for the consonants so that the reader may note the root easily.

1. *Glory (KaBhoD)*, from the Hebrew verb "to be heavy," is first a designation for the impressive presence of God that permeates all creation (Isa 6:3) but is especially associated with the tabernacle (Ex. 40:34f) and Temple (Psalm 24:7-10). The renown of God is not associated with material wealth (as for a king) but with light which benefits Jerusalem (Isa 60:1) and eventually all the

⁴⁰See my essay on the biblical heritage, "Humanity and Nature according to the Jewish Scriptures," *SIDIC* (#3-1984):5-8.

nations (Isa 66:18). The ascending response of giving glory to God is an acknowledgment of this presence. This recognition leads to an act of praise and adoration.

2. *Blessing* (*BeRaKhaH*) is first of all God's gift of life and then all that relates to it. The ascending response is an act of *thanks* for the gift and *praise* to the Giver. Note the effort of the Latin to capture the richness of "blessing" in the responses to the gift of God's Word in the Scripture: "Deo gratias" (*Thanks* be to God) for the first reading and "Laus tibi, Christe" (*Praise* be to you, O Christ) for the Gospel.
3. *HeSeD* may be rendered loving-kindness, steadfast love, mercy (Greek *eleos*) when it designates the divine action and gift. The human response is best translated by the terms "devotion" or "loyalty." (*HaSiDim* is a title of devout Jews in 1 Maccabees 2:42 and in the eighteenth century and later for followers of the Baal Shem-Tov.) The term *HeSeD* is used frequently within the context of Covenant. Within the Covenant, the people of Israel gradually came to grasp that life is much more than our physical existence. The fullness of life is communion with the living God. As such, even death itself cannot threaten the members of the Covenant community. Their life transcends space and time, bringing them into never-ending union with God.
4. *Faith* (*'eMUNaH*), from the verb "to believe" and related to *'eMeT* (truth), is intimately associated with the Covenant, which derives from the abundance of divine love (*HeSeD*). The gift of faith provides an insight into the mystery of life, relating everything to God's purpose. Faith supplements our human reason, providing a deeper vision of reality, and is linked with trust or confidence in God's continuing providential care (note the Latin *fides* for faith and *confidentia* for confidence).

The human response to the gift of life within the Covenant and to the gift of faith is twofold. First, the person accepts the gift (*"Amen"* means ratification and con-

firmation of what has preceded in a prayer). Then the act of faith must express itself in deed of faithfulness (*fides, fidelitas*), based on obedient adherence to the commandments.

5. *SbaLoM* (peace, in the sense of wholeness, prosperity) also has two dimensions. As a descending gift of God, peace is the concept of salvation (from the Latin *salus*), with its connotations of health and wholeness). This should be experienced *now* and especially in eternal communion with God. The human response is the acceptance of the responsibility of becoming peacemakers (Mt 5:9), in imitation of God, 'oSeH *SbaLoM* (maker of peace), as God is addressed in Jewish prayer.

The human task of becoming instruments of peace finds its origins for the covenanted community in its worship (*'aBhoDab*). Because the Hebrew term for worship also means "work," "service" (note the Latin "cult" and "cultivate"), the liturgy (*laos* and *ergon* in Greek were used for "work of the people") prepares people for effective service, both of God and neighbor (with care of the environment a component of the latter). The drama of worship must have an impact on daily life, as the prophets of Israel and Jesus frequently insisted. The formula "Ite, Missa est" (or an equivalent, such as, "Go in peace!") is not merely a dismissal; it is a commission, a sending forth in Christ's name to bear witness to the Father's love (see John 17:20-23).