



**Seton Hall University**

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**From the Selected Works of Reverend Lawrence E. Frizzell, D.Phil.**

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1995

# Mary and the Biblical Heritage



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## MARY AND THE BIBLICAL HERITAGE

*Lawrence E. Frizzell\**

Throughout the ages, the Church and her teachers have often acknowledged that the fourfold Gospel offers only a limited number of passages that feature the Mother of Jesus. Undaunted, the great doctors of the early Church and the theologians of the Middle Ages found abundant resources for their meditation concerning Mary in the Jewish Scriptures and literature related to the New Testament. The theological premise that God is the principal author of the entire Bible led them to find hints and images of the Messiah everywhere. Recognizing that the link of Jesus to the people of Israel is Mary, his Mother, they rejoiced to find that her coming and her attributes are virtually as ubiquitous as the foreshadowings of Jesus. The lover finds reminiscences of the beloved everywhere, and these teachers and their communities were intoxicated with love, thirsting to know Jesus and his Mother more deeply.

Except for those who pray the Little Office of the Immaculate Conception with Mother Theresa's Missionaries of Charity, most Catholics seem to have forgotten the Marian interpretations of the Jewish Scriptures, or they do not consider this part of the heritage to be relevant to modern piety. Nevertheless, there may be ways to recapture these insights, to serve our need for integrating an understanding of God's plan of salvation into a biblically and liturgically grounded piety. It would, seem, however, that first we should explore the resonances of the biblical heritage and

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Jewish way of life that might cast light on aspects of Mary's life and her role in the divine plan.<sup>1</sup>

"Your attitude must be that of Christ" (Phil 2:4). Because the Gospel is rooted in the Jewish culture, all who wish to imitate the Master should be familiar with this privileged vehicle as the context chosen for divine revelation. Of course, the Bible itself contains not only the high points of this way of life but also sharp critiques of the abuses and aberrations that could mar its ideals. Like the prophets of earlier times, Jesus challenged his listeners—and all generations of his disciples—to submit all aspects of the human order to the penetrating scrutiny of the divine plan. The Christian community and its members must be strangers to the culture in which they were raised and wherein they live so that its strengths and weaknesses can be evaluated. The Church can be at home in every age and culture while judging it in the light of the biblical vision, which calls for us to be faithful to a higher calling. Thus Christians are bi-cultural, able to remove themselves from their immediate life-setting by recognizing the manner in which it responds to the Gospel message. Refreshing our memory concerning the patterns of piety in the Jewish home and larger community will help us to model our lives on the examples of Jesus and his Mother.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Recent studies on the relationship of Mary to the Jewish people include the extensive work of the Servite Father Aristide Serra and the proceedings of a conference sponsored by the Marianum in Rome: "Maria nell'ebraismo e nell'Islam oggi" (Oct. 7-9, 1986); the papers, in an abbreviated form, on "Mary the Jewess" are published in SIDIC 20 (no. 2-1987). David Flusser has an evocative essay "Mary and Israel" in *Mary: Images of the Mother of Jesus in Jewish and Christian Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986). Michael O'Carroll makes some interesting points in the entry "The Jews" in his *Theotokes: A Theological Encyclopedia of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1983), 197-198. The special issue "Mary—Woman of the Mediterranean" in *Biblical Theological Bulletin* 20, 2 (Summer 1990) has an approach that brings results quite different from this present study. For full-length studies with careful attention to the biblical text, see Bertrand Buby, *Mary of Galilee, Volume I: Mary in the New Testament* (New York: Alba House, 1994) and Beverly Gaventa, *Mary: Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus* (University of South Carolina Press, 1995). A review of biblical models and texts referring to Mary in Christian piety is offered by Bertrand Buby in *Mary of Galilee, Volume II: Woman of Israel—Daughter of Zion* (New York: Alba House, 1995).

<sup>2</sup>See John M. Oesterreicher, "Piety and Prayer in the Jewish Home," *Worship* 27 (1953): 540-549.

## I. MARY IN THE DOCUMENTS OF THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

To begin discussion of the theme "Mary and Biblical Culture" we will review the teachings of the Second Vatican Council and its use of the Sacred Scriptures. The Council Fathers wanted to explain Mary's place in the divine plan and to foster devotion to her. "Should she be treated as a figure apart, as it were in her own right, with all the risk of isolation that would involve, or in a context which alone could bring out her importance in the work of redemption and therefore in the Church's devotion?"<sup>3</sup> Opting to place the Council's discussion of Mary in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen gentium*), which emphasized the title "People of God,"<sup>4</sup> the Fathers provided a basis for relating Mary to the Scriptures in a very fruitful way.

Detailed exegesis of given passages of the Jewish Scriptures involves searching for the meaning intended by the human author (Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei verbum*, 12). This message has a lasting value and should be probed so that we may have hope (*DV*, 14) and insights into principles that may help us to deal with modern problems. However, in Christian faith we believe that another level of understanding is plumbed when the entire message is examined. "The economy of the Old Testament was deliberately so oriented that it should prepare for and declare in prophecy the coming of Christ . . . and should indicate it by means of different types" (cf. 1 Cor 10:11) (*DV*, 5). In the liturgy the faithful experience to the highest degree the benefits of "that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the sacred Scriptures" (*DV*, 11). These principles help us to appreciate the review of the biblical message concerning Mary in *Lumen gentium*, 55. In describing the bond of the Church to the Jew-

<sup>3</sup>Otto Semmelroth, "The Role of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, in the Mystery of Christ and the Church," in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (2 vols.; New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), 1:285-186.

<sup>4</sup>See John Russell, "People of God According to the Second Vatican Council," in *People of God*, ed. Lawrence Frizzell (N. Richland, TX: BIBAL Press, forthcoming).

ish people, the Declaration on Non-Christian Religions (*Nos- tra aetate*) noted from Romans 9:4-5 that Christ descended from the patriarchs, "son of the virgin Mary" (NA, 4). The Jewishness of Mary, mentioned more obliquely than that of the apostles and many of the early disciples, is a topic that merits further exploration. Perhaps the Council Fathers included this as one of "those questions which the work of theologians has not yet fully clarified" (LG, 54). In this brief study we will consider 1) Jewish family life and 2) Mary and the Jewish practices of prayer.

## II. JEWISH FAMILY LIFE: PRAYER AND SERVICE

### A. *Corporate Person*

From early stages of Israel's existence, the stark realities of a rugged terrain and often oppressive climate led people to value solidarity. The individual could not survive long in the wilderness, as Miriam learned after she challenged the authority of Moses (Nm 12:1-15). A model of interdependence among individuals within the family and larger clan is much more realistic for the people of Israel than that of independence and a sense of self-sufficiency. This experience constituted an aspect of the background for Israel's understanding of the bilateral covenant that resulted from God's creative call. The dynamic interplay between individual and community with mutual responsibilities in the social order has led scholars to label the community as a "corporate person."<sup>5</sup> Certainly, this concept could lead to abuses, especially clear in the prophetic critique against those who blamed King Manasseh and his generation for the woes of the Exile (Jer 31:29-30; Ez 18:1-32). The individual's membership in communities (such as family, clan and nation) must not seem to obliterate a sense of personal responsibility for decisions and actions. Although external influences may modify the person's behavior, people in each generation are challenged to examine their conscience regarding idolatry, justice and

<sup>5</sup>H. Wheeler Robinson, *Corporate Personality in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964).

the content of other commandments. The Lucan infancy narrative portrays Mary as responsible and responsive to the divine presence in her life (Lk 1:38) and acutely aware of her bond to the people of Israel in her own generation and back to Abraham and Sarah (Lk 1:37, 54-55).

### *B. Siblings of Jesus?*

The provocative references in the Synoptic Gospels to brothers and sisters of the Master have been subjected to critical analysis in recent works on "the historical Jesus." The use of the tools of critical research, with a conscious effort to avoid eisegesis reflecting doctrinal positions, has led John P. Meier to postulate that the view of the fourth-century Roman layman Helvidius is more probable than the opinion of Epiphanius or Jerome.<sup>6</sup> As you may recall, Helvidius declared that Joseph and Mary had other children after Jesus was born; Epiphanius recorded the tradition that Joseph had children by a previous marriage, whereas Jerome held the opinion that the extended family was so closely knit that cousins were called "brothers and sisters." Richard Bauckham, a scholar who declares that he has no vested interest in the doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity, effectively rebuts Meier's position in favor of the theory of Epiphanius.<sup>7</sup> Only this view is recorded in extant Christian literature until Tertullian (late-second to early-third century). Bauckham suggests that the Syrian Christian tradition represented by the Protevangelium of James, the Gospel of Peter and the Infancy Gospel of Thomas may have historical value. Mark records that in Nazareth Jesus was known as "the carpenter, the Son of Mary . . ." (Mk 6:3). Bauckham suggests that perhaps this designation was used locally because it distinguished Jesus from the children of Joseph by his first wife.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup>John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 1991); also, his "The Brothers and Sisters of Jesus: An Ecumenical Perspective," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 54 (1992):1-28.

<sup>7</sup>Richard Bauckham, "The Brothers and Sisters of Jesus: An Epiphanian Response to John P. Meier," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 54 (1994):686-700.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 696 and 699.

I would add another point. The words of Jesus crucified to his Mother and the Beloved Disciple (Jn 19:25-27) undoubtedly have profound theological and spiritual resonances. However, these need not exclude the practical concern of a devoted son who would not be able to care for his mother in her old age. If Mary had other surviving children, all younger than Jesus, one of them should have taken this responsibility. Unless one takes the Beloved Disciple to be merely a fictional symbol of the typical Christian, a practical concern can well be part of the message related by the Fourth Evangelist. This episode offers support to the teaching that Mary did not have other children.<sup>9</sup>

### *C. Temple and Commandments*

As the Lucan infancy narrative illustrates, the center of focus for Jewish life at the time of Jesus was the Temple, the place of God's dwelling with Israel and the unique setting for sacrificial worship. From early times, the leaders of the community were very concerned about the worthy response of all members to the challenge of the commandments (see the examination of conscience in Pss 15; 24:3-6). Ritual purity laws prepared priests and people for worship; tithing and dietary laws, as well as rules governing marriage, touched the fabric of their everyday lives. As devout and educated laymen, the Pharisees held that the entire people of Israel constituted "a kingdom of priests, a holy nation" (Ex 19:6). To what extent did their interpretation of the commandments, which extended the ideals of priestly holiness and worship into the synagogue and home, penetrate into village life at Nazareth? Even if the Jews in that part of Galilee were unaware of the entire Pharisaic synthesis, they did know the Mosaic commandments and were trying to live according to their demands.

<sup>9</sup>See Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (2 vols.; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966-70), 2:923, for a discussion of the patristic use of this suggestion. On p. 906, Brown notes that perhaps Salome (Mk 15:40) is Mary's sister and the mother of Zebedee's sons. Then, if John were the Beloved Disciple he would be the cousin of Jesus.

The patterns governing their lives looked especially to Temple-worship, with its implications for daily rhythms of prayer in synagogue and home; food laws, with the farmer's responsibility to tithe before selling his produce; and the commandments governing marriage.<sup>10</sup> These three areas were related intimately in the Pharisaic vision, which might be sketched as follows:

Place:	Temple	field-kitchen	home
Agents:	priest-people	farmer-homemaker	husband-wife
Focus:	altar	table	bed

Would the people of Nazareth grasp that the preparation of food (with its emphasis on the responsibility of farmer and housewife) enabled those partaking of a meal to experience God's presence? If *they* did not express the experience, Luke certainly understood the spiritual significance of a meal (e.g., Lk 14:1-24; 22:1-20; 24:13-35). The prophets Hosea (ch. 1-3), Jeremiah (2:1; 3:10) and Ezekiel (16:1-63) stressed that marriage is a paradigm in the human order that provides a basis for their teaching about the covenant between God and his people. People attuned to this aspect of the biblical vision would have a basis for respecting the laws of marriage so that they would reflect the covenant between God and Israel. The laws of sabbath and feasts would point toward Jerusalem and the Temple, to which they would turn in prayer at the three moments of sacrifice (see Dn 6:11). Thus Luke begins and ends his version of the Gospel in the Temple and remarks that, when Jesus approached the time "when he was to be taken from this world, he firmly resolved to proceed toward Jerusalem" (Lk 9:51).

From this model one can note how the Temple can symbolize the family and the individual person as the place of divine indwelling. This link may be noted already in the Torah: the

<sup>10</sup>See Mary Douglas in an appendix to Jacob Neusner, *The Idea of Purity in Judaism* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973, 137-142. The diagram, which is based on her work, is my own.



tabernacle and all its accoutrements are constructed "according to the pattern (*betabhnith*) that I will now show to you" (Ex 25:9, 40), and the human being is made in the divine image and likeness (*beselem udemuth*) as male and female (Gn 1:26).<sup>11</sup> The evocations of "Daughter Zion" and the "Ark of the Covenant," which derive from Luke's use of the biblical heritage to describe Mary, are consonant with the parallel between the Tabernacle/Temple and the community of God's people, those persons who belong to it (see 1 Cor 3:9-17; 6:12-20 for Paul's thought, which may well have been shared by Luke).<sup>12</sup>

As Luke introduced a new stage in the divine plan, he very appropriately described the Temple at the time of evening sacrifice (Lk 1:8-22). The revelation to Zechariah concerning the mission of John the Baptist "to prepare for the Lord a people well-disposed" (Lk 1:17) is juxtaposed to the annunciation of the Incarnation of Christ, who "will rule over the house of Jacob forever . . ." (Lk 1:33). The surprise that a greater revelation would come to a young woman in a little-known town is consistent with earlier examples of the poor and obscure being vehicles of a divine message and redemption. For example, David was the youngest and most unlikely candidate among Jesse's sons for royal anointing by Samuel (1 Sm 16:5-13); both Jacob and his father Isaac were also younger sons and therefore not favored by human standards to lead the incipient community of the chosen people. The passages quoted about the vocation of John and Jesus stress their mission to the community, for whose wellbeing they are responsible. Luke shows that Mary is the humble maidservant of the Lord (Lk 1:38), manifested by her service of neighbor when she visits Elizabeth (Lk 1:39-56). As with the prophets in ancient Israel, the vocation of Mary brings a kind

<sup>11</sup>Peter J. Kearny, "Creation and Liturgy: The P Redaction of Ex 25-40," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 89 (1977):375-386.

<sup>12</sup>See Norman Habel, "Form and Significance of Call Narratives," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 77 (1965):297-323, and G. Meagher, "The Prophetic Cell Narrative," *Irish Th Q* 39 (1972):164-177. See my essay, "Paul the Pharisee," in *Jewish-Christian Encounters over the Centuries: Symbiosis, Prejudice, Holocaust, Dialogue*, ed. by Marvin Perry and Frederick M. Schweitzer (New York: Peter Lang, 1994).

of profound personal experience that might lead some to forsake "the world." However, the biblical sense of solidarity with God's people impels such favored individuals into a mission of service. The contemplative union with God in a "prophetic call" does not distract the individual from the higher experience of a community worshipping God through sacrificial offering and communion.

Besides these concerns, three other observances related to the Torah demanded the special attention of the wife in the Jewish home. Failure to keep them was understood as bringing disaster, reminiscent of the penalty for Eve's sin (Gn 3:16). "For three transgressions do women die in childbirth: for heedlessness regarding the laws of the menstruant (*niddah*, Lv 20:18 and 15:28), of the dough offering (*ballah*, Nm 15:17-21) and the lighting of the lamp (*ner*) on the sabbath" (Mishnah Shabbat II:6).<sup>13</sup> By the sweat of his brow (Gn 3:15) the husband provides the food needed by the family. As the wife prepares the bread, she sets aside some for an offering. She shares responsibility for the sanctity of the marriage bed and greets the sabbath by celebrating the divine gift of light. Even if there were no exercise of the right to marital privileges, as in the home of Joseph and Mary, she would still observe the commandments regarding menstruation. If the practice in Nazareth was close to the Pharisaic norm, Joseph would ask the family when darkness fell on the eve of the sabbath: "Have you tithed? . . . Light the Lamp" (M. Shabbat II:7). Thus would they collaborate in keeping the commandments at home, as they had done in Jerusalem (Lk 2:22-24), as Zechariah and Elizabeth had done (Lk 1:6).

#### *D. Pilgrimage*

Spontaneously, people of every culture look upon human life as a journey. Many will focus on a specific goal toward which they move with a sense of commitment, which poses limitations and calls for sacrifices. In many spiritual traditions people experience life as a pilgrimage, a journey with others towards a sacred goal, intimately associated with the very purpose of life.

<sup>13</sup>See Asher Finkel, "Women in the Biblical Tradition," *Journal of Dharma* 13 (1988):5-14.

The practice of pilgrimage in several major religious traditions includes elements that transcend specific cultures. These components of a typical pilgrimage include: 1) separation from home and occupation, often marked by a ceremony; 2) a goal which is sacred and clear to the pilgrims; 3) a purpose for the journey, such as fulfillment of a spiritual duty, forgiveness of sin, purification for a special task, and so forth; 4) the possibility of hardships, trials and dangers along the way, which make failure a real possibility.<sup>14</sup>

In the infancy narrative, Luke makes explicit reference to pilgrimage (Lk 2:22, 41-42), and the journey of Jesus toward Jerusalem is described as a pilgrimage which draws an ever-increasing crowd of disciples (Lk 9:51-19:40). In the context of pilgrimage Mary and Joseph learn that pain and separation must be expected (Lk 2:34-35, 43-50), precisely in the child's growth to maturity and to fulfillment of his mission related to the Temple and its sacrifices. Later, Jesus would call his disciples to renounce the joys and duties of family life and daily occupation to follow him. Pilgrims appear to have abstained from sexual relations during pilgrimage, just as the Israelites arriving at Mount Sinai were instructed to prepare by abstinence for divine revelation (Ex 19:15). It is from this context that Jesus would demand celibacy in the service of the Kingdom (Mt 19:10-12; Lk 18:29-30), the goal which is analogous to the holy city, Jerusalem, where God reveals divine mysteries and enters into communion with his people. The coming of the Kingdom implies the manifestation of God's majestic power and goodness in bringing healing and order into the world. Forgiveness of sin is part of the necessary preparation for the gift of new life and peace. As Joseph and Mary learned, any journey included inconvenience (Lk 2:7) and possible dangers (see Mt 2:13-15); the pilgrims to Jerusalem might even face religiously motivated hostility (Lk 9:52-56).<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup>See my article, "Pilgrimage: A Study of the Biblical Experience," *Jeevadbara* 71 (1982):358-367.

<sup>15</sup>The mission sermon of Jesus (Mt. 10:1-42; Lk 9:1-6, 10:1-16) contains several elements that are best explained by reference to pilgrimage. I owe this insight to my colleague, Asher Finkel.

Priests in service at the Temple were required to abstain from the marital relationship (see Lk 1:23-25), as were soldiers in the battlefield or military camp (2 Sm 11:6-13). Those dedicated to prayer and study at Qumran practiced celibacy, but not for ascetical reasons. Rather, as priests in God's service and as soldiers in the army of the sons of light, they stood in readiness for the moment when God would send Michael and the heavenly army against the sons of darkness (1QM VII:1-5). Among the *Therapeutae* described by Philo of Alexandria (*De vita contemplativa*),<sup>16</sup> Jewish women lived as virgins dedicated to God; but theirs was an esoteric group, and, like the men of Qumran, they had little influence on other Jewish communities. However, there was a tradition that Moses abstained from sexual relations with his wife after the Sinai revelation. Those in close communion with God in the Temple continued the temporary abstinence demanded at Sinai (Ex 19:15). These precedents would make the celibacy of Jesus and Mary meaningful to the early Christians of Jewish background. The womb that bore Jesus was consecrated, like the tabernacle, in a unique way. The message which provided Joseph's understanding of the virgin birth of Jesus affected his relationship with Mary (Mt 1:20-23).<sup>17</sup> He is portrayed as one aware of her unique vocation in the divine plan, so the Jewish tradition could well reinforce a new insight into his marriage. To what extent could Temple symbolism be applied to Mary by one who knew her secret? Since the people of Israel, long before Qumran, seem to be designated as a spiritual Temple (Ps 114:2), it is not beyond plausibility that a deeply spiritual man could arrive at the conclusion that abstinence was now demanded because of God's plan for Mary.

<sup>16</sup>See David Winston, *Philo of Alexandria: The Contemplative Life, The Giants and Selections* (New York: Paulist, 1981).

<sup>17</sup>The text of Mt 1:25 cannot be taken as a statement favoring sexual relations between Joseph and Mary. "At times, in both Hebrew (*ad*) and Greek (*heos hou*) the conjunction we translate as 'until' may not imply that any change takes place after the event mentioned in the 'until' clause occurs" (Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 321).

### III. MARY AND THE JEWISH PRACTICES OF PRAYER

By the first century, the local synagogue was each town's center for prayer and learning. The Torah was proclaimed on the sabbath over a three-year cycle, with a reading (*Haftarah*) from "the Prophets" (Joshua to Malachi) selected to illustrate a facet of the Torah text. Did Mary learn to read and write? The pictures of Anna teaching her daughter are correct about a mother sharing essential elements of what were perceived as the feminine arts and crafts. Was reading included? Quite probably a *beth-hasepher* ("house of the book") was attached to the synagogue of Nazareth.<sup>18</sup> Did little girls have the privilege of such elementary education? Quite possibly Mary learned to read. Although women probably were seated separately from men during the synagogue services, they could have learned the prayers and listened attentively to the readings from the Sacred Scriptures. Like the men they would have been grateful for the work of the *meturgamen*, who gave a running translation from Hebrew into Aramaic. This would include elements of interpretation, especially with regard to obscure or theologically challenging passages. The homily would weave themes from the Torah and Prophets together, probably with verses from the Writings that would be pertinent to the preacher's purpose.<sup>19</sup> The application of the given passages to the needs of the congregation was the main purpose of the homily. Thus, people expected to discover ways in which God's Word was to have an impact on their lives. There is no reason to question that Mary was present in the synagogue when Jesus read from Isaiah 61. Would she not have reflected on such passages already, wondering about their Messianic implications? In many a pious home, the parents probably discussed the sabbath readings in the family circle. Besides praying the *Shema* (Dt 6:4-9; 11:13-21 and Nm 15:37-41), some psalms, blessings before and after meals, and other daily devotions, Jewish parents would celebrate the feasts and fasts of the

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 268-278.

<sup>19</sup>Luke 24:44 indicates that Jesus drew from all three parts of the Hebrew Scriptures. See Asher Finkel, *The Pharisees and the Teacher of Nazareth* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994), on the homily.

liturgical year as well as commemorate life cycle events of family and neighbors (especially circumcision, marriage and death). Although the primary purpose of all prayer is God-centered, the powerful pedagogical impact on the members of the family would be an aspect of ongoing education.

Some scholars may ask: What did Luke know about the details of Jesus' life during the hidden years? Even if he did not have contact with witnesses and the oral tradition, he would have been certain that Jesus was circumcised on the eighth day (Gn 17:10; Lv 12:3), that he was presented in the Temple (Lv 12:2-6), and that the family partook in some way in the great pilgrimage feasts. Women were not obliged to keep any positive commandment that requires a specific time or place to be fulfilled (*Mishnah Kiddushin I:7*). Their life was centered on the home and governed by the rhythms of the body associated with the menstrual cycle. However, when circumstances allowed, women were certainly welcome to participate in the pilgrimage feasts, the Temple sacrifices and other communal experiences.

The prayers of women were preserved in the biblical text. Whether Deborah (Jgs 5:1-31) or Hannah (1 Sm 2:1-10) uttered prayers that were recorded need not concern us. The point is that Jews learned that women's prayers were worth considering as paradigms of piety. Stories preserved or written in Greek drew attention to women at prayer, especially in times of persecution (Judith in Jdt 9:1-14, 16:1-17; Esther in Est 4, c 12-30; Susannah in Dn 13:42-43; Aseneth in the romance "Joseph and Aseneth"; the mother of the seven sons in 2 Mc 7 and 4 Mc). With these precedents, and in view of the links displayed in the Magnificat (Lk 1:46-55) to the hymn attributed to Hannah, Luke's contemporaries who heard this prayer would not question its attribution to a woman, and especially to one as graced by God as Mary had been. As Joseph Fitzmyer noted, this is "a cento-like composition, a mosaic of Old Testament expressions drawn from the Septuagint."<sup>20</sup> Besides the biblical allusions noted by the com-

<sup>20</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX* (New York: Doubleday, 1981), 359. In *The Magnificat: Musicians as Biblical Interpreters* (New York: Paulist, 1995), Samuel Terrien summarizes the scholarship, pointing to a Hebrew original of this prayer (p. 1-10).

mentators, and the prayer of praise attributed to David (1 Chr 29:10-13), one might note the themes in common with the Jewish liturgy. The first benediction of the Tefillah (*Amidah*) is addressed to the God of the patriarchs, “the great, mighty, awesome God, *El Elyon* (see Gn 14:20), bestower of good (deeds of) mercy, Master (*qoneh*) of all, who remembers the devoted deeds of the Fathers and who brings a Redeemer (*go'el*) in love to their children’s children because of his name. O King, Helper, Savior and Shield. Blessed are you, O LORD, the Shield of Abraham” (see Gn 15:1; Hebrew Sira at 51:12).

Nothing in Hannah’s prayer provides a background for the first clauses of the Magnificat, nor does that text refer to Israel or to the patriarchs. The first of the Eighteen Benedictions resounds with references to the attribute of divine magnitude and magnificence. The titles Savior (*moshia'*—present participle of *yasha'*) and Shield—just before the “seal” of the blessing—crystallize the works of mercy (*hesed*) that flow from divine omnipotence from one generation to the next. The help offered to the descendants of Abraham and Sarah is given because God remembers and is mindful of his mercy. The exercise of divine power on behalf of a servant manifests the greatness of the God who revealed himself to be Abraham’s Shield and promised to protect his descendants (Gn 15:14 and 18-19).

The Magnificat moves from the personal experience of God, by way of the divine title “my Savior,” to faith in the protection that God offers to the poor, to those who acknowledge their emptiness as creatures. They will be the beneficiaries of divine omnipotence, in mercy toward them and in judgment against the arrogant and wicked. As servant, Israel remembers God’s mercy in the Passover and other great feasts, and thus the entire people offer service to God, in worship and in acts of devotion that reflect divine mercy to their fellow human beings.

This impressive prayer is Mary’s enduring challenge to the Church, who must recognize her poverty and weakness, placing all her trust in God’s capacity to rectify the evils of the world. The prayer calls for justice and right order in the world, and this faith in God’s power to transform creation can

be very disturbing. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow drew upon a medieval legend to express this:<sup>21</sup>

Robert of Sicily, brother of Pope Urbane  
 And Valmond, Emperor of Allemaine,  
 Apparelled in magnificent attire,  
 With retinue of many a knight and squire,  
 On St. John's eve, at vespers, proudly sat  
 And heard the priests chant the Magnificat.  
 And as he listened, o'er and o'er again  
 Repeated, like a burden of refrain  
 He caught the words, "Deposuit potentes  
 De sede, et exaltavit humile";  
 And slowly lifting up his kingly head  
 He to a learned clerk beside him said,  
 "What mean these words?" The clerk made answer meet,  
 "He has put down the mighty from their seat,  
 And has exalted them of low degree."  
 Thereat King Robert muttered scornfully,  
 "'T is well that such seditious words are sung  
 Only by priests and in the Latin tongue;  
 For unto priests and people be it known,  
 There is no power can push me from my throne!"  
 ("King Robert of Sicily")

The spirit of the prophets and psalmists is captured in Mary's Magnificat, a hymn that resonates well with Jewish prayer of the first century. Like the typical blessing of Jewish prayer, thanksgiving-and-praise are the framework of gratitude that is the foundation for all petitions. The compassion in the prayer for the poor and downtrodden is linked to a profound assertion of faith in the God of Israel. This comes not merely from a knowledge of the Greek Bible, but from a lived experience of Jewish faith.

<sup>21</sup>*The Poetical Works of H. W. Longfellow: Tales of a Wayside Inn* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1863), 46-53.