

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

THE MAGNIFICAT.

I.

IT has recently been argued¹ with much ingenuity by Professor Burkitt that the true interpretation of St. Luke's narrative of the Visit of Mary to Elisabeth suggests that he meant to place the hymn *Magnificat* in the mouth of Elisabeth. A few MSS. of the Latin Gospels (*a, b, l**), indeed, actually read *et ait Elisabeth* in Luke i. 46; and it has been shown that Niceta of Remesiana,² a fourth century bishop (to whom the authorship of *Te Deum* is now ascribed by many good scholars) followed this tradition, of which there are also traces in the Latin versions of Origen and Irenaeus. Full details will be found in Professor Burkitt's article, and in a brilliant essay taking the same line published in 1900 by Professor Harnack.³ But there is no doubt that an overwhelming majority of MSS., versions, and early interpreters, are on the side of the traditional *And Mary said*, with which *Magnificat* is introduced in all printed editions of St. Luke's Gospel. Nothing ought to be allowed to set this aside, except some incoherence or inconsequence in the text thus attested, of so grave a character that internal evidence might, for once, be permitted to outweigh the external and objective testimony of the MSS. The *onus probandi* lies with those who ask us to abandon MS. authority; and unless it can be shown that there is something in the hymn itself, or in the phrases in its immediate context, which forbids us to believe that St. Luke intended to represent the Virgin as

¹ *Journal of Theological Studies* for Jan. 1906, p. 220 ff.

² See A. E. Burn's edition of his Works, p. 76.

³ *Das Magnificat der Elisabeth* (*Sitz.-ber.* of the Berlin Academy, pp. 538 ff.

the speaker of it, we must continue to accept *And Mary said* as his introduction to *Magnificat*.¹ First, then, are there any tell-tale phrases in the context which prove that the reading *And Mary said* cannot be in accordance with the original writer's intention? Professor Burkitt points in reply to the words *σὺν αὐτῇ* in Luke i. 56, which, he holds, indicate that Elisabeth is to be taken as the speaker of the preceding verses. The sequence of the conversation is as follows :

i. 40. Mary greets Elisabeth.

i. 41-45. Elisabeth, being filled with the Holy Spirit, salutes Mary in the words *Blessed* (*εὐλογημένη*) *art thou among women . . . and happy* (*μακαρία*) *is she that believed, because there shall be a fulfilment of the things which were spoken to her from the Lord.*

i. 46-55. *And Mary said, Magnificat . . .*

i. 56. *And Mary abode with her about three months, and returned to her own house.*

Now it is quite true that the pronoun "her" in the last-quoted verse refers (according to the ordinary interpretation) to an antecedent (sc. Elisabeth) separated from it by a dozen verses. And it is quite probable that this awkwardness of phrase accounts for the variant reading *Elisabeth* in i. 46, as is suggested in the critical notes of Westcott and Hort. But, surely, awkwardness (or freedom) of this kind in the use of pronouns abounds in the Greek Bible. Take two or three instances :

(1) Gen. xix. 23-26: "The sun was risen upon the earth when Lot came unto Zoar. Then the Lord rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven; and He overthrew those

¹ I do not enter into the question as to whether the autograph may not have been *And she said*, no personal name being given, as Prof. Burkitt and Prof. Harnack and the Bishop of Salisbury think probable. That may be a true conjecture; but the question of interest remains, To whom did St. Luke mean to ascribe the hymn?

cities and all the Plain and all the inhabitants of the cities and that which grew upon the ground. But his wife (ἡ γυνὴ αὐτοῦ is the LXX) looked back from behind him . . .” Whose wife? Lot’s, without doubt, but the antecedent is a long way back, if purity and precision of style are demanded.

(2) Tobit xiv. 3-12: “Now he (Tobit) grew very old; and he called his son, and the six sons of his son, and said unto him . . . *here follows a long charge of eight verses* . . . And while he was saying these things, he gave up the ghost in his bed; but he was a hundred and eight and fifty years old; and he buried him magnificently.” Now the antecedent of the last “he” is Tobias, who has not been mentioned during a speech of eight verses, much longer than *Magnificat*.

(3) Acts xv. 1-2. “And certain men having come down from Judaea taught the brethren that ‘except ye be circumcised after the custom of Moses ye cannot be saved.’ And when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and questioning with them, they appointed that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders about this question”; i.e. *καί τινες κατελθόντες ἀπὸ τῆς Ἰουδαίας . . . γενομένης δὲ στάσεως, καὶ ζητήσεως οὐκ ὀλίγης τῷ Παύλῳ καὶ τῷ Βαρνάβῳ πρὸς, αὐτοὺς ἔταξαν ἀναβαίνειν Παῦλον καὶ Βαρνάβαν κτλ.* We ask what is the subject of ἔταξαν, “they appointed”? Probably it is the Christian brethren at Antioch; but it might be the men “from Judaea.” And the Western Text of Acts has actually got the reading *οἱ δὲ ἐληλυθότες ἀπὸ Ἱερουσαλὴμ παρήγγειλαν αὐτοῖς τῷ Παύλῳ καὶ Βαρνάβῳ καὶ τισιν ἄλλοις ἀναβαίνειν*. This is a case in which the awkwardness of the ordinary text seems to be responsible for the variant reading, exactly as in Luke i. 46, *Elisabeth* is read for *Mary* in a few Latin versions, owing to the distance of *αὐτῆς* from its antecedent in verse 56.

That is to say, there is no real difficulty in referring *αὐτῆς* to an antecedent a dozen verses back, when we recall the freedom in the use of pronouns throughout the Greek Bible, and remember that even in St. Luke's writings ambiguity is sometimes due to a like cause. *Αὐτῆς* is not as far removed from its antecedent as is the subject of the word "buried" in Tobit iii. 12; and the passage just quoted from the Acts shows that St. Luke's occasional awkwardness in the construction of his sentences may lead to a variant reading and the consequent misinterpretation of a pronoun. So far as *μετ' αὐτῆς* in Luke i. 56 is concerned, there is nothing to show that it does not refer to Elisabeth, who was the speaker in verses 42-45.

We have, next, to ask if there is anything in the hymn itself which is more appropriate to Elisabeth than to Mary. It is urged that, in the absence of any indication of the speaker, it might be regarded as appropriate to either, and I recognize that, modelled as it is on the Song of Hannah—a point to which I shall come back later on—most of it would be suitable in the mouth of Elisabeth. Professor Burkitt calls attention to the words of Hannah's prayer (1 Sam. i. 11), "If thou wilt look on the affliction of thine handmaid and remember me, and not forget thine handmaid," which are parallel to Luke i. 48, "He hath regarded the lowliness of his handmaiden." And it might be added that the words placed in the mouth of the barren woman in 2 Esdras ix. 45 show that *Magnificat* would be suitable enough in a case like that of Elisabeth: "It came to pass after thirty years that God heard me, thine handmaid, and looked upon my low estate and considered my trouble and gave me a son" (*exaudivit me Deus ancillae tuae et pervidit humilitatem meam*). The Greek is not extant, but it is quite clear from the Latin version that the author of 2 Esdras (who wrote about the same time as St. Luke) would

have felt that Luke i. 48a would be appropriate on the lips of Elisabeth.

This, however, does not prove that it would not be also appropriate on the lips of Mary, and I believe that there are definite indications (apart from *And Mary said* of Luke i. 46) that the Evangelist meant to assign it to her. For instance, the word *δούλη* of verse 48 (which goes back, as has been said, to Hannah's Song) is surely intended to be taken with *ἡ δούλη κυρίου* of verse 38. "Behold the handmaiden of the Lord" is all that Mary will say when her destiny is revealed to her; when she breaks out into thanksgiving she speaks of herself in the same phrase of humility.

Again, take the word *μακαριοῦσιν* in Luke i. 48: "All generations shall call me *blessed*, or *happy*." Although it is from this verse that the Church has learnt to call the Virgin *Blessed*, yet *μακαρία* need not mean more than *happy*, and (as Professor Burkitt has reminded us) is a usual word for a "*happy mother*."¹ Indeed the verse 48b of *Magnificat* is but an adaptation of Leah's thanksgiving on the birth of Asher, *μακαρία ἐγώ, ὅτι μακαρίζουσίν με πᾶσαι αἱ γυναῖκες*. The verb would be appropriate for Elisabeth; there is no doubt of it. But, again, surely St. Luke intended the use of the verb *μακαριοῦσιν* in *Magnificat* to correspond to and take up the salutation of Elisabeth to Mary in verse 45, *μακαρία ἡ πιστεύασα ὅτι ἔσται τελείωσις τοῖς λελαλημένοις αὐτῇ παρὰ κυρίου*. Elisabeth greets Mary as *blessed* (*εὐλογημένη*) and the fruit of her womb as *blessed* (*εὐλογημένος*); but she also offers her congratulations upon the *happiness* in store for her. "*Happy* is she that believed, for, etc." I think that to miss this correspondence between Luke i. 45 and Luke i. 48 is to miss something that the Evangelist intended to convey. And if the correspondence was intentional, then St. Luke meant *Magnificat*

¹ *Beata Maria*, not *benedicta*, which would be the equivalent of *εὐλογημένη* in Elisabeth's salutation, but which has not been adopted by the Church as the designation of the Virgin.

to be spoken by Mary, whether *Μαριάμ* in verse 46 was written by him or not.

Further, while Elisabeth might say (as Leah did) *μακαρίζουσίν με πᾶσαι αἱ γυναῖκες*, it would be a gross exaggeration for her to say *πᾶσαι αἱ γενεαί*. Zacharias had, indeed, been told of the son that she should bear, *πολλοὶ ἐπὶ τῇ γενέσει αὐτοῦ χαρήσονται* (i. 14); but the thankfulness of Elisabeth is not once connected with any anticipations of the future greatness of her son. She is humbly thankful that her "reproach" has been removed (i. 25; cp. i. 36); that is all. Her exultation in *vv.* 42-45 is ascribed to her recognition of the supreme blessing in store for Mary, i.e. that she should be the mother of Messiah; and to pass from this to an utterance of thanksgiving for the lesser joy of her own motherhood (as we must suppose her to do, if *Magnificat* is hers) would be inexplicable at this point of the narrative. For *Magnificat* is clearly a hymn of exultation for mercies personal to the speaker (*μακαριοῦσίν με . . . ἐποίησέν μοι μεγάλα*).

And, more generally, it would be, as it seems, to rob St. Luke's narrative of its climax, if *Magnificat* were not spoken by Mary. For in that case, she would be represented as receiving in unbroken silence the greeting and the sympathy of Elisabeth, which it was the object of her visit to elicit. Let us go through the story as it stands, and I believe we shall be impressed with its artistic completeness and its coherence.

The incident with which St. Luke connects the recitation of *Magnificat* is the visit of Mary to her kinswoman Elisabeth. Mary has learnt from a heavenly messenger of the destiny in store for her; and she goes in haste (*μετὰ σπουδῆς*)—how natural the story is!—to tell of her perplexity and her trembling hope to an older woman, who will sympathize and understand, for she, too, is soon to be a mother. And her confidence is not misplaced. What-

ever others may think, Elisabeth greets her as *Blessed* (εὐλογημένη, favoured by God), and with quick intuition—with a Divine inspiration of sympathy—pours out impassioned words of joy and of reverent congratulation for the young Maiden who is to realize at last the dream of every Jewish woman of the house of David, by becoming the Mother of the national Deliverer, the long-looked-for Messiah. And then the gladness of being understood,¹ of being believed, breaks out into humble thanksgiving to GOD who has counted her worthy of so great a destiny. “And Mary said, *Magnificat*.” To place *Magnificat* in the mouth of Elisabeth at this point would be prosaic indeed.

II.

It has sometimes been thought that the Evangelist intends to represent the Virgin as giving utterance to this hymn of praise in a moment of prophetic or poetic inspiration, and, as it were, *extempore*. Such a view is, no doubt, possible, although it is not easy to understand how an extemporaneous thanksgiving could be afterwards recalled to memory and actually recorded. In moments of deep emotion, men and women are apt to express themselves more eloquently and more poetically than is their wont in the ordinary affairs of life.² The warnings and promises of the prophets are as often clothed in the language of poetry as in the language of prose; and, indeed, in Hebrew it is not easy to distinguish between impassioned prose and poetry. We may grant that it is possible—although, surely, it is improbable—that *Magnificat* was the spontaneous outpouring of a thankful heart, stirred to its depths by a marvellous experience of God’s favour. But, at any rate, St. Luke does not say that it was so. His statement is simply that the Hymn which we call *Magnificat* was Mary’s response to the greeting of Elisabeth; he does

¹ This is well brought out by Lange, *The Life of Christ*, vol. i. p. 368 ff. Engl. (Transl.). ² Cp. 1 Cor. xiv. for prophetic utterances of this kind.

not say that it was an original composition of her own, or used by her for the first time.

We must examine the piece to see whether it is like an *extempore* utterance or whether, like the best lyric poetry, it is constructed with due regard to rhythm and balance. And when we thus examine it, we can hardly doubt that the words of Mary's thanksgiving are the words of an existing hymn, which she applied—perhaps with the modification of a word here and there—to her own circumstances and her own destiny. The hymn is, in part, appropriate to others beside the Blessed Virgin, and thus most of it would not be out of place if spoken by Elisabeth, as some persons hold it was intended by St. Luke to be.

I am not, however, convinced by Dr. Harnack's reasoning that the hymn is St. Luke's own composition; for I see little to favour such a thought. It is not Luke's habit to invent speeches for the persons who come into his narrative; the speeches in the Acts are not like the speeches in Thucydides, which are obviously "made up" by the historian. St. Luke, on the other hand, ascribes the recitation of hymns of thanksgiving to Mary, to Zacharias, to Simeon, because he believes that they uttered them, not that he may add an artistic touch to his narrative. It is worth observing that he places no such hymn in the mouth of Anna the aged prophetess, although he tells that she, like Simeon, "gave thanks to God, and spake of Him to all them that were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem."¹ But St. Luke gives no hymn here; he only gives us hymns where he has learnt that they were actually used. And those that he has preserved for us have none of the characteristic marks of his own style; neither in language nor in thought are they in the least like the rest of his Gospel. They are no inventions or compositions of his.

The striking similarity of *Magnificat* to the Song of

¹ Luke ii. 38.

Hannah in 1 Samuel has, of course, been noticed by every careful reader. In both we have as the theme the reversal of the world's judgements, the overthrow of the mighty and of kingdoms, the satisfaction of the Hungry, the discomfiture of the Rich. The speaker in both cases is an expectant Mother who exults in the Divine Mercy which has been shown her, although one need not stay to emphasize the difference between the two cases. But the similarity in structure between the two Songs is so close as to suggest—what is in itself in no way improbable—that both are hymns in which Jewish women were accustomed to pour out their heart's thanksgiving. No race has ever thought more of the dignity and blessedness of Motherhood than did the Jewish race, and the eager expectation of Messiah, which was the root of all their national hopes, would be most keenly felt by the young mothers of Israel. That we may see how intensely Jewish is the Hymn of the Virgin it is only necessary to set down some parallels from the Old Testament to its beautiful phrases. These will show that there is no single phrase which was not familiar to every pious Jew.

- i. 46. *My heart rejoiceth in the Lord* is the opening phrase of the Song of Hannah ;¹ *I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation* is the climax of the prayer of Habakkuk.²
48. *If Thou wilt look on the affliction of thine handmaid*³ was the prayer which Hannah prayed in her grief ; *the Lord hath respect unto the lowly* is the assurance of a Psalmist.⁴

*Happy am I, for the daughters will call me happy (or blessed)*⁵ is Leah's exclamation of joy in the birth of a son, who though not her's would be counted as of her household.

¹ 1 Sam. ii. 1. ² Hab. iii. 18 ; Ps. xxxv. 9 ; Isa. xxv. 9, lxi. 10.

³ 1 Sam. i. 11. ⁴ Ps. cxxxviii. 6. ⁵ Gen. xxx. 13.

49. *The Lord hath done great things for us*¹ is the cry of one Psalmist ; *Holy and reverend is His Name*² is the call to adoration by another ;
50. *The mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear Him*³ is the assurance of yet another.
51. *Put on strength, O arm of the Lord*⁴ is a prophet's prayer. *Thou hast humbled the proud as one that is wounded : Thou hast scattered thine enemies with the arm of Thy strength*⁵ is a verse from the Greek version of the 89th Psalm.
52. *He poureth contempt upon princes :*⁶ *He overthroweth the mighty :*⁷ *He setteth up on high those that be low ;*⁸ these are phrases from the Book of Job.
53. *He filleth the hungry soul with goodness*⁹ is from the Psalter ; *The Lord maketh poor and maketh rich ; He bringeth low, He also lifteth up*¹⁰ is, again, from the Song of Hannah.
54. *He hath remembered His mercy and His faithfulness towards the house of Israel* is from the 98th Psalm¹¹ ; *Thou wilt perform the truth to Jacob and the mercy to Abraham which Thou hast sworn unto our fathers from the days of old*¹² is from the prophet Micah.

It is quite clear that *Magnificat* is a *cento* from the Old Testament. There is no distinctly Christian phrase in it, although every phrase is suggestive of a Christian meaning. Other parallels have been found to its language in the Sacred Songs of the Jews, gathered in the remarkable

¹ Ps. cxxvi. 3. ² Ps. cxi. 9 ; cp. Isa. lvii. 15.

³ Ps. ciii. 17. ⁴ Isa. li. 9. ⁵ Ps. lxxxix. 10. ⁶ Job xii. 21.

⁷ Job xii. 19 ; cp. Eccus. x. 14. ⁸ Job v. 11. ⁹ Ps. cvii. 9.

¹⁰ 1 Sam. ii. 7. ¹¹ Ps. xcvi. 3 ; cp. Isa. xli. 8. ¹² Mic. vii. 20.

collection which was called the Psalter of Solomon.¹ And Dr. Chase has suggested parallels from the ancient Prayers of the Synagogue.² That is not surprising, for all alike have their roots in the Old Testament. The Advent Canticles of the Christian Church are the last notes of Hebrew song; they mark the moment of transition from Old Testament to New Testament, from the Law to the Gospel, from the Promises of Hope to their Consummation in Grace.

III.

But it is time to analyse the Hymn itself, and to seek to discover its leading thoughts. Hebrew poetry—and whether *Magnificat* was originally written in Hebrew or not,³ it is constructed after the model of a Hebrew Psalm—was marked by attention to rhythm and the balance and parallelism of clauses, and not by rhyme or what we call metre. Now the balance of repetition of clauses in *Magnificat* is plain enough. *My soul doth magnify the Lord—My spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour*, the second clause repeating the thought of the first, of thanksgiving to Jehovah, the Saviour of Israel, whom Mary takes for her own. “GOD, my Saviour” would be referred by a Christian to our Lord; and we cannot tell with what joyful premonitions of the future Mary may have used it; but the phrase is frequent in the Psalter of Solomon, and generally is used in connexion with mercies shown by Jehovah to the nation. Then comes a single line, giving the reason of the rejoicing:

*For He hath had respect to the lowliness of His hand-
maiden.*

The strain of joy rises higher:

¹ See Ryle and James, *The Psalms of Solomon*, p. xci.

² Chase, *The Lord's Prayer in the Early Church*, p. 147.

³ That *Magnificat* seems to reproduce the language of the LXX does not determine the matter, for the Greek translator (if the hymn be a translation) would naturally use the LXX, as we see in the Psalms of Solomon.

All generations shall call me happy.

The Mighty One hath done great things to me.

Holy is His Name.

And then at the end of the first stanza we have the keynote of *Magnificat*:

His MERCY is on them that fear Him throughout all generations.

This is the master thought; to this all leads up, and the thought is repeated, with glowing memories of the past, at the end of the second stanza:

He hath holpen Israel His servant . . .

that He might remember MERCY to Abraham and his seed for ever.

MERCY is the keyword. In the first stanza the singer praises God for His overwhelming Mercy which rests upon her, as it will upon all who fear Him, for ever. She sings of personal mercies, and that with no loud protestations, but with a humble thanksgiving which is sacred indeed. And then, in the second stanza, the hymn bursts out uncontrolably—as it seems—into a paeon of national hope; the usurping overlords of Palestine are scattered; the mighty Roman governors are humbled; the downtrodden Jew has come to his own again. And all this because of the Divine Mercy which has never failed throughout the years of oppression—the Mercy promised in the far off past.

Mercy is the keyword of *Magnificat*. And as in so many of the Psalms, the devotion which begins with thoughts of self and of God's mercy to the individual issues in a larger and more generous thanksgiving for His mercy to the nation and to the Church which He has taken for His own.

The meaning of *Magnificat* is missed if it is sung to music which does not recognize this structure. It is in two stanzas, and both lead up to the same thought—of mercy. In the first stanza the individual is rejoicing in patient humility;

this is not to be sung with the crash of a full chorus. The second stanza breaks out into a triumphant *fortissimo* of praise ; and there is no good reason in the thoughts which it suggests for the habit which musical composers often have of ending with a faint and timid rehearsal of the promise to Abraham and his seed.¹

IV.

The Song of the Blessed Virgin Mary is a Song of the Christian Church. It has been sung in daily public worship for nearly 1,400 years, and the place which it occupies in the service of Evensong, between the reading of the Old Testament and New Testament, has a special appropriateness as we recall its occasion and its meaning. The Virgin looked back in thankfulness upon the promises to ancient Israel, and looked forward in trembling hope to the fulfilment which they were to receive. We too, as we hear the Old Testament read, feel that it is incomplete without the New Testament. It points onward to the Christ and His Kingdom. And of this *Magnificat* speaks. The Decline and Fall of the Empires of which the Hebrew prophets tell, are but illustrations and instances of that perpetual reversal of the world's judgements by God, which is so emphatically set forth in the Sermon on the Mount.

*He hath scattered the proud. . . . Blessed are the poor
in spirit.*

¹ The difference in thought between *Magnificat* and *Cantate Domino*, which is the alternative Canticle for Evensong in the services of the Church of England, is chiefly to be seen in this twofold structure of *Magnificat*, personal rejoicing first—national afterwards. In *Cantate Domino* (the 98th Psalm), we have in the first four verses most of the characteristic expressions of *Magnificat* ; that, of course, is the reason why it was selected as an alternative. "The Lord hath *done marvellous things . . . with His holy arm . . . He hath declared His salvation . . . He hath remembered His mercy towards the house of Israel.*" But this is all *fortissimo*, and the more subdued rejoicing of a thankful heart for personal mercies finds no place in its jubilant phrases.

He hath exalted the humble and meek. . . . Blessed are the meek.

He hath filled the hungry. . . . Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled.

The Beatitudes [re-echo the phrases of *Magnificat*, and fill them with a more spiritual meaning. The contrast between the proud and the humble is the perpetual theme of both Old Testament and New Testament; even as the spirit which can see God's mercy in His judgements no less than in His favours is in both commended as blessed. And as *Magnificat*, with its hopes of securing salvation, its faith in the Divine *mercy*, is the daily hymn of the Church, so the daily prayer of the Church [for each soul is, *O Lord, shew Thy mercy upon us: And grant us Thy salvation.*

J. H. BERNARD.

LUCAN *VERSUS* JOHANNINE CHRONOLOGY.

THE only New Testament writer who confronts his task as a historian, aiming to present the origins of Christianity in their proper sequence and their relation to the larger world-order, is St. Luke. It is natural that we should find several direct attempts in his two-fold treatise to correlate the events narrated with secular history, besides the occasional undesigned points of contact. These, however, do not exactly bear out Professor Ramsay's classification of St. Luke as a historian along with Tacitus and Thucydides. In spite of some very laboured defences, it is the general verdict of impartial historical criticism that in identifying the census of Luke ii. 1 with that of Quirinius (*v.* 2), taken at the deposition of Archelaus in A.D. 6, and again referred to in Acts v. 37, he has shown himself capable of decided con-