

§ 007

THE MAGNIFICAT OF MARY

⁴⁶ And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸ for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; ⁴⁹ for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. ⁵⁰ And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. ⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; ⁵² he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; ⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. ⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, ⁵⁵ as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever." ⁵⁶ And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home. ¹

Luke 1:46-56

Introduction

1. The song of Mary (called the *Magnificat* from its opening word in the Latin translation) is an outburst of praise largely in Old Testament language.
 - In particular there are several resemblances to the song of Hannah (1 Sam. 2:1–10).
 - But there is a difference in tone.
 - Hannah's song is a shout of triumph in the face of her enemies;
 - Mary's a humble contemplation of the mercies of God.
 - Ford asks whether some later poet may have composed the song and attributed it to Mary; but he thinks it more likely that Mary on her four days' journey to Elizabeth brooded over the story of Hannah and then uttered her own inspired song.²
2. This song, commonly known as the Magnificat, has several striking features.
 - a. First, it is saturated with OT concepts and phrases.

¹ *The Holy Bible: English standard version*. 2001 (Lk 1:46-56). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

² Morris, L. (1988). *Vol. 3: Luke: An introduction and commentary*. Originally published: Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press; Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1988, in series: *The Tyndale New Testament commentaries*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (92). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

- Plummer (pp. 30–31)³ cites twelve different OT passages it reflects line by line, in addition to Hannah’s prayer in 1 Samuel 2:1–10, on which the song seems to have been modeled.
- b. Second, assuming that the song is correctly attributed to Mary, it shows her deep piety and knowledge of Scripture.
 - Such familiarity with the OT was not at that time so unusual for a pious Jewess like Mary as to bar her from consideration as its author. Moreover, it reflects qualities suitable to the mother of the Lord.
 - c. Third, though it reveals a God who vindicates the downtrodden and ministers to the hungry (cf. 1 Sam 2:1–10), it also strikes a revolutionary note.
 - If Hannah spoke of the poor being raised to sit with nobles (1 Sam 2:8), Mary sees the nobles toppled from their places of power (Luke 1:52).
 - Yet Hannah’s song is not without its elements of judgment in which the hungry and those who arrogantly oppose God are routed (1 Sam 2:3, 5, 10; cf. Luke 1:51, 53).
 - Luke conveys a strong social message to us, one that is rooted in the OT and that, with cultural adaptations, is of continued meaning.
 - d. Fourth, Mary’s Magnificat markedly transcends Hannah’s song.
 - It does this through its messianic element and implies Mary’s consciousness of her own exalted role as the kingdom dawns (v. 48).
3. This song can be divided into four strophes:
 - a. verses 46–48 praise God for what he has done for Mary, a theme that continues into the first part of the next strophe;
 - b. verses 49–50 mention certain attributes of God—power, holiness, and mercy;
 - c. verses 51–53 show God’s sovereign action in reversing certain social conditions; and, finally,
 - d. verses 54–55 recall God’s mercy to Israel.⁴
 4. There is a danger in trying to _____⁵ the Magnificat.
 - These are the most revolutionary words ever spoken.
 - Through the Messiah, the mighty will be brought low; the humble, the lowly, will be exalted.

³ Plummer, Alfred. (1922). *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Luke*. ICC. 5th ed. (30-31). Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark.

⁴ Leifeld, W.L. (1984). Luke. In F.E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (F.E. Gaebelin, Ed.) (835). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

⁵ spiritualize

5. William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury, warned his missionaries to India never to read the Magnificat in public.
 - Christians were already suspect in that country and they were cautioned against reading verses so inflammatory.
 - Jesus, the ultimate revolutionary, completely reverses all human values.
 - What Mary was prophesying about her unborn son is terrifying to the establishment, whoever and wherever they are.
 - They cannot hear these words gladly.
 - We may attempt instead to spiritualize these verses, but deep down we all know that Jesus has come to instigate the kind of revolution we need.⁶

Commentary

1. *And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. Her song begins with an expression of _____."*⁷
 - We should not make a difference between *soul* and *spirit*, the change being nothing more than poetic parallelism, RSV misses a change of tense which may be significant: *magnifies* denotes the habitual act (Mary keeps on magnifying the Lord), but *rejoices* is better 'rejoiced' (cf. AV), where the aorist points to a special act of rejoicing, probably when the angel brought his message.
 - The word is a strong one and could be rendered 'exulted' (cf. the corresponding noun in v. 44).
 - *God my Saviour* shows that Mary recognized her need—she was a sinner like other people.⁸
2. Mary has found joy in God's action of enabling her in a miraculous way to become pregnant with the child of messianic hopes.

⁶ Larson, B., & Ogilvie, L.J. (1983). *Vol. 26: The Preacher's Commentary Series, Volume 26: Luke*. Formerly The Communicator's Commentary. The Preacher's Commentary series (38). Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Inc.

⁷ **praise**

RSV Revised Standard Version: Old Testament, 1952; New Testament, 1971.

AV Authorized (King James) Version, 1611.

⁸ Morris, L. (1988). *Vol. 3: Luke: An introduction and commentary*. Originally published: Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press; Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1988, in series: The Tyndale New Testament commentaries. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (92). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

- She recognizes here the _____⁹ of God as savior.¹⁰
3. The phrase 'God my Saviour' is familiar in the LXX, where it represents the Hebrew 'God of my salvation' (Pss. 24:5 (23:5); 25:5 (24:5); Mi. 7:7; Hab. 3:18; Sir. 51:1).
 - The nearest Old Testament parallels to the couplet as a whole are Hab. 3:18; Ps. 35:9 (34:9); 1 Sa. 2:1 (cf. Ps. Sol. 3:7; 17:3).¹¹
 4. *He has looked on the humble estate of his servant.* Some take *low [humble] estate* to signify 'humiliation'.
 - This probably goes too far, but the word certainly expresses humility, as does *handmaiden* (= 'slave-girl').
 - Goodspeed brings out the meaning with 'he has noticed his slave in her humble station'.¹²
 5. Though her language is personal ("my savior") as in verse 48a, the salvation she has in view is that for which the nation had longed (just as her *ταπείνωσις*, "afflicted state," in verse 48a is the common state of God's people and no predicament specific to Mary).
 - The development of the song makes this clear.¹³
 6. This humble state or lowliness is referred to again in 1:52.
 - It need not refer to childlessness as in 1 Sam 1:11 (or to a hypothetical vow of perpetual virginity and thus childlessness on Mary's part).
 - Rather it refers to such a low estate as described in Acts 8:33; Phil 3:21; Jas 1:10.
 7. In this verse it may refer to the low state or status in which Mary was held by the standards of this world.
 - Her child would also share this low estate, being born in a manger and of poor, insignificant parent(s).

⁹ **intervention**

¹⁰ Nolland, J. (2002). *Vol. 35A: Word Biblical Commentary: Luke 1:1-9:20*. Word Biblical Commentary (69). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

¹¹ Marshall, I.H. (1978). *The Gospel of Luke: A commentary on the Greek text*. Includes indexes. The New international Greek testament commentary (82). Exeter [Eng.: Paternoster Press.

¹² Morris, L. (1988). *Vol. 3: Luke: An introduction and commentary*. Originally published: Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press; Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1988, in series: The Tyndale New Testament commentaries. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (92). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

¹³ Nolland, J. (2002). *Vol. 35A: Word Biblical Commentary: Luke 1:1-9:20*. Word Biblical Commentary (69). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

- Yet the salvation of which Mary rejoiced also looks beyond her to the nation of Israel, as Luke 1:50–55 makes clear.¹⁴
8. From thankfulness for what God has done for her (46–49a) Mary turns to his wider activities (49b–53).
 - She dwells on three things:
 - a. his power,
 - b. his holiness and
 - c. his mercy.
 - She sees herself as insignificant, but that does not matter, for ‘the Mighty One’ (Rieu) is at work.
 9. But God is not to be thought of only in terms of power.
 - He is *holy*.
 - The *name* in antiquity was used with a fuller meaning than with us: it stood for the whole person.
 - So this verse means not simply that God’s name is a holy name and must be used reverently; it means that God _____¹⁵ a holy God.
 - Further, he is merciful.
 - In every generation *his mercy* (*mercy* occurs five times in this chapter) is certain for those who reverence him (so, rather than *fear him* in our sense of the term).¹⁶
 10. The impression left by an English translation is that Mary continues to recite God’s habitual actions.
 - But we have a series of six aorist tenses in the Greek which are most unlikely to have this meaning.
 - Mary may be looking back to specific occasions in the past when God has done the things she mentions.
 - Ford takes this view and comments. ‘Only because the mighty Lord has done mighty things is there good news to tell, only because of the past tenses which speak of God’s deeds is there a gospel to proclaim.’
 11. Or Mary may be referring to acts still future but which have begun to be realized.

¹⁴ Stein, R. H. (2001, ©1992). *Vol. 24: Luke* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; The New American Commentary (92). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

¹⁵ is

¹⁶ Morris, L. (1988). *Vol. 3: Luke: An introduction and commentary*. Originally published: Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press; Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1988, in series: The Tyndale New Testament commentaries. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (93). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

- It is perhaps more likely that she is looking forward in a spirit of prophecy and counting what God will do as so certain that it can be spoken of as accomplished (this is frequent in the Old Testament prophets).
- This section of the song tells of a complete reversal of human values.
- It is not *the proud* or *the mighty* or *the rich* who have the last word.
- Indeed, through his Messiah, God is about to overthrow all these.
- *The proud* are spoken of with reference to *the imagination of their hearts*, i.e. it is proud thoughts that are in mind and not simply arrogant actions.
- *The mighty* are on *thrones*: Mary is speaking of those actually ruling (NEB, 'monarchs'), not simply of powerful people.

12. There is a _____¹⁷ note about filling *the hungry* and sending *the rich* away *empty*.

- In the ancient world it was accepted that the rich would be well cared for.
- Poor people must expect to be hungry.
- But Mary sings of a God who is not bound by what people do.
- He turns human attitudes and orders of society upside down.¹⁸

13. *He has helped his servant Israel*. Mary now sings of God's help for his people.

- The verb *helped* is not explained, but the aorist is probably still prophetic.
 - If so Mary is thinking of the help that will come through Messiah.
- We should probably understand *as he spoke to our fathers* as a parenthesis (there is a change of construction in the Greek with *pros* before *fathers* but a simple dative with *Abraham*; it is difficult to take *fathers* as in apposition with *Abraham*).
- Mary is saying that God's action in the Messiah is not so much completely new as a _____¹⁹ of his mercy to Abraham.
- It is also in accordance with his promises to the fathers of old time.

14. The song concluded, Luke tells us that Mary's visit lasted *about three months*, after which she went home.

- He may simply be finishing this part of Mary's story before returning to Elizabeth; but it seems more likely that he means that Mary left before John was born (though Marshall thinks she probably stayed).

NEB The New English Bible: Old Testament, 1970; New Testament, 1970.

¹⁷ **revolutionary**

¹⁸ Morris, L. (1988). *Vol. 3: Luke: An introduction and commentary*. Originally published: Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press; Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1988, in series: The Tyndale New Testament commentaries. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (93). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

¹⁹ **continuation**

- There would then be much excitement and many visitors.
- Mary, in her condition, might not wish to be there for that.²⁰

Conclusion

THE STRUCTURE AND ROLE OF MARY'S SONG²¹

By means of this pause Luke is able to provide his readers with a foretaste of the salvific themes he will develop throughout Luke-Acts, while at the same time rooting that salvation squarely in God's past dealings with his people.²² Unfortunately, the role of Mary's Song as a narrative pause has led numerous interpreters to overlook the many ways it is embedded in its literary co-text:²³ (1) the use of "Lord" + "God" — 1:16, 32, 46–47;²⁴ (2) Mary "magnifies the Lord," the Lord "magnifies his mercy" — 1:46, 58;²⁵ (3) Mary rejoices—cf. 1:14, 28, 44, 48; (4) Mary identifies God as "my Savior," anticipating the concern with "salvation" elsewhere in the birth narrative—1:31, 47, 69, 77; 2:11; (5) As with Elizabeth, so with Mary, God "has looked favorably on me" — 1:25, 48; (6) Luke has repeatedly characterized Mary as a person of low social status²⁶ and now she speaks of her "lowliness" — 1:26–38, 48; (7) Mary identifies herself as "servant" — 1:38, 48; (8) "all generations will call [Mary] blessed" just as Elizabeth has done — 1:45, 48; (9) Note other common words: Mighty One/power/impossible — 1:35, 37, 49;²⁷ great — 1:15, 32, 49; holy — 1:35, 49; and semantic domains: "looked favorably," "favored one," "favor," "looked with favor," "mercy," "mercy" — 1:25, 28, 30, 48, 50, 54; and (10) "the fruit of your womb" corresponds to "Abraham and his seed" — 1:42, 55.²⁸

In these and other ways, Mary's Song pulls together threads from the surrounding narrative, casting them within the framework of a celebration of God's redemptive coming. Moreover, the Song brings to expression themes that are integral to the Lukan narrative as a whole.

²⁰ Morris, L. (1988). *Vol. 3: Luke: An introduction and commentary*. Originally published: Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press; Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1988, in series: The Tyndale New Testament commentaries. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (94). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

²¹ Green, J.B. (1997). *The Gospel of Luke*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament (98). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

²² Cf. Bemile, *Magnificat*, 134–236.

²³ So, e.g., C. F. Evans, 171; Nolland, 1:63. For the positive connection of this pericope to its co-text in Luke 1–2, see above, §2; Farris, *Hymns*, 99–102; Kaut, *Befreier und befreites Volk*, 286–93.

²⁴ "Lord" appears in vv 9, 11, 15, 16, 17, 25, 28, 32, 38, (43), 45, 46; "God" in vv 6, 8, 16, 19, 26, 30, 32, 35, 37, 47.

²⁵ Both verses employ a form of μεγαλύνω.

²⁶ See Green, "Social Status."

²⁷ That is δύναμις, ἀδυνατέω, δυνατός.

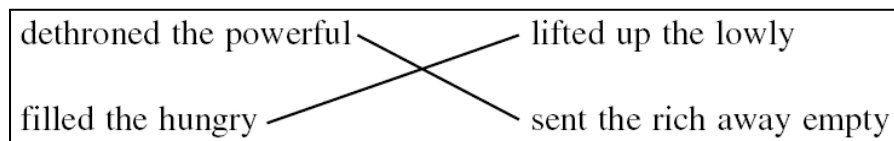
²⁸ σπέρμα; NRSV: "descendants." See Bemile, *Magnificat*, 40.

Our understanding of Mary's Song is to some degree dependent on and is certainly enhanced by an appreciation of its structure. Several aspects of the Song's design merit attention. First, it shares with declarative psalms of praise the form: word of praise + reasons for praise (cf., e.g., Psalms 8, 33, 47, 100, 135, 136).

Second, again like the poetry of the Jewish milieu, Mary's Song is marked by extensive parallelism:

- (v 46b) my soul magnifies the Lord
- (v 47) my spirit rejoices in God my Savior
- (v 48a) for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant
- (v 49a) for the Mighty One has done great things for me
- (v 51a) he has shown great strength with his arm
- (v 51b) he has scattered the proud
- (v 52a) he has brought down the powerful from their thrones
- (v 52b) [he has] lifted up the lowly
- (v 53a) he has filled the hungry with good things
- (v 53b) [he has] sent the rich away empty
- (v 55a) according to the promise he made to our ancestors
- (v 55b) to Abraham and to his descendants

The fourth and fifth are set in a chiasmic relationship to express even more dramatically the transposition they declare:



Parallelism of this nature has an important interpretive role, not least in poetic discourse. By juxtaposing related but not identical lines, the design expands the possible meaning of both lines, building the metaphorical field from which the audience will draw in order to hear and appropriate the Song.

A third aspect of the structure of Mary's Song is heard in its employment of verbs. Note that this Song describes dramatic acts of grace and power, places those active verbs repeatedly in the anterior position, presents this action in the aorist tense, and consistently locates God as the subject of these verbs. The effect of this presentation of divine activity is to underscore the decisive work of God, dramatically in operation, and unmistakably in control of human affairs, as the advent of God's peaceful, just kingdom is realized. That these verbs are *aorist* may remind us of God's prior activity on behalf of

Israel, but, in the context of Luke's narrative, has a more profound meaning.²⁹ What has happened that could possibly justify this celebration of such far-reaching, divine, decisive activity? The only possible answer in this narrative co-text is also the impetus for John's leaping in the womb and Elizabeth's profound words of greeting to Mary. Mary's Song is a response to the miraculous event confirmed by Elizabeth's words—namely, the supernatural conception of a son who would be called "Son of the Most High," whose kingship would never end, who even in the womb might be addressed as "my Lord." Mary's Song proclaims that this act of conception has set in motion the decisive, eschatological work of God.

At the same time, that these verbs sponsor images of God's salvific work that are so concrete and this-worldly, and that they are set within a larger narrative world of foreign occupation and religio-political oppression, requires that we not relegate Mary's vision of redemption to some distant future or spiritualize it as though it were not concerned with the social realities of daily existence.³⁰ The decisive event, the advent of God's kingdom grounded in the miraculous conception of Jesus, has already occurred. Hence, already in Mary's exaltation is the vision of her Song coming to fruition. And the transposition she announces, summed up in the move from lowliness/humiliation to exaltation, is characteristic of Jesus' ministry. In fact, it is the very fabric of Luke's whole narrative.³¹ Luke is very concerned with the coming of salvation *today*, in the present (cf., e.g., 4:21; 23:43), even if the consummation of God's work remains future. Hence, the revolution embodied in Mary's Song is a vision for the present.

This has caused some interpreters to locate in this hymn a call to revolution, to initiate and engage in revolutionary activity that, they perceive, will lead to a here-and-now incarnation of Mary's vision.³² On this, two observations must be held in tension. First, as we have observed, the subject of these verbs of powerful action is in every case *God*. Mary's Song is not a revolutionary call to human action but a celebration of God's action. Indeed, God's dramatic work is *against* those who would take power into their own hands, according to this Song (v 52). On the other hand, the story of God's redemption is not God's story only. Through his gracious initiative, God seeks out other actors, partners like Mary and Anna, who will share in God's work. Mary's Song cannot be defined as a

²⁹ The debate regarding the nuance intended by these aorists has often revolved around tradition-historical concerns. Thus, e.g., if Mary was in fact the originator of the Song, then these aorists are prophetic, but the view that the hymn was composed by Jewish Christians in the post-resurrection period might lead to the conclusion that they should be read as a reference to the salvific work of Christ in the past. See the discussion in R. E. Brown, "Gospel Infancy Research," 667–68; Farris, *Hymns*, 114–16. The point of our concern, however, is how they must be understood in their current literary co-text.

³⁰ Cf. Scholer, "Magnificat"; Zorilla, "Magnificat"; Boff, *Maternal Face*, 196–201.

³¹ Green, "God's Servant"; cf. Grundmann, "ταπεινός," 20.

³² See, e.g., R.M. Brown, *Unexpected News*, 81. For a different view, see Bemile, *Magnificat*, 237–53; Marshall, "Magnificat."

clarion call to revolutionary activity, then, but it does solicit from its audience outside the narrative, from us, a similar choice.

Finally, we turn to the structure of the Song as a whole, which begins by focusing on Mary and ends by focusing on Israel, thus moving from the personal to the corporate. This progression divides the Song roughly in half, with vv 46–50 taken up with God’s graciousness to Mary and vv 51–55 concerned with his mercy to Israel. Verses 50, 54–55 each function as a conclusion to their respective sections, emphasizing the breadth of God’s covenantal mercy. On the other hand, to suggest a “division” in the movement of the psalm is probably to overstate the case, for these two portions of Mary’s Song are stitched together by repeated terms and images:

<i>Mary</i>		<i>Israel</i>
v 48	“his servant”	v 54
vv 48, 50	object of favor/mercy	v 54
v 48	“lowly”	v 52
v 50	perpetuity of mercy	v 55

In addition, both sections emphasize God’s “doing” (vv 49, 51)³³ and a contrast is developed around the use of the term “mighty/powerful”³⁴ in vv 49 and 51. The effect of this parallelism is twofold. First, it demonstrates how the narrative, very much concentrated on individual Jews—Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary—thus far, actually concerns the whole nation of Israel. The portrayal of the realization of God’s aim is expanded to embrace all Israel, perhaps even all humanity.³⁵ Second, it shows the relationship of God’s favor to Mary and his larger salvific purpose: It is *by means of* his looking “with favor on the lowliness of his servant” Mary that “he has helped his servant Israel.” It is through her that God has chosen to fulfill his covenantal promise. And his having “done great things for” Mary is already a manifestation of the socio-political revolution so graphically proclaimed in vv 52–53.

³³ Both use the aorist form of ποιέω.

³⁴ Verse 49: δυνατός; v 52: δυνάστης.

³⁵ That is, v 50 is susceptible of being read in this universalistic way, as might the reference to Abraham in v 55.