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Your Word, O Lord, is a lamp for my steps and a light for my path.

Psalm 119:105



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“My Soul magnifies the Lord”: The four Canticles in Luke’s Infancy Narrative

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Marian Mortell

Luke’s Gospel has always been called a gospel of prayer, as Jesus not only talks about prayer, but also goes away by himself to spend time in prayer before the major events in the gospel. The first four prayers of the gospel, however, are not prayed by Jesus but by three major characters in the Infancy Narrative (Mary, Zechariah and Simeon) and also “a multitude of the heavenly host” of angels. These four prayers are usually known as the canticles, a word that comes from the Latin for song or hymn. They are also usually called by the first word in their Latin titles: the Magnificat (1:46-55), the Benedictus (1:67-79), the Gloria (2:14) and the Nunc Dimittis (2:29-32).

The four canticles are also very well known in the prayer of the Church. The Benedictus is prayed at Morning Prayer, the Magnificat at Vespers and the Nunc Dimittis at Compline while the Gloria of the Angels is incorporated into the Gloria that is recited at Mass. The origin of the various canticles is up for debate. They probably were not written by the characters that speak them but are earlier Christian hymns that have been added to the Infancy Narrative. They are too well structured to have been composed on the spot by the various individuals as they were speaking. Also, they imitate the style of Jewish hymns of the period 200 BCE to 100 AD and they contain numerous references to Old Testament books, like the prophets and psalms. So they were probably hymns composed by early Jewish-Christian communities.

Even though the words are composed by women and men, there is so much Scripture in them that the Word of God shines through the human words very clearly. While it is true that if the prayers are removed from the text, the reader would still be able to make complete sense of the story, the canticles add a profound depth to the gospel. Also, all four hymns are thematically inter-connected. These themes include salvation, light, mercy and peace. When the canticles are taken together, we get a concise summary of the history of salvation. Beginning with the promise made to Abraham, we move through David and the prophets until we arrive at the fulfilment of salvation with the birth of Jesus, the Saviour. This salvation is not only for Abraham’s descendants but opens out to include the whole world, Jews as well as Gentiles (1:55; 2:32).

The Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55)

Setting

Immediately after the Annunciation, Mary sets out on a very dangerous journey into the hill country of Judah to visit her cousin Elizabeth, another woman who is having a baby in very unusual circumstances. Elizabeth greets Mary with an outpouring of joy and blesses her three times, first because she has been chosen by God for a special task, next because as Jesus' mother she has a role in bringing salvation to God's people and finally, she changes focus to bless Mary because of her response to God; Mary is blessed because she shows her faith in what the Lord has promised her and trusts in God's action in her life (1:45).

The Magnificat

Mary responds to Elizabeth, not by talking about herself but by glorifying and rejoicing in the Lord in the Magnificat. She begins by praising God who intervenes on behalf of his people. In this, it follows the pattern of psalms and hymns like those of Moses (Exod 15:1-18), Miriam (Exod 15: 9-21), Deborah (Judg 5:1-31), Asaph (1 Chr 16:8-36), Judith (Jdt 16:1-17) and especially Hannah (1 Sam 2:1-10).

Hannah's song (1 Sam 2:1-10) is a response to God who has listened to her prayer and given her a child after years of distress because she was childless. She begins by praising God, then acknowledges how God has treated her. As a woman who has not produced a baby, Hannah would have been marginalised in a society that considered that this was a woman's main role in life. Finally Hannah praised God for his treatment of all the lowly and disadvantaged.

Mary's Magnificat follows the pattern of Hannah's song: Like Hannah's Song, it refers firstly to Mary and then to God's action on society in general. This can be seen much more clearly if we divide the hymn into two verses.

1:46-50	1:51-55
And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the <u>lowliness</u> of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; ⁴⁹ for the <u>Mighty One has done great things</u> for me, and holy is his name. ⁵⁰ His <u>mercy</u> is for those who fear him from generation to generation	⁵¹ He has shown <u>strength</u> with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. ⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the <u>lowly</u> ; ⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. ⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his <u>mercy</u> , ⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

- Same themes highlighted with regard to Mary and the Lowly
- Parallelism: My soul magnifies the Lord/My spirit rejoices in God . . .
- Reversal: The lowly are raised/ the powerful brought down
- God's actions are highlighted: In the original Greek, each line begins with strong verbs of action
- God's actions are described in past tense because Salvation now come through the baby that Mary carries

In the first stanza Mary's response comes from her whole being, ('my soul' and 'my spirit' are mentioned) as she contemplates her relationship with God. She realises that, despite her humble state, future generations will call her blessed (1:48) because of what God has done for her (1:49).

Like the Annunciation, she once again calls herself a servant or slave of the Lord. Thus she foreshadows Jesus' message of service that permeates this Gospel. "But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves" (22:26-27).

Mary then moves out beyond herself to include all marginalized and oppressed people. Using the past tense, she describes how established power structures have been turned upside down. It could be said that Mary proclaims the re-ordering of society under God's rule. This same theme is taken up by Jesus when he proclaims his mission statement in the synagogue at Nazareth at the beginning of his ministry (4:16-31) and then continues to proclaim it throughout his ministry, for example in the Beatitudes (6:20-25).

Mary concludes the prayer by returning to the beginnings of the people of Israel. God's promise or covenant to Abraham and his descendents is being fulfilled through the incarnation of Jesus, the Saviour.

"The Magnificat is the great New Testament song of liberation - personal and social, moral and economic - a revolutionary document of intense conflict and victory. It praises God's actions on behalf of the speaker, which are paradigmatic of all of God's actions on behalf of marginal and exploited people."¹

So how do we read it today? Is it a spiritual prayer, looking to an eschatological reversal on the last day or is it a cry for justice for the poor and oppressed? As a church, how should we read it?

The Benedictus (Luke 1:68-79)

Setting

When the Angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah while he was ministering in the Temple sanctuary, he told him that his wife would bear a son even though she was beyond child-bearing years. Because he doubted the angel's words, Zechariah was struck dumb. It is only

¹ Jane Schaberg. "Luke." Pages 275-292 in *WBC*. Edited by Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (London: SPCK, 1992), 284.

after the child is born and the name John is given to him that Zechariah is able to speak again. His first words are in praise of God. Then like Elizabeth when she encounters Mary, he is filled with the Holy Spirit and prophecies (1:64, 67).

The Benedictus

The Magnificat begins with Mary and moves out to encompass everyone. The Benedictus however does the opposite. It begins with praise of God and his faithfulness to Israel and then the second section focuses on John the Baptist, the precursor of Jesus. The same themes (salvation, mercy) that are found in the Magnificat can also be found here.

1:68-75	1:76-79
<p>"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. ⁶⁹ He has raised up a mighty <u>savior</u> for us in the house of his servant David, ⁷⁰ as he spoke through the mouth of his holy <u>prophets</u> from of old, ⁷¹ that we would be <u>saved</u> from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. ⁷² Thus he has shown the <u>mercy</u> promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, ⁷³ the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us ⁷⁴ that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.</p>	<p>And you, child, will be called the <u>prophet</u> of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, ⁷⁷ to give knowledge of <u>salvation</u> to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. ⁷⁸ By the tender <u>mercy</u> of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, ⁷⁹ to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."</p>

Like the Magnificat and the psalms of praise, the Benedictus begins with praise of God who has visited his people to bring salvation (Pss 41:14, 72:18, 106:48). The introduction "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel" is typical of many Jewish prayers. As we move from Old Testament times to the New, it is obvious that the God of Abraham, David and the prophets is also the God of the new Christian Community. Zechariah then goes on to elaborate on how God's saving work has been accomplished throughout the history of Israel. While not following chronological order, he traces salvation from the covenant with Abraham (1:72-73), through his promises to David (1:69-70) and the teachings of the prophets until the arrival of the mighty saviour, Jesus (1:69). The covenant with Abraham promised that God would always be with them (Gen 12:1-7) and this is now fulfilled in the redemptive act of the arrival of Jesus. The community must respond by living in "holiness and righteousness" (1:75).

In the second section of the Benedictus, the role of John the Baptist is explained by his father. He calls him a prophet who will prepare a way for the Lord. His role will be to announce the coming of salvation and the forgiveness of sins.

Zechariah then reflects on the coming of the Messiah, which will transform the world. God has saved his people and shown them his mercy. To illustrate this he describes it as a dawn from on high that will bring light out of darkness and establish a new era of peace (1:78-79).

This canticle summarises the history of salvation and proclaims the arrival of the Saviour. What message does it have for us today?

The Gloria (Luke 2:14)

Setting

Immediately after the birth of Jesus, angels appear to the shepherds in the field to announce the birth of the Saviour. The angel first describes it as 'good news of great joy for all the people and then goes on to give three titles to Jesus: Saviour, Messiah and Lord (2:10-11). This angel is then joined by "a multitude of the heavenly host" praising God in the words of the Gloria.

The Gloria

"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!"

This canticle is only one verse long. The first half echoes Isaiah 6:3 where the seraphs call to one another to proclaim the holiness of YHWH that originates in the Temple but spreads out to fill the whole earth. "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory" (Is 6:3). When the angels proclaim glory to God in this scene, they are no longer focusing on the temple because it has been replaced by the birth of the child in a manger. The presence of God has moved from the Temple to the baby, Jesus.

The second part of the sentence invites people to glorify God because the birth of his Son has brought peace. This peace is not only for the people of Israel but is open to all humanity. This song of praise to God is echoed again in the triumphant entry into Jerusalem when the disciples cry out "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" (Luke 19:38). God is glorified in the birth of Jesus and now in his passion and resurrection.

The Gloria is a song of pure praise of God. This form of prayer was very common in the psalms but is it one that we neglect in our prayer today?

The Nunc Dimittis (Luke 2:29-32)

Setting

Mary and Joseph bring Jesus to the Temple to present him to the Lord, according to the Law of Moses. Here they meet Simeon and the prophet Anna. Simeon takes the child in his arms and recites this prayer.

"Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

As Simeon receives the child Jesus into his arms from his parents, he realises that he is meeting the Messiah, the saviour, the one who is the consolation of Israel. His hope has been fulfilled.

Simeon's prayer is primarily a prayer of praise. He can now be dismissed in peace. He has completed his service for his master, the Lord Yahweh, by recognising the Messiah, Jesus, and he can go peacefully to his death now that he has seen him. His encounter with Jesus is an encounter with the salvation of God and is a reminder of Is 45:5: "Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

God as a light who transforms, has already been used as a metaphor in Zechariah's prayer (1:79). Now however, Simeon expands this light to take in both the people of Israel and the Gentiles. He draws heavily again on Deutero-Isaiah who talks of light going from Jerusalem out to the ends of the earth (Isa 42:6; 49:6; 52:10) and also of the servant of the Lord bringing that light ("I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth" Isa 49:6).

There is an important difference, however, between Deutero-Isaiah and Simeon as, in Deutero-Isaiah, the promise of salvation came from God to Israel, God's chosen people, but in Simeon's prayer it applies to all humanity regardless of religion, culture or ethnic background. Jesus has come for all Gentiles as well as the Chosen People and salvation now spreads to the ends of the earth (he has already done it in the birth narrative (Luke 2:10). Thus Luke declares Christianity a universal religion.

This is a prayer not only of hope but of fulfilment. With the coming of Jesus, salvation has arrived. This should be a transformative prayer for us in our lives.