

## **Luke 1:39-56 Exegesis Paper and Homily**

### **EXEGESIS**

#### **Introductory Overview**

Lk 1:39-56 portrays a joyous turning of the page in salvation history, where through Mary during her visit with Elizabeth, Luke announces God's liberation to all peoples. In presenting Elizabeth the mother of John the Baptist and Mary the mother of Jesus in this manner, Luke is contextualizing the roles their sons will play in the unfolding Christian epoch. John is the last of the prophets of Israel, and Jesus is the ur-prophet, the Son of God who will vastly surpass previous ideas of what being the Messiah meant by extending salvation to the Gentiles.<sup>1</sup> Through analyzing the theology of the Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth and the Cantic of Mary throughout this exegesis, I will clarify what Luke is developing throughout these narratives: that God's promises have been made universally accessible to all.<sup>2</sup>

#### **Mary Visits Elizabeth (1:39-45)**

Consonant with biblical figures moving quickly "as soon as divine activity is perceptible" (Bovon 2002, 58), Luke shows harmony between faith and divine purposes

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<sup>1</sup> Though not a total summary of Christ's attributes, themes relative to extending salvation to the Gentiles comprise the locus of this exegesis.

<sup>2</sup> Included here is a brief summary of the text to be analyzed: Beginning with a narrative introduction where Mary visits Elizabeth (1:39-41), a hymn from each of them (1:42-45, 46-55), and a narrative conclusion (1:56), the passage serves as a "bridge between the annunciations of John and Jesus (1:5-38) and the births and early lives of John and Jesus" (1:57-2:52) (Parsons 2015, 40). Luke omits Mary's name in the first hymn of Elizabeth, suggesting that "Mary in relation to God's plan" is more significant than "Mary in her own right" (Parsons 2015, 40). The second hymn where Mary praises God "divides into two strophes:" 1:48-50 states "Because he has looked upon the humble state of his servant, because the Mighty One has done great things" for her and "Holy is his name" from "one generation to the next" for "his mercy extends to those who fear him;" and 1:51-55 "is concerned with God's activity in the larger society. Luke's intention for the Magnificat is therefore not a direct response to Elizabeth's hymn of praise but rather a theological reflection on the work of God" (Parsons 2015, 40).

by telling us that Mary traveled with haste to meet Elizabeth.<sup>3</sup> He wants us to understand that God actively intervenes in bringing people together, that “salvation develops in the context of human relations,” and that John the Baptist leaping for joy in his mother’s womb is a sign from God (Bovon 2002, 58). “Just as Esau and Jacob anticipate their future relationship already in their mother’s womb (Gen 25:22-28), the Baptist even now exercises his prophetic function as precursor” (Bovon 2002, 58-59). By portraying theological continuity through the precursor-messiah dynamic, Luke simultaneously foreshadows unprecedented newness in that God is mysteriously revealing Jesus’ significance as universal redeemer.<sup>4</sup>

### **Canticle of Mary (1:46-55)**

The Canticle of Mary, or the Magnificat, is “ascribed to a pre-Lucan Jewish Christian source,”<sup>5</sup> (Fitzmyer 1981, 357), where in response to Elizabeth’s praise, Mary proclaims her praise to God for what he has done. Though Luke himself did not write these specific verses,<sup>6</sup> by inserting them into his narrative, he intends his readers to agree

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<sup>3</sup> This is in contrast with Lk 2 and Matt 1-2, in that Joseph is absent.

<sup>4</sup> This section points to an unfolding theme of messianic fulfillment: “And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord” (Lk 1:45). Luke undoubtedly knew that learning anything meaningful from a literal reading of these verses was unlikely. Would a “fourteen-year-old Jewish virgin” (Karris 1990, 681) really travel across the country by herself? – Even if so, for what purpose? Was Mary making a charitable visit to look after her elderly cousin? – No, for if this was the case, why would she have stayed for three months before “returning to her home” (Lk 1:56) and abandoning Elizabeth at the time of her greatest need in the process? Luke’s intention is “literary and theological,” bringing these two women together is to present John the Baptist as Christ’s precursor, and Elizabeth is able to interpret the leaping of John in her womb due to his *in utero* recognition of Jesus as Lord “through the gift of the holy Spirit” (Karris 1990, 681).

<sup>5</sup> It is plausible to attribute this source to the “Poor Ones or Anawim.” The distinction was “used originally to denote the physically poor, but in time it came to be applied to people in Israel who were unfortunate, lowly, sick, downtrodden. Their opposites were not simply the rich, but included the proud, the arrogant, those who felt no need of God.” Such poor ones are described in Ps 149:4, Isa 49:13, and Isa 66:2 (Fitzmyer 1981, 361).

<sup>6</sup> There is no evidence the Magnificat existed in Semitic literature, was written by Mary, or even by Luke (Fitzmyer 1981, 359). Luke’s authorship of the remainder of the text analyzed in this exegesis is undisputed.

with Mary's position "in the conclusion to the Magnificat (vv. 54-55)" (Fitzmyer 1981, 361).<sup>7</sup> This is where she "recognizes that the salvation that is to come through the birth, life, and career of Jesus is related to the covenant made by God with Abraham of old" (Fitzmyer 1981, 361). In having Mary recall Israel and the patriarchs, Luke intends us to understand that "the remnant of Israel is to have a new meaning, for it will be reconstituted in a way that will extend the promises of old to others not under the Law" (Fitzmyer 1981, 361).<sup>8</sup>

In addition to expanding salvation beyond Judaism specifically, the Magnificat reveals an "important Lukan compositional technique,"<sup>9</sup> one he shares with all Hellenistic historians, namely the use of speeches. In his *Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides did not report "a verbatim account of what a particular Greek general said before battle, but rather an idealized version of what he should have said to properly represent Hellenic virtues" (Johnson 1991, 43). As a Gentile, Luke likewise utilizes speeches in

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<sup>7</sup> "He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever" (Lk 1:54-55).

<sup>8</sup> Recalling "Abraham and his descendants forever" in Lk 1:55 brings to mind what God promised him. In Gen 12:2-3, God says "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." In Gen 15:5, God "brought (Abraham) outside and said, 'Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.'" Gen 17:7-8 portrays God establishing his covenant between himself, Abraham, and Abraham's offspring "throughout their generations," promising all of them the land of Canaan "for a perpetual holding" where he will also "be their God," and in 18:18 claims that "Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him." The point is further driven home in Gen 22:17: "I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies." These passages in Genesis inform what Luke is trying to accomplish for Gentile Christian readers (Johnson 1991, 42-43). Rightly understanding God's Abrahamic covenant means that divine blessing extends to "all the families on earth" whose descendants are as numerous as the stars throughout all generations, and for all "nations of the earth." This even includes enemies to such an extent that God also becomes the God of the Gentiles, symbolized by the Canaanites. Contextually, it is not lost on Luke that Abraham himself began life as a Gentile, for his circumcision is not depicted until Gen 17:24 ("Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin"), well after God's promises were initially made.

<sup>9</sup> Though it is understood that Luke did not write the Magnificat, its placement within his narrative is consistent with his compositional technique.

proclaiming the most retrospectively salvific understanding of events.

This technique is demonstrated through Mary's praise of "what God had done to her personally" in that it "widens out to include what God does for 'all who fear him' in every age," even including "what God is doing for Israel by the birth of its Messiah" (Johnson 1991, 43).<sup>10</sup>

The song moves in stages from the reversal of Mary's condition from lowliness to exaltation (1:46-49), then to a general statement of God's mercy to those who fear him (1:50), then to a recital of his past and present reversals (1:51-53), finally to the statement of how that mercy is now being shown to Israel in fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham (1:54-55). (Johnson 1991, 43)

Luke presents Mary herself as symbolic of Israel with the mercy shown toward her reflective of mercy shown others, and attributes of God from Lk 2:34 such as "Lord, Savior" and "Holy" are also applicable toward Jesus who is likewise called "lord" (1:43), "holy" (1:34), and will be called "savior" in Lk 2:11 (Johnson 1991, 43-44). The message that Luke wants his readers to understand here is that "God reverses human status and perception" (Johnson 1991, 44). By scattering the arrogant, pulling down the mighty, sending the rich away empty, exalting the lowly, filling the hungry, and taking Israel by the hand – these reversals also foreshadow Jesus' beatitudes and woes (6:20-26) (Johnson 1991, 44).

### **Concluding Application**

Throughout Lk 1:39-56, the author first introduces us to forerunners and messiahs in the Visitation, and then illustrates reversals of conditions through the Magnificat: rulers are deposed and the lowly are uplifted, the hungry have good food to eat and the

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<sup>10</sup> Though God has shown power through "mighty works in the past" he now takes "Israel by the hand" (Johnson 1991, 43).

rich find themselves empty-handed (Lk 1:52-53). Though Luke grounds this in the Hebrew Bible, which shows God's rulership over rich and poor alike while favoring the poor, reversals of fortune also occur in Greek literature due to Zeus' intervention, and are attested to in "both Jesus' parables and Paul's theology of the cross" (Bovon 2002, 62-63). "From the Magnificat, a new power goes forth into our own time. The liberation that Luke intends to announce is understood as a promise by all those who work for the liberation of individuals and peoples" (Bovon 2002, 96). Divinely initiated by reversing conditions, announcing God's liberation to all people is the culminating purpose of this reading. Through the context, however, we are to understand that this liberation, eternal justice expressed by mercy, is for those who acknowledge that they need it.<sup>11</sup> These are the poor, who, consistent with reversal of conditions, become rich in an eternal way by accepting the divine liberation that comes through Jesus Christ.<sup>12</sup>

Yet the beatitudes are foreshadowed here, and the poor are not necessarily financially destitute or socially insignificant. God rules over all, and choosing the powerless to reveal divine power serves to manifest it all the more. Luke understands that the poor will tend to know they need God, for they know what it is to need. Though their resources may cause the rich to forget, remembering their own interior poverty in that they, too, are finite beings, can rightly dispose them toward God when they remember to be humble. Through the Magnificat and his surrounding text, Luke shows us that God will always defy expectations, bringing the most abundant yield from the

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<sup>11</sup> I stipulate those who *acknowledge* that they need God's mercy over those who simply *need* it because all persons, from rich and powerful, to poor and powerless, are equally insignificant in light of God's omnipotence.

<sup>12</sup> Given the imperially-occupied minority status of the patriarchal culture of the time, choosing a miraculously impregnated post-menopausal woman and an unmarried pregnant girl to announce the astonishing news that God incarnate was entering the world, is itself an astonishing reversal!

appearance of the least; which is an invaluable application of what this overall narrative can still provide for us today. Because everyone matters to God who gives his love to all, we ourselves, including Luke, are to do no less.

## **HOMILY**

My friends, today's reading from the Gospel of Luke describes a classic episode in Salvation history, the Visitation followed by the Magnificat, or the Canticle of Mary that we recite daily at evening prayer. The passage begins with Mary visiting Elizabeth – one a young pregnant teenager travelling alone and claiming to be a virgin miraculously impregnated by God, and the other a post-menopausal woman whose impregnation by her temple priest husband was so shocking as to render him temporarily mute. Elizabeth is the mother of John the Baptist and we all know who Mary's Son is, and when John leapt in Elizabeth's womb, it was due to *his* recognition of who Jesus is. John, the last of the prophets of Israel recognized Jesus *in utero*, serving his purpose as forerunner to the Lord before he was even born. The circumstances of this encounter can tell us many things about how God acts in people's lives, and for our purposes we will develop one of them – namely, that through God all things are possible, especially for those who acknowledge that they need him.

This premise is laid out for us in the Magnificat text, which features reversals of conditions: God shows might by dispersing the arrogant, casts down rulers to uplift the lowly, and feeds the hungry while permitting the rich to remain empty. Symbolized by Israel, this shows that God remembers and helps those who call upon him, and this is not only in continuity with the covenant made with Abraham, but extends beyond to all people everywhere and for all time. God is always willing to love, provide, and help.

Yet why would God disperse or cast down anyone? Though such people are described as arrogant, powerful, and rich, presumably to the point of deliberately withholding sharing their resources for the common good, is God not all-inclusive and all loving? Why would anyone at all be excluded in light of this? Could not God inspire others to be more merciful and just without creating negative consequences for anyone? The answer is yes, albeit only theoretically. God's response to us is always yes, though due to unavoidable life circumstances and our capacity to make decisions, sometimes the overall divine *yes* will have to be interspersed with individual *nos*. These can be understood as reversals.

What sorts of reversals are we likely to encounter? There are infinite possibilities here, so for clarity I will focus on one – the example of marriage. For married couples, an emotional distance can develop if they stop communicating. Many idealistic young couples meet, find each other fascinating, fall in love and get married, only to barely look up and grunt when the other comes home from work after a few years together. Such ambivalence can lead to a lack of intimacy, even contempt, and families can break up because they forget to love. God does not do this to people, people choose to become too arrogant to reach out in love and understanding, too self-assured in their personal power to bother lifting up and showing interest in their spouse, too enriched by pursuing material gain to continue safeguarding the love that gives prosperity meaning in the first place.

Fortunately, reversing conditions remains possible. Through acknowledging the God that brought them together in the first place, couples can rediscover the love they seem to have lost. They can do this by praying and worshipping at mass together,

making a point of having meaningful conversations and listening to one another, rediscovering personal intimacy through date nights where they can take turns planning something meaningful that the other person will like, and remembering to look upon one another with the love that was once all they could think about.

As the forerunner to Christ represents continuity with the past that reaches out to a vastly magnified future, so the rediscovery of love invigorates and gives renewed meaning to the marital vocation. This becomes particularly true when couples begin to have children. Men's hearts should leap within them with the news that their beloved wife is pregnant, for this is not only a primary end of marriage, but the opportunity to further grow in the image and likeness of God by co-creating life. In that sense, we can see marriage before children as the forerunner to our own home church, where two persons become three or more as life continues.

The continued possibility of life is the greatest reversal, for it acknowledges that we both need God to live this life, and when we pass into heaven while our line continues on earth. Thereby growing in the image and likeness of God we cast down self-centered arrogance that prevents us from reaching out in love and understanding, and replace self-assurance with the power of God that empowers us to create new life with our beloved spouses. The vocation to married life that gives material gain meaning in the first place is thereby fully actualized. We progress in life to love and give more of ourselves, emulating our creator God while proclaiming the greatness of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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