

“FROM THIS DAY FORWARD ALL GENERATIONS WILL CALL ME BLESSED”:

A Biblical Foundation of the Magnificat

John Roskoski, PhD

St. Peter's University

Omega Bible Institute

INTRODUCTION

The “Magnificat” (Luke 1: 46-55) is powerful song, or Canticle, Mary spoke when the baby within her moved at the greeting of Elizabeth, the kinswoman of Mary. Scholars have debated if the song is genuine to Mary. Typifying the position, J.L. McKenzie states;

“It is scarcely possible that the Magnificat is intended to be a literal report of the words of Mary; it is a song put in her mouth as apt to the situation, despite the fact that it makes no concrete reference to the Messiah. . . [It is] probable that it was an existing hymn which the author applied to this passage. The song was possibly a Jewish psalm adopted by the early Christian community.” (McKenzie: 536)

McKenzie overlooks the phenomenon that, according to the *Midrash*, in times of great emotion the Jewish people of the First Century did quote appropriate psalms. For instance; the cry of Jesus, from the Cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:45) is from Psalm 22. Therefore, his argument suggesting that this being a Jewish psalm precluding it being in the mouth of Mary is untenable.

Many commentators have tried to establish a Lukan authorship for the song; that Luke adapted a Semitic prayer or composed it himself. Contrary to this position, J. Fitzmyer contends that it “is hardly likely that Luke composed the Magnificat himself”. Luke was a Gentile and it is must be observed that the “the song praises God’s salvific activity. . . the canticle resembles what have been called ‘hymns of praise’ among the canonical psalms.” Yet, the emphasis of the song is on “salvation now coming to Israel in a new way”. Fitzmyer, following R.E. Brown, suggests that the song originated with the “*anawim*”; originally referring to the “physically poor, but in time it came to be applied to people in Israel who were unfortunate, lowly, sick, downtrodden.” These were the opposite of the rich, proud, and arrogant. These people were often identified as “the remnant of Israel, and developed in time

a piety of dependence on God and even a 'Temple piety'." (Fitzmyer: 359-362) These are themes expressed in Mary's words. There is little reason to speculate that a psalm or song existed in the early Jewish Christian community that was "fitted" to this context. Mary was among the lower classes of Roman society, she felt the oppression of Rome. Therefore, she would be familiar with such a hopeful song of praise in God's saving actions.

Some critics have pointed out that there is no mention of a Messiah in the Magnificat. Admittedly, the song does not mention the Messiah but, instead, defines the coming salvation in terms of help to the downtrodden and poor. This foreshadows the words of Jesus in Luke 7:22, the answer he gave John's followers to question of whether he is the One who is to come. In other words, Jesus defines His own ministry in the terms similar to those used by the Magnificat. Mary and Jesus are speaking of a new Messianism. This is not the Davidic Messiah, who will overthrow Rome and establish his kingdom in Zion. This is Messiah who, as foretold by the Isaiah prophecies, that will redeem the people of Israel. This is the new way of salvation to which Fitzmyer refers. Mary recognized this new mode of salvation in the words of the angel, Gabriel, that spoke of the greatness of her future son and eternal kingship which the Father will bestow upon him (Luke 1: 26-38), and echoed it here.

Therefore, based on the Jewish roots of the canticle and the forward orientation of the new means of salvation, it seems likely that this song can be traced back to Mary. Possibly, as it moved from Aramaic to Greek it was stylized to some degree. But, there seems to be little evidence to suggest that Mary would not have known of, or created, this song and not have recited it at a time when the events of salvation, the angelic announcement, and the visit with Elizabeth, were manifesting in her life.

The Angelic Context: The Angelic Pronouncement (Luke 1:28-30)

When the angel appears to Mary, he proclaims that she is favored and that the Lord is with her. Culminating this proclamation is the statement; "Blessed are you among women". Some commentators have suggested that this last comment is a later insertion, by later redactors, based on Elizabeth's words. However, we would propose that this is *not a later gloss*, but original to the Lucan text. This is part of the "Child of Promise" tradition which Luke employs. This is a theological tradition in which a childless person or couple conceive and bear a child who will have a singular mission in Salvation. Fitzmyer points to the "five-element pattern of the OT birth-announcement" that is present;

"a) the entrance of the angel (1:26)

b) Mary's perplexity (1:29)

- c) the heavenly message (1:30-33)
- d) Mary's objection (1:34bc)
- e) reassurance and sign (1:35b-37)

Thus Luke has taken some of the details of the pre-Lucan and pre-Matthean tradition about the birth of Jesus and modeled an announcement of Jesus' birth on the stereotyped OT pattern."(Fitzmyer: 335) This "Child of Promise" motif is found in the birth accounts of Isaac, Samson, and John the Baptist. The Virgin Birth account of Luke subsumes and completes the earlier traditions. Unlike the OT accounts, Mary is referred to as "blessed" and the conception of Jesus is the result of Divine activity of the Holy Spirit. This sets Mary apart, as even though the parents of the child were shown favor the Bible records that it is the child that will in some way be blessed or have God's favor; Isaac (Genesis 21:20), Samson (Judges 13:25) and John (Luke 1:80). After proclaiming Mary's blessedness, the Angel repeats the favor which Mary has found and explains the eternal power of her Son. Thus, the Angel thereby connects her blessedness to the reign of her son, Jesus. In light of the powerful theological history of this type of account, there is little reason to argue for words of the Angel regarding Mary's blessedness being a later gloss. It is much more likely that the words, most likely original to the text, serve to amplify and explain the Angel's proclamation and assurance about Mary being favored.

Mary's connection to this tradition is one of completion and culmination. The "children of promise" were to have specific roles in Salvation History. But, they were also to look ahead to one who would fulfill their missions. Isaac fathered Jacob, the forefather of the founders of the 12 Tribes of Israel. Samson typifies the "Child of Promise" account. He was to *begin* the deliverance of Israel from the hand of the Philistines (Judges 13:5). David was to break the Philistine power over the region. John the Baptist prepares the way for the Messiah and states how the greatness of the one who is to come is greater than his own (Luke 3:15-18). While John was entrusted to prepare *for* the Messiah, Mary was entrusted to give birth to, care for, and prepare *the* Messiah for the ministry to come.

Therefore, in the Lucan narration of the events surrounding Jesus' birth we see Mary doubly fulfilling the archetypal children of promise; her interactions with the angel are part of a centuries- old theological and literary tradition of the OT and she looks ahead to One greater than herself, the Messiah who will complete the careful preparations of which she was a part and have eternal power.

The Familial Context: The Visit with Elizabeth (Luke 1: 39-56)

Mary now knows of Elizabeth's pregnancy (1:36) and hurries to visit her kinswoman. The words of Elizabeth are powerful and need to be clarified. In verse 42, Elizabeth offers a "blessing" while in verse 45 she offers a "beatitude". In English, the distinction between the forms of the word "bless", occurring in both phrases, is much more subtle than in the Greek. Mary is "blest" (*eulogemene*) because of the life in her womb (v. 42). However, she is "blessed" (*makaria*) because of her faith.

The distinction made by Elizabeth is powerful and based upon OT theology, according to McKenzie. Basically, the concept of "blessing" entails the "communication of life from YHWH". With "blessing" comes "vigor and strength and success". YHWH alone can bless, men bless by wishing and praying that YHWH will bestow His blessing. (McKenzie: 98) A blessing is understood as "an effective pronouncement in which God himself is deemed to be the real agent". (Collins: 1:629) According to K. Richards, "God blesses with a benefit on the basis of the relationship. The blessing makes known the positive relationship between the parties." (Richards: 1:764)

Beatitudes are a literary form found in both Testaments, according to McKenzie. It is a "declaration of blessedness on the ground of some virtue or good fortune. . . One is called blessed for virtue, or for enjoying the forgiveness, protection, or nearness of YHWH. The beatitude is common in the NT also, most frequently for faith or for sharing the Kingdom of God". (McKenzie: 84) Collins explains macarisms, or beatitudes, as something "which describes a particular conduct or quality which prompted the praise of the person who is pronounced blessed." They are usually constructed in the third person and "are expressions of praise or congratulation". (Collins: 1:629)

Overall, according to Fitzmyer;

"The visitation scene proper. . . [depicts] Mary as the 'mother of the Lord', a believer, a model of faith. Luke is picking up the lowly handmaid motif of 1:38 and making her a disciple from the beginning of his account".
(Fitzmyer:358)

We propose that this blessing-beatitude of Elizabeth, with the proclamation of the Angel, provides the context that Mary echoes in her words, of being "blessed", in the Magnificat.

"SHALL CALL ME BLESSED"

In the midst of the canticle, Mary states that "From this day all generations will call me blessed" (Luke 1:48). This statement is a macarism, recognizing the saving actions of God, and typifies the humility which marked the life and legacy of Mary. Mary uses a form of the term, *makaria*.

The word is well attested in ancient Greek. Its semantic field encompasses "blessed, fortunate, happy", usually in the sense of "privileged recipient of divine favor". It also connotes "things that stand in a very close relationship to the divinity". (Bauer: 486-487) Fitzmyer argues that this phrase takes on the literal meaning of "will pronounce a beatitude over me". Mary uses a future tense of the word, which reflects the adjective used by Elizabeth (v. 45). This phrase seems to echo Genesis 30:13; "all women will count me blessed". Fitzmyer contends:

"Luke has changed 'all women' to 'all generations' and implies a respect for her who is the mother of the Lord and the first representative of faith in his account vis-à-vis all those who will accept her son in faith. The verse expresses a fundamental attitude of all Christians toward the believing Mother of the Lord." (Fitzmyer: 367)

Fitzmyer also comments on the humility of Mary illustrated in the phrase. He points out that the verse is made to "contrast her humble station with YHWH's greatness, might, holiness, and mercy. 'All generations' will count her blessed, not because of any intrinsic, personal holiness or merit, but because of him whom she is bearing". (Fitzmyer: 360) Therefore, as Fitzmyer's argument implies, Mary will receive her beatitude from the proximity to God, as the Holy Spirit came upon her, and the singular relationship she will have with the "Son of God" (1:35).

The Old Testament Background

Throughout the OT, occurrences of blessings are numerous. However, a recurring aspect becomes apparent; progeny. McKenzie points out that "the effect of the blessing most frequently mentioned is fertility, whether in men, animals, or crops. Indeed, we read this frequently throughout the accounts of Creation and the Patriarchs. Scholars have argued that the prominence of blessing in these contexts could mean that the peoples of the earth "will ask that God blesses them as he blessed Abraham", or it could connote that "the patriarchs and their descendants will be medium of blessing". (McKenzie: 98) Throughout the Historical Books of the OT, the connotation shifts to include success, particularly against one's enemies. We see Jael be blessed for her killing of Sisera (Judges 5:24). It seems likely that Elizabeth's blessing (Luke 1:42) echoes the blessing of Jael. We also see the Judge, Samson, being blessed by YHWH (Judges 13:24). His blessing is noteworthy as it is immediately juxtaposed with a reference to the Spirit of the Lord

coming upon him (13:25). The union of blessing and charisma in such a way is unique to the Samson narratives. Throughout the later books, the concept of "blessing" expands to the happiness deriving from the right way live in the ways of the Lord and, particularly in the Psalter, praise of God. The word also occurs in common speech as a greeting.

The Hebrew root of "blessing" is *barak*. According to J. Oswalt, "in general, the blessing is transmitted from the greater to the lesser". In its occurrences, "the verbal blessing . . . was normally futuristic. However, it could be descriptive, an acknowledgement that the person addressed was evidently possessed of this power for abundant and effective living". (Oswalt: 1:132) Keller and Wehmeier stress the aspect of "benevolent power, health-creating power". They contend that there exists a close association between God's "blessing" and human activity. They will argue :

"Many texts demonstrate therefore that God's health-creating act can be in response to human deed and speech. . . God 'blesses' those who 'bless' his elect and he 'blesses' other people for the sake of his chosen, he creates well-being and success for them. God is certainly the author of beneficial activity; yet the person must also affirm this activity". (Keller/Wehmeier: 1:273)

This theological background connected to the concept of "blessing" is foundational to the Lukan narrative. Luke assures blessings for Elizabeth, in her blessing-beatitude of Mary. By Mary's assent to the angelic announcement and the affirmation of God's activity, through speech and word, her blessing is assured. She incorporates the future-oriented aspects by her reference to the "generations". We see Mary as a foundational conduit through which the blessings of the Cross will be bestowed upon the faithful. This role as conduit, or vessel, through which blessings flow fulfills the role of the descendants of the Patriarchs, the medium of blessings.

Mary, Uniquely Blessed

The combination of Elizabeth's words, the angelic pronouncement, and Mary's beatitude depicts Mary as having a blessing like none other in the Bible. In Luke's Gospel we see how she culminates the OT traditions regarding children and the inherent role of the medium of patriarchal blessing. Not only will she have a child, but she will have a "Child of Promise" who will be the "Son of the Most High". As Fitzmyer suggests, Mary echoing the "lowly handmaid" imagery illustrates the idea that blessings flow from the greater to the lesser. With Mary, we see the full interaction between "blessing" and human activity. Herein we see God blessing Mary for the sake of His Elect, Israel, and His Chosen, Jesus. Mary was not chosen to be blessed at random, but lived a life that found favor with God (Luke 1:28-30).

Herein we see the Psalter fulfilled. However, Luke makes special emphasis to note that Mary assents to this activity in which she will be the center (Luke 1: 38).

Mary stands at a powerful moment in Christian history; when the New Covenant takes in and completes the Old Covenant. She is not abolishing the Old Covenant or its foundational teachings, but completing them. She helps to establish a new order of faith, as she stands as a model of Christian assent to the will of God. She, like John the Baptist, reopens the OT canon, thought to be closed, and fulfills the prophecies. By reopening the canon she shows Jesus, her son, to be the fulfillment of the Jewish Scriptures. Her unique blessed nature is the result of a singular combination of faithful living which won her God's favor, being part of the Divine Salvation plan of YHWH which we see unfolding through the accounts of the OT, and bearing the Son of God. She enjoys a physical and spiritual relationship with God that no other human can approximate and from this her enduring blessed nature is generated.

CONCLUSIONS

Mary, the handmaid of the Lord, being blessed with this momentous role in Salvation History embodies the ideal response to God's call. God does not have to look for the biggest, strongest, or most prominent person to carry out His will. He, as the great heroes of the OT show, provides the resources needed for success. He offers the beatitude of blessing to those who respond to His call and embrace His Kingdom. Mary, by her simple affirmation of God's Word, gives herself entirely to the Kingdom of God, the establishment of God's authority. She is at the beginning of a new Kingdom, one that is not to be defined by geography or birthright- but *by faith*. Herein is the reason why her simple assent to God's will is a model. She was not to know how God, by the power of His Holy Spirit, would bring about this Virgin Birth. She gave herself to the Kingdom *in faith* and will, therefore, be called "blessed" for as long as the Kingdom endures.

REFERENCES

Bauer, W. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979.

Collins, R. "Beatitudes", *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 6vols. NY: Doubleday, 1992.

Fitzmyer, J. *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX*. NY: Doubleday, 1970.

McKenzie, J.L. *Dictionary of the Bible*. Chicago: Bruce, 1966.

Midrash, (Tehillim) *Shochar Tov* 18. Hamburg: Literaturblat, 1891.

Oswalt, J. "barak", *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* 2 vols. Chicago: Moody, 1980.

Richards, K. "Bless/Blessing", *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 6vols. NY: Doubleday, 1992.

Shogren, G. "Redemption", *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 6vols. NY: Doubleday, 1992.

Vine, W.E. "Redeem", *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, 1996.