

The Quotations Bible Study: Series I: The Person of Jesus

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Week 2. Unto Generations: the *Magnificat* of Mary

Prayer: Father, as we gather before your Word, written, we seek the guidance of your Holy Spirit, for understanding, for light, and for sustenance, in Jesus' Name, amen.

The verb “magnifies,” from the opening phrase of the Song of Mary, provides us with the Latin name for this passage, the *Magnificat*. There has never been a time when the church did not hold this song, the *Magnificat*, in the highest possible esteem. The English translation provided by William Tyndale, following Wycliffe, led to its final form in the Authorized Version: a prose-poem, in the Hebrew mode, of great power, depth, and beauty.

The *Magnificat* is itself very similar to the Song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2, but with several elements added or changed. Accordingly, we will first study Hannah's song, and then consider Mary's song. We will conclude with a brief study of the quotations in the *Magnificat*.

I. The Song of Hannah

Focus passage:

¹ Then Hannah prayed and said:

“My heart rejoices in the LORD;
in the LORD my horn is lifted high.
My mouth boasts over my enemies,
for I delight in your deliverance.

² There is no one holy like the LORD;
there is no one besides you;
there is no Rock like our God.

³ Do not keep talking so proudly
or let your mouth speak such arrogance,
for the LORD is a God who knows,
and by him deeds are weighed.

⁴ The bows of the warriors are broken,
but those who stumbled are armed with strength.

⁵ Those who were full hire themselves out for food,
but those who were hungry hunger no more.
She who was barren has borne seven children,
but she who has had many sons pines away.

⁶ The LORD brings death and makes alive;
he brings down to the grave and raises up.

⁷ The LORD sends poverty and wealth;
he humbles and he exalts.

⁸ He raises the poor from the dust
and lifts the needy from the ash heap;
he seats them with princes
and has them inherit a throne of honor.
For the foundations of the earth are the LORD'S;
upon them he has set the world.

⁹ He will guard the feet of his saints,
but the wicked will be silenced in darkness.
It is not by strength that one prevails;

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¹⁰ those who oppose the LORD will be shattered.
He will thunder against them from heaven;
the LORD will judge the ends of the earth.
He will give strength to his king
and exalt the horn of his anointed.”—1 Sam. 2:1-10

Background: 1 Sam. 1

The prayer of Hannah (often called the Song of Hannah for its poetic qualities) is given at the culmination of a brief story about Hannah, the wife of Elkanah the Ephrathite (a Levite). Hannah, whose name means grace, had no children, in contrast with Elkanah’s other wife, the fruitful Peninnah. As a result, she was deeply unhappy, partly because of the provocations of Peninnah (1 Sam. 1:6). She constantly prayed to the LORD for a child. On one occasion, while on the family’s annual pilgrimage to the shrine at Shiloh, she prayed and made a vow, that if the LORD would grant her a son, she would dedicate him to the LORD’s service. While she was praying silently but with her lips moving, she was seen by Eli the chief priest, who thought at first that she was drunk. After she told Eli of her sorrow, Eli dismissed her to return home in hope. She then conceived and bore a son, whom she called Samuel. She withheld Samuel from the annual visits to Shiloh until he was weaned, but then took Samuel to stand before Eli. She explained to Eli that this child was the product of God’s grace in answer to her prayers, and that the child would be dedicated to the LORD’s service, a Nazarite who would never cut his hair.

That child would grow to become the Samuel for whom the two books are named, who prophesied and judged Israel, and who would anoint both the failed king, Saul, and the great king, David, a figure that towers over the remainder of the Old Testament. Hannah’s Song, uttered at the time of the dedication of Samuel before the chief priest, is about the justice and the victory of the LORD. Though only certain verses are quoted in Mary’s song, we will briefly examine Hannah’s prayer/song as a whole.

Consider some questions about Hannah’s prayer:

- Q1:** For one’s “horn [to be] lifted high” (1 Sam. 2:1) is an idiom that occurs several times in the Bible, and it may mean that one’s strength is displayed or increased in or by the LORD. Another possible understanding is that one’s honor or prestige is increased. How are either of these true for Hannah?
- Q2:** The mention of enemies strikes a militant tone. Who are Hannah’s enemies? (1 Sam. 2:1)
- Q3:** God is compared to a rock for the sake of what characteristic? (1 Sam. 2:2) Where else is God compared to a rock?
- Q4:** Which does God pay attention to, talk or actions? (1 Sam. 2:3) Whose proud talk and arrogance might Hannah have been thinking about?
- Q5:** In 1 Sam. 2:4-8, Hannah’s Song turns to the mighty acts of God. A main theme of this passage is “reversal of fortune.” What are six pairs of conditions that are contrasted, for instance, in 1 Sam. 2:4, strength in war vs. the stumbling warriors?
- Q6:** Where can the same kind of reversal be found in the New Testament? (Matt. 5:5)
- Q7:** What are the “foundations of the earth”? (1 Sam. 2:8)
- Q8:** What does “guard the feet of his saints” mean? (1 Sam. 2:9)
- Q9:** If “it is not by strength that one prevails,” then how? (1 Sam. 2:9, 10)
- Q10:** In 1 Sam. 2:10, Hannah’s Song mentions the LORD’s king. Who is that?

We note that the idiom of the horn is used again for the anointed one at the end of Hannah’s Song. For practical purposes, we want to ask ourselves one more question: is Hannah’s Song Messianic? Recall now, that it predates all the Psalms and Prophets. A partial answer can be discovered in Judges 21:25, “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.” This is the final verse of history, except for the interposition of the book of Ruth, preceding the passage of 1 Samuel we are studying.

II. The Song of Mary

Focus passage: Luke 1:46-55 (see below)

Background: Luke 1

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Before we delve into Mary's Song and its comparison with Hannah's Song, I recommend that we consider the poetical aspects of Mary's Song. We have this song in Greek from Luke's pen, which probably was originally Greek, but the style is that of a poem in the Hebrew mode.

[Enrichment: Some thoughts on Hebrew Poetry]

Whenever we read or recite poetry in English, we expect to hear rhyming, to feel meter, and to encounter regularity in form, in numbers of lines, in length of lines, etc. Even in blank verse or modern poetry, we still expect these features to peep out at us now and then.

Hebrew poetry employs none of these vehicles or forms in any consistent way. Instead, Hebrew poetic form consists in imitation or parallelism of various kinds, not just in the words but in the ideas. Often the lines are paired, with the first exposing a subject and the second paralleling the thought, either by restating it (synonymous parallelism, ex. 1 Sam. 2:2), extending it (synthetic parallelism, ex. 1 Sam. 2:10), or by contrasting it (antithetical parallelism, ex. 1 Sam. 2:4). Sometimes the lines are not paired but occur in sets of three lines, and there is an example of this in Hannah's Song, where three lines are tied together, ex. 1 Sam. 2:2. Sometimes, a question and answer pattern is used. Strong hints of antiphonal presentation are often apparent. The varieties of these modes abound, and it is not our purpose here to analyze either Mary's or Hannah's Song in this fascinating, technical, literary way.

What the reader should notice is that the essence of Hebrew poetic form, the interplay of ideas in imitation and parallelism, is a feature of language that survives translation (as pointed out in C. S. Lewis' *Reflections on the Psalms*). This fact is a marvelous example of God's provision. While it is not clear that the early Hebrew poetry was sung, it is obvious that many, if not all, of the Psalms were intended to be sung, and that this might be true of all recorded Hebrew poetry.

God knew that the music would not survive (even if it had, it would mean nothing to us; music is irreducibly embedded in culture; if you doubt that, let me invite you to a Sudanese church service, provided you are not Sudanese), and that His Word needed to carry over fully in translation. Thus, God uttered the paradigm of Hebrew poetry, and as a result, the principal feature of Hebrew poetry, parallelism, is one that we can understand and appreciate in its artistic content today, thousands of years later, in an immensely remote language, and in a profoundly different culture.

(This is not to suggest that there are not other aspects of Hebrew poetry, *e.g.*, alliteration, word plays of various kinds, etc., that are not very translatable. The poetry of the Old Testament unquestionably suffers many nicks and bruises on its bumpy road from Hebrew to English.)

Why is the survival of parallelism in translation important? It signifies God's inspiration of the Bible not only in its "message," in some abstract way, but in its literary form and presentation. The poetry is part of the message, tied to it more firmly than is typical of Western language poetry. In its own way, it helps to convey Who God is and who we are to Him. It sets a perspective and point of view that we can all partake of, regardless our language and culture. That is the miracle of it.

Let's do a little experiment. Read Mary's Song from Luke 1:46-55 in Wycliffe's translation, the Authorized (King James) Version, and a modern translation, say, NIV. First Wycliffe, from around 1380, remembering that Wycliffe translated the Latin Vulgate, which already had several translation flaws,

- 1:46 And Marie seide, Mi soule magnyfieth the Lord,
- 1:47 and my spirit hath gladid in God, myn helthe.
- 1:48 For he hath biholdun the mekenesse of his handmaidun.
- 1:49 For lo! of this alle generaciouns schulen seie that Y am blessid. For he that is myyti hath don to me grete thingis, and his name is hooli.
- 1:50 And his mercy is fro kynrede in to kynredes, to men that dreden hym.
- 1:51 He made myyt in his arme, he scaterede proude men with the thouyte of his herte.
- 1:52 He sette down myyti men fro sete, and enhaunside meke men.
- 1:53 He hath fulfillid hungri men with goodis, and he hath left riche men voide.
- 1:54 He, hauynge mynde of his mercy, took Israel, his child;
- 1:55 as he hath spokun to oure fadris, to Abraham and to his seed, in to worldis.

Then the Authorized (King James) Version,

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- 1:46 And Mary said, My soul doth magnify the Lord,
1:47 And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.
1:48 For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden: for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.
1:49 For he that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is his name.
1:50 And his mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation.
1:51 He hath shewed strength with his arm; he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
1:52 He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree.
1:53 He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away.
1:54 He hath holpen his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy;
1:55 As he spake to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his seed for ever.

And finally, the NIV,

- ⁴⁶ And Mary said:
“My soul glorifies the Lord
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
⁴⁸ for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is his name.
⁵⁰ His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.
⁵¹ He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.
⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
⁵⁵ to Abraham and his descendants forever,
even as he said to our fathers.”

I think those examples illustrate to some extent the way that the poetic vehicle transcends translation.

Reflect for a moment on the fact that what you have just read was translated twice, most recently from Greek. But recall, Mary spoke Aramaic.]

Now let us consider a few questions about Mary’s Song.

- Q11:** The opening lines, in which Mary exalts the Lord, are a response to what recent events? (Luke 1:31, 36, 42-45)
Q12: Why does Mary consider her state “humble”? (Luke 1:26,27)
Q13: Why will Mary be considered blessed? (Luke 1:32,33)
Q14: What is God’s mercy, extended from one generation to the next conditioned on? (Luke 1:50)
Q15: In Mary’s recital of the mighty acts of God, a main theme of the passage is “reversal of fortune.” What are three conditions that are contrasted, for instance, in Matt. 1:51, scattering those who are proud? (Luke 1:51-3)
Q16: At the end of Mary’s Song, she speaks of God’s mercy to Abraham and his descendants, helping Israel. On what basis has God done this? (Luke 1:54,55)

III. The Quotations

The quotations in Mary's Song are different from those in the passages from Matthew that we examined the previous lesson, in that these are not indicated as quotations by words like, "as it is written..." or "as the prophet said." Instead they are inclusions, patches of Scripture incorporated into a new statement. Let's examine them.

A. Inclusions from 1 Samuel 2

There are five inclusions from 1 Samuel 2, Hannah's Song.

Mary: My soul glorifies the Lord (Luke 1:46)

Hannah: My heart rejoices in the LORD (1 Sam. 2:1)

Mary: ... my spirit rejoices in God my Savior (Luke 1:47)

Hannah: ... for I delight in your deliverance. (1 Sam. 2:1)

Mary: ... holy is his name. (Luke 1:49)

Hannah: There is no one holy like the LORD ... (1 Sam. 2:2)

Mary: He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. (Luke 1:52)

Hannah: The LORD sends poverty and wealth; he humbles and he exalts. He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with princes and has them inherit a throne of honor... (1 Sam.2:7,8 cf. Ps. 113:7,8)

Mary: He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. (Luke 1:53)

Hannah: Those who were full hire themselves out for food, but those who were hungry hunger no more... (1 Sam.2:5)

Another parallel, not as direct as the others, is Mary's statement, "he has scattered those who are proud," (Luke 1:51) with Hannah's statement, "... those who oppose the LORD will be shattered." (1 Sam. 2:10)

Briefly, these inclusions are fairly exact in underlying meaning and intent. Some of them are a little hard to identify as quotations due to changes in language. But I think that there is enough here to suggest that Mary identified herself with this great woman of Israel's history as one to whom the LORD had shown special favor. She knew this in her own case, "... From now on all generations will call me blessed..." (Luke 1:48)

B. Inclusions from other sources

There is another inclusion from the story of Hannah, in an earlier statement, in Hannah's vow.

Mary: ... for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. (Luke 1:48)

Hannah: ... if you will only look upon your servant's misery and remember me... (1 Sam. 1:11)

There are two other inclusions worth mentioning from other parts of the Bible, a psalm and the prophet Isaiah..

Mary: His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. (Luke 1:50)

Psalmist: But from everlasting to everlasting the LORD's love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children's children... (Psalms 103:17; cf. Isa. 51:8)

Mary: He has helped his servant Israel... (Luke 1:54)

Isaiah: "But you, O Israel, my servant... I myself will help you," declares the LORD. (Isa. 41:8,14)

The latter note is struck many times in the Old Testament, the Isaiah passage being only one of them. So is the former, exemplified in Psalm 103.

Contrasts: One immediate contrast is that Hannah spoke of the king at the end, while Mary went back to the promise made to Abraham. Hannah concentrated on the militant power of the LORD in 1 Sam. 2:4-7,9,10. Mary, by contrast, concentrated on the mercy of the Lord in Luke 1:50, returning to that theme in Luke 1:53-55.

IV. Conclusions

From the parallels we have set out, one gains a sense of striking kinship between these songs composed 1100 years apart. The quotations or inclusions create an indelible connection between them. Beyond these, we ask,

Q17: What are the similarities and common themes between the Song of Hannah and the Song of Mary?

Q18: What are the differences?

The Song of Hanna has long been described as the “seedplot” for the Song of Mary, and there is no doubting the relationship. But the eras they lived in impose distinct perspectives on God’s plan, as they each experienced it and expressed it.

The *promise* and the *realization of the promise* are at the heart of the difference between these two remarkably similar songs. The thing that binds the two together despite differences is grace, the LORD’s sovereign intervention in Israel’s history to work His will and achieve His victory. Ultimately, that victory is Christ, to whom both Hannah and Mary, in their different ways, bear witness.

Can we pray this **prayer** together?

Father, we bless you and thank you for your mercy to your people. We thank you for the examples of these two women in their devotion to your will and their obedience to your purposes. Lord, we ask you to increase our confidence in your victory, and grant us strength for the challenges of the coming days in your church, in Jesus’ Name, amen.