

The canticles of Zechariah, Mary and Simeon are carefully placed in Luke's Infancy narrative in a manner that does much to illuminate his theological aims. While the content of the canticles is obviously of great importance, the decision to use material of this provenance at all in his carefully constructed history says much for his debt and gratitude to the original Christian community, which was, of course, Jewish. For Luke, it is the fulfilment of God's promise to the Jews in Jesus that allows the salvation of his Gentile group. It is also possible that the continuing existence in Luke's time of remnants of this group of Jewish Christians, is for Luke's audience, a sign of God's plan that reassures their Gentile Christian community. It was likewise drawn from the most deprived classes and the "poor" act as a model of the kind of community that is possible when reliance on God is all you have. Trumpeting these triumphal Jewish hymns in the face of the destruction of Jerusalem is also an example of Luke's "reversal" thinking. The horror of the sack of Jerusalem and the Temple is added to the shame of Mary's pregnancy and the scandal of Jesus's crucifixion in an overarching gospel beatitude where waiting upon God is the essential hallmark of the Way.

To discuss the theological significance of the canticles in Luke, I will firstly examine their origin within the mix of Second Temple Judaism and then look at the impact each piece makes when inserted into Luke's Gospel.

Structurally, these songs are placed as speeches in characters in the pageant that is Luke's Infancy Narrative. Spong<sup>1</sup> may be overstating the case when he sees these as songs in an actual Jewish Christian religious play, as the habit of inserting speeches into protagonists' mouths was a commonplace of

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<sup>1</sup> John Shelby Spong, *Born of a Woman* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992), 108.

Greco-Roman histories <sup>2</sup>. They are certainly not from the immediate mindset of late first century Gentile Christianity; rather, their concerns bear the hallmarks of Jewish Christian Psalms. They are not essential to the story, which flows rather better without them, and while they suit the Jewish Christian milieu of their tellers, for the most part they do not relate specifically to the situation of the singer. It is reasonable, therefore, to suggest then that they are Pre-Lukan and indeed minimally changed from Luke's sources.<sup>3</sup> Brown<sup>4</sup> notes their similarity to psalms and hymns of Jewish communities from 200 BCE to 100 CE, including those from Qumran. The Benedictus, for example, while containing "a mosaic...of OT and intertestamental phrases and ideas",<sup>5</sup> lacks direct obvious OT parallels<sup>6</sup> and has characteristics that align it with only the later periods of psalms.<sup>7</sup> Yet it resonates well with and shares the concerns of a Qumran Psalm like the Apostrophe to Zion:

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<sup>2</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 13.

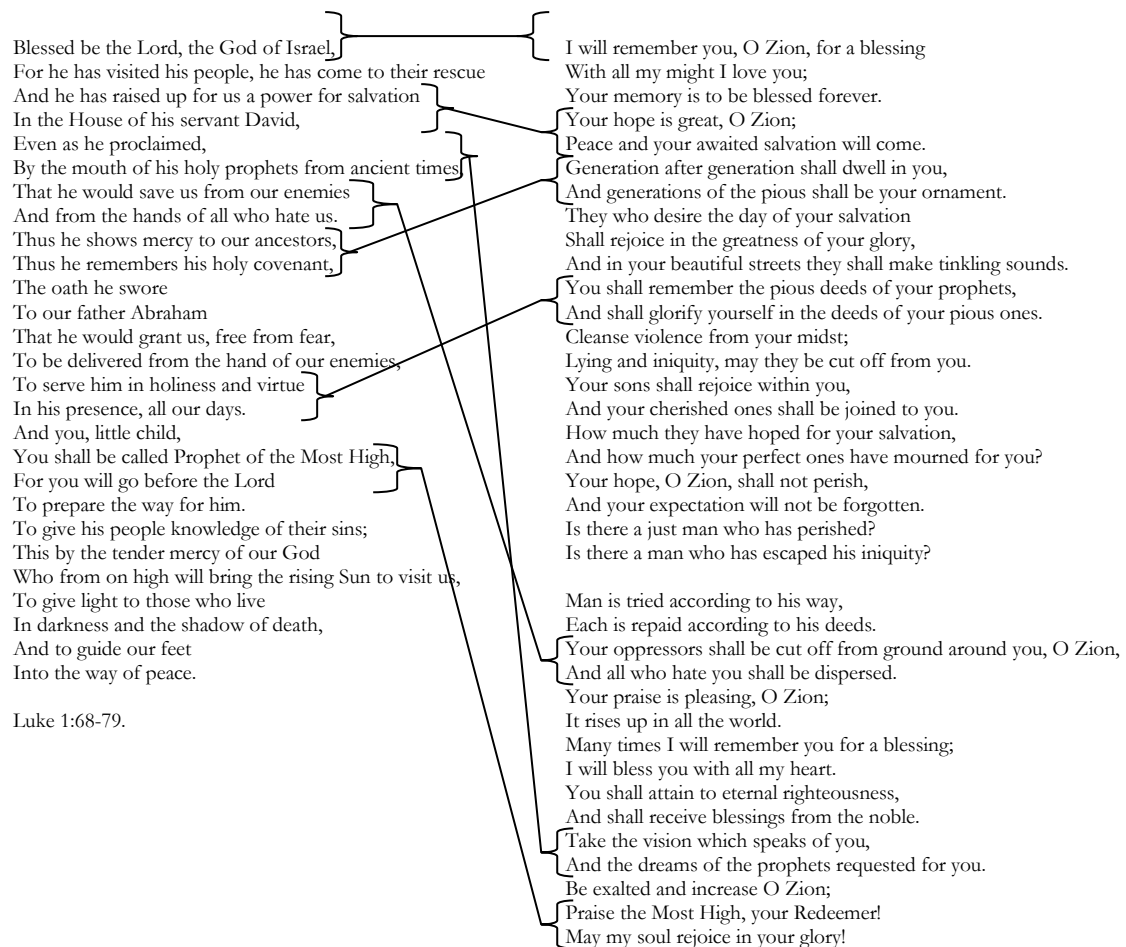
<sup>3</sup> C.T. Ruddick, Jr, "Birth Narratives in Genesis and Luke," *Novum Testamentum* 12 (1970), 343.

<sup>4</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 349.

<sup>5</sup> Brown, *Birth*, 384.

<sup>6</sup> Helmer Ringgren, "Luke's Use of the Old Testament," in George W.E. Nickelsburg and George W. MacRae (eds.), *Essays in Honor of Krister Stendahl* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 232.

<sup>7</sup> Douglas Jones, "The Background and Character of the Lukan Psalms," *Journal of Theological Studies* 19 (1969), 29.



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The similarities in ideas are thrown further into relief with Brown's suggestion that "were an orthodox Jew in our times come to the conclusion that the Messiah had come, I suspect that he could recite the Benedictus (except for vss. 76-7) without any sense of alien composition."<sup>8</sup> The Apostrophe's "will come" becomes the Benedictus's "has come" and you could rewrite the Apostrophe with changed tenses to create a Pseudo-Benedictus. There is also a clear expectation in the Apostrophe in the certainty of God's fidelity, which is recapitulated throughout the whole of Luke's Gospel.

<sup>8</sup> Brown, *Birth*, 353.

These Psalms' origin within Jewish Christianity is a reminder that Israel as a block did not reject Jesus: the original Christians were, after all, just another sect within Second Temple Judaism.<sup>9</sup> The original authors of the canticles certainly saw themselves as redeemed Israel, and Luke putting them in his introduction to his Gospel illustrates his acceptance of Jewish Christians as the basis of the whole Church.<sup>10</sup> At least some Jewish Christians had escaped to Pella prior to the fall of Jerusalem and escaped the slaughter.<sup>11</sup> It is likely they also remained a component of the Diaspora,<sup>12</sup> where Luke would have been inevitably in contact with them.

Further, the origin within Christian Judaism of the canticles has been refined to a Christian branch of the Anawin.<sup>13</sup> With Luke's repeated concern for the marginalised in his Gospel and Acts, this group, which by its very nature was a remnant community, was a natural exemplar for Luke's assembly from within the spectrum of Jewish groups. Its similar concerns would have made their canticles suitable material for Luke to honour by incorporating them into his Gospel. The Anawin were arguably the precursors of the Qumran sectaries and Jewish Christian groups<sup>14</sup> and in many ways the antithesis of the Jews closest to the Temple. The Jewish Christian element of the Anawin tradition would have inherited the same literary background as their Qumran counterparts but would have had to additionally incorporate both their belief in Jesus as a soteriological messiah and their developing acceptance of the Gentile Christians.

In Luke's time they are by their nature one of the Jewish groups who, having less to lose, would be more able to adapt to the loss of the Temple. The remnant

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<sup>9</sup> John Dominic Crossin, *The Birth of Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1998), xxxiii.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen Farris, "The Hymns of Luke's Infancy Narratives" *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* Supplement Series 9 (1985), 159.

<sup>11</sup> Helmut Koester, *History, Culture, and Religion of the Hellenistic Age* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1982), 400.

<sup>12</sup> Brown, *Birth*, 353.

<sup>13</sup> Brown, *Birth*, 352.

<sup>14</sup> Brown, *Birth*, 352.

Jewish Christians scattered around the time of the destruction of Jerusalem to the Middle East and around the Mediterranean would still have gone on being a group wholly reliant on God, having no resources of their own. From Luke's perspective, it is possible that their very survival was a sign of God's fidelity in a real rather than figurative way and their monetary support by the whole Christian community documented by Luke (Acts 11:30, 24:17) and possibly Paul (Gal 2:10) may have had a near sacramental flavour. That their future was to be limited and would appear to indicate God's neglect rather than fidelity is not something Luke could know.

With the temple laid waste, Luke gives Zechariah, the man in whom the blessing from the Temple ritual stops because he was struck dumb, a song that prophesies a way of living that offers a different way of serving God. It is Beatitude writ large to use this Psalm, proclaiming the protection that the God of Israel gives to his people, with the dust of the Temples' destruction still settling. But in the new world after the visitation, the sign of the covenant would not be temple service, nor even the child's circumcision that Zechariah is celebrating, but rather the life of Jesus that will fulfil the prophets by giving them the light to live in holiness and peace. Their whole way of life becomes a replacement for the cultic sacrifices of the temple era.<sup>15</sup> Brown notes that both the early Christian community and the Qumran group saw in "their own history the renewal of God's covenant with Israel."<sup>16</sup> Luke sees his group as sharing in that renewal.

The Benedictus recapitulates themes already expounded in the Magnificat. Reading this psalm divorced from its Marian context, we once again have a song recalling the promise to Abraham, involving an agent of salvation, and extolling

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<sup>15</sup> Warren Carter, "Zechariah and the Benedictus (Luke 1,68-79) Practicing What He Preaches," *Biblica* 69 (1988), 247.

<sup>16</sup> Brown, *Birth*, 385.

God's mercy. The reversal of the Benedictus that delivers Israel from their enemies is extended here to the proud of heart and the rulers of the world (1:51-2). While having a more obvious OT provenance in the Song of Hannah in 1 Sam 2:1-10<sup>17</sup>, it derives from the same thought world as the Benedictus.

To give such a psalm to Mary makes her the "spokesperson of a theme of reversal".<sup>18</sup> Beatitudes form the point where "wisdom ran into apocalyptic,"<sup>19</sup> as the traditional proverbial suggestion that a good life leads to reward is found to be nonsense, a point most obvious to those who are not blessed in this world. Luke finds meaning in the suffering of his community using the reversal of thought found in the Beatitudes. While Jesus' life is the ultimate Beatitude, Mary is herself the subject of a Beatitude (1:45) and 1:52-3 looks forward to the Sermon on the Plain with its exaltation of the powerless. Mary becomes a representative for and perhaps even one of the Anawin<sup>20</sup>, as the "lowliness" (1:48) is indicative of real poverty and powerlessness.<sup>21</sup> Appropriately, the offering at Jesus's presentation at the Temple is that of the poor (Luke 2:24).<sup>22</sup> Mary is therefore a specific link to the real world of pain and service to which Jesus calls his people. She remains a presence into the early community (Acts 1:14) and through her son James's leadership of the Jewish Church. Luke rearranges his Markan source material to put the discussion about who is his real family after the Parable of the Sower (8:19-21) to remove the suggestion in Mark (3:31-5) that his biological family are outside his true kindred. Such efforts show the respect Luke gives to the memory of

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<sup>17</sup> Ringgren, "Luke's Use of the Old Testament," 230.

<sup>18</sup> Raymond E. Brown et al (eds), *Mary in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 143.

<sup>19</sup> John P. Meier, "Matthew 5:3-12," *Interpretation* 44 (1990), 281.

<sup>20</sup> Brown et al, *Mary*, 142.

<sup>21</sup> Johnson, *Luke*, 42.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Fallon, *The Gospel According to Saint Luke* (Kensington, NSW: Chevalier Press, 1997), 54.

Jesus's family. This nostalgia extends to the poor of the first Christian community whom Luke lauds for its sharing in the face of poverty (Acts 2:44-6, 4:32-6).

The Nunc Dimitis makes explicit the consequences for Luke's Gentile Christians of the fulfilment of the Jewish hope. The canticle uses material from throughout second Isaiah <sup>23</sup>to fuel its exultation. Simeon is awaiting the consolation of Israel (2:25) as prophesied in Isaiah 66.<sup>24</sup>

Rejoice, Jerusalem,  
Be glad for her all you who love her!  
Rejoice, rejoice for her,  
All you who mourned her!

That you may be suckled, filled,  
From her consoling breast...

Like a son comforted by his mother  
Will I comfort you.  
(And by Jerusalem you will be comforted.)

Isaiah 66:10,11,13

The "suckling" imagery interestingly recurs in the Apostrophe to Zion, reinforcing the common threads in the expectation of these groups as represented by Luke in Simeon. While less obviously a song in English, linguistic analysis suggests regular Hebrew couplets and that, with the content, argue for the same Jewish Christian milieu as for the other canticles.<sup>25</sup>

Simeon is "the embodiment of the piety of the Anawin".<sup>26</sup> For Luke, he is at the pivot of time where "will send" becomes "has sent" and the promise to Simeon that he will see this, is a microcosm of the fidelity of God to devout Jews. The

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<sup>23</sup> Brendan Byrne, *The Hospitality of God* (Strathfield, NSW: St Pauls, 2000), 35.

<sup>24</sup> Steven F. Plymale, "The Prayer of Simeon (Luke 2:29-32)," in James H. Charlesworth (ed) *The Lord's Prayer and Other Prayer Texts from the Greco-Roman Era* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press, 1994), 29.

<sup>25</sup> Plymale, "Simeon", 30.

<sup>26</sup> Brown, *Birth*, 452.

canticle itself says nothing of a Jewish rejection of Jesus.<sup>27</sup> Simeon's prophecy that follows the canticle, of Jesus causing "the fall and for the rising of many in Israel," (2:34) uses suffering and resurrection terminology to underline the nature of the salvation Jesus has brought the Jews.<sup>28</sup> Simeon's prophecy also may look forward to the dissension over the extension of God's promises to the Jews to the Gentiles as chronicled by Luke in Acts 15. The song takes the light from the Benedictus (1:78) and has it shine on pagans, in the first Lucan statement of universality of salvation.

Riesner<sup>29</sup> finds early and surprising patristic tradition for identification of this Simeon with that mentioned in James's speech in Acts 15:14, rather than Simon Peter. James, a link to the singers of the canticles through his mother and her cousin's husband, is given a speech that includes the Gentiles in God's plan from Amos 9:11-2 in a form corresponding to that in the Damascus scroll.<sup>30</sup> This links the Lucan source material about the acceptance of the saving of Gentiles to the same milieu as the canticles, suggesting a process by which those Jews who accept the outreach to the Gentiles are mining their heritage to assimilate the existence of the Gentile Christian phenomenon.

The theology of the canticles themselves is that of a Jewish Christian group steeped in the Anawin principles of waiting on the Lord, who believed that in Jesus, God had visited and redeemed Israel. It appears Luke has appropriated this material from the Jamesian successors of the Jerusalem Church who would have retained a lower Christology than the Pauline Church on the one hand, while being

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<sup>27</sup> Farris, "Hymns", 159.

<sup>28</sup> Fallon, *Luke*, 55.

<sup>29</sup> Rainer Riesner, "James's Speech (Acts 15:13-21), Simeon's Hymn (Luke 2:29-32), and Luke's Sources," in Joel B. Green and Max Turner (eds), *Jesus of Nazareth: Lord and Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: William E. Eerdmans, 1994), 266.

<sup>30</sup> Riesner, "James's Speech," 271.



barred from the synagogue on the other.<sup>31</sup> Despite their differences from Luke's community, the use of these songs indicates a reverence for the original community who have, by recognising Jesus, opened the way for the salvation of the whole world. Luke makes use of that communities' search in its traditions for understanding of the opening up of God's promise to all. The placement of the canticles by Luke opens up layers of beatitudes that redeem the suffering of Mary and the family of Jesus, that of Jesus himself and through the early Jewish Church to the pain endured by the lowest social strata that made up the Church in Luke's time.

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<sup>31</sup> Karen Armstrong, *A History of God* (London: Mandarin, 1993), 108.

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