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## **My Soul Magnifies the Lord: Luther's Hermeneutic of Humility**

**Arthur A. Just Jr.**

The story of the Reformation cannot be told without recognizing that Martin Luther was first and foremost a biblical scholar, a professor of the Bible at Wittenberg, whose lectures on the Psalms and on the books of Romans and Galatians led him to recognize the need for radical changes in the church catholic. The Reformation reformed how the Scriptures were being interpreted, and Luther's clear-eyed hermeneutic of justification by grace through faith was the battering ram that opened the Scriptures to reveal Christ as the primary context of both the Old and New Testaments.

It seems appropriate that an examination of Luther's contributions to Reformation exegesis include a contemplation of his magisterial treatise on Mary's Magnificat in Luke's gospel. Written in 1521, it closely follows three famous treatises of 1520: *To the Christian Nobility* on social reform, the *Babylonian Captivity* on the sacraments, and *Freedom of a Christian* on Christian life.<sup>1</sup> Luther wrote his treatise on the Magnificat to Prince John Frederick, the son of Elector John of Saxony and nephew of Frederick the Wise, as an expression of gratitude to the young duke upon receiving a letter of support from him. Luther had just received the papal bull *Exsurge Domine* that would lead to his excommunication from the church. The young seventeen-year-old prince encouraged Luther to keep on preaching, teaching, and writing, which, of course, Luther did. These were stressful days for Luther, and one of his many virtues was his capacity to continue to preach, teach, and write under great duress, even while physically sick, even during bouts of depression. Luther wrote this treatise between November 1520 and September 1521, during which time he was distracted by such events as the Diet of Worms, his excommunication, and his abduction by Frederick the Wise to the Wartburg, where he took refuge. These were trying times, indeed, for Luther!

Luther's treatise on the Magnificat opens up many possibilities for comment and reflection. Some use this treatise to encourage, even promote, a higher form of Mariology among Lutherans since it is here that Luther affirms the perpetual

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Hagen, "Luther, Martin (1483–1546)" in *Historical Handbook of Major Biblical Interpreters*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 214.

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virginity of Mary and her sinlessness.<sup>2</sup> Luther even appears to invoke her at the beginning and the end of the treatise. In Luther's dedication:

May the tender Mother of God herself procure for me the spirit of wisdom, profitably and thoroughly to expound this song of hers, so that your Grace as well as we all may draw therefrom wholesome knowledge and a praiseworthy life, and thus come to chant and sing this Magnificat eternally in heaven. To this may God help us. Amen.<sup>3</sup>

In Luther's concluding words:

We pray God to give us a right understanding of this Magnificat, an understanding that consists not merely in brilliant words, but in glowing life in body and soul. May Christ grant us this through the intercession and for the sake of His dear Mother Mary. Amen.<sup>4</sup>

As tempting as it might be to devote time to unpacking whether this commentary "should be viewed as a catholic work or as a Reformation work," or whether this shows "Luther as a medieval theologian whose Mariology, typical of the age, was lost in later Lutheranism,"<sup>5</sup> I will resist this temptation. Those who are interested in this perspective can examine an evenhanded essay by Donal Flanagan in which he deconstructs Luther's Mariology from his Roman Catholic perspective and concludes that Luther's exposition of the Magnificat demonstrates an effort to "purify and renew" the traditional Marian piety Luther inherited from his medieval training as an Augustinian monk.<sup>6</sup> Flanagan comments about Luther's invocation of Mary in the dedication and conclusion of his treatise on the Magnificat, cited above, in this manner:

Luther here [in the dedication] clearly speaks of the tender Mother of God obtaining wisdom for him. He prays that she may do so. He does so, however, as if to avoid any misunderstanding of her role, and in a short and significant

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther, "The Magnificat" (1521); vol. 21, pp. 295–355, in *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–1976); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–1986); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009–), hereafter AE: "She does not want you to come to her, but through her to God" (323); "Mary also freely ascribes all to God's grace, not to her merit. For though she was without sin, yet that grace was far too great for her to deserve it in any way" (327); "We ought to call upon her, that for her sake God may grant and do what we request. Thus also all other saints are to be invoked, so that the work may be every way God's alone" (329).

<sup>3</sup> Luther, "The Magnificat" (1521), AE 21:298.

<sup>4</sup> Luther, "The Magnificat" (1521), AE 21:355.

<sup>5</sup> Hagen, "Luther, Martin (1483–1546)," 214.

<sup>6</sup> Donal Flanagan, *Luther on the Magnificat* (Wallington, Surrey: The Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary, 2001), 17.

sentence at the end of his prayer: "To this may God help us. Amen." This is presumably to ensure that people see Mary's role correctly and understand that any gift is God's gift, not hers.

The last sentences in the Commentary use equally clear words in speaking of the intercession of Mary, but again this intercession is not something which Luther views or even writes about in isolation. The marian invocation is set within a prayer directed to God, and Christ is explicitly named as the one who is to grant the favour asked—a right understanding of the Magnificat.<sup>7</sup>

There is also a temptation to engage in the current debate concerning whether this is Elizabeth's canticle or Mary's.<sup>8</sup> I will resist the temptation to address this fully as well. But in my commentary on Luther's hermeneutic of humility, I will affirm my belief that this is Mary's song. It is, therefore, this theme—Luther's hermeneutic of humility—to which we now turn.

### I. Did Luther Have a Hermeneutic?

"Did Luther have a hermeneutic?" This question is worth asking. Kenneth Hagan, who opens up for us Luther's way of interpreting the Scriptures, suggests that Luther did not have a hermeneutic:

Technically, Luther did not have a hermeneutic because hermeneutics is a nineteenth-century discipline that presupposes the distance of the biblical text and the need for the interpreter to bridge the gap and make any interpretive moves necessary to bring the text into modern linguistic jargon understandable in post-Enlightenment philosophy.<sup>9</sup>

For Luther, Scripture could not be removed from its place in the liturgical life of his church. Luther may not have had a hermeneutic as it is defined today, but he did have an approach to Scripture that was theological, pastoral, and that could not be divorced from his life in the church as preacher, teacher, and writer. Mickey Mattox describes Luther's approach to Scripture this way:

[Luther] always encountered the text as a baptized Christian. Charged with responsibility for preaching on a regular basis (usually several times each week), biblical exegesis remained for him a spiritual exercise performed in service to God and the church, a task for which one was fitted by the Holy Spirit

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<sup>7</sup> Flanagan, *Luther on the Magnificat*, 16.

<sup>8</sup> See Jeffrey Kloha, "Elizabeth's Magnificat (Luke 1:46)," in *Texts and Traditions: Essays in Honour of J. Keith Elliott*, ed. Peter Doble and Jeffrey Kloha (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2014), 200–219.

<sup>9</sup> Hagen, "Luther, Martin (1483–1546)," 218.

and by a living faith, given in baptism. . . . His classroom exposition slowly evolved from monastic meditation on the “sacred page” (*sacra pagina*)—in which prayer and exegesis were inseparable—toward something more akin to modern university lectures. . . . The consistent linkage between prayer and Scripture is one of the important links between Luther’s biblical interpretation and the patristic traditions of “spiritual exegesis.”<sup>10</sup>

Is it possible to have a hermeneutic when there is no distance from the interpreter and the sacred page of Holy Writ as was the case with Luther? To approach the Scriptures as holy, as intended for preaching and teaching in the context of the church’s life, to come to the Scriptures in prayer, meditation, and temptation (*oratio, meditatio, tentatio*) is to come in faith, as a baptized believer seeking theological meaning from a sacred page that speaks directly to the heart.<sup>11</sup> Luther’s discipline of the sacred page “goes counter to much of modern effort to see Luther as the first Enlightenment figure.”<sup>12</sup> With respect to how Luther approached the Scriptures, he continues the tradition in which he was nurtured as an Augustinian monk. Such a discipline is both pastoral and theological, which is why many today who yearn to return *ad fontes* find in Luther a refreshing approach to the art of interpretation. Kenneth Hagen summarizes it this way:

It is often assumed that Luther ended the medieval approach to the Bible and started the modern methods, but Luther approached Scripture in a manner appropriate to what the document is (*sacra pagina*). Luther did not superimpose his agenda onto Scripture; he took out and applied the message of Scripture as he claimed to do and thus was consistent with the grammar and vocabulary of Scripture.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Mickey L. Mattox, “Luther, Martin,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kenneth J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 471–472.

<sup>11</sup> See Mattox, “Luther, Martin,” 472, who also accents both the *sacra pagina* and *oratio, meditatio, tentatio*: “Asked how to pray, Luther showed his indebtedness to the *sacra pagina*, instinctively directing the questioner to the Bible. Prayer is human address to God, centered in the Spirit-inspired application of all one’s powers to the biblical text, searching for authentic spiritual illumination. This illumination is inevitably followed, however, by testing, the trials faced by the struggling Christian. These trials drive one back to prayer, back to the text, and so on, in a lifelong cycle of prayer, meditation, and temptation (*oratio, meditatio, tentatio*). As the Holy Spirit works in unflinching agreement with Christ, the Word of God, so spiritual experience is tethered to the word in Holy Scripture.”

<sup>12</sup> Hagen, “Luther, Martin (1483–1546),” 219.

<sup>13</sup> Hagen, “Luther, Martin (1483–1546),” 215. He adds this: “What the scholastics separated— theology and commentary on Scripture—Luther sought to bring together again along the lines of *sacra pagina*. Scripture alone is the sole authority for the church, the disciple of theology and the life of faith. Luther continued the call for the reform of the church on the basis of Scripture. Every office and activity in the church falls under the judgment of Scripture. God has revealed all that we

This movement back to a “Lutheran” approach to Scripture that is premodern, even patristic, has characterized the interpretive approach to the “sacred page” of several who teach at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne.<sup>14</sup> This movement gave birth to the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (ACCS)<sup>15</sup> and now the *Reformation Commentary on Scripture* (RCS).<sup>16</sup> The recovery of an organic biblical theology from our patristic roots in the ACCS and our Reformation roots in the RCS is an attempt to return to the exegesis of our spiritual fathers in the church. As editors of these commentaries, our goal was simple: to compile in one volume the consensual exegesis of the church. Much of the best exegetical commentary comes from pastoral writings, particularly the sermons, homilies, letters, and catechetical lectures of the church fathers, for the exegesis of both the early church and our Reformation fathers was pastoral and theological.

Over twenty years ago, Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson compiled a series of essays entitled *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church*, and their concern still obtains today, especially as we celebrate our Reformation heritage in 2017, and even more, in a culture that is losing its moorings to the biblical faith. As they asserted,

What needs to be claimed for the church is the Bible as authoritative Scripture. There is loss of confidence in the ability of the church to read the Bible through the eyes of its own faith and in light of its own exegetical and liturgical traditions.<sup>17</sup>

Here Luther can show us the way with this “discipline of the sacred page” that is practiced in communities of faith that gather around font, pulpit, and altar to be hearers of the word, to pray, to receive Christ’s body and blood, and that are led by pastors whose hermeneutic in preparing for preaching is *oratio, meditatio, tentatio*.<sup>18</sup> Aidan Kavanagh captures how the Bible, to be interpreted as it was intended to be interpreted, must be seen as first and foremost “the sacred page”

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need to know about God in Christ. Theology must be biblical theology; any other kind is human invention.”

<sup>14</sup> For example, see Arthur A. Just Jr., *Luke 1:1–9:50*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1996), 206, where in the catch of fish and Peter’s call in Luke 5:1–11, the “boat” represents the church, in keeping with Luther’s allegorization of the miracle.

<sup>15</sup> For example, see Arthur A. Just Jr., ed., *Luke*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 89.

<sup>16</sup> For example, see Beth Kreitzer, ed., *Luke*, Reformation Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015), 113.

<sup>17</sup> Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, eds., *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), x.

<sup>18</sup> See Luther, “Preface to the Wittenberg Edition of Luther’s Writings” (1539), AE 34:285–287.

written for communities that believe Christ is present bodily as the word is read, preached, and celebrated:

The Word gets *written* within communities that regard the Word worshipfully. This means that rather than being Scripture's stepchild, worship is Scripture's home. Thus worship is not merely a function of Scripture; together, both Scripture and worship are a function of the Word spoken and received. Neither Scripture nor worship is *about* God; they are *of* God, each in its own proper way. They are strictly correlative; neither can exist without the other. To take a lead from Luther, if the authority of Scripture arises from its being the cradle in which Christ lies, then Christian worship is, in Samuel Terrien's phrase, the liturgy of the Word that pervades the Scriptures and is incarnate in the living Christ. And what Christ is by nature, his Body the church is by grace, particularly in its worship, where his Spirit flourishes.<sup>19</sup>

The expression *sacra pagina*, "discipline of the sacred page," not only captures Luther's approach to the Scriptures, but it also leads us to consider how this is to be the very hermeneutic we are to use in our own exegesis. But what does this "discipline of the sacred page" look like? Having argued that Luther does not have a hermeneutic in the modern sense of the term, it would be misguided to try and list Luther's hermeneutical principles. Kenneth Hagen, who, with Mickey Mattox, repeatedly uses the language of "sacred page," summarizes the major themes of Luther's exegesis:

Luther was concerned to place the Bible in the center of everything: church, theology and especially preaching . . . The Reformation was a movement of the Word: Christ, Scripture and preaching—in that order. . . . Luther was pre-modern; he continued the general medieval understanding of interpretation as commentary, annotation and exposition. . . . Luther emphasized that Scripture is its own interpreter. . . . The doctrine of justification by faith is the criterion by which all other doctrines, offices and practices in the church are judged. . . . Basic to Luther's understanding of Scripture was his distinction between law and gospel. . . . The center of Scripture for Luther is Christ, present in both the Old and New Testaments. . . . Luther's distinction is his construction of Scripture as containing a single testament (will, promise) of Christ. . . . The word *testament* is a short summary of all God's grace fulfilled in Christ.

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<sup>19</sup> Aidan Kavanagh, "Scriptural Word and Liturgical Worship," in *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church*, 131–132 (emphasis Kavanagh). He says a similar thing in *The Shape of Baptism: The Rite of Christian Initiation* (New York: Pueblo, 1978), xiii: "The written texts of the Christian bible, as they emerged, entered into worship patterns that were already established—especially in the synagogal, paschal, and domestic usages of Judaism which the earliest Christians continued to employ even as they began to fill them with a new content. The liturgy is scripture's home rather than its stepchild, and the Hebrew and Christian bibles were the Church's first liturgical books."



... Promise, one ingredient in the category of testament, is God's announcement of redemption. ... The second ingredient in testament is Luther's theology of the Word. The Word is the dynamic manifestation of the person of God. ... The third part of Luther's testament theology is a theology of the cross. ... The fourth aspect of Luther's theology of testament is grace. Grace for Luther is unilateral gift. ... The fifth [and final] aspect of testament is faith or trust in the inheritance.<sup>20</sup>

Hagen's summary captures all the great themes in Luther's exegesis that became the foundation for how Lutherans interpret the Scriptures.

## II. The *Sensus Literalis* Is Christ

One aspect of Luther's interpretive approach to the sacred page that we have not accented thus far is his desire to get at the *sensus literalis* of the text, its one intended meaning, especially for the first-century audience. This accent of *sensus literalis* in Luther goes back to Aquinas and the scholastic method of interpreting the Bible. Terence Keegan, a Roman Catholic, points out the ramifications of the scholastic accent on the literal meaning of the text in his *Interpreting the Bible: A Popular Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics*. In the process, Keegan comments on our own hermeneutical world:

St. Thomas' insistence on the literal sense excluded allegorical interpretation but did not exclude recognizing that the Bible often employs metaphorical or figurative language. When the language used is figurative, then the literal sense is the figurative sense. As a result, the literal sense was much richer than a sense that could be derived simply from a literal reading of the text. So rich was the literal sense for St. Thomas that it could only be discovered when the Scriptures were read in the light of the traditions of the Church.

Scholastic theology left the Christian world with a single-minded concern for the literal, historical sense of Scripture, a concern which remains manifest among most Christians right up to the present day. Scholastic theology had another, less fortunate, consequence. The rigorous methodology developed under the influence of Aristotelian philosophy eventually degenerated into the practice of proof-texting, searching the Scriptures for texts whose literal sense supports or proves doctrines that one accepts independent of their scriptural foundation, a practice which likewise continues to the present day.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Hagen, "Luther, Martin (1483–1546)," 215–218.

<sup>21</sup> Terence Keegan, *Interpreting the Bible: A Popular Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 17.

Luther embraced this richer, deeper sense of the literal meaning of the text that read the Scriptures in the context of the church's life, that is, in the discipline of the "sacred page," which is one way of thinking of the tradition. Luther was no scholastic, and even a casual reading of Luther's exegesis shows that he did not apply a rigid hermeneutical method to the text, even though as a biblical scholar and a linguist, fluent in the biblical languages, his exegesis always flowed out of the grammar of the "sacred page." Mickey Mattox affirms this as well as Luther's christological and ecclesial sensibilities in his comments on Luther's interpretive method, especially in his translation of Scripture:

Luther also insisted that interpretation centers on the plain meaning of the text (*sensus literalis*). Understanding requires attention to biblical languages and to history, a conviction he shared with other early modern biblical humanists. Indeed, working with the Wittenberg translation team, what he called his "Sanhedrin," he translated the entire Bible from Greek and Hebrew into German, a process that necessitated careful attention to grammar and history in order to discern the sense of the text. However, translation, and with it interpretation, is a distinctively Christian task, a work of the Spirit and of the mind shaped by Christian truth. Grammatical and historical knowledge alone are insufficient. Translation and interpretation depend on understanding not only the words of Scripture (*verba*) but also the substance (*res scripturae sacrae*). The reader dare not bracket out Christian beliefs when grappling with a difficult text, either for translation or for interpretation.

Luther often spoke negatively of allegorical interpretation, but his own exegesis remained strikingly sensitive to allegorical and tropological resonances in Scripture, particularly those that could be applied to Christ and faith. The *sensus literalis* is Christ, for the Scriptures are the "swaddling cloths" in which the Christ-child is laid. Interpretation is Christocentric because the text unflinchingly witnesses to the redemption accomplished by Christ.<sup>22</sup>

### III. Luther's Hermeneutic of Humility

So what does this have to do with Mary's Magnificat and Luther's hermeneutic of humility? It is in *The Magnificat* from 1521, written during the troubled days of

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<sup>22</sup> Mattox, "Luther, Martin," 472. See also Hagen, "Luther, Martin (1483–1546)," 217, who affirms that the *sensus literalis* for Luther was Christ: "Luther's response to the various senses of meaning in the Middle Ages (fourfold, double-literal) was that Scripture has one simple sense (most often, Christ). Or Luther will talk about the grammatical sense as the meaning of the text, that the grammatical meaning and theological meaning are the same. Luther availed himself of humanist scholarship and was a part of a late medieval trend to highlight (once again) the christological meaning of a text. Luther also used allegory, not to establish a doctrine but to embellish it. He also used the other spiritual senses."

the Diet of Worms, excommunication, and hiding at the Wartburg, where we see Luther's understanding that the *sensus literalis* of Mary's words is Christ. The substance of Scripture, its *res scripturae sacrae*, is found in Mary's low estate, her nothingness, her humility. Luther's "hermeneutic" of humility is forged in this treatise to Prince John Frederick. The key, then, to Luther's interpretation of the "sacred page" is that the *sensus literalis* of the text is Christ and the theology of the cross.

Mary's Magnificat responds to the praise of Elizabeth by declaring "that all the glory is due to God: this is the theme of the *Magnificat*."<sup>23</sup> In good Hebraic synonymous parallelism, Mary sings that her soul magnifies the Lord and her spirit rejoices in God her Savior. Beginning with the highest of doxologies, Mary teaches us the reason we were created: to praise God. "Theology is Doxology. Theology must sing,"<sup>24</sup> said Martin Franzmann, and that is what Mary does as she announces the great themes of Luke's gospel in her hymn that praises God for his mighty acts of salvation. Dare we say that this is Mary's hermeneutic, that theology is doxology, that theology must sing? The Lord is magnified because the births of Jesus and John are interpreted as acts of mercy. Perhaps this is what Luther means when he describes the threefold purpose of the Magnificat:

Just as a book title indicates what is the contents of the book, so this word "magnifies" is used by Mary to indicate what her hymn of praise is to be about, namely, the great works and deeds of God, for the strengthening of our faith, for the comforting of all those of low degree, and for the terrifying of all the mighty ones of earth. We are to let the hymn serve this threefold purpose; *for she sang it not for herself alone but for us all, to sing it after her*.<sup>25</sup>

That last line—"for she sang it not for herself alone but for us all, to sing it after her"—is why this cannot be Elizabeth's canticle.<sup>26</sup> For all that might be said about

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<sup>23</sup> John McHugh, *The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1975), 73.

<sup>24</sup> Martin H. Franzmann, *Ha! Ha! Among the Trumpets* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966), 92.

<sup>25</sup> Luther, "The Magnificat" (1521), AL 21:306 (emphasis added).

<sup>26</sup> The issue that the Magnificat is Elizabeth's and not Mary's has been promulgated by Jeffrey Kloha in his essay "Elizabeth's Magnificat (Luke 1:46)." He makes a case that the original text simply had *καὶ εἶπεν* (which very well may be the original reading), that Elizabeth is grammatically the natural antecedent, that Mary was added because of a growing Mariology within the church, and that there is more textual support for Elizabeth than many admit (especially Irenaeus and Nicetas of Remesiana, on whom Kloha wrote his doctoral thesis). Kloha does acknowledge that the textual evidence is overwhelmingly in favor of Mary. The best reason to take Elizabeth is because it is the more difficult reading. He makes a case stylistically, as well, which is the strength of his article. The weakest part of his argument is an attempt to demonstrate within Luke's gospel that Elizabeth is the better choice thematically and theologically. What he misses is Luke's portrayal of Mary as Israel, temple, and ark. In fact, an underlying concern throughout the essay is his concern

Luther's traditional, medieval Marian piety, he understands that in Luke's gospel, Mary personifies Israel, she is the first catechumen, she is the church. Even more, Luther would resonate with Luke's portrayal of Mary first as Israel, then as the temple, and finally as the ark of the covenant.

This portrayal of Mary as Israel, temple, and ark is in service to Luke's greater themes—that there has been a shift in the locale of God's presence from the temple in Jerusalem and the word in the synagogue to the virgin Mary because of what is now present in her womb—Jesus, the Great One, Son of the Most High, King over the house of David and Jacob, the Holy One, Son of God. These are the various designations the angel Gabriel uses to catechize Mary about the child begotten in her. This invasive act in her womb, through her ear by the voice of Gabriel and the Spirit of God, causes Mary to sing a hymn that praises God precisely because the child in her womb is the greatest demonstration of God's "hermeneutic of humility."

This is Luke's theme of the Great Reversal, where God breaks what is whole and makes whole what is broken.<sup>27</sup> The infancy narrative proclaims the full ramification of the incarnation for the cosmos, and how the Christ child and his messianic program comes to make all things new in all humbleness and poverty and suffering. This is why the Magnificat could never be Elizabeth's hymn. For only Mary, the mother of God, the personification of Israel and the personification of the church, could announce that Jesus comes to scatter the arrogant in the imagination of their hearts, to pull down the mighty from their thrones, to exalt those of low degree, to fill the hungry with good things, to send the rich away empty. To see these acts of reversal as expressions of God's mercy is at the heart of Luther's commentary on the Magnificat, for, as he says, "How can one know God better than in the works in which He is most Himself?"<sup>28</sup>

In the humility of the child in Mary's womb, God restores man back to himself in mercy. Thus, for Luther, the interpretation of the Magnificat must be christological, as it centers on how God enters our cosmos in order to bring us back into communion with him through the fleshly, bodily presence of Christ in a grand act of reversal on the cross and then in the cruciform lives of those who daily take up that cross and follow him. Our way back to God is "in Christ" (*ἐν Χριστῷ*), in humility, through his body, conceived in the mother of God who, in bearing the child in her womb, is Israel, temple, and ark. What other reason does she have to magnify the Lord, to rejoice in God her Savior? As Luther said, "She sang it not for

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for the elevation of Mary, and that to place Elizabeth as the singer of the song counters a Mariology that he believes led to the designation of this canticle as Marian.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Luther, "The Magnificat" (1521), AE 21:299.

<sup>28</sup> Luther, "The Magnificat" (1521), AE 21:332.

herself alone but for us all, to sing it after her," which is what we do as the church when we gather to praise God in evening prayer.

*Mary as Israel, Temple, and Ark*

Luke describes his gospel as a systematic narrative whose purpose is kerygmatic. His first demonstration of both its systematic and its kerygmatic character is in his development of Mary as the corporate personality of Israel.

Mary is first alerted to the radical change in her life when the angel Gabriel greets her in Nazareth. The exact form of the greeting addressed to Mary in Luke 1:28 is χαῖρε (rejoice), addressed to the "daughter of Zion" twice in the Septuagint (Zeph 3:14 and Zech 9:9).<sup>29</sup> John McHugh notes that "the imperative form χαῖρε, far from being a conventional greeting, always refers to the joy attendant on the deliverance of Israel; wherever it occurs, it is a translation of a Hebrew verb meaning 'Rejoice greatly!'"<sup>30</sup> McHugh goes on to note that

[Zephaniah] envisages the day of salvation as already begun, and calls upon the Daughter of Zion to rejoice with all her heart, not to fear, because the Lord is with her, as her king and saviour. This is exactly the message of the angel in Lk 1:28–33: Luke envisages the two Annunciations as the dawning of the day of salvation (Lk 1:77–79), and Gabriel therefore tells Mary to rejoice, not to fear, because the Lord is with her, and because she will bear within her womb a son who will be the king of Israel and its saviour.<sup>31</sup>

The second element of Gabriel's tripartite greeting (Luke 1:28) is the statement that Mary is κεχαριτωμένη, "She who has been shown grace, she who has been favored." The Vulgate's rendering, *gratia plena*, "full of grace," even if "full" is overstated, may be rightly understood in the sense of "unmerited grace received from God," but the *passive* Greek participle and the context are abused if interpreted as "grace now available to give others." As Lenski says, "Mary is a vessel to receive, not a fountain to dispense."<sup>32</sup> Equally wrong would be "grace merited." Luther's

<sup>29</sup> The only other two occurrences of χαῖρε in the LXX are in Joel: θάρσει, γῆ, χαῖρε καὶ εὐφραίνου (2:21), where τέκνα Σιων appears in 2:23, and in Lamentations, where the daughter of Edom is told to rejoice (in irony?) in 4:21 and the daughter of Zion is addressed in 4:22 (cf. H. Conzelmann, χαίρω κτλ., in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 10 vols. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–1976], 9:367). Therefore all the occurrences in the LXX of this form of the imperative are at least in proximity to the theme of the daughter of Zion.

<sup>30</sup> McHugh, *The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament*, 38–39. He cites Isa 66:10, 14; Jer 31:13 (38:13); Bar 4:37; Hab 3:18; Zech 4:10; 10:7.

<sup>31</sup> McHugh, *The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament*, 41–42.

<sup>32</sup> R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Luke's Gospel 1–11* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, reprint 1961), 62.

treatise on the Magnificat makes this abundantly clear, even as he embraces a traditional Marian piety:

Mary also freely ascribes all to God's grace, not to her merit. For though she was without sin, yet that grace was far too great for her to deserve it in any way. How should a creature deserve to become the Mother of God? Though certain scribblers make much ado about her worthiness for such motherhood, I prefer to believe her rather than them.<sup>33</sup>

The third and final part of the angel's initial greeting, "The Lord is with you" (Luke 1:28), is the first in a series of statements about the presence of God with his people. The Lord is with Mary (Luke 1:28) in two senses. He will come upon her and overshadow her, and the presence of the Lord will be in her womb. The new era of salvation begins with the conception of Jesus in Mary by the gracious action of God upon Mary, who finds favor with God—not due to any superiority over other women or any merit in God's estimation, but simply because of God's good pleasure (cf. Luke 10:21). Thus, the angel says, "Rejoice," for Israel—humanity—is now to be reborn through the Son in Mary's womb. The Lord is with Mary; he is with his church. Mary is the new Israel.

After Mary hears the word of the angel and conceives the child in Luke 1:35, the angel tells her that what she has conceived in her womb "will be holy; he will be called Son of God" (Luke 1:35, my translation). What first strikes us is that this child is the "Son of God," balancing the first designation by the angel calling him Jesus, which, we know from Matthew's Gospel means "he will save his people from their sins" (Matt 1:21). What we sometimes miss is the title *holy*. God is holy. He dwells in the temple, in the Holy of Holies. Mary's womb is now the *sanctum sanctorum*, "the Holy of Holies" because the shift in the locale of God's presence is complete. God is present in the temple in Jerusalem and he is also present in the temple of Mary's womb in Nazareth. Mary knows this, which is why she sings, "The Mighty One has done great things to me, and holy is his name" (Luke 1:49, my translation).

John McHugh notes an interesting series of parallels between Mary's journey to the hill country of Judah and the movement of the ark of the covenant to the same locale on its way to Jerusalem. In these parallels, Luke is showing that Mary, as a temporary and portable vessel housing the immanent presence of the true God, fulfills the purpose of the ark of the covenant:

The two stories open with the statement that David and Mary "arose and made a journey" (2 Sam 6:2; Lk 1:39) up into the hill country, into the land of Judah. On arrival, both the Ark and Mary are greeted with "shouts" of joy (2 Sam 6:12,

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<sup>33</sup> Luther, "The Magnificat" (1521), AE 21:327.

15; Lk 1:42, 44). The verb used for Elizabeth's greeting in Lk 1:42 (ἀνεφώνησεν) is, in the Septuagint, used only in connection with liturgical ceremonies centered round the Ark; it is best translated as "intoned." The Ark, on its way to Jerusalem, was taken into the house of Obededom, and became a source of blessing for his house (2 Sam 6:10–12); Mary's entry into the house of Elizabeth is also seen as a source of blessing for the house (Lk 1:41, 43–4). David, in terror at the untouchable holiness of the Ark, cried out: "How shall the Ark of the Lord come to me?" (2 Sam 6:9); Elizabeth, in awe before the mother of her Lord, says, "Why should this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (Lk 1:43). Finally, we read that "the Ark of the Lord remained in the house of Obededom three months" (2 Sam 6:11), and that Mary stayed with Elizabeth "about three months" (Lk 1:56).<sup>34</sup>

The Magnificat is Mary's response to this extraordinary reality she now knows about herself because of the child in her womb: she is Israel, temple, and ark. Such sentiments became embedded in the liturgy and piety of the ancient church, as is reflected in this hymn to Mary by Theophanes, a hymnographer and bishop of Nicaea from AD 842–845, in his Canon of Annunciation:

Theotokos: The descent of the Holy Spirit has purified my soul; it has sanctified my body; it has made me a temple containing God, a divinely adorned tabernacle, a living sanctuary and the pure mother of life.

The angel: I see you as a lamp with many lights; a bridal chamber made by God! Spotless maiden, as an ark of gold, receive now the gift of the law, who through you has been pleased to deliver humankind's corrupted nature!<sup>35</sup>

When the infant Lord comes to his temple, Simeon prophecies to Mary: "Behold, this child is destined for the fall and resurrection of many in Israel, and for a sign spoken against, and of you yourself, through your soul a sword will go, in order that the thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed" (Luke 2:34–35).<sup>36</sup> There are three interpretations of the sword passing through Mary's soul (καὶ σοῦ αὐτῆς τὴν ψυχὴν διελύσεται ῥομφαία). One interpretation accents Mary's sorrow at the crucifixion of her son. Another brings out the idea that she (like the other disciples) has misunderstood Jesus' destiny.<sup>37</sup> The more likely possibility, corresponding with

<sup>34</sup> McHugh, *The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament*, 62.

<sup>35</sup> Arthur A. Just Jr., ed, *Luke*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press: 2003), 19.

<sup>36</sup> Translation mine; see Arthur A. Just Jr., *Luke 1:1–9:50*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1996), 114.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 1992), 117, and Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I–IX*, *Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1982), 429–430, who state both interpretations, but opt for the second.

Luke's earlier portrayal of Mary as the personification of Israel, sees the sword as God's revelation in Jesus' words and deeds throughout his ministry:

The meaning of Simeon's prophecy, therefore, is that the word of revelation brought by Jesus will pass through Israel like a sword, and will compel men to reveal their secret thoughts. Thus, just as Jesus will fulfil the prophecy of Is 49:6 by being "light bringing revelation to the Gentiles" (Lk 2:32), so he will fulfil the role assigned to the Servant of Yahweh in Is 49:2, for his message will be felt as a sharp sword.<sup>38</sup>

This interpretation clarifies Luke's statement in 2:35 that a sword will go thorough Mary's soul "in order that the thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed" (*ὅπως ἂν ἀποκαλυφθῶσιν ἐκ πολλῶν καρδιῶν διαλογισμοί*; my translation). If the sword piercing Mary refers only to her own sufferings or misunderstandings, it is hard to see how this will reveal the thoughts of many hearts. However, if the sword is Jesus' preaching, which pierces "Israel"—represented here by one Israelite woman, Mary—then the statement makes perfect sense. Throughout Luke's gospel, the thoughts of many continue to be revealed because of their reactions to Jesus and his proclamation.<sup>39</sup> Mary the woman, as a part of Israel and as the mother of Jesus, will feel the pain of Jesus' words and his crucifixion. Like every other participant in Jesus' life, Mary, Israelite and mother, will experience sharp pain because of Jesus' teaching and death. From this moment on, the preaching of Jesus, his sword of revelation, will go through Israel by first going through Mary, who anticipates the suffering of the New Israel.

*He has regarded with favor the low estate of his servant*

Simeon's prophecy of Jesus' death and rejection is the ultimate manifestation of Jesus' humility. But the "hermeneutic of humility" that prepares for this moment of Simeon's prophecy of Jesus' humiliation is first announced by Mary in the Magnificat. This "hermeneutic" is captured by Luther on the first page of his commentary on the Magnificat with these two sayings:

God is the kind of Lord who does nothing but exalt those of low degree and put down the mighty from their thrones, in short, *break what is whole and make whole what is broken*.

Just as God in the beginning of creation made the world out of nothing, whence He is called the Creator and the Almighty, so His manner of working continues

<sup>38</sup> McHugh, *The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament*, 109. See his discussion on 106–112.

<sup>39</sup> Again, McHugh, *The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament*: "The sword which passed through Israel was the preaching of Jesus: it brought about the downfall of many, because it compelled men to reveal their secret thoughts" (112).



unchanged. Even now and to the end of the world, all His works are such that out of that which is nothing, worthless, despised, wretched, and dead, He makes that which is something, precious, honorable, blessed, and living. On the other hand, whatever is something, precious, honorable, blessed, and living, He makes to be nothing, worthless, despised, wretched, and dying. In this manner no creature can work; no creature can produce anything out of nothing.<sup>40</sup>

The heart of this hermeneutic of humility is in Luther's insistence on translating ἐπὶ τὴν ταπείνωσιν as "low estate" or "nothingness."

St. Paul also says in 1 Corinthians 1:27, 28: "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world, even the things that are not, to bring to nothing the things that are."

In this way He turns the world with all its wisdom and power into foolishness and gives us another wisdom and power. Since, then, it is His manner to regard things that are in the depths and disregarded, I have rendered the word "humility" with "nothingness" or "low estate." This, therefore, is what Mary means: "God has regarded me, a poor, despised, and lowly maiden, though He might have found a rich, renowned, noble, and mighty queen, the daughter of princes and great lords.

"He might have found the daughter of Annas or of Caiaphas, who held the highest position in the land. But He let His pure and gracious eyes light on me and used so poor and despised a maiden, in order that no one might glory in His presence, as though he were worthy of this, and that I must acknowledge it all to be pure grace and goodness and not at all my merit or worthiness."<sup>41</sup>

Mary so internalizes this hermeneutic of humility, nothingness, and low estate, that the rest of her hymn manifests how this is at the heart of the gospel, at the heart of the theology of the cross. The humility of Mary's low estate anticipates the total humiliation of her son on the cross, where he enters the lowest of all estates. In shame and utter humiliation, he makes full identification with our nothingness by taking into himself our rebellion and our sin, giving meaning to those in the world whose lives are already defined by humility and suffering.

Lowliness is the theme of the second part of Mary's hymn. She is "the spokesman of the 'lowly.'"<sup>42</sup> In a magnificent chiasmic structure, the center of the chiasm

<sup>40</sup> Luther, "The Magnificat" (1521), AE 21:299 (emphasis added).

<sup>41</sup> Luther, "The Magnificat" (1521), AE 21:314.

<sup>42</sup> McHugh, *The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament*, 74. See also his final comments on the Magnificat: "Thus, in the Magnificat, Mary begins by voicing the praise and gratitude of Israel in

emphasizes the theme of lowliness, or the Great Reversal. This is accented by the frame of mercy, described in Luke 1:50 as mercy for the generations of those who fear him (the “Holy” One), and in Luke 1:54b–55 as God’s remembrance of mercy, which was continually given to Israel’s fathers, particularly Abraham, whose seed would culminate in Mary’s child. Mercy is a theme of the infancy narrative, particularly of the first two hymns, for Zechariah will use similar language in the Benedictus (Luke 1:72) to describe God’s general salvific action for Israel, “To do mercy with our fathers and to remember his holy covenant” (my translation). Jesus comes as the merciful and compassionate Messiah and not as a God of vengeance.<sup>43</sup>

The center of the chiasm, however, gives specifics on how this mercy expresses itself in the lives of the people of God. Within Luke 1:52–53, there is another chiasm that accents God’s principle of the Great Reversal. As we have already heard Luther say, “God is the kind of Lord who does nothing but exalt those of low degree and put down the mighty from their thrones, in short, *break what is whole and make whole what is broken.*”<sup>44</sup> Mary herself, a servant of the Lord (Luke 1:48a) and personification of Israel, is the pattern for all those of low estate whom God visits with his merciful presence and raises up as an act of pure grace: God has exalted the humble (Luke 1:52b) and the hungry he has filled with good things (Luke 1:53a). Here in the Magnificat, Mary announces the hermeneutic of humility, the theology of the cross, the Great Reversal: “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 14:11; cf. 18:14).

Jesus is the ultimate reversal of God as the Creator come to his creation as one of us in humility and poverty. As the Father exalted Jesus in his humility, so now Jesus will exalt those of low estate. This is what Simeon prophesied to Mary, that her child Jesus “is destined for the fall and resurrection of many in Israel, and for a sign to be spoken against” (Luke 2:34, my translation), and what Jesus prophesied to the scribes and chief priests when he cited Psalm 118:22, “What, therefore, is this that is written, ‘The stone that the builders rejected, this has become the head of the corner’? Everyone who falls on that stone will be dashed to pieces; on whomsoever it falls, it will crush him” (Luke 20:17–18, my translation). Luther affirms this: “Christ was powerless on the cross; and yet there He performed His mightiest work

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Messianic days (vv. 46–50); then she reflects that God has sent this salvation not to those whom the world esteems, but to the lowly, in whom the spiritual destiny of Israel was centred from the time of Jeremiah, i.e., from the end of monarchial times (vv. 51–3); and finally her thoughts move back further still, to the very beginning of Israel’s history, and she sees her virginal conception as the final accomplishment of the promises made to Abraham himself (vv. 54–5). Just as Abraham, one man, had received the promises at the beginning on behalf of the entire nation, so one woman, Mary, received fulfillment of those promises on behalf of the nation at the end of time” (78–79).

<sup>43</sup> One of the major points in his Nazareth sermon (Luke 4:16–30) and in his response to John and his disciples as to whether he is “the Coming One” (Luke 7:18–35, my translation).

<sup>44</sup> Luther, “The Magnificat” (1521), AE 21:299 (emphasis added).

and conquered sin, death, world, hell, devil, and all evil.”<sup>45</sup> This is the language of Jesus’ beatitudes and woes (Luke 6:20–26) and the nature of his ministry as he goes to the sick and sinners (tax collectors and prostitutes) instead of the healthy and self-righteous (Pharisees and chief priests). Jesus’ entire ministry of table fellowship shows a hermeneutic of humility. When he sits down with tax collectors and sinners, with the five thousand, with the Twelve at the Last Supper, with the Emmaus disciples after the resurrection, the presence of God at table with the hungry fills them with good things. Jesus, the humble child in the womb of this humble servant, shows God’s hospitality to the world by coming to those who expect it least and bringing them salvation.

All of this begins with Mary, without whom there would be no incarnation, no humiliation, no cross, no resurrection. This understanding was embraced by Luther in the Reformation even as it should be with us today. She is, in Luther’s words, “The foremost example of the grace of God,”<sup>46</sup> and her song, with tiny unborn Jesus in her womb, still throughout the church goes on and on.

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<sup>45</sup> Luther, “The Magnificat” (1521), AE 21:340.

<sup>46</sup> Luther, “The Magnificat” (1521), AE 21:340.