Luke 1:46–55 is both a beautiful hymn sung to glorify God and an interpretive puzzle. This text, widely known as the Magnificat, is one of several songs Luke uses at a crucial moment in the birth narratives in order for characters to explain the amazing ways in which God is moving. Luke includes it in his narrative to foreshadow the ministry of reversal Jesus will bring, first to Israel and eventually to all people. It is a praise hymn made up of a combination of OT allusions—more specifically, allusions to the Greek translation of the OT commonly referred as the Septuagint and abbreviated LXX.¹ What follows is a study of the LXX allusions that combine to make up this praise hymn—allusions which have the cumulative effect of presenting Mary as a key character in the continuation of God’s OT promises and plan.

Narrative Setting

In the narrative surrounding the Magnificat, Luke weaves the birth stories of John and Jesus into a tapestry of joyful songs and hope for the oppressed. When Gabriel announces the pregnancy to Mary, she shows obedience by hurrying to Elizabeth’s house (Luke 1:39). When Mary first speaks to Elizabeth, the baby in Elizabeth’s womb leaps; Elizabeth is able to interpret her baby’s movement like Rebekah does in Gen 25:21 (Luke 1:41, 44). Elizabeth and Mary are the first to realize the significance of the child Mary is carrying (Luke 1:41–45). Elizabeth is then filled with the Holy Spirit and blesses Mary. Though John’s birth is significant enough to merit an angelic announcement, Elizabeth acknowledges Mary’s superiority in the situation (Luke 1:42–45).² Elizabeth’s words prompt from Mary a ballad praising God for acknowledging Mary’s superiority in the situation (Luke 1:42–45). Elizabeth’s words prompt from Mary a ballad praising God for blessing her and for bringing about the hopes of Israel. Luke’s narration halts the movement of the story when Mary meets with Elizabeth. This deliberate slowing highlights the angel’s proclamation and ensures that the audience understands its significance to Mary and the blessing pronounced by Elizabeth—and that meaning is rooted in the covenantal purpose of God.

The Magnificat functions as a foretaste of the major themes of Luke–Acts. As Richard Hays notes, it is also the key to viewing how Luke understands the OT and who Jesus is; Luke narrates “the story of Jesus in a way that joins seamlessly to Israel’s story.”³ Mary’s song, a prophecy of Jesus’s significance, emphasizes women, the poor, the reversal of fortunes, and the fulfillment of God’s promises.⁴ Mary’s song juxtaposes the mighty and rich against the lowly and hungry; the former are put down while the latter are exalted. This is the core of Luke’s gospel: Jesus is good news to all, but especially to those who have none. Luke places a special emphasis on those who are on the periphery. Characters who oppose Jesus desire honor and exclude the less fortunate and socially unacceptable. The Magnificat is more than simply a joyous scene of praise; it is an integral part of the introduction to what the good news means, and it is the lens through which to read Luke–Acts.⁵ The poor and the lowly have cause to lift their voices and join Mary in song.

Allusions and Echoes

Mary’s Song is a collage of biblical allusions.⁶ Although there is disagreement about the full range of Septuagintal allusions, the hymns of praise by women in the OT are particularly formative.⁷ Of particular interest are other hymns of praise sung in response to God’s gracious and powerful intercession, such as Miriam, Deborah, Judith, and most importantly, Hannah.⁸

The sentiments of reversal language are familiar from the OT, but it is difficult to isolate specific allusions. Rather, Luke’s use of motifs and language “evokes more generally the whole thought world of OT faith and declares its eschatological fulfillment … in God’s present activity with Mary.”⁹ The Magnificat’s closest parallel is Hannah’s song of thanksgiving for her son. Hays notes that it is rare for Luke to explicitly quote a text; rather “he subliminally evokes it, so that the reader who knows 1 Samuel will hear Mary singing a harmonious descant to Hannah’s song of praise.”¹⁰ Mary’s song expresses gratitude for a miraculous pregnancy, as does Hannah’s. Each song also focuses on the notion of reversal; both allude to the exalting of the humble, the lowering of the elevated and filling the hungry.¹¹ Furthermore, Hannah’s song is alluded to in Ps 113, which is deeply intertwined with the Passover. Hays argues,

If the hearers of Luke’s Gospel understood this link between Hannah’s hymn of deliverance and the Passover, they might well have understood that Mary’s song, too, should be heard in the same tradition, as a song celebrating the impending deliverance of Israel, this time through Mary’s own offspring.¹²

Judith’s celebratory hymn after saving Israel has many of the same characteristics. She also thanks Yahweh for working a miracle through her (Judith 16:6–7). She sings of the Lord’s greatness, how God brings down those who brag of their own strength, and how wonderful God’s mercy is towards those who fear God (16:2, 5, 13, 15–16).

The Singer of the Magnificat (v. 46a)

A few Latin manuscripts record Elizabeth instead of Mary as the singer of the Magnificat.¹³ It is unclear why a scribe would alter the singer from the mother of Jesus to Elizabeth. Hypothetically, some early texts could have contained neither woman’s name and later scribes added the name of the woman they felt it befitted most appropriately.¹⁴ Since Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and pronounces a blessing on Mary, some scribes may have seen it fitting that she continue by praising God with a song. Additionally, Elizabeth’s story reflects the text most closely associated with the Magnificat—Hannah’s song; both women are barren and Elizabeth’s yearning for a child resembles her predecessor’s prayers closely (1:24–25). Furthermore, God blesses them in their old ages and they bear children who are important characters in Israel’s history. Nonetheless, in the
larger narrative, the hope this child will bring to Israel is found in Jesus, not John. Despite John’s importance, Elizabeth defers to Mary throughout the narrative surrounding the Magnificat. In the end, overwhelming manuscript evidence affirms Mary as the singer of the Magnificat.

Mary’s Joy and Thanksgiving (vv. 46b–50)

Mary responds to the miraculous event with spontaneous song.15 She expresses the depth of her gratitude and thankfulness; this song radiates from the very core of her being.16 The verb “praise, magnify” (megalunô) is common in the Psalms as well as in Luke–Acts.17 The term operates in the Septuagint in connection with praising God and, in the NT, with praising Jesus as well (e.g., Luke 10:21). Mary’s innermost self is thanking and revering the Lord through the words of her song.

Verse 47 is parallel to v. 46b.18 While she magnified the Lord in the previous verse, here she rejoices because God is her Savior.19 The term “rejoice, exult” (agalliaô) is a natural synonym of “magnify” (megalunô),20 and the use of synonyms for designations of God in parallel statements (“the Lord” and “God”) is frequent in the Psalms (e.g., 62:11–12, 70:1). Mary treasures God’s miraculous action in her life and her role of bearing the child of Israel’s hopes. She recognizes here the intercession of God as savior, in particular her savior. However, she has not yet elaborated upon that from which he has saved her.

Mary then expresses her reasons for praise. God has looked on her with favor despite her lowly status. However, she does not clearly elaborate on what makes her so lowly. The term “humble state” (tapeinōsis) is often used in the LXX to describe the humiliation of barren women (e.g., Gen 16:11, 29:32, 1 Sam 1:11). Kindalee DeLong, however, contends that the only hint of Mary’s humble status in the narrative thus far is her pregnancy in a culture that values a woman’s virginity until marriage; thus her lowly state is a side-effect of God’s blessing.21 The reasons for Mary’s lowly state become more evident in the second half of her song. She is part of a nation that is currently oppressed and groaning for God’s deliverance. The first strophe highlights Mary’s unique and singular experience; the second highlights God’s salvation of Israel. The use of the adjective “humble” (tapeinôsis) in both v. 48 and v. 52 suggests a connection between Mary and Israel. Her experience is unique but, simultaneously, she is the first to experience the salvation that is for all Israel.22 However, though she shares in her nation’s burdens, Mary’s lowliness is not solely representative of Israel. The term Luke uses belongs to the semantic domain of “the poor” in Luke–Acts, a domain associated with those who lack honor. This lack of honor clearly was the case with Mary. Her privileged position is exclusively because of God’s grace.23

Mary understands that from this moment onward all generations will call her blessed. Elizabeth is the first of this generation to recognize Mary’s position. The verb “bless(ed)” (makarizô) is not characteristic of Luke–Acts but is Septuagintal. The unique feature of the term in the NT is the distinctive joy that comes through participation in the divine kingdom. However, the following generations’ blessings do not lift Mary out of her lowly status. Rather, the antithesis is provided by the “great things” (megala, v. 49a) God provides.

Mary recognizes that she will be called blessed because of the great things God has done for her. The title “the Mighty One” (ho dunatos) occurs nowhere else in the NT with reference to God; in the LXX, it is found only in Zeph 3:17. The title may also echo Isa 42:13 and further give her song a Messianic and forward-looking tone. This title may imply one who is truly powerful, as opposed to the earthly rulers mentioned in v. 52, who are arrogant about their abilities but all their strength comes to naught when faced with God. In this context, it “is to be understood as his mightiness and is taken up in v. 51 in terms of the strength shown by God’s arm, which scatters the proud but also brings help to Israel (v. 54).”24 Mary then calls the Lord by another title, “Holy One.” Again, v. 49a and v. 49b are parallel as Mary calls the Lord by various titles. Luke does not mention the holiness of God again in Luke–Acts. God’s mercy is also an aspect of his holiness. The term “great, great things” (megala) is a stereotyped reflection of LXX language used alongside God’s saving intervention, especially in relation to the Exodus.25

Verses 49b–50 function as a transition from the first stanza to the second by beginning to widen those affected by Mary’s pregnancy. She remarks on the holiness of God’s name and his mercy for all generations that fear him. Verse 49b echoes Ps 103:17. What God is accomplishing through Mary is not for her alone, but will be felt forever by those who fear him.26 The term “fear” (phobeomai), when referring to God, mixes fright and profound respect.27 God’s mercy includes how he has remained faithful to Israel and the promises he made to Abraham, despite Israel’s repeated breaking of their own promise. Hays raises the possibility that “Luke’s reference to the Abrahamic promise also adumbrates the extension of the blessing to ‘all the nations of the earth’ (Gen 22:18; cf. Gen 12:1–3).”28 God is now demonstrating his mercy with Mary’s miraculous pregnancy. Her baby will forever affect all those who fear God.

God Fulfills His Promises to Israel (vv. 51-55)

Mary now expands her praise from her individual experience to what God is accomplishing for all Israel. The corporate implications of God’s activity now come into full view. This progression divides the song in half, with vv. 46–50 dealing with God’s graciousness to Mary herself and vv. 51–55 concerned with God’s mercy to Israel. These two portions of Mary’s song contain repeated terms and images:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mary</th>
<th>Israel</th>
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<tr>
<td>v. 48</td>
<td>The notion of “his servant”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vv. 48, 50</td>
<td>The object of favor and mercy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v. 48</td>
<td>The term “lowly” (tapeinôsis, tapeinos)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v. 50</td>
<td>The timelessness of God’s mercy</td>
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These repetitions serve to tie the two parts together as well as to identify Mary as the first of the great reversal. The two strophes’
similarities link Mary with Israel. Mary is the first to receive this glorious gift, but Israel will not be far behind.

Mary’s pregnancy is so pivotal in Israel’s history that Mary speaks of God showing “strength with his arm.” In the LXX, this expression is used specifically with regard to the Exodus and signifies a fundamental shift in history. While Mary uses language from the distant past, she is referring to the current miracle God is performing—the sending of the long-awaited Messiah to save Israel. The second stanza is a fresh description of the miracle in v. 49. In fact, Mary’s pregnancy is in the same vein as one of the most significant events in all of Israel’s history—the Exodus. Luke’s consistent grammar conveys that Mary is referring to the same event and not suddenly speaking about a distant event in Israel’s history (although God’s continual faithfulness is part of the backdrop). Thus, Mary’s praise responds to her own experience of transformation in which she recognizes the dawn of God’s restoration of Israel.

With his mighty arm, God scatters his enemies and humbles the proud. In anticipation of Luke’s major themes, God begins to work against forces in opposition to his purpose. The proud do not fear God and are neither hungry nor distressed. The clause, “He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts,” identifies the pride of those scattered as a “deeply rooted orientation of the person.” “The thoughts of their hearts” (dianoia kardias) appears twice in the LXX. The Magnificat outlines a number of ways that enemy has attacked—oppression of the poor, pride, claims of power, and amassing wealth—and it is against such opposing forces that God has come to declare war.

The sentiment of God casting down rulers is a common trope in the OT. The rulers should be identified with the arrogant of v. 51b and those who have become rich in v. 53, while those of humble estate are equivalent to the hungry of v. 53a and the needy of Israel in v. 54a. The needy fear God while the powerful do not. The linguistic connections with the OT are closer in v. 51b and those who have become rich in v. 53, while those of humble estate are equivalent to the hungry of v. 53a and the needy of Israel in v. 54a. The needy of Israel in such a way that the story of Israel and the church can be confidently recognized as the fulfillment of the divine plan for salvation, for Israel and for the whole world.” Mary’s song plays an important role in the “renarration” of Israel’s story. Thus, Mary not only follows in the tradition of OT prophets but becomes one of the first NT prophets.

The final two verses of Mary’s song explain why God is taking such interest in Mary and Israel—Israel is his servant and he will mercifully keep his promises to Abraham and his progeny forever. In the LXX, the noun “Israel” and the verb “help” (antilambanō) come together in Isa 41:8-9. The term “servant” (pais) is a description for the nation addressed in exile and assured of God’s help, the restoration of their fortunes, and of their role as an instrument of his purposes. To speak of God remembering is typical, especially in the Psalms. Mary celebrates God’s remembrance of his servant Israel. The phrase “to remember mercy” (mnēsthēnai eleous, v. 54) is a Semitism that further defines God’s activity as a remembering of mercy. Linked to the clauses following in v. 55, the term “mercy” may be part of an allusion to 2 Sam 22:51 and Mic 7:20. The helping of Israel (v. 54a) stands in antithesis to the scattering of the proud in v. 52b. Both the helping and scattering, together with their expansion in vv. 52–53, elaborate the strength exhibited by God’s arm (vv. 51a–54a), which in v. 52b is said to be in remembrance of God’s mercy. God’s reversal is rooted deeply in his covenantal relationship with his people. All of the operative words in vv. 54–55 (servant, remember, mercy, promise, ancestors, and Abraham) point to God’s history with Israel, to their election, and to their covenantal relationship. The God Mary praises is the covenant-making God, the one who acts out of his own self-giving nature to embrace men and women in relationship.

That God should stoop to recall his pledge to Abraham is the theme of many OT passages. That the Mighty One should recall Israel and help them in their time of need is a source of constant amazement. These examples show that Mary recognizes in her pregnancy the coming restoration of Israel, in keeping with the promise made to Abraham. The song ends with reference to the power and the eternal dimensions of God’s blessing, which Mary is now celebrating.

Conclusion

The overarching observation of this article is that Mary’s Magnificat is saturated with OT allusions (primarily gleaned from the LXX in light of its common language with Luke’s Gospel). This saturation enhances the connection between the Magnificat and the history and faith of Israel—indeed between Mary herself and Israel. Mary thus fills a role much like the various OT prophets who not only spoke to Israel but represented Israel in their words and actions. Hays declares, “Luke’s hermeneutical strategy, then is to renarrate the story of Israel in such a way that the story of Jesus and the church can be confidently recognized as the fulfillment of the divine plan for salvation, for Israel and for the whole world.” Mary’s song plays an important role in the “renarration” of Israel’s story. Thus, Mary not only follows in the tradition of OT prophets but becomes one of the first NT prophets.

Furthermore, two motifs are sustained throughout the song. The first is the portrait of God as the divine warrior who accomplishes deliverance at both the personal and corporate level. God is the Mighty One who accomplishes great things, who shows strength by scattering the proud, bringing down the powerful from their thrones, and sending the rich away empty. Mary sings of the Holy One who will do these things for her as well as for Israel. She is one of the lowly who will benefit from this rearrangement of the world. God engages in battle on behalf of God’s people but, at the same time, is the merciful God of the covenant. He lifts up the lowly, extends mercy to those who fear him, fills the hungry, and helps Israel. These two images of
God merge in the theme of reordering the world. God's dynamic acts are for the sake of those who fear him. At this point in the narrative, it is only hinted that this reordering will do more than help those who are a part of the traditional Israel. Furthermore, the gender of the singer also hints at Luke's focus on the uplifting of women in Jesus's ministry. The child Mary bears will become an event larger than anything God has yet done for Israel. It will change the entire world, not merely a nation. In light of Luke's major themes in Luke—Acts, these descendants mentioned in the Magnificat's final verse will include Gentiles as well as the Jews. God is in the process of turning the world upside down, and he has announced this through the voice of Mary. We are right, therefore, to join with Luke and with the angel Gabriel in saying, "Hail, favored one," and to join with Christians across the ages in saying, Ave Maria.

Notes

1. Note that the LXX includes books commonly designated Apocrypha or Deuterocanonical. Thus this article will sometimes refer, for example, to books such as Judith or Baruch. Note also that the versification of the LXX sometimes differs from the Hebrew text of the OT. Thus, for example, Ps 23 [24]:5 means v. 5 of Ps 23, which is Ps 24 in the Hebrew Bible. The edition used in this study is Albert Rahlfs, Septuaginta, editio altera, ed. Robert Hanhart (Stuttgart: Deutche Bibelgesellschaft, 2006).

2. This is replayed in a similar fashion when John and Jesus meet as adults; the former acknowledges the greatness of the latter (Luke 3:15–17, 21–22).


5. Similarly, Jesus proclaims his purpose in coming in 4:14–37. Many view this pericope as the inaugural address of Jesus's ministry, but Luke establishes these themes while Christ is still in the womb through Mary's song.

6. Hays, Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels, 193, argues that Luke, more than the other gospel authors, relies on the "literary device of allusion and echo" to "lure us into the work of close, retrospectively alert reading, seeking to discern and interpret the intertextual clues woven into the fabric of the story."

7. See Richard Hays, Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 14–33, for a solid introduction to allusions, echoes, and quotations to Scripture. See also Hays, Echoes of Scripture, 1–4, for the "imagination" required to see scripture through the evangelists' viewpoint. Additionally, see Carl Holladay "Luke's Use of the LXX in Acts," in Die Septuaginta und das frühe Christentum, ed. S. Thomas Caulley and Hermann Lichtenberger (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 233–95, for a history of previous scholarship as well as a sampling of how one can find allusions and echoes from the LXX.


14. Contra Brown, Mary, 109, who contends that the argument that the song better describes one woman rather than the other is inconclusive and the manuscript evidence should be the deciding factor.


18. The similarity between pneuma and psuchē is Hebraic and is reflected in the LXX (Ps 77:2–3, Job 12:10, Isa 26:9, Wis 15:11). Nolland, Luke, 69.

19. "God my savior" follows the LXX and is also a Hebrew idiom (e.g., 1 Chr 16:35; Ps 23 [24]:5, 24 [25]:5; 26 [27]:9, Hab 3:18). Nolland, Luke, 69.

20. It is found only in Ps 38 [39]:16 and both words are also used in relation to God.

21. Luke's audience lived in a society in which virginity was highly valued. If Mary were pregnant, it would be assumed that she lost her virginity before her marriage. From this perspective, an ancient reader might easily consider a virgin and a barren woman to be in parallel situations. See DeLong, Surprised by God, 168.

22. Scholars debate the exact meaning of Mary's humble state. Nolland argues, "Though her language is personal ("my savior") as in v 48a, the salvation she has in view is that for which the nation had longed (just as her tapeinōsis, "afflicted state" in v 48a is the common state of God's people and no predicament specific to Mary). For God's people it is the lack of that child who is to be the messianic deliverer that causes them to suffer (Isa 9:6). Nolland, Luke, 69. Green agrees that term is used with reference to the oppressed people of God. This places Mary's affirmation of God's saving act squarely in the context of the lowliness experience by Israel under foreign domination and at the time of her pregnancy in Luke's narrative world (15). Mary's lowly estate, then, should be taken as representative of her people's. Green, Luke, 103.


26. The notion is that of Ps 103 [102]:17, but the exact language deviates from the LXX. The exact phrase in Luke 1:50 is not found anywhere in the LXX; however, the phrase does occur in the T. Levi 18:8. Nolland, Luke, 71.


31. Luke uses the verbs in the aorist tense in both stanzas. Johnson, however, argues that Mary is speaking about the Exodus itself. He
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—Paul Chlcte, Ashland Seminary

contends that v. 51 marks a transition from what God has done with Mary to what he has done in Israel’s past. The use of the aorist is “less a problem than endless scholarly discussions of it might suggest: as God did in the past, he continues—age after age.” Johnson, Luke, 42. Additionally, praise is closely associated with past narrative, for when people acknowledge God in praise they do so by retelling and memorializing historical events as the actions of God. DeLong, Surprised by God, 44.

32. See DeLong, Surprised by God, 161–62, for a detailed analysis on how the aorist functions in this hymn. DeLong conducts a narrative analysis that concludes that Mary’s song is referring solely to events that have taken place thus far in the narrative.

33. References to God scattering his enemies can be found in Num 10:35, Pss 67 [68]:1 and 88 [89]:10. The theme of humbling the proud is a common motif in the Hebrew Bible: Pss 17 [18]:27, 118 [119]:21, 78, Prov 3:24, Isa 1:25, 13:11.

37. Nolland, Luke, 71. For “lift up” (hupsoō) see Ezek 21:31; for “humble” (tapeinos) see Job 5:11, 12:21 [LXX]; Ps 33 [34]:18, Ps 87 [88]:35, 101 [102]:17, Prov 3:24.
38. Nolland qualifies this interpretation, stating, “The socio-political language of vv. 52–53 should not be spiritualized away, but justice is only done to it when it is seen in relation to the matrix that is established in the poem by the juxtaposition of the ethical and religious (vv. 50, 51), the socio-economic (vv. 52–53), and the national (vv. 54–55; 50, 21). Each must be allowed to interpret the other; values from none of the spheres can be allowed to stand alone.” Nolland, Luke, 72.
39. Luke is concerned with the coming of salvation in the present (cf., 4:21; 23:43), even if the consummation of God’s work remains future.