

THE SONG OF MARY  
VISION OF A NEW EXODUS (LUKE 1:46-55)

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For centuries the Song of Mary has had an important place in the liturgies of many Christian traditions. However, to our knowledge, the carefully composed structure of this song has not been observed.<sup>1</sup> An awareness of this structure makes the theology of the poem significantly clearer and its use in worship more meaningful. In this brief paper we intend to demonstrate that the Song of Mary (Luke 1:46-55) is a two stanza poem, constructed with the use of inverted parallelism. The theme of lowliness-exaltation forms the climax of each stanza.

The first stanza is the personal story of Mary. In the second her story becomes a paradigm for the people of God. The language, we will observe, is largely traceable to the Song of the Sea in Exodus 15. Thus the poem offers a vision of the potentialities of a new Exodus.

In a recent article Johannes Louw observes that, in the history of linguistics, scholars first concentrated on the *word* as the “practical unit of communication.” During the 1960’s there was a shift to *the sentence*. The ’70’s, Louw feels, “will direct its attention to larger units.”<sup>2</sup> In New Testament studies this shift to an emphasis upon the larger unit as the vehicle of communication is merely a return to an aspect of New Testament studies already introduced by John Jebb in 1820.<sup>3</sup> A thin stream of scholars since that time have continued interest in the field, some responsibly, others irresponsibly. A review of past scholarship is available and need not be repeated.<sup>4</sup> However, one aspect of this ever-widening field of research needs some explanation as background to the passage under consideration. This aspect is that of “inverted parallelism.”

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<sup>1</sup> In his recent monumental commentary Marshall says of this passage, “No precise metric form has been established.” He also observes,

The background of the hymns is doubtless to be sought in Jewish poetry, and elements from older compositions may well have been used, but we have no means of distinguishing between tradition and redaction. I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1978), pp.78-79. We are not arguing for a precise meter but for a colometric harmony that sheds considerable light on the meaning of the poem and does identify one redactional element. For a listing of recent studies on the passage cf. Marshall, p.79.

<sup>2</sup> Johannes P. Louw, "Discourse Analysis and the Greek New Testament," *Technical Papers for the Bible Translator*, vol. 24, No.1 (Jan. 1973), p.201.

<sup>3</sup> John Jebb, *Sacred Literature* (London: n.p., 1820).

<sup>4</sup> One of the finest contributions, although brief, was by the late T. W. Manson. Cf. “Poetic Form,” *The Teaching of Jesus* (Cambridge: The University Press, c. 1935, 1955), pp. 50-56. For a review of past scholarship on the question of literary structures in the New Testament, and for an analysis of the structures themselves, cf. K. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant: A Literary Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), pp. 27-76; for the passage here discussed, cf. R. C. Tannehill, “The Magnificat as Poem,” *JBL*, vol. 93 (1974), pp. 263-275; R. E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1977). This last volume was not available to me.

The poetical pattern of parallelism extensively used in the Psalms and prophets is familiar to all. This is where poetic lines are set in a series of matching pairs and can be represented schematically as AA' BB' CC' etc. The two lines which constitute a pair are related to each other in a variety of ways. This literary pattern we call "standard parallelism." Building on this basic design the poets of the Old Testament, at a very early stage, occasionally "inverted" their pairs rather than leaving them in a simple sequence. That is, rather than AA' BB' CC' they chose A B C — C' B' A' as a literary pattern. A well-known example of this is the Isaiah passage quoted in Matthew 13:15. The repeating themes are heart-ears-eyes, eyes-ears-heart. Over 80 years ago the Wescott and Hort Greek text indicated these six lines on the printed page as follows:

A For this people's *heart* has grown dull  
 B And their ears are heavy of hearing  
 C And their eyes they have closed  
 C' Lest they should perceive with their *eyes*  
 B' And hear with their *ears*  
 A' And understand with their *heart* and turn to me to heal them.<sup>5</sup>

This particular literary device is a type of O.T. parallelism which we prefer to call "inverted parallelism."<sup>6</sup> This pattern of inverted parallelism determines the structure of the Song of Mary, to which we must now turn.

In the translation below we have given a very literal rendering of the Greek text, keeping all the words in their original order.

*Luke 1:46-55 The Song of Mary*

A	It magnifies my soul the Lord	PRAISE
B	and it rejoices my spirit in God my Savior	SALVATION
C	Because he looked upon the low estate of his handmaiden	LOWLY-EXALTED
C'	For behold from now on all generations will bless me	
B'	Because he made for me great things the Almighty	SALVATION
A'	And holy is his name.	PRAISE
A	And his mercy is from generation to generation to those who fear him.	MERCY TO THE FAITHFUL

<sup>5</sup> The entire passage in Matthew from vs. 11-17 is a seven unit inverted structure of 1-7, 7-1. The Isaiah quote listed above includes only the three center themes out of the seven (K. Bailey, pp. 61-62).

<sup>6</sup> Our "inverted parallelism" is often referred to as *chiasmus*, which technically refers only to a crossing of terms within two lines of poetry.



Line C calls attention to the low estate of Mary while matching line C' refers to a reversal of that low estate. We have called this the “lowliness-exaltation” theme. The second line reverses the first and the two together form a whole. At the same time we observe in passing that along with the theme of “lowliness-exaltation” the secondary themes of “all generations” and “his handmaiden” are also introduced. The six lines are personal and speak boldly of the exaltation of a lowly peasant girl betrothed to a carpenter and tell the story of her exaltation and the ensuing joy and praise she thankfully offers to a gracious God. We turn to the second stanza.

In the second stanza the personal gives way to the communal. What happened to Mary is announced as an already accomplished fact for all the community of faith. At the same time there is a timelessness about the language. Abraham is remembered from the past and yet God’s mercy is from “generation to generation to those who fear Him.” There is an open-endedness to what is said in that this new exaltation extends on into the indefinite future — indeed “forever.”

Our particular interest is to trace the repetition of themes from stanza one to stanza two and to see how the first informs the second. Some external similarities are obvious. The second stanza also uses inverted parallelism. Again there are three themes. Stated in their fuller form they are:

- A mercy to all generations.
- B salvation-judgment
- C lowliness-exaltation

Again the climax of the stanza appears in the center and again it focuses on “lowliness-exaltation.” The second theme of “salvation” is positioned identically in each stanza. The first theme of the first stanza (praise) can be seen to be related to the first theme of the second (recollection of mercy). These can be seen diagrammatically as follows:

Themes of stanza one (personal)	Themes of stanza two (communal)
A Praise Him	A Remember his Mercy
B Salvation	B Salvation
C Lowliness-exaltation	C Lowliness-exaltation

Thus it is clear that what happens to Mary is an illustration of the past *and* future history of the community. At the same time the two stanzas are so carefully interwoven that the three themes occurring in the climax of the first stanza (noted above) are spread out and reoccur in turn in the three thematic units of the second stanza. This can be demonstrated as follows:

The three themes in the climax of stanza one	These same themes as they reoccur in the second stanza
A All generations	A From generation to generation
B His handmaiden blessed	B His servant aided
C Low estate looked upon	C Low estate exalted

At the same time there is distinct movement between the two stanzas in addition to the crucial shift from the personal to the communal. In the second stanza the poet works with double lines rather than single. Furthermore the theme of “salvation” becomes “salvation-judgment” and the “exaltation of the lowly” becomes “the exaltation of the lowly *and* the downfall of the exalted.” The precise nature of the parallels within the second stanza must now be examined. These are as follows:

*A and A'*

- A And his *mercy is from generation to generation*  
*To those who fear Him.*  
 A' To remember *mercy* as he spoke to *our fathers*  
*To Abraham and to his seed forever.*

The repetition of the theme of “mercy to all generations” is sufficiently obvious in these matching double lines as to need no comment. Furthermore the overall grammatical construction of the lines here in stanza two is significant in relation to A and A'. These outer couplets affirm the general theme of mercy to those who fear him. Then in the center we have seven short statements of specific actions. This can be seen as follows:

- A His mercy — from generation to generation  
 He made, scattered, put down, exalted, filled, sent, aided.  
 A' To remember mercy—forever.

*B and B'*

It is our view that a line on the theme of judgment has been dropped from the original poem. An older Jewish stanza may have been reused in a Christian context by a Jewish Christian author (Mary?). Lines B and B' seen together are as follows:

- B *He made mighty deeds with His arm*  
*He scattered the arrogant in the thoughts of their hearts*  
 B' *He aided Israel His servant*  
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The relationship between this Song and the Song of Hanna in I Samuel 2:1-10 has long been observed. There, also, the opening section of the poem is personal and the second section communal. Some phrases in the Song of Mary do have counterparts in the Song of Hanna. Yet the Song of Moses in Exodus 15:1-18 offers stronger parallels.

There also the opening stanza is personal and the rest of the poem speaks of the people. In the Song of Moses the initial personal section (v.1-3) begins “I will sing to the Lord” and ends with “The Lord is His name,” which is strikingly parallel to the opening and closing of the personal section of the Song of Mary. Moses also refers to God as “my salvation” early in the song (v.2). In like manner in stanza II of the Song of Mary the theme of “salvation-judgment” (B and B') is much closer to the Song of Moses than to the Song of Hanna. In the Song of Moses God acts to save his people through the mighty use of His “right hand” (v.6, 9, 12) and the “greatness of His arm” (v.16). In Mary’s Song the Almighty *does* great things for Mary and He

does mighty deeds *with His arm* for Israel whom He also aids (B, B´). All of this sounds very much like the God who is “terrible in glorious deeds, doing wonders” (Ex. 15:11). Indeed, the community section of the Song of Moses is simply a list of the mighty deeds of God in aiding His people. This imagery is much fainter in the Song of Hanna. Thus the events of the Exodus as set forth in the Song of Moses are surely a primary source for the background of Jesus’ “Exodus” (*ten exodon autou*) Luke 9:31.

With the Song of Moses as a background, with its record of the mighty acts of God in destroying the enemies and saving the people, we look at the theme of salvation-judgment in the Song of Mary. In the first double line (B) we have a contrast. God “made mighty deeds with His arm” (salvation) and He “scattered the arrogant” (judgment). We observe that this couplet is quite general in its application. The community is simply “those who fear Him.” God does mighty deeds, but the beneficiaries are the unspecified “those who fear Him.” The application of judgment is also unspecified. The “arrogant” are to be scattered whoever they may be. By contrast, when we look at the matching line (B´) the reference becomes specific. The recipient of divine aid is now “my servant Israel.” Yet here we read only of “salvation,” and the ensuing line of judgment seems to be missing. All the other lines in this stanza are doubled. Section C, as we will observe, has four lines with two positives and two negatives; why not section B? We conclude that this second occurrence of the theme of salvation-judgment (B´) originally also had two lines. The first speaks of blessing “my servant Israel” and the second may have thundered judgment on her gentile enemies. The Song of Moses abounds in specific references to judgment on the enemies of Israel. Thus we suggest that stanza two, line B´ may have originally read something like this:

He aided Israel His servant  
With His right hand He shattered the enemy the gentiles (Ex. 15:6)

or

He aided Israel His servant  
He overthrew His adversaries with majesty (Ex. 15:7)

The Jewish Christian poet who may have refused an older hymn was perhaps happy to retain the theme of *salvation* for “Israel His Servant” but he did not want the harsh line of judgment on Israel’s enemies which originally balanced it. There is clear precedent for what we are suggesting. The reading from Isaiah in Luke 4:18-19 concludes with, “to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.” The quotation from Isaiah 61:2 has,

“to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,  
and the day of vengeance of our God.”

The second line is deleted in Luke 4:19. Clearly the new anointed one has not come for a “day of vengeance.” It is our suggestion that the same motivation may have led to the deletion of a second line in the song of Mary.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> It is possible that the Christian Jewish author is not intending to balance his/her lines as precisely as we suggest. In which case there is nothing miming and the Jewish Christian author may have written the entire poem. However, the precise balance in the rest of the poem would suggest a line missing here. It is also possible that Luke has deleted the missing line, or a later editor.

### *C and C'*

The climax of stanza II expands the “lowliness-exaltation” theme of stanza I to four lines. The negatives appear on the outside, the positives form the climax in the center. Abbreviated to their major themes these four lines are as follows:

C The mighty — put down  
     *The lowly — exalted*  
 C' *The hungry — filled with good things*  
     The rich — sent away empty.

In this carefully constructed climax there is a form of literary “counterpoint.” That is, two sets of artistic devices are superimposed into four lines.<sup>8</sup> We observe that the first two lines form a pair (the mighty-*down*; the lowly-*up*). The second two lines also form a pair (the hungry-*filled*; the rich-*empty*). Thus from the point of view of these two pairs we have AA BB as a structure. But at the same time, when we concentrate on the negatives (the mighty-*down*; the rich-*empty*) and the positives (the lowly-*exalted*; the hungry-*filled*) we observe an ABBA form. Both literary devices function at once to give the four lines an exquisite balance, which in turn repeats and expands the climax of the first stanza.

### *Conclusion*

Thus we have seen the Song of Mary as a two stanza poem of exceptional artistry and beauty. Three themes applied to the person of Mary in the first stanza are picked up, expanded and applied in the second stanza to the God-fearing community. These themes are “blessing,” “mercy,” “salvation,” and “lowliness-exaltation.” Both stanzas use inverted parallelism with the matching climaxes in the center. The Song of Moses offers the clearest background as regards both form and content. A single line, most likely on the theme of judgment against the enemies of Israel, may be omitted from the second stanza. The Jewish Christian poet has incorporated into the climax of his first stanza a semantic reference to each of the three units in the second stanza. Surely an awareness of the artistic nature of this ancient song can make its theological message clearer and its liturgical

Protestant piety traditionally ignores Mary almost entirely for known historical reasons. Surely it is time to open new doors of awareness. In this time-honored poem Mary is presented both as a humble and grateful recipient of God’s blessing and salvation and as the pattern of what God has done and will yet do for all believers. The great events of the liberation during the Exodus are recalled through reference and allusion. The poet understands these events to be a pattern of God’s mercy for every generation. The lowly, the oppressed and downtrodden, like Mary, can recall the past and live in the hope of a new liberation. For His mercy is from generation to generation.

Finally, if our argument is sound, the omission of the line on judgment is theologically significant. Focusing exclusively on what is *included* in the poem, there is nothing that the Old Testament community would reject. Yet, a new creation is emerging. Indeed, the arrogant are to

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<sup>8</sup> We have observed this phenomenon also as early as Amos.

be put down, but no word of judgment is thundered against the enemies of “my servant Israel.” Is it not possible in this omission to find a part of the dawning of the new age?