

Exegesis and Sermon Study of Luke 1:46-55

The Magnificat

Megal uhei h⁹uxh/mou toh kurion

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In Nomine Iesu

The Gospel of Luke is the longest and most comprehensive of the four Gospels and includes several features the other Gospels do not have. Among these features are the most detailed narratives concerning the annunciation and birth of John the Baptizer, the annunciation and birth of the Savior, and the account of the Savior's circumcision and presentation in the temple. Also among the features unique to Luke are the three canticles, or songs, of Mary, Zechariah, and Simeon. We usually refer to these canticles by their Latin liturgical names: the Magnificat, the Benedictus, and the Nunc Dimittis.¹

From the beginning, the Christian church has recognized in these three canticles the new song of the gospel, which God's people sing to the Lord (Ps 96, 98, etc.), for all three songs commemorate the Lord's incarnation as the fulfillment of his promises of salvation. So from early on, the church made these canticles its own song by incorporating them into its worship. The Nunc Dimittis has been used at least since the fourth century as a post-Communion canticle or prayer in divine services in both the East (the liturgy of St. John Chrysostom) and in the West (the Mozarabic rite); however, it was not used in the Roman rite. Not surprisingly, therefore, only a few 16th century Lutheran orders of the divine service included it. We are all familiar with the place it has enjoyed in the Common Service since the 19th century. In the daily monastic office, the Nunc Dimittis was also sung at Compline,² from which it later came into the Lutheran Vespers. The Benedictus came into the Lutheran Matins via the office of Lauds³ and is appropriately used as an alternative to the Te Deum especially during Advent and Lent. The Magnificat has been sung at Vespers in the Western church since the sixth century at least and was chanted to all the Gregorian psalm tones. Lutherans carried the Magnificat into Vespers, where it still occupies a prominent place today.

Recognizing the rich gospel content of these songs and esteeming the experience of the church at worship throughout its history, the compilers of *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal* wisely incorporated these songs into our worship book. New musical settings in a contemporary American style were composed for the Magnificat and the Nunc Dimittis in Evening Prayer, and metrical versions of all three songs are included in the "Hymns of the Liturgy" section of the hymns (CW 269, 274, 275, 276).

For the same reasons that the compilers of *Christian Worship* gave these songs prominent places in our worship book, pastors will want to use these songs in regular congregational worship and also teach the texts of these songs to their congregations. Because of their place in the Gospel of Luke and their common theme of the Lord's incarnation as the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises of salvation, these three songs lend themselves very well for a three-part sermon series for midweek Advent services.

¹ We are not overlooking the other canticle in Luke 1 and 2, the angels' great hymn of the incarnation, the Gloria in Excelsis. As the following paragraphs demonstrate, because these three canticles have certain themes and elements in common, they lend themselves well for a three-part sermon series for midweek Advent services. The Gloria in Excelsis certainly could be chosen as a sermon text for Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, if desired.

² I.e. the last hour of prayer in the evening, before retiring.

³ I.e. the first hour of prayer in the morning, about 2:30 A.M.

This presentation will consist of an exegesis and sermon study of the Magnificat, while the following two essays on our conference agenda will offer studies of the Benedictus and the Nunc Dimittis. The presenters will read the exegetical portions of their presentations in full. The sermon study portions will be conducted in a workshop format for small groups, with study questions to guide the discussions. Hopefully, our study and discussions will result in several basic outlines for the three texts, perhaps an overall theme that ties together the three texts, and several ideas for sermon applications.

We turn our attention now to Mary's song, the Magnificat.

Verse 46) **Kai\ei\pen Mariah,**

And Mary said,

We note, first of all, that the textual apparatuses of both the UBS and Nestle editions of the Greek text include a variant reading. A small number of Latin manuscripts have Elizabeth as the subject of the verb, thus making Elizabeth the author of the song. All the Greek manuscripts, however, and most Latin manuscripts have Mary as the subject. Although "Elizabeth" is the more difficult reading, the external evidence overwhelmingly favors the reading "Mary."

Before looking at the song itself, we need to address another question regarding Luke's brief introductory words, "And Mary said": Was Mary inspired when she composed and spoke her song? Is every word of Mary's song to be understood as God's Word in the sense of divine doctrine? Or are these words only Mary's words, which Luke recorded?

This is not a moot question, for what is at stake for the preacher is exactly how he will treat the words of the text in his sermon. Think how crucial such a question is for properly understanding the book of Job. Much of the inspired text of Job consists of the speeches of Job's three so-called friends. Because of biblical inspiration, we do not doubt that the text accurately presents what Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar actually said to Job. But they did not speak by divine inspiration, even though their words are recorded in the Bible. In fact, the text clearly says so in Job 42:7: "After the LORD had said these things to Job, he said to Eliphaz the Temanite, 'I am angry with you and your two friends, because you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.'" Even if this passage had not been included in the book of Job, we would know from the rest of Scripture that Job's friends grossly confused law and gospel as they tried to "comfort" Job and thus did not speak for God, much less speak by divine inspiration.

The words of Mary's song certainly are "God's Word" in the sense that they are part of the inspired text of Luke's Gospel. We know without a doubt that Mary composed this song and spoke it after she arrived at Zechariah and Elizabeth's home, as the inspired text states. But was Mary herself inspired? It's interesting to note that Luke explicitly states that Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit as she greeted Mary (Lk 1:41) and that Zechariah spoke the Benedictus by divine inspiration. "His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied" (1:67). Luke's wording also seems to indicate the same regarding Simeon: "He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts" (2:25-27). Luke, however, makes no mention of the Holy Spirit in connection with Mary speaking the Magnificat.

Does Mary say anything in her song that would lead us to conclude she must have been speaking by inspiration? We note that she makes no explicit claim for inspiration. But what about the second half of verse 48: "From now on all generations will call me blessed"? These words certainly are prophetic, and they certainly have been fulfilled. Could Mary have spoken this only by divine inspiration, or could she have safely made this deduction in faith based on what the angel Gabriel had revealed to her in the annunciation (Lk 1:26-37)? It seems Mary could have safely made the deduction in faith, based on the angel's announcement. Mary knew from the annunciation that God had blessed her in a singular way. He had chosen her to be the human vessel through whom the eternal Son of God would become incarnate. Mary would forever after be known for this

singular role she played in God's plan of salvation. Although Mary clearly based what she said in verse 48 on Gabriel's revelation to her, I don't think we can assume or say with dogmatic certainty, as some have, that Mary spoke by inspiration. William Arndt, for instance, makes this assumption in his commentary: "We assume that Mary, too, on this occasion was filled with the Holy Spirit in an extraordinary degree and was granted the gift of prophecy and inspired utterance."⁴ Clearly, nothing in the text rules out the possibility that Mary spoke by inspiration, but at the same time, we should not assume what Scripture doesn't explicitly state.

Where does this leave us as far as a text to preach on? Certainly with much more than only Mary's pious feelings and personal thoughts. When we compare Mary's words with the rest of Scripture, we come to the undeniable conclusion that everything Mary says in the Magnificat is indeed scriptural. Her song clearly proclaims divine truths taught in the rest of Scripture. In fact, Mary obviously borrows many words and expressions from the Old Testament Scriptures. To demonstrate this, I have included in an appendix on pages 14 and 15 a chart that aligns many Old Testament passages parallel to Mary's words. Everything Mary says is scriptural, and in that sense her song conveys divine truth.

Although the preacher will not dwell on such matters in a sermon, he certainly has to think through these matters for himself in his own study of the text so that he interprets and applies the text correctly in the sermon. I let Werner Franzmann sum up my thoughts on this issue: "Now it is not stated that Mary spoke by inspiration, as is expressly stated of Elizabeth (v. 41) and Zechariah (v. 67). But the song in which Mary exalted (magnified) the Lord expressed divine truths, for she borrowed the language from Hannah's song of praise (1 Samuel 2:1-10) and from the passages in the Psalms and the Prophets."⁵

Mary begins her song:

Verse 47) **Megal uhei h̄yuxh/mou toh kurion,**
kai h̄gal liāsen to pneuma mou epi tw swthri mou,

*My soul magnifies the Lord,
 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,*

The thoughts of the first strophe of Mary's song (vv. 47-50) hinge on the two finite verbs in this verse, **megal uhei** and **h̄gal liāsen**. The verb **megal uhei** literally means "to make large or big" and then, by extension, "to make great, to exalt, glorify, praise, extol, magnify." Mary is magnifying the Lord by telling others how great she thinks he is. The present tense of the verb simply conveys what Mary is currently doing. With the phrase **h̄yuxh/mou** Mary indicates that her praise for God comes from deep inside her. Her worship is deeply personal; it comes from her heart. The one she ascribes greatness to is **toh kurion**, the Lord, which is the common Greek New Testament name for ἠϋῳ, the God of Israel, the God of free grace, who is faithful to his people and to his covenant promises of mercy and salvation. Perhaps this is a good place to call attention to the fact that Mary does not address God directly in the second person in her song. She always speaks about him in the third person.

The second line of verse 47 is in synonymous parallelism to the first line. Mary is clearly expressing herself here in a Hebrew poetic thought pattern. The verb **h̄gal liāsen** means "to exult, to rejoice exceedingly." What is the significance of the shift in tense here from the present to the aorist? The shift might reflect Mary's original Hebrew or Aramaic thought pattern (waw consecutive construction translated as an English present tense). Another plausible explanation is that the verb is an ingressive aorist, intended to describe Mary's initial reaction to the annunciation, "My spirit has begun to rejoice." Because so much of the Magnificat reflects the thought patterns of the Old Testament, I prefer the first explanation.

⁴ William Arndt, *Bible Commentary: The Gospel According to St. Luke* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), p. 59.

⁵ Werner Franzmann, *Bible History Commentary: New Testament*, Vol. 1 (Milwaukee: WELS Board for Parish Education, 1989), p. 12.

What is the meaning and significance of **to pneuma mou**? Both **yuxh** and **pneuma** refer to the nonmaterial part of a human being. Some commentators (Luther, Lenski, Wenzel) see a distinction between the two: **yuxh** designating the nonmaterial part of a person as it animates the body and **pneuma** designating the same nonmaterial part as it is directed upward to God or as it is capable of having fellowship with God. In response, I would say that nothing in this context indicates that Mary is drawing such a distinction. Because of the obvious synonymous parallelism between the two lines, I understand “soul” and “spirit” here to be synonymous. Again, Mary’s joy is not something superficial; it comes from deep within her inner being.

With the prepositional phrase **epi tw qew tw swthi mou**, Mary designates God not only as the object of her worship but as the cause, the reason, the basis of her great joy. I have translated, “My spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” It could just as well be translated, “My spirit rejoices *on account of* God my Savior.” The article with **qew** makes it definite, the one true God, the one who is my Savior. We note that this is the first time the word *savior* was spoken in the New Testament. We might also mention that Luke is the only synoptic Gospel that refers to Jesus as **swthi**. Mary found her highest joy in God *her* Savior. The genitive pronoun **mou** is objective. Mary is applying the gospel to herself; she sees herself as the recipient of God’s saving work. What does Mary see God saving her from and saving her for? From the context of her song, the angel’s message to her, Elizabeth’s greeting, and the broader context of the Old Testament Scriptures’ plan of salvation, it is clear that Mary looked to the Lord as her Savior from sin, from the curse of the law, from death and damnation, and from all the evil brought upon his world because of sin. He is the Savior who would redeem her for himself, to be his own, to live under him in holiness and righteousness with the fullness of his blessings, culminating in heaven.

Please permit me to digress for a moment. We are all aware that this verse is a clear proof passage against the Roman Catholic false doctrine of the immaculate conception of Mary, that Mary supposedly was conceived without original sin and, what’s more, remained sinless her entire life. We might ask, Aren’t Catholic theologians aware of Mary’s own testimony in this verse of the Magnificat? Indeed, they are well aware of it, and they do try to reconcile the clear and obvious truth of this verse with their unscriptural teaching by resorting to some sleight-of-hand theological sophistry. “Yes,” the Romanists say, “God truly was Mary’s savior. Based on Christ’s merits, God saved and redeemed Mary from all sin by not allowing her ever to become sinful!” Roman dogmatists refer to this unique form of redemption as *redemptio anticipata* or *praeredemptio*. This preredemption, according to Catholic teaching, formally consisted in the infusion of sanctifying grace into Mary’s soul immediately after its creation.⁶ The Scriptures, of course, know nothing of this sophistry. They clearly reject it not only with Mary’s own testimony in the Magnificat, but most emphatically by the apostle Paul’s statement in Romans 3:23,24: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.” Mary rejoiced in God her Savior even as we do. She expands on her reasons for rejoicing in the following verses of her song.

Verse 48) **o bi epebl eyen epi thh tapeihwsin thv doulv hv auou**
idou'gak apo tou nun makariosin me pasai ai geneai

because he has looked with favor upon the humble state of his servant.
For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed,

With the **o bi** clause Mary sets forth the basis for her praise to God: “He has looked with favor upon the humble state [or “status”] of his servant.” The verb **epebl eyen** literally means “to look upon” and then, by extension, “to regard with favor and affection.” Here it describes God’s loving care in selecting Mary to be the mother of the Messiah. The aorist tense recalls the simple historical fact. God did this when he sent Gabriel to announce to Mary that she would conceive by the power of the Holy Spirit and bear God’s Son.

⁶ Cf. Joseph Pohle and Arthur Preuss, *Mariology: A Dogmatic Treatise on the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God* (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1946), pp. 39-71.

Mary speaks of herself as the Lord's **doul h**, his servant, which expresses a position of subordination and absolute submission to God. She also speaks of her **tapeihwsiv**, her humble, lowly status. **tapeihwsiv** here does not mean humility as a virtue, as Catholic exegetes have long maintained, as if God chose Mary because she had earned God's favor by being so filled with humility. Rather, with this term Mary is referring to her lowly social status. She was a poor peasant girl; there was nothing notable or great about her, as the world views such things. Luther catches the spirit and significance of Mary's words with his paraphrase:

“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.”⁷

Luther goes on to say:

Hence she does not glory in her worthiness nor yet in her unworthiness, but solely in the divine regard, which is so exceedingly good and gracious that He deigned to look upon such a lowly maiden, and to look upon her in so glorious and honorable a fashion. They, therefore, do her an injustice who hold that she gloried, not indeed in her virginity, but in her humility. She gloried neither in the one nor in the other, but only in the gracious regard of God. Hence the stress lies not on the word “low estate” but on the word “regarded.” For not her humility but God's regard is to be praised. When a prince takes a poor beggar by the hand, it is not the beggar's lowliness but the prince's grace and goodness that is to be commended.⁸

Mary recognizes that God has given her a special role in his plan of salvation by choosing her to bear the Messiah. She explains (**gak**) that because of God's special favor shown to her, all generations (**pasai ai9 geneai**) shall pronounce her blessed (**makariosin**). I said earlier that I don't interpret Mary's statement here necessarily to be inspired prophecy. It could well be a bold (**idou**), faith-inspired deduction based on the angel's announcement to her. With the temporal phrase **apou tou nun**, Mary indicates in faith that from that time on, God's people of all succeeding generations until the end of time will speak of her as blessed. Indeed, believers have been speaking of Mary as **makariov**, not just happy but blessed, favored, gifted by God, ever since that day when Elizabeth greeted her as “the mother of my Lord” (Lk 1:43). This same pronouncement of Mary as blessed and favored by God occurs every time this chapter of Luke's Gospel is read and heard and every time Christians speak the words of the Apostles' and Nicene creeds and confess that Christ was born “of the virgin Mary.” To the end of time, believers will continue to acknowledge the special blessing the Lord gave to Mary. Again, and obvious to us all, what Mary says about herself here has nothing to do with the Mariolatry that crept into the church centuries later and still pervades Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy to this day. Luther's words in this regard are also worth quoting:

Note that she does not say men will speak all manner of good of her, praise her virtues, exalt her virginity or her humility, or sing of what she has done. But for this one thing alone, that God regarded her, men will call her blessed. That is to give all the glory to God as completely as it can be done. . . Not *she* is praised thereby, but God's grace toward her. . .

⁷ Martin Luther, “The Magnificat,” *Luther's Works* (LW), American Edition, Vol. 21 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), p. 314.

⁸ LW 21:314.

For, in proportion as we ascribe merit and worthiness to her, we lower the grace of God and diminish the truth of the Magnificat. The angel salutes her only as highly favored of God, and because the Lord is with her (Luke 1:28), which is why she is blessed among women. Hence all those who heap such great praise and honor upon her head are not far from making an idol of her, as though she were concerned that men should honor her and look to her for good things, when in truth she thrusts this from her and would have us honor God in her and come through her to a good confidence in His grace (*und durch sich yderman zu gutter zuvorsicht in gottis gnaden bringen*).⁹

Mary affirms that this is the correct interpretation of her words by what she says next in her song.

Verse 49) **οἱ εἰρησεν μοι μεγαλα οἰουηατοῦ,**
και ἁγιον το ὄνομα αὐτου,

*because the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name,*

With this second **οἱ** clause, Mary states exactly why all generations will call her blessed: not because she has done great things for God, but because he has done great things for her. Following the line of thought in the song, this second **οἱ** clause also introduces a second reason why Mary is praising and rejoicing in God her Savior: the Mighty One has acted on her behalf and on behalf of all others who fear (believe in) him.

“The Mighty One” is the subject in this verse and the rest of the Magnificat. By referring to God as **οἰουηατοῦ**, the Mighty One, Mary focuses on God’s attribute of power and then on that attribute combined with God’s holiness and mercy – all descriptions designed to focus attention on God, not on Mary. The reference to God as the Mighty One alludes to his power in creating the child in her womb and giving her the role of serving as his virgin mother. The great things (**megala**) God promised to do (Isa 7:14), even though biologically impossible (Lk 1:34), God did (**εἰρησεν**).

Mary further describes the Mighty One as holy: “Holy is his name.” God’s name includes everything he has revealed about himself in his holy Word. Without that revelation we would not know God at all as holy. Saying that God’s name is holy is saying that God’s Word describes God as being holy. He is completely separate from sin in everything he is and in everything he does. By connecting the two lines of this verse with **kai**, Mary reminds us that in his mighty work of salvation, God shows himself as holy. God’s holy and mighty work is to redeem us sinners from sin and to separate us from sin and all its unholy consequences. Through the mighty, sanctifying work of his Holy Spirit, God makes his people holy, set apart for himself and his holy purposes for us.

⁹ LW 21:321,322; WA 7:568 (emphasis original). I believe the last phrase in this Luther quote should be understood in the same sense as when the Lutheran Confessions state that we honor the memory of the saints (including Mary) by giving thanks to God because he has shown examples of his mercy in the lives of the saints and his desire to save men (Ap XXI:4). When we see in the lives of the saints how God’s grace truly superabounds over sin, this serves to strengthen our faith and confidence in God’s grace (XXI:S). Thus, when we consider how God in his grace worked out his plan of salvation, using lowly Mary as part of his plan, it strengthens our faith in God’s saving grace toward us. Although Luther in his medieval piety had not yet at the time of this writing (1521, cf. LW 21:327) shed his belief in Mary’s immaculate conception and apparently always regarded Mary as *semper virgo*, he had come to clarity on the doctrine of justification by faith and the sole mediatorship of Christ. I don’t think anyone can fairly read into Luther’s words here any false notion of Mary as “mediatrix of all graces.

Verse 50) **kai\to_elleov auObu-eiOgeneav
toi\ foboumehoiv auObh.**

*and his mercy for generations and generations
is to those who fear him.*

As the first **kai/**(v. 49) connects the revelation of God’s holiness with his mighty deeds, so this second connective **kai/**at the beginning of verse 50 joins the thought of God’s mercy to his holiness. **elleov** is used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew term דְּסֶ֫עַ which refers to the royal, gracious, faithful love God has pledged to his people by means of a solemn covenant. Grace (**xariv**) in the New Testament emphasizes God’s love toward those who don’t deserve it because of their guilt; mercy is love toward those who are in misery as a result of their sin and guilt. Even though mercy is stressed here, grace is not excluded. They are two facets of the same jewel of God’s love. God’s merciful love does not sparkle for his people one day only to become dim and dull the next. Rather, it is faithful and constant, **eiOgeneav kai\geneav** (“from generation to generation,” NIV; “throughout every generation,” God’s Word). The mercy Mary had experienced parallels what believers throughout time experience.

God’s mercy is directed specifically to “those who fear him,” **toi\ foboumehoiv auObn** (dative of advantage or dative indirect object). The present tense of the substantive participle emphasizes the ongoing state of believers; they are continually fearing the Mighty One. This is the fear of the Lord spoken of so often in the Old Testament and also in the New Testament. This fear is not the abject terror and horror that will fill the hearts of unbelievers when they face the infinite anger of God in the judgment. This fear is the respectful, reverential childlike awe that is combined with childlike trust in the heavenly Father and fills the heart of the believing child of God. It shows itself in the reverential bearing of those who recognize God’s majesty and greatness. Those who fear God in this evangelical sense truly know who God is, and they know who and what they are in relationship to him.¹⁰

By way of application, don’t we get the uneasy feeling that many of God’s people in our congregations and schools today are losing this sense of God’s majesty and greatness and the corresponding reverential awe and respect that ought to reflect itself in their bearing before God and his Word and then also in their relations with his appointed earthly representatives? The biblical worldview, as we know, is in certain respects a hierarchical worldview in which human beings are meant to relate to one another more often than not through vertical relationships. God is at the very pinnacle of all our relationships, and he has placed human, earthly representatives over us in the family, church, and society. God wants to bless us through his appointed representatives, and he wants us, in turn, to respect, obey, and submit to them as to the Lord. It seems, though, as our Christian people more and more imbibe what I might call the secular horizontal-democratic worldview of our society, which emphasizes the absolute autonomy of the individual person and absolute equality of all people, they assume only horizontal relationships, and with that comes a corresponding loss of respect for God-ordained authority.

Teachers who have served in our schools for a generation or more certainly notice in many young people the changing attitudes that seem to reflect this changing worldview. Pastors who have been around for a few years have noticed it, too, and I don’t think we are merely romanticizing the past. As people’s worldview shifts from the hierarchical to the horizontal-democratic, God also loses his place over people and is looked upon more and more as a buddy who is always supposed to be at their disposal to help them feel comfortable with themselves. Theologians sometimes speak of this as an overemphasis of God’s immanence at the expense of God’s transcendence. The practical question for us to wrestle with in connection with this text is, In our preaching and teaching how can we more effectively teach and instill in our people the biblical, evangelical concept of the fear of the Lord, the reverential awe and respect and wonderment we owe our great, high,

¹⁰ On the topic “the fear of the Lord,” see the very helpful article by Prof J. P. Meyer, “What Does It Mean to Fear God?” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (July 1939), pp. 174-188.

majestic Savior-God? (People in our circles who think a lot about worship will also remind us that the sermon is preached within the context of the rest of the service, which has the potential either to reinforce or to undermine these concepts.) We will have opportunity to revisit this question in the discussion portion of this presentation. Returning to the text, did you notice the shift in objects in verse 50 of Mary’s song? In verses 48 and 49 Mary was the object, the receiver of God’s gracious attention and mighty saving works. In verse 50 the object shifts from Mary to God’s people in general (“those who fear him”). For the rest of the Magnificat, Mary praises God for his mighty acts of salvation for his people Israel.

Verse 51) **Ἐποίησεν κρατέων ἐν βραχίονι αὐτοῦ·
διέσπορῆσεν ὑπερήφανοὺς διανοίας αὐτῶν:**

*He has done a mighty deed with his arm;
he has scattered the arrogant in the way of thinking of their hearts.*

The word order in this sentence draws our attention right away to the verb **ἐποίησεν**. The implied subject of the verb is the Mighty One. A bit more difficult question we need to address concerning the verb is, What is the significance of the aorist tense? Our answer to that question will have a bearing on how we interpret the six aorist verbs that follow. Commentators and grammarians suggest a number of possibilities. The three most plausible seem to be

1. The aorists describe only past events and should be translated in the past tense. Mary is referring only to specific saving acts of God in the Old Testament, such as when he rescued Israel from the Egyptians, the Babylonians, etc.
2. The aorists are gnomic aorists, describing what God habitually does, and they should be translated as present tenses. (In response to this, it should be noted that the gnomic aorist is rare in Hellenistic Greek, which favors the present tense for this usage. More importantly, this view ignores the theme in verses 54 and 55 of the singular event of God fulfilling the Abrahamitic covenant by the sending of his Son and the saving work Jesus would accomplish.)
3. The aorists are to be taken as prophetic aorists, reflecting the Hebrew prophetic perfect tense and describing future events as so certain that the speaker considers them as good as done. (I favor this explanation but do not rule out the fact that Mary also has past events in mind.)

Regarding the significance of the Greek aorist tense in general, we need to keep in mind that the aorist “presents an occurrence in summary, viewed as a whole from the outside, without regard for the internal make-up of the occurrence.”¹¹ The aorist is sometimes compared to a snapshot, while the present and imperfect tenses are represented by a video. With the aorist the speaker describes an action as simply having happened. The aorist doesn’t tell us whether or not the action has occurred repeatedly or continuously, only that it happened. It views the action as a whole.

Verses 54 and 55 clearly state that what Mary is describing in this strophe is the fact that God has fulfilled the Abrahamitic covenant; he has completed his plan of salvation for the fallen human race through the redeeming work of his Son. Certainly part of this plan included such specific historical events as making the family of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob into a nation. It involved bringing enslaved Israel out of Egypt under Moses and into the Promised Land under Joshua. It included establishing the royal line of David, sending the prophets, and all God did in the Old Testament so that his covenant with Abraham would be carried out. Mary was witnessing the fulfillment of that covenant with the coming of God’s Son, who would suffer and die, rise

¹¹ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), p. 554, quoting B. M. Fanning, *Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), p. 97.

again, and ascend into heaven, from where he would send forth his Holy Spirit on his New Testament people. The ultimate fulfillment of the covenant will take place when Christ returns on the Last Day to raise the dead and usher in the new heaven and the new earth (2 Pe 3:13). I therefore understand Mary as speaking here of God's entire plan of salvation, centering in Christ. Since Christ had become incarnate in the virgin's womb, she views God's plan as accomplished, as good as done. I therefore have opted to translate the aorists in verses 51 to 54 as past perfects in English to suggest that even those parts of God's plan still waiting to be accomplished are viewed as already a present reality. This reflects the Hebrew prophetic perfect. So much for the discussion on the tense of **εποιησεν** and the six finite verbs that follow it.

One other item needs to be noted before we proceed with the rest of the details of this verse. In verses 51 to 54 Mary borrows heavily from the salvation rhetoric of the Old Testament to describe what God did to fulfill the Abrahamic covenant. Much of this Old Testament language is figurative. In phraseology that literally depicts conditions belonging to this mundane world, Mary refers to things that actually belong to the realm of the spirit. The proud, the rulers, and the rich are the unbelieving enemies of Christ who oppose his kingdom rule of grace in people's hearts through the gospel. The humble, the hungry, and God's servant Israel, on the other hand, are the penitent believers who despair of their own righteousness before God and cling in faith only to Christ and his righteousness, which he gives them freely in the gospel. The prophets often spoke in this figurative way (Isa 2; 11:6-9; 55:1-13; 61; etc.), as did Jesus (Mt 5:1-10; Lk 4:14-21; etc.). The testimony of Jesus and the apostles, however, makes it abundantly clear that such figurative language is not meant to be taken literalistically, as if to promote Zionism, Millennialism, social-gospelism, or liberation theology. Jesus reminded his followers, "My kingdom is not of this world" (Jn 18:36). The apostle Paul also clearly set the record straight when he described the spiritual nature of God's kingdom: "The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Ro 14:17).

Now that I have tipped my hand as to how I understand this section of the Magnificat, let's proceed with looking at some of the remaining details in verses 51 and following.

Mary exults in the fact that the Lord has performed a mighty deed. **κρατος** is not just latent strength but power displayed. In this context we translate it "a mighty deed." The Mighty One performed a mighty deed with his arm. 'Ev functions instrumentally here. The expression *God's arm* is an anthropomorphism; it is fairly common in the Bible and refers to God using and displaying his almighty power and strength to carry out his saving plans for his people (cf. Dt 4:34; Ps 44:3; 89:13; Isa 51:9; 52:10; 53:1; etc.).

When God rules mightily for his people ("those who fear him," v. 50) he also overrules all those who oppose him and his saving plan. Mary describes this side of God's mighty deed first of all by saying, "He has scattered the arrogant in the way of thinking of their hearts." **υπερηφανου** is a substantival adjective. The lack of the definite article with all the objects in verses 51 to 53 (**υπερηφανου**, **δυνασταν**, **ταπεινου**, **πεινωταν**, **plotountav**) emphasizes the quality of people whose whole character may be summed up by these words. **υπερηφανου** is derived from **υπερ** ("above") and **φαινομαι** ("show oneself") and literally means "someone who shows or portrays himself to be above others, someone who is pre-eminent, especially in a bad sense, haughty, arrogant." It is the opposite of **ταπεινου**.

Mary is speaking of people who are arrogant not only in the way they outwardly appear to other people, but **διανοια|καρδιαυ αυων**, literally, "with respect to the mind of their hearts." **διανοια** (here a dative of reference) is "intelligence, understanding, the mind," and then (in this context) "a way or kind of thinking, a mindset." The way of thinking of those who are arrogant before God is one of pride and conceit in their hearts. **καρδια**, "heart," is the center of the inner life, emotions, reasoning power, and the will. These people are proud and arrogant not only because they think they are better than other people, but because they think they know better than God. They think they don't need God's grace or the Savior. In their hearts and way of thinking they are opposed to God's plan of salvation. Salvation by human achievement is their mindset. Such people, Mary says, God has scattered (**διεσκορπισεν**). He has overruled them, defeated them, rejected them.

Mary continues to contrast God's powerful rule as it is directed toward unbelievers and believers.

Verse 52) **kaqeilen dunaŝtav apoŝtrohwn
kai uŝwsen tapeinouŝ,**

*he has brought down rulers from [their] thrones,
and he has lifted up the humble.*

kaqeilen is the second aorist form of **kaqairelw**, “to pull, bring, take, throw down.” The implied subject of the verb is still the Mighty One. The **dunaŝtav** are rulers, sovereigns, the high and mighty of this world who, in context, have set themselves up against God. We can't help but think of how God mightily overruled the ungodly rulers of the world at Babel, in Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, and Persia during Old Testament times. The same was true of the Ptolemies and Seleucids during the Intertestamental period. None of the most high and mighty of this world could stop the Mighty One from carrying out his saving plan. Even the Roman Caesar and King Herod would have to bow to God's plans, which would be fulfilled. The virgin had conceived and would bear a Son and call his name Immanuel, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever! God had kept his promises: he had performed the mighty deed of choosing a lowly peasant girl from out-of-the-way Nazareth to bring his Son into the world. Mary was nothing great in the eyes of the world, and she had nothing meritorious to offer God that he should choose her. Mary was **tapeinouŝ** because she recognized that fact.¹² She was a child of grace, as were the disciples, and as are all believers. Nothing in her hands did she bring; simply to her Savior and his cross did she cling. God has raised up with Christ all such people who are humble before him and seated them with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus (Eph 2:6). He has exalted them to the status of being God's children, “heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ” (Ro 8:17).

Verse 53) **peinwntav eŝplhsen aŝaqwn
kai uŝploutountav eŝapeŝteil en kenouŝ.**

*The hungry ones he has filled with good things,
and the rich ones he has sent away empty.*

Mary describes God's mighty deed of salvation with still another contrast. The hungry ones and the rich ones are not two new classes of people, but the same two as in verse 52, viewed from a different aspect. The two classes still are believers and unbelievers, the penitent and the impenitent, the humble and the proud, those who stand before God with empty hands, which can only receive from God's bounteous mercy, and those who try to come to God with their hands filled with the treasures of their own merits, by which they think they deserve God's favor. They are the same two kinds of people as the Pharisee and the tax collector in Jesus'

¹² By contrast, at the bottom of all Roman Catholic Mariolatry is brazen work-righteousness. This fact was clearly demonstrated in an article recently published in a well-known American Catholic journal of pastoral theology, “Did Mary Merit the Incarnation?” We quote just a brief portion: “For this personal cooperation of hers we owe a debt to Mary for her work in our Redemption. Her part in the Incarnation and Redemption was not a passive one like that of a ciborium receiving the consecrated particles, or like the ground receiving the living seed. Prior to the Incarnation she actively prepared herself to be a worthy dwelling place for the Redeemer by her personal cooperation with the divine graces given her. She prepared herself to become, as it were, the bride of the Redeemer, so that she was able to cooperate actively and mutually with the Redeemer in the very act of Redemption” (Fr. Robert Auman, “Did Mary Merit the Incarnation?” *Homiletic & Pastoral Review*, Vol. XCVII; No. 8 [May 1997], p. 43). Although notions of Marian cooperation in salvation can be traced all the way back to the writings of some of the church fathers in the third and fourth centuries, full-blown coredemptrix teaching has become noticeably more pronounced in Catholicism especially since the 17th century and increasingly so in the last 150 years. The coredemptrix teaching (although not the term itself) was enshrined in Vatican II's Dogmatic Constitution of the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) nn. 52-69 and was reaffirmed in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (United States Catholic Conference, Inc.: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994), §494,964-969. For a good up-to-date overview of the current worldwide movement in the Catholic Church that is trying to persuade the pope to make an ex cathedra infallible decree regarding Mary as coredemptrix, see the cover story, “Hail Mary,” in the August 25, 1997 issue of Newsweek, pp. 48-55.

parable (Lk 18:9-14). The tax collector went home filled with good things: God's gift of justification, God's gracious pardon for his sin, God's approval, heaven itself. The Pharisee went home empty-handed and empty-hearted. He had no room for God's love in his heart because his heart was filled with the vanity of self-righteous self-love. The present tense substantive participles (**peinwrtav, pl outountav**) again emphasize the ongoing condition of people's hearts.

God has shown mercy to those who fear him, but he has scattered the proud and arrogant. He has brought down the high and mighty of this world who oppose him, but he has raised to the high and noble status of sonship those who have been humbled by the law to see that nothing good lives in them by nature and trust rather in Christ and his goodness for salvation. God has filled the desire of those hungry for Christ's saving righteousness while he has sent away empty-handed all those who think they are rich in themselves before God. This is God's principle of the great reversal, as it has been called.¹³ It is the paradoxical great reversal Jesus speaks of in so many of his parables. "Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Lk 14:11; 18:14; Mt 23:12; etc.). "There are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last (Lk 13:3; etc.) See also the Beatitudes in Jesus' Sermon on the Plain (Lk 6:20-26). The apostle Paul expounded upon this same principle of the great reversal in 1 Corinthians 1:18-31:

¹⁸ For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For it is written:

"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise;
the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate."

²⁰ Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. ²² Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.

²⁶ Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. ²⁸ He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are, ²⁹ so that no one may boast before him. ³⁰ It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God – that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. ³¹ Therefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord."

God's great reversal takes place through the preaching of law and gospel. The message of the Magnificat that scores and condemns all human pride and self-righteousness is squarely aimed at our sinful hearts and our natural-born ways of thinking and acting. Mary's words condemn us all. And Mary's words comfort us all, for those whom God knocks down with the law he also lifts up with the gospel. Through Christ, God has graciously helped us in every way. With these same thoughts Mary concludes the second strophe of her song with the final sentence in verses 54 and 55.

¹³ Arthur A. Just Jr., Luke 1:1 – 9:50, Concordia Commentary series (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1996), p. 85.

Verses 54,55) **antel abeto** **brahl paidov auou=**
mnhsqhrai eDeuv,
kaqwy eDahsen prov touv paterav hawn,
tw|Abraam kai tw|spermati auou eiō ton aiōna.

*He has come to the aid of Israel his servant,
to remember mercy
(just as he spoke to our fathers),
to Abraham and his seed forever.*

Antel abeto is an aorist middle form of **antilambanomai**. The verb literally means “to take in turn, to receive one thing for another,” and then “to take hold of, to embrace and hug, to support and help.” It conveys the idea of tender feelings, and as a verb of touch, it takes a genitive object. *Israel* here refers not just to the patriarch Israel but to all his believing descendants. The name *Israel* connotes the covenant name for God’s Old Testament people. The Lord, the Mighty One, has kept his promises of salvation.

Whenever the Bible speaks of God remembering, as Mary says here, it is employing a figure of speech called an anthropopathism, assigning human emotions and mental activities to God. When Mary says God remembered his mercy to Abraham, etc., she means God has done something to fulfill his covenant with Abraham.

I take **mnhsqhrai** as a causal infinitive connected with **antel abeto**, not as a purpose infinitive. The infinitive thus describes the basis of God’s acting for his people, not his purpose in acting for them. God’s mighty saving action is motivated by his loyal covenant love, his mercy. With this infinitive clause, Mary is referring to the unilateral covenant of salvation the Lord made with Abraham and his seed (datives of interest or advantage; Ge 12:1 ff.; 22:15ff.; etc.) Because of the incarnation of the promised Seed *par excellence*, Mary is celebrating the fulfillment of God’s covenant promise of mercy. All believers in Christ, the promised Seed, count themselves as beneficiaries of this promise of help and mercy to Abraham’s spiritual seed (Gal 3:26,29), and they celebrate this promise in faith as Mary did.

In my translation I placed the first line of verse 55 in parentheses to show that I take it as parenthetical to the thought of the rest of the sentence. It would be awkward if the second line of verse 55 was in apposition to the first line (a dative following an accusative does not normally indicate apposition). What’s more, if the last line is in apposition to the **prov** clause, the thought would be: “God spoke [aorist] to Abraham and his seed forever,” which would be awkward at best, especially since the verb is in the aorist tense. The NIV takes these verses the same way I have and translates them, “He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers.” Placing the parenthetical phrase at the end of the sentence does not give the sentence the familiar rhythm we are accustomed to hearing in the more traditional version of the Magnificat, but it does accurately reflect the sense of the original Greek.

With the **kaqwy** clause, Mary shows that her faith is firmly grounded in the Scriptures. Everything Mary knows and says about the Lord – his mighty deeds, his covenant of mercy, his promises of salvation – is grounded in the Scriptures, the inspired written record of what God spoke to her Jewish forebears. Mary’s worship and praise of the Lord flows out of her knowledge of the Scriptures and God’s plan of salvation recorded in them. Our faith and our worship and praise of the Lord flows from the same source. In fact, with her entire song Mary shows herself to be an ideal model for our worship today. Her worship focuses on God and his gracious promises, what he has done for us. Her worship centers in Christ as the fulfillment of all God’s promises of mercy to sinners. Her worship is based on the Scriptures and flows out of them. And her worship comes from her heart; in repentance and faith she applies law and gospel to herself, resulting in joy-filled praise and wonderment at the mighty and faithful saving mercy of God in Christ.¹⁴

¹⁴ This is the same theology of worship espoused by the Lutheran Confessions, which say the highest worship of God is to believe and proclaim the gospel, to receive and share the forgiveness of sins. Cf. Ap IV:154,310 (Tappert, pp. 128,155; in the Trilog the references are Ap 111:33,189, pp. 162,206); Ap XV:42 (Tappert, p. 221; Trilog, p. 324).

As a conclusion to the exegetical section of the presentation, we offer these few words of Dr. Luther:

After enumerating the works of God in her and in all men, Mary returns to the beginning and to the chief thing. She concludes the Magnificat by mentioning the very greatest of all God's works – the Incarnation of the Son of God. . .

Now, the Israel that is God's servant is the one whom the Incarnation of Christ benefits. That is His own beloved people, for whose sake He also became man, to redeem them from the power of the devil, of sin, death, and hell, and to lead them to righteousness, eternal life, and salvation. That is the help of which Mary sings.¹⁵

That is the help of which we also sing and preach.

LW 21:349,350.

Appendix

Mary's Magnificat and Old Testament Parallel Passages

<p>Lk 1:46) My soul glorifies the <i>Lord</i></p>	<p>1 Sa 2:1 My heart rejoices in the LORD; in the LORD my horn is lifted high. Ps 34:2,3 My soul will boast in the LORD; let the afflicted hear and rejoice. Glorify the LORD with me; let us exalt his name together. Ps 103:1 Praise the LORD, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name.</p>
<p>v. 47) and my spirit rejoices in God in my Savior,</p>	<p>Ps 18:46b Exalted be God my Savior! Isa 61:10 I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness.</p>
<p>v. 48a) for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.</p>	<p>Ps 138:6 Though the LORD is on high, he looks upon the lowly, but the proud he knows from afar.</p>
<p>v. 48b) From now on all generations will call me blessed,</p>	
<p>v. 49a) for the Mighty One has done great things for me-</p>	<p>Ps 71:19 Your righteousness reaches to the skies, O God, you who have done great things. Who, O God, is like you?</p>
<p>v. 49b) holy is his name.</p>	<p>1 Sa 2:2 There is no one holy like the LORD; there is no one besides you. Ps 22:3 You are enthroned as the Holy One; you are the praise of Israel. Ps 71:22b I will sing praise to you with the lyre, O Holy One of Israel. Ps 89:18 Indeed, our shield belongs to the LORD, our king to the Holy One of Israel. Ps 99:3 Let them praise your great and awesome name – he is holy. Ps 103:1b Praise his holy name.</p>
<p>v. 50) His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.</p>	<p>Ps 103:17 From everlasting to everlasting the LORD's love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children's children.</p>
<p>v. 51 a) He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;</p>	<p>Ps 44:3 It was not by their sword that they won the land, nor did their arm bring them victory; it was your right hand, your arm, and the light of your face, for you loved them. Ps 77:14,15 You are the God who performs miracles; you display your power among the peoples. With your mighty arm you redeemed your people, the descendants of Jacob and Joseph. Ps 98:1 Sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things; his right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him.</p>

<p>v. 51b) he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.</p>	<p>1 Sa 2:3 Do not keep talking so proudly or let your mouth speak such arrogance, for the LORD is a God who knows, and by him deeds are weighed. 2 Sa 22:28 You save the humble, but your eyes are on the haughty to bring them low. Ps 89:10 You crushed Rahab like one of the slain; with your strong arm you scattered your enemies.</p>
<p>v. 52a) He has brought down rulers from their thrones</p>	<p>1 Sa 2:4 The bows of the warriors are broken (Pharaoh, Sennacherib, Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, etc.)</p>
<p>v. 52b) but has lifted up the humble.</p>	<p>1 Sa 2:4b but those who stumbled are armed with strength. 1 Sa 2:8 He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with princes and has them inherit a throne of honor. (David, Daniel, Esther, etc.)</p>
<p>v. 53a) He has filled the hungry with good things</p>	<p>1 Sa 2:5b but those who were hungry hunger no more. Ps 103:5 who satisfies your desires with good things. Ps 107:8,9 Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men, for he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things.</p>
<p>v. 53b) but he has sent the rich away empty.</p>	<p>1 Sa 2:5 Those who were full hire themselves out for food.</p>
<p>vv. 54,55a) He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever,</p>	<p>Ps 25:6 Remember, O LORD, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old. Ps 98:3 He has remembered his love and his faithfulness to the house of Israel. Ps 105:8-11 He remembers his covenant forever, the word he commanded, for a thousand generations, the covenant he made with Abraham, the oath he swore to Isaac. He confirmed it to Jacob as a decree, to Israel as an everlasting covenant: "To you I will give the land of Canaan as the portion you will inherit." Ps 136Aff. His love [mercy] endures forever.</p>
<p>v. 55b) even as he said to our fathers.</p>	<p>Ge 12:1ff; 22:15ff.; etc. Ps 147:19 He has revealed his word to Jacob, his laws and decrees to Israel. Mic 7:20 You will be true to Jacob, and show mercy to Abraham, as you pledged on oath to our fathers in days long ago.</p>