

Mary in Scripture - Part 4 of 8 – The Visitation

Reading Luke 1:39-56

Introduction

I was once asked by a Muslim artist who was contracted to do the artwork for a chapel in a Catholic college in the Philippines what was my idea of the Visitation. My answer was two pregnant women meeting and touching each other's bellies in fascination at the new life within them. I am happy to say that the chapel of the Magnificat in Manila has a beautiful rendition of the scene. Luke has two believing women, confident in God's word, sharing the grace of being pregnant with two children who will have special missions in God's plan of salvation.

Old Testament Background

Mary moves with eager haste to visit Elizabeth who greets her with a loud cry of praise. Behind this wonderful scene lies the Old Testament pattern of the surprise of elderly Sarah in giving birth to Isaac and the stirring of Jacob and Esau within the womb of Rebekah. The action of Elizabeth's unborn infant leaping in the womb not only reminds us of Rebekah's unborn twins (Genesis 25:22ff.) and David's dance before the Ark of the Covenant (2 Samuel 6:16), but also of the messianic leap of joy among the poor, the *anawim*, of whom Mary is representative (Isaiah 35:6).

The scene reaches over to the song of Zechariah (the Benedictus, vv. 68-79) and forward into what follows, the song of Mary (the Magnificat, vv. 46-55); it brings together the triad of Elizabeth, Zechariah, and John the Baptist with that of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus. The fulfilment of the first covenant, so present in the first group, flows into the second covenant at the advent of the Messiah. Mary is depicted as the model believer and it is Elizabeth who proclaims her blessed because she has believed (vv.42 and 45).

This blessing foreshadows the blessing given by the woman in the crowd in Luke 11:27-28 - *Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you! But he said, 'Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it!' Mary's faith is explicit in her hearing the word of God and keeping it – My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it. (8:21).*

Mary will be declared 'blessed' more than once in this gospel; she is the beatitudes personified. She is joyful, happy, fortunate, and blessed woman of faith. Again we have Old Testament echoes of Jael who is called blessed among women (Judges 5:24) and Judith who is addressed in Judith 13:18 as *you are blessed by the Most High God above all other women on earth.* The Song of Songs 1:8 spoke of the loved one as *O fairest among woman.*

The Journey Theme

The Visitation is a point of departure for Mary's active journey of faith; Luke's gospel features Jesus own journey from 9:51-18:14, but there are many other journeys, here one before Jesus is even born. The long journey of almost ten chapters to Jerusalem has Jesus carefully preparing his disciples for his own *exodus* to God. In the Visitation, through the meeting of Mary and Elizabeth, Jesus prepares in joy the mission of his own precursor, John

the Baptist. Mary may have first made her journey of faith within her own heart. We read how she journeyed to Elizabeth with great eagerness or haste; later she ponders over the events and words spoken to her (2:19 and 51). The journey in Luke from Nazareth to the home of Zechariah would be 70 to 80 miles in length, a full week to reach Ain Karem where today a church in this little village bears beautiful panels of the Magnificat prayer of Mary in more than 24 languages.

The Magnificat

Mary's song of joy and praise of God for the wonders being accomplished is both a response to God and an acknowledgement of Elizabeth's praise of her as being blessed among all women. The song of the male, Zechariah, is balanced by the song of a woman, Mary, a regular feature of Luke's gospel. The Lukan themes of joy, fulfilment of God's promises, the reversal of mighty by the lowly, the merciful love of God for the people of Israel, the praise of God by servants like Mary and Elizabeth, the blessings poured out on Mary, the conversion of minds and hearts, and salvation, thread their way through this great hymn.

The structure of the Magnificat resembles that of Psalms of Praise - 33, 47, 48, 113, 117, 135, and 136 that begin with a call to praise God, then give the reasons why, and conclude with a summary of the psalm. The hymn itself is more Semitic in style than the rest of Luke's Infancy account and links into the primitive Jewish-Christian community overwhelmed by the salvation of God that has come to Israel in a new and startling way. The link with the prayer of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2:1-10 is a certain pointer in that direction as Hannah gives praise to God for the birth of her son Samuel and all that God would do through him.

Conclusion

By general scholarly agreement the Magnificat did not originate with Luke; it is a compilation of Old Testament motifs. By placing it on the lips of Mary, Luke is certainly making the point that Mary lived this prayer as the first disciple of Jesus and the embodiment of the poor (the *anawim*) even if she did not literally compose the Magnificat itself, word for word. How appropriate that she leads the hymn of praise to God as Saviour of the people, as had Miriam, Deborah, and David of old.

Reference

Buby, B. (1997). *Mary of Galilee vol.1: Mary in the New Testament*. St. Pauls: Manila.

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