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The Canticle of Mary in Luke's Gospel (Lk 1, 46-55) Its Composition and Intertextual Connections with the Book of Psalms

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Abstract

This article explores the intertextual connections between the Megalynarion and the Book of Psalms, focusing on quotations, allusions, structure, and theology. It examines the strong literary ties between the Megalynarion and the Psalms in terms of genre, terminology, and theological themes. The canticle of Mary in Luke's Gospel is seen as fulfilling a similar role to that of the Psalms in the Old Testament, as both sets of hymns articulate the believer's existential interpretation of divine intervention in history. The text serves as a profession of faith, expressed through prayer, reflecting the human response to divine providence.

Keywords

Megalynarion, Infancy Gospels, Luke, Hymnology, Magnificat, Mary, Psalter, Psalms, Septuagint

I. Introduction

The hymn of Mary from Luke 1, 46-55 has been a cornerstone in various Christian liturgical traditions since ancient times. Known as the

Megalynarion in the Orthodox Church, it is part of the daily morning service. In the Latin Church, it is called the *Magnificat* and is recited during vespers. This hymn shares a strong connection with the other three hymns in Luke's infancy narrative: the *Evlogetós* (Luke 1, 67-79), the *Doxa* (Luke 2, 13-14), and the *Nyn Apolyeis* (Luke 2, 28-32)¹. These hymns are integral to the daily services of the Orthodox liturgy, highlighting the significant impact of Luke's writings on the development of Christian worship.

The parallels of this hymn with Hannah's canticle in 1Sam 2, 1-10 have been frequently pointed out in modern biblical commentaries and studies.² Furthermore, the *Megalynarion* also finds its inspiration in several texts of the Psalter since it is the most cited book in the hymn³. As indicated in the title, the intertextuality with the Psalms is the central theme of this article, not only because of the hymn's quotations and allusions but also because of its structure and theology. This publication seeks to emphasize the literary connections between the *Megalynarion* and the Book of Psalms, focusing on genre, terminology and theology. Additionally, it compares the role of Mary's canticle in Luke's Gospel to the position of the Psalms within the Old Testament canon. Both sets of hymns convey the believer's existential interpretation of God's intervention in history. The text is framed as a prayerful declaration, reflecting the human response to divine providence.

¹ See George DIACONU, "One of the First Liturgical Hymns of the Eastern and Western Christian Church: The Great Doxology-Gloria in Excelsis Deo: From the Beginning until Its Liturgical Crystallization", in: *Review of Ecumenical Studies, Sibiu*, vol. 7, no. 3, Dec. 2015, pp. 313-335; Krzysztof MIELCAREK, "Prayers of Old People: Zechariah, Simeon and Anna", in: *Verbum Vitae* 22, 2012, pp. 75-92; Daniel AYUCH, "The Hymn of Elder Simeon in Luke 2:29-32. Its Narrative Context and Theology", in: Viorel SAVA, (ed.), *De la teologia rostită la cântul teologic. Misiunea doxologică a cercetării teologice, astăzi*, coll. *Studia Theologica Doctoralia XV*, Doxologia/Universităţ Graz, Iaşi/Graz, 2023, pp. 11-23.

² Raymond E. BROWN, *The Birth of the Messiah*, Garden City, New York, 1977, pp. 358-360.

³ cf. François BOVON, *El Evangelio según san Lucas. Lc 1-9. Vol. I*, Ediciones Sígueme, Salamanca, 1995, pp. 120-121.

II. The Genre and Structure of the Hymn

According to Fitzmyer, scholars using the diachronic historical method have not identified any Hebrew or Aramaic tradition that has preserved the hymn⁴. Nevertheless, the hymn clearly exhibits a strong Semitic character, particularly evident in its nominal grammatical constructions such as “καὶ ἅγιον τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ, καὶ τὸ ἔλεος αὐτοῦ εἰς γενεὰς καὶ γενεὰς” in verses 49-50 and the extensive use of the conjunction “καί”, to mention a few examples⁵. The extraordinary affinity of the text with the Greek of the Septuagint and the permanent quotations from the Book of Psalms allow us to study the hymn as one more psalm of the Greek Old Testament, which is finally how Luke has presented it in his work and which agrees with the synchronic method applied in this study. A first careful reading of the hymn allows us to deduce that it is a praise for God’s saving action. Precisely this is the main theme of the psalms that belong to the literary genre “praise” (*tehillah* - αἶνος), which Alonso Schökel defines as:

“A song of praise to God, typically for his works. The tone is festive, and it is usually choral. It can be outlined in an introduction, body, and conclusion. General or summarized formula *praise the Lord because he is good*”⁶.

This definition fits the *Megalynarion* perfectly in every aspect. The hymn’s choral nature is evident in two ways: initially, Mary represents the entire People of God, and subsequently, the community is depicted through references to the humble and hungry (vv. 52 and 53).

In the introduction to a praise, the psalmist calls for praising, and the most used Hebrew verbs are: *hll*, *shyr*, *hwdh*, and *rnn*. Using one of the

⁴ Joseph A. FITZMYER, *El Evangelio según Lucas II. Traducción y comentario Capítulos 1 – 8,21*, Ediciones Cristiandad, Madrid, 1987, p. 136.

⁵ Luis A. SCHÖKEL and Cecilia CARNITI, *Salmos I. Salmos 1-72. Traducción, introducciones y comentario*, Verbo Divino, Navarra, 1994, p. 22.

⁶ L. SCHÖKEL, C. CARNITI, *Salmos...*, p. 92.

tools of Bibleworks¹⁰⁷ the LXX translates *rnn* by ἀγαλλιάω twenty-four times (22 of them occur in the Psalter) and serves as the opening in Psalm 33, 1 “Shout for joy!” (ἀγαλλιᾶσθε - *rannenu*). Psalm 33 is considered as a typical hymn of praise and contemporary studies often compare it to the *Megalynarion*.

The most usual way to begin the core part of the praise is the particle *ki* in Hebrew and ὅτι in the LXX. This conjunction is also present in the hymn of Mary in vv. 48-49. This section evokes the reasons for the praise and provides the fundamental theological reflection of the hymn. The *Megalynarion* has two sections, as stated by Bovon and Karris⁸: in the first part, Mary refers to divine intervention in her personal life (vv. 46b-50), while in the second part, the Mother of God revisits the people's salvation history from of old and in a generic way (vv. 51-56). This is perfectly applicable to the Psalms of Praise in which “God's being and working can be concentrated in titles or predicates; a participle can synthesize an action or state a constant”⁹. In Mary's hymn, we find three titles or attributes: “Savior” (σωτήρ), “Mighty One” (δυνατός), “His name is Holy” (ἅγιον τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ). Furthermore, one can add the phrase “His mercy is from generation to generation” (τὸ ἔλεος αὐτοῦ εἰς γενεὰς καὶ γενεὰς), as a variant to “Merciful” (ἐλεήμων or οἰκτίρμων). On the other hand, Mary's hymn lacks participles that describe and express the divine action, but it does have ten verbs in aorist indicative that fulfill this function: two verbs whose recipient is the Virgin (vv. 48-49) and eight verbs whose beneficiary is the people of God (vv. 51-54). The use of aorist verbs in the Psalms of Praise can be easily tracked with the help of research software such as BibleWorks¹⁰. Here are three of many other examples:

⁷ Michael S. BUSHILL, Michael D. TAN, and Glenn L. WEAVER, *BibleWorks*, V.10.0.4.114, PC.Norfolk, VA: BibleWorks LLC, 2015.

⁸ F. BOVON, *Evangelio...*, p. 124; Robert J. KARRIS, “Evangelio según Lucas”, in: Raymond E. BROWN et al., *Nuevo comentario bíblico san Jerónimo: Nuevo Testamento y artículos temáticos*, Editorial Verbo Divino, Estella, 2004, p. 142.

⁹ L. SCHÖKEL, C. CARNITI, *Salmos...*, p. 93. Translated by the author.

Ps 3, 9	ὅτι αὐτὸς εἶπεν καὶ ἐγενήθησαν αὐτὸς ἐνετείλατο καὶ ἐκτίσθησαν (LXX 32, 9) For He spoke, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast.
Ps 47, 4	ὑπέταξεν λαοὺς ἡμῖν καὶ ἔθνη ὑπὸ τοὺς πόδας ἡμῶν (LXX 46, 4) He brings peoples under our yoke and nations under our feet.
Ps 100, 3	γινῶτε ὅτι κύριος αὐτός ἐστιν ὁ θεός αὐτὸς ἐποίησεν ἡμᾶς καὶ οὐχ ἡμεῖς λαὸς αὐτοῦ καὶ πρόβατα τῆς νομῆς αὐτοῦ (LXX 99, 3) Know that the LORD is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.

The conclusion of the Psalms of Praise usually takes up the idea of the opening. In this respect, Mary's hymn offers a generic conclusion and summarizes God's work in vv. 54-55: "He has helped his servant Israel, remembering his mercy to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors". The keywords that lead the reader to the first part of the hymn are undoubtedly "mercy" that occurs both in verse 50 and 54 (ἔλεος) and the expression "He has helped Israel" (ἀντελάβετο Ἰσραὴλ) which is a paraphrase for the title "Savior" that appears in the opening, in verse 47.

Summing up, the *Megalynarion* consists of an introduction (v. 46b-47), a body that consists of two parts, one that praises the deeds in favor of Mary (vv. 48-50) and another that deals with the good deeds for all the people (vv. 51-53), and finally a conclusion that recaps God's salvation (vv. 54-55). As a result of the analysis of the literary genre the hymn can be segmented and presented in interlinear format as follows:

	⁴⁶ Καὶ εἶπεν Μαριάμ·	
	And Mary said:	
I	Μεγαλύνει ἡ ψυχὴ μου τὸν κύριον,	⁴⁷ καὶ ἡγαλλίασεν τὸ πνεῦμά μου ἐπὶ τῷ θεῷ τῷ σωτῆρί μου,

	"My soul magnifies the Lord	and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
--- 0 ---		
II	⁴⁸ ὅτι ἐπέβλεψεν ἐπὶ τὴν ταπείνωσιν τῆς δούλης αὐτοῦ.	ἰδοὺ γὰρ ἀπὸ τοῦ νῦν μακαριοῦσίν με πᾶσαι αἱ γενεαί,
	for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.	Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
III	⁴⁹ ὅτι ἐποίησέν μοι μεγάλα ὁ δυνατός.	καὶ ἅγιον τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ,
	for the Mighty One has done great things for me,	and Holy is his name.
IV	⁵⁰ καὶ τὸ ἔλεος αὐτοῦ εἰς γενεὰς καὶ γενεὰς	τοῖς φοβουμένοις αὐτόν.
	His mercy is from generation to generation	for those who fear him.
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V	⁵¹ Ἐποίησεν κράτος ἐν βραχίονι αὐτοῦ,	διεσκόρπισεν ὑπερηφάνους διανοίᾳ καρδίας αὐτῶν·
	He has shown strength with his arm;	He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
VI	⁵² καθεῖλεν δυνάστας ἀπὸ θρόνων	καὶ ὕψωσεν ταπεινούς,

	He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,	and lifted up the lowly; (Lk 1, 52 NRS)
VII	⁵³ πεινῶντας ἐνέπλησεν ἀγαθῶν	πλουτοῦντας ἐξαπέστειλεν κενούς.
	he has filled the hungry with good things,	and sent the rich away empty.
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VIII	⁵⁴ ἀντελάβετο Ἰσραὴλ παιδὸς αὐτοῦ, μνησθῆναι ἐλέους,	⁵⁵ καθὼς ἐλάλησεν πρὸς τοὺς πατέρας ἡμῶν, τῷ Ἀβραάμ καὶ τῷ σπέρματι αὐτοῦ εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα.
	He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,	according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

III. The Hymn’s Intertextual Connections with the Psalms

In each of the eight verses of this hymn, at least one direct quotation or allusion to the Psalms can be identified. Creating a synoptic table of both the psalmic and Lucan texts would condition the extent of these literary echoes, which sometimes appear in shared syntactic elements and other times in the resonance of key terms or phrases. However, you will find the most common examples for each verse in the following table:

Ps 25, 5 (v. 47)	Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long. <i>(And my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.)</i>
Ps 113, 8 (v. 48)	to make them (the poor) sit with princes, with the princes of his people. <i>(Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed.)</i>
Ps 111, 9 (v. 49)	He sent redemption to his people; he commanded his covenant forever. Holy and awesome is his name. <i>(For the Mighty One has done great things for me, and Holy is his name.)</i>
Ps 103, 17 (v. 50)	But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's children. <i>(His mercy is from generation to generation for those who fear him.)</i>
Ps 89, 11 (v. 51)	You crushed Rahab like a carcass; you scattered your enemies with your mighty arm. <i>(He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.)</i>
Ps 107, 9 (v. 53)	For he satisfies the thirsty, and the hungry he fills with good things. <i>(He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.)</i>
Ps 98, 3 (v. 54)	He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God. <i>(He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy.)</i>

We can say that the intertextuality is manifested particularly through the following elements: First, by the opening the verbs “to magnify” and

“to rejoice” in verses 46-47, then by the divine attributes, and the ten verbs of salvation. Furthermore, the attributes of the people of God together with the common theology between the psalmist and Luke are also conclusive for achieving progress in this endeavor.

With respect to the verb “to rejoice” (ἀγαλλιάω), its importance for the definition of the literary genre has already been indicated in the previous paragraph. So, its presence confirms its direct relationship to the psalms of praise that were written in the style of Psalm 33. On the other hand, the verb “to magnify” (μεγαλύνω) corresponds to the Hebrew root *gdl* which is also frequently used in the praise hymns of the Psalter¹⁰. Μεγαλύνω is an uncommon verb in the New Testament (see Ac 10, 46; 19, 17) and means “to praise or exalt”¹¹. To acknowledge God’s greatness and to proclaim it in the form of prayer also belong to the semantic field of the word. This is an interesting connotation. The greatness for which God is praised is not that of a ruler who demeans himself, but of a savior who makes use of his authority and power for the sake of others¹². This idea is deduced from the very content of the hymn which emphasizes these divine features. Its source is therefore from the Septuagint and particularly from the Psalter.

If we examine the titles attributed to the divinity and the ten verbs of salvation in the hymn, the parallels with the Psalter are extensive. God is portrayed as a merciful deity, eager to save His people and deeply committed to His holiness. On the other hand, he is a God of action, he has neither a city nor a temple, and he only knows weak people whom he cares for and helps with good deeds. The term mercy (ἐλεος) appears twice in the hymn (v. 50 and 54) and is one of the most prominent features of the God of the Psalms. Mercy renders the Hebrew stems *hsd* and *rhm*. It highlights God’s faithfulness to men and the covenant he made with them¹³. As for the action verbs are, the following table shows them in detail:

¹⁰ See, for instance, Ps 18, 51; 20, 6; 34, 4; 35, 27; 40, 17; 41, 10; 57, 11; 69, 31; 70, 5; 92, 6; 104, 1; 126, 2.3; 138, 2. The most relevant verses are found in Ps 20, 6; 34, 4; 35, 27. In the last one, both verbs “to magnify” and “to rejoice” come together.

¹¹ About μεγαλύνω in Luke and the New Testament see Ceslas SPICQ (comp.), *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, Volume 2, Hendrickson, Peabody Massachusetts, 1994, pp. 459-460.

¹² See F. BOVON, *Evangelio...*, pp. 129-130; Helmut KOESTER, *Luke 1. A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1-9:50*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2002, p. 60.

¹³ See for instance Eze 39, 25-39 and Jer 31, 1-34.

Verse	Verb in English	Verb in Greek
v. 48	He has looked	ἐπέβλεψεν
v. 49.51	He has done	ἐποίησεν
v. 51	He has scattered	διεσκόρπισεν
v. 52	He has brought down	καθεῖλεν
v. 52	He has lifted up	ᾤψωσεν
v. 53	He has filled	ἐνέπλησεν
v. 53	He has sent	ἐξαπέστειλεν
v. 54	He has helped	ἀντελάβετο
v. 54	He has said	ἐλάλησεν

All the verbs have the people of God as a direct object in the sentence, no matter if they have either a positive or a negative effect on them. In v. 51 “the proud in the thoughts of their hearts” are part of the people who no longer accept God’s doctrine. The definition of the people in the second part of v. 50 as “those who fear him” suggests that in all cases the hymn speaks of one and the same people. The verbs: “to look”, “to do”, “to lift up”, “to fill”, “to help” and “to say” all of them describe a constructive and redemptive action done by the Lord. On the other hand, the verbs “to scatter”, “to bring down”, and “to send” describe God’s rejection of those who are indifferent to His covenant and take advantage of their position for their own benefit. Regarding the meaning of the aorist usage in the hymn, there are several hypotheses among interpreters, such as the Historical Narrative Aorist, the Gnomic Aorist, the Ingressive Aorist, and the aorist as equivalent to the perfect verb in Hebrew¹⁴. Dupont sustains that the use

¹⁴ See Alfred PLUMMER, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Luke* (ICC), New York, 1896, p. 33; Marie-Joseph LAGRANGE, *Évangile selon saint Luc* (EtB), Librairie Lecoffre, Paris, 1948, p. 48; Hermann GUNKEL, “Die Lieder in der Kindheitsgeschichte Jesu bei Lukas”, in: *Festgabe von Fachkollegen und*

of the aorist tense here has the ingressive meaning, which is to emphasize the beginning of an action that is to be perpetuated in time. A typical use of the ingressive aorist can be found in Psalm 93, 1 “The Lord reigns” (*YHWH malakh*) which the Septuagint translated with an ingressive aorist as “ὁ κύριος ἐβασίλευσεν”. But, as Bovon points out, it seems to be more convincing to consider the Aorist verbs with a prophetic sense, i.e., that these verbs would indicate actions to be achieved in the future. This is because the text refers to all the good things the Lord “did” to the Virgin before they happened, i.e., before the birth of Jesus Christ. Hence, the *Megalyntarion* differs from Hannah’s hymn, since Hannah sung when the child was already born, while Mary pronounces her words not only before Christ did his salvific work, but even before the child came to this world.

Regarding the attributes of the people of God, the emphasis is on their humility and poverty. Both Mary and the people are “ταπεινός” (vv. 48 and 52), that is, humble, little, and even insignificant from a worldly and authoritarian perspective. But, in addition, the people are “hungry” (πεινῶντας; v. 53) and understand themselves in Mary’s voice as the “servant” of God (παῖς; v. 54). Luke chooses the adjective “ταπεινός” because in the Septuagint Psalter it is the equivalent of several Hebrew terms that fluctuate between the meanings of being humble, poor and/or destitute: ‘any, dall, rosh, and dakh.

We can find the nuances of this term in verses that speak of the poor whom the Lord will save (cf. Ps 12, 6; 14, 6; 72, 4.12-14) and verses in which the faithful stand before God as oppressed and needy (cf. Ps 40, 18; 70, 6; 86, 1; 109, 22). This authentic recognition of the human being’s need for God’s help also echoes in Jesus’ dialogue with the teachers of the Law, which ends with the saying: “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Lk 5, 31-32). In Psalm 82, 3-4 the term humble is complemented by those of the poor and the weak: “Defend the weak (πτωχόν) and the fatherless; uphold the cause of the poor (πένητα) and the oppressed (ταπεινόν). Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked”.

Freunden... dargebracht, Tübingen, 1921, p. 53, and Jacques DUPONT, “Le Magnificat comme discours sur Dieu”, in: *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 102 (1980), pp. 331-35.

Both terms (οἱ πτωχοὶ καὶ οἱ πένητες) are also present in Luke's diptych and complement the sense of the humble who hunger.

IV. The Virgin Mary sings a Psalm

Following Erich Zenger's proposition that the Psalter is defined in its essence as a book of praise that expresses the response of the faithful to the Divine revelation¹⁵, the *Megalynarion* fulfills a similar function within the Lucan work and guides readers to situate the story within a particular reading of Israel's Biblical tradition. The transition in the hymn between the pronoun "I" in vv. 46-50 and "they" in vv. 51-55 highlights the representative role of Mary who pronounces this praise on behalf of the people with the same hopes of salvation. Therefore, this hymn allows the reader of the Lucan narrative to immerse themselves in the Mother of Jesus' vision of the world and glimpse how she interprets these acts. The figures of Christ and Mary have a new connotation thanks to the hymn and the story takes on a different theological meaning, especially because what Luke relates is hence the fulfillment of the promises to the humble people of Israel as announced from the beginning in the patriarchal era.

Similar to the Psalter, this hymn does not present an abstract or speculative concept of divinity. Instead, it recalls and evokes God's works, preserved in the people's memory, revealing a God who actively intervenes in history rather than remaining distant. The *Megalynarion* introduces a new understanding of history and the ethical and material values of creation in light of God's divine intervention.

The Virgin Mary is a model for the people of faith who understand themselves to be "humble" and poor but secure in God's hands. She behaves like the people of faith in the Psalms, as can be read in the quotations given above. The Virgin Mary proclaims the wisdom of biblical Israel. After this hymn, the reader can better understand that a Savior is born in a "manger" (2, 7), that he is visited by simple shepherds (2, 8.16), that he comes down to teach where the peasants work (6, 17) or that he is moved by a widow

¹⁵ Erich ZENGER et al, *Einführung in das Alte Testament*, 5th Edition, Kohlhammer, Stuttgart, 2004, pp. 367-368.

weeping for her dead son (7, 11-13). Luke's Christ teaches three parables about the joy of recovering what was lost (15, 3-32) and manifests himself above all in his mercy. Therefore, he will not ask for perfection but mercy as the greatest virtue of his believers: "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Lk 6, 36 vs. Matt 5, 48).

This clearly contrasts with the wisdom of the Stoic philosophers, for example, who, as Rivas says, considered mercy to pertain to the order of the soul's illnesses and preferred terms such as kindness or philanthropy¹⁶. But in Luke's Gospel, Jesus' mission to "seek and save that which was lost" (Lk 19, 10) would not be accomplished without mercy.

V. Conclusions

In this scene, the Virgin Mary embodies the ideal believer, recognizing and commemorating all of God's works throughout history with absolute trust. She bears witness to these divine acts for both her contemporaries and future generations. The *Megalynarion* draws from, alludes to, and expands upon the praises found in the Psalter, thereby affirming its place within the biblical tradition in both form and content.

However, the hymn does not solely reflect on the past; it also expresses hope for the fulfillment of divine promises through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. By singing this hymn daily, Christian worship recalls these promises, helping believers remember God's deeds for His people throughout history. It also reinforces the certainty that God continues to touch the hearts of the humble and needy with messages of joy and salvation every day.

¹⁶ Luis H. RIVAS, *La Misericordia En Las Sagradas Escrituras*, Nueva edición, Ed. Paulinas, Buenos Aires, 2015, p. 5.