AUGUST 2010

EXAMINATION IN OPEN BOOK BIBLE EXEGESIS

GENERAL INSTRUCTIONS

This examination shall assess the candidate's ability to interpret an assigned passage of Scripture by demonstrating attention to the original language of the text, an understanding of the text's historical context, and an ability to relate the text effectively to the contemporary life of the church in the world.

The candidate shall have access to Hebrew and Greek texts, translations, commentaries, and other exegetical tools. Using these, he or she shall provide a faithful interpretation of the passage, show how he or she arrived at this interpretation, and suggest how this passage might be used in the contemporary life of the church. (This description approved by 2008 General Assembly.)

ASSIGNMENT OF PASSAGE

Choose from selected passages:

Amos 5:16-20 OR Luke 1:46-55

Your examination is due to your proctor at 9:00 AM, SEPTEMBER 2, 2010. The time of submission will be strictly observed.

SPECIFIC INSTRUCTIONS

1. You must do your own work, without giving or receiving aid from anyone after the passages are announced. The exam will not be proctored.

2. Clearly identify each section of the exam. Within Section I label your answers "First Required Response," etc., and indicate "A" or "B" where appropriate. Identify the parts of Section II by number.

3. In formulating your answers, remember that your readers will be looking for an ability to work with the passage in its original language and to communicate the findings of biblical scholarship to those who have not had the opportunity of formal training in the field.

4. You must provide original answers to the exam questions. When using written material from other sources, you must identify the author, title, and page number. You must also identify electronic sources, either software or on-line. You may use parenthetical citations within the text of your answers, endnotes, or footnotes.

5. Include a bibliography of consulted works.

6. Readers will be looking for logical organization and consistency within the examination. They will evaluate the exam as a unit and not in parts.
REQUIRED PARTS OF A SATISFACTORY EXAMINATION
The following sections are required parts of a “Satisfactory” examination. Failure to complete any of these sections will result in the failure of the examination as a whole. The specified ministry contexts for each passage and specific questions in each of the categories of Section I will be provided when the passages are announced.

Section I: Language, Historical Situation, Scriptural and Theological Context
After studying the passage, answer the questions in the following subject areas.

1. **Language of the Text**: word meanings, grammar, literary and other features with respect to both its original language and its translation into the language of the modern community.

2. **Historical Situation**: the influence of the historical and cultural context in which the engagement between God and God’s people has come.

3. **Scriptural and Theological Context**: the passage’s relation to the broad teaching of Scripture and theological tradition of the church.

A total of four responses will be required in Section I of the examination, and there will be a 600-word limit per response. You will be required to respond to three specified questions and will be permitted to select between an option of either A or B in the other response. To assist the readers of your examination, clearly label this portion as Section I and identify each response by required response number and letter (as necessary).

Section II: Presenting a Faithful Interpretation

1. **Focus Statement**: Write a focus statement based on your broad study of the passage (not just material presented in Section I) that articulates a central theme of your faithful interpretation of the passage. *Limit your statement to 50 words.*

2. **Supporting the Interpretation**: Write an essay presenting your faithful interpretation of the passage consistent with the central theme in the focus statement. Support your interpretation by a careful and critical analysis of the text. You may draw on any material in areas of the required responses in Section I and other exegetical methods and evidence relevant to the interpretation. *Limit your essay to 1,200 words.*

Section III: Application
Present a sermon outline or lesson plan (as required by the specified ministry context) based on your faithful interpretation of the passage and consistent with your focus statement. *Limit your sermon outline or lesson plan to 2 pages.*
FINAL INSTRUCTIONS

You may write your answers in ink in your own handwriting, type them, or use a computer. Do not use a pencil to write your responses; papers written in pencil will be returned without being evaluated. If you handwrite your examination, do not skip lines in the examination book. You may make corrections, deletions, or additions without rewriting or erasing. Identify every answer by the number and letter assigned to it (e.g., III. B). Illegible papers shall be returned without being evaluated.

You are encouraged to use a computer. You may bring your own equipment or, at some exam sites, you may use equipment provided by the proctor. You must confirm with the proctor in advance of the testing date what equipment (power strips, computers, printers, etc.) is available at the testing site.

If you use a computer:
- A printed copy of the exam must be turned in before you leave the test site. Not turning in a printed copy will result in failure. You are strongly urged to make sure that all the necessary equipment and software are properly working and coordinated.
- Number the pages.
- Include your candidate number on each page of the exam, but not your name.
- Print responses using double spacing and 12-point font size.
- When finished, staple the printed copy to the first few pages of the exam book.

Syntax or grammar will not be evaluated. However, the evaluation of papers may be affected if they cannot be understood because of poor syntax or grammar.

Maintaining the candidate's anonymity is of fundamental importance to assure fair evaluation of examination papers. Failure to comply with any of the following instructions will result in the paper being found as unsatisfactory:
- Do not include your name
- Do not include the name of your congregation or presbytery
- Do not identify the seminary you attend or have attended
- Do not identify professors with whom you have studied
- Do not indicate whether you have taken this or other senior ordination exams before
Amos 5:16-20

 Ministry Context:
You are leading a midweek adult Bible study on Amos, and at the same time preaching through the book of Amos. This coming week, the focus of your teaching and preaching is Amos 5:16-20. This ministry context should inform your responses throughout the examination. In the final section of this examination, you will present your outline for this sermon.

Section I: Language, Historical Situation, Scriptural and Theological Context
After studying Amos 5:16-20, answer the questions in the following required areas of response. To assist the readers of your examination, clearly label this portion as Section I and identify each response by number and letter as necessary. Limit your answer for each response to 600 words.

1. Language of the Text
   First Required Response
   In comparing translations of Amos 5:18, you notice a difference in the following three translations:
   - Why do you want the day of the LORD? (New Revised Standard Version)
   - What will this day of the LORD mean for you? (New American Bible)
   - For what good is the day of the LORD to you? (New King James Version)
   Explain the basis for these different translations of לַחְצִי יְהוָה. How would you translate this phrase and why?

   Second Required Response
   As you were identifying segments for your series on Amos, you asked yourself if 5:16-20 forms a coherent unit of text. Explain how 5:16-20 does or does not form a coherent unit. Support your conclusion by discussing pertinent Hebrew grammar, syntax, and/or vocabulary in this passage, and its placement within Amos.

2. Historical Situation
   Third Required Response
   What is the historical context of Amos’s prophetic ministry? What aspects of Amos’s message and of Israel’s situation might have led to conversation about “the day of the LORD” (יָמֵי יְהוָה)? What insights do you gain from this context for the interpretation of Amos 5:16-20?
3. Scriptural and Theological Context

Fourth Required Response – CHOOSE ONE: A or B

A. In Amos 5:17 God declares to the people of Israel, “I will pass through the midst of you” (NRSV). The same Hebrew construction, נָתַן, occurs in Exodus 12:12. How does the Exodus tradition relate to Amos’s prophetic message? How does that tradition inform your understanding of what God plans to do in Amos 5:16-20?

OR

B. Your study drew your attention to the language of mourning and wailing in Amos 5:16-17. Identify and discuss similar imagery elsewhere in the book of Amos. What is the function of this imagery for Amos’s prophetic message? What is the significance of this imagery in Amos 5:16-17?

Section II: Presenting a Faithful Interpretation

Identify the parts of Section II by number.

1. Focus Statement: Write a focus statement based on your broad study of the passage (not just material presented in Section I) that articulates a central theme of your faithful interpretation of the passage. Limit your statement to 50 words.

2. Supporting the Interpretation: Write an essay presenting your faithful interpretation of the passage consistent with the central theme in the focus statement. Support your interpretation by a careful and critical analysis of the text. You may draw on any material in areas of the required responses in Section I and other exegetical methods and evidence relevant to the interpretation. Limit your essay to 1,200 words.

Section III: Application

Present a sermon outline (as specified by the required ministry context) based on your faithful interpretation of the passage and consistent with your focus statement. Limit your sermon outline to 2 pages.
Luke 1:46-55

Ministry Context:
You are preparing a sermon for the fourth Sunday of Advent. The community you minister in was once a thriving town, but lately the economy has been difficult. The session has been discussing how your congregation might respond to the increasing needs of the poor. What message will you deliver this Sunday in light of the session discussion and your community’s changing needs? This ministry context should inform your responses throughout the examination. In the final section of this examination, you will present your outline for this sermon.

Section I: Language, Historical Situation, Scriptural and Theological Context
After studying Luke 1:46-55, answer the questions in the following required areas of response. To assist the readers of your examination, clearly label this portion as Section I and identify each response by number and letter as necessary. Limit your answer to each question to 600 words.

1. Language of the Text
   First Required Response
   In your study of the text you note that all of the verbs in verses 51-53 are in the same tense. How does the author’s choice of this tense influence your interpretation of the passage? What might the tense of these verbs say about God?

   Second Required Response
   Within the literary structure of the first two chapters of Luke there are four songs: the Song of Mary (1:46-55), the Song of Zechariah (1:68-79), the Song of the Angels (2:14) and the Song of Simeon (2:29-32). How do these songs relate to one another in terms of their literary aspects and function(s)? How does your understanding of that relationship influence your interpretation of the Song of Mary?

2. Historical Situation
   Third Required Response
   Luke 1:46-55 proclaims a vision of social reversal. Discuss what you know from your study about the early Christian community for whom this Gospel was written. Informed by your study do you think the readers would have identified with Mary as one who is exalted or with the rich whose positions of privilege are being threatened? How would that identification have affected the ways they would have understood this song? How do modern tendencies to identify with the rich or the poor affect the way the song is understood today?
August 2010

Page 7 of 7

3. Scriptural and Theological Context

Fourth Required Response – CHOOSE ONE: A or B

A. One of the basic issues in New Testament theology is the tension between the “already” and the “not yet,” between what God has already done in the world and what has not yet been realized in the fullness of God’s reign. In light of that tension, is this passage a song of praise to God for help granted or a prophecy of salvific hope for the future? Discuss and support your answer with reference to other passages in the Gospel of Luke.

OR

B. The Gospel of Luke is known to use Old Testament models. Compare and contrast the Song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2:1-10 with the Song of Mary in Luke 1:46-55. How does this affect your understanding of Mary’s song?

Section II: Presenting a Faithful Interpretation

Identify the parts of Section II by number.

1. Focus Statement: Write a focus statement based on your broad study of the passage (not just material presented in Section I) that articulates a central theme of your faithful interpretation of the passage. *Limit your statement to 50 words.*

2. Supporting the Interpretation: Write an essay presenting your faithful interpretation of the passage consistent with the central theme in the focus statement. Support your interpretation by a careful and critical analysis of the text. You may draw on any material in areas of the required responses in Section I and other exegetical methods and evidence relevant to the interpretation. *Limit your essay to 1,200 words.*

Section III: Application

Present a sermon outline (as specified by the required ministry context) based on your faithful interpretation of the passage and consistent with your focus statement. *Limit your sermon outline to 2 pages.*
I. EVALUATION OF THIS EXAMINATION. The examination consists of three sections, designed to be completed over five days. All three sections must be answered. Section I has four required responses, one of which will instruct the candidate to choose between an option “A” or “B.” A single evaluation of either “Satisfactory” (S) or “Unsatisfactory” (U) must be given on the examination as a whole. If any required response is omitted from a section, then the examination must receive an overall evaluation of “Unsatisfactory.”

Each examination will be evaluated independently by two readers. If both overall evaluations are “S,” the conveners will record a final evaluation of “Satisfactory.” If both readers evaluate the exam overall as “U,” the exam receives a final evaluation of “Unsatisfactory.” If the two readers disagree in their overall evaluations, the exam will be given to a third reader. The conveners will record the final evaluation based on the two concurring overall evaluations.

II. THIS EVALUATION SHEET GOES TO THE CANDIDATE. Each reader’s comments should represent his or her considered appraisal of the paper. These comments are read by the candidate and the candidate’s Committee on Preparation for Ministry.

S OVERALL EVALUATION

Wendy Keys
Reader’s Name (print)

Wendy Keys
Reader’s Signature

NOTE: COMMENTS INCLUDE A MESSAGE FOR COMMITTEE ON PREPARATION FOR MINISTRY (CHECK IF APPLICABLE).

Section I: Language, Historical Situation, Scriptural and Theological Context [600 words/response]

1. Language of the Text

First Required Response

Listing the English verbs is most helpful for those of us not familiar with the Greek. Also, including the different options of interpretation was well done.

Second Required Response

Of the four songs that are listed, although Mary’s song is after Zechariah’s, how is that Zechariah’s Song then reiterates the theme from Mary’s Song?

2. Historical Situation — Third Required Response

The paper answers all the questions asked.
3. **Scriptural and Theological Context — Fourth Required Response (A or B)**

Well done, but the last sentence really is part of response A.

---

**Section II: Presenting a Faithful Interpretation**

1. **Focus Statement [50 words]**
   
The Focus Statement is clear, but very broad in scope.

2. **Supporting the Interpretation [1200 words]**
   
Well written and supports Focus Statement.

---

**Section III: Application [2 pages]**

Quite extensive, it might need to be more specifically focused on this one passage.

---

**Summary Statement (why exam is satisfactory or unsatisfactory)**

This paper was very well written. Thank you.

---

**Comments for CPM:**

[Signature]

[Signature]
I. EVALUATION OF THIS EXAMINATION. The examination consists of three sections, designed to be completed over five days. All three sections must be answered. Section I has four required responses, one of which will instruct the candidate to choose between an option “A” or “B.” A single evaluation of either “Satisfactory” (S) or “Unsatisfactory” (U) must be given on the examination as a whole. If any required response is omitted from a section, then the examination must receive an overall evaluation of “Unsatisfactory.”

Each examination will be evaluated independently by two readers. If both overall evaluations are “S,” the conveners will record a final evaluation of “Satisfactory.” If both readers evaluate the exam overall as “U,” the exam receives a final evaluation of “Unsatisfactory.” If the two readers disagree in their overall evaluations, the exam will be given to a third reader. The conveners will record the final evaluation based on the two concurring overall evaluations.

II. THIS EVALUATION SHEET GOES TO THE CANDIDATE. Each reader’s comments should represent his or her considered appraisal of the paper. These comments are read by the candidate and the candidate’s Committee on Preparation for Ministry.

S OVERALL EVALUATION

Alice Fisler

Reader’s Name (print) Reader’s Signature

NOTE: COMMENTS INCLUDE A MESSAGE FOR COMMITTEE ON PREPARATION FOR MINISTRY (CHECK IF APPLICABLE).

Section I: Language, Historical Situation, Scriptural and Theological Context [600 words/response]

1. Language of the Text

First Required Response

This response is an excellent presentation of the variants in the aorist tense, as applied to verbs in vv. 51-53. Also presented is a correspondingly well-developed understanding of God as active in the past, present and future.

Second Required Response

This selection provides a very complete discussion of the four songs in their literary function(s) with one another as well as being illustrative of God’s salvation plan.

2. Historical Situation — Third Required Response

This is an extraordinarily insightful response to the complex issue of the social/cultural background of Luke’s community. Especially well expressed is the identification with Mary as both a comfort and a challenge for the original readers.
3. *Scriptural and Theological Context — Fourth Required Response (A or B)*

Both the comparison and contrast of the songs of Mary and Hannah are done completely and well.

Section II: Presenting a Faithful Interpretation

1. *Focus Statement [50 words]*

   The focus statement is well written, but could be narrowed a bit to sharpen the content for a sermon developed from it.

2. *Supporting the Interpretation [1200 words]*

   It is clear from this essay that much careful exegetical work has been done on this text. Particularly insightful is the portion on "God's gracious surprises," that ties in well with an understanding of God who is active in all times.

Section III: Application [2 pages]

   The sermon outline is well organized. Since the focus statement (as indicated above) is rather broad, the sermon will turn out, however, to be rather long. A more condensed focus statement, perhaps centering on "God's gracious surprises," or "we are not nobodies," for example, would sharpen the sermon.

Summary Statement (why exam is satisfactory or unsatisfactory)

   This exam is satisfactory because it illustrates excellent exegetical work in exploring the text, from the language to literary function to historical/cultural background, etc.

Comments for CPM:
Note: All Scriptural passages cited are NRSV and from Luke 1 unless otherwise noted.

SECTION I: LANGUAGE, HISTORICAL SITUATION, SCRIPTURAL AND THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

1. Language of the Text

First Required Response

All of the verbs in Luke 1:51-53 (ἐποίησεν – shown; διεσκόρπισεν – scattered; καθείλεν – brought down; ὑψωσεν – lifted up; ἐνέπλησεν – filled; ἐξαπέστειλεν – sent away) are in the aorist tense. In Greek, the aorist indicates not only the time frame of the action but also whether the action is ongoing or completed. This presents several options for interpretation:

Global: emphasizes the fact of an event rather than its nature; translated using simple English past tense

Inceptive: focuses on the start of an action; rendered as “began to…”

Culminative: implies action already underway that will be coming to a conclusion; translated with the auxiliary verb “have”

Futuristic: describes action that, though not yet past, is certain to be completed; usually translated using simple English past tense

Though the possibilities presented by the nuances of the aorist may seem bewildering, noting the options is important because each carries a different theological implication. If the aorists are considered to be global in meaning, then Mary is proclaiming that God’s salvation had already been accomplished. However, if the verbs are taken as inceptive, then Mary is indicating that God was just now beginning God’s act of deliverance. A culminative reading suggests that Mary viewed God’s actions as having begun in the past but as being completed in the present. Finally, if the aorists are futuristic, Mary is recognizing that God’s salvation would be completed.

---

in the future, but was so confident of the outcome that she considered deliverance “a done deal”.

Context provides important cues in interpreting Luke’s use of the aorist. Mary’s references back to God’s promises to Abraham and forward to “forever” invite us to view God’s sovereign actions as part of a larger story of salvation that spans human history since the fall to the consummation of the kingdom at Christ’s return. Therefore a culminative interpretation is appropriate. However, Mary cites the covenantal faithfulness arising from God’s gracious and loving nature character as God’s motivation for helping Israel in the past (“in remembrance of his mercy”, v 54). This fidelity to God’s promises, coupled with God’s strength (v 51) assures Mary that God could and would accomplish Israel’s deliverance. Thus a futuristic interpretation is also defensible. In fact, acknowledging both God’s sovereignty and God’s covenantal faithfulness requires a combination of both these nuances of the aorist – culminative and futuristic – as the text is translated. Such a combination is in keeping with the “already...not yet” tension that is seen with regard to God’s kingdom in other portions of Luke’s gospel.

This understanding that blends two aorist nuances presents difficulties in providing an English rendering. All major recent translations gloss these verbs using “has” (e.g., “has shown strength”, v 51). In English, this type of form (“have/has —ed”) is generally used for completed action, and – though it seems insufficient to express both the ongoing event through the scope of history and an assured future outcome, I can think of no alternative that would concisely encompass both meanings. Yet, along with the one who sings this song, we want to proclaim that Almighty God, who is faithful and merciful, is at work in the world today and that God will in the fullness of time fulfill all God’s promises of salvation that were first given so long ago.

Therefore the implications of the aorist, if important to the hermeneutical final focus, would have

---

2 Randall Buth (“Hebrew Tenses and the Magnificat”, 67-83) suggests that Mary’s song was originally composed in Hebrew and that the verb tenses reflect the nuances of Hebraic poetry. Nevertheless, Luke did select the aorist when he included the Greek version of the song in his gospel.
to be explained in more detail during the sermon.

**Second Required Response**

The songs in Luke 1-2 are related in both form and function. Each is a song of praise that glorifies God for the action God has taken and will take in human history: they offer praise followed by reasons why such praise is appropriate. The songs celebrate the motif of promise/fulfillment or what Bock refers to as prophesy/pattern. Each song celebrates the inbreaking of God into history as the incarnate Christ – an event completely new and unexpected. Bock states, however, that “as Luke saw it, that new thing that was in Christ ‘fit’ the pattern established in the history of God’s gracious and mighty deeds on behalf of this people”. It is appropriate, then, that each song is steeped in Old Testament imagery and allusion. As each song is introduced, the revelation of the good news of Jesus gradually unfolds. First, Mary praises God as merciful Savior. Zechariah then reiterates that theme, introducing new themes of light and peace and providing readers with information concerning Christ. The angels supply a vertical, heavenly dimension to the horizontal, temporal aspect of the revelation and extend the message of good news to all people. Simeon reprises the themes of the previous three songs, specifically including gentiles among those who will be enlightened. But Simeon also ominously foreshadows the consequences of the ministry of Jesus. Thus with each song, the reader learns more about this promised one through whom God’s reconciliation will be accomplished.

---

3 Some scholars argue that the four songs were part of a collection of canticles used by Luke and therefore are not tied to the specific contexts in which they were placed. For example, see John Nolland, “Luke 1-9:20”, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 63.
4 The complete announcement by the angels was given in spoken word (2:10-12) plus song (2:14).
As literary devices, Luke’s songs are both beautiful and functional. They follow the convention of first century Greco-Roman biographies in describing miraculous events that attend the births of great leaders. In addition, the songs introduce themes of prophesy/pattern and restoration that are prominent in Luke’s gospel. However, Luke also uses the songs to set the theological framework for his gospel: “to set forth how God, through the agency of his son, accomplished the decisive act of deliverance.” Therefore the songs serve to enumerate God’s actions but also to reveal God’s character as a God who is “mighty but uses that might in mercy toward the weak, one who is revolutionary in upsetting human ranks but conservative in keeping ancient promises”. God is shown to be active, just, and faithful (echoed in Luke’s use of the aorist). As readers begin to understand God’s nature through the songs, they perhaps also begin to identify themselves with the singers: Mary, a young woman who, though in difficult circumstances, trusts God; Zechariah, an disillusioned old man who relinquishes his doubts; angels, who proclaim the good news joyfully to society’s outcasts; Simeon, who patiently waits for the fulfillment of God’s promises and is satisfied. As Luke draws his readers into the story, they – like the singers and those who hear the songs – are challenged to reflect on their response to the gospel message. Will they respond with trust or with doubt? In humble submission or in resistance to God’s will?

These four songs keep in our view the broad sweep of God’s salvation plan when we interpret Mary’s Song. The God who graciously created and sustains the universe is faithful to the covenant to redeem and reconcile all creation in Christ. God’s actions throughout the history of humankind bear witness to this faithfulness and assure us that God’s kingdom will come – a kingdom characterized by God’s peace and justice. The “already” of that kingdom was initiated

---

9 New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary, 44.
with Christ’s life, death, resurrection, and ascension; its “not yet” is Christ’s continuing ministry on earth. We are called to respond to God’s grace, offering ourselves in Christ’s service.

2. **Historical Situation**

**Third Required Response**

Luke’s gospel was probably written in ~ 85 AD to a socially and culturally diverse group of gentiles and Hellenistic Jewish Christians\(^\text{12}\) experiencing doubts about their role in God’s plan of salvation.\(^\text{13}\) Luke’s readers were familiar with Herod’s cruelty and with the *pax Romana* imposed by the empire’s heavy hand. They probably included men and women, some of lower class and some with higher social standing, some poor and some economically comfortable,\(^\text{14}\) all working to build a faithful witness within a culture in which persecution of Christians had already begun.

Some readers might have identified with Mary as being chosen by God because of their own special worthiness. However, it is more likely that these Christians would have viewed Mary as representative of the poor and outcast (and identified with her as such) for several reasons. First, Mary herself expresses solidarity with the lowly, indicating that she will be called “blessed” only because God has looked with favor on her (v 48). She contrasts her position with that of the “proud” who will be “scattered” (v 51). Second, these readers lived under Roman oppression: even if they were not poor themselves, they certainly witnessed the plight of the poor around them. In addition, the culture in which these Christians lived was not socially, economically, or politically much different than that of Mary. So they could well understand the difficulties that Mary could face as an unmarried pregnant woman and the dangers of singing

---


about “the powerful being cast down from their thrones” (v 52).

If Luke’s readers did identify with Mary as one of the poor who is exulted, then the song offered both comfort and challenge. The social reversal Mary describes brings comfort as a reminder that God is faithful and just, keeping promises to all generations (v 55). In fact, God’s mercy to Mary is an indication that while she — and they — might be of lower social status, they are not “nobodies”\(^{15}\) but are individuals remembered by God and blessed by God’s mercies. In addition, solidarity with the poor means that the exultation of Mary and the other lowly would also happen to them, not through political revolt but through “God’s kingdom and its vision for a new society embodied in the church”\(^{16}\). The challenge in Mary’s Song comes in having the courage, as Mary did through the Holy Spirit, to call for God’s justice in the world. This song also is a call to respond to God’s grace, either in faithful submission to God’s will (like Mary) or in disbelief (like Zechariah, at least at first). Finally, Luke’s readers would be challenged to enact the ethic of God’s kingdom in their own diverse community by displaying the sacrificial love modeled by Jesus.

Our self-identification as rich or poor can certainly affect how we understand Mary’s song today. The rich might feel threatened; the poor, vindicated. But more important than our bank statement is how we view ourselves with respect to God’s grace. Those who see themselves as completely dependent on God and who gladly submit to God’s will consider themselves to be blessed to be able to use their talents and wealth (however much or little that might be) in God’s service. Like Mary, they see all people as recipients God’s freely-given grace and therefore as brothers and sisters whom we love and care for in community. However, those who find meaning and security in power and riches often selfishly hoard what they have and do what is


\(^{16}\) Scot McKnight, “The Mary We Never Knew”, 29.
necessary to obtain more, without regard to the consequences to others. These are the proud whom God will scatter and the rich who will be sent away empty.

3. *Scriptural and Theological Context*

Fourth Required Response – B

One of the notable features of Luke’s gospel is the number of Old Testament models and allusions in the text. The Song of Mary, for example, parallels the song Hannah sings when she dedicates Samuel to the Lord’s service (1 Sam 2:1-10). Both women’s songs are in gratitude for a pregnancy which will produce a child whose ministry figures prominently in Israel’s history.\(^\text{17}\) Although neither song contains specific reference to the singer’s particular circumstance,\(^\text{18}\) both songs acknowledge the faithfulness and sovereignty of God as seen in the complete arc of salvation history. Hannah and Mary each present a vision of the social reversal that will occur as God’s rule is made manifest. While Mary sings because the Christ who will usher in God’s kingdom is about to be born, Hannah’s song also has messianic overtones (e.g., reference to the Lord’s king 1 Sam 2:10). In fact, Mary quotes Hannah nearly verbatim in her own song:\(^\text{19}\)

> And Mary said, ”My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior (Luke 1:46-47)

> Hannah prayed and said, ”My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God. (1Sam 2:1)

And again,

> He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. (Luke 1:53)

> The Lord makes poor and makes rich; he brings low, he also exalts. (1 Sam 2:7)


\(^\text{18}\) For this reason some scholars have posited that the songs were earlier, general canticles of praise that were placed, for the author’s or redactor’s purposes, into the mouths of Mary and Hannah. See for example Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 271.

It is clear that Luke wants his readers to see Mary as standing in the tradition of faithful women of Israel, individuals who trust in God and respond in faith to God’s action in their own lives and in the history of God’s people.

However, there are significant differences in structure and circumstance between the two songs. The Song of Mary is a patchwork of excerpts from or allusions to many Old Testament passages, including 1 and 2 Samuel, Genesis, Deuteronomy, Psalms, Job, Isaiah, and Micah. The Song of Hannah, because of its earlier date of composition, draws its language from the Psalms. While Mary sings out of praise for God’s mercy and faithfulness in light of an unexpected pregnancy, Hannah rejoices in God’s mercy and faithfulness exhibited in answered prayer for a child. Thus Mary responds in willing submission to God’s call, while Hannah offers herself (and her child) in God’s service. Both women, however, consider themselves to be servants of God (Mary, v 48; Hannah, 1 Samuel 1:11) who are delivered by God, therefore they rejoice in song.

Recognizing the Old Testament echoes in the Song of Mary emphasizes again the scope of God’s plan of salvation and the length and breadth of the Church universal. God’s faithfulness has reached through the generations, as God graciously cares for creation and individually for each one of us. God consistently demonstrates love and mercy in spite of our rebellion. The Scripture provides many examples of individuals who have offered us models of how to live grateful lives of service to God and others. Though Mary and Hannah are two such examples, the paradigm of perfect obedience to God is Jesus Christ, who was foreseen by prophets and who fulfilled all the ancient promises of God. We, too, look back to the evidence in Scripture – and in our own lives – of God working out God’s purposes. With the help of the Holy Spirit, we work.

in the present to follow Jesus Christ’s example of faithful living and of loving service to others as Christ continues his ministry on earth. And we look forward with confidence to the fulfillment of God’s “already...not yet” kingdom: the time when God will set all things right.

SECTION II: PRESENTING A FAITHFUL INTERPRETATION

1. Focus Statement

Christ’s incarnation is part of God’s gracious plan of salvation that spans all of time itself. Like Mary, we are called – with the Spirit’s help – to respond to this grace by joyfully submitting to God’s will and living faithfully in community, using Jesus as our model for love and service.

2. Supporting the Interpretation

There are many fruitful and faithful hermeneutical directions suggested by the Song of Mary. For example, one might choose to focus on singing our witness to God’s grace in times of trial, seeing Mary within a Reformed perspective, or envisioning God’s kingdom fulfilled. However, given the context (possible responses to the increasing needs of the poor in a once thriving town) and the timing (fourth Sunday in Advent), I have chosen to focus the sermon on what should be our grateful response to God’s grace to us: joyful submission to God’s will and loving service to our brothers and sisters. Since the session of this particular church is discussing how the congregation might respond to the increasing needs of the community’s poor, I want to place this potential outreach into the larger theological framework of God’s grace as seen in the broad arc of God’s plan of salvation, beginning with the promises to Adam and Eve, through the incarnation of Christ, to the culmination of God’s kingdom. How has God been at work throughout human history and in our lives? What is our response? How then should we live?
God spoke creation in being\textsuperscript{22} through Christ\textsuperscript{23} at the beginning of time and since then, by the Holy Spirit, has graciously sustained it.\textsuperscript{24} When humans in their pride rebelled against God, God did not abandon creation but assured humans that all creation would be redeemed and that they would be reconciled with God.\textsuperscript{25} God graciously called Abraham through whose descendents God’s promised blessing of humanity would be accomplished,\textsuperscript{26} and Abraham trusted God’s faithfulness.\textsuperscript{27} Through the centuries that followed, the Israelites experienced God’s faithful providence over and over again, yet over and over they were faith-less. But God delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt and from exile in Babylon and, through the prophets, assured the Jewish nation that God would send the Messiah and that God’s kingdom would come in the fullness of time. God’s people eagerly awaited the coming of this one anointed by God to initiate God’s rule, which would be characterized by abundance, peace, justice, and – most importantly – by God’s very presence among the people.\textsuperscript{28} God’s plan of deliverance for Israel, from the beginning of time itself to its end, is the “big picture” of which Jesus’ birth is one part. This broad arc of salvation provides both the poignancy and the overwelling joy of Mary’s Song – and of our Christmas celebration.

Although the pregnancy announced by Gabriel to Mary (and the fact that this baby is the promised Messiah of God) is unexpected, it is important to understand Jesus’ incarnation as part of God’s plan of salvation because it confirms that God is loyal to God’s promises. In other words, this “new thing in Christ” affirms God’s faithful nature and therefore “fits” with God’s

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{22} Gen 1:3-27
\item \textsuperscript{23} John 1:3
\item \textsuperscript{24} Ps 139:7-12
\item \textsuperscript{25} Gen 1:15
\item \textsuperscript{26} Gen 12: 1-3
\item \textsuperscript{27} Heb 11:11
\item \textsuperscript{28} Is 62
\end{itemize}
pattern of action in the past. Even the aorist verbs used by Luke in vv 51-53, if interpreted with a culminating nuance, reflect the ongoing nature of God. But Mary’s pregnancy also shows us that this faithfulness might manifest itself in unexpected ways. God’s promised Savior is not a warrior but an infant. God’s battle plan is not attack but sacrifice. God’s greatest are not emperors but servants. Therefore we must be open to God’s gracious surprises, which we recognize only through faith by the power of the Holy Spirit. Like Mary, we then can sing a joyful song of praise for God’s action in that moment (v 48), God’s providence through the course of our lives (v 49), and for God’s working out of God’s purposes in all of human history (vv 51-55).

The choice by God of Mary to be the mother of Jesus Christ is one such surprise – most especially to Mary herself! Mary perhaps seems to be person of little significance in first century Palestine. Thus individuals sitting in the pews, perhaps like Luke’s original audience, might wonder if they are an important part of God’s plan. Maybe they are not politically powerful, influential people; perhaps they are not well-educated or sophisticated. The example of Mary demonstrates that those earthly measures of success do not determine the depth of God’s love nor whether a person can be used by God in building Christ’s kingdom. As O’Day puts it, for God no one is a “nobody.” God’s love extends to each individual; God’s grace is freely available to all.

The coming of God’s deliverance, the demonstration of God’s faithfulness seen in the initiation of God’s kingdom in Christ, was long awaited. But, according to Mary’s Song, the social reversals that mark that salvation will not be good news for everyone: the lowly will be

---

30 Mark 10:45
31 Luke 22:26
lifted and fed but the proud and rich will be brought low, scattered, and sent away hungry (vv 51-53). The tense used here by Luke implies that this future is not merely a possibility but rather is a sure thing: this reversal is certain to occur. It is important then to understand precisely who are “poor” and who are “proud”. The many Old Testament allusions in Mary’s Song all point to one answer: the poor are those who are completely dependent on God’s grace; the proud are those who find meaning and security in power and riches. Thus Mary’s Song serves as a call to assess one’s priorities and to rest on God’s grace alone.

Christmas is certainly a time of joyful song, as Luke conveys by including four songs of praise to God in his gospel’s infancy narrative (songs sung by Mary, Zechariah, the angels, and Simeon). We think of Christmas as a time of (as the carol says) “comfort and joy”.

Like Mary – and like Luke’s original readers – we can find comfort in the coming of God’s kingdom: renewed trust in God’s unchanging faithfulness, reassurance of constant God’s love for us, and confidence that in the fulfillment of God’s kingdom all will the set right. Yet embedded in the Song of Mary is challenge as well as comfort. Serving God requires our energy and our best creative efforts. Participating with Christ in building his kingdom means examining our presuppositions and setting aside our tendency to judge others. Offering ourselves to God involves being willing to step outside our comfort zone and to take the risk of speaking out against injustice and sometimes even against popular culture. Serving God means following the example given to us by Jesus Christ. But, still, when presented with the opportunity to serve God by bearing God’s son, Mary responds by saying, “here am I” (v 38). This is the response of an

---

33 For example, Psalm 52:6-8.
34 Luke repeats this theme in his gospel; one example is Jesus’ list of blessings and woes (Luke 6:20-21, 24-25).
individual who accepts God's call and is willing to take action in God's service. Not only does Mary willingly serve God, she sings for joy at the opportunity.

The Song of Mary provides both comfort and challenge in any season. Called to respond to God's grace, we joyfully submit to God's will and, with the help of the Holy Spirit, face the challenges of living faithfully in community using Jesus as our model for love and service.

SECTION III: APPLICATION

(see outline on the next two pages)

---

35 This same response echoes through the Scriptures as the response of the faithful to God's call: Gen 22:1,11; Ex 3:4; 1 Sam 3 (repeated five times in verses 4-16); Is 6:8; Acts 9:10.
I. Introduction
   
   A. Music/singing is one of many people's favorite parts of the Christmas season
   
   B. What do we hear in the Song of Mary?

II. The coming birth of Jesus is part of God’s larger plan of salvation
   
   A. God created the world good but humans in their pride rebelled against God
   
   B. God did not abandon creation: humanity and all creation would be redeemed
      
      1. God graciously called Abraham and Abraham trusted God's faithfulness
      
      2. Israelites experienced God's faithfulness but were faith-less
      
      3. God promised a Messiah
   
   C. God promised that God's kingdom would come in the fullness of time

III. God’s plan of salvation confirms God’s faithfulness, but there are elements of surprise
   
   A. The Messiah comes in a surprising form
   
   B. Salvation occurs by a surprising means
   
   C. The nature of the kingdom is surprising: the greatest are those who serve
      
      1. Mary: insignificant by the world’s standards
         
         a. Mary plays a significant role in God’s purposes
         
         b. Mary is not a “nobody” but an object of God’s love
      
      2. Luke audience – and us!
         
         a. We are not “nobodies” but objects of God’s love
         
         b. We have a significant role to play in God’s purposes

IV. God’s plan of salvation will not be good news for everyone (yet another surprise?)
   
   A. Social reversal – a sure thing!
      
      1. The poor/lowly will be lifted/fed
      
      2. The proud /rich will be brought low/scattered/sent away hungry
B. Whom does God consider to be the lowly and the proud?

1. The poor: those who are completely dependent on God’s grace
2. The proud: those who find meaning/security in power riches

C. Mary’s Song is a call to assess one’s priorities and to rest on God’s grace alone

V. Both comfort and challenge in Mary’s Song

A. Comfort

1. Renewed trust in God’s faithfulness
2. Reassurance of God’s love for us
3. Confidence that in the fulfillment of God’s kingdom all will the set right

B. Challenge

1. Serving God requires our energy and our best creative efforts
2. Participating with Christ in building his kingdom means examining our presuppositions and setting aside our tendency to judge others
3. Offering ourselves to God involves being willing to step outside our comfort zone and to take the risk of speaking out against injustice and sometimes against popular culture
4. Serving God means following the example given to us by Jesus Christ: how might we serve God in our families, our workplaces, and our communities?

VI. There is joy in the service of God!

A. Mary responds by saying, “here am I” – the response of an individual who accepts God’s call and is willing to take action in God’s service

B. Not only does Mary willingly serve God, she sings for joy at the opportunity

VII. Conclusion – our grateful response to God’s grace to us: joyful submission to God’s will and loving service to others, following the model of Jesus Christ. Sing for joy!
Bibliography of Consulted Works


