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The Infancy Canticles in Luke

Kantyki w ewangelii dzieciństwa według świętego Łukasza

Abstract: The article focuses on the four canticles in Luke's Infancy Narrative (*Magnificat*, *Benedictus*, *Gloria* and *Nunc dimittis*) and puts a question about why there is a passage from prose to poetry. The studies of the so-called *inset psalms* and the research on the Psalter as a book led to a backward and a forward approach. The former is that of intertextuality, showing how Luke's canticles evoke texts of the Old Testament. Alluding to Scripture, whose status as inspired and canonical text is a truth that concerns the protagonists, the evangelist and also the recipients of the work, the narrator invites the reader to accept that hymn as the Word of God for today. The latter highlights "melodic lines" introduced by the canticles in the works of Luke (Gospel and Acts). The four canticles are closely concatenated so as to become privileged hermeneutical places for understanding the sense of the whole narrative. Why, then, does Luke introduce his canticles? They underline their strongly anthropological value and represent a response to the salvific event. This response participates in the event itself because only through it is communicated the fullness of what the Lord has performed, is performing and will perform in the future.

Keywords: Magnificat (Lk 1:46-55), Benedictus (Lk 1:68-79), Gloria (Lk 2:14), Nunc dimittis (Lk 2:29-32), narrative criticism, intertextuality

Abstrakt: Przedmiotem analizy w niniejszym artykule są cztery kantyki z Łukaszowej Ewangelii Dzieciństwa (*Magnificat*, *Benedictus*, *Gloria* oraz *Nunc dimittis*). Autor stawia pytanie o przyczynę przejścia od prozy do poezji. W badaniach nad kantykami (określanymi jako psalmy wstawione w tekst Ewangelii (ang. *inset psalms*) oraz Psałterzem zastosowano dwa podejścia: historyczne oraz prospektywne. W ramach pierwszego – intertekstualnego – przedstawiono, w jaki sposób kantyki Łukasza nawiązują do natchnionych i kanonicznych tekstów Starego Testamentu, wywierających istotny wpływ na bohaterów, ewangelistę, a także odbiorców dzieła. Narrator zaprasza czytelnika do przyjęcia ich jako Słowa Bożego na dziś. W podejściu drugim podkreśla się „linie melodyczne" wprowadzone przez kantyki w dziele Łukaszowym (Ewangelia i Dzieje Apostolskie). Cztery kantyki są ściśle ze sobą powiązane, stając się

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uprzywilejowanymi miejscami hermeneutycznymi dla zrozumienia sensu całej narracji. Dlaczego zatem Łukasz wprowadza kantyki do testu Ewangelii? Podkreślają one ich antropologiczną wartość i stanowią odpowiedź na wydarzenie zbawcze. Odpowiedź ta staje się częścią samego wydarzenia, ponieważ tylko przez nią przekazywana jest pełnia tego, czego Pan dokonał, dokonuje i będzie dokonywał w przyszłości.

Słowa kluczowe: Magnificat (Łk 1,46–55), Benedictus (Łk 1,68–79), Gloria (Łk 2,14), Nunc dimittis (Łk 2,29–32), krytyka narracyjna, intertekstualność

A change of paradigm

In what is called his Infancy Gospel (cf. Lk 1:5–2:52), Luke the Evangelist inserts into his narrative no less than four poetical compositions, namely, the *Magnificat*, the *Benedictus*, the *Gloria* and the *Nunc dimittis*. The question is: why? What is the meaning of these hymns within his account? It is an ordered construction with a storyline where the various elements are linked in a complex scheme. Why, then, does Luke insert these compositions? What does the narrator intend to achieve by passing from prose to poetry?[1] What effect does he aim to produce in the reader by means of this device?

Luke's canticles have long been clearly identified, which is evidence that the reader's ear perceives the difference between narrative and poetry.[2] This perception has been supported by the literary study which has identified rhythmical stress, different syntactical constructions, rhymes and so forth.[3] H. Gunkel in his book on literary genres assigned the genre of "hymn" to our texts,[4] although with some variants. In his magisterial study of the literary genres of the New Testament, K. Berger describes the *Magnificat* as a "song of

1 Cf. J.-N. Aletti, *Les passages néotestamentaires en prose rythmée. Propositions sur leurs fonctions multiples*, [in:] *Les hymnes du Nouveau Testament et leurs fonctions. XXII[e] congrès de l'Association catholique française pour l'étude de la Bible (Strasbourg, 2007)*, Serie: *Lectio Divina* 225, D. Gerber, P. Keith (édd.), Paris 2009, pp. 239–263.

2 It is enough to remember that, in many manuscripts of the *Septuagint* (as also in the editions), there is a book called *Odæ* which is a collection of fourteen hymns used by the Church for prayer. These hymns are taken from the Bible but not without some differences. Here is the list (according to Rahlfs' edition): *Ode* 1 (Ex 15:1-19), *Ode* 2 (Deut 32:1-43), *Ode* 3 (1 Sam 2:1-10), *Ode* 4 (Hab 3:2-19), *Ode* 5 (Is 26:9-20), *Ode* 6 (Jon 2:3-10), *Ode* 7 (Dan 3:26-45), *Ode* 8 (Dan 3:52-88), *Ode* 9 (Lk 1:46-55,68-79), *Ode* 10 (Is 5:1-9), *Ode* 11 (Is 38:10-20), *Ode* 12 (2 Chr 33:12-13,18-19), *Ode* 13 (Lk 2:29-32), *Ode* 14 (*Gloria in excelsis Deo*).

3 Cf. J. Irigoin, *La composition rythmique des cantiques de Luc*, "Revue Biblique" 98/1 (1991), pp. 5–50.

4 Cf. H. Gunkel, *Einleitung in die Psalmen. Die Gattungen der religiösen Lyrik Israels*, Serie: *Göttinger Handkommentar zum Alten Testament* 2, Göttingen 1933, p. 33.

individual thanksgiving (*individuelles Danklied*),"[5] the *Benedictus* as a "psalm of thanksgiving (*Dankpsalm*)," which begins with a eulogia, and the *Nunc dimittis* as a "prayer of thanksgiving before death (*Dankgebet vor dem Tod*);"[6] the *Gloria*, on the other hand, would be a "doxology" which also carries within itself an announcement of salvation.[7]

Not infrequently, the study of the Lucan canticles has become bogged down in the *quid* and the *quomodo*, that is, the texts, the context, the intertextual relations, the Old Testament echoes and so on.[8] Only in recent years has the question arisen as to the *cur*, that is, why there are canticles within the narrative.

The study of the biblical canticles (in the Old and New Testaments) has changed its paradigm in step with the development of exegetical research. In the middle of the 1970s, in a comprehensive and representative work, R.E. Brown asked what lay behind the canticles. He hypothesised that the hymns were pre-Lucan texts composed by Jewish Christians. He wrote:

> It is not farfetched then to suggest that Luke got his canticles from a somewhat parallel community of Jewish *Anawim* who had been converted to Christianity, a group that unlike the sectarians at Qumran would have continued to reverence the Temple and whose messianism was Davidic.[9]

With the narrative analysis the heuristic criteria have changed so that current synchronic research is no longer concerned with what lies behind the text but, rather, its effect on the implied reader. A first focal point of this research takes its cue from a question: why, within the narrative text (dominated by the rule of the plot), are there four canticles which break the rhythm of the account and are not essential for the plot? This is the *nouvelle vague* of studies which has placed particular attention on psalms inserted into narratives (called *inset psalms*):[10] what is the point of their presence and what is the effect of the passage from prose to poetry?

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5 K. Berger, *Formen und Gattungen im Neuen Testament*, Serie: *UTB Theologie* 2532, Tübingen–Basel 2005, p. 301.

6 K. Berger, *Formen und Gattungen...*, op. cit., p. 407.

7 Cf. K. Berger, *Formen und Gattungen...*, op. cit., p. 295.

8 Cf. S.C. Farris, *The Hymns of Luke's Infancy Narratives: Their Origin, Meaning and Significance*, Serie: *Journal for the Study of the New Testament. Supplement Series* 9, Sheffield 1985.

9 R.E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary of the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. New Updated Edition*, Serie: *The Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library*, New York et al. 1999, p. 352.

10 Cf. J.W. Watts, *Psalms and Story: Inset Hymns in Hebrew Narrative*, Serie: *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament. Supplement Series* 139, Sheffield 1992; S. Weitzman, *Song and*

The study of *inset psalms* has led to a deeper study of lyric poetry, that is, that form in which the narrating I speaks of himself, quite different from epic poetry where the poet sings of the deeds of others.[11] It enables the awareness of the interior nature of the characters. Usually, in fact, the narrator is rather reticent about unveiling the feelings, motives and intentions of the human characters who take part in the plot. In lyrical poetry, instead, this personal world emerges with great power to the extent that the reader perceives its breath. Moreover, the reference to parts of the body – one thinks of the mouth, the heart, the eyes (cf. Lk 2:30) rather than of the soul and the spirit (cf. Lk 1:46-47) – expresses the warmth of the discourse, its fervour and its force. Furthermore, as J.-P. Sonnet states, "[p]ar le biais du poème, des thèmes sont introduits, une ligne mélodique est amorcée, un crescendo est esquissé,"[12] a *crescendo* that has a long influence over the narrative. It is not rare to find that plots subsequent to the canticle represent a thematic elaboration of that hymn: there are no relations on the historical level, but they do exist on the level of the account, and these must be established and acknowledged by the reader. Precisely on account of its concise nature, declamation in verse has "une qualité de mémorabilité (musicale) qui échappe aux pouvoirs de la prose du narrateur"[13] and so introduces a "tune" that the reader can easily identify. Poetry, then, transcends the concrete situation from which it flows. From the poem, the reader derives appeals to the present which render him contemporary with the characters and render the characters contemporary with the reader.

A second focal point of the research draws on the study of the Psalter as a book.[14] As is well known, the canonical reading appreciates the order of the psalms. If we apply this principle to Luke's infancy canticles, we may ask if it is possible to find in them any kind of *concatenation*,[15] thus grasping the unity of the four components in their mutual links. Exemplary, from this point of

Story in Biblical Narrative: The History of a Literary Convention in Ancient Israel, Serie: *Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature*, Bloomington–Indianapolis, IN 1997.

11 Cf. J.-P. Sonnet, *"C'est moi qui, pour Yhwh, c'est moi qui veux chanter" (Jg 5,3). La poésie lyrique au sein du récit biblique*, [in:] *Analyse narrative et Bible. Deuxième colloque international du RRENAB, Louvain-la-Neuve, avril 2004*, C. Focant, A. Wénin (édd.), Serie: *Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium* 191, Leuven–Paris–Dudley, MA 2005, pp. 373–387.

12 J.-P. Sonnet, *"C'est moi qui, pour Yhwh, c'est moi qui veux chanter"...*, op. cit., p. 378.

13 J.-P. Sonnet, *"C'est moi qui, pour Yhwh, c'est moi qui veux chanter"...*, op. cit., p. 379.

14 Cf. M. Crimella, *Psałterz i modlitwa*, "Wrocławski Przegląd Teologiczny" 29/1 (2021), pp. 7–28.

15 The first to highlight this characteristic of the Psalter was F. Delitzsch, *Symbolæ ad Psalmos illustrandos isagogicæ*, Lipsiæ 1846, pp. 35–72.

view, is the contribution of N. Lohfink,[16] who appreciates the concatenation of the Lucan hymns, demonstrating their theological *crescendo*, consistent with their narrative context. First of all, for the German exegete, the Psalter is not a simple collection of compositions assembled at random like a pack of cards since the order of the psalms has a meaning and can become one of the principles for their interpretation. In 1994, the year of his contribution on the canticles of Luke, he began to circulate studies on the Psalter as a book, studies which recognised the order of the psalms and the theology of the five books which make up this collection of prayers. Lohfink applies this principle to the Lucan infancy canticles and shows the unity of the four components, linked, as they are, with one another. A second observation concerns the insertion of the psalms in the narrative context. In this connection, Lohfink mentions the Old Testament exemplars (cf. Ex 15; Jdg 5; 1 Sam 2; Jon 2). With the exception of the Song of Jonah, the other hymns are songs of victory for the resolution of situations of *impasse*, personal or national. Lohfink combines the two perspectives: he appreciates the hymns inserted within an account, as well as their concatenation. It is clear that the four Lucan hymns draw on the context from the lexical point of view although they do not advance the action. Thus, there is achieved both a closeness and a distance among the hymns and their context. Of course, the exegete does not simply settle for observing the datum; he assesses it in order to obtain a theological interpretation of these canticles. Moreover, comparison of the various canticles and attention to their concatenation reveals that the four hymns are interdependent, with an increase in meaning from one canticle to the other. It cannot be concealed that the theoretical contribution of Lohfink's essay is really notable in that he acknowledges the insertion of the hymns in their context, the links between the four canticles and the individuality of the literary genre of the hymn. Especially estimable is Lohfink's methodology in that it is developed from the literary point of view alone and not from the historical angle, highlighting the construction of the account and not the various compositional hypotheses.

[16] Cf. N. Lohfink, *Psalmen im Neuen Testament. Die Lieder in der Kindheitsgeschichte bei Lukas*, [in:] *Neue Wege der Psalmenforschung. Für Walter Beyerlin*, K. Seybold, E. Zenger (Hrsg.), Serie: *Herders Biblische Studien* 1, Freiburg–Basel–Wien 1994, pp. 105–125.

The play of intertextuality

The canticles evoke texts of the Old Testament, always by way of allusion. That is, there is established the play of intertextuality, namely, a relation between two texts, more precisely between a (more recent) *hypertext* and an (older) *hypotext*. In this connection, G. Genette has provided an interesting set of criteria:

> Sous sa forme la plus explicite et la plus littérale, […] la pratique traditionnelle de la *citation*; […] sous une forme encore moins explicite et moins littérale, celle de l'*allusion,* c'est-à-dire d'un énoncé dont la pleine intelligence suppose la perception d'un rapport entre lui et un autre auquel renvoie nécessairement telle ou telle de ses inflexions, autrement non recevable.[17]

To these two forms we can add a third, the *reference*: in this case too, we have a form of intertextuality whose chief characteristic is to refer the implicit reader to a known text without citing it explicitly.[18]

Let us consider some examples in connection with the *Magnificat*. The first example is the hymn's *incipit*: "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God, my Saviour" (Lk 1:46-47). Many passages are being evoked here. A first one comes from Habakkuk: "I exult in the Lord, I rejoice in God, my Saviour" (3:18). In the context (cf. Hab 3:1-19) it is the prophet who sings: perhaps he can represent the people of Israel. Moreover, in the *Septuagint*, the verbs "magnify (μεγαλύνω)" and "exult (ἀγαλλιάω)" are traditional terms for the praise of God (cf. 2 Sam 7:22,26; Pss^{LXX} 2:11; 9:3; 12:6; 31:11; 33:4; 68:31; 69:5; 102:1). To these allusions, we must then add the very precise echo of the Song of Anna (cf. 1 Sam 2:1-10). Samuel's mother proclaims: "My heart has been strengthened, thanks to the Lord, my horn has been raised, thanks to my God; my mouth has been opened against my enemies, I am joyful, thanks to your salvation" (1 Kgds 2:1^{LXX}). This is the song of the barren and humiliated woman whose lament has been heard by the Lord. She is now full of joy for the birth of her son, and, in the song, she proclaims her experience.[19]

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17 G. Genette, *Palimpsestes. La littérature au second degré*, Serie: *Poétique*, Paris 1982, p. 8 [author's italics].

18 Cf. N. Piégay-Gros, *Introduction à l'intertextualité*, Serie: *Lettres supérieures*, Paris 1996, pp. 45–55.

19 Cf. S. Koch, *Die Samuelbücher als Indikation heilsgeschichtlichen Handelns im Lukasevangelium*, [in:] *The Books of Samuel: Stories – History – Reception History*, W. Dietrich, C. Edenburg, P. Hugo (eds.), Serie: *Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium* 284, Leuven–Paris–Bristol, CT 2016, pp. 555–562.

Immediately connected with the proclamation of praise comes the reason (ὅτι) which begins to account for the salvific title awarded to God (cf. Lk 1:48a). Once again, the style recalls the Old Testament hymns (cf. Ps 31:8), with a double reference: the first is contextual, given that Mary had described herself as "handmaid of the Lord" (Lk 1:38); the second reference is intertextual in that Anna expresses herself thus: "Adonai, Lord God of hosts, if indeed you are looking on the lowliness of your handmaid (ἐπιβλέψῃς ἐπὶ τὴν ταπείνωσιν τῆς δούλης σου)" (1 Kgds 1:11[LXX]). Leah reacted in the same way: she was not barren but simply not loved by Jacob: "my Lord has seen my humiliation (εἶδέν μου κύριος τὴν ταπείνωσιν)" (Gen 29:32). The humility is not bound up with the sterility; it is not even exalted as a virtue. Rather, it can be read as a participation in the situation of the people of Israel, a remnant, humiliated by the powerful (cf. Deut 26:7; 1 Sam 9:16; 2 Kgs 14:26; Ps 136:23) but liberated by God, as it says in a passage in the *Fourth Book of Ezra* (of which there is a Latin translation) put in the mouth of personified Zion: "God has heard his handmaid; he has looked on my lowliness (*pervidit humilitatem meam*); he has listened to my tribulation and has given me a son" (9:45). The introduction of an ἰδού signals a change of perspective (cf. Lk 1:48b). The reader is associated with the point of view represented by Mary who expresses her elevated position among people. There is a strong allusion to what Leah had said: "And Leah said: 'I am blessed because the women call me blessed (μακαρίζουσίν με αἱ γυναῖκες)'" (Gen 30:13). The macarism proclaimed by Elizabeth (cf. Lk 1:45) is expanded hyperbolically so as to involve "all [future] generations" and mark the insuperable character of God's action in the present.[20]

The Virgin then delivers a second reason for her praise, indicated, again, by ὅτι (cf. Lk 1:49). This introduces a second metaphor for God: whereas, in the first line, Mary spoke of the "Saviour," here, instead, the Most High is represented as the "Mighty One (δυνατός)." The title is not new in the *Septuagint* (cf. Pss 23:8; 44:4,6; 119:4; Zeph 3:17) and refers to contexts in which God intervenes with might on behalf of his people. The verb and the object ("he has done great things in me [ἐποίησέν μοι μεγάλα]") allude to the warrior God who engages in battle with the enemies of his people (cf. Deut 10:21; 11:7; 2 Kgs 7:23; Pss 70:19; 105:21). The reference to the Exodus epic of the liberation from Egypt reverberates strongly but also recognisable is an allusion to the promise made to David. In reply to the words of the prophet, Nathan, the king addresses God like this: "you have wrought all this greatness to make it

[20] Cf. J.B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, Serie: *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, Grand Rapids, MI–Cambridge 1997, p. 103.

known to you servant (ἐποίησας πᾶσαν τὴν μεγαλωσύνην ταύτην γνωρίσαι τῷ δούλῳ σου)" (2 Kgds 7:21^{LXX}). David then twice describes himself as "servant (δούλος)" (2 Kgds 7:20,21^{LXX}) and "magnifies (μεγαλῦναι)" (2 Kgds 7:22^{LXX}) the Lord. During the annunciation, the angel had referred to the Davidic promise (cf. Lk 1:32-33); hence it follows that the "great things" do not allude just to the liberation from Egypt but also to David's descendant, namely the Messiah.[21]

Another example concerns the logic of reversal (cf. Lk 1:51-53).[22] Many texts are being evoked here. First of all, the Song of Anna: "The Lord makes poor and makes rich, he humbles and he exalts. He raises the needy from the ground and lifts the poor from the dunghill so that he may dwell with the princes of the peoples, giving them also a throne of glory as their inheritance" (1 Kgds 2:7-8^{LXX}). However, the *motif* of the overturning of situations is a regular biblical *topos*. It suffices to recall Sirach: "God unseats the proud from their throne and makes the humble to sit in their place" (Sir 10:14; cf. Ps 147:6). By means of a construction which employs the *parallelismus membrorum*, a contrast is established between God's action on behalf of Mary and the fate of the arrogant. Such a relation is set up by means of the semantic opposition between "lowliness (ταπείνωσις)" (Lk 1:48) and "pride (ὑπερηφανία)" (Lk 1:51), an opposition that alludes to many texts of the *Septuagint* (cf. Pss 17:28; 88:11; 118:50; Prov 3:34; Sir 13:20; Is 1:25).[23] The salvific action of God in the Old Testament was accompanied by the annihilation of Israel's enemies (cf. Jud 13:13). There is, therefore, a continuity between the action of God sung of throughout the Old Testament and that proclaimed by Mary in the *Magnificat*.

Finally, the *Magnificat* evokes the promise made to Abraham (cf. Lk 1:55). God had promised the patriarch numerous descendants (cf. Gen 12:2), a land (cf. Gen 12:7) and the extension to all the nations of the blessing accorded to him (cf. Gen 12:3; 22:18). There also appears clear an allusion to a text of Isaiah: "But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen (σὺ δέ, Ισραηλ, παῖς μου Ιακωβ, ὃν ἐξελεξάμην), seed of Abraham (σπέρμα Αβρααμ) whom I loved, whom I took from the ends of the earth" (Is 41:8-9). The designation of Israel as παῖς recalls, more generally, the language of Deutero-Isaiah (Is 44:1-2,21; 45:4; 49:6), and it is the starting point for declarations about salvation and

[21] Cf. D.E. Garland, *Luke*, Serie: *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* 3, Grand Rapids, MI 2011, p. 97.

[22] Cf. J. Dupont, *Le Magnificat comme discours sur Dieu* [1980], [in:] J. Dupont, *Études sur les évangiles synoptiques*, t. 2, Serie: *Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium* 70 B, Leuven 1985, pp. 972–974.

[23] Cf. M. Wolter, *Das Lukasevangelium*, Serie: *Handbuch zum Neuen Testament* 5, Tübingen 2008, pp. 103–104.

liberation. God's salvific action on behalf of his people is thus linked with the tradition of the patriarchs: the expression "remembering [his] mercy" (Lk 1:54) evokes similar syntagmas in the *Septuagint* (cf. Ex 2:24; 6:5; Lev 26:42,45; Ps 97:3), which show the inviolable continuity of the covenant and of God's faithfulness to his promises.[24]

The *Benedictus* begins with a "eulogia" (cf. Lk 1:68) which evokes many texts from the *Septuagint* (cf. 1 Kgds 25:32; 3 Kgds 1:48; 8:15; 2 Chr 2:11; 6:4 Pss 10:14; 71:18; 105:48) that celebrate God as "the God of Israel."[25] This designation emphasises the election of his people. The singer acknowledges the glory of God and proclaims that God is blessed. Such an introduction employs a precise technical doxological formula which is found at the conclusion of some of the five books of the Psalter. For example, the first, second and fourth books of the Psalms end thus: "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel" (Pss 41:14; 72:18; 106:48). These doxologies represent a prayerful response to the actions of God that have been sung in the psalms. In other words, Zacharias, beginning his blessing with words that usually conclude the canticles, is declaring that the birth of John the Baptist seals a great intervention of God in history. The same words are in the mouth of David at Solomon's coronation (cf. 1 Kgs 1:48): the old king recognises the fulfilment of the promise made through the mouth of the prophet, Nathan. The *Benedictus* is situated at the end of the Old Testament economy: the God of Israel is blessed; henceforth, he is the God of the Messiah, of Jesus. The God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob is the same God as the one celebrated by the Christian community.

Let us focus on two symbols which allude to texts from the *Septuagint*: the "horn" and the complex image of the ἀνατολή. In the Greek Bible, God often causes people "to arise" in order to perform something on behalf of Israel (cf. 3 Kgds 11:14,23; Zech 11:16). The "horn (κέρας)" is a metaphor for power and strength (1 Kgds 2:1,10^{LXX}; 1 Chr 25:5) and, not rarely, indicates God himself (2 Kgds 22:3^{LXX}; Ps 17:3^{LXX}), or else, the Messiah (Ps 131:17; Ez 29:21). The horn is what endures when the animal dies: thus, the horn represents the strength of the Messiah, his power of redemption and salvation. It is enough to think of the Song of Anna: "[God] will raise the horn of his Messiah" (1 Kgds 2:10^{LXX}). The final part of the canticle (cf. Lk 1:78b-79) is dominated by the complex image of the ἀνατολή and by a semantics entirely focused on the

[24] Cf. M. Crimella. *Luca. Introduzione, traduzione e commento*, Serie: *Nuova versione della Bibbia dai testi antichi* 39, Cinisello Balsamo 2015, p. 58.

[25] Cf. J.-N. Aletti, *L'Évangile selon saint Luc. Commentaire*, Serie: *Le Livre et le Rouleau* 57, Bruxelles–Paris 2022, pp. 64–65.

theme of darkness and obscurity. The sense of ἀνατολή (literally, "the rising") is difficult to understand: the term can indicate "the dawn" or "a luminous star" (cf. Num 24:17) – consistent with the context, in particular, with Lk 1:79 – or else allude to the Davidic "shoot" (cf. Jer 23:5; Zech 3:8; 6:12). The allusions multiply, even finding room for amphibology whose polysemic value enriches the reader's horizon, giving him the impression of a space much larger than that envisaged at first sight.

A final and single observation with regard to the *Nunc dimittis:* the canticle takes up the vision of salvation attested in Second and Third Isaiah (there are precise allusions to Is 40:5; 42:6; 46:13; 49:6; 52:10; 60:1).[26] These allusions function on different levels: first of all, they root the words of Simeon in God's plan attested in the Scriptures; more precisely, they anchor the old man's speech in Isaiah's prophetic vision which announces a restoration carried out by God that is made explicit in the work of salvation; then, they emphasise the universalistic dimension of God's salvific plan; finally, they refer to the Isaian figure of the servant of Yahweh, a fundamental metaphor with which to interpret the mission of Jesus in the work of the Third Evangelist. By alluding to prophetic passages, the narrator – who yields the floor to Simeon – obliges the reader to revive the memory of the continuity of God's salvific plan, taken up now no longer under the banner of promise but that of fulfilment.

We could identify still many allusions, but it is useful to ask about the point of this wholly particular means of expression which obliges the reader to remember the pages of Scripture. Far from being a mere exercise in imitation (or, worse, a cento of quotations), this procedure through allusions takes account of what is at stake theologically in the canticles. By alluding to Scripture, whose status as an inspired and canonical text is truth which concerns the characters in the narrative, the evangelist and even the addressee of the work, the narrator invites the reader to accept these hymns as Word of God for today. The human voices of Mary, Zacharias and Simeon sing the work of salvation without this proclamation being dictated by God; and, yet, the plentiful use of the Scriptures takes up the very Word of God so that human word and Word of God are united indissociably, the word of faith fed by the Word of God and so itself Word of God.

[26] For the complex relationship between Luke's work and Isaiah, cf. the panoramic survey: M. Crimella, *La ripresa dell'Antico Testamento nell'Opera Lucana. Lo stato dell'arte*, [in:] *L'Opera Lucana (Vangelo di Luca e Atti degli Apostoli). Seminario per studiosi di Sacra Scrittura. Roma, 21-25 gennaio 2019*, Serie: *@biblicum* 5, Roma 2019, pp. 90–95.

Realisation of a melodic line

Precisely because of their poetic status, the canticles introduce some "melodic lines" which the Lucan account (both in the Gospel and in Acts) will take up again.

The Song of Mary does not involve any setting of the scene, that is, it is without a plot of its own. Yet, the *Magnificat* refers to a series of events, known to the reader whether by means of the preceding account or whether through biblical memory. In this way, the events resonate, not as in the prose narrative (wholly dependent on the skilful dosage of suspense, curiosity and surprise) but according to a different mode, none other than the poetic. Semantic intensification, contrast, concatenation – intolerable in a narrative because they suppress the play of freedom – in key points of the structure, they underline great internal themes that are important for the book as a whole.

Hence the second observation. The hymn introduces a melodic line with a long range. For the first time in the Third Evangelist's account, the logic of reversal is set out,[27] and it will return on several occasions: in the "beatitudes" and in the "woes" (cf. Lk 6:20-26); in the sayings about "losing" and "saving" one's own life (cf. Lk 9:24; 17:33); in the antithesis between "being exalted" and "being humbled" (cf. Lk 14:11; 18:14); in the parable of Dives and Lazarus (cf. Lk 16:19-31); and in the contrast between "being served" and "serving" (cf. Lk 22:24-27). This logic draws its inspiration from the apocalyptic tradition which is entirely dominated by the idea of a great final upheaval in which the powerful will be annihilated, the wicked punished and the humble exalted. The *Magnificat* reflects this language which looks at history from the point of view of its fulfilment, but introduces an important difference: Mary speaks in the past, and her song refers to something that has already been fulfilled; it exalts the action of God in her own personal event where the impossible has become possible precisely in the generation of her son who is also the Son of the Most High. What has happened in her womb is the sign of the reversal: the misery of the world is rehabilitated by the power of the God of Israel.

The Song of Mary is placed at the beginning of a very extended narrative span which will close with the end of the Acts (cf. Act 28:26-28), where there will be a re-echo of the quotation of Is 6:9-10, which is a dramatic allusion to the rejection of the Gospel by Israel. The salvation of which Mary sings is what the Christian readers (cf. Lk 1:4) have received in Jesus, whose coming into the world in the womb of his mother the hymn celebrates. Thus, a great bridge is created:

[27] Cf. P. Paszko, Mundus inversus *nei cantici femminili dell'Antico Testamento*, Serie: *Analecta Biblica* 227, Roma 2019, pp. 291–333.

the Virgin's Song reveals a precise face of God, a face which has been revealed throughout the whole of the history of the people of Israel just as it is attested in the Old Testament; but, on reflection, the image of God in the *Magnificat* will later be that revealed by Jesus, expressed in the Beatitudes (cf. Lk 6:20-26), sung in the hymn of jubilee (cf. Lk 10:21-22), told about in the parables.

The double reference to the theme of "visiting" (Lk 1:68,78) in the *Benedictus* introduces another Lucan "tune"[28]. Luke makes use of the verb ἐπισκέπτομαι a good seven times: three times in his Gospel narrative (cf. Lk 1:68,78; 7:16) and four times in Acts (cf. Acts 6:3; 7:23; 15:14,36). If we carefully observe the attestations in the Third Gospel, it emerges that the verb has a strong theological value in which the subject is always connected with the divine sphere. The Song of Zacharias opens with praise for the visit which God has already made and closes in suspense towards the future: God will visit his people anew. The result of this visit is the liberation (that is, the redemption) performed by the Davidic Messiah who reveals his salvific power. The fact that the subject of the first verb at its first appearance is "the Lord" (Lk 1:68) whereas, on the second occasion, it is a "star" and/or a "shoot" (Lk 1:78) stresses the theological value of the action, in perfect continuity with the use of the verb *in bonam partem* in the *Septuagint* (cf. Ex 4:31; Ruth 1:6; Ps 79:15; Zech 10:3).[29] In the dynamic of the Infancy Narrative, the *Benedictus* is a real point of convergence: put in the mouth of Zacharias, the hymn represents the human response to the divine revelation, with a strong Christological emphasis.[30]

These same characteristics reappear in the third occurrence of the verb: "All were seized with fear and glorified God, saying: "A great prophet has risen up among us, and God has visited his people" (Lk 7:16). At the end of the account of the raising of the Widow of Nain's son, the evangelist records the choral reaction which has an omnicomprehensive subject („all") and a homologetic character („they glorified"), very close to the lyrical-praying tone of the *Benedictus*. Furthermore, there emerges here the Christological dimension (Jesus is called "great prophet"), the theological („God" is explicitly cited as the subject of the verb) and the soteriological (the verb ἐγείρω recalls Lk 1:69: "And has raised up [ἤγειρεν] for us a horn of salvation"). The divine visit is presented as the salvific and eschatological intervention of God, inseparable from the person of Jesus.

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[28] Cf. M. de Lovinfosse, *La pédagogie de la* « visite » *(episkopé) de Dieu chez Luc*, Serie: *Études bibliques. Nouvelle série* 76, Leuven–Paris–Bristol, CT 2018.

[29] Cf. T. Muraoka, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint*, Louvain–Paris–Walpole, MA 2009, pp. 279–280.

[30] Cf. D.E. Garland, *Luke*, op. cit., p. 110.

In the episode of Jesus' weeping over Jerusalem (cf. Lk 19:41-44), we note the substantive ἐπισκοπή ("visit/visitation"), the only example in the Gospels. It occurs within an expression ("the time of your visitation") which recalls the prophetic oracles of judgement (cf. Jer 6:15; 10:15; Is 10:3). The tears over Jerusalem also cause the tragic aspect of the narrative to emerge, still more accentuated when Jesus' lament and the Song of Zacharias are compared: what is celebrated with joy as the fulfilment of hope on the lips of John's father is lamented as a tragic loss in Jesus' words over the holy city. The canticle salutes the salvific visit of God whereas the city has not recognised the time of its visitation; the canticle alludes to a "way of peace" (Lk 1:79), unrecognised by the city (cf. Lk 19:41); the canticle proclaims "salvation from the enemies" (Lk 1:71,74) whereas Jesus announces the destruction of the city by its enemies (cf. Lk 19:43); finally, the failure of recognition (cf. Lk 19:44) lies in contrast with the "knowledge of salvation" (Lk 1:77). In other words, the salvation proclaimed in the *Benedictus* is being lost, not because it is an inappropriate hope but because, in the crucial time of its visitation, Jerusalem rejects the Messiah. It appears, that is, that everything that has been proclaimed is going up in smoke. In fact, immediately after his lament, Jesus enters the temple (cf. Lk 19:45) and begins the final section of the Gospel narrative at the heart of which stands his passion and resurrection. Rejection by the holy city does not represent an obstacle to God's plan which is brought about fully in the Paschal mystery.

The theme of visiting/visitation is also taken up in James's speech during the 'Council' of Jerusalem (cf. Acts 15:13-21). In the apostle's statement ("Simon has told how God first visited [ἐπεσκέψατο] the gentiles to create among them a people for his name" [Acts 15:14]), the gentiles are not assimilated to the people of Israel but to the people of God who certainly contain the former but also transcend it. The people of Israel remain the people of God, but the people of God is not limited to the people of Israel.

In sum, around "visitation" cluster the different threads of the account: the Christological, bound up with the recognition of the identity of Jesus; the theological, focused on the manifestation of the divine plan in history and culminating in the Paschal event; the ecclesiological, connected with the opening to the gentiles; and the soteriological which reveals its deepest meaning in the sign of the victory over death. The "tune" intoned by the *Benedictus* has a notable development.

The *Gloria* of the angels (cf. Lk 2:14) also introduces its own melodic line which is to be reprised in the narrative. It has not escaped the commentators[31]

[31] Cf. M. Wolter, *Das Lukasevangelium*, op. cit., pp. 130–131, 631.

how the heavenly hymn looks forward to the cry of the crowd of disciples at the time of the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem: "Blessed is he who comes, the king, in the name of the Lord. Peace in heaven and glory in the high [places]" (Lk 19:38). In the acclamation at the gates of the holy city there is no polarity between "heaven" and "earth;" it is only a question of "high [places]." However, "he who comes" is acting on earth so that what happens in the human sphere is correlated with what happens in heaven. On earth, God has sent the king while, in heaven – correspondingly – there are "peace and glory." Notable also is the inversion: whereas the heavenly host proclaim peace on earth, a multitude of disciples proclaim peace in heaven. However, the relocation of peace refers to a change announced by Jesus himself: "Do you think that I have appeared to bring peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but division" (Lk 12:51). The *motif* is taken up again in the lament over Jerusalem (cf. Lk 19:41-44): the grave words of one who sheds tears over the holy city are a counter melody to the expectations aroused by the Infancy Narrative: there, the Messiah is announced as he who "will reign over the house of Jacob" (Lk 1:33), and it is he who will perform "the liberation of Jerusalem" (Lk 2:38); as if in spite of all this, Jesus weeps over the inability of the holy city to recognise these opportunities. However, this dysphoric upheaval of perspectives is followed by the greeting of the Risen One who addresses his disciples, saying: "Peace be with you" (Lk 24:36). The peace, foretold by Zacharias, sung by the angels and not recognised by the holy city, is offered by the risen Christ as the sum of all goods.[32]

The *Gloria* is the only canticle which is not in the mouth of human characters but of angelic creatures. It, therefore, is all the more confirmation that the passage from narrative to poetry provides the meaning of the event itself, here, actually, according to a heavenly point of view which, although not coinciding with that of God, nevertheless comes close to it.[33] We are dealing with a perspective that is certainly bold, which must not mislead us. Luke is more cautious than he seems: actions which the Old Testament would have readily reported in the more direct key of a theophany, Luke remodels as angelophanies (cf. Lk 1:11,26; 2:9,13; 24:23; Acts 5:19; 8:26; 10:3; 12:7; 27:23); their impact is somehow more softened, in the sense of a reworking of two factors that are in

[32] Cf. E. Manicardi, *"Lo pose in una mangiatoia". Il racconto lucano dell'infanzia di Gesù*, Serie: *Biblica*, Bologna 2019, pp. 203–205.

[33] Cf. J.-N. Aletti, *L'Évangile…*, op. cit., p. 73, notes: "Ici, christologie et louange viennent des mêmes voix angéliques ; plus tard, avec Syméon, elles viendront des vois humaines. […] Ce faisant […] Luc imite encore les récits bibliques et s'apparente aux deutérocanoniques, où la louange ponctue les événements et se présente comme un assentiment des personnages du récit aux voix de Dieu."

play: revelation and transcendence, on the one hand, the anthropological reaction and the human story, on the other.[34] Precisely this close but very delicate relationship is held together by the angelic hosts,[35] whose song, however – as for the human characters which people the account – is a poetic word which shares in the prerogatives of the divine Word.

Finally, the *Nunc dimittis* introduces various *motifs* which are going to find ample development in the Lukan *œuvre*.[36] The first *motif* is salvific. The rare neutral term σωτήριον (which evokes Is 40:5) returns in another two passages (cf. Lk 3:6; Acts 28:28). The context of the gospel passage is the activity of John the Baptist (cf. Lk 3:1-20), which is introduced by means of an extensive prophetic quotation (cf. Is 40:3-5 in Lk 3:4b-6): it outlines the Lord's return to Zion, which demands a radical transformation of the landscape through a threefold parallelism ("prepare" and "straighten," "fill" and "bring low," "make straight" and "make smooth"). This quotation (a little rearranged compared with the *Septuagint*) pushes in a direction that is strongly Christological, evoking the previous words of Simeon. John's announcement is inserted within a Word which precedes him and which no one can control, a Word which proclaims a path guided by God. The second text is the finale of Acts within the wider context of Paul's two encounters with the Jewish community in Rome (cf. Acts 28:17-31). At this point, at the conclusion of Luke's second volume, there is a fulfilment of the word of Jesus with which the book of Acts opened: the announcement of the Gospel has finally reached Rome, the heart of the empire and, from there, it will be able to spread even to the furthest ends of the earth (cf. Acts 1:8). In fact, Paul's last words recapitulate the whole of the plan announced right at the beginning of the work, precisely by Simeon: "salvation (τὸ σωτήριον)"

[34] Cf. A. George, *Les anges*, [in:] A. George, *Études sur l'œuvre de Luc*, Serie: *Sources Bibliques*, Paris 1986, p. 154: "La gloire du Seigneur qui enveloppe de sa clarté tous les assistants n'est pas proprement une théophanie, puisque le texte ne parle que d'anges ; et chez Luc les anges ont leur gloire."

[35] Cf. P.A. Sequeri, *Effetti dell'Angelo. Prospettive dell'angelologia per una nuova teologia della storia*, "La rivista del clero italiano" 89 (2008), p. 255: "L'Angelo è l'annunciatore e l'operatore dei legami fra Dio e la storia che si fa mediante l'intelligenza e l'azione dell'uomo. Il «cielo creato di Dio» – che comprende molta «creatura spirituale» di cui sappiamo e molta di cui non sappiamo ancora – è una polarità attiva negli intrecci che costituiscono la storia della creazione. L'Angelo è il legame «proporzionato» alle potenze e alle intelligenze degli umani. Allo stesso tempo apporta all'universo dello spirito creato, la riserva di trascendenza che è necessaria per forzare i possibili e le energie felicemente trasparenti alla signoria di Dio."

[36] Cf. D. Gerber, *'Ton salut que tu as préparé'. Les diverses fonctions du cantique de Syméon en Luc-Actes*, [in:] *Les hymnes du Nouveau Testament…*, op. cit., pp. 93–97.

has reached all the peoples. The deafness of one part of the people of Israel is contrasted with the gentiles' acceptance of the Gospel. The three passages analysed constitute the pillars which bear a great narrative and theological arc intended to make the reader discover the soteriological meaning of the coming of Jesus for "all flesh," that is, for Israel and for the gentiles.

A second *motif* is that of the preparation of salvation. The expression "which you have prepared" (Lk 2:31) refers to God's promise to the fathers (cf. Lk 1:55), communicated through the prophets (cf. Lk 1:70), "the oath to Abraham" (Lk 1:73). This preparation has an ultimate purpose, the manifestation of Jesus. All that is confirmed by Paul's address at Antioch (cf. Acts 13:16b-41). In it, he offers a retrospective (cf. Acts 13:17-23) which takes its cue from the election of the fathers, passing through the judges, Samuel, Saul and David to arrive at Jesus.

Finally, there is a third *motif* introduced by the canticle and taken up extensively in Luke's works: this is the theme of light. While Simeon characterises the "instrument of salvation" as "light," alluding to Is 49:6, this same prophetic passage is quoted explicitly at the culminating point of Paul's discourse at Antioch in Pisidia (cf. Acts 13:46-47). As is well known, the interpretation of this passage is much discussed and very delicate. We have to beware of thinking that the rejection (or hardening) of the Jews is the justification for the mission to the gentiles. If anything, it is precisely the contrary: it is the mission to the gentiles, the widening of the work of evangelisation, which provokes the opposition of the Jews! Given the salvific-historical priority of Israel, the Jewish opposition in Pisidian Antioch forced the missionaries at a certain point to have to limit their own range of action predominantly, if not exclusively, to the gentiles of the city.[37] Allowing this interpretation, it follows that not only do Paul's last words in the book of Acts have the function of upsetting and provoking the Jews but also that the hardening of Israel will have as its consequence that the mission will be restricted to the gentiles. However, that does not take away from the fact that salvation was offered to Israel first, as Paul also recalls in his speech before King Agrippa: "The Christ was to suffer, and, raised as the first among the dead, was to announce a light to the people and to the gentiles (φῶς μέλλει καταγγέλλειν τῷ τε λαῷ καὶ τοῖς ἔθνεσιν)" (Acts 26:23).

It follows that the hymn opens up themes whose significance has a triple value: Christological, soteriological and ecclesiological. Jesus' mission is an instrument of salvation for all peoples, Jews and gentiles, bearing, thus, the

[37] Cf. S. Mele, *A causa della speranza d'Israele. Il finale del libro degli Atti (At 28,17-31) alla luce della predicazione ad Antiochia di Pisidia (At 13,13-52) e a Corinto (At 18,1-18)*, Assisi 2014, pp. 128–137.

glory of Israel, giving, that is, fulfilment to those Jewish expectations which find their perfect and abundant realisation in the Messiah.

Finally, we must reflect, once again, on the decision to insert a song within a narrative context. Simeon speaks and acts under the influence of the Spirit (cf. Lk 2:26-27). However, precisely this repeated observation distinguishes his character as the recipient of a particular and special action from on high. Yet, that takes nothing away from the human character of the canticle which participates in the salvific event celebrated by the old man. Once again, the poetic word participates in the prerogatives of the divine word. In the universal salvific event which has Jesus as its protagonist, the evangelist also includes the reaction of Simeon which, by virtue of its poetic status, belongs to the same action of revelation.

The concatenation

Despite the fact that the canticles are inserted into the narrative at specific and precise moments, they can still be considered as four concatenated steps.[38] It is a question of verifying whether there are links between the canticles. These links are expressed, first of all, on the semantic level. The first ring on the chain is the *Magnificat*. Only at the end of the hymn is there an explicit reference to Israel: "he helps Israel, his servant" (Lk 1:54). This reference is taken up at the beginning of the *Benedictus*: "Blessed the Lord, the God of Israel" (Lk 1:68) "who has raised a horn of salvation in the house of David, his servant" (Lk 1:69). In other words, the second canticle takes up the discourse where the first left off and develops it, making reference to the same promise (cf. Lk 1:55,70). The recipients of the promise in the *Magnificat* were "our fathers, Abraham and his seed" (Lk 1:55), whereas, in the *Benedictus*, the reference to the promise is twofold: it occurred "through the mouth of his holy prophets" (Lk 1:70) and by means of the "oath sworn to Abraham, our father" (Lk 1:73). Moreover, the characterisation of God as "Saviour" (Lk 1:47) and as the one whose "mercy" (Lk 1:50,54) reaches men and women is taken up in the *Benedictus*: "salvation" appears twice (Lk 1:69,71); "mercy" too is attested (Lk 1:72). Then, what the *Magnificat* had omitted, namely, the theme of the coming of the royal Davidic Messiah, is introduced by the *Benedictus*.

The second part of the *Benedictus* sings of and to John the Baptist who is called "prophet of the Most High" (Lk 1:76) in that he will enable knowledge

[38] Cf. N. Lohfink, *Psalmen...*, op. cit., pp. 112–122.

of the coming of "a star from on high" (Lk 1:78). This star will shine like light in the darkness and will guide the steps of the people "on a way of peace" (Lk 1:79). After the birth of the Messiah, the angelic choirs sing their hymn which proclaims "glory in the high [places]" and "peace on earth" (Lk 2:14): once again, a concatenation. The same two key words taken up from the *Benedictus* in the *Gloria* are found again, in reverse order, in the *Nunc dimittis*: "peace" (Lk 2:29) and "glory" (Lk 3:32).

These observations are limited to the surface of the text. Yet, they reveal information that is objective and easily ascertainable, namely, the concatenation of the canticles. This is not simply a rhetorical strategy but, rather, a precise theological design in which God's action is a mark of continuity and progression, but is also woven together with the human response which, by means of the song, belongs to it from within. Going on, instead, to the contents, what appears clear is the broad panorama of the history of salvation. There is a real soteriological arc which starts from Abraham (cf. Lk 1:55,72-73) and reaches to the eschatological "now" (Lk 2:29) which corresponds to the coming of Jesus. This is the "salvation prepared" (Lk 2:30) by God, the "Saviour" (Lk 1:47), starting from the "oath" (Lk 1:73) made to the patriarch and now fulfilled in Jesus Christ, whose birth is sung by the angels and whose influence extends over the whole of humanity by means of "peace" (Lk 2:14). The extension of God's salvific action to all the nations, typical of the *Nunc dimittis*, begins precisely with the *Magnificat*[39]. Simeon, first of all, mentions the "peace" (Lk 2:29) that concerns him personally, while Mary, in first place, sings of her joy (cf. Lk 1:46-47). The old man includes "all the peoples" (Lk 2:31), while the Virgin recalls "those who fear him" (Lk 1:50). Finally, the stress falls on the "glory" (Lk 2:32) for Israel, while the *Magnificat* closes with the proclamation of God's faithfulness to his "seed" (Lk 1:55), that is, Abraham's descendants. In other words, the hymns are privileged hermeneutical places for understanding the meaning of the account as a whole: not only the segment narrated by Luke but the whole story of salvation of which the Jesus-event represents the apex.

[39] Cf. M. Coleridge, *The Birth of the Lukan Narrative: Narrative as Christology in Luke 1-2*, Serie: *Journal for the Study of the New Testament. Supplement Series* 88, Sheffield 1993, p. 168.

Why the canticles?

Finally, we return to the question which opened this paper: Why are there poetic texts within a narrative *corpus*? What is its place within the structure of the account? Do the canticles have the same function as the chorus in ancient tragedy, namely, that of a lyrical repetition of what has been said, or do they have a different significance? It appears to us that Luke's hymns do not simply say again in poetic language what has already been enunciated nor do they represent a personal interpretation in the form of an explanatory comment. The point is different, that is, the passage from prose to poetry: this passage highlights the unprecedented character of an event of which the intention is to give the absolute sense.[40] Poetic language has the power to express the invisible which lies beyond words. It follows that when Luke interrupts his account and makes room for a poem, he is offering a strong signal to the reader: what we have here is the passage towards something that cannot be told but only communicated through poetic language inasmuch as it is a personal encounter with God. Mary, Zacharias and Simeon recognise and celebrate God's intervention in their existence but also beyond their personal experience. Such an intervention can only be sung.[41] The angels too – creatures of God – sing the divine glory.

This is already the function of the *inset psalms* in the Old Testament. That is, the narrator gives voice to some characters so that they may express their feelings in a lyrical way, but, at the same time, tell of their understanding of the events recounted, an understanding which not infrequently surpasses these same events, assuming also a function that is proleptic in relation to the meaning of the events. The lyrical-praying summary of the hymns sings of the action of God and the revelation of Jesus, without confronting humanity, as in the prose account. In the narrative, God reveals his plan to Zacharias and to Mary through the angel, Gabriel, but he has to take account of their times, their questions, their difficulties, even their rejections. In the summaries of the *Magnificat*, the *Benedictus*, the *Gloria* and the *Nunc dimittis*, however, the divine action is sung in its advancing, without objections, without motivations, without the human times of confrontation. God is not a God who acts outside history – quite the contrary – but his action unfolds on the terrain of human

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40 Cf. D. Gerber, *Le* Magnificat*, le* Benedictus*, le* Gloria *et le* Nunc dimittis*: quatre hymnes en réseau pour une introduction en surplomb à Luc-Actes*, [in:] *La Bible en récits. L'exégèse biblique à l'heure du lecteur. Colloque international d'analyse narrative des textes de la Bible, Lausanne (mars 2002)*, D. Marguerat (éd.), Serie: *Le Monde de la Bible* 48, Genève 2005, p. 356.

41 Cf. O. Flichy, *Quand le récit se fait poésie. Les hymnes de Luc 1–2*, [in:] *Analyse narrative et Bible…*, op. cit., p. 403.

events by means of upheavals, reversal of roles, contrasts of points of view without any obstacle being introduced.

The passage from narrative to poetry necessitates the suspension of plot in order to enter into a celebration that is almost liturgical. If, then, the hymn underlines the strongly anthropological character of the canticle, it represents a response to a salvific event. Such a response is neither juxtaposed nor accessory but shares in the event itself because only through its means is communicated the fullness of what the Lord has performed, is performing and will perform in the future. In the work of God narrated through the story, there is also the gift of the Spirit and prophecy from which the canticles spring. Thus, the poetic word becomes a sharer in the prerogatives of the divine word.

At the entrance to the Third Gospel (cf. Lk 1:5–2:52), the narrative weaves together two dimensions, the theological and the anthropological which are set out in the account of God's visitation of his people and the human response. This nexus highlights the dynamic of the promise and its fulfilment, on the one hand. To this corresponds, on the other hand, the faith and the interpretation of the signs. From this point of view, the hymns represent the perfect equilibrium of these dynamics, balanced between the dimension of revelation and the response of faith. In conclusion, the choice to pass from narrative to poetry has enabled Luke to include in the divine event the human response as well which, precisely on account of its poetic nature, belongs to the same revelatory action which has God as its subject.

In the liturgy

It is necessary to mention, at least briefly, the liturgical use of these texts (in the Western tradition). As is well-known, the *Magnificat* acts as the climax for Vespers, the *Benedictus* for Lauds, while the *Nunc dimittis* concludes Compline. The *Gloria,* in its broad elaboration building on the angelic hymn (as far as we know, its first attestation is in the *Constitutiones Apostolorum* 7:47, the most important liturgical collection of antiquity, dated around about 380[42]), has become part of the Eucharistic liturgy on feast days. Our point of view is not liturgical but biblical theological.[43]

[42] Cf. *Didascalia et Constitutiones Apostolorum*, vol. 1, F.X. Funk (ed.), Paderbornæ 1905, pp. 454–457.

[43] Cf. J.-P. Sonnet, *"Tu diras ce jour-là..." (Is 12,1)*, [in:] R. Lafontaine et al., *L'Écriture âme de la théologie*, Serie: *Collection Institut d'Études Théologiques* 9, Bruxelles 1990, pp. 163–187.

In the first place, by liturgy we understand every new confessing enunciation of the biblical text, that is, its tradition as a living text within a believing community. The vocation of Scripture to be read and reread is part of its canonicity: that is, it is sufficient (but also necessary) for a text to be canonical if it can (and ought to) be read and reread. In this sense, Scripture finds its fulfilment precisely in being read. Before any kind of secondary discourse (*midrash,* homily, exegetical commentary), Scripture is fulfilled in its new enunciation and its related hearing, turning human beings into enunciators and hearers.

If, then, the first fulfilment of Scripture lies in the symbolic actions of reading and proclamation – that is, re-enunciation – this role is explicitly stated precisely in the *Magnificat*: "Behold, from henceforth, all generations will call me blessed" (Lk 1:48). The readers and singers of the *Magnificat* (and of the other canticles) belong to those "generations." In other words, the very text of Luke indicates and explicitly refers its own reader to the symbolic action of "calling blessed." In proclaiming the canticle, the reader performs an illocutionary act, that is, he does something through his word: in fact, calling Mary "blessed," re-enunciating the Lucan hymn corresponds to receiving the entire logic of the Gospel account from beginning to end.

It is interesting to note a triple mechanism in the Lucan canticles: first of all, they allude extensively to the Scriptures of Israel; they intone a "tune" which will be reprised in Luke's own account; and, finally, they explicitly seek a re-enunciation. The many Old Testament allusions and the numerous anticipations of the great themes of Luke's work – as we have seen in detail in the analytical section – are not to be held simply as a phenomenon of intertextuality, that is, a semantic phenomenon which refers to a past and anticipates a future of the narrative. Precisely because uttered (first of all by their speakers), these canticles represent a speech act and so a pragmatic phenomenon, that is, one that can be valued under the profile of its effects. In the act of their re-enunciation, the reader dares to say words which do not go back just to Mary, Zacharias, the angels and Simeon but return both to the Old Testament and to the fulfilment of salvific history in the Risen Christ. There is, therefore, a profound continuity between the Old Testament language, the hymns in the mouths of the Lucan characters and the fulfilment of the salvific plan narrated by Luke. The canticles, which are proposed to the reader as hymns which have to be re-enunciated in the future, are re-enunciating in their turn the past words of the Scriptures of Israel – which attests the salvific revelation of God – but also what the characters of the Lucan account have sung. The one who intones these hymns anew celebrates a liturgy, that is, enters into the logic of the same event as that being sung, participating in its revelatory dynamic and, once again, proclaiming its salvific truth for all time.

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