

THE LOWLINESS OF MARY

By HENRY WANSBROUGH

IT is striking that Luke, the most educated and sophisticated of the evangelists and the one most familiar with wealth,¹ is also the evangelist who most insists on the reversal of values brought by the gospel, and particularly in the matter of poverty and riches. Nowhere, however, is this more clearly brought out than in the part played by Mary in the infancy narratives. These first two chapters of Luke's gospel are shot through with Old Testament reminiscence and Old Testament spirituality, and Mary is presented as the heir of the tradition of 'lowliness' in the Old Testament; the reversal of roles is at its most explicit in the *Magnificat*, but the theme is like a thread which runs through the whole story and beyond into the body of the gospel. As the lowly mother of the Lord, Mary is mother also of the Church of the lowly who are his disciples.

The tradition of the blessedness of poverty, of God's special care for the poor, is too well known to require a major exposition.² The social injustice accompanying the rise of a wealthy class in the northern kingdom of Israel led the earliest writing prophets to denounce the rich exploiters, though they did not yet take the step of adding a promise of restoration to their victims. It was in the southern kingdom of Judah that Isaiah and Micah promised God's special love to the oppressed; but then the southern kingdom had always been the poor relation, and furthermore, had always kept well in mind the stories which tell of the choice of the younger and less gifted brother: Jacob over Esau, Joseph over all his brothers, David himself over all the other sons of Jesse. It was, therefore, open to the idea that God chooses whom he will, even the less fortunate and less naturally prominent. This current was especially strong in the messianism of the southern kingdom; thus the prophet Isaiah foretells that 'he judges the wretched with integrity, and with equity

¹ Cf 'St Luke on Poverty', in *New Blackfriars*, 49 (1968), pp 582-87.

² Cf A. Gelin, *The Poor of Tahweh* (Collegeville, 1964).

gives a verdict for the poor of the land';³ and Micah hails Bethlehem Ephrathah, 'the least of the clans of Judah', as the birthplace of the Messiah.⁴

Revelation is most often related to the events of history, the situation in which God's people find themselves, provoking them to reflect on their destiny; and in the next century, as the historical situation in Judah became more and more desperate with the war-clouds gathering ever thicker on the northern and eastern horizons, Isaiah's prophecy of the remnant becomes more explicit in Zephaniah's contrast:

When that day comes

I will remove your proud boasters from your midst.

In your midst I will leave a humble and lowly people, and those who are left in Israel will seek refuge in the name of Yahweh.⁵

The qualification, 'when that day comes', refers this event to the final, eschatological visitation of Yahweh, when he will set all things right: the visitation which we know to have been introduced by the coming of the Messiah. During the babylonian exile and afterwards, this longing for the rehabilitation of the oppressed becomes a standard element of the hope expressed in the later chapters of the Book of Isaiah, 'for Yahweh consoles his people, and takes pity on those who are afflicted'.⁶

The strength of this current becomes evident from its presence even in the Wisdom literature. In much of this, worldly success is regarded as Yahweh's reward for good sense and good behaviour; which makes it surprising that any room can be found for the unsuccessful, those for whom the favour of Yahweh is not expressed in material prosperity. And yet amid the praise of practical virtues, there paradoxically remains the clear realization that the apparently less favoured do enjoy a special place in the Lord's favour:

The Lord has thrown down rulers' thrones
and seated the humble in their place.

The Lord has plucked up proud men by the roots,
and planted the lowly in their place.⁷

But it is above all in the Psalms that God's protection for the poor, the weak, the needy, the afflicted and the lowly is most clearly and frequently expressed. This has an especial importance, because the Psalms provided the expression and the nourishment of the prayer-life of the Jews, and as such convey to us the most intimate testimony

³ Isai 32, 4.

⁴ Mic 5, 1.

⁵ Zeph 3, 11-12.

⁶ Isai 49, 13.

⁷ Sir 10, 14-15.

of the aspirations of the people who were preparing for the Messiah. Here again the historical situation is linked to the development of the emphasis of revelation. For in the last centuries before Christ, the situation of the chosen people in Israel was truly a depressed one. Harried on the return from exile by the local inhabitants and neighbours, Palestine remained for over a century the battlefield between the Ptolemies of Egypt and the Seleucids of Syria, changing hands with bewildering frequency. When the latter finally gained firm control, this only opened the way to the persecutions of Antiochus Epiphanes and the oppression of his successors. There was scarcely any respite. A few decades later, the pagan and totally alien domination of the Romans was established, first through a client prince and finally by direct rule. The spirituality of the Psalms is so shot through with the longing of the lowly for liberation, and with confidence in Yahweh's eventual will to save, that it would be superfluous to single out individual expressions of it.

The final context for the New Testament spirituality concerning the weak and the needy is provided by the prayers of two highly divergent bodies within first-century Judaism. On many points the sectaries of Qumran were in revolt against conventional Judaism, but lack of self-confidence was not one of their characteristics. They had withdrawn from official Judaism in the conviction that it was insufficiently pure; they confidently expected that the Messiah would be revealed to themselves, enabling them to destroy the 'sons of darkness'. It is, therefore, all the more remarkable that, with this as the backbone of their spirituality, their prayers should be marked by an awareness that God's mercy comes to the unfortunate and oppressed:

You have not abandoned me in my distress
and have listened to the sound of my wretched groaning;
you have delivered the afflicted from the den of lions.⁸

At the other end of the spectrum of palestinian Judaism, the same awareness of the special claims which the needy have on the Lord is shown in the so-called Psalms of Solomon, which are in fact prayers of the Pharisaic school, composed in the middle of the first century before Christ:

In my affliction I called on the name of the Lord. I hoped in the help
of the God of Jacob and was saved; for you, God, are the help and
refuge of the needy.⁹

⁸ 1 QH 5, 12-13.

⁹ *The Odes of Solomon*, 15, 1; 10, 6.

There is, therefore, a current running through the history of the chosen people in the centuries before Christ, and becoming increasingly part of their prayer-life and spirituality, which recognizes that the poor, the needy and the afflicted are the special target, as it were, of God's saving power, that they have a special claim on him. What is perhaps most significant is that this aspiration is most clearly seen in the intimacy of prayer. It must have been a hope very deeply and personally felt among those sections of the people who are not normally literate enough to leave much trace of their own thoughts to subsequent generations.

In the *Magnificat*, Mary expresses this sentiment in the phrase, 'he has looked on the lowliness of his handmaid'. Before investigating how this idea fits into the theology of Luke, it is important to see exactly what is meant by 'lowliness'. It is a tricky word, not only because this particular english equivalent is somewhat archaic, but also because it needs to be carefully distinguished from others expressing similar ideas. The basic concept in the hebrew bible is rendered by 'anaw or 'ani: which in the greek bible normally used by the New Testament writers — certainly by Luke in these early chapters — becomes *tapeinos*. However, the important second-century A.D. translators of the Bible, Aquila and Symmachus, avoid this greek word. Aquila prefers *praüs* (meek or gentle), and Symmachus *ptöchos* (poor or needy). It was certainly of concern to them to get it right; for their influential near-contemporary, Rabbi Joshua ben Levi, teaches that the quality described is the greatest of all virtues, above even observance of the Law — though of course this evaluation did not go unchallenged.¹⁰ A complete study of the fifty-two cases where 'anaw and 'ani are used in the Psalms shows that up to this time, or in this context, they point uniquely to a passive state rather than to an active response. They refer to those who are exploited, oppressed, wounded, deserted, devoid of help, orphans, in a state of need. On rare occasions, it is true, the parallel expression used in the other half of the verse is 'those who seek God' or 'those whose hope is in God'. But in view of the overwhelming homogeneity of the uses of the word, it is more reasonable to regard these as expressing attitudes naturally associated with such wretchedness and exploitation rather than as part of the meaning of the word. There is, then, a very real basis of

¹⁰ Cf *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. R. E. Brown, et al (London/New York, 1969), 69: 64-68, pp 571ff; Strack & Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum N.T.*, I, p 194.

actual oppression in the sense of the word itself: one which cannot be reduced to a mere spiritual disposition. It is only in the Book of Proverbs that the spiritual disposition arising from such destitution comes to the fore, in such sayings as:

The fear of Yahweh is a school of discipline;
before there can be honour there must be humility.¹¹

This emerging spiritual nuance continues to reveal itself in the writings of Qumran, where 'lowliness' goes with 'the practice of truth in common'; and it is the quality which, with loving charity, must accompany paternal correction.¹² But the ambivalence of the concept, or rather its dual aspect, persists, as is seen by the very different translations adopted by Aquila and Symmachus.

With this background, we can at last turn to the theology of Luke, where both aspects (the actual oppression and the spiritual response to it) have an important part to play. Throughout the gospels, of course, one of the major elements in the teaching of Jesus is that there is no possibility of earning merit with God. This was a lesson which must have come hard to the Pharisees and to all strictly observant Jews. No matter how hard the faithful religious observer repeats this truth to himself, he still maintains a lingering, all too natural, presumption that he has after all deserved better of God than the reprobate. Every Christian knows that this presumption is in fact indefensible; and it would be unfair to Jewish, even pharisaic theology at the time of Christ not to say that even Pharisees knew it too. But the fact remains that Judaism was a religion of such strict observance that this erroneous and easily-fostered presumption did in fact flourish. Its error had to be stressed endlessly by Jesus: his eating with outcasts and religiously impure, his showing no concern at all about actually touching the unclean, such as lepers. The parable of the workers in the vineyard in Matthew must originally have focused on this lesson. In its present context in the gospel, it seems to be intended to illustrate the fairly innocuous point that the first shall be last and the last first. But it is far more unsettling than a mere temporal disarrangement. It is not the order of payment which upsets the early workers, but the fact that the paymaster seems to have no conception that they have earned more; he has no conception of deserts. To him merit seems to be irrelevant. The same point is made by Matthew in his parable of the wedding-feast,

¹¹ Prov 15, 33; 18, 12.

¹² Cf 1 QH 5, 3, 25; 2, 32; 18, 14, 22.

when the appropriate long-invited guests will not accept their moment to come. They must represent the Jews, so preoccupied with their due (religious) presuppositions that they cannot recognize anything outside these.

The contrast in Luke's treatment is instructive: he emphasizes that it is the poor, afflicted and underprivileged who are invited to replace the absent guests. It does not seem primarily to be a religious distinction so much as one of material privilege; for those who refuse the invitation are prevented specifically by the acquisition of possessions: a point which is not at all clear in Matthew.

The contrast between the opening speech of Jesus in Matthew and in Luke is also instructive, for in each case this constitutes a sort of manifesto or programme. In Matthew it is the Sermon on the Mount, which starts with the beatitudes: a list of dispositions required for entering into the kingdom of heaven. In Luke, on the other hand, it is the declaration in the synagogue at Nazareth which provides Jesus's programmatic first proclamation. Here he declares that he has come to remedy the ills of captives, the blind and the downtrodden, the real classes of the underprivileged. When Luke comes to his version of the beatitudes, those who receive the blessing are again not so much those who are spiritually open to the kingdom as those who are in real need: the poor, the hungry (not, as in Matthew, the poor *in spirit* or those who hunger *for justice*), the weak and the despised. In Luke's great stories of conversion, it is again the despised who are welcomed. All we know about the sinner who wept at Jesus's feet in Simon's house is that she was despised for her bad reputation;¹³ it would be a distraction to know what her sin was. Salient features in the story of the Prodigal Son are the self-humiliation of the son and the contempt of his brother, as well as the utter destitution of the son in his foreign land.¹⁴ Similarly with Zacchaeus: the contempt in which he is held comes out in the expostulation of the bystanders that Jesus should invite himself to his house — perhaps also in the derogatory remarks about his stature.¹⁵ And it is clear that Luke is highly sensitive about good repute.¹⁶ From the very beginning, the poor are the ones to pay Jesus homage, in the person of hired shepherds, who are doing the unenviable job of watching the sheepfolds at night.

¹³ Cf Lk 7, 39. ¹⁴ Cf Lk 15, 19, 30, 15-17.

¹⁵ Cf Lk 19, 3, 7.

¹⁶ Cf Acts 5, 34; 6, 3; 16, 12, etc.

Luke insists, then, that the underprivileged and oppressed are the special object of the Lord's favour. This element in the concept of *'ani-tapeinos* is amply illustrated in his gospel. But the other element, the resulting spiritual disposition of openness to and total dependence on God, is also prominent. In the conversion stories mentioned above, the will to turn to Jesus or to be converted no doubt depends from a realization of the desperateness of the situation, that there is no one else to turn to. The attitude is perhaps illustrated best of all by the story of the good thief. Just as the shepherds pay homage to Jesus at the beginning of his earthly life, so in its last moments the dying thief acknowledges his guilt — his lowliness — and turns to Jesus for salvation. But also elsewhere, Luke is more explicit about the need for this attitude of humble expectancy. This is shown in the parable of the wedding-guests, where the humble guest is raised to a higher position and the self-confident displaced to the bottom of the table,¹⁷ and best of all in the memorable contrast of the Pharisee and the tax collector at prayer.¹⁸

Such is the attitude of the evangelist in the course of the gospel to the two aspects of the concept of *'ani-tapeinos*. But nowhere is it more central to Luke's message than in his treatment of Mary, and particularly in her canticle, the *Magnificat*, which serves to sum up the whole matter. What the origin of this hymn may be has been hotly disputed: whether it was composed by Luke himself, or taken over from popular hymnology, being originally composed perhaps during the Maccabaeon persecution. A firm answer is no more necessary than it is possible, for we must credit Luke with putting into Mary's heart and on her lips a hymn which expressed what he felt should be expressed, wherever he derived the material. A basic insight into the hymn is given by its similarity to the song of Hannah, mother of Samuel. She too conceived with God's special help a son who was to be crucial in the history of God's people; but the important point is that Hannah had been barren and despised for her barrenness, and so Mary's song also is presented as the song of thanksgiving of the afflicted who has received God's help. This is reinforced by another quotation: the phrase 'he has looked upon his lowly handmaid' is in fact a repetition of Hannah's first prayer, 'if you will look upon the distress of your handmaid' (similarity is disguised in the familiar translation).¹⁹ Verbally, the

¹⁷ Cf Lk 14, 7-11.

¹⁸ Cf Lk 18, 9-14.

¹⁹ 1 Sam 1, 11.

rest of the hymn may resemble other verses of the Bible more closely, but the sentiments and contrasts are all those of Hannah. Mary is, therefore, the afflicted one who relies upon the Lord and is rewarded with his salvation in the form of her Son.

It is tempting to see in Mary here an image of the Church. A generation ago René Laurentin caused great joy in Catholic circles by his book, which saw Mary at the annunciation as the eschatological Daughter of Sion and Ark of the Covenant.²⁰ Thus she was seen as the spearhead of the chosen people, in whom all its hopes were fulfilled. Standing herself for the chosen people, she could be seen as the mother of the Church. This beautiful exegesis, attractive as it is, has not stood the test of time; the parallels which Laurentin uses are not sufficiently solid to bear the weight he puts on them. Much the same goal may, however, be reached by another route. In the theology of John there is no doubt that Mary is the mother of the Church: she stands by the cross as a representative figure, and is entrusted with that other representative figure, the Beloved Disciple, as her son; the Beloved Disciple represents in his person all disciples whom Jesus loves, and Mary is their mother. None of this is explicit in the theology of Luke, but Luke is surely working in a similar vein. It is certainly true that in the Infancy Narratives, so carefully composed by Luke to bring out particular lessons about Jesus, his mother sums up a particular theme of Old Testament and Jewish spirituality, the spirituality of the oppressed who trust only in God. Similarly in the remainder of the gospel, Luke directs his special attention to the oppressed and afflicted, stressing that they are the natural recipients of, and are ideally prepared to respond to, the invitation of Jesus to repentance and salvation. It is these who constitute the community of God's favoured ones. It would, perhaps, not be unfair to sum up by saying that, if in John's gospel Mary is the mother of the Beloved Disciple, in Luke she is the mother of the Good Thief.

²⁰ *Structure et Théologie de Luc I et II* (Paris, 1957).