# Canticles Old and New

**Treasure No 77: Canticles Old and New by Ann Harrison**
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> *'Be this, while life is mine,*
> *my canticle divine:*
> *may Jesus Christ be praised!'*[1]

In these well known lines from the hymn 'When morning gilds the skies', Caswall uses the word 'canticle' in the general sense of a song, derived from the Latin 'canticulum', a little song. Canticles, in the plural, in some contexts refers to the biblical book the Song of Songs. You can buy a CD of music by Hildegard of Bingen with the title *Canticles of Ecstasy*. However, usually when we hear 'canticle' we think of a biblical song used in worship, for example the *Magnificat* or Song of Mary from the first chapter of Luke's Gospel, sung at the evening office in many traditions. There are also ancient hymns like the *Te Deum* which are known as canticles due to their liturgical use; while drawing on Scripture they are not taken directly from the biblical text. Certain psalms sometimes function as canticles too (for example Psalm 95, the *Venite* used as the morning call to worship in the *Book of Common Prayer*), but my focus is on metrical paraphrases of Scripture from outside the Psalter, looking at examples from the early Reformation until the present day.

As the daughter of a vicar I grew up knowing the *Book of Common Prayer* canticles very well from weekly chanting in church, and my father was working for the Church Pastoral Aid Society at the time when *Psalm Praise* (which has many metrical versions of canticles as well as psalms) was in preparation.[2] In various places where I worshipped, songs and hymns paraphrasing the canticles were increasingly being used in place of the prose versions, and when I came to study ways of singing Scripture many years later while I was working at St John's College in Durham, I tried to explore as many resources as possible, including metrical forms. I can only scratch the surface of what has proved a vast but fascinating topic, but as well as looking at part of the history of metrical versions of canticles, I want to reflect briefly on what it might mean for today's worshippers to sing some of these biblical songs, and on how they have been used in different church traditions.

Here, first, is a recent version of Mary's song, with possible tunes including SINE NOMINE and ENGELBERG:

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[1] Edward Caswall (1814-1878), translation of 'Beim frühen Morgenlicht' from 1828 *Nürnberg Gesangbuch*
[2] *Psalm Praise* (Falcon, London 1973)

*My soul exalts and magnifies the King,*
*my spirit in my Saviour finds her joy;*
*to God the mighty One I'll ever sing:*
*hallelujah!*

*To me, his slave, he comes a royal guest,*
*fills with his bounteous grace my lowliness;*
*all generations now will call me blessed:*
*hallelujah!*

*The mighty Lord has done great things for me;*
*for all who love and fear his holy name,*
*his mercy shall endure eternally:*
*hallelujah!*

*His powerful arm has swept the proud aside,*
*down from their thrones he hurls earth's mighty kings;*
*he raises high the humble to his side:*
*hallelujah!*

*He feeds his servants from his boundless store*
*and satisfies their hunger with his love;*
*the boastful rich are banished from his door:*
*hallelujah!*

*He has fulfilled his covenant of grace*
*to Abraham and all his promised seed;*
*redemption dawns on Israel's chosen race:*
*hallelujah!*

Nick Needham (b.1959), based on Luke 1.46-57, the Song of Mary © the author, reproduced with permission

Hughes Oliphant Old, in a book on reformed worship, describes the Song of Mary and the other 'infancy canticles' from Luke's Gospel as 'Christian psalms, written in the literary genre of the Hebrew votive thanksgiving psalms.' In a sense, he says, they 'complete the Old Testament psalms'; they speak of God's covenant promises fulfilled.[3] Dr Needham's versification appears in the hymn book *Praise!* in the 'Adoration and Thanksgiving' section, alongside other hymns.[4] The author, pastor of the Reformed Baptist Church in Inverness, teaches church history at a theological institute in the Scottish Highlands. His versions of the Song of Mary, the Song of Zechariah and other biblical passages were written because he felt that there were classic portions of scripture which ought to be sung and that it would be useful to have them in modern English.[5]

One of the factors behind a booklet I wrote about ways of singing psalms and canticles was my sense of the huge importance of singing Scripture as part of our formation as followers of Jesus, and my awareness that, for various reasons, most worshippers today have little chance of becoming familiar with texts which have played a significant part in praise and prayer since early times.[6] When John Bell spoke at a liturgical conference in Durham he referred to St Paul's

[3] Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship: Reformed according to Scripture* (revised edition, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville 2002), p.37
[4] *Praise!* (Praise Trust, Darlington 2000), 185, with a tune by Michael Baughen
[5] Personal communication, 17 July 2010

exhortation to sing (along with psalms) 'hymns and spiritual songs': 'Some of these we find within the canon of the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. We call them canticles. They include the visionary songs in Isaiah, the prophetic texts associated with Mary and Simeon, the creedal hymns in Colossians and Philippians, and John the Divine's transcriptions of the liturgical songs of heaven. They, like the Psalms, are part of the given: crafted texts embedded in Holy Scripture for the perennial use of Christendom.'[7] We learn our corporate identity as Christians partly through hearing and repeating the songs which belong to our community.

Ronald Byars, writing about the Bible and Christian worship, talks of the importance of our language and frame of reference being shaped by the biblical story: 'The crucified and risen Jesus was, of course, a Jewish man whose story is rooted in the story of Israel, with its law, prophets, narratives, hymnody and proverbs. To worship in and through Jesus Christ requires language and gestures and symbolic actions, all of which share a common root in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments... To absorb a biblical way of perceiving God, and to see oneself and the church and the whole universe through the lenses of Christ's death and resurrection, require becoming saturated in biblical narratives, poetry, laments and doxologies.' He points out that singing is a way of indwelling this biblical language, of growing into it. Singing Scripture after a reading, which is often how canticles are used, is a doxological act, 'an act of praise to the God who is in front of, behind, and in the reading.'[8]

Enabling worshippers to sing Scripture together in their own language was obviously one of the key developments of the Reformation, and much has been written about metrical psalmody in England and elsewhere. Perhaps not quite so widely discussed is the production of sung versions of other biblical passages, for use in various ways in public worship or domestic devotions, as well as for didactic purposes. The value of music in teaching is stressed in this poem from the end of an early German Lutheran hymnal, translated into English verse:[9]

*For Music has the special grace*
*That whatso in her power is placed*
*Is sooner learned than what is read*
*Or what in church or school is said.*
*Like a schoolmistress sweet and kind,*
*She calls her lessons back to mind,*
*And what she teaches, without pain,*
*Is e'er remembered and retained.*

An early Dean of Durham Cathedral was William Whittingham (1524-1579), a skilled linguist who spent a number of years with the English exiles in Geneva in the 1550's, married Calvin's sister, and was one of those responsible for the Geneva Bible; he became Dean of Durham in 1563. The British Library has a pocket-sized copy, published in 1558, of the *Order of Prayers used by the English congregation in Geneva* which includes Whittingham's metrical paraphrases of the Ten Commandments and the Song of Simeon (or *Nunc dimittis*), both with unison

[6] Anne Harrison, *Recovering the Lord's Song: Getting Sung Scripture Back into Worship* (Grove Worship Series 198, Cambridge 2009)

[7] From transcript of lecture given at Scripture and Liturgy conference, St John's College, Durham, 25 March 2009

[8] Ronald Byars, What language shall I borrow? The Bible and Christian Worship (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan 2008), pp.xvi-xvii

[9] Christopher Boyd Brown, *Singing the Gospel: Lutheran Hymns and the Success of the Reformation* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA/London 2005), p.65 (from the end of Nicolaus Herman's *Sonntags-Evangelia*, various editions, 1560-1630; presumably author's own translation)

melodies. Whittingham had worked closely with John Knox as disciples of Calvin, who had provided a metrical *Nunc dimittis* in French (*'Maintenant Seigneur Dieu'*) in his 1545 Strasbourg order for the Lord's Supper, after the post-supper prayer of thanksgiving. Whittingham's version uses the same metre and melody (by Louis Bourgeois, now known as NUNC DIMITTIS and often paired with the hymn 'O gladsome light').[10]

*Now suffer me, O Lord,*
*as thou didst once accord*
*hence to depart in thy peace*
*since I have had the sight*
*of thy great saving might,*
*which shall our sins all release.*

*From him thou hadst prepared,*
*and to the world declared,*
*by all the prophets of old:*
*as to the Gentiles grace,*
*and to Israel solace,*
*which is thine own chosen fold.*

William Whittingham (1524-1579), based on Luke 2.29-32, the Song of Simeon (spelling modernised)

Alan Clifford, the pastor of Norwich Reformed Church, has written a paraphrase of the Song of Simeon to be sung to the same melody:[11]

*Now Lord may I depart*
*in peace and joy of heart,*
*with happy exultation;*
*your promise is fulfilled,*
*for now my eyes behold*
*your wonderful salvation.*

*You have, O Lord, prepared*
*for us your glorious word;*
*through light of revelation,*
*Israel and Gentiles all*
*shall hear redemption's call,*
*to every generation.*

Alan C. Clifford (b.1941), based on Luke 2.29-32, the Song of Simeon © 2000 the author, reproduced with permission

It would be interesting to compare Whittingham's text (with its emphasis on being God's 'own chosen fold') with the relevant verses from Luke's Gospel in the Geneva Bible and any marginal notes about the canticle there. Beth Quitslund, in *The Reformation in Rhyme*, says that Calvin permitted the singing of the Song of Simeon but not of other canticles which related to unrepeatable historical events (for example, Zechariah thanking God for the birth of John the

[10] *The formes of prayers and ministrations of the sacramentes etc used in the Englishe Congregation at Geneva: and approved by the famous and godly learned man, John Calvin* (J. Poullain and A. Rebul, Geneva 1558)
[11] *Reformed Praise* (Norwich Reformed Church, Norwich 2000), 20

Baptist in the *Benedictus*).[12] The precise source from Calvin's writings is not given; there were four canticles in the 1542 Genevan Psalter. Whittingham's 1556 preface to the *Forme of Prayers* includes a general defence of congregational song, prayers being 'after two maner of sortes, that is, either in wordes only, or els with songe ioyned thereunto'. He claims that Moses, Hezekiah, Judith, Deborah, Mary, Zechariah and others 'by songes and metre, rather than in their common speache, and prose, gave thankes to God, for such comfort as he sent them.'

We know from a letter written by a visitor to the Protestant congregation in Strasbourg that songs from the New Testament as well as psalms were being used in public worship there: 'On Sundays…we sing a psalm of David or some other prayer taken from the New Testament. The psalm or prayer is sung by everyone together, men as well as women with beautiful unanimity, which is something beautiful to behold…No one could believe the joy which one experiences when one is singing the praises and wonders of the Lord in the mother tongue as one sings them here.'[13] Nicholas Temperley says that we have only slender evidence about the singing of the 'Anglican' exiles, but in their use of the prayer book services, 'they probably substituted metrical versions of the canticles for the prose versions officially authorized, perhaps finding that the prose versions could not be effectively sung in the absence of a trained choir.'[14] We have no proof that Whittingham ever tried to introduce metrical canticles into the worship at Durham Cathedral, although Julian's dictionary says that he did, citing Warton, and it does seem certain that he encouraged congregational psalm-singing at Durham, as well as supporting choral music.[15] But having once written a metrical version of a canticle, as he had, must affect the way you experience that text in worship afterwards.

The main subject of Quitslund's *The Reformation in Rhyme* is the metrical English psalter which we know as 'Sternhold and Hopkins' or the 'Old Version', and which went through various editions.[16] Dick Watson has pointed out the way in which different versions of the early metrical psalms often stressed their relevance to contemporary life and to religious and political experience.[17] Quitslund looks at some of the changes in particular metrical translations in the context of the changing religious and political situation in England. She describes as 'a very strong reading' a paraphrase which is guided more by the writer's agenda than by close fidelity to the text. Sternhold's original psalms, dedicated to the godly young monarch Edward VI, can be seen as 'self-conscious *interpretations* that sometimes attempt to clarify or apply God's Word, without ever straying far from the texts'; a metrical paraphrase, she says, 'can have a purposeful agenda which goes beyond neutral transmission through song'.[18] The emphasis on being the people of God, often under attack from enemies, is striking in some psalm versions – unsurprising in an era of religious conflict and persecution. The way that the proud and the rich oppress their humble neighbours was also a central part of Edwardian Reformation rhetoric, a theme obviously found in Mary's song as well as certain psalms.[19] Despite the associations of the

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[12] Beth Quitslund, *The Reformation in Rhyme: Sternhold, Hopkins and the Metrical English Psalter 1547-1603* (Ashgate, Aldershot 2008), p.10

[13] Quoted by John Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding: Windows into Christian Practice* (Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, Michigan 2003), p.207

[14] Nicholas Temperley, *The Music of the English Parish Church*, Vol.1 (CUP, Cambridge 1979), p.33

[15] Jonathan Willis, *Church Music and Protestantism in Post-Reformation England: Discourses, Sites and Identities* (Ashgate, Farnham 2010), pp.156, 228

[16] E.g. *The Whole Booke of Psalmes: collected into English meeter by Thomas Sternhold, John Hopkins and others; conferred with the Hebrue, with apt Notes to sing them withal* (John Day, London 1583)

[17] J.R.Watson, *The English Hymn: A Critical and Historical Study* (Clarendon Press, Oxford 1997), p.56

[18] Quitslund, *op. cit.*, pp.21-22, p.42

[19] *Ibid.*, p.48

*Magnificat* in the Roman rite with ceremonies regarded as dubious by the Reformers, 'The song of blessed Marie' does find its way into quite a few early English psalters. (Perhaps we might describe as a recent 'very strong reading' Fred Kaan's 'Sing we a song of high revolt', with its title 'Magnificat now').[20] It may be that the inclusion of the canticles from the new English liturgy in later editions of Sternhold and Hopkins were designed to show that this psalter could be a semi-official companion to the prayer book, but there were tunes provided for these versifications too – so they *could* have been sung, at least in private households. In due course, the Sternhold and Hopkins psalter came to be bound together with either the *Book of Common Prayer* or the *Bible*.

Matthew Parker (1504-1575), who became Archbishop of Canterbury in 1559 under Elizabeth I, produced a complete metrical psalter, probably written in about 1556 during the reign of the Catholic Queen Mary while he was living quietly in Cambridge; it seems he originally intended it for his personal use but was persuaded to publish it in about 1567. Parker had been a close friend of Martin Bucer, who fled Strasbourg in 1548 and became Professor of Divinity in Cambridge; Parker preached at Bucer's funeral in 1551. His psalter is now best known for the psalm tunes by Tallis published with it, including the one used by Vaughan Williams in a famous piece for string orchestra. Parker's *Whole Psalter* probably chiefly provided 'holy songs for the recreation and private devotion of [his] household', but the published version included, as well as a versification of the Athanasian Creed, some canticles with directions for antiphonal singing by 'the quieure' and 'rectors' (men's voices), for example in the Song of the Three Children (*Benedicite*).[21] This gives a strong hint of liturgical use, though it is hard to prove how and where metrical canticles were used. Nicholas Temperley claims that, under the influence of Puritan ministers, metrical versions were illegally substituted for the prose canticles, in cathedrals as well as in parish churches, and some choral settings of these texts have survived. However, he says the practice was stopped under Charles I, who came to the throne in 1625.[22]

By the time Thomas Ravenscroft's Psalter was published in London in 1621, each canticle as well as psalm had a particular tune associated with it. The full title page describes the book like this:

> The whole booke of psalmes: with the hymnes evangelicall, and songs spirituall. Composed into 4 parts by sundry authors, with such seuerall tunes as haue beene, and are vsually sung in England, Scotland, Wales, Germany, Italy, France, and the Nether-lands: neuer as yet before in one volume published. Also: 1 A briefe abstract of the prayse, efficacie, and vertue of the psalmes. 2 That all clarkes of churches may know what tune each proper psalme may be sung to.

In 1623 George Wither (1588-1667) published his *Hymnes and Songs of the Church* with music by Orlando Gibbons. His paraphrases range far beyond the prayer book canticles; among the texts is the passage about the good wife from Proverbs 31, unlikely to be selected by many contemporary hymn-writers, despite the shortage of good hymns for weddings! The first lines are 'Who finds a woman good and wise/a gem more worth than pearls hath got' and Wither writes by way of introduction:

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[20] *100 Hymns for Today* (Hymns Ancient and Modern; Clowes, London 1969), 86

[21] Rivkah Zim, *English Metrical Psalms: Poetry as Praise and Prayer 1535-1601* (CUP, Cambridge 1987), pp.135, 235, 292

[22] Nicholas Temperley, 'Canticles §4: Anglican', *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie (Macmillan, London 2001), Vol.5 pp.51-52

> ‘It is indeed an excellent Marriage Song, fit to be used at the solemnizing of those rites; for it ministereth instruction becoming that occasion; yea, perhaps the music of it would stir up good affections also (where unpleasing discords are now heard) if it were often sung in private families.’

Some of the hymns by Wither and Gibbons have been recorded, including verses based on Exodus 15.[23] Wither introduces ‘The First Song of Moses’ this way:

> This Song was composed and sung to praise the Lord for the Israelites’ miraculous passage through the Red Sea, and for their delivery from those Egyptians who were there drowned. It may (and should also) be sung in the Christian congregations, or by their particular members, both with respect to the historical and mystical senses thereof: Historically, in commemoration of that particular deliverance, which God had so long ago and so wondrously vouchsafed to his persecuted and afflicted church: mystically, in acknowledgement of our own powerful deliverance from the bondage of those spiritual adversaries, whereof those were the types: for Pharaoh (signifying Vengeance) typified our great enemy, who, with his host of temptations, afflictions, etc, pursueth us in our passage to the spiritual Canaan. The Red Sea represented our baptism, 1 Cor.10.2. By the Dukes and Princes of Edom (mentioned in this Song) are prefigured those Powers and Friends of the kingdom of darkness, which are, or shall be, molested at the news of our regeneration: and thereto this Hymn may very properly be used after the administration of baptism.

The recording includes just the first and last of Wither’s verses:

> *Now shall the praises of the Lord be sung;*
> *for he a most renowned Triumph won:*
> *both horse and man into the sea he flung;*
> *and them together there hath overthrown.*
> *The Lord is he whose strength doth make me strong;*
> *and he is my salvation and my song;*
> *my God, for whom I will a house prepare;*
> *my fathers’ God, whose praise I will declare.*
>
> *The Lord shall ever and for ever reign,*
> *his sovereignty shall never have an end;*
> *for, when as Pharaoh did into the main*
> *with chariots and with horsemen, down descend,*
> *the Lord did back again the sea recall,*
> *and with those waters overwhelm’d them all:*
> *but through the very inmost of the same,*
> *the seed of Israel safe and dryshod came.*
>
> George Wither (1588-1667), based on verses from Exodus 15

The *Common Worship* title for this canticle is ‘The Song of Moses and Miriam’. Another ancient name for it is ‘The Song of the Sea’; it featured in Jewish temple worship and as a celebration of God’s victory over evil forces it was widely employed in the early church as a morning canticle, as well as having associations from the fourth century with the Easter Vigil.[24] There was

[23] Orlando Gibbons, *Hymnes and Songs of the Church*, sung by Tonus Peregrinus (Naxos CD, 8.557681, 2006)

[24] Gregory W. Woolfenden, *Daily Liturgical Prayer: Origins and Theology* (Ashgate, Aldershot 2004),

apparently a metrical version in Andro Hart's 1615 Scottish psalter. In Revelation 15.3 we read that the victorious in heaven 'sang the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb', and it is thought that canticles reflecting heavenly worship became increasingly important in the early Christian centuries.[25] Verses from several chapters of Revelation are used in the canticles 'Glory and honour' and 'Great and wonderful', which first came into authorised Church of England liturgy with the *Alternative Service Book* in 1980. Metrical versions of these can be found in the canticles section of *Sing Praise*: 'Glory, honour, endless praises' (Edwin Le Grice) and 'Great and wonderful your deeds' (Christopher Idle).[26] It is surely appropriate for us to find ways of keeping in the repertoire of today's congregations what one might call the first and the last songs in the Bible, the Song of Moses and the Song of the Lamb, which have for so long played an important part in the church's worship.

Carl Daw's collection of canticles, *To Sing God's Praise*, has a version of the Song of Moses which begins 'Sing to the Lord, who has vanquished the horse and the warrior'.[27] Christopher Idle's hymn based on Exodus 15 ('I will sing the Lord's high triumph') was published in *Psalms for Today* in 1990 with a fine Welsh tune, and is also in *Sing Praise*, with material for the Easter Vigil.[28] Idle makes no direct reference to the drowning of horses and their riders.

John Playford's 1671 psalter contains an important preface on the place of music in worship, as well as a delightful hymn 'on the divine use of music', included in Routley's *Panorama of Christian Hymnody*.[29] Playford describes earlier writers of metrical psalms and canticles as 'men whose piety exceeded their poetry'; he includes in his own collection canticles versified by Dr Henry King (the recently deceased Bishop of Chichester), and an alternative *Nunc dimittis* by Miles Smith. These are paired with the tunes by now regularly associated with them, and further vocal parts are added, with a bass line for organ, lute or viol.[30]

The so-called 'New Version' of the Psalms', by Tate and Brady, initially appeared in 1696 without canticles, but a supplement was added in 1700; although authorized by the queen in council on 30 July 1703, this was never treated as an appendage to the Prayer Book in the way that the psalter was.[31] Christopher Idle wrote about the Song of Mary and the Song of Simeon from Tate and Brady's collection in the July 2009 Hymn Society *Bulletin*; he had attended a service of Evensong marking the 250th anniversary of the birth of Pitt the Younger, in which the music (including metrical *Magnificat* and *Nunc dimittis*) was led by the London Gallery Quire. It is hard to find written evidence of these metrical canticles being used in parish worship by church bands in the eighteenth century. However, an entry dated 2 October 1758 in the diary of one James Warner describes a service in Fordingbridge: 'they sung Magnificate and Psalms 1 and 40. They have a Bassoon…'.[32]

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p.64; John Arthur Smith, 'Musical Aspects of Old Testament Canticles in their Biblical Setting', in *Early Music History* 17 (CUP 1998, pp.221-264), p.237

[25] Old, *op. cit.*, p.39

[26] *Sing Praise: Hymns and Songs for Refreshing Worship* (Hymns A&M/RSCM, Norwich 2010), 202 and 203

[27] Carl P. Daw Jr, *To Sing God's Praise: 18 Metrical Canticles* (Hope Publishing, Carol Stream, Illinois 1992), 25

[28] *Psalms for Today* (Hodder & Stoughton/Jubilate, London 1990), 167; *Sing Praise* 72

[29] Erik Routley, *A Panorama of Christian Hymnody* (Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota 1979), p.12

[30] *Psalms and Hymns in Solemn Musick of Foure Parts on the Common Tunes to the Psalms in Metre: Used in Parish-Churches* (John Playford, London 1671)

[31] Temperley, 'Psalms, metrical, §3: England', *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Vol.20 pp.495-6

[32] Bryan Spinks, *Liturgy in the Age of Reason: Worship and Sacraments in England and Scotland 1662–*

It certainly seems that metrical canticles could form a part of prayers in the home; Matthew Henry (1662-1714) published in 1694 a collection entitled *Family Hymns Gathered Mostly Out of the Translation of David's Psalms*; the preface to the third edition says 'I have also taken in some of the New Testament hymns.' He includes several from Revelation as well as Luke's Gospel. It seems that Isaac Watts and the Wesleys wrote metrical canticles (a 'Te Deum' paraphrase by Charles Wesley is in the 1933 *Methodist Hymn-Book*);[33] I would be interested to know of any accounts of the Wesleys singing versified Scripture in their personal or family devotions.

When I joined a Church of Scotland congregation for a Sunday morning service in Miavaig on the Isle of Lewis in June 2010, we sang several metrical psalms, led by a precentor and remaining seated, and with wonderfully ornamented vocal lines. Towards the end of the service we also sang a paraphrase from Revelation, in the same style. There is insufficient space for a detailed history of the Scottish paraphrases here, but a significant number of biblical paraphrases were added to the Scottish Psalter in 1781, from the Old Testament and the New, arranged in Scripture order and mostly in Common Metre. A few verses from the Song of Simeon appear in the Epiphany section of the most recent Church of Scotland hymn book.[34] In the previous edition of the *Church Hymnary* a similar selection of verses (but in a different order) was placed at the end of the Lord's Supper section.[35] The original version was much longer and sets Simeon's words in context, with the first verse beginning 'Just and devout old Simeon liv'd;/to him it was reveal'd,/that Christ, the Lord, his eyes should see/ere death his eyelids seal'd.'

The Song of Simeon's place in some early Reformed liturgies towards the end of Communion services was noted above. Still provided as an optional text before the dismissal and blessing in the URC's outline order of service found in *Rejoice and Sing* (1991), it is sometimes used as a post-communion canticle in the Lutheran tradition too. It also has strong associations with evening prayer and Compline; some lament its absence from the *Common Worship* service of evening prayer, appearing only in night prayer. An attractive song-like version by Michael Mahler, 'Lord, let your servants go in peace' is on a GIA CD of daily prayer resources.[36] Simeon had been told by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Messiah, so his song is also an obvious canticle choice for funerals. Francis Bacon (1561-1626) wrote in his Essay 'Of Death', 'But, above all, believe it, the sweetest canticle is, *Nunc dimittis*; when a man hath obtained worthy ends, and expectations.'[37] Interestingly, Miles Smith's version from Playford's Psalter actually mentions the grave:

> *Lord, let thy servant now in peace*
> *unto the grave descend,*
> *since thine Eternal Word is come*
> *unto the promis'd end.*

while Andrew Pratt's version is ideal for singing last thing at night:[38]

*c.1800* (Ashgate, Farnham 2008), p.208

[33] Old, *op. cit.*, p.51; *Methodist Hymn-Book* (Methodist Conference Office, London 1933), 'Infinite God, to thee we raise' (33)

[34] *Church Hymnary: Fourth Edition* (Canterbury Press, Norwich 2005), 'Now, Lord! according to thy word' (333)

[35] *Church Hymnary: Third Edition* (OUP, Oxford 1973), 590

[36] *When Morning Breaks and Evening Sets: Psalms, Canticles and Hymns for the Liturgy of the Hours* (Tony Alonso, Michael Mahler and Lori True; GIA Publications, Chicago 2004; music book G-6401, CD-609)

[37] Francis Bacon, 'Of Death', *The Essays of Francis Bacon* (Odhams Press, London n.d.), p.25

*God's prophecy fulfilled, my duty done;*
*in this I have been well and truly blessed.*
*My eyes have seen the promised gift of God,*
*now let me go in peace and to my rest.*

*All nations find the health for which they pray.*
*God's light dispels the darkness of the night,*
*and Israel at last has met its day:*
*God's glory shines majestic, noble, bright.*

Andrew Pratt (b.1948), based on Luke 2.29-32, the Song of Simeon © 2004 the author, reproduced with permission

Many will know Timothy Dudley-Smith's hymn based on Simeon's song, 'Faithful vigil ended', which the *New English Hymnal* allocates to the music for 'Sundays after Christmas'. In *Common Praise* it is placed in the 'General Liturgical Section' along with 'Tell out, my soul', surely the best-known hymn based on the *Magnificat* and famously inspired by the opening words of the Song of Mary in the *New English Bible* (1961). In some books 'Tell out, my soul' is in the Advent section, while in the *New English Hymnal* it can be found with hymns for days when the Blessed Virgin Mary is honoured.

So what do we think *we* are doing if we sing the Song of Mary, a pregnant young virgin visiting her elderly cousin Elizabeth while awaiting the birth of the Son of God? It seems rather ironic that this is one of the canticles sung most frequently by all-male choirs, at Choral Evensong. The words draw heavily on the Song of Hannah in 1 Samuel, another womanly song. John Stott's 1966 commentary on the canticles and selected psalms is helpful here:

> 'How can we possibly sing this canticle? A Hebrew virgin, chosen to be the vehicle of the incarnation of the Son of God, gives inspired expression to her wonderment that she should have been thus honoured. How can we take her words on our lips? Is it not quite inappropriate, and even a trifle irreverent?'

He says that it was partly for this reason, and partly because of the elaborate rituals associated with it before the Reformation, that the Puritans wanted it omitted from the Prayer Book. But, he continues,

> 'Christians have recognised that Mary's experience, which in one way was absolutely unique, in another is typical of the experience of every Christian believer. God's amazing grace or mercy, unique in its particular gift to Mary, is yet lavished on us as well. She spoke eloquently of God's sovereign initiative of grace. He had…done great things for her…He had scattered the proud, thrown down the mighty, exalted the humble, filled the hungry, dismissed the rich. Not unless we think the Virgin Mary is the only person to have experienced these great things that God has done, is it improper or inappropriate for us to sing her song.'[39]

Stott adds another sense in which we can compare our experience to Mary's, since God gave his Son to be formed in her body and one can speak of Christ being formed within us, as St Paul did.[40]

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[38] *HymnQuest* 2010 unpublished
[39] John R. W. Stott, *The Canticles and Selected Psalms* (Hodder and Stoughton, London 1966), pp.44-45
[40] Galatians 4.19, 'My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you' (NRSV)

Not all recent hymn-writers have kept a specifically female element in their versifications of the *Magnificat*. Although Dudley-Smith's 'Tell out, my soul' is often suggested in daily prayer resources as a metrical version of this canticle it actually avoids any direct reference to God's handmaiden, making the hymn a more general song of praise and thanksgiving for God's mighty acts. Roman Catholic musician Martin Foster has a rather lovely version paired with a tune from Peter Warlock's *Capriol Suite*, using the non-gender specific word 'servant' in place of 'handmaiden'.[41] David Mowbray begins 'With Mary let my soul rejoice', neatly retaining the original reference but avoiding putting us directly in Mary's shoes, as it were; this is in *Sing Praise* with a fine syncopated tune by Peter Moger.[42] John Bell's version includes the line, 'Pregnant with justice, my heart gladly sings'.[43] Edwin Le Grice, who was Dean of Ripon Cathedral, wrote a *Magnificat* paraphrase which begins, 'Sing with me a song of gladness'.[44] Dick Watson's discussion in *The English Hymn* of the complex interaction between the author and the singer is of interest here; who is the 'me' in 'Sing with me a song of gladness'? There is certainly a potential plurality of self and plurality of interpretation, although a later verse becomes more specific, 'Me, his servant, poor and lowly,/chosen Mother of his Son'.[45]

Another problem of particularity arises with the Song of Zechariah, the *Benedictus* (Luke 1.68-79), in which the elderly priest sings to the infant John the Baptist, 'and you, my child, will be called a prophet of the most high'. When the biblical passage is read the context will be clearer, with verse 67 introducing the song: 'His father, Zechariah, was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied…' When using a sung version, either on a regular basis or as an occasional hymn, there is surely an educational task to be done if singers are to understand the words. Worshippers need the ability to 'interpret the code correctly'.[46] When looking at metrical versions of this canticle in 2004, at the request of a Church of England committee working on *Common Worship: Daily Prayer*, I was surprised to find relatively few successful paraphrases of the Song of Zechariah in comparison to versions of the Songs of Mary and Simeon. This may reflect in part the affection we traditionally seem to have had for Evensong in English-speaking cultural contexts, but might it also relate to the line addressing a baby son, and how to make that our own as part of an act of praise?

I ended up trying to write my own version of the *Benedictus*, principally as an experiment, and found inspiration in part through Maurice Bevan's tune CORVEDALE, once I realised how well the opening words 'Bless the Lord, the God of Israel' would fit to the initial phrase of the music.

*Bless the Lord, the God of Israel,*
*who has come to set us free.*
*He has raised for us a Saviour*
*sprung from royal David's tree.*
*Through his prophets God had spoken*
*of the hope the Christ would bring;*
*of his faithfulness and mercy*
*let each generation sing.*

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[41] *Cantate* (Decani Music, Brandon, Suffolk 2005), 179
[42] *Sing Praise* 197
[43] 'Sing out, my soul, sing with joy to the Lord', *Love and Anger* (Wild Goose Publications, Glasgow 1997), p.48
[44] Edwin Le Grice, *Sing Together: Bible Songs and Canticles* (Canterbury Press, Norwich,1994), p.21
[45] Watson, *op. cit.*, p.20
[46] *Ibid.*, p.18

*Long ago God made a promise*
*he would set his people free,*
*that in all our life and worship*
*we might know true liberty,*
*to be holy, to be righteous*
*in his sight throughout our days;*
*now this child will be a herald*
*making ready all God's ways.*

*Let all people know salvation*
*through forgiveness of their sin,*
*as our God in his compassion*
*bids a shining dawn begin.*
*So may all who dwell in darkness*
*see the shadows disappear*
*while he guides our feet in pathways*
*where his peace is ever near.*

(Repeat second half of tune)
*To the Father be all glory*
*With the Spirit and the Son,*
*As it was, is now and shall be*
*While eternal ages run.*

Anne Harrison, based on Luke 1.68-79, the Song of Zechariah © the author, May 2004

This paraphrase was published in *Common Worship: Daily Prayer* alongside another by North American hymnwriter, Ruth Duck.[47] She includes the line 'And you, my child, shall go before, to preach, to prophesy'. Nick Needham bypasses the 'baby problem' ('The Lord, his way prepared by John, makes known/salvation from his tender mercy's throne') while James Quinn confronts it head-on: 'O tiny child, your name shall be the prophet of the Lord'. James Seddon keeps the second-person address with 'And you shall be God's prophet', and Carl Daw has 'My child, as prophet of the Lord you will prepare the way', whereas David Mowbray paraphrases with 'How favoured is the child who bids God's people turn from sin'.[48]

Lutheran writer Paul Westermeyer argues that in the songs of Mary, Zechariah and Simeon, the original singer now stands for the whole church, and that the canticles themselves 'sing the Old Testament' in a new way. The particularity of the texts is important, because we are thanking God not in general, but for his acts in a specific history with real people: in the Song of Zechariah, for example, we recall God acting in an oath to Abraham, through the house of David, speaking through the prophets, and now preparing the way for the Saviour by John the Baptist.[49]

Besides these issues of particularity in metrical versions of the canticles, there are obviously also other issues of language which apply to any scriptural paraphrase. How close does one stay to the original text? Is accuracy of translation more important than making a paraphrase which is both poetically satisfying and easy to sing? Nicholas Temperley points out that 'Calvin followed the German Reformed churches in adopting *metrical* psalms as the basis of church song, accepting

[47] *Common Worship: Daily Prayer* (Church House Publishing, London, 2005), pp.611-612
[48] *Praise* 293; *Church Hymnal: Fifth Edition* (OUP, Oxford 2000) 685; *Psalm Praise* 14; *To Sing God's Praise* 3/4; *Songs from the Psalms* (Hodder & Stoughton/Jubilate, London 1990) 153d
[49] Paul Westermeyer, *'Te Deum': The Church and Music* (Fortress Press, Minneapolis 1998), pp.45-50

the unavoidable deviation from literal translation in the interest of having all join in the singing.'[50] Should one include phrases which will have a particular resonance for those used to certain Bible translations? Does one try to reflect the contemporary context of the singers? David Brown has written, 'It is the writer's metaphors that help to engage our attention and thus our imaginations. Their inclusion can also pose important theological questions about the proper application of old material to new situations. It is often assumed without a moment's forethought that the best version to sing of any biblical text must be that closest to the original's meaning. But that is to confuse authorial intention with what might be the quite different context to which the text is now to be applied in the singing.'[51]

The extraordinary flourishing of metrical paraphrases of the canticles over recent decades is due to various factors: one is the initiative taken by Evangelical Anglicans from the 1960's onwards, to provide liturgical texts for worship in contemporary English linked with musical styles which would engage people of all ages. One of the first fruits was *Psalm Praise*; *Church Family Worship* followed in 1988,[52] then *Songs from the Psalms* and *Psalms for Today* in 1990. Among the key figures were Timothy Dudley-Smith, Christopher Idle, Michael Perry, Michael Saward, Norman Warren and James Seddon, whose metrical Song of Simeon is in *Sing Praise*.[53] The Jubilate book *Sing Glory* (published in 1999) is also an excellent resource for scriptural song.[54]

As part of a wider liturgical renewal movement, there has also been interest in a fuller range of biblical canticles, as witnessed by the Joint Liturgical Group's work and the Franciscan book *Celebrating Common Prayer*, for example.[55] A Roman Catholic writer who should not be overlooked is James Quinn (1919-2010), whose obituary in the *Times* newspaper said, 'His aim, while composing, was to produce a "catechism in song"…His inspiration came from the writings of the saints, the psalms and ancient texts that reflected on church teaching, Scripture or the Eucharist. "Hymns form a rich scriptural quarry," he said. The language used should be "clear but not banal and above all simple"…[Quinn] did not always use rhyme. Its absence "when you are setting out to capture words of Scripture, makes for greater fidelity to the text – providing that there are compensating cadences".'[56] One example is 'Blessed be the God of Israel', his metrical *Benedictus* (included in the Church of Ireland's current hymn book, which has a substantial section of canticles).[57]

Over recent decades there has been a remarkable recovery of interest in daily prayer, either for individuals or groups, in many different denominations; there is, for example, a new Anabaptist resource for daily prayer which encourages the use of the Beatitudes as well as the singing of more common canticles. The editors write, 'Our hope is that frequent repetition of these vital texts will help you learn them by heart, in all the rich meanings of that phrase.'[58] The introduction to the Scottish *Book of Common Order* encourages a return to the Reformation

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[50] Temperley, *The Music of the English Parish Church*, p.21
[51] David Brown, *God and Mystery in Words: Experience through Metaphor and Drama* (OUP, Oxford 2008), p.83
[52] *Church Family Worship: Music Edition* (Jubilate Hymns/CPAS/Hodder & Stoughton, London 1988)
[53] *Sing Praise* 198
[54] *Sing Glory: Hymns, Psalms and Songs for a New Century* (Jubilate Hymns/Kevin Mayhew, Stowmarket 1999)
[55] *Celebrating Common Prayer: A Version of the Daily Office SSF* (Mowbray, London 1992)
[56] *The Times* newspaper, 1 May 2010, p.101
[57] *Church Hymnal: Fifth Edition* 685
[58] *Take our Moments and our Days: An Anabaptist Prayer Book* (Herald Press, Scottdale, Pennsylvania 2007)

practice of daily prayer in the church; canticles and what are described as biblical 'songs of praise' are suggested for each day of the week.[59]

Of course we have many fine hymns closely based on Scripture that are not canticles as such, including Alington's 'Ye that know the Lord is gracious' and Seddon's 'Church of God, elect and glorious' (both based on 1 Peter 2), Dudley-Smith's 'Not for tongues of heaven's angels' (from 1 Corinthians 13), Perry's 'Who can bind the raging sea' (based on verses from Job 38 and 39) and Idle's 'Who can measure heaven and earth' (from the first chapter of Ecclesiasticus), to name but a few.[60] There are also countless scriptural songs, short and long, of different kinds, including some by Roger Jones and John Pantry based on canticles, and biblical settings like 'Unless a grain of wheat' by Bernadette Farrell, who has also produced a metrical *Magnificat* setting with Owen Alstott.[61] In the North American *Psalter Hymnal* there's a substantial section of 'Bible Songs', with an interesting essay in the accompanying handbook edited by Emily Brink and Bert Polman.[62] Calvin Seerveld's 'Song of Jonah' written for the *Psalter Hymnal*, 'In the fish for three days buried',[63] draws on a biblical passage not often set to music, though a preacher in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* exclaims 'What a noble thing is that canticle in the fish's belly!'[64]

Reluctantly leaving aside the canticles drawn from Isaiah and elsewhere, I end by considering one other interesting and sometimes controversial text: the *Benedicite*, the Song of the Three Children, or A Song of Creation. Carl Daw's version of this was sung at the 2010 conference Hymn Festival in Durham. Edward Darling has written a paraphrase, 'All created things, bless the Lord', as well as a version of a related text, 'Come, bless the Lord', sung when Bishop Edward was honoured by the Royal School of Church Music at their national Celebration Day in 2010.[65] When the Prayer Book was being revised in 1661 there was an attempt to remove the *Benedicite* from Morning Prayer because of Presbyterian objections to material from the Apocrypha.[66] The background is that the *Benedicite* was inserted into the book of Daniel, between the 23rd and 24th verses of chapter 3, as a song sung by the three young men in the burning fiery furnace; in the 1552 *Book of Common Prayer* the canticle was provided as an alternative to the hymn *Te Deum*. The bishops at the Savoy Conference responded to those objecting to its retention by saying that the *Benedicite* had been used 'all the Church over' and should keep its place in the liturgy as well as the hymns *Te Deum* and *Veni Creator*, which the Presbyterians had not objected to, even though they were not scriptural.[67] In some early Christian liturgies, the *Benedicite* preceded a prayer of penitence; one writer suggests that perhaps the vision of creation giving praise moves humans to repentance so that they too might praise God.[68]

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[59] *Book of Common Order of the Church of Scotland* (Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh 1994), pp.xvi, 509, 512-513, 524

[60] *Durham Sings! Durham's contribution to English hymnody* (Friends of Durham Cathedral, 2009) p.112; *Sing Praise* 152; *Sing Praise* 135; *Praise!* 213; *Sing Praise* 318

[61] *Sing Praise* 49; *Common Ground* (St Andrew Press, Edinburgh 1998) 15b

[62] Emily Brink and Bert Polman (eds), *Psalter Hymnal Handbook* (CRC Publications, Grand Rapids, Michigan 1998), pp.55-61

[63] *Psalter Hymnal* (Christian Reformed Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan 1987), 202

[64] Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale* (1851), chapter 9, 'The Sermon'

[65] *Church Hymnal: Fifth Edition* 682, 688

[66] Spinks, *op. cit.*, p.10

[67] Colin Buchanan, *The Savoy Conference Revisited* (Alcuin Club and GROW Joint Liturgical Studies No.54, Grove Books, Cambridge 2002), pp.38-39

[68] Woolfenden, *op. cit.*, p.108

One of the ideas which shaped thinking about music in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was the classical theory of the harmony of the spheres, and the impact of music on the natural world. A few verses from a 1691 paraphrase may help to illustrate this:

> *Ye Spheres whose high and vast expanded Face,*
> *can't limit Him, who knows no Time nor Place,*
> *extend God's praise beyond your bounded Space.*
>
> *You who so nimbly climb, and swiftly fly,*
> *and in perpetual rolls dance round the Skie,*
> *your motions Tune to gracefull Harmony.*
>
> *Let Snow, which clothes the naked Earth in white,*
> *and Ice, which stops the liquid water's flight,*
> *dissolve in Praises to the God of might.*
>
> From a paraphrase upon the canticle '*Benedicite omnia opera*' by T. Walker, fellow of Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, 1691

This kind of thinking may not be central to our understanding of the world today, but perhaps the importance of environmental concern as an element in the church's mission should make us think seriously about using this canticle more regularly. The *Benedicite* in the Sternhold & Hopkins psalter is headed 'The song of the three children, praising God, provoking all creatures to do the same'.

I began by quoting a nineteenth century hymn, and would like to end with the first verse of a hymn by Brian Wren:[69]

> *Sing together on our journey!*
> *Sing with joy, Alleluia!*
> *Share, as we proceed,*
> *canticle and creed,*
> *and with faith and fervour strong*
> *spin our stories into song:*
> *sing with joy, Alleluia!*
>
> Brian Wren (b.1936) © 1992 Stainer & Bell Ltd.

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[69] *Sing Glory* 580