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# MARY AS THE ARK OF THE COVENANT IN THE SCENE OF THE VISITATION (LUKE 1:39-56) RECONSIDERED

In his *Structure et théologie de Luc I-II* from 1957, René Laurentin advanced the view that the author of the Gospel of Luke wanted the figure of Mary to be seen as “the type of the Ark of the Covenant” (Laurentin, 1957, p. 80)<sup>1</sup>. in the scene of the Visitation (Luke 1:39-56). According to Laurentin, the argument in favor of this interpretation of Mary’s figure is provided by a reference to 2 Sam 6:2-11: “The story – very stylized – is composed of selected elements that refer us in a convergent manner to the story of the transport of the Ark to Jerusalem

1 “Le type de l’arche d’alliance”

by David” (ibidem, p. 79)<sup>2</sup>. Laurentin enumerates the following parallels between the two narratives<sup>3</sup>:

1. “In both of them, the journey takes place in the land of Judah”<sup>4</sup>.
2. “The Ark ascending to Jerusalem – and that indeed is the direction Mary is heading in – is carried *into the house of Obed-Edom* (2 Sam 6:10), and Mary enters *the house of Zechariah* (1:40); These two chapters [*scil.* Luke 1-2] are focused on the ‘ascending’<sup>5</sup>.
3. “David’s cry: 2 Sam 6:9 ‘How can the Ark of the Lord ever come to me?!’ / Elizabeth’s cry: Luke 1:43 ‘Why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?!’; The meaning (sacred respect and feeling of being unworthy before the place of Presence) is analogous”<sup>6</sup>.
4. “2 Sam 6:11 The Ark of the Lord remained in the house of Obed-Edom *three months* / Luke 1:56 And Mary remained with her about *three months*; In both cases, the stay lasts for *three months*, in a *house* that is *blessed* by it”<sup>7</sup>.
5. “They [*scil.* the journey of the Ark and of that of Mary] produce the same effect: the joy of the people of Jerusalem [*scil.* ἐν εὐφροσύνῃ], the joy of Elizabeth and of her child [*scil.* ἐν ἀγαλλιάσει], David’s and John the Baptist’s leaps of joy... , people’s and Elizabeth’s shouts: φωνή and κραυγή appear in both texts; we should note that the verb ἀνεφώνησεν (1:42), which expresses the cry of the mother of John the Baptist, is used [*scil.* in the Septuagint] exclusively for liturgical exclamations, and more precisely for those which accompany the transport of the Ark of the Covenant; The verb σκιρτᾶν serves to designate the leaps of joy

2 “Le récit – très stylisé – est composé de traits choisis qui nous renvoient de façon convergente au récit du transfert de l’arche à Jérusalem par David” .

3 The order and the numbering of Laurentin’s arguments, presented on pages 79-81 (chapter *Utilisation de l’Écriture en Luc 1-2*), are my invention.

4 “De part et d’autre, le voyage se déroule dans le pays de Juda”.

5 “L’arche montant vers Jérusalem – et telle est bien la direction que prend Marie – est conduite *dans la maison d’Obededom* (2 Sam. 6, 10), et Marie entre *dans la maison de Zacharie* (1, 40); Ces deux chapitres [*scil.* Luc 1-2] sont axés sur la ‘montée’.”

6 “Cri de David: 2 Sam. 6, 9 Comment (se peut-il) que l’arche du Seigneur vienne chez moi?! / Cri d’Élisabeth: Lc 1, 43 D’où m’échoit que la mère de mon Seigneur vienne chez moi?!; Le sens (respect sacré et sentiment d’indignité devant le lieu de la Présence) est analogue.”

7 “2 Sam. 6, 11 L’arche de Yahweh resta chez Obededom *trois mois* / Luc 1, 56 Marie resta avec elle environ *trois mois*”; “Dans les deux cas, le séjour se prolonge, *trois mois* durant, dans une *maison* qui en reçoit *bénédiction*.”

that accompany the coming of the Lord: Mal 3:20; Ps 113(114):4-6; Wis 17:9”<sup>8</sup>.

Laurentin’s argument did not convince New Testament scholars<sup>9</sup>. The aim of the present article is to show, in light of new evidence, that Laurentin, seeing in Luke 1:39-56 a reference to 2Sam 6:1-11 and, on this basis, Mary as a type of the Ark of the Covenant, was right.

In the same chapter of his book Laurentin (1957, pp. 81–82) tries to show – through a reference in Luke 1:42 (καὶ ἀνεφώνησεν κραυγῇ μεγάλη καὶ εἶπεν· εὐλογημένη σὺ ἐν γυναιξίν καὶ εὐλογημένος ὁ καρπὸς τῆς κοιλίας σου) to Jdt 13:18 (καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῇ Οὐζίας Εὐλογητὴ σὺ, θύγατερ, τῷ θεῷ τῷ ὑψίστῳ παρὰ πάσας τὰς γυναῖκας τὰς ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, καὶ εὐλογημένος κύριος ὁ θεός, ὃς ἔκτισεν τοὺς οὐρανοὺς καὶ τὴν γῆν) – that we should perceive Jesus in the womb of Mary as ἸΗΣΟΥΣ Himself. Laurentin, however, does not give any additional arguments in favor of his thesis. Therefore, it is not surprising that his interpretation of this reference did not convince New Testament scholars<sup>10</sup>.

8 “Il [*scil.* the journey of the Ark and that of Mary] donne lieu aux mêmes manifestations: joie du peuple de Jérusalem [*scil.* ἐν εὐφοροσίῳ], joie d’Élisabeth et de son enfant [*scil.* ἐν ἀγαλλιάσει], bonds joyeux de David et de Jean-Baptiste [...], cris du peuple et cri d’Élisabeth: φωνὴ et κραυγὴ figurent dans les deux textes; on notera dans le même sens que le verbe ἀνεφώνησεν (1, 42) qui exprime le cri de la mère de Jean Baptiste est exclusivement employé pour désigner les exclamations liturgiques et plus spécialement celles qui accompagnent le transport de l’arche d’alliance; Le mot σκιρτᾶν sert à désigner les bonds et les sauts de joie qui accompagnent la venue du Seigneur: *Mal.* 3, 20; *Ps.* 113 (114), 4-6; *Sag.* 17, 9.”

9 E.g. “Less persuasively, Laurentin connects Mary’s visit to Elizabeth (Luke 1:39-44, 56) with David’s attempt to return the Ark to Jerusalem (2 Kgdms 6:2-11); Laurentin, reading these echoes typologically, likens Mary to the Ark of the Covenant” (Rice, 2016, p. 63); “It seems unlikely, however, that Luke would be drawing so subtle an allusion here” (Strauss, 1995, p. 96); “It is the Ark’s power to kill that causes David to ask his question – a motivation quite different from that of Elizabeth’s question. The Ark’s eventual journey to Jerusalem after the three-month stay is quite different from Mary’s return home. The connecting link in the Lucan reminiscences may be David rather than the Ark. When David goes to Araunah the Jebusite to purchase the threshing floor that will ultimately become the site of the Temple in Jerusalem Araunah asks ‘What is this, that my lord the king has come to his servant?’ (2Sam 24:21). This question also resembles Elizabeth’s question, and it does not concern the Ark” (Brown, 1993, pp. 344–345); “Die Symbolik Maria = Lade ist zu weit hergeholt” (Bovon, 1989, p. 86 n. 43; cf. Bovon, 2002, p. 59, n. 46); “Der Bericht 2 Sm 6 tendiert auf die Erwählung Jerusalems zur heiligen Stadt, Maria aber hat nur ‘la direction’, keineswegs aber das Reiseziel ‘vers Jérusalem’ (Laurentin, 1957, p. 80). Das furchterfüllte dreimonatige Belassen der Lade im Hause des Obed Edom (2Sam 6, 10ff) wird sehr unpassend mit dem dreimonatigen Verweilen Mariens bei Elisabeth (s. u. S. 80) verglichen. Der furchtsame Ruf Davids: πῶς εἰσελεύσεται πρὸς με ἢ κιβωτὸς κυρίου (2Sam 6,9) läßt sich nicht besser mit dem der Elisabeth Lk 1, 43 (s. dort) vergleichen als 2 Sm 24,21, ergibt in seiner Formelhaftigkeit jedenfalls keine tragfähige Basis dafür, Maria hier als Lade des Bundes gekennzeichnet zu finden” (Schuermann, 1984, pp. 64–65 n. 161); “But this is subtle. If, indeed, the story may be compared with 2 Sam 24:21, then what connection does it have with the ark?” (Fitzmyer, 1981, p. 364).

10 François Bovon in his comprehensive *Luke the Theologian. Fifty-five Years of Research (1950-2005)* from 2005, commenting Laurentin’s observation, stated: “We formally refuse to speak of an identification of Jesus with God: Luke always respects a distance between the Father and the Son. Luke 1-2 is far from contradicting this thesis. The Son is the manifestation of the Father, his envoy, and his glory, but we cannot speak of an assimilation of Jesus to Yahweh” (pp. 183–184).

In a recently published article, “*The Fruit of Your Womb*” (Luke 1,42) as “*The Lord God, Creator of Heaven and Earth*” (Judith 13,18). An *Intertextual Analysis* (Kozłowski, 2017), I formulated arguments in favor of Laurentin’s interpretation, the most important of which is, as it seems, the following: “We deal with similar intertextual play in the opening sentence of the *Acts*, which summarizes the content of the first part of the diptych. Luke says that his Gospel was *περὶ πάντων ὧν ἤρξατο ὁ Ἰησοῦς ποιεῖν τε καὶ διδάσκειν*. Here we have an evident reference to Gen 2:3, where God blessed the seventh day because on this day He rested *ἀπὸ πάντων τῶν ἔργων αὐτοῦ, ὧν ἤρξατο ὁ θεὸς ποιῆσαι*. Instead of the intertextually expected ὁ θεός in a manner similar to Luke 1:42, ὁ Ἰησοῦς appears. What is interesting is that God appears explicitly as the Creator in both hypotexts!” (ibidem, p. 341). We can therefore safely accept that the author of the Third Gospel wanted us to see the embryo in Mary’s womb, in the scene of the Visitation, as *YHWH* in the fullness of His holiness – and hence Mary as *θεοφόρος*. Taking this into account, Laurentin’s argumentation (especially points 3-5) appears in a new light.

(ad Laurentin’s 3) On the formal level, it is difficult to judge whether Elizabeth’s question in Luke 1:43 (*καὶ πόθεν μοι τοῦτο ἵνα ἔλθῃ ἡ μήτηρ τοῦ κυρίου μου πρὸς ἐμέ;*) better resembles David’s in 2 Sam 6:9 (*πῶς εἰσελεύσεται πρὸς με ἡ κιβωτὸς κυρίου;*) or that of Araunah in 2 Sam 24:21 (*τί ὅτι ἦλθεν ὁ κύριός μου ὁ βασιλεὺς πρὸς τὸν δοῦλον αὐτοῦ;*)<sup>11</sup>. However, in light of my conclusions in the abovementioned article, Elizabeth’s question, in terms of content, is much more similar to that of David in 2Sam 6:9. Like the Ark of the Covenant, Mary makes *YHWH* directly present by her appearance. Both in Luke 1:43 and in 2Sam 6:9 we are dealing with a rhetorical question directed to oneself, the content of which, in Laurentin’s words, is “sacred respect and feeling of being unworthy before the place of Presence.” In 2Sam 24:21 we see a simple question, the meaning of which is identical to its literal form. We may therefore say that between Luke 1:43 and 2Sam 6:9 there is a far-reaching parallel of content which matches the formal parallel much better than 2Sam 24:21.

(ad 4) If we accept that Mary is *θεοφόρος* in the literal sense of the word, 2Sam 6:11 and Luke 1:56 become very similar to each other. The motif of remaining in a place for three months also appears in Jdt 16:20: *καὶ ἦν ὁ λαὸς εὐφραϊνόμενος ἐν Ἱερουσαλημ κατὰ πρόσωπον τῶν ἁγίων ἐπὶ μῆνας τρεῖς, καὶ Ἰουδιθ μετ’ αὐτῶν κατέμεινεν*. Taking into account the reference in Luke 1:42 to Jdt 13:18 (see above), it is possible that in Luke 1:56 we hear an echo of Jdt 16:20. However, the parallel between Luke 1:56 and 2 Sam 6:11 is much closer. In both cases an ele-

<sup>11</sup> See note 6.

ment that can be described by the adjective θεοφόρος remains at a private house for three months, giving blessing to it<sup>12</sup>. No other Old Testament image resembles Luke 1:56 more than 2Sam 6:11!

(ad 5) Laurentin notices that the verb ἀναφώνέω in Luke 1:42 “is used [*scil.* in the Septuagint] exclusively for liturgical exclamations, and more precisely, for those which accompany the transport of the Ark of the Covenant.” This merits closer consideration. In the New Testament ἀναφώνέω is a *hapax legomenon*. In the *Septuagint* it appears five times: 1 Chr 15:28; 16:4.5.42 and in 2 Chr 5:13. In 1 Chr 16:42 it figures in the context of the cult of ἸΗΩΗ, without reference to the Ark, while in the other four cases (i.e., in 80%) it appears in the context of the liturgical activities which accompany David’s transfer of the Ark to Jerusalem. We should also note that the verb ἀναφώνέω introduces Elizabeth’s: εὐλογημένη σὺ ἐν γυναιξίν καὶ εὐλογημένος... which, through the reference to Jdt 13:18 (see above), suggests that Mary is carrying God the Creator in her womb.

In light of the discovery that, in the scene of the Visitation, the embryo carried by Mary is to be identified with ἸΗΩΗ, the arguments advanced by Laurentin find new evidence. The formal parallels resonate with the conceptual parallels to such a degree that a coincidence is very unlikely. We can therefore repeat after Laurentin: “The story – very stylized – is composed of selected elements that refer us in a convergent manner to the story of the transport of the Ark to Jerusalem by David”. What could be another reason, if not that the author of the Third Gospel saw in Mary “the type of the Ark of the Covenant”?

Brown and Schuermann (note 9) drew attention to the allegedly different character of the two scenes: whereas in Luke 1:39-56 we are dealing with a mild, almost idyllic image of pregnant women bound by a friendly relationship, the atmosphere in 2 Sam 6 is full of fear and awe. However, if we think more deeply, these scenes are conceptually not distant from each other. We must remember that in the scene of the Visitation we have a revelation of ἸΗΩΗ Himself, the same God who is a consuming fire (Deut 4:24) and whom “man shall not see and live” (Exod 33:20). The intertextual reference to 2 Sam 6 would discretely remind the reader of it by introducing into the narrative an element of *tremendum*, expected of a theophany. At the same time, the detection of the hypotext would subtly emphasize the gentleness of the incarnated God, as vividly depicted in the Epistle to the Hebrews:

12 The Ark of the Covenant is a blessing for the house of Obed-Edom (2Sam 6:11-12). Also, although it is not explicitly stated, Mary’s visit is a blessing for the house of Elizabeth and Zacharias.

You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them. For they could not endure the order that was given, “If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death.” Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear.” But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant (12:18-24).

Once again the author of the Third Gospel appears as a writer who uses the intertext in a masterly way. He reminds us that the word “text” (Latin *textus*) etymologically means “fabric”, which also consists of threads invisible at first sight, but whose finding is essential for a proper understanding of the whole.

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## SUMMARY

In his “Structure et théologie de Luc I-II” from 1957, René Laurentin advanced the view that the figure of Mary is to be interpreted as a new Ark of the Covenant in the scene of the Visitation (Luke 1:39-56). This interpretation is based primarily on an intertextual reference to 2 Sam 6:1-11. Still, Laurentin’s thesis did not resonate with New Testament scholars. In the present paper, it is shown that recent observations according to which the embryo in Mary’s womb is to be identified as  $\Upsilon\text{HWH}$  Himself offer new evidence for Laurentin’s thesis.

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