Multicultural Worship in the Song of Zechariah and Contemporary Christian Worship

Jordan Covarelli

Abstract: This article explores the ethics of “speaking” the artistic languages or idioms of diverse cultures in the earliest Christian communities. This article presents a key New Testament text, the Song of Zechariah (the Benedictus in Luke 1:68–79), as a poetic text meant for communal performance and examines that cultural phenomenon through the lens of “musical caring” to examine the meaning such a poetic phenomenon has for modern Christian life and worship. First, I will briefly summarize the evidence for the Song of Zechariah as a lyrical poem containing the artistic “multilingualism” of both Hebrew and Greek poetic idioms. Then, I will assess such an artistic communal expression in its first-century context with Myrick’s concept of musical caring, broadened to allow for uncertainty of the Song of Zechariah’s first-century performance methods. Finally, I will consider the twenty-first-century implications or lessons from such care and inclusivity in the first century.

Keywords: multicultural worship; early Christian worship; contemporary Christian worship; biblical studies; biblical psalms; Greek poetry (classical); ethics of style; diversity and inclusion

1. Introduction

While earning my PhD, every time I drove to campus, I passed through a heavily Latino community. A fixture of this area was a mall with a movie theater that had a billboard which read “El Cine en tu Idioma” (the cinema in your language.) As a modest student of the Spanish language, I knew idioma meant language. However, as a musician and artist, I know the word idiom to mean a style or mode of expression in an artform (e.g., certain melodies are more idiomatic for violins than they are for flutes or the human voice). The correlation of the two terms shows the way one often speaks of a musical language and even different musical languages between cultures. Consider the Mendelssohn quote that “music is more definite than words”.

This article explores the ethics of “speaking” the artistic languages or idioms of diverse cultures in the earliest Christian communities. This article presents a key New Testament text, the Song of Zechariah (often called by its Latin name the Benedictus, Luke 1:68–79), as a poetic text meant for communal performance and examines that cultural phenomenon through the lens of “musical caring” as expressed in works such as Nathan Myrick’s Music for Others to examine the meaning such a poetic phenomenon has for modern Christian life and worship. First, I will briefly summarize the evidence for the Song of Zechariah as a lyrical poem containing the artistic “multilingualism” of both Hebrew and Greek poetic idioms. Then, I will assess such an artistic communal expression in its first-century context with Myrick’s concept of musical caring, broadened to allow for uncertainty of the Song of Zechariah’s first-century performance methods. Finally, I will consider the twenty-first-century implications or lessons from such care and inclusivity in the first century.
2. The Multiple Idioms in the Song of Zechariah

The Song of Zechariah—along with all the Lukan canticles—arises from a rich song-writing and hymn-singing intertestamental period. While many have debated whether various ancient hymnic texts would have been sung or read aloud or read quietly, recent research suggests that public singing was far more common in the Roman era than it is today. Éléonore Salm surveyed how various orators wrote about the delivery of other orators (Salm 2015). She found that many of the foremost orators complained of a chronic practice of many orators, finding every opportunity to elevate their speeches to song. This phenomenon, unparalleled in modern Western times, arises from the “melody of language” inherent in the Latin and Greek tongues. Therefore, scholars that have adopted a hermeneutic of suspicion when assessing whether hymn-like texts were actually sung do so by projecting asynchronous modern presuppositions onto ancient contexts. The answer of whether a hymnic text would likely have been sung ought to receive a default answer of more-than-likely unless clear evidence indicates otherwise.

Considering this evidence as well as the psalm-singing nature of Second Temple Judaism and descriptions/depictions of singing in the New Testament church (Col 3:16; Eph 5:19; Matt 26:30; Rev 5:9–10), the Song of Zechariah ought to be examined as a text of song or a psalm. The entire form of the song follows the parallelism of Hebrew psalmody. Zechariah’s song opens with a line taken directly from the benedictions at the end of the books of the Hebrew Psalter: “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel” (Luke 1:68a; Ps 41:13, 72:18, 89:52, 106:48). The seven and a half verses (Luke 1:68b-75) settle into twelve lines divided into four triplets—or four sets of three-line groupings. Each of the three lines in a triplet parallel each other in echoing similar imagery, offering a clarification, or offering a contrasting yet complementary image. For example, Luke 1:68b-69 continues: “For he has visited and redeemed his people/And has raised up a horn of salvation for us/In the house of his servant David”. The second line gives another image (a horn of salvation) of how God has visited and redeemed his people. The third line clarifies where the horn of salvation came from, fulfilling ancient prophecy. After the four triplet sets, verses 76–79 continue with a couplet, another triplet, and then a final four-line sequence of parallel lines. The last four lines have interweaving layers of resonance: “the sunrise will visit us from on high/To shine on those who in darkness/And in the shadow of death sit/The one to guide our feet into the way of peace” (vv. 78b–79). The Song of Zechariah has poetic craftsmanship to rival the Biblical psalter or other intertestamental psalms such as the Hodayot or Psalms of Solomon.

However, layered within this exquisite psalm lie six lines that also fit into the infamous Greek poetic meter of dactylic hexameter—the meter of Homer’s Iliad and Odyssey. In the Greek, verses 72–75 maintain Hebrew parallelism while meeting this Greek meter. Multi-genre artistry fittingly appears in the thematic climax of the song. It declares what the Lord’s saving redemption came to do: “to fulfill mercy promised to our father and/to remember his holy covenant, the oath/that he swore to Abraham our father/To grant us, who from the hand of our enemies have been delivered, to serve him fearlessly in holiness/And righteousness before him all the days of our life”. This core section declares the covenant faithfulness of God of Israel with the poetry of Greece and Rome.

This multi-genre or multicultural artistry is striking for two reasons: (1) what we call Christianity began as a sect of Judaism and still had a decidedly Jewish self-identity throughout the first century, and (2) the mixing of Hebrew and Greek poetic elements for communal song is unique in antiquity. The Jesus movement began as a Jewish sect that followed a Jewish messiah. Throughout the first century, this sect grew in number and diversity as it increasingly added Gentiles to its number. However, regardless of the Jewish vs. Gentile composition, even by the end of the first century, Jesus followers apparently were still frequenting synagogues like they were in the New Testament era since the Jewish leader Gamliel II felt the need to expel Christians from synagogues around 100 CE (González and González 2022, pp. 41–43). While the Jesus movement grew in a Hellenized world from a Second Temple Judaism with varying levels of Hellenization, one
aspect of the Jewish world that largely avoided the effects of Hellenization was their poetry. The only other extant example of a Jewish document using Greek poetry is the Exagoge by Ezekiel. The Exagoge was a Greek-style play based on the stories of the patriarchs’ journey to Egypt and later Exodus. However, it was intended for entertainment purposes rather than communal worship. In fact, it seems to have been rejected by Jewish communities, especially those in Jerusalem, and received only by Gentile audiences.

The Song of Zechariah, unlike the Exagoge, was intend for communal worship. As Lukan congregations heard the Gospel of Luke, or one of the “memoirs of the apostles”, read aloud as they assembled for worship and edification, they would have heard the Song of Zechariah sung aloud. And in time, as they recognized and learned the song, they may have come to sing it communally. Having established the uniquely multicultural artistic expression in the Lukan Song of Zechariah, I can now turn to what impact this inclusive technique could have had for the diverse communities of Jesus followers as they learned to care for one another.

3. The Ethics of Style

Monique Ingalls’s observation about modern corporate worship equally applies to that of the first century: “musical style itself communicates a specific set of ideas and values to enculturated listeners”. The first-century Jesus movement began as a Jewish movement both ethnically and religiously. However, it quickly became a novel thing: ethnic exclusivity faded as religious exclusivity increased. Non-Jews were worshiping the Jewish God and following a Jewish Messiah side-by-side with Jewish believers.

Gentile inclusion in Jewish practices was not new to the Jesus movement, but the level of equality was. Second Temple Judaism allowed Gentiles with varying levels of commitment and conviction to attend synagogue—but not Temple. At risk of oversimplifying things, in scholarship, these Gentile worshipers are often grouped into two categories: God-fearers and Proselytes. God-fearers were Gentiles who attended synagogue while also still offering sacrifices at the shrines of other gods. The God of Israel, YHWH, was just another God in their pantheon. Proselytes, however, represented a level of conversion and increased devotion on the part of the Gentiles that involved observance of Torah law, including circumcision for the males. The Jesus movement offered Gentiles full membership without full Torah observance (Acts 15:19–20). The ethics of such an invitation can be explored in this Song of Zechariah embedded in the Gospel of Luke.

Various (ethno)musicologists have drawn inspiration and insight from Charles Taylor’s The Ethics of Authenticity and Sources of the Self. Timothy Rommen highlights that Taylor’s framework for ethics provides an “an emphasis on the existential aspects of life” as a means for understanding communal ethics and meanings. Taylor emphasizes that an analysis of ethics cannot remain in the abstract but must assess the lived practices of a people group, which he calls a “thick” description of ethics. Ethnographers building off his premise emphasize that the music of a people or region likewise informs and is informed by—shapes and is shaped by—the ethics of the same. While Taylor, Rommen, Myrick, and others establishing this framework apply it to the modern context, it need not stay there. Indeed, Taylor argues for this framework as a corrective to the default social imaginary of the modern West. Therefore, this corrective framework can be worn by modern scholars seeking understanding of past eras. This framework corrects our modern astigmatism.

In music or any artform, “style itself functions as discourse.” (Rommen 2007, p. 36) Genre and poetic forms are a language—an idiom—that carries with it an implicit in-grouping. An artistic idiom, like a community, carries within it genetics and a heritage. Like a community, an artistic idiom has encoded within it a means of belonging and understanding. Like a language, an artistic idiom or genre carries within it a requirement for shared meaning-making to interpret and understand one another. To speak a certain language is to welcome the heritage of meaning-making carried within the language and to welcome native speakers to connect their present situation to their heritage inherent in the language. To use an artistic idiom is to welcome the artistic genetics within the
idiom carried within the forms and to welcome native artists and audiences to connect their present situation with the heritage of the artform. When a new artform engages in a new context, it brings with it a fresh perspective and nuance. However, just as some words in a language have different meanings and terms in different regions and settings, various styles and artistic symbols within an artwork or genre may not always retain the same meaning across times, places, and spaces. As W. David O. Taylor says, any new artform “both opens up and closes down possibilities for the formation” of a community. While Nathan Myrick notes that “communication-cum-community formation is not always a definable ‘good’; sometimes those communities are formed in opposition to other such communities—to destructive effect”, communal identity formation can serve a healthy purpose. While there were elements of Christian self-identification that developed in opposition to Jewish communities—and vice versa—in later centuries, this article focuses on the role music can play in uniting previously incongruous communities. Music’s community formation power may not be “always a definable ‘good’”, but it surely can be. As Simon Frith says, music is “the cultural form best able both to cross borders . . . and to define places”.

4. First-Century Church Caring for Others in Corporate Song

Mark Porter claims that, “musical practices within a church community have the potential to be a location of ethical significance and that the interaction between the musical lives of diverse and different individuals and the church community of which they are a part is a key site for ethical negotiation”. While this belief is set in the context of 20th- and 21st-century Western churches, the claims remain true across cultures and centuries. While both church fathers and twentieth-century church leaders voiced moral concerns over certain styles of music influencing and inspiring elicit behaviors, discussions of musical styles in worship also call for the ethical considerations of inclusion and identity. Within a diverse community, the hegemony of a particular cultural expression implicitly places the expression’s culture in a place of primary importance. Many times, within a culture or subculture, those in places of power work to preserve their place of privilege. The Jewish exclusion of the Exagoge by Ezekiel serves as an example of this in act in the Roman era. By contrast, the Song of Zechariah features an inclusion of Greco-Roman artistry that embodies the Gentile’s full inclusion in the new messianic community.

Curiously, the section of Greek dactylic hexameter does not coincide with the mention of “those that sit in darkness”, which could represent those outside the historical Jewish and Hebrew people and faith (Luke 1:78–79). Instead, as mentioned above, it coincides with the central claims of the song that the God of Israel has been faithful to his covenant with the fathers of the Hebrew faith to rescue them from the hands of their enemies to worship Him in holiness. The song does not give “those that sit in darkness” a moment to have their own cultural artistry heard as they are reminded of their historical identity in some first-century form of tone painting. Instead, the Greek artistic form declares God’s covenant faithfulness to “our father”, modeling the adoption of the Gentiles into the people of God. Likewise, the section of dactylic hexameter ends with lines declaring that they, the people of God, would serve God “in holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life” (v. 75). The juxtaposition of the covenant text with the novel poetic style models an ethic of inclusion and comradery across ethnic boundaries.

Additionally, the wedding of Hebrew poetry and covenant language with Greco-Roman meter invites a reimagining of the term “our enemies” (v. 74). The enemies of the Jews were historically the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greek Seleucids, and finally the Romans; however, the presence of Gentile members in the community and the presence of Greco-Roman lyrics or meter in this song creates a juxtaposition between traditional labels and contemporary situations. This juxtaposition invites a redefinition of one’s enemy for both the Lukan communities’ in-group and out-group. The hostility between Jew and Gentile breaks down in the very artform as Hebrew and Greek poetry combine in a celebration of YHWH’s faithful deliverance through the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth, their messiah. The Greek or Roman followers of Jesus now heard and perhaps...
sang a song in their own genre celebrating YWHW’s faithfulness to them. The inclusion of Greek artistry models to the Lukan congregations that serve the Lord in holiness is not simply an adherence to an ethnic heritage but a welcoming of all the good things of present in creation and culture. Holiness has a positive position, rather than only a negative that stands in opposition to all aspects of the other. The call to be set apart (which holiness means) does not mean an ascetic life detached from the life around them. Instead, those that come into the holy service of YHWH bring their whole selves. Within certain limits, cultural practices, including their artistic styles and genres, were allowed to be offered before him all the days of their lives.

Similarly, the adoption of a foreign or even “pagan” artform into a liturgical context provided an opportunity to the early Jesus followers to realize that those different than them were not inherently the enemy. They could live as a community of believers peacefully within a larger culture, engaging with that culture and welcoming aspects of that culture into their communal practices. Other cultural practices of civic and cultic participation—these two were closely intertwined—never found a home in the Jesus movement: animal sacrifice, cult prostitutes, gladiatorial games, polytheism, or ancestor worship. Various aspects of these ran in contrast to instructed behaviors for the followers of Jesus. However, styles of song, at least initially, seem to have been an area of welcome acceptance and inclusivity. Here stands an example of the Pauline concept of “being all things to all people . . . for the sake of the gospel, that I might share with them in its blessings” (1 Cor 9:22–23, ESV) both expanded and constrained. The liturgical experience of a multicultural hymn expands this Pauline adage by inviting every member to practice “being” something that they “might share with them in [the gospel’s] blessing”. In its historical-cultural context, it also constrains the Pauline passage, demonstrating that Paul and other believers would (or should) not break certain moral principles “that [they] might save some” (v. 22). Hymnic or poetic styles, like dietary habits (Gal 2:11–14; 1 Cor 9:21), were negotiable practices, while the previously mentioned cultic practices of the dominant pagan culture were not acceptable in the name of winning “those outside the law”.

5. Contemporary Ramifications

The first-century Roman world was not so dissimilar from the twenty-first-century Western world. Both represent cosmopolitan melting pots of diverse cultures and belief systems. Both include cultures of social stratification enhancing dominant sentiments of belonging and the “other”. While the modern construct of the “self” may be different from its ancient counterpart, the issues of communal belonging, religious gatekeeping, and acceptable practices of worship remain constant across the millennia.

The wrestling between tradition and fresh creativity seems to reinvent itself with every generation, region, and culture. The Song of Zechariah’s inclusion of artistic expressions from new members from “foreign” cultures speaks to contemporary issues of the cultural assimilation of the Christian church. Whether on the mission field or in diverse population centers, people from new cultural backgrounds frequently join a church or are converted by missionaries. The blending of Hebrew and Greek poetic forms or genres speaks an encouraging word to advocates of multicultural worship such as Sandra Maria Van Opstal.

Christian worship, in both the first and twenty-first centuries, should welcome creative expressions from various cultural heritages. Converts from new cultures should not be asked to adopt the cultural norms of the original or dominant people group. Rather, their participation includes the incorporation of their native artistic idioms. The Song of Zechariah models that not only are the peoples of every tribe and tongue welcome in the house of YHWH, but so are the artistic forms of every tribe and idioma. The Song of Zechariah’s layering of both Hebrew and Greek poetry together in the same lines suggests that multicultural worship is not having a worship jukebox that jumps from one genre to the next with each song, creating a musical schizophrenia. Instead, when the styles or genres can be infused with each other, it invites simultaneous joint participation from the diverse cultures represented in the community. The multicultural song unifying
various genres into a single artistic expression embodies the uniting of people from diverse backgrounds into a united people. Pastoral discernment is required to negotiate the real-world application of this. Perhaps Luke had just such a reason for including a song with only a portion in Greek meter.

6. Conclusions

Embedded in the Lukan nativity narrative, the Song of Zechariah combines Hebrew and Greek poetic forms into a song intended for corporate worship and edification. The central stanza of the Song of Zechariah retains its pattern of Hebrew Psalmic parallelism while also settling into a rhythm of Greek dactylic hexameter. This corporate expression of faith provides an insight into the ethics of style within the first-century Jesus movement and offers potential ramifications for contemporary Christian worship practices. Choices of artistic style in corporate worship are not neutral. While different genres are not inherently evil or prone to causing listeners to sin as twentieth-century Christian traditionalists claimed, the exclusion or inclusion of artistic styles and musical genres speaks to the ethics of who does or does not naturally belong in the community of faith. Privileged genres lead to and/or arise from privileged peoples. To honor one genre above another is to honor one people group above another within the “One New Man”. Just as a single language or *idioma* is not premier within the majority of the Christian faith, neither should a single genre or artistic *idiom* receive preferential treatment within the faith.

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**Appendix A**

For Table A1, the superscript numbers 68–79 are the verse numbers of the song in the Gospel of Luke. The italicized section is the central stanza that contains Greek dactylic hexameter. The superscript letters in the cola A, B, and C stand for synonymous, functional, and antithetical parallelism (respectively).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lyric</th>
<th>Cola</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>68Blessed be the Lord the God of Israel</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For he has visited and performed redemption on his people</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>69And has raised up a horn of salvation for us</td>
<td>B'S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the house of his servant David,</td>
<td>B'F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70As he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets of old,</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>71Salvation from our enemies</td>
<td>C'F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And from the hand of all those who hate us;</td>
<td>C'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>72To fulfill mercy promised to our fathers and</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To remember his holy covenant,</td>
<td>D'B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That he swore to Abraham our father,</td>
<td>D'B'S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>74To grant us [], who from the hand of our enemies</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have been delivered, to serve him [fearlessly] in holiness,</td>
<td>E'B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And righteousness before him all the days of our life.</td>
<td>E'F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>76And you now, child, will be called the prophet of the Most</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,</td>
<td>F'B</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table A1. Cont.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lyric</th>
<th>Cola</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>77. The one to give knowledge of salvation to his people,</td>
<td>G/F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the forgiveness of their sins,</td>
<td>G/F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>78. Through the compassionate affections of our God,</td>
<td>G/F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In which the sunrise will visit us from on high,</td>
<td>G/F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>79. To shine on those who in darkness</td>
<td>G/F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And in the shadow of death sit,</td>
<td>G/F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The one to guide our feet into the way of peace.</td>
<td>G/F</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table A2. Scansion of the Song of Zechariah’s central section as Greek meter.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lyric</th>
<th>Cola</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. To fulfill mercy promised to our fathers and</td>
<td>H/A/F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. To remember his holy covenant, the oath</td>
<td>H/A/F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. That he swore to Abraham our father,</td>
<td>H/A/F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. To grant us [fearlessness], who from the hand of our enemies</td>
<td>H/A/F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Have been delivered, to serve him [fearlessly] in holiness</td>
<td>H/A/F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. and righteousness before him all the days of our life.</td>
<td>H/A/F</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes

1. Find this and Mendelssohn’s further thoughts in (Mendelssohn 1906).
2. For more on Myrick’s work, see (Myrick 2021a, 2021b, 2018a, 2018b).
3. Consider, for example, Hodayot, the Psalms of Solomon and the Odes of Solomon. For more information, see (Pajunen and Penner 2017; Helyer 2002; Embry et al. 2018).
4. For examples, see (Leonhard and Lühr 2014; Leonhard 2014; Brucker 2014, pp. 1–14).
5. Space limits an exhaustive analysis. For the full analysis see (Covarelli 2024).
6. The scansion is provided in the Appendix A.
7. For more on this, see (Boyarin 2006; Eisenbaum 2009; Becker and Reed 2003; Boyarin 2013; Boccaccini et al. 2016; Bird et al. 2023; Fredriksen 2022).
8. For examples, see (Jacobson 1982; Kramer 2022).
9. Having established the Song of Zechariah as a song, I will treat the surviving poetic elements of the songs as musical elements and refer to them as such (Ingalls 2017).
10. For more, see (Oliver 2013; Fredriksen 2003, pp. 41–52).
12. As quoted in (Rommten 2007, p. 33).
13. For more on this, see (Best 1993, pp. 39–40; Bohlman 2001; Molino et al. 1990).
14. Taylor examines numerous common artforms and how each one opens up and closes down these opportunities. (Taylor 2019, p. 11).
15. For more on this, see (Boyarin 2006).
16. For more, see (Frith 1996, p. 125).
In the Greek, the word translated “fearlessly” appears after the phrase “to grant us”, because Greek syntax allows modifiers to appear anywhere in the sentence. However, the adverb applies to serving God in holiness. Throughout my translations, I have aimed to preserve word order where possible because of the significance for identifying line order, line breaks and chiastic structures; however, here, the syntax of the English language causes the meaning of this word to be very difficult to retain in its original place. Therefore, the empty brackets serve to show the place of the word in the Greek text and the brackets around fearlessly show you where the word fits in the English syntax.

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