Christmas Songs in the Book of Luke

1. **There are 5 songs in Luke 1-2 surrounding the Advent and birth of Christ**
    a. 1) Song of Elizabeth; 2) The "Benedictus" of Zechariah; 3) The "Magnificat" of Mary; 4) "Soli Deo Gloria;" and 5) "Nunc Dimittis" of Simeon

2. **What was the cultural attitude/atmosphere when these songs were sung**? From creation until the birth of Christ, Israel unsuccessfully looks for a savior and is terribly disappointed.
    a. List of "saviors" with a lower case "s" are: Joseph, Moses, Joshua, a few of the Judges, Saul, David and a few reformer kings. Then…
    b. Exile. Psalm 89:49 captures Israel's attitude, "Where is your steadfast love of old…"
    c. A return under Ezra and Nehemiah. Optimistic Israel hears Zechariah 4:7 about Zerubbabel (of the line of David). Then…
    d. Jewish practice diluted by Greek syncretism under Alexandar the Great.
        i. Judea on the way between Greek-controlled Egypt and Persia. Used as a steppingstone for each to attack the other
    e. Ptolemy and Seleucid Empires. Long story short:
        i. Jewish practice outlawed by the infamous Antiochus Epiphanes and he and his son systematically persecute the Jews and sacrifice pigs in the 2nd Temple[1]
        ii. Jewish High Priestly office bought and sold[2]
        iii. Maccabean revolt (160 ish B.C.). Recaptured Jerusalem and instituted Hannukah[3]
        iv. Judas Maccabeus allies with Rome against Seleucids, and then…
    f. Rome captures Judea
        i. Pompey takes Jerusalem in 63 B.C. and enters the Holy of Holies[4]
        ii. Mini exiles and resettlements to Rome[5]
        iii. Herod appointed "King" in 40 B.C. Jewish in practice but ethnically, he's an Edomite[6]
    g. Therefore, after humiliating exile, promise after the exile, and yet more humiliation and subjugation, the Jewish Nation is not hopeful.

3. **It is into this dark historical moment that Christ's Advent songs appear**
    a. The song of Elizabeth (Luke 1: 42-45)
    b. The "Magnificat" of Mary (Luke 1:46-55)
    c. The "Benedictus" of Zechariah (Luke 1:67-79)
    d. The Angels' "Gloria In Excelsis Deo" (Luke 2:13-14)
    e. The "Nunc Dimittis" of Simeon (Luke 2:29-32)

4. **Common elements between the songs**
    a. Glory goes to God alone
    b. God saves his people
    c. God remembers his Word and Covenants with his chosen ones

d. God is faithful
e. The humble are exalted and the proud/wicked are brought low
f. Light in the darkness
g. All songs are expressions of joy!

5. Common elements between the songs' singers or hearers

a. Most could be considered outcasts
    i. Elizabeth was a baren old woman
    ii. Mary was pregnant during betrothal
    iii. Zechariah, a priest, had a baren wife and was struck dumb
    iv. Angels sung to unclean shepherds in unceremonious fields
    v. Simeon is an unknown man attending the Temple
b. Most were weak, powerless, and inconsequential figures
    i. Elizabeth hid herself while pregnant having thought herself reproached (Luke 1:24-25)
    ii. Mary was young, unknown, and from a scorned town (John 1:46)
    iii. Shepherds were the lowest on the social ladder
    iv. Nothing is known about Simeon except Luke 2:25-35
c. Most were waiting endlessly and some doubted
    i. Zechariah doubted the words of Gabriel until struck dumb
    ii. Simeon waited his whole life to see Christ presumably at the end
    iii. Simeon's "colleague" Anna spent her long widowhood in the Temple
d. None are heroes, but God uses them anyway
    i. God uses these people to announce His Salvation and light to the dark hopeless world of Judea at the time

6. How are we to consider all these things and what do we do with them?

a. Do we feel that the world around us is broken and hopeless?
b. Do we feel that we are inadequate or somehow unusable?
c. Do we feel that sin in our past keeps us from God?
d. Remember the Biblical songs of Christmas: None of our feelings matter. God saves. God remembers his promises and covenants. God uses broken, seemingly inconsequential people to glorify Himself

7. How can we know that God will be faithful to us too? Consider Psalm 98.

a. One of a group of "Royal Psalms" between Psalm 95-99
b. Hebrews 4:7 credits Psalm 95 to David; likely he wrote 95-99[7]
c. Similar themes across the whole group
    i. Joyful Singing: 95:1, 7; 96:1, 2, 11; 97: 1, 12; 98: 1, 5, 8
    ii. Salvation: 95:1, 7; 96:2; 97:10-11; 98:2-
    iii. Context of "working" salvation or making it known
    iv. God's Work and Reign: 95:5; 96:5; 97:1; 98:1; 99:1
    v. God's Righteous Judgement/Justice: 95:10; 96:13; 97:2-5; 98:9; 99:4—repeated use of "judging with equity"
d. Psalm 97 about evil and wickedness swept away by God

e. Psalm 98 about the King/Savior's established reign after 97's cleansing
f. Psalm 98 could be a dual fulfillment about Davidic conquest AND the coming of Christ[8]
g. Assuming Psalm 98 is about Christ, what is He doing in it?
    i. Saving
    ii. Judging with righteousness and equity
    iii. Accepting worship for his work and salvation
h. How shall we respond to this?
    i. Spurgeon[9] and Calvin[10] both respond by challenging the reader to sing. Spurgeon even cites lyrics from hymns of his day
i. Given the words, we could think the Psalm is about the 2nd coming
    i. Isaac Watts thought so and wrote a hymn paraphrasing Psalm 98 in 1719. Handel set it to music in 1742[11] but we know it as *Joy to the World*

Joy to the World
Verse 1
Joy to the world, the Lord is come (98:4, 98:9)
Let Earth receive her King (98:4)
Let every heart prepare him room (98:2)
And heaven and nature sing (98:7-8)
Verse 2
Joy to the Earth, the Savior reigns (98:9)
Let men their songs employ (98:5-6)
While fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains (98:7-8)
Repeat the sounding joy (98:7-8)
Verse 3
No more let sins and sorrows grow (98:2)
Nor thorns infest the ground (Genesis 3:18)
He comes to make his blessings flow (98:2-3, 9)
Far as the curse is found (Genesis 3:17)
Verse 4
He rules the world with truth and grace (98:2)
And makes the nations prove (98:2, 9)
The glories of His righteousness (98:2, 9)
And wonders of His love

8. With the themes of judgment, restoration, and praise along with Watts' thoughts, it looks like this is the 2nd coming rather than the first
a. Watts reminds us of the logical implications of Christ's 1st AND second coming
b. At His second coming, His saints will be vindicated and he will judge with righteousness and equity, finally. Sins and sorrows will not grow and He will rule the world with truth and grace
c. In the interim, how is this true about Christ's 1st coming

i. Consider Luke 18:42 and Luke 19:10 for “already” making His blessings flow far as the curse is found.
ii. If Jesus restores the traitor Zacchaeus, He restores us too

9. Therefore, since Christ came and rules now, how should we respond?

a. Have Joy!
    i. We may feel that this time is dark, but by comparison with the time before Christ, it is not—we have the Word and God The Spirit
b. Teach the Church to have Joy and take comfort in Christ’s ruling with truth and grace
c. Teach others that though they have sinned, Jesus makes His blessings flow far as the curse is found
d. Take comfort in knowing that the full restoration and righteous judgement will come in God’s good time.

---

[1] *Backgrounds of Early Christianity.* Ferguson, Everett. Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1987. P381-388
[2] Ibid.
[3] 1 Maccabees 4:44-59 (Apocrypha)
[4] Ferguson, p. 388
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid., p. 390
[7] *The Treasury of David,* Charles Spurgeon, 1869. Loc 51476 of 91859
[8] *Commentary on the Psalms*, John Calvin, Geneva, 1557. Loc 21745 of 31316; Spurgeon, Loc 51476
[9] Spurgeon, Loc 51500
[10] Calvin, Loc 21785
[11] Trinity Hymnal (the Red one) printed 2021--195