GLIMPSES OF JOY IN THE BEGINNING OF THE LUCAN GOSPEL: A NARRATIVE-CRITICAL READING OF LK 1:5-2:52[1]

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Introduction

Lucan scholars have long recognized the writer of the third Gospel as an exceedingly skilled and sophisticated storyteller whose masterpiece has attracted both ordinary readers and academic researchers. Moreover, the Gospel according to Luke, replete with the theme of joy, is acclaimed as the "Gospel of Joy."[2] As Marshall points out, "The note of joy sounds throughout Luke-Acts."[3] Bo Reicke observes the frequency with which Luke explores the theme of joy, "No other Evangelist or writer in the New Testament deals so often with the idea of joy as Luke."[4]

In line with the genre that Luke defines as narrative, this paper applies the narrative-critical approach to explore the theme of joy in the Lucan Gospel. This approach allows the

1. This article is based on an excerpt from the author's master's thesis entitled *Glimpses of the Pattern of Joy in the Lucan Gospel: A Narrative Critical Reading of Lk 1:5-2:52.*

2. William G. Morrice, *Joy in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1985), 91.

3. I. Marshall Howard, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary, vol. 3. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 56.

4. Bo Ivar Reicke, *The Gospel of Luke*, trans. Ross Mackenzie (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1964), 77.

readers to immerse themselves in the Lucan narrative, experiencing the Gospel message and encountering God's love and joy in a profound and transformative manner. D. M. Rhoads, who pioneered the approach, derived the theoretical framework from the secular literary critic Seymour Chatman, according to whom the narrative is to be studied as a literary whole and has two levels of communication: story and discourse. The story level is the "what" of the narrative, comprising settings, characters, and events. The discourse level is the "how" of the narrative, concerned with how the given story is told. It includes rhetorical devices and an evaluative point of view. More specifically, the contrast between the "what" and the "how" of the narrative can be exemplified by comparing a particular episode in the synoptic Gospels. Although they share similar events (the "what"), their presentation and interpretation (the "how") vary, resulting in distinct theological implications. Simply stated, the author influences the reader's understanding through the "what" and the "how" of the narrative.

Settings

Social Setting

Luke situates his stories "in the days of Herod the Great" (v. 5), a time that suggests that the Jews were under the control of the Romans through a tyrannical client-king.[5] The loss of political sovereignty led to an increasing emphasis on the coming of the eschatological messiah.[6] On the other hand, the phrase "in the days of" is reminiscent of the language of the beginning

5. Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke, The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1997), 64.

6. Mark L. Strauss, *The Davidic Messiah in Luke-Acts: The Promise and its Fulfillment in Lukan Christology* (UK: Sheffield Academic Press Ltd, 1995), 54.

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of a few prophetic books, which reminds the readers of God's interactions with Israel.[7] So, the infancy narratives unfold against the backdrop of the "political turmoil of the Roman occupation of Palestine," a period characterized by rampant eschatological anticipation.[8]

Spatial Setting

The initial narrative takes place in the sanctuary of the temple, the center of Jerusalem, and the dwelling place of God. The specific setting is the "altar of incense" in the Holy Place, separated from the Holy of Holies by a curtain.[9] It is the second most sacred space, only surpassed by the holy of the holies, which can only be accessed by the High Priest on the Day of Atonement.[10] Such "a privileged setting and an intense locus of communication with the divine"[11] calls the readers' attention to the momentous events unfolding in this sacred space.

Temporal Setting

The narrative unfolds during the daily incense at the temple. The offerings occur twice a day, at dawn and dusk

7. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 64.

8. Joel B. Green, *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), 8-9.

9. Talley, "A Narrative-Critical Interpretation of Allusions to Abraham in the Lukan Infancy Narrative" (PhD diss., New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 2017), 59. In *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses*, https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/narrative-critical-interpretation-allusions/docview/2108943544/se-2 (accessed January 5, 2024).

10. Michael Colin McKeever, "Sacred Space and Discursive Field: The Narrative Function of the Temple in Luke-Acts" (PhD diss., Graduate Theological Union, 1999), 57. In *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses*, https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/sacred-space-discursive-field-narrative-function/docview/304501626/se-2 (accessed June 30, 2024).

11. Ibid., 58.

(Exod. 30:7-8).[12] The assembly waiting outside during the incense offering echoes the event in which the Angel Gabriel visited the prophet Daniel in the temple during the evening incense offering.[13] This resonance signifies that it is time for the evening offering, for only the evening offering will coincide with the prayer time of the assembly.

Chiastic Structure of the Plot Development

Building on Green's analysis, Kuhn found the following four-level chiastic structure in 1:5-25, with the announcement of the good news serving as the central element:[14]

A Faithful Couple, yet Barren Elizabeth (vv. 5-7)
  B Service, Sanctuary, People (vv. 8-10)
    C Angel's appearance and Zechariah's Response (vv. 11-12)
      D Announcement of "Good News" (vv. 13-17; cf. v. 19)
    C` Zechariah's Objection and Angel's Response (vv. 18-20)
  B` People, Sanctuary, Service (vv. 21-23)
A` Pregnant Elizabeth Offers Faithful Praise (vv. 24-25)

The discussion of each level follows below.

A: Faithful Couple; Barren Elizabeth (vv. 5-7)

The first section begins with the portrait of a couple from priestly lineage. In addition to their ancestral purity, Luke uses two parallel phrases to highlight the moral excellence of this couple in light of God's standard.[15] They are "righteous" in the eyes of "God", "observing all the commandments and

12. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 68.

13. Howard, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 54.

14. Karl Allen Kuhn, *The Heart of Biblical Narrative: Rediscovering Biblical Appeal to the Emotions* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 71. https://zh.z-lib.fm/book/16791204/453861/the-heart-of-biblical-narrative-rediscovering-biblical-appeal-to-the-emotions.html (accessed April 13, 2024).

15. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 65.

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ordinances" of the "Lord" blamelessly (v. 6).[16] The implied readers may expect that this blameless couple would have received all kinds of blessings in their lives. They are burdened with the shame of childlessness, viewed within biblical Judaism as a state of divine curse or punishment.[17] Yet, this devout and childless couple might evoke the memories of the implied readers of some biblical figures who faced a similar tragedy: Abraham and Sarah (Gen. 16), Isaac and Rebekah (Gen. 25:21-26), Jacob and Rachel (Gen. 30:22-24), Manoah and his wife (Judg. 13:3-25), and Elkanah and Hannah (1Sam. 1:1-20).[18] The mention of advanced age makes the story of Abraham and Sarah stand out among these biblical allusions (Gen. 17:1). Besides, the words "righteous" and "blamelessly," which appear in the Abrahamic episode, confirm the readers' association of Zechariah and Elizabeth with the OT couple (cf. Gen. 15:6; 17:1).[19] That association rouses the expectation of the implied readers that God would do something for Zechariah and Elizabeth, just as he did for their ancestors.

B: Service, Sanctuary, People (vv. 8-10)

This part is framed by three themes: Zechariah's priestly service, temple, and the people (cf. vv. 8-11; 21-23).[20]

16. Ibid.

17. Gregory J. Polan, "Joy Mixed with Crisis: The Birth Narratives in the Gospels," *The Bible Today* 55, 6 (2017): 412.

18. Jae Wang. Chung, "The Annunciation Narratives in Luke 1:5-56: An Inquiry into Luke's Literary Techniques" (PhD diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1996), 5. In ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/annunciation-narratives-luke- 1-5-56-inquiry-into/docview/304287222/se-2 (accessed January 5, 2024), 85.

19. Joel B. Green, "The Problem of a Beginning: Israel's Scriptures in Luke 1–2," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 4 (1994): 69-70.

20. McKeever, "Sacred Space and Discursive Field: The Narrative Function of the Temple in Luke-Acts," 55.

The priesthood is divided into twenty-four divisions, with each group serving for one week, twice a year.[21] Given a large number of priests, the selection of priests who will offer the incense is done by lot, and the lot is carefully restricted to priests who have never been selected.[22] In wider Greek thought, the casting of lots was understood as a way of circumventing human will, so Luke's mention of this custom affirms the divine will at work.[23] Consequently, Zechariah's opportunity to carry out the incense offering is presented as a once-in-a-lifetime honor.

Outside the sanctuary is the whole assembly of the people. The expression "the whole assembly" implies the entire nation.[24] The offering of incense inside the temple and the people praying outside create a corporate, solemn atmosphere.[25] In the midst of this deeply religious atmosphere, the angel comes.

C: Angel's Appearance and Zechariah's Response (vv. 11-12)

The angel of God appears at the right side of the altar, the side of favor.[26] Zechariah's response typifies the expected reaction of an individual who directly experiences a divine manifestation.[27] Luke prepares the implied readers to engage with the pivotal events of this narrative by highlighting the

21. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 68.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid., 70.

24. McKeever, "Sacred Space and Discursive Field: The Narrative Function of the Temple in Luke-Acts," 56.

25. Darrell L. Bock, "Luke 1:1-9:50," *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1994), 80.

26. Ibid.

27. Talley, "A Narrative-Critical Interpretation of Allusions to Abraham in the Lukan Infancy Narrative," 61.

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sacred setting, the presence of God's messenger, and the priest selected by God.

D: Announcement of "Good News" (vv. 13-17; cf. v. 19)

Luke's decision to make the angel the first speaker in his Gospel is noteworthy. Being the divine messenger, the angel initiates the declaration of God's intended actions, suggesting that "God begins to move onto the center stage."[28] After reassuring Zechariah not to be afraid, the angel proceeds to announce the good news that his prayer has been answered and a son will be granted to him and his wife. The succeeding verse of the angel's announcement features a cluster of terms that convey the theme of joy (χαρά; ἀγαλλίασις; χαίρω; v. 14), as the angel foresees what Zechariah and Elizabeth will experience when God's promise of an offspring begins to be fulfilled. The angel conveys a dual sense of joy.[29] On one level, the birth of John will bring joy and gladness (χαρά; ἀγαλλίασις) to his aging parents. On another level, many will rejoice (χαίρω) because John will participate in the restoration of an entire people.

Χαρά (χαίρω) and ἀγαλλίασις appear as a pair in LXX to celebrate God's saving acts (Ps. 125:2; Ps. 95:12; Hab. 3:18). The use of "χαρά and ἀγαλλίασις" in Psalm 125 captures the jubilant joy felt by the Israelites at the end of their long exile in Babylon. Similarly, "χαίρω and ἀγαλλιάω" depict the joyful response of all creation as God restores harmony and fertility to the world in Psalm 95. Hab. 3:18 strikes a different note as the people continue to exult in God, using joyous language (ἀγαλλιάω; χαίρω) even amidst impoverished circumstances.

28. Chung, "The Annunciation Narratives in Luke 1:5-56," 89.

29. Kindalee Pfremmer De Long, "Surprised by God: Praise Responses in the Narrative of Luke – Acts," *Beiheft zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche*, vol. 166 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009), 139.

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This multifaceted portrayal of joy, encompassing both celebratory expressions of God's redemptive work and a steadfast posture of rejoicing even amidst trial and suffering, provides an important context for understanding Luke's use of the language of joy. All this joy has eschatological implications. This eschatological joy is further proved in the second half of verse 14, where the rejoicing has a corporate dimension. The narrative explicitly portrays the needs and obstacles faced by Zechariah and Elizabeth, while Luke, at the same time, alludes to the needs and challenges confronting Israel.[30] The announcement of John's birth intertwines these two narrative threads: God's answer to the petition of a faithful servant and the fulfillment of God's promise to Israel. At this moment, the divine plan begins to unfold, signaling the dawning of a new era, full of hope and joy, as God acts to redeem his people. The joy proclaimed in verse 14b signals the shift from the needs of the parents to the needs of the people praying outside the sanctuary.[31]

The eschatological atmosphere is intensified when the angel explains the reasons for the joyful announcement of John's birth.[32] The angel gives a five-fold preview of the character and purpose of John's life.[33] First, John will be great in the sight of God (v. 15a). John's future mission is God-oriented (ἐνώπιον τοῦ Κυρίου), evident in the twofold reference to God. Second, John will have a special consecration to God (v. 15b). Complete abstinence from wine and other strong drinks echoes the angelic announcement of the birth of Samson (Judg. 13:3-6).[34] Third,

30. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 73.

31. Ibid., 74.

32. Chung, "The Annunciation Narratives in Luke 1:5-56," 92.

33. John T. Carroll, *Luke: A Commentary*. New Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 30-31.

34. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 75.

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John will be filled with the Holy Spirit while he is still in the womb. This is quite unprecedented (v. 15c). There is a widespread tradition in Second Temple Judaism that the prophetic spirit has been withdrawn from Israel since the destruction of the first temple, but will be poured out upon the restored Israel at the end of the age (cf. Joel 2:28-32).[35] Therefore, the mention of the Holy Spirit in the story of John underscores the divine purpose and heightens the sense of eschatological expectation in the narrative. Fourth, he will prepare people fit for the Lord, turning them back to God and God's way (vv. 16; 17b). Fifth, John will go before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah (v. 17a). The wording of this verse is similar to Mal. 3:1, 24-25, which contains a promise of the coming of Elijah before the end-time.[36] A parallelism between the end-time ministry of Elijah and the reforming ministry of John is easily detected.[37] The repeated references to God and the heavily eschatological emphasis indicate that God is actively working to bring an end to the time of anticipation. "The promise is at the dawn of its fulfillment."[38]

C`: Zechariah's Objection and Angel's Response (vv. 18-20)

The narrative unfolds in a manner consistent with other ancient, divinely directed-accounts. The implied readers are expected to have rejoiced at the good news of conception and

35. Chung, "The Annunciation Narratives in Luke 1:5-56", 93.

36. Ian Peter Pells, "How Far If at All Do the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke Set the Agenda for the Rest of Their Gospels and Do Those Agendas Reflect Common Matters of Concern?" (MA Thesis, University of Exeter, 2012), 80. In *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses*, https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/how-far-if-at-all-do-infancy-narratives-gospels/docview/1651907696/se-2 (accessed June 30, 2024).

37. Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50,* 80.

38. Strauss, *The Davidic Messiah in Luke-Acts*, 86.

are ready to witness its fulfillment with Zechariah and the whole assembly. However, in verse 18, Luke shifts the story in a markedly different direction by "introducing a human touch into God's drama."[39]

Zechariah responds to the angel's annunciation with the very words κατὰ τί γνώσομαι ("how shall I know this?" v. 18) that Abraham used in Gen 15:8, similarly on the grounds of his and his wife's advanced age.[40] Scholars agree that Zechariah must have the Abrahamic story in mind as Luke has him utter the very word of his predecessor Abraham.[41] As a devout priest who knew the history of his people, Zechariah must also be familiar with other remarkable examples of God blessing barren women with significant sons: Sarah conceiving Isaac, Rachel conceiving Joseph, the wife of Manoah bearing Samson, and Hannah bearing Samuel.[42] Besides, the angel's statement (v. 13) that Zechariah's prayer was heard implies that Zechariah has been praying for a son. However, Zechariah's response indicates that he is not petitioning for a personal need at that moment. Rather, as prayers for national salvation are commonly offered during the evening ritual, he is likely interceding for the arrival of the messiah and the era of salvation.[43] Zechariah surpassed the age of childbearing as well as the age of enthusiastic expectation that such a miracle would happen to him. As Talley observes, Luke presents an ironic situation in which the devout and faithful priest, who bestowed divine

39. Chung, "The Annunciation Narratives in Luke 1:5-56," 99.

40. Talley, "A Narrative-Critical Interpretation of Allusions to Abraham in the Lukan Infancy Narrative," 66.

41. De Long, *Surprised by God*, 175.

42. Robert H. Stein, "Luke," *New American Commentary*, vol. 24 (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 46.

43. Howard, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 56.

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blessings upon others, did not himself display the expectation that God would answer his own prayers.[44]

At this juncture, the angel discloses his identity and credentials as Angel Gabriel, who appeared only in the book of Daniel in the OT (Dan. 8:16; 9:21).[45] Gabriel's role is linked to eschatological events, as he is the messenger who delivered the prophecy of the seventy weeks. (Dan. 8:15-16; 9:21).[46] Additionally, Luke intends the readers to see a parallelism between Gabriel's appearance to Daniel and his appearance to Zechariah.[47] In both appearances (Lk 1:10-11; Dan. 9:20-21), Gabriel comes at the time of liturgical prayer to a figure who has been praying in distress.[48]

The εὐαγγελίζω (announce good news) modified by the plural ταῦτα suggests that the entirety of the angelic message (vv. 13-17) is in view, indicating that the birth of John the Baptist is part of the good news being announced.[49]

Because of Zechariah's doubt, which is stated explicitly by the angel (1:20b), Zechariah is struck dumb. Luke employs a dual description of Zechariah as "speechless" and "unable to speak" to accentuate Gabriel's credentials as a trustworthy divine messenger.[50] The implied readers are supposed to witness the initial realization of God's proclamation in the

44. Talley, "A Narrative-Critical Interpretation of Allusions to Abraham in the Lukan Infancy Narrative," 62.

45. Raymond E. Brown, "The Annunciation to Zechariah, the Birth of the Baptist, and the *Benedictus* (Luke 1:5-25, 57-80)," *Worship* 62.6 (1988): 485.

46. Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 92.

47. Brown, "The Annunciation to Zechariah," 485.

48. Ibid.

49. Chung, "The Annunciation Narratives in Luke 1:5-56," 102.

50. Talley, "A Narrative-Critical Interpretation of Allusions to Abraham in the Lukan Infancy Narrative," 67.

verse that follows (v. 22). The sign serves not only a punitive purpose but also an educational function, as this is how Zechariah will come to "know" (γνώσομαι Lk 1:18; γνῶσιν Lk 1:77) the truth of the angel's announcement.[51] Furthermore, the angel's claim that the words will be fulfilled (πληρόω) in due time conveys a sense of orderly (καθεξῆς cf. Lk 1:3) progression under the control of God, which is a central theme that Luke aims to establish through his narrative.[52]

B`: People, Sanctuary, Service (vv. 21-23)

Verses 21-23 parallel verses 8-10 in the chiastic structure. In verses 8-10, the people who are praying outside the temple serve as the backdrop for the annunciation, while in verses 21-23, the same people are not only the recipients of the joyful news but also witnesses of the initial fulfillment of the heavenly messenger's proclamation.[53] Dumbstruck, Zechariah cannot bless the people who are left to themselves to interpret the sign of the silent Zechariah.

Luke ends the first part of the story by describing how Zechariah finishes his duty and returns home. Luke slows down the pace of his narrative, granting the characters and readers time to comprehend and appreciate this concealed joyful message.[54] Zechariah, the priest, and the people must learn to be patient and reflect on God's unpredictable ways of fulfilling his promises.[55]

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51. Chung, "The Annunciation Narratives in Luke 1:5-56," 102.

52. Ibid., 103.

53. Ibid., 106.

54. Scott F. Spencer, "Luke," *Two Horizons New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), 48.

55. Ibid.

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A`: Pregnant Elizabeth Offers Faithful Praise (vv. 24-25)

Luke reports Elizabeth's conception, fulfilling the initial promise of Gabriel. She hides herself for five months. The narrative does not explain Elizabeth's decision to withdraw from public view, yet this detail accounts for Mary's unawareness of Elizabeth's conception mentioned in 1:36.[56] Although no vocabulary of joy appears in this section, the joyful atmosphere radiates from Elizabeth's reaction to her conception, "So has the Lord done for me ...to take away my disgrace..." (v 25). The joyful Elizabeth correctly interprets the miraculous nature of her conception as the gracious act of God. The dual use of the first-person singular pronoun (μοι) in her concise statement suggests that she perceives her conception solely as a personal and private matter to rejoice about, and has not yet fully grasped the broader significance of the divine act.[57] Besides, Elizabeth's response echoes that of Rachel who found herself in a similar situation, "God has removed my disgrace" (Gen 30:23).[58] In connection with Elizabeth's five-month seclusion, Bosetti insightfully points out, "When God speaks it is right that one keep silent (Zechariah remained mute); when God works marvels it is not right to lose oneself in chatter, but to immerse oneself in religious silence. And this scene ends as it had begun in Lk 1:8: "before God" (ἔναντι τοῦ θεοῦ).[59]

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56. Stein, *Luke*, 78.

57. Chung, "The Annunciation Narratives in Luke 1:5-56," 109.

58. Elisabeth Ann Johnson, "Barrenness, Birth, and Biblical Allusions in Luke 1–2" (PhD diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 2000), 108. In *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses*, https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/barrenness-birth-biblical-allusions-luke-1-2/docview/304632822/se-2 (accessed June 30, 2024).

59. Elena Bosetti, *Luke: The Song of God's Mercy*, trans. Julia Mary Darrenkamp, FSP (USA: Pauline Books & Media, 2006),19.

Characterization

Zechariah

At the beginning of the narrative, Zechariah is introduced with his wife Elizabeth and characterized as a pious and law-abiding couple before God (1:5-6). Despite their childlessness, which by no means is a punishment, Zechariah must be praying and enduring significant suffering due to this reality. Thus, he struggles to believe that God will still answer his petition after a prolonged and agonizing wait. Even when the angel announces the birth of his son, Zechariah displays skepticism by mentioning their advanced age as an obstacle. It appears that, in their younger years, Zechariah maintained trust in God's power to overcome his wife's barrenness. As the days pass, nothing changes except Zechariah's enthusiasm and trust in God. Although he still faithfully carries out his priestly duties, the years of waiting for the "unanswered petition" have seemingly obscured his perception of God as compassionate, relational, and powerful. Though he still remembers those miraculous interventions of God towards his ancestors, they seem to be just stories that happened a long time ago. He is waiting, but has forgotten what he is waiting for. As years of waiting in vain pass, his sense of joy seems to leave him.

During this moment of absence of joy, Luke encourages the readers to pause and reflect alongside the silent Zechariah, contemplating God's unexpected plan. The narrative prompts the readers to consider the following: if a devout and faithful priest struggles to believe in God's remarkable deeds, who else can trust in divine providence? Will Zechariah's period of solitude lead to a transformation in his understanding and faith?

Elizabeth

Elizabeth is introduced alongside her husband as a descendant of a priestly family. Together with her husband, she is a

living example of what it means to be righteous before God. However, she suffers from barrenness until she miraculously conceives a son at her advanced age. Significantly, there is no mention of her complaint about this condition. Rather, the first words she utters are words of praise, demonstrating that her long suffering from barrenness has not deprived her of the ability to recognize and celebrate God's providential action. Elizabeth's response is a stark contrast to Zechariah's initial skepticism. Her praise signifies that she understands her conception as a divine gift bestowed in God's perfect timing, not as a consequence of her own righteousness or piety, but solely because of the graciousness of God. She not only praises God immediately but also spends five months more contemplating this mystery. Bosetti observes, "Elizabeth retires from public view to remain totally beneath the gaze of God, who has decided to rest the divine gaze upon her."[60] As such, Elizabeth emerges as the first grateful and joyful recipient of God's grace in this Gospel. However, her understanding remains incomplete, as the eschatological significance of John's role has not been revealed to her yet. Consequently, her joy, though profound, is not yet fully realized, and she retains the capacity for even deeper celebration of God's providential work.

The Rhetorical Device of Intertextuality

The most predominant rhetorical device used in this section is allusion. John Drury points out that in this section, "septuagintal words and phrases are as thick on the ground as autumn leaves."[61] Luke draws upon a range of OT language and imageries, particularly how the first two characters recall

60. Ibid.

61. John Drury, *Tradition and Design in Luke's Gospel: A Study in Early Christian Historiography* (USA: John Knox Press, 1977), 49.

biblical patterns concerning previously barren women conceiving remarkable sons. Through these allusions, Luke takes the readers back to Israel's history, even to the very beginning: the Abrahamic story.[62] Green makes a similar observation, "Luke is not introducing a new story, but continuing an old one, as if the real 'beginning' were the Septuagint."[63] Luke intends to make his readers aware that the same God is at work in behalf of his people in the past and in his own day.[64] Luke references the Book of the Prophet Malachi, which is the final book of the Hebrew Scriptures according to the Septuagint canon.[65] Significantly, the last two verses of Malachi (3:23-24), especially the final one, appear nearly verbatim in Luke 1:17, suggesting that Luke consciously writes a sequel to the narrative of God's story.

Evaluative Point of View

Luke's narrative begins by situating the story within the framework of Israel's salvation history, with God as the central protagonist. Moreover, Luke evaluates all events from the perspective of the divine, as evidenced by his frequent use of phrases like "in the sight of God" or "before God" (ἐναντίον τοῦ Θεοῦ, vv. 6, 8; ἐνώπιον τοῦ Κυρίου, vv. 15, 17, 19). The righteousness of Zechariah and Elizabeth, the greatness of John, and the credibility of Angel Gabriel are measured according to God's evaluative point of view. Furthermore, the messenger of God,

62. Jean Noël Aletti, "Unbelief and faith in Luke 1:5-25: Why does Luke's account begin with unbelief?" *Kanien* 1.1 (2013): 15.

63. Green, "The Problem of a Beginning: Israel's Scriptures in Luke 1–2," 66.

64. Andrew E. Ar*terbury, "Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary,"* Reading the New Testament 2nd Series (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2019), 23.

65. Richard Rohr, *The Good News according to Luke: Spiritual Reflections* (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 61.

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Angel Gabriel, is made the first speaker, announcing God's plan for his people. This implies that God takes the initiative to act in Luke's narrative, and then everything unfolds based on God's agenda. In Talley's words, "Luke is reminding the reader that the narrative is God's story."[66]

God's solution to the sterility of Zechariah and Elizabeth is interwoven with the broader covenantal relationship between God and his people.[67] Luke gives no hint about Israel's expectation and hopelessness, but the intertwined threads enable the readers to envision a people who suffered from the long and disappointing wait, even to the point of lacking hope of receiving an affirmative answer to their prayers. Through this, the implied readers are made aware that the people waiting outside the temple symbolize God's people eagerly anticipating the fulfillment of the divine promises. Ultimately, God answers the desires of his people.

The Theme of Joy

The best news in this episode is that God takes the initiative to bring joy to his people. Luke locates most of the action in the temple, where God is most present. In this sacred place, God delegates his messenger to announce the birth of John. The announcement is not only good news for his elderly parents but also signifies the dawn of eschatological fulfillment. "John represents a bridge between promise and fulfillment."[68] In this sense, this joy is intimately related to the fulfillment of God's promise. God is reaching out to his people in the present in a

66. Talley, "A Narrative-Critical Interpretation of Allusions to Abraham in the Lukan Infancy Narrative," 65.

67. Ibid.

68. Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 86.

manner that parallels the way he interacted with his people historically.[69]

Second, the same faithful God is still at work, remembering his covenant with his people and answering their prayers. Luke imbues the entire narrative with the style and ambiance of the OT by frequently alluding to biblical images and expressions. As the readers engage with this episode, those joyful stories made possible by God's gracious intervention must echo in their minds. After years of prayers and waiting, the barren and nearly distressed mothers were granted unexpected and remarkable sons. All the promises came to pass according to the divine agenda. In Darrell Bock's words, "God's answers sometimes come at a surprising time, in a surprising place, and in a surprising way."[70]

Most importantly, human doubt cannot thwart God's plan to bring his people joy.[71] Zechariah's lack of faith postpones the joyful moments predicted by Gabriel. A period of silence temporarily replaces joy. Zechariah needed to spend time contemplating the divine salvation, which would equip him for an appropriate response when the promise would have been fulfilled. It was a silent interval for Zechariah to cultivate trust in God.

In summary, this joy stems from a faithful God who proactively brings it to his people. Nothing can hinder the divine will from unfolding. All those involved in this divine mystery are summoned to ponder, to engage with this merciful God, and then to rejoice and extol God.

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69. Chung, "The Annunciation Narratives in Luke 1:5-56," 108.

70. Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 83.

71. Mark Coleridge, *The Birth of the Lukan Narrative: Narrative as Christology in Luke 1–2*, *JSNT Supplement Series* 88 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 49.

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