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Title “Thou Shalt Be Silent”: Literary Allusions to Isaiah 6:1-8 in Luke 1:5-25

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Abstract Luke 1:5-25 shares several themes and type-scenes in common with other biblical narratives, and yet one major allusion has often been overlooked: its connection with Isaiah 6:1-8. Like the first chapter of Luke, Isaiah 6 is also a prophetic call narrative that takes place in the temple, involves an angelic encounter, and explores the themes of silence and language. Despite the centrality of the temple in Israelite theology, temple epiphanies are surprisingly uncommon in the Hebrew Bible. Furthermore, in no other biblical texts does the recipient of the vision encounter an angel specifically at the temple’s altar. Where Zechariah is struck dumb, Isaiah also finds himself unable to speak and must have his language cleansed prior to his prophetic task. Because these are the only two texts in the Bible that share these convergences, it is clear that Luke intentionally alluded to Isaiah 6:1-8 in crafting the opening of his narrative. This allusion helps inform his audience about Jewish theology, sets John the Baptist apart as a prophetic figure, and introduces Luke’s later use of Isaiah 6:9-10 in Luke-Acts.

“THOU SHALT BE SILENT”: LITERARY ALLUSIONS TO ISAIAH 6:1-8 IN LUKE 1:5-25

Kimberly M. Berkey

Scholars have long recognized the importance of Isaiah for the theological and christological agenda of Luke-Acts.¹ In all of this scholarship, however, at least one major Lucan allusion to Isaiah has been overlooked, in part because it is not a direct

1. James Flammig, “The New Testament Use of Isaiah,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 11 (1968): 89-103; Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), 426, 454, 458-59; David Seccombe, “Luke and Isaiah,” *New Testament Studies* 27 (1981): 252-59; Geoffrey W. Grogan, “The Light and the Stone: A Christological Study in Luke and Isaiah,” in *Christ the Lord: Studies in Christology Presented to Donald Guthrie*, ed. Harold H. Rowdon (Illinois: Inter-Varsity, 1982), 151-67; C. K. Barrett, “Luke/Acts,” in *It Is Written: Scripture Citing Scripture*, ed. D. A. Carson and H. G. M. Williamson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 235-36; James A. Sanders, “From Isaiah 61 to Luke 4,” in *Luke and Scripture: The Function of Sacred Tradition in Luke-Acts*, ed. Craig A. Evans and James A. Sanders (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 46-69; Charles A. Kimball, *Jesus’ Exposition of the Old Testament in Luke’s Gospel* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 97; Rebecca I. Denova, *The Things Accomplished among Us: Prophetic Tradition in the Structural Pattern of Luke-Acts* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997); Thomas S. Moore, “The Lucan Great Commission and the Isaianic Servant,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154 (1997): 47-60; Christopher Tuckett, “Isaiah in Q,” in *Isaiah in the New Testament*, ed. Steve Moyise and Maarten J. J. Menken (London: Clark, 2005), 51-61; Bart J. Koet, “Isaiah in Luke-Acts,” in Moyise and Menken, *Isaiah in the New Testament*, 79-100; Peter Mallen, *The Reading and Transformation of Isaiah in Luke-Acts* (London: Clark, 2008). For a broader Christological survey of Luke’s use of the entire Hebrew Bible, including several references to Isaiah passages, see Darrell L. Bock, *Proclamation from Prophecy and Pattern: Lucan Old Testament Christology* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1987).

quotation or verbal parallel. It is my contention that Luke 1:5-25 contains intentional allusions to Isaiah 6:1-8,² particularly in its cultic setting, angelic encounter, and theme of silence. This paper will commence a rhetorical analysis of the relationship between Luke 1:5-25 and Isaiah 6:1-8 and explore various functions of such an allusion.

Textual Summary

Luke's narrative opens with two elements central to Jewish devotion: a pious Jewish family and the Jerusalem temple.³ We meet Zechariah (KJV Zacharias) and Elisabeth, an elderly, childless couple from the tribe of Levi. At the time of the narrative, it is Zechariah's priestly privilege to offer incense at the temple. Interrupting the priest's ministrations, the angel Gabriel appears and promises Zechariah a son who will "make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Luke 1:17).⁴ Openly skeptical of the ability of his post-menopausal wife to bear a child, Zechariah asks for a sign and is struck dumb until the birth of the promised infant. It is only some nine months later when he confirms the angelically appointed name of the child (John) that his speech returns.

Luke 1:5-25 clearly shares a number of themes in common with other biblical narratives.⁵ Like Abraham and Sarah, John's parents are elderly and barren, granted a miraculous child despite one parent's disbelief (Genesis 18:12-14). As in the case of Hannah, also bar-

2. This connection has never before been noted, with the possible exception of a single sentence in François Bovon, *Luke 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1-9:50*, trans. Christine M. Thomas (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 32. Unfortunately, the brevity and ambiguity of Bovon's reference to the relationship between Luke 1:5-25 and Isaiah 6 renders it useless for the purpose of this paper.

3. See R. Alan Culpepper and Gail R. O'Day, *Luke-John* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 55; Barrett, "Luke/Acts," 235.

4. All scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the King James Version (KJV).

5. For an analysis of Luke's hermeneutical methods regarding these allusions, see Joel B. Green, "The Problem of a Beginning: Israel's Scriptures in Luke 1-2," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 4 (1994): 61-86; Bock, *Proclamation from Prophecy and Pattern*, 57-58, 88.

ren, the promise of a son is given in the temple (1 Samuel 1:7, 10).⁶ Like both Samuel and Samson, John will not drink alcohol, hinting at his prophetic calling (Luke 1:15; 1 Samuel 1:11; Judges 13:4-5).⁷ In these and several other parallels, Luke demonstrates an obvious interest in and familiarity with the Hebrew Bible and deems it necessary to connect his gospel with some of Israel's most cherished myths. Luke wants to connect the Christian movement with its Jewish heritage and does so by connecting his narrative with the Hebrew Bible.⁸ Another of these echoes, to which we now turn, is Isaiah's commission in Isaiah 6.

Much like Zechariah, Isaiah is startled to find himself the unexpected recipient of a heavenly epiphany. He stumbles into the

6. Parallels with the mother of Samuel continue throughout the infancy narrative. Indeed, it is widely agreed that the Magnificat is based primarily on the Song of Hannah (1 Samuel 2:1-10). See Walter R. Bowie, *The Gospel according to St. Luke* (New York: Abingdon, 1952), 41-42; Helmer Ringgren, "Luke's Use of the Old Testament," *Harvard Theological Review* 79 (1986): 227-35; Bock, *Proclamation from Prophecy and Pattern*, 69; Raymond E. Brown, "The Annunciation to Zechariah, the Birth of the Baptist, and the Benedictus (Luke 1:5-25; 57-80)," *Worship* 62 (1988): 484-85; James A. Sanders, "Isaiah in Luke," in Evans and Sanders, *Luke and Scripture*, 17; Denova, *Things Accomplished among Us*, 97.

7. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke I-IX* (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 326. Although Fitzmyer claims that John will be subject to a Nazarite vow, I believe that, lacking a reference to uncut hair, the nature of his privation remains ambiguous. See also Culpepper and O'Day, *Luke-John*, 46, for whom abstinence from alcohol is appropriate for Levites (Leviticus 10:9) and prophets as well as Nazarites.

8. Luke's application of the Hebrew Bible serves several purposes. He is particularly interested in showing continuity with past prophecy; see Nils A. Dahl, "The Story of Abraham in Luke-Acts," in *Studies in Luke-Acts*, ed. Leander E. Keck and J. Louis Martyn (New York: Abingdon, 1966), 139-58; D. Moody Smith Jr., "The Use of the Old Testament in the New," in *The Use of the Old Testament in the New and Other Essays*, ed. James M. Efrid (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1972), 51; Jacob Jervell, "The Center of Scripture in Luke," in *The Unknown Paul: Essays on Luke-Acts and Early Christian History*, ed. Jacob Jervell (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 122-37; Jack T. Sanders, "The Prophetic Use of the Scriptures in Luke-Acts," in *Early Jewish and Christian Exegesis*, ed. Craig A. Evans and William F. Stinespring (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 191-98; Brigid C. Frein, "Narrative Predictions, Old Testament Prophecies and Luke's Sense of Fulfilment," *New Testament Studies* 40 (1994): 22-37. For an example of how Luke uses the Hebrew Bible to illuminate the relationship between Jews and Gentiles, see Larrimore C. Crockett, "Luke 4:25-27 and Jewish-Gentile Relations in Luke-Acts," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 88 (1969): 177-83.

divine council at the exact moment YHWH pronounces judgment on Israel.⁹ Isaiah sees the Lord and his attendant angels and, fearing destruction, bemoans the impurity of both himself and Israel. A seraph approaches and ritually cleanses Isaiah's mouth with a hot coal from the altar, after which the prophet volunteers to bear YHWH's message to Israel, to "make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed" (Isaiah 6:10).

This Isaianic task already has a strong and much-studied presence in the New Testament. To begin with, scholars have noted an interesting shift in verb moods from the Masoretic Text to the LXX. In the Hebrew, the verbs are imperative, commanding Isaiah to make the minds of the people dull. Finding this problematic, the LXX translators changed the verbs to the indicative mood, thus reading "for the heart of this people *has become* fattened, and *they* hear heavily with their ears and *they* shut their eyes" (my translation). The LXX translators, anxious about the theological difficulties of a god who actively renders his people rebellious, changed the Hebrew imperatives into Greek indicatives, thus shifting the blame for YHWH's rejection. It is this Septuagintal translation, with its emphasis on Israel's obstinacy, that found its way into New Testament quotations of Isaiah 6:9-10 (Matthew 13:14; Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10; Acts 28:26-27).

There is a general consensus that Isaiah's writings were crucial to the structure and content of Luke's gospel. Luke contains four direct Isaiah quotations (i.e., quotations in which he explicitly identifies Isaiah as the source or plainly asserts that he is quoting scripture), two of which he shares with Matthew and Mark (Isaiah 40:3-5 in Luke 3:4-5; Isaiah 56:7 in Luke 19:46) and two of which are uniquely his (Isaiah 61:1-2 in Luke 4:17-19; Isaiah 53:12 in Luke

9. John D. Watts, *Isaiah 1-33* (Nashville: Nelson Reference & Electronic, 2005), 108.

22:37). Acts includes five further quotations (Isaiah 66:1-2a; 53:7-8; 55:3; 49:6; 6:9-10).¹⁰

Luke’s careful placement of quotations from and allusions to Isaiah signals the importance he affords the prophet. Bart J. Koet has noted that Luke quotes Isaiah when introducing leading characters (e.g., Jesus, John the Baptist, and Stephen) and sometimes merely alludes to an Isaiah text in one passage in preparation for a more direct quotation later.¹¹

Peter Mallen analyzes Luke’s use of Isaiah in the context of Second Temple Judaism, concluding that the evangelist employs Isaiah to several ends: to explain and interpret events; to demonstrate that history is unfolding according to God’s plan, however unconventional; to lend credibility to his narrative; to show that salvation extends to the Gentiles; to explain Israel’s mixed response to the Christian message; and to provide traditional salvation imagery without specifically referencing Mosaic law.¹²

Rhetorical Parallels

Although both Isaiah 6 and Luke 1 contain elements connecting them with numerous other biblical call narratives,¹³ three elements

10. Koet, “Isaiah in Luke-Acts,” 79-80.

11. Koet, “Isaiah in Luke-Acts,” 79-80. As instances of Isaianic allusions that are later quoted, Koet provides the pairing of Isaiah 49:6/Luke 2:28-32, later quoted in Acts 13:47; Isaiah 6:9/Luke 8:10, later quoted in Acts 28:26-27; and Isaiah 53:2/Luke 22:37, later quoted in Acts 8:32-33. It may be of interest to note that all the allusions Koet identifies are in the Gospel of Luke, while the later direct quotations are all found in the book of Acts.

12. Mallen, *Reading and Transformation*, 100, 133, 157, 201-3.

13. There is some disagreement over whether or not Luke 1:5-25 and Isaiah 6 can actually be called “call narratives.” In the case of Isaiah 6, Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1-39* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 223, 226, argues that since it doesn’t come at the beginning of the book and Isaiah is never reassured by God, it doesn’t qualify as an official call, while Watts, *Isaiah 1-33*, 104, 108, notes that Isaiah is not commissioned so much as he volunteers for the prophetic task. Several others, however, do term Isaiah 6 a call narrative. See W. J. Dumbrell, “Worship and Isaiah 6,” *Reformed Theological Review* 43 (1984): 1, 4, who still notes the atypical lack of feeling unworthy; G. K. Beale, “Isaiah VI 9-13: A Retributive Taunt against Idolatry,” *Vetus Testamentum* 41 (1991): 260; Gene M. Tucker, *The Book of Isaiah 1-39* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 101-4. In the case of Luke

in particular link them specifically with each other: their temple setting, dynamic interaction with the altar, and theme of silence.

The first of these elements is their shared setting, which is striking given that temple epiphanies are so uncommon. Moses encounters YHWH in a burning bush on Mt. Horeb (Exodus 3:1-2), Gideon meets an angel on a threshing-floor (Judges 6:11), and Ezekiel is on the banks of a river when he sees the Lord's chariot approaching (Ezekiel 1:1). Although Jeremiah's exact location at the time of his commission is not specified, we learn from Jeremiah 1:1 that he lives in the Levitical town of Anathoth, not Jerusalem. Despite being steeped in a priestly tradition, not even Jeremiah opens his narrative with a temple epiphany. Even the case of Micaiah is ambiguous on this point.¹⁴ He never gives the setting for his vision but simply recounts that he "saw the LORD sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing by him" (1 Kings 22:19). Although the natural location of YHWH's throne and attendants is in the temple, this is not an adequate parallel to Isaiah 6 because no temple accoutrements play any role in his vision and because the temple is not specifically mentioned.

A possible exception to the rarity of call narratives in the temple is the case of Samuel. The prophet is described as lying "in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was" (1 Samuel 3:3), when he hears the voice of God and mistakes it to be Eli. I would argue

1:5-25, John Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20* (Dallas: Word Books, 1989), 24, feels that any similarities with biblical commission narratives are incidental to Luke's use of Old Testament motifs and that it is more properly called a birth oracle. Fearghus O. Fearghail, "The Literary Forms of Lk 1,5-25 and 1,26-38," *Marianum* 43 (1981): 321-44, similarly advocates caution but disagrees that Luke 1:5-25 is a birth annunciation, preferring the term "miracle story." He does admit, however, that the annunciation of Jesus's birth in 1:26-38 has more in common with call narratives, and given that the two scenes are meant to be parallel (see Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 250-51), I don't think we can be too rigid in our limitations on Luke 1:5-25. For examples of those who share my view of Luke 1:5-25 as a commissioning scene, see Terence Y. Mullins, "New Testament Commission Forms, Especially in Luke-Acts," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 95 (1976): 603-14; Benjamin J. Hubbard, "Commissioning Stories in Luke-Acts: A Study of their Antecedents, Form and Content," *Semeia* 8 (1977): 103-26.

14. Which is perhaps of some importance, given the fact that this story forms the closest parallel to Isaiah 6:9-10 in the Hebrew Bible. See Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1-39*, 224.

that the temple setting ought to be considered less important for this narrative since, again unlike Isaiah and Zechariah, Samuel does not interact in any significant way with the features of the sanctuary. Given Luke’s obvious fascination with the Jerusalem temple,¹⁵ it would be very odd for him not to engage one of the most potent temple scenes available in the Hebrew Bible.

The second element linking Luke 1:5-25 with Isaiah 6 is the dynamic interaction with the altar. In both texts, the temple setting forms more than a mere backdrop. First, both stories include an element of smoke. It was Zechariah’s duty to offer the evening incense (Luke 1:9; cf. Revelation 8:4),¹⁶ while Isaiah also witnesses incense smoke filling the temple following the trisagion of the seraphim: “The posts of the door moved . . . and the house was filled with smoke” (Isaiah 6:4).¹⁷ Second, the altar becomes an important focal point for angelic¹⁸ encounters in both narratives. Luke describes Gabriel “standing on the right side of the altar of incense” (Luke 1:11),¹⁹ while Isaiah is ritually cleansed by a seraph holding “a live coal . . . which he had taken . . . from off the altar” (Isaiah 6:6). In

15. Not only does his infancy narrative begin and end in the temple (Luke 1:9; 2:46), but so does the entire gospel (24:53). See Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 237, 351-54, 451, 485; J. Bradley Chance, *Jerusalem, the Temple, and the New Age in Luke-Acts* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1988); James M. Dawsey, “The Origin of Luke’s Positive Perception of the Temple,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 18 (1991): 5-22.

16. Although Bowie maintains that we cannot be sure whether this was the morning or evening offering (*Gospel according to St. Luke*, 32), Fitzmyer believes that parallels with Daniel 9 suggest that Zechariah was performing the evening ritual at the time he saw Gabriel (*Gospel according to Luke I-IX*, 318, 324). At any rate, in both cases Zechariah is interacting with smoke.

17. Given the temple setting, it seems unnecessary to attempt to identify this smoke with the transient *shekinah* and more logical to point to a connection with regular cult sacrifices or incense, according, at least, to Tucker, *Book of Isaiah 1-39*, 102; Watts, *Isaiah 1-33*, 108; G. G. D. Kilpatrick, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-39* (New York: Abingdon, 1956), 207.

18. Interestingly, each angel is also identified in relation to YHWH’s presence. Isaiah’s seraph is “one of the seraphs” he “saw in attendance above [YHWH],” (Isaiah 6:2, 6), while Gabriel explicitly reports his authority to Zechariah by saying “I am Gabriel who stands before God” (Luke 1:19).

19. Fitzmyer identifies Gabriel’s position on the right side of the altar as a sign of divine favor, though he gives no parallels to justify his claim (*Gospel according to Luke I-IX*, 324-25).

other words, not only is the altar *present* and *smoking* in both narratives, but the main character interacts with an angel related to that altar, as well.

The third connecting element—the most subtle, unique, and literarily rich connection between the two narratives—is the theme of silence.²⁰ Here we take a step back from the temple settings of each narrative to look at the literary elements of each pericope as a whole.

Regarding the theme of silence, Luke 1 seems fairly straightforward on the surface. Doubting the veracity of Gabriel's words, Zechariah asks, "Whereby shall I know this?" to which Gabriel responds, "I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God; . . . thou shalt be dumb, and not able to speak, until the day that these things shall be performed, because thou believest not my words" (Luke 1:18-20). Because Zechariah dared to venture unfaithful speech, all speaking ability is taken away from him for the next nine months.²¹ So far, the role of silence in the text is fairly clear: Zechariah is struck dumb.

Paradoxically, this very cessation of communication serves to communicate something: Zechariah's silence informs the people of his angelic encounter (Luke 1:22). To add to the complexity of the role silence plays in Luke 1, the crowd waiting outside the temple is described responding to Zechariah in the third person, thus silencing their collective voice. In other words, it is as if Luke hit the "mute" button on his scene once Zechariah left the sanctuary. Instead of Luke singling out a handful of characters from the crowd to say "Look! Zechariah cannot speak!" he simply reports "he could

20. The theme of silence has been severely neglected in biblical scholarship. Besides Paolo Torresan, "Silence in the Bible," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 31 (2003): 153-60, the vast majority of studies on silence have focused on the repression of female characters. See, for example, Esther Fuchs, "For I Have the Way of Women': Deception, Gender, and Ideology in Biblical Narrative," *Semeia* 42 (1988): 68-83.

21. Commentators find it likely that Zechariah's punishment also involves being unable to hear. Bowie points to the fact that it is Elisabeth who must protest the relatives' assumption about the child's name in Luke 1:60 (*Gospel according to St. Luke*, 44), while Fitzmyer relies on the silent gestures of verse 62 and the word *kōphos* in the original punitive declaration of verse 20 (*Gospel according to Luke I-IX*, 328-29).

not speak to them: and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple.”

Not only is the public response narrated in the third person, thus silencing the voice of the crowd who just prior had been engaged in the very verbal act of prayer (Luke 1:10), but the crowd also mistakes the essential character of Zechariah’s experience: “they perceived that he had *seen* (*heōraken*) a vision” (Luke 1:22). While the reader experiences a primarily verbal dialogue between Zechariah and Gabriel that involves few visual elements, the people perceive in purely visual terms and leave little room for the fact that an angel *spoke* to Zechariah. The crowd’s response essentially silences Zechariah’s encounter by interpreting it primarily as a vision.

Pervasive silence continues to mute the scene and emphasize its visual elements as Zechariah is reduced to gestures to convey his new handicap. Luke closes the pericope on the same muted note. Still in the narrative third person, Luke simply concludes with “as soon as the days of his ministration were accomplished, he departed to his own house” (Luke 1:23).

Isaiah 6 is, if anything, even more occupied with the theme of silence. The most striking feature in this chapter is the *visual* immediacy of the Lord. Before describing the throne, the temple, or the seraphim, Isaiah simply reports, “I saw . . . the Lord” (Isaiah 6:1). The object of Isaiah’s perception is first and foremost YHWH. This divine transcendence is marked only in the language of sight, in contrast to other biblical commissions, where God’s *verbal* immediacy is the point of emphasis. Even in the commissions of two of the most important figures for the biblical prophetic tradition, Moses and Samuel,²² neither is privileged with a *primarily* visual experience. God first *spoke* to Moses out of the burning bush (Exodus 3:4), and 1 Samuel 3 emphasizes the Lord’s verbal summon by repeating

22. Moses’s prominence is due to his role in the exodus and establishment of Israel, while Samuel assumes importance in the Deuteronomistic tradition as the prophet who inaugurated the era of kings and the United Monarchy. On Samuel’s role in the Hebrew Bible as well as the importance of the Deuteronomist for Luke, see John Drury, *Tradition and Design in Luke’s Gospel: A Study in Early Christian Historiography* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1976), 58, 82–87, 139–41.

it three times (1 Samuel 3:4-8). Although a visual element cannot be denied in either case, each narrative wishes primarily to emphasize the Lord's words. Jeremiah doesn't report any visionary element to his commission but simply explains that "the word of the LORD came unto me, saying . . ." (Jeremiah 1:4). Even Micaiah in 1 Kings 22 doesn't give any description of "the host of heaven" but jumps straight to the Lord's direct question, "who shall persuade Ahab?" (1 Kings 22:19-20). Thus, Isaiah 6 is unique in the Hebrew Bible for God's failure to immediately address his prophet.²³ Isaiah is left with nothing to encounter but YHWH's direct gaze.

The prophet's visual encounter with the Lord is even more striking if we remember that there is reportedly nothing filling the space between them—rather, the seraphs were in attendance "above" the Lord (Isaiah 6:2). In addition, the only sound in the room is their worshipful trisagion. The realm of language is relegated to the air above the Lord and Isaiah. Across this empty space between them, Isaiah can only *see* God; he cannot hear or address him.

Isaiah himself recognizes this difficulty when he hears the seraphic praise. Distraught at his inability to join the angelic song,²⁴ he blames his mouth: "Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips" (Isaiah 6:5). Even more dramatically, since *nidmêti* may be a niphal verb from *damah* ("to be silent"), an alternate translation of Isaiah's terrified statement reads "Woe is me! I must be silent!"²⁵ Ironically, even as he expresses the necessity of reserve, he speaks. He is speaking at the very moment he is expressing the need for silence and thus renders his statement devoid of meaning. Isaiah's

23. The case is obviously different for Ezekiel. The first chapter of his book is entirely taken up with describing the appearance of God and his attendants. In fact, Ezekiel is even more delayed than Isaiah 6 in introducing the direct voice of God. Yet a distinction can be drawn on the basis that the narrative silence in Ezekiel 1 is an extended description of God's throne.

24. Kilpatrick, *Book of Isaiah*, 209; Watts, *Isaiah 1-33*, 108.

25. There is no need to tie this verb down to just one meaning. The ambiguity of "I am silent" versus "I am destroyed" only enriches the interpretive possibilities. See also H. D. Preuss, "דמה," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 3:250-60; A. Baumann, "דמה II," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 3:260-65.

language, as well as the language of Israel, may not be uttered here, and in expressing that impossibility, language collapses.

Isaiah’s lament apparently does not go unnoticed. Isaiah writes,

Then flew one of the seraphims unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar: And he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged. **Also I heard the voice of the Lord.** (Isaiah 6:6-8, emphasis added)

Now ritually cleansed,²⁶ Isaiah is admitted immediately back into the realm of language. The entire encounter with the seraph takes place in silence until the stone has touched Isaiah’s lips. Only *then* does he hear the angel’s (verbal) pronouncement, and only *then* does he hear the actual voice of God.²⁷

Isaiah’s curious relationship with language does not end there, however. In verses 9-10 he is commissioned to preach in such a way that purposely confuses his audience. Isaiah’s mission is to reverse the typical function of speech; instead of communicating accurately, he is to “make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they . . . understand with their heart.”²⁸ Isaiah’s language, having been influenced by the divine council, has been rendered foreign to the language of Israel.²⁹

26. See Victor A. Hurowitz, “Isaiah’s Impure Lips and Their Purification in Light of Akkadian Sources,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 60 (1989): 39-89.

27. There may be a sense in which, by hearing the seraph’s voice first, the seraphim fulfill their traditional role as guardians of YHWH’s throne by mediating Isaiah’s encounter with God.

28. For an analysis of the theme of deafness/blindness in Isaiah 6 and other Isaiah passages, see Geoffrey D. Robinson, “The Motif of Deafness and Blindness in Isaiah 6:9-10: A Contextual, Literary, and Theological Analysis,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 8 (1998): 167-86; and Rolf Rendtorff, *Canon and Theology: Overtures to an Old Testament Theology*, ed. and trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 172-79. Robinson believes that Israel’s deafness/blindness is punitive, which has interesting implications for Zechariah’s response to Gabriel and subsequent punishment.

29. Andrew F. Key, “The Magical Background of Isaiah 6:9-13,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 86 (1967): 198-204, raises the possibility, based on parallels between

Returning to the connection with Luke 1, two phenomena bear attention. First, Zechariah and Isaiah are each characterized by speech that is *opposite* of the angel they encounter. Gabriel comes to Zechariah and does nothing but discourse for eight verses; at the end of the scene, Zechariah is made silent. In contrast, Isaiah's seraph comes in complete silence, but afterward Isaiah is commissioned to speak. A second, related point is that the final speech of these characters also stands opposite their initial reaction. Zechariah speaks inappropriately by expressing disbelief and is punished by having his speech removed. Isaiah, meanwhile, volunteers his silence ("I must be silent") and is given to speak at much greater length, bearing the council's divine message back to Israel.

Thus, although the Jerusalem temple and its altars have a rich cultic heritage with several individual parallels elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, no other two texts in the Bible share the convergences of a temple setting, active contact (both human and angelic) with the altar, *and* a fascination with the theme of silence.

Function

We turn, finally, to the question of how this Isaiah 6 allusion functions in Luke's gospel and why it may have been included.³⁰

prophecy and magic in ancient religions, that Isaiah's message actually consists of ecstatic babbling!

30. I need here to address the redactional question of the sources behind Luke 1-2. Scholars have long been aware that Luke's first chapter contains strong "Semitic Greek" in comparison with the Greek in the rest of Luke-Acts, but it is still unclear whether this is evidence of an isolable Hebrew source document behind Luke's narrative or whether Luke chose to adopt the Semiticized style of LXX Greek for rhetorical purposes. If a specific source document is primarily responsible for the strongly Semitic flavor of Luke's infancy narrative, it is possible that the Isaiah 6 allusion was incorporated along with the other material. While recognizing this as a distinct possibility, I am more sympathetic with those who see in Luke a highly aware editor capable of consciously imitating the linguistic style of the LXX at the same time as he incorporates biblical motifs and type-scenes. On this debate, see H. F. D. Sparks, "The Semitisms of St. Luke's Gospel," *Journal of Theological Studies* 44 (1943): 129-38; Bowie, *Gospel according to St. Luke*, 30; Paul Winter, "The Proto-Source of Luke I," *Novum Testamentum* 1 (1956): 184-99; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "Peace upon Earth among Men of His Good Will (Lk 2:14)," *Theological Studies* 19 (1958): 225-27; H. H. Oliver, "The Lucan Birth Stories

The rhetorical function of this allusion has implications for how one reads the rest of Luke-Acts and how its original audience would have understood the person and mission of John the Baptist. What follows, then, are three (not necessarily exclusive) interpretive possibilities for reading Isaiah 6:1-8 within Luke 1:5-25.

Introduction to Jewish Theology

As we noted above, Luke opens his narrative with a case study of Jewish piety.³¹ He shows Zechariah ministering in the Jerusalem temple and will soon introduce Zechariah/Elisabeth's and Joseph/Mary's strict observance of Mosaic law. Eight days after John's birth, family and friends gather to witness his circumcision and naming (Luke 1:59). Jesus, too, is circumcised and named at eight days of

and the Purpose of Luke-Acts,” *New Testament Studies* 10 (1963): 202-26; Matthew Black, “Second Thoughts IX. The Semitic Element in the New Testament,” *Expository Times* 77 (1965): 20-23; Fitzmyer, *Gospel according to Luke I-IX*, 308-9; Drury, *Tradition and Design*, 7, 49, 66; Nigel Turner, “The Quality of the Greek of Luke-Acts,” in *Studies in New Testament Language and Text*, ed. J. K. Elliott (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 387-400; Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 244-47, 266; Fred L. Horton, “Reflections on the Semitisms of Luke-Acts,” in *Perspectives on Luke-Acts*, ed. Charles H. Talbert (Edinburgh: Clark, 1978), 1-23; S. C. Farris, “On Discerning Semitic Sources in Luke 1-2,” in *Gospel Perspectives: Studies of History and Tradition in the Four Gospels*, ed. R. T. France and D. Wenham (Sheffield: JSOT, 1981), 2:201-37; William G. Most, “Did St. Luke Imitate the Septuagint?” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 15 (1982): 30-41; Frederic Raurell, “Influence of Is-LXX in the New Testament,” *Revista Catalana de Teologia* 8 (1983): 263-64; Bock, *Proclamation from Prophecy and Pattern*, 17-19, 26; Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20*, 21-22. On the importance of the infancy narratives for understanding the broader themes at work in Luke-Acts, see Paul S. Minear, “Luke’s Use of the Birth Stories,” in Keck and Martyn, *Studies in Luke-Acts*, 111-30.

31. A Gentile audience may be partly responsible for this. See Brady S. Billings, “At the Age of 12’: The Boy Jesus in the Temple (Luke 2:41-52), the Emperor Augustus, and the Social Setting of the Third Gospel,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 60 (2009): 70-89; Joseph B. Tyson, *Images of Judaism in Luke-Acts* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1992), 18-39; and C. H. Talbert, “Prophecies of Future Greatness: The Contributions of Greco-Roman Biographies to an Understanding of Luke 1:5-4:15,” in *The Divine Helmsman: Studies on God’s Control of Human Events*, ed. James L. Crenshaw and Samuel Sandmel (New York: KTAV, 1980), 129-41. On Jewish piety in Luke, see John H. Elliott, “Household and Meals vs. Temple Purity Replication Patterns in Luke-Acts,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 21 (1991): 102-8, and Tyson, *Images of Judaism*, 42-53. For a balanced discussion of Luke’s attitude toward Judaism generally, see J. L. Houlden, “The Purpose of Luke,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 21 (1984): 53-65.

age (2:21). Mary accomplishes the necessary purification rites after giving birth (2:22), and Mary and Joseph take the infant to the temple and offer sacrifice (2:22–24). At the temple they encounter Simeon and Anna, two other embodiments of piety, who spend all day worshipping in the sanctuary and awaiting God’s promised redemption of Israel (2:25, 36–38). Later, we learn that Mary and Joseph journey to Jerusalem every year to observe Passover (2:41).

Instead of merely adding another element of what Jews *do*, Isaiah 6 contributes to an idea of what Jews *believe*—theology, in other words. Their god counsels in heaven, administers justice, and demands reverence, even silence (cf. Habbakuk 2:20). He sends prophets and directs the affairs of Israel, even when his method seems counterintuitive (Isaiah 6:9–10). The allusion to Isaiah 6 provides a theological backdrop against which this panoply of Jewish rituals acquires meaning and significance.

John as the Last of the Prophets

Luke seems to characterize John the Baptist as a kind of “last prophet” inaugurating the Messianic era.³² Jesus clearly places him at the end of the prophetic tradition when he explicitly calls him “a prophet” (Luke 7:26) and says “the law and the prophets were *until John*” (16:16, emphasis added). Several allusions throughout Luke connect the Baptist with various prophetic figures from Israel’s history. As noted above, the conditions of his birth connect him with Samuel, while Gabriel announced that John would go “in the spirit and power of Elias” (1:17). Just six chapters later, Jesus clarifies, “this is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee” (7:27). By quoting Malachi, Jesus draws a direct identification between the Baptist and Elijah who, by this time, had already been associated with the preparatory messenger of Malachi 3.³³ Furthermore, when Luke associates John with the Holy Spirit, he may be announcing

32. See also Oliver, “Lucan Birth Stories,” 216–18.

33. Fitzmyer, *Gospel according to Luke I–IX*, 320; John H. Hughes, “John the Baptist: The Forerunner of God Himself,” *Novum Testamentum* 14 (1972): 191–218.

his prophetic career by way of connections with 1 Samuel 10:10, 2 Samuel 23:2, and 2 Kings 2:9-16.³⁴

In this context, an allusion to Isaiah 6 would bolster the assertion that John is a legitimate prophet by making him a participant in a traditional call narrative and would further elevate his importance by highlighting the fact that he was called from before birth. The fact that Zechariah is silenced in the scene portrayed in Luke 1:5-25 (opposite Isaiah, who was told to speak) may be a method of eliminating confusion about exactly who is being commissioned in this scene. Zechariah’s punitive muteness reminds the audience that his role is not to preach, but to be a sign of the true orator to follow, namely John.

Introduction to Isaiah 6:9-10

Perhaps the most significant role Isaiah 6:1-8 may play in Luke 1 is related to later quotations of Isaiah 6:9-10 within Luke-Acts. Isaiah 6:9-10 is quoted in all three synoptics (Matthew 13:14; Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10) and becomes an important mainstay in early Christian theology. Craig Evans discusses each of these uses to determine how they contribute to the overall message of the authors. Matthew, he says, uses Isaiah 6:9-10 to explain *why* people cannot recognize God’s plan, but places the responsibility for this “obduracy” on Jesus’s enemies, not on his own enigmatic teachings. Mark uses the passage to demonstrate that Jesus’s mission was misunderstood by his disciples as well as by his enemies, thus contributing to Mark’s theme of secrecy, and shows Jesus quoting Isaiah 6:9-10 to explain the violent opposition against him. Luke, however, employs the passage to explain why the Jews reject Christianity and to justify the gospel’s extension to the Gentiles.³⁵

Luke-Acts further emphasizes this passage by quoting it in its most extended form within the entire New Testament in Acts

34. Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 274.

35. Craig A. Evans, *To See and Not Perceive: Isaiah 6.9-10 in Early Jewish and Christian Interpretation* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 106, 113, 127. See also Harold S. Songer, “Isaiah and the New Testament,” *Review Expositor* 65 (1968): 469.

28:26-27, a mere four verses before the very end of this two-part work. It would certainly be a very poetic move on Luke's part to open his narrative with an allusion to verses 1-8 of Isaiah 6 and to conclude it with an extended quotation of verses 9-10.

Conclusion

Isaiah 6:1-8—in its temple setting, dynamic interaction with the altar, and theme of silence—has convinced us not only of its place among the rhetorical parallels Luke employs in 1:5-25 but that it serves a very real function by aiding in the conveyance of Luke's message. Luke appears to be even more interested in Isaiah than many scholars have previously supposed, and Luke's specifically theological interest in the role of the temple deserves more attention in light of what has been laid out here. Although Christianity's early appropriation of Isaiah has received a great deal of attention, we stand to gain much by continuing to pursue more nuanced theological allusions within Christian texts.

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