

Benedictus

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⁵⁷ Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son.

⁵⁸ And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

⁵⁹ And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father,

⁶⁰ but his mother answered, "No; he shall be called John."

⁶¹ And they said to her, "None of your relatives is called by this name."

⁶² And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called.

⁶³ And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And they all wondered.

⁶⁴ And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God.

⁶⁵ And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea,

⁶⁶ and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, "What then will this child be?" For the hand of the Lord was with him.

⁶⁷ And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying,

⁶⁸ "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people

⁶⁹ and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David,

⁷⁰ as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,

⁷¹ that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us;

⁷² to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant,

⁷³ the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us

⁷⁴ that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear,

⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,

⁷⁷ to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins,

⁷⁸ because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high

⁷⁹ to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

⁸⁰ And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel.

(Luke 1:56-80)

The Covenant and Its Messengers

“There is no way out of that ravine. Théoden is walking into a trap. He thinks he’s leading them to safety. What they will get is a massacre. Théoden has a strong will, but I fear for him. I fear for the survival of Rohan. He will need you before the end, Aragorn. The people of Rohan will need you. The defenses have to hold.”

“They will hold,” insists Aragorn.

Gandalf turns to Shadowfax and begins stroking his main. “The *Grey Pilgrim*... that’s what they used to call me. Three hundred lives of men I’ve walked this earth and now

I have no time.” The White Rider mounts his White Stallion and with one last word turns to the rightful king, “**With luck, my search will not be in vain. Look to my coming at first light on the fifth day. At dawn, look to the East.**”¹

With those words, shortly after having **eaten together**, Gandalf and Aragon make a kind of **covenant** with one another. It is a covenant that will benefit king Théoden, to whom both Gandalf and Aragorn will be, each in their own way, **a messenger of that covenant**. Gandalf will spend the next few days **relaying the message** to the Riders of Rohan to come to their aid, while Aragon will **relay the message** to the king by rousing Théoden to rise out and meet the orcs at the precise moment, when all hope seems lost.

One of the great **insights Reformed Theology** has brought to the larger world of Christianity is its penetrating heat and light upon one of the Scripture’s biggest, but until then underdeveloped, themes. That theme is “**covenant.**”

The first explicit mention of “**covenant**” (*berith*) occurs in **Gen 6:18**, “**I will establish my covenant with you [Noah], and you will enter the ark— you and your sons and your wife and your sons’ wives with you.**” This itself comes on the heels of **a great oath** that the Angel of the LORD swears to

¹ This dialogue is in *The Two Towers* movie, but not the books.

Adam Eve just three chapters earlier, though it is in the form of a curse to the serpent, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel” (Gen 3:15).

We all have many covenants or contracts or oaths that bind us together with other people. If you take out a mortgage on a house, you enter into a *contract* with a bank. If you go get a job, you are employed via an *agreement* you make with the employer. If you fall in love and get married, you enter into a *covenant* with your spouse. Children often do the *pinky-promise* as they swear they will perform whatever it is the two have agreed upon.

What is a covenant and what makes them differ from these other obligations? Fred Malone puts it this way. “A ... covenant [is] ... a solemn promise or oath of God to man.”² God does not enter into contracts or pinky-promises with men. He makes covenants with them by taking an oath that he swears he will perform.

Covenants differ from these other contractual obligations or promises in several ways. Among other things, covenants

² Fred Malone, *The Baptism of Disciples Alone: A Covenantal Argument for Credobaptism Versus Paedobaptism* (Cape Coral, Fl.: Founders Press, 2003), p. 62. There are human to human covenants too, but we are not concerned with those here.

between God and men are **always initiated by God**. Other obligations are initiated by either party. As such, covenants require that the **two parties not be equals**. God is the superior and even if he enters into a relationship with a king like David, God is the superior king (suzerain vs. vassal). Covenants are **cut in blood** rather than ink or handshakes. This demands a sacrifice. And, covenants are **sealed with a (sacrificial) meal** of friendship between the two parties.

The two covenants just mentioned with God and **Adam** and God and **Noah** are the beginning of covenant relationships progressing throughout Scripture, especially to **Abraham, Moses, Levi, and David**. Each receives a promise rooted in earlier promises in such a way that they are all inextricably bound together as organic yet distinct promises of God. In this way, covenant binds the OT together as a unified pact of salvation, as God swears one-sided promises that he will remember to perform all that he has sworn that he will do for his people whom he loves and has chosen to be his treasured possession.

Perhaps **the OT culmination** of this is found in our last book: **Malachi**, whose name means “My Messenger/Angel.” “**Behold, I send my messenger** (Heb: *malak*; Gk: *aggelos*), **and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you**

seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the *messenger* of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.” (Mal 3:1). This utterly fascinating verse has **two messengers**—one called the messenger *of the covenant*. This messenger of the covenant is parallel to the Lord (Adonai) in the verse, and thus, Malachi is predicting that God himself would be one messengers. The other messenger would come before him, preparing the way. And that is the last we hear of “covenant” in the OT.

Luke 1:56-80. Context and Structure

At the point that **Luke begins the story** of his Gospel, 400+ years after Malachi penned those prophetic words of two coming messengers, the nation of **Israel is in disarray**. Judea is a **vassal servant of Caesar** and his mighty empire. For the first time in a thousand years, since king David, **Judah is not governing** its own territory, thus appearing as if promise of Jacob to Judah is finished. The people themselves have fallen into a kind of **dark hopeless languishing** that God has forgotten them. They, for their part, have **turned from the Lord** as they were so prone to do.

It is at this **perfectly planned moment** that the Gospel begins. The angel Gabriel, on behalf of the Lord, has come

to **Zechariah** the priest and promised him an unthinkable son. He then heads over to **Mary** and promises her *impossible* one. **Elizabeth**, Zechariah's wife, has her own pregnancy confirmed to her. Then, through a series of miraculous signs, **she** confirms the as of yet unknown pregnancy of Mary to her. At that moment, **Mary** bursts forth into joy and begins singing of all that God has done for his people through her miraculous conception of the God-man. Now, we are primed and ready to see the births of **John and Jesus**.

Our passage probably **technically begins** in **vs. 57**. “**Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son.**” However, since the previous unit was Mary's Song (the *Magnificat*), I failed to speak about **vs. 56**, which also provides more context for this week. “**And Mary remained with her [Elizabeth] about *three months* and returned to her home.**” Recall that **for five months**, Elizabeth had kept herself hidden with child (**24**). Then, on **the sixth month**, Mary was visited to the angel and went to visit her relative (**26**) where we now see she remained for **three more months**. That makes **nine** months, the length of a normal pregnancy. Therefore, Elizabeth is ready to have her child (while Mary, meanwhile, is still pregnant).

But though she is to give birth, it is not Elizabeth who will be the focus this time. That privilege returns us to her husband Zechariah. The full passage consists of two fairly obvious units. The first deals with **John's birth** and **centers** on what he should be "**called,**" which takes us back to Gabriel's announcement of what his name must be. The second deals with Zechariah's Song—the *Benedictus*—and **centers** on God **remembering his covenant.**

Luke 1:57-66	Luke 1:57-80
A. "Neighbors" "heard" of the Lord's mercy (57-58)	A. Zechariah filled with the Holy Spirit (67)
B. John <i>circumcised</i> (59)	B. God as "visited" and redeemed his people (68)
C. Elizabeth: His name will be "John"	C. Raised a horn of "salvation" for us (69)
D. None of your relatives are "called" this (61)	D. As predicted by the "prophets" (70)
D'. What does the father want him "called" (62)	E. We should be saved from "our enemies" (71)
C'. Zechariah: His name is "John" (63)	F. God "holy covenant" to "our fathers" remembered (72)
B'. Zechariah's <i>mouth</i> is opened (64)	F'. "The oath" that he sword to our "fathers" (73)
A'. "Neighbors" "heard" Zechariah and pondered (65-66)	E'. being delivered from "our enemies" (74-75)
	D'. You, child, will be called "the prophet" of the Most High (76)
	C'. To give knowledge of "salvation" to his people (77)
	B'. The sunrise shall "visit" us (78-79)
	A'. The child grew and became strong in "spirit" (80) ³

It can also be noted now that there is a kind of **larger inverse parallel** going on with Zechariah and Mary. First, the angel comes to Zechariah. Then he comes to Mary. But then *Mary* sings only to have her be followed by Zechariah's singing.

³ Something very similar to these two is found at "Literary Structure (Chiasm, Chiasmus) of Gospel of Luke," *Literary Structures of the Bible*, http://www.bible.literarystructure.info/bible/42_Luke_pericope_e.html.

- A. Angel to Zechariah (1:5-23)
- B. Angel to Mary (1:6-38)
- B'. Mary's Song (1:46-55)
- A'. Zechariah's Song (1:67-80)

This **links an unexpected pair** together—not Zechariah and Elizabeth, not Mary and Joseph, but Mary and Zechariah. Previously, we saw that the visit of Gabriel to both people were perfectly parallel, centering on their questions: “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years” (18) and “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” (34). So it makes sense that Luke might want the two songs be read together as well. The songs, going in reverse order of speaker, answer their questions. Yes, they will know, and each person's response will be a glorious faith-based, OT saturated act of worship and remembering God's promises about to come to fulfillment.

One more point about this can be seen, because this pairing is a kind of **foreshadowing** of the way Luke is going to describe the Gospel. On at least **21 separate occasions**, Luke **pairs up stories with opposites**: Mary and Zechariah, Simeon and Anna, The widow of Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian, a demonic and Peter's mother-in law, a centurion and a widow, the twelve apostles and a group of women, Jairus's

daughter and a bleeding woman, the Good Samaritan and Martha and Mary, a neighbor and a widow, a woman and a man, the Queen of the South and the Ninevites (to the north-east), a crippled woman and a lame man, a daughter and son of Abraham, a man and a woman, a shepherd and a woman, two men and two women, a servant girl and two men, Cimon of Cyrene and women, Joseph of Arimathea and women, women and two disciples (see table below; * pair found only in Luke).

Twenty-One Pairs In Luke's Gospel⁴

*Angel Gabriel appears to Zechariah (1:8-23)	Angel Gabriel appears to Mary (1:26-38)
*Canticle of Mary (<i>Magnificat</i> ; 1:46-55)	Canticle of Zechariah (<i>Benedictus</i> ; 1:68-79)
* Simeon encounters the infant Jesus & his parents in the Jerusalem Temple (2:25-35)	Anna thanks God & prophesies about Jesus in the Jerusalem Temple (2:36-38)
* Widow of Zarephat & Israelite widows (4:25-26)	Naaman the Syrian & Israelite lepers (4:27)
Exorcism of a Demoniac at Capernaum (4:31-37)	Healing of Simon's mother-in-law at Capernaum (4:38-39)
Centurion's slave is healed (7:1-10)	Widow of Nain's son raised from the dead (7:11-17)
Naming of the twelve apostles of Jesus (6:12-16)	Naming of women who accompanied Jesus (8:1-3)
Jairus' daughter is raised to life (8:41-42, 49-56)	Bleeding woman is healed (8:43-46)
*Parable of the Good Samaritan (10:25-37)	Examples of Martha and Mary (10:38-42)

⁴ **Felix Just**, "Story Pairs in Luke's Gospel," *Catholic Resources*, <https://catholic-resources.org/Bible/Luke-Pairs.htm>. Cited by **Ian Paul**, "Reading the Benedictus with the Magnificat," *Psephizo* (Dec 17, 2018), <https://www.psephizo.com/biblical-studies/reading-the-benedictus-with-the-magnificat/>.

*A neighbor asks for bread at midnight (11:5-8)	A widow asks for justice persistently (18:1-11)
*A woman in a crowd shouts out to Jesus, “ <i>Blessed is the womb that bore you...</i> ” (11:27)	A man at a dinner tells Jesus, “ <i>Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!</i> ” (14:15)
The Queen of the South (11:31)	The Ninevites (11:32)
*A crippled woman is healed (13:10-17)	A lame man is healed (14:1-6)
*“ Daughter of Abraham ” reference (13:16)	“ Son of Abraham ” reference (19:9)
Parable of a man planting a mustard seed (13:18-19)	Parable of a woman mixing yeast & flour (13:20-21)
Parable of a shepherd looking for a lost sheep (15:3-7)	Parable of a woman looking for a lost coin (15:8-10)
Example of two men together asleep (17:34)	Example of two women grinding meal (17:35)
A servant girl questions Peter (22:56-57)	Two men also question Peter (22:58+59)
Simon of Cyrene carries Jesus’ cross (23:26)	Jesus meets women on the way to Calvary (23:27-29)
Joseph of Arimathea buries Jesus’ body (23:50-53)	Women see where Jesus is buried (23:55-56)
Women find Jesus’ tomb empty (24:1-11)	Two disciples journey to Emmaus (24:13-35)

In doing this, it is clear that the good doctor wants us to see that **the Gospel is truly good news for one and all**. And that is news unheard of in the world of men both before and after. This gospel is utterly unique in world history.

The Birth of John

Moving to the story, “**Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. And her neighbors and relatives *heard* that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her” (57-58)**. At this point, we meet a

group of people that this little story will also end with—her *neighbors* (see vs. 65). The neighbors are said to do something. They “hear” the news that she is pregnant.

This verse is the definition of *what happens then the gospel comes* to people. First of all, since it is news, it must be heard. Paul tells the Roman Christians, “How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never *heard?*” (Rom 10:14). Heard what? He continues with a quote, curiously enough, right at the beginning of perhaps the most precise and stunning *Messianic prophecy* in history, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach *the good news!*” (Rom 10:15; cf. Isa 52:7). Amazingly, John is going to be born just before the Messiah and he will prepare the way by proclaiming the good news of Jesus to Israel. But this takes us far ahead of Luke.

Sticking with our passage today, this verse signals that *Elizabeth’s baby has now been born*. So it continues, “And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child” (Luke 1:59a). Circumcision is the cutting off of part of the male organ foreskin. It is terribly painful, even for an eight-day old child, but he will not remember it. Why would they do this and why would Luke tell us about it?

Remember, this is a devout priestly Levitical Jewish family. So of course, they are going to do exactly what the law requires. Circumcision is found in the law of Moses. “And on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised” (Lev 12:3). But it actually has its roots hundreds of years earlier, in Abraham. Listen to the language, “This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. He who is *eight days old* among you shall be circumcised. *Every male* throughout your generations ... shall surely be circumcised” (Gen 17:10-13).

What does this act symbolize? **First**, it symbolizes fealty and ownership to the High King. This is a sign of the covenant that the Suzerain (Yahweh) made with the vassal (Abraham/Israel). So, it is a sign cut in their flesh that they belong to this God. It will never go away. **Second**, the Apostle teaches us that it is a sign, not of works-based salvation or salvation that comes simply by being born a Jew, but **faith**. “He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness *that he had by faith* while he was still uncircumcised” (Rom 4:11). **Third**, I believe that Bede and other Fathers

were right when they suggest that circumcision is a sign of the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus is *cut off* from the land of the living, only to live again. “Circumcision clearly set forth *an image of the Lord’s resurrection* because it too occurred on *the eighth day* ... And just as the former was wont to release people from the punishable state of everlasting death, so the latter displayed the perfect newness of immortal life in our Creator, and revealed that it is to be hoped for in us” (Bede, *Homilies on the Gospel* 2.20). Finally, it is a sign that God remembers his covenant. The old Reformer Johannes Brenz said,

The Lord commanded this *circumcision* by which, as by a public seal, he might testify and *declare the covenant* made with Abraham and with his seed ... because the covenant of God also applies to them and brings salvation to them. When John was born, the law of Moses was in effect, and there was never any time closer to the time when Christ should be born, who was promised to the seed of Abraham. And there was no other person who should give more evident testimony concerning Christ, his ascension into heaven and the sending of the Holy Spirit after he was glorified, than John. Therefore none ought more justly and necessarily to be circumcised than John.

(Johannes Brenz, *Ecclesiastical Exposition upon Saint Luke* 1)⁵

⁵ In Kreitzer, 35.

Luke continues. “And they would have called him Zechariah after his father...” (Luke 1:59b). What does it mean they would have called him Zechariah? Why wouldn't Zechariah name him? Remember, Zechariah had become mute as a sign to everyone of Gabriel's visitation. He couldn't speak. So it seems that the relatives and neighbors are going to do the job for him. It was a tradition, after all, to name the firstborn after the father.

However, it continues, “But his mother answered, ‘No; he shall be called John’” (60). John means “Yahweh has been gracious.” Recall that this is precisely the name that Zechariah was told he must be called (13). But how did Elizabeth know to call him John? From Ambrose to Luther, it has been suggested that she learned this through a miracle of the Holy Spirit who simply told her this name. Of course, the text doesn't say that, and we will learn soon enough that Zechariah could communicate even without speech (although at the same time, it appears that he may not be able to hear either; see vs. 62 and how they “make signs” to him). But Luke also doesn't say that she learned it in an ordinary way either. We are left to wonder.

The center of the birth narrative now appears with two verses in a row that repeat the word “called.” “And they said

to her, ‘None of your relatives is *called* by this name’ (61). As if confused, it says that they “made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be *called*” (62). Is Zechariah also deaf? Why do they need to make signs to him? Whatever the case, he has been suffering with this condition for nine months, ever since the moment Gabriel told him the name and he stubbornly refused to believe the message.

The story continues, “And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote...” (63a). Clearly, Zechariah can communicate. It just wasn’t easy. “His name is John” (63b), he writes down. As Ryken points out, rather than saying something like, “We are thinking of calling him John,” the Greek is, “John is his name.”⁶ This is not a name that Zechariah or Elizabeth had chosen. It is the name that *God had chosen*. Why?

As he scribbles the name, it says, “And they all wondered” (63c). That is precisely what we are doing right now. It may have something to do with all of their names. Zechariah means, “God remembers.” Elizabeth means, “God is faithful.” John now means, “Yahweh has been gracious.” Clearly, centering on “calling” is showing us that God is up

⁶ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, vol. 1, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 56.

to something truly astonishing. It is God who calls us by name. And his calling now is focusing here upon this small priestly family and the birth of their miracle boy.

Vs. 64 begins with a word that is one of Mark's favorites, though Luke uses it from time to time, "*Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God.*" **For nine months** this priest has been mute and perhaps deaf (both, by the way, made him unclean so he could no longer be a priest; **Lev 21:20**). But the moment he writes down the name, displaying **faith that was lacking** all those months ago in the Temple, his tongue is loosed. Another miracle! This verse seems to parallel the circumcision verse, with its **focus on body parts**. As such, it reminds us of that covenant seen with circumcision. What the content of that blessing is, we shall see in a moment.

The **birth of John wraps up** with a return to the **neighbors**. "*And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, 'What then will this child be?' For the hand of the Lord was with him*" (**65-66**). I am struck by how **God chose to begin** the greatest story ever told **with an elderly woman and a priest who would become unclean** surrounded by no

entourage, no fanfare, no one but [a few neighbors and relatives](#).

Like a mustard seed, very small and unnoticed, God will soon usher in mighty grace. Through the loosening of his tongue, the people began to wonder and then talk and then ask, *What is God doing in this? For such a thing has never been heard of in our times.* As they talked, the good news spread, farther and wider, extending ever outward, even down through the centuries and across oceans to you and I. That's how this all works. The more we [wonder](#), the more we talk, the more we [talk](#), the more people [hear](#). No [hearing](#) means not [talking](#). No talking means no [wonder](#). No wonder means we don't really understand or care about the story. If the gospel has been lost in our day, it is because we have forgotten the wonder of its humble yet miraculous beginnings.

The Benedictus

As the story of the birth comes to an end, [Zechariah's song begins](#), “[And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying...](#)” (67). This is [the fourth time the Holy Spirit is said to come upon someone](#) in the first chapter of Luke. That is remarkable and it will have a great parallel when we come to the beginning of Acts.

Acts also introduces us to the idea of **prophecy**, a theme that Luke's Gospel will not really explore. On that first Pentecost when all those people were filled with the Holy Spirit, Peter preached on **Joel 2:28-32** saying, "I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall *prophecy*" (**Acts 2:17**). Paul will teach us that prophecy is a **gift of the Spirit** (e.g. **1Co 14:1**). This gift has been the center of a great deal of attention, especially among more charismatic Christians. I believe that if we want to know what it refers to, we need to begin here, in Zechariah's prophecy, because it is deliberately parallel by Luke.

Zechariah begins, "**Blessed be the Lord God of Israel**" (**68**). As with Mary's song, so with this. There is much OT here. This is nearly the same as **1Kg 1:48** LXX, which occurs in the context of a **Davidic king**. The Latin translation reads, "*Benedictus Deus Israhel.*" Just like how Mary's Song begins with the word *Magnificat*, this is where we get the title for Zechariah's song: *Benedictus*. Benedictus means "blessed." The Greek word is *eulogētos*, from which we get "eulogy." A **eulogy** is not a dour sad speech, but a "praise" of "good or fine language." It is literally a "speaking" (*logia*) "well" (*eu-*) of someone. Zechariah is praising God. This is how his prophecy begins.

As I said earlier, just as Luke begs us to read the annunciation stories of Zechariah and Mary together, so also I think he begs us to **read their songs together**. Doing this can yield fascinating results. Here are just a couple of my thoughts.

First, Mary's song calls us to *remember*. We will see the same thing in a moment with Zechariah's song. **Second**, both songs rely heavily on the OT.⁷ **Third**, Mary's *Magnificat* starts with her as an individual and moves to the corporate nation. Meanwhile, Zechariah's *Benedictus* starts on what God will do for his people and moves more individual as he focuses in on John. **Fourth**, and often unnoticed, the *Magnificat*'s verbs are almost entirely in the past (aorist) tense as she celebrates that God has already done. On the other hand, the *Benedictus* is mostly focused on the future, for what God will do in things that have not yet happened.⁸ As Ian Paul puts it, **“God's action here is less a pattern of salvation and more a means by which salvation will come.”**⁹ **Fifth**,

⁷ For the OT references cited in the sermon see **David W. Pao** and Eckhard J. Schnabel, “Luke,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, UK: Baker Academic; Apollos, 2007). For a table format of a few of these see **Andrew Perriman**, “The Benedictus of Zechariah,” *Postost* (12-21-2006), <https://www.postost.net/commentary/benedictus-zechariah/>.

⁸ Ryken says, **“Both Mary and Zechariah were among the principal soloists who sang the first oratorio praising God for the Messiah's birth. Both of them spoke in the past tense, although both of them were also looking to the future. As one scholar has explained it, ‘The retrospect of prophecy and the prospect of fulfillment are commingled in the speaker's mind’”** (Ryken, 59). But looking at it more closely, I think Paul is more on point.

⁹ Paul, *ibid*.

Mary sings of the reversal of the current order of rich and poor, with the focus being on their internal transformation. Meanwhile, Zechariah sings of salvation coming to the corporate people that try to oppress, and this salvation allows them to worship God together in peace. Again, as Paul puts it, for Mary, “God is a warrior *in* Israel on behalf of the poor” while for Zechariah, “God is a warrior *for* Israel” [italics original].¹⁰ All this goes to show us, again, just how all-encompassing the Gospel truly is.

Luke continues, “For he has visited and redeemed his people” (68b). “Visited” is the word that he will return to near the end of his song in the parallel. I like the way one journal article title puts it, “We Have Been Visited.”¹¹

Visitations can be good or bad. In 1983, all the kids in my Jr. High were swept up in the sci-fi miniseries “V” in which a group of aliens “visit” the earth promising to share their technology with mankind in exchange for much needed chemicals and minerals that they need to mine here on earth. The twist is that this visitation was anything but good. The reptilian Visitors lied, and what they really wanted to do was control the earth and farm humans for food.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ David Seal, “We Have Been Visited: Divine Encounter Through the Lukan Benedictus (Luke 1:68-79),” *The Biblical Anals* 11.2 (2021), https://repozytorium.kul.pl/bitstream/20.500.12153/2127/1/Seal_David_We_Have_Been_Visited_Divine_Encounter_through_the_Lukan_Benedictus.pdf.

Zechariah sings of what can only be said as **the diametrical opposite**. God has visited his people *to redeem* (*lutrosis*), not destroy, them. Notice, this is a **particular redemption**. He has redeemed *his people*. This is more Exodus language from the Song of Moses. “**You have led in your steadfast love the people whom you have redeemed**” (**Ex 15:13; cf. Ps 111:9**). What did that redemption entail? Freedom from slavery to Pharaoh. The word will appear only one more time in all of Luke-Acts (other forms appear three more times), on the lips of the old Prophetess Anna who said we have been waiting for the redemption of Israel, words spoken about Jesus, also from **Isaiah 52:9**.

Similarly, visitation is **an OT idea**. One of the most appropriate is **Ps 105:4 LXX**, “*visit us with your salvation.*” This takes us to the next verse in our song. “... **and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David**” (**Luke 1:69**). A “**horn**” of salvation is rather strange language, but it appears in the OT, significantly on the lips of *king* David. “**The LORD is ... the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. I call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised, and I am saved from my enemies**” (**Ps 18:2-3; cf. 2Sam 22:3**). The king has a higher King—his Horn, God.

Horns are **symbols of power**. Think Texas Longhorns. They were often put on helmets and headdresses as symbols of the wearer's power. In Daniel, Zechariah, and Revelation, horns become political and **military symbols** of power. In **Psalm 132:17**, horn parallels the lamp of the messiah, thus light. They also **symbolize sacrifices**. The altar had four horns on it upon which the blood of the covenant was to be sprinkled. It is curious to me in this regard that Jesus takes the cup, the blood of the covenant, and that in the old Gothic translation of the NT, it says, “**We share in one loaf of bread and the one drinking horn.**”¹² Here, the horn is raised up, symbolizing what *is*—a miraculous conception of a virgin, and what *will be*—a man raised from the dead.

12



“*Ainis blaibis jah ainis stiklis brūkjam.*” A *stiklis* is a cup, goblet, or drinking horn. Translation in **D. Gary Miller**, *The Oxford Gothic Grammar* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 131. Curiously, this tradition has covenant and drinking-horns together. “Seven steeds to the king of men of Uaithne | Seven swords, it is a wise covenant, | Seven drinking-horns to their companies to whom it is due | To be in office under the monach.” **John O’Donovan**, “*на 8-Септ,*” *The Book of Rights* (Dublin: The Celtic Society, 1847), 79.

I’m not suggesting that Jesus used a drinking horn. That is a cultural appropriation. However, they certainly did have them in Israel in the first century, as a first century Roman glass drinking horn is on display at the Land of Israel Museum in Tel Aviv. Without question, “lifting up the horn” is also something one does when drinking. Picture taken from <https://www.erezmuseum.org.il/e/107/>.

Not coincidentally, it is at this point that the **song begins to look forward**. “... as he spoke by the mouth of his holy *prophets from of old*” (Luke 1:70). Zechariah is said to be prophesying. Besides his prophecy being a praise to God for things he has already done, now we see that his own prophecy is rooted in biblical prophecy. This isn't some kind of off-the-wall unheard of prophecy from this priest. It is profoundly biblical from start to finish. **God has foretold these things**. What things?

Specifically, “*that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us*” (71). You can feel in his words **the frustration that these Jews must have had** living under Roman rule without any of their own people over them even as governors. This song has in mind something like, “*And he saved them out of the hand of them that hated them, and redeemed them out of the hand of the enemy*” (Ps 106:10).

“... to show the mercy promised to our *fathers* and to remember his holy *covenant (diathēkē)*” (Luke 1:72). Suddenly, this idea of **covenant** with which we began today appears. It has **been in the background** with ideas such as **horn** (and the blood and cup of the covenant), **circumcision** (the

sign of the covenant), and **salvation** (the blessing of the covenant). But now it comes into full view.

Importantly, this is **the first half of the center** of Zechariah's song. Let's look at its match in the next verse. "... *the oath (horkos) that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us*" (73). Two things parallel one other in these verses. **First**, the **repetition of "father"** shows them to be a match. In this case, **Abraham** is singled out. This is important for what we saw in John's birth with his circumcision. Circumcision was given *to Abraham*. It was the sign of Abraham's covenant. This in turn takes us to the names we saw earlier. Zechariah means "**God remembers.**" This is what he is singing about in the center of his song. God is going to show the mercy promised to our fathers and "*remember his holy covenant.*" How amazing that his own name becomes the anchor point upon which his song will be dropped and will thus pivot!

Remembering the holy covenant is paralleled in the second feature of the two verses—*the oath*. We saw earlier that a covenant is a solemn promise *or oath* of God to man. Here, "oath" and "covenant" are in poetic parallelism. Thus, they are the same thing. But where one emphasizes the relationship, the other emphasizes God's one-sided gracious action! God has sworn; God will perform. This is the heart of the

song, and rightly so. The gospel is all about God, his work, his promises, his covenant-keeping, his mercy, his salvation, his redemption, to the praise of his glorious grace.

Where has God promised all these things? The very last verse of Micah is where he gets the “fathers” from. “You will show faithfulness to Jacob and steadfast love to Abraham, as you have sworn to our fathers from the days of old” (Mic 7:20). Psalm 105 LXX again is where he remembers his covenant. “For their sake he remembered his covenant, and relented according to the abundance of his steadfast love” (Ps 105:45 LXX). The oath probably comes from God’s words to Abraham, “By myself I have sworn” (Gen 22:16). Hebrews (possibly also written by Luke) tells us just a little bit more about God’s oath-making, “but this one was made a priest with an oath by the one who said to him: ‘The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, ‘You are a priest forever.’” This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant” (Heb 7:21-22). And this new covenant takes us right back to that idea of the drinking horn or cup of the covenant being raised up and held high and in which Jesus will say, “This is the new covenant in my blood.” All of this, Zechariah is saying is about to come to fulfillment.

In **Luke 1:74**, the *Benedictus* turns around and goes back the other way. He returns to the theme of *enemies*. "... that we, being delivered from the hand of our *enemies*, might serve him without fear." "*Let my people go, so that they may worship me in the wilderness*" (**Ex 7:16**), God through Moses told the Pharaoh. Zechariah continues, "... in *holiness and righteousness* before him all our days" (**Luke 1:75**). God had told Solomon, "If you will walk before me, as David your father walked, *with integrity of heart and uprightness* ... then I will establish your royal throne over Israel forever, as I promised your father David, saying, 'There shall not fail you a successor on the throne of Israel'" (**1Kg 9:4-5**). Do you hear how **this song is bringing together OT pieces** that narrow in on the coming Messiah? This is very much like Mary's song of the Messiah she carries in her womb. The two complement one another like harmonies in a choir.

And yet, just here, **Zechariah changes subjects**. He moves from the nation to the individual, from what Jesus will do for God's people, to his own son, John. First, he returns to the word "**prophet**." "*And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways*" (**Luke 1:76**). Zechariah is prophesying.

He has recognized that the prophets predicted all this. Now he says that **John will be a prophet**.

Importantly, this comes from **Malachi 3:1** which we have already discussed. “Behold, I send my messenger, and he *will prepare the way before me*. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.” (**Mal 3:1**). The way Zechariah is thinking about Malachi’s prophecy is stunning. We saw previously that Malachi himself is thinking about **two messengers**. One of these is the “messenger of the covenant.” “Covenant” is precisely the center of the *Benedictus*. This covenant, we have now seen, is *the new covenant* that comes through Jesus. Hence, Jesus is the messenger of the covenant.

But look carefully at the language of Malachi again. “*I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me.*” **The Lord** (*Adonai*, cf. **Ps 110:1**) is the “me” and “I” making the very prophecy. And this is exactly what Zechariah says. His child is going to prophetically usher in the Lord’s coming. Zechariah knows that the Messiah is coming, he knows that his own son is going to be his herald, and he knows that the Messiah is the Lord of the OT. Jesus and John are tied together through this remarkable prophecy about the two of them.

The song continues by returning to “salvation.” “... to give knowledge of *salvation* to his people in the forgiveness of their sins” (Luke 1:77). Again, the OT is in mind, “The LORD has made known his *salvation*; he has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations” (Ps 98:2).

Next, he returns to the *visitation*. “... because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby *the sunrise shall visit us* from on high to give *light* to those who sit in *darkness* and in the shadow of *death*, to guide our feet into the way of peace” (Luke 1:78-79). Thinking about God’s “tender mercies,” the content here is beautiful. Isaiah said, “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of *the LORD* has risen upon you. For behold, *darkness* shall cover the earth, and *thick darkness* the peoples; but the *LORD* will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you” (Isa 60:1-2).

We’ve already seen how *shining* is a theme related to the *horns*. It is also, however, related to Malachi. For in Malachi, “*The sun of righteousness* shall rise with healing in [his; KJV] wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall” (Mal 4:2). Malachi calls the Messiah *the Sun*. Jesus calls himself the *Light* of the world. Darkness and shadows are also from the Psalms, “... *even* them that sit in *darkness* and the shadow of *death*” (Ps 107:10 LXX). God’s mercy to

bring people out of such a state is truly unimaginable. Yet here it is, and John is going to have a special place in showing people the light of the Messiah.

It is **here that the song ends**, but the passage has **one final verse**. It is a verse that parallels Zechariah being filled with the Holy Spirit. “**And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel**” (**Luke 1:80**). Even as God would have Israel go free to worship God in the wilderness, so now John heads to the wilderness until the day he would first appear in public in his role as the Baptizer of Israel.

The Messengers of the New Covenant

As we come to the end of Luke 1, we've **seen two announcements** coupled with **two songs**. Both songs point us to the **mysteries of the gospel** that Luke will unfold in the following chapters. They are mysteries that make the greatest minds wonder. They are mysteries that cause us all to talk. Both songs **teach us about their singers** and the faith that they had in the God who has promised so many good things to his people and now they are about to come true.

But that **these are songs** is important to consider yet again. These are **not theological treatises** or **doctrinal lectures**. Luke

is the artist, and he has chosen to begin his Gospel with **poetry**. Something quite interesting has been demonstrated by scholars about poetry in the ancient world. We saw last time that Mary's Song serves as a Christian counterpart to **invoking the muse**, which was done at the beginning of epic poems, except that she does not invoke the muse goddess as her inspiration, but the Holy Spirit.

We can **take this idea one step farther**. Poetry itself was “**considered to be the language of the deities**” in the ancient world.¹³ The rhymes, the tones, the names, the words were considered closer to the sacred than the profane. We still see this today in how we elevate pop-music, even though it is usually bad poetry! (*The music industries are themselves deeply invested in the occult, for reasons certainly related to this, but that's for another time.*) Thus, **in opening with poetry, Luke is bringing us up to heaven** and this is precisely how the Magnificat and Benedictus have been used throughout the history of the church in her high liturgies—which are attempts to usher us into heavenly realms.

Into this, consider yet again **some of the words** we have looked at, but from a poetic, symbolic, metaphorical point of view. It isn't just that a horn is used, but that the Messiah

¹³ Seal, 238, 34.

himself is named as a horn. Horn of Salvation is his name. The image itself evokes **strong beasts** that have different functions in our lives. As we have seen, they are **powerful** and **sacrificial**. Their horns are used to carry oil, drink wine, and shine light. The horn is raised, and so parallels the Messiah being called the Sunrise, evoking the early dawn, as darkness is evaporating and shadows, being at their longest, begin to slowly recede.

Then there are **images of visitation** and being *redeemed, saved, and delivered*. Each is worthy of deep contemplation and consideration on their own. They are **what Messiah will do** and **what John will prepare the way for us to see**. Visited by the Horn, visited by the Sunrise. Redeemed by the Horn, redeemed by the Sunrise. Saved by the Horn, saved by the Sunrise. Delivered by the Horn, delivered by the Sunrise. Given light by the Horn, given light by the Sunrise. All of this is embodied in the person of Jesus Christ, the baby who will burst on to the scene in the very next chapter.

All of this comes to us through **the nearly unspeakable tender mercies of God** through two messengers—one who prepares the way, one who comes bearing the covenant in his own person. Like Gandalf and Aragorn, their messages and covenant will be to save God's people from the vile armies of

death and darkness. Like Gandalf, John will **prepare the way** by sending out the message as a prophet—harken to the call, join the battle. *Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.* Like Aragon, Jesus will send out the message as King. *I am. And from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the power of God.*

Similarly, like that oath sworn by Gandalf that redemption will come at dawn on the fifth day in the east, so the Gospel of Jesus Christ will show you that **redemption will come at dawn on the third day**, when the **Sun of Righteousness rises in the east** with healing in his wings. Very place and nature of the sun rising each morning is a picture of this for you, repeated every single day of your life. Raised to new life, having conquered death and darkness and shadow, because not even the grave could hold our Lord for long.

Let us now raise our cups, our horns, together as we partake one holy food and drink that cup of forgiveness poured as the new covenant in Christ's blood. Blessed be the Lord God who takes away our sins in Christ and delivers from the powers of death and darkness that loom large over this fallen world of men.

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BENEDICTUS. LUC. 1. V. 68.

The God of Israel be blest,
His people who releast,
And hath by One Salvation wrought,
From Davids linage brought.
As He by all His Prophets said,
Ere since the world was made,
That from our foes we should be sav'd,
Whose hatred us enslav'd.
His promis'd mercy to performe,
To Abraham first sworne,
The Oath and holy Covenant
Which He to us would grant;
That we who now deliver'd were,
Might serve Him without feare,
In holinesse and righteous wayes,
Before him all our daies.
And Thou, O Child, of Gods decree,
Shalt call'd the Prophet be,
For Thou must go before His face,
Sent to prepare His place:
Unto His People in His Name,
Salvation to proclame;
And to the Souls perplext within,
Remission of their sin.
Through Gods most tender love, whose eye,
Did visit us from high,
And caus'd his Morning Star to shine,
Diffusing beames Divine,
To lighten those in darknesse layd,
By Deaths unhappy shade,
And guide our feet which knew no ease,
Into the wayes of Peace.¹⁴

¹⁴ Henry King, *The Psalmes of David from the New Translation of the Bible Turned into Meter to Be Sung after the Old Tunes Used in the Churches: Unto Which Are Newly Added the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, the Ten Commandments, with Some Other Ancient Hymnes*, Early English Books Online (London: S.G. and are to be sold by Humphrey Moseley .., 1654), 287.