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JOHN THE BAPTIST'S 'LEAP FOR JOY'
IN THE LIGHT OF HIS PROPHETIC CALLING AND MISSION
(An exegetical-theological study of Luke 1: 41, 44)

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ABSTRACT

In the Gospel of Luke, we witness three significant encounters between John the Baptist and Jesus (Lk 1:39-56; 3:21-22; 7:18-24). The first encounter, a pre-natal meeting, occurs at the Visitation scene (Luke 1:39-56). This encounter serves as the central point of Luke's Infancy Narrative, marking the introduction of John the Baptist's characterization, calling, and mission. The encounter is mediated by prophetic figures in the scene, including Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary, Simeon, and Anna. At the core of this encounter, John the Baptist, in a unique and profound act, leaped into the womb (*ἔσκίρτησεν τὸ βρέφος ἐν τῇ κοιλίᾳ αὐτῆς* - the baby leaped in her womb) in Lk 1:41. Elizabeth later describes this leap as 'leaped for joy' (*ἔσκίρτησεν ἐν ἀγαλλιάσει*) in Lk 1:44. This unique action of John the Baptist in his mother's womb signifies his sanctification, consecration, and confirmation of his prophetic calling.

The phrase, *ἔσκίρτησεν ἐν ἀγαλλιάσει*, not only underscores the involvement of the Holy Spirit through Mary, the mother of Jesus, in John's "in-womb" encounter but also highlights Elizabeth's role in bearing witness to this significant milestone in God's plan for Salvation. This dual role of Elizabeth and Mary is a testament to the mystery of God's unique role in the Salvation of his people. Drawing on the wider context of the OT, specifically the "in-womb" election of some prophets, this research analyzes Luke 1:41, 44 in the light of Jeremiah 1:5. This thematic link demonstrates that at the moment of his "in-womb" encounter, John the Baptist is prepared to respond positively to his prophetic calling as the one who would prepare the way for the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Lk 1:76).

This initial encounter of John the Baptist in the Gospel of Luke, signified by his 'leap for joy,' serves as a bridge between the OT and the NT, linking one prophetic era to another with many characteristics of the OT prophets before him. An examination of the call narratives of the prophets in the OT portray the pattern which the prophets followed in their call experiences, and which we identify, albeit without "strait-jacket" parameters in the calling and mission of John the Baptist. One of the primary literary features Luke uses in the IN is its elegant intertwining of the birth stories of John and Jesus presenting them in a parallel fashion. In any case, the Infancy Narrative in its final form grants Jesus complete priority, and Luke has brought the whole account into conformity with his presentation of

John the Baptist as the forerunner of Christ and the inaugurator of the period of fulfillment, emphasizing the historical and theological depth of the encounters.

Extensive scholarly analysis of Luke's Infancy Narrative (Lk 1:5-2:52) and particularly the scene of the Visitation (Lk 1:39-45) from various perspectives tend to concentrate on John the Baptist's action as primarily an inauguration of messianic joy and a demonstration of John's role as a precursor of the Messiah. In this line of thought, John the Baptist's 'leap for joy' is intended by him as recognition of his relation to Jesus, and he acknowledges him as "the Lord." The use of the verb *σκιρτάω* (*ἔσκιρτησεν*), which is severally found in the OT, points to his theological and literary purpose to place John the Baptist as a link between the OT and the NT. Accordingly, it is more likely that Lk 1:41, 44 is a different motif configuration from Gen 25:22, especially since the verb is also interpreted in the pericope itself as an expression of joy (Lk 1:44). Notwithstanding, Gen 25:22 is the only passage in the Septuagint that associates *σκιρτάω* with the movement of unborn children in the womb. So, there is some evidence that the allusion may have been intentional on Luke's part. Throughout the NT, *ἔσκιρτησεν* (he leaped) from *σκιρτάω* (to leap) is used only three times and only in the Gospel of Luke 1:41, 44, and 6:23. This gives this particular expression a specific semantic connotation which expresses Luke's probable influence from the LXX and OT texts in the composition of his narrative.

John the Baptist becomes the beginning of a vocational story that has its place and time in the history of Salvation. Every vocation receives its specific character and has a definite historical significance that must be identified and projected. Like Jeremiah, John the Baptist's "in-womb" calling exemplifies authentic prophetic ministry today. The Church will always need prophets who will continue to spread the message of Salvation, the 'joy of the gospel'. The authenticity of every genuine vocation must have its roots in a particular experience of the call, a special moment when the one called makes a positive response, and the validation of his call by the ecclesial community. The proliferation of false prophets and prophecies results from the absence of the initial call encounter, that is, the problem of prophets whom God did not call, who rather "called God." In the end, the light of John the Baptist's "in-womb" calling, which propels his mission, stands as a vocational yardstick for fruitful vocational discernment in contemporary pastoral ministry.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION.....	i
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	iv
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	ix
GENERAL INTRODUCTION.....	1

CHAPTER ONE

PRELIMINARY ISSUES: MOTIFS, CONCEPTS AND RELATED PHENOMENA

1.1. Possible Background: Prophet, Calling and Mission.....	16
1.1.1. Prophet.....	16
1.1.2. The definition of Prophet in Israel: To know a prophet when you meet one	17
1.1.3. The ambiguous use of the word prophet (<i>nabi</i>).....	19
1.2. The Concept of Divine elction of Prophets.....	21
1.3. An examination of prophetic call genres in the Old Testament.....	23
1.3.1. The diversity of the Form of Call Narratives.....	25
1.3.2. Norman Habel’s call narratives pattern	25
1.3.2.1. Divine Confrontation	26
1.3.2.2. The Introductory Word	27
1.3.2.3. The Commission	29
1.3.2.4. The Objection.....	30
1.3.2.5. The Reassurance	33
1.3.2.6. The Sign.....	34
1.3.3. Vogel’s call narrative pattern.....	36
1.3.3.1. Officer/Military serviceman type.....	37
1.3.3.2. The Master-Faithful servant with full powers type.....	38
1.3.3.2.1. The four elements of the Master/Faithful Servant with full powers type ..	38
1.3.3.2.2. Application of this module to the call narratives of some prophets	39
1.3.3.2.3. The King-counselor type.....	40
1.3.3.2.4. The divine council: call of the Prophet Isaiah as paradigm	40
1.3.3.2.5. The Purification of the Prophet.....	40
1.3.3.2.6. The request for a volunteer	41

1.3.3.2.7. The Self offering	42
1.3.3.2.8. The command for the mission.....	42
1.3.3.2.9. Dialogue and request for explanation	42
1.3.4. The Master/disciple type.....	42
1.3.4.1. The first <i>misunderstood</i> calls (vv 4-5)	43
1.3.4.2. The second misunderstood calls (vv 6-7)	43
1.3.4.3. The third misunderstood calls (vv 8-9).....	44
1.3.4.4. The decisive call (cc 10-14).....	44
1.3.5. The Vocation of each prophet is unique – <i>Beyond Habel</i>	45
1.4. An analysis on the type of call genre that Jer 1:4-9 recounts.....	46
1.4.1. Structure and content of the Call of Jeremiah	47
1.4.2. God’s call to the Prophet Jeremiah (Jer 1:4-5)	47
1.4.3. The ‘in womb’ calling (Jer 1:5)	48
1.4.4. Jeremiah’s response to God’s call (Jer 1:6).....	50
1.4.5. God’s response to Jeremiah (Jer 1:7-8)	51
1.4.6. God’s commission to Jeremiah (Jer 1:9-10).....	51
1.5. Luke and the OT motifs: Prophetic Space	53
1.5.1. Jeremiah’s “in-womb” election and other OT references.....	57
1.5.2. Jeremiah and John the Baptist “in-womb” thematic link (Jer 1:5 and Lk 1:41, 44)	59
1.6. Conclusion	61

CHAPTER TWO

SYNCHRONIC ANALYSIS OF LUKE 1:41, 44

2.1. Introduction.....	63
2.2. The Text in its context	63
2.2.1. The text of Lk 1:41, 44 and translation.....	64
2.2.2. Textual Criticism	64
2.3. The General Nature of the Infancy Narratives.....	65
2.3.1. The Preference of Luke’s IN	66
2.3.2. Similarities and Differences of the Infancy Narratives of Mathew and Luke.....	68
2.4. Contextual Analysis of the pericope Lk 1:41, 44 (The IN of Lk 1:5-2:52).....	71

2.4.1. The Infancy Narrative of Luke 1:5-2:52	71
2.4.2. The Structures and patterns of thought in the Lucan IN	73
2.4.2.1. Luke's specific use of Temporal Indicators.....	73
2.4.2.2. A Brief Linguistic Analysis of Luke's IN.....	74
2.4.2.2.1. The use of <i>καὶ ἐγένετο / ἐγένετο δέ</i>	76
2.4.2.2.2. Instances of the use of <i>καὶ ἐγένετο / ἐγένετο δέ</i>	77
2.4.2.2.3. The Use of <i>καὶ ἐγένετο</i> in Lk 1:41	78
2.4.2.2.4. Uses of <i>ἐν</i> + dative of the articular infinitive... ..	80
2.4.2.2.5. The use of <i>καὶ ἰδοὺ</i>	80
2.4.2.2.6. <i>Ἐνώπιον</i> + genitive.....	81
2.4.2.2.7. <i>Ἐκ κοιλίας μητρός</i> – from the mother's womb.....	82
2.5. Possible Structure of the Infancy Narrative	82
2.5.1. The Lucan parallelism in the arrangement of the IN	83
2.5.2. Contextual parallelism in the Lucan IN.....	84
2.5.3. Rhetorical Synkrisis in the Lucan IN.....	88
2.5.4. Luke's Annunciation narrative technique (Lk 1:5-56)... ..	90
2.5.4.1. Announcement to Zechariah (Lk 1:5-15)... ..	93
2.5.4.2. Announcement to Mary (Lk 1:26-38)... ..	97
2.5.4.3. Meeting of Elizabeth and Mary (the Visitation) Lk 1:39-45.....	99
2.6. The Semantic Flow... ..	102
2.7. Conclusion... ..	106

CHAPTER THREE

DIACHRONIC ANALYSIS OF LUKE 1:41, 44

3.1. Introduction.....	108
3.2. Source Criticism - The problem of Lucan Sources.....	108
3.2.1 Source Critical Analysis: The problem of Lucan redaction and sources of the IN.....	109
3.2.1.1. The Problem of Lucan Sources.....	112
3.2.1.2. Theological Indications of Sources.....	113
3.2.1.3. The Presence and working of the Holy Spirit.....	115
3.2.1.4. The action of the Holy Spirit in the Scene of the Visitation (Lk 1:41-45) ...	117
3.2.1.5. Christological indications of Lucan Sources... ..	119
3.2.1.6. Literary Indications of Lucan Sources... ..	120

3.2.1.7. The Q source and the L (Baptist Source).....	122
3.2.1.8. Semitic Origins of the ‘L’ Source.....	123
3.2.1.9. Oral Sources.....	123
3.3. Form Criticism of the Lucan IN.....	125
3.4. The ‘prophetic call narrative’ genre in the Lucan IN... ..	127
3.5. Conclusion	128

CHAPTER FOUR

CLOSE READING OF LUKE 1:41-45

4.1. Introduction.....	130
4.2. Exegesis	
4.2.1. Lk 1:41: The baby leaped in my womb (ἐσκίρτησεν τὸ βρέφος ἐν τῇ κοιλίᾳ αὐτῆς)...	
.....	131
4.2.2. Elizabeth’s response to Mary’s greeting and her <i>Benedictus</i> (Lk 1:42).....	132
4.2.3. The Mother of my Lord (Lk 1:43).....	135
4.2.4. ‘Leaped for joy’ as a receptive response - Lk 1:44.....	136
4.2.5. The moment of Fulfillment (Lk 1:45).....	138
4.2.6. John’s ‘leap for joy’ and Mary’s Magnificat (Lk 1:46 -55).....	140
4.2.7. προφήτης ὑψίστου, γὰρ ἐνώπιον κυρίου (A prophet of the Most High, to go before the Lord) (Lk 1:76)	142
4.2.8. Redactional components of Zechariah’s Prophetic speech (Lk 1:76).....	145
4.3. Conclusion	147

CHAPTER FIVE

THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1. Introduction.....	149
5.2. Theology of the Church Fathers: The Sanctification of John the Baptist.....	149
5.2.1. St Ambrose of Milan.....	151
5.2.2. St Augustine.....	152
5.2.3. St Thomas Aquinas.....	153
5.2.4. Further Insights on the “in-womb” calling and sanctification of John the Baptist.....	155
5.3. Contextual Implications.....	158
5.3.1. Prophetic Calling and receptive response	159

5.3.2. The Impact of Authentic Prophetic calling today as Jeremiah and John the Baptist.....	163
5.3.3. The problem of prophets not called by God... ..	165
5.3.4. ἐσκίρτησεν ἐν ἀγαλλιάσει ('leaped for Joy') in the light of <i>Evangelii Gaudium</i> . ..	167
5.4. Conclusion	169
GENERAL CONCLUSION	170
SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY	176