Michal Beth Dinkler


Silence is an often overlooked and under-theorized aspect of New Testament narrative analysis. In Silent Statements, Michal Beth Dinkler aims to rectify that situation. Acknowledging the centrality of speech in Luke’s Gospel, Dinkler notes that the power of spoken words in Luke cannot be fully understood without recognizing the equally important role played by silence. Her purpose, therefore, is to map the wide range of silences in play throughout Luke, which she terms “Luke’s narrative soundscape” (p. 2). According to Dinkler, “the Lukan narrator seeks to shape the reader/hearer into an ideal witness to his (sic) message – an ideal witness who listens to, receives, and perceives the divine word correctly” (pp. 3–4).

Seeking to integrate silence into narrative criticism, Dinkler’s “Introduction” begins by stressing that silence is not merely the absence of speech, but rather an illocutionary act. Silence takes a variety of forms (e.g., gaps, delays, internal monologues), operates on multiple levels, is innately polyvalent and contextually determined, and carries rhetorical force. Dinkler justifies her decision to take a narrative-critical approach to the topic on the grounds that narrative discourse is fundamentally rhetorical in nature. She proceeds to outline key concepts related to the study of narrative generally and of particular relevance for the aspect of silence (viz., story and narration, narrator, point of view, reader, plot, characterization, and theme). The following section of her book briefly surveys the variety of silences one encounters in Luke’s Gospel specifically (e.g., explicit references to silence, narratorial silences).

Dinkler organizes the next four chapters around the traditional divisions of Luke (1:1–4:13; 4:14–9:50; 9:51–19:27; and 19:28–24:53). Each interprets Lukan silences in relation to both the individual section and the story as a whole, at the level of both the narration and the story, and concludes with an exegetical vignette illustrating what attending to Lukan silences adds to our understanding of Luke’s “plot, characterization, and theological themes” (p. 48). Dinkler’s rationale for selecting these episodes for analysis is that “they are widely dispersed throughout the gospel; they represent various types of stories ... and they exhibit different kinds of speech-silence interactions” (p. 48 n. 236).

I found the author’s decision not to focus on a single figure (e.g., Jesus) insightful insofar as it highlights that narrative silences are foremost dynamics related to the narrator and the narrative work.

Dinkler argues that Luke’s prologue and opening narrative segment (1) “introduce the ideal relationship between narrator and reader by orienting the
reader and raising readerly expectations, while simultaneously creating ten-
sions that problematize this ideal”; (2) introduce Jesus and portray his unique
identity through the reliable speech of others; and (3) establish the regulation
of characters’ speech in juxtaposition to the theological theme of tension be-
tween the certainty of the divine plan and the varieties of human response (p.
55). These three moves form the backbone of Luke’s narrative rhetoric.
Throughout the Gospel, the narrator will develop and manipulate them in ser-
tice to the narrator’s primary aims, which may or may not be perfectly achieved.
Dinkler concludes, “[T]he tension between divine providential guidance and
human response subtly mirrors on the story level a tension that also occurs on
the level of the narration: the narrator, situated in a position of programmatic
influence, effectively aligns [one]self with God, who is depicted as the reliable
authority directing events within the story. And yet, the narrator can never
control the reader absolutely” (p. 84).

The next three chapters trace the contours of silence in Luke, demonstrat-
ing the role it plays in relation to both the shape and the content of Luke’s nar-
ɾative. At the level of the narrative, the Lukan narrator uses various types of
silences (e.g., ambiguities, delays, unanswered questions) to provide causality,
unify seemingly disconnected episodes, drive the plot, surprise readers, create
suspense, and challenge conventional views. At the level of the story, speech
and silence primarily serve the processes of characterization, and are most in-
fluential in the portrayal of the disciples, religious leaders, and Jesus. Finally,
Dinkler argues that silence plays an integral role in the Lukan themes of salva-
tion to the ends of the earth, hearing vis-à-vis doing, and the word of God.
Speech and silence, moreover, is a theme in its own right (p. 87), foremost in
relation to Luke’s focus on discipleship as a journey that entails properly re-
ceiving God’s word, which is coupled with an emphasis on proper speech eth-
ics (p. 135) and on “verbal witness as a constitutive component of true
discipleship” (p. 167).

In the “Conclusion,” Dinkler suggests three benefits of attending to the as-
pect of silence: Doing so will provide new options for resolving interpretive
difficulties; strengthen narrative theory by enhancing our understanding of
the interplay between narrator, narratee, and narrative; and “nuance and deep-
en conceptualizations of Lukan plot, characterization, and theme” (p. 216). Si-
lent Statements stands as an excellent example of all three. Dinkler has not
only demonstrated that narrative silences cannot be ignored but also has pro-
vided readers with a strong methodological foundation on which to build fur-
ther research. The author’s classification of silences, her articulation of the
multidimensional nature of narrative silences, her analysis of interior mono-
logues (esp. pp. 118–121 and pp. 123–125), and her reading of the so-called