

LUKE

(1)

Author: Luke was not an apostle but an evangelist who accompanied Paul on his missionary journeys, and who wrote the most methodical and detailed of all the Gospels. Luke was also a physician, for that is how Paul refers to him in his Letter to the Colossians: “**Luke the beloved physician and Demas greet you**” (Colossians 4:14). Indeed, Luke uses common medical terminology to describe illnesses and afflictions: “**And behold, there was a man before him who had dropsy**” (14:2). Dropsy or *hudropikos* (Greek), which is swelling due to fluid retention, is a term in Greek medical literature found nowhere else in the Bible.

Date of composition: A.D. 80—85

Place of composition: Although Luke was from Antioch (Syria), Scripture scholars cannot determine precisely where his gospel was written.

Audience: Primarily Gentile Christians in Greece and Syria.

Sources: Luke’s primary source was the Gospel of Mark (65% of Mark is found in Luke), but he also used other “**eyewitnesses and ministers of the word**” (Luke 1:2), and Paul: “**And when he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on to Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them**” (Acts 16:10).

Prologue (1:1-4)

In the first century, large ungainly scrolls did not allow for casual browsing of the Scriptures. Therefore a scroll’s first sentence was to make clear what was to follow, and was considered as crucial as a book’s cover or a title page today.

In the first verse Luke states that he is writing a “history,” the purpose of which is to assure Gentile Christians of the truth about Jesus. Such reassurance was needed given the failure of the mission to the Jews who rejected the Gospel. Gentile Christians might wonder why they should feel confident about their new faith if even the Jews are no longer among the faithful. To allay such concerns, Luke’s Gospel is written as a continuation of God’s fidelity in the Old Testament, and how the Gentile Christian Church emerged from a restored and now faithful Israel.

In Luke *salvation* and *discipleship* are central themes; no longer is one’s inherited Jewish status the measure. Jesus calls on the people not to seek honor and status, but instead to love your enemies; do good to those who hate you; and extend hospitality to those who cannot return the favor.

Who was Theophilus? (1:1-4)

Theophilus, whom Luke refers to as “most excellent,” was the likely benefactor for Luke’s written gospel. In the first century scrolls made of papyrus or especially parchment (animal skin) were very expensive to produce, so a scroll was commonly dedicated to its financial patron. And Luke’s “orderly account” was perhaps to improve upon what Bishop Papias of Hierapolis (central Turkey) concluded about Mark’s gospel in his first-century commentary: “*Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately, though not indeed in order, whatsoever he remembered of the things done or said by Christ. For he neither heard the Lord nor followed him, but afterward, as I said, he followed Peter, who adapted his teaching to the needs of his hearers, but with no intention of giving a connected account of the Lord’s discourses, so that Mark committed no error while he thus wrote some things as he remembered them.*”



St. Luke’s symbol is the sacrificial ox because his Gospel begins with the account of Zechariah, who in the Temple offers a sacrifice of incense.

Birth and childhood of Jesus - John the Baptist birth announcement (1:5-2:52).

Luke writes the opening chapters as a continuation of Abraham's covenant with God, which is to be fully realized in Jesus.

King Herod

As a descendant of Esau (Jacob's brother, Genesis 25:24-25), King Herod was not accepted as a "real" Jew. For centuries the descendants of Esau, the Edomites, **battled with Israel**. Moreover, Herod heavily taxed the people to pay for his extravagant building projects.

The Temple and the incense offering

By drawing lots among the many Temple priests, Zechariah was chosen to burn incense in the Holy Place, which was just outside the Holy of Holies (Exodus 30:7-8). Casting lots was a way of ensuring that the choice of a particular man for the honor was not intruding upon God's will (Acts 1:17, 26). Typically, eligible priests stood in a circle and extended one or two fingers. A random priest was chosen as the starting point. The overseer then announced a random number (e.g., 70 or 100), and counted fingers one by one, moving around the circle. The priest on whom the final number fell won the lot. This method prevented manipulation and ensured public transparency.

Mary visits Elizabeth (1:39-56)

After the Annunciation Mary first greets Elizabeth, which is only proper because Elizabeth is her elder. Moreover, Elizabeth is married to the priest, Zechariah, who is a descendant of Moses' brother, Aaron. All the more surprising, then, is Elizabeth's greeting to Mary; for Elizabeth places herself in the role of a servant, bestowing on Mary the title, "the mother of my Lord."

We don't know if anyone went with Mary to Bethany, but normally a young girl never walked unaccompanied, and certainly not on a seventy-mile journey to the hill country. For until she entered the bridal chamber, a betrothed girl lived at home in seclusion.

The birth of Jesus (2:1-20)

Sensitive to the historical record, Luke mentions four times the census of Caesar Augustus. The census was a periodic listing of persons and property to collect taxes, to register for military service, or to secure one's oath to the Emperor. Jews hated the census because it was also a reminder of their subjugation under Rome.

The finding of Jesus in the Temple (2:40-52)

At that time, "house" or "household" was considered less a physical space than a place of *authority*. When Jesus says, "**Did you not know that I had to be in my Father's house?**" he is aligning himself with the Father's will, even if it appears to compromise his relationship with Mary and Joseph.

Preparation for the ministry of Jesus (3:1-4:13)

The appeal of popular prophetic movements such as John the Baptist's (after a nearly 400-year hiatus) stems from the widespread sense of injustice and oppression felt by the people. By the time John preaches, "**Prepare the way of the Lord . . .**," the common people knew that change was needed (3:4).

Tiberius: Emperor of Rome (A.D. 14-37), infamous for his last years as a time of pure terror.

Pontius Pilate: Prefect of the Roman province of Judea (A.D. 26-36/37) who led his administration with savage ferocity and frequent executions without trial.

Herod Antipas: (4 B.C.—A.D. 39), surviving son of Herod the Great, who was not a king but a *tetrarch* (a ruler of one quarter of a region) who constructed his new capital city, Tiberias, over a graveyard. This was a serious violation of Jewish religious law, which made the city “off limits” for Jews.

Annas: high priest (A.D. 6-15), whose five sons and son-in-law (Caiaphas) follow him in office.

Joseph Caiaphas: high priest (A.D. 18-36/37), who as head of the Temple and in league with Annas exercised great power and privilege among the Jewish people.

The genealogy of Jesus (3:23-38)

Unlike Matthew’s genealogy, which begins with Abraham and ends with the birth of Jesus, Luke’s genealogy begins with the birth of Jesus and ends with Adam, emphasizing the divine origin of the human race and Jesus’ solidarity with all mankind.

Temptation in the desert (4:1-13)

In Jewish tradition fidelity to God was proven in the midst of testing, whether by the direct action of God, or through difficult circumstances, or by the devil. Though Israel repeatedly failed in her obedience to God (Exodus 17:1-7; Deuteronomy 9:6-29), Jesus proves his fidelity and now is ready to begin his public ministry.

Mission and controversy (5:1-6:11)

In the general population sinners and the sick were considered “outsiders,” but Jesus sees them as worthy of God’s grace because they are responding to Him. The religious leaders are the “insiders,” but they view Jesus with suspicion and hostility.

Jesus calls Matthew the tax collector

Because the Jews believed that the holiness of the Temple extended to their own households, when people gathered at table, not only the food but also the guests must be ritually clean. Therefore the Pharisees took great exception to Jesus and his disciples when they ate with tax collectors and sinners.

The Sabbath and plucking grain (6:1-11)

Exodus 34:21 obligates Jews to observe the Sabbath even during the harvest. Only later did Jewish tradition interpret even the random “plucking” of grains from their stalks as a form of “harvesting.” In fact, the precise Pharisaic interpretations of the law could also accuse the disciples of “reaping,” “threshing,” and perhaps even “grinding” the grains as they walked through the fields. Still, Jesus does not outright reject Sabbath observance, but only the position that strict Sabbath observance was an unassailable sign of faithfulness to God.

Jesus calls and instructs his disciples (6:12-49)

By choosing his twelve disciples, Jesus is signaling judgment upon Israel’s leadership for their lack of insight into God’s plan to redeem mankind. Thus Jesus intends to establish new leadership (the Apostles) for the twelve tribes of Israel.

In the Beatitudes of Luke 6, Jesus does not represent the conventional wisdom of the day, for example, that wealth was a sign of God’s blessing (Deuteronomy 28:1-6). Jesus always has in view the world to come; for with his coming the end has already arrived. The values he teaches reflect this new era, which is difficult for tradition-minded Jews to accept. So Jesus calls for a radical change in thinking, including the acceptance and even embrace of those whom Jewish society rejects. As such, in a series of “woes” Jesus repudiates the scribes and Pharisees who insist on monitoring their fellow Jews’ legal observances (5:17-6:11). In fact, the followers of Jesus are to give freely and reject the never-ending

cycles of indebtedness and repayment to each other. Additionally, the command to love one's enemies contradicts the thinking that one must distinguish enemies from friends.

Jesus, a Pharisee, and a woman (7:36-50)

Remarkably, people's homes were generally open to all comers, which explains the woman's presence in the home of Simon the Pharisee who invited Jesus to dinner. Houses were small and crowded. Doorways were often left open during the day. Social life mixed easily between the street and one's home and courtyard. Since Jewish tradition strongly emphasized hospitality, especially toward the poor and travelers, passersby might reasonably enter or stand nearby along the walls.

When the woman touches Jesus' feet with her hair, it is no wonder Simon has serious reservations about Jesus' status as a holy man, let alone a prophet. A woman who let her hair down in public was akin to appearing half-naked. **"If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner"** (7:39).

The nature of discipleship (9:18-27)

Discipleship entails radical self-denial and daily cross-bearing in following Jesus. To deny oneself is to set aside the relationships, extended family origins, and one's inner circle of friends which make up one's identity.

In its Roman context, to take up one's cross meant to be a victim who actually carries a crossbeam to the place of crucifixion. But within Luke's narrative, to carry one's cross "daily" (9:23) is to live each day as one dead to a world that is passing away.

Transfiguration

The Transfiguration is the *disclosure* of Jesus as he is; that is, his inner being was made *transparent* to those who witnessed his glory on Mount Tabor.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan (10:25-37)

The Parable of the Good Samaritan undermines the accepted notion of "classes" within God's people. The priest and the Levite were accustomed to being seen by others as indisputably righteous. Perhaps assuming the man is dead and fearful of defiling themselves if they touched him, they do nothing. Yet Jews were obliged to bury a neglected corpse; leaving a corpse unburied overnight for any reason was a serious sin ("**You shall surely bury him on the same day.**" Deuteronomy 21:23). The parable teaches that the door to help one's neighbor is never closed.

The Fatherhood of God and the Lord's Prayer (11:1-13)

In a culture of creditors and debtors, exchanged favors created a relationship of debt and repayment. But often such debts were exploited and leveraged among the Jews. In the Lord's Prayer Jesus teaches the disciples to give without expectation of return. With forgiveness there is no intricate patronage system, no *quid pro quo*.

Jesus' behavior questioned (11:14-54)

A Pharisee invites Jesus to dinner but is **"astonished to see that he did not first wash before dinner"** (11:38). Purity is rooted in the Jewish community's understanding of the nature of God. Ritual purity, e.g., handwashing, serves to enhance this understanding. But Simon's concern for ritual purity overlooks his own need for integrity; that is, his outward observance ought to match his heart's disposition. Repeatedly Jesus seeks to collapse the distance between the social elite and the needy.

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, . . ." (Luke 13:34-35)

Looking over the city, Jesus laments that if only Israel would repent from her centuries-old stubbornness and receive him, then Israel would receive the blessings of salvation.