

The Gospel According to Luke: Background

General features • Luke is the only gospel with a sequel, and the only gospel which takes us from Jesus' birth to resurrection

- Luke is the longest gospel. Luke and Acts constitutes 24% of the NT

- Luke is the only gospel with a sequel ◦ Luke and Acts are joined by their prologues, style, language, theology and even some parallel structure: Both open with a descent of the Holy Spirit, go on to narrate miracles and preaching, emphasize traveling, and feature trial scenes toward their close. In Luke the movement is toward Jerusalem throughout, and in Acts it's outward into the world. Note though that they are different genres: gospels are closest to Hellenistic biography, which Acts certainly is not

- Luke draws on what appears to be an early or incomplete version of Mark, adding about the same amount more material, both from “Q” and from other sources (“L”)

Authorship • There is little dispute, based on the “we” sections of Acts, that the author is Luke, “the beloved physician” (Col 4:14). •

The author is educated—Luke-Acts has the more elegant Greek of the NT, and the author shows the ability to fluidly change styles, from

the classical Greek prologue to the “Septuagintal” Greek of the infancy narratives to the Hellenistic Greek of the rest of Luke.

- The author, while not Jewish, was quite possibly a “God fearer” before converting to Christianity

Date

- After Mark, which Luke uses, but also likely before Paul's death or the destruction of the temple or Nero's persecution (Rome is seen in a somewhat positive light). Opinions differ between a date in the 60s or one in the 75-85 range

Audience

- Ostensibly written to Theophilus—which, meaning “lover of God,” could be a generic address, or could be a patron and recent convert (1:4)

- Internal choices about the background Lk presents, including the concern to situate the Gospel in the context of secular history, suggest a primarily (though likely mixed)

Gentile audience

- It is likely an urban audience given the predominantly urban settings

Some Major Themes

- Often singled out as the key thematic verse in the Gospel of Lk is 19:10, Jesus' closing comment on the Zacchaeus episode: “For the Son of Man came to seek and save what was lost.”

- Ministry to the excluded or disadvantaged, including especially ◦

Women : There is an abundance of pairs of passages where a man and a woman do the same or similar things, such as the man from Syria and the woman of Sidon (4:27; 4:25-26); the list of male followers in 6:12-16 and of female followers in 8:1-3; the demon in the man rebuked (4:31-17) and the fever in the woman rebuked (4:38); a man loses a sheep (15:4-7) and a woman loses a coin (15:8-10); etc. ◦

The poor; (including those lacking honor or prestige or power, such as Samaritans or tax collectors): In Jesus' inaugural address he specifically says the purpose of his ministry is to “bring good news to the poor” and “to let the oppressed go free” (4:18; cf. 7:22)

- Gentiles : The gospel is a message of hope for all people

- **Food:** Luke mentions 19 meals, 13 of which are unique to his gospel, and Jesus is criticized for eating too much and with the wrong people
- **Worship and Prayer:** Luke opens and closes with scenes of people worshiping God in the temple, and there are 20 references in Luke to people worshiping or giving thanks, far more than in the other gospels
- **Salvation here and now:** Over and over salvation is something which is happening first now, and not just waited for at the end times. So, e.g., when Jesus says to Zacchaeus that salvation has come to his house, he means not just that his sins are forgiven, but that he's freed from slavery to mammon.

Luke highlights various parallels between the births of John and

Jesus :**PARAELLISM**

- For both sets of parents the birth was unexpected: Elizabeth was old and barren (1:7), and Mary was unmarried (1:26-27)
- The angel Gabriel appears to one parent of each child (1:11-19; 1:26-38)
- Both future parents are “troubled” (1:12; 1:29)
- Both are told not to fear (1:13; 1:30) • Both are promised a son (1:13; 1:31)
- Both are given names for their unborn sons (1:13; 1:31) • Both sons will be “great” (1:15; 1:32) • Both parents ask, “How?” (1:18; 1:34)
- Both are given signs (1:20; 1:36) • There is joy over the birth of each son (1:58; 2:15-18)
- Following John's circumcision, neighbors react in fear (1:59-66); following Jesus' circumcision, Simeon and Anna recognize God at work (2:21-38)
- On both occasions canticles are sung (the Benedictus, 1:68-79; the Nunc Dimittis, 2:29-32)

• Luke tells us of both sons, “The child grew and became strong...”
(1:80; 2:40)

Why is Luke so careful to highlight these parallels? What does this structure communicate about both John and Jesus?

THE MAGIFICAT

Luke's first two chapters are distinctive because the characters keep breaking out into lyrical prayer. It's also true that Luke most important themes are introduced in these song-prayers. As Mark Allan Powell puts it, “...the analogy of an overture is appropriate: the reader hears snippets of everything that is to come, presented in an especially engaging and artistic fashion; then, as the story unfolds, these themes are reintroduced and developed more fully.”² For instance, in the Magnificat—Mary's prayer—the theme of reversal is presented: “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he as filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty” (1:52-53).

Joanna Adams observed about Mary's prayer, I admit that I am having trouble with my verb tenses here. “The Mighty One has done great things for me,” Mary sings, but her baby hasn't even been born

yet. God has filled the hungry already, she implies, but millions are stomachs are still empty. Either she has lost her mind, or she has been blessed with double vision. She believes that heaven and earth are on an unavoidable convergence course. With eyes of faith and a hopeful ear, she is able to discern that the future God has planned is bleeding back into the here and now. Adams concludes, "We will be blessed if we can see, as Mary saw, the possibility of transformation for our often unjust and loveless world." One might put this more concretely: Mary had the gift of seeing where and how God was at work. Her immediate response was to burst forth in praise. Just as important, in the years to come, it made her an ideal parent to raise the Lord, who would one day announce, "Blessed are the poor, blessed are the hungry, blessed are the meek," and create the church to do just this. a) Where do you see God at work in our church and our country, to accomplish the amazing things foreseen by Mary and Simeon and Zechariah? (Be as specific as you can.) What are the telltale signs of God's hand?

