

The Yale Divinity School Bible Study
New Canaan, Connecticut
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The Gospel of Luke

General Introduction

The third gospel offers a depiction of the life and teaching of Jesus that anchors him in the prophetic and priestly traditions of the scriptures of Israel while it focuses on compassionate forgiveness as a central feature of the Christian life.

The author, traditionally identified as a companion of Paul, the “beloved physician” of Col 4:14, was probably connected in some fashion to the Pauline churches, although his immediate connection with the apostle is disputed. He certainly revered Paul and saw his ministry as a continuation of the work of Jesus. To give expression to that continuity he composed a two-volume work, united by the matching literary prefaces that introduce each. The first volume, the Gospel, is structured around large temporal and geographical axes. The history of humankind in general, and of Israel in particular, culminates in the life and ministry of Jesus and in the decisive events of his death and resurrection in Jerusalem. The second volume, The Acts of the Apostles, traces the history of the followers of Jesus from their beginnings in Jerusalem through their expansion to Rome and ultimately to the “ends of the earth.” Luke thus sketches a historical outline with a decidedly theological perspective. The Spirit of God is what gives history its meaning and shape and that Spirit was abundantly at work in Jesus and in his followers.

As the preface to the Gospel indicates, the work was not composed from scratch, but had access to sources. Most scholars believe that the major sources available to Luke were the Gospel of Mark in some form, perhaps abbreviated from what we now know as canonical Mark, and a collection of sayings of Jesus, which was also available to the author of the Gospel according to Matthew. Comparison of the text of Luke with its parallels in the other two “synoptic” gospels can be helpful in isolating the distinctive features of Luke’s theology.

The author of the Gospel probably composed his work late in the first century, in the 90’s, after the composition of Mark, around 70 CE, and after the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem in that same year. We do not know where he worked, but the fact that Acts prominently features the Pauline communities in Asia minor, particularly Ephesus, hints that that city may have been the evangelist’s home.

The events of the Jewish revolt cast a shadow over the Christian movement and called for a response defining the movement in relationship to its Jewish and gentile constituents and to the political power under which it operated. Such concerns are obvious in the book of Acts, and can also be felt within the gospel, particularly when it treats issues of eschatological expectation.

Whatever apologetic concerns Luke may have had, he is concerned above all to tell the story of Jesus and his movement in a way that will instruct and edify his readers. An important tool for that is Luke's mastery of narrative techniques, particularly evident in the beloved opening chapters with their rich poetry and vivid characterization. Luke's narrative sensitivity is also evident in the fact that he has preserved so many of the most important parables attributed to Jesus, including the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son, both of which appear only in Luke.

Luke's accounts of the decisive events of the life of Jesus, at the end as well as at the beginning of his life, have distinctive features that have resonated throughout the history of the Church. The shepherds who watch their flocks by night take their place beside the despondent disciples on the road to Emmaus as bookends of the story of the life of Jesus. All herald the joyous good news that through Jesus the God of Israel has done something new for Israel and for all humankind.

Luke's gospel also sketches some of the implications of that divine action. The third evangelist offers a prominent place in his story to women, at the beginning, at the end, and at key junctions along the way. They seem to be the focus of Jesus' special concern. Is this liberation or condescension or some mix of the two? Luke also raises concerns about what responding to Jesus means for the use of wealth and earthly goods. The rich and the powerful are subject to prophetic judgment, and are called to some decisive action, but what is that supposed to be, radical transformation of the economic order, compassion for the widow and orphan, or something in between? The gospel poses questions to its readers rather than definitive solutions, but it strongly suggests that the answers are to be found in a prayerful appropriation of the example of Jesus, the one anointed to proclaim the good news of God's forgiving love.

Major segments of the Gospel

I.	1-2	The Birth of the Anointed One
II.	3:1-6:11	Jesus Begins to Preach and Heal
III.	6:12-8:55	Jesus Begins to Teach
IV.	9:1-11:54	Jesus Begins to form a Community
V.	12:1-14:35	Jesus Teaches "On the Road"
VI.	15:1-19:27	Lost and Found
VII.	19:28-22:71	In Jerusalem
VIII.	23:1-24:53	The Passion and Resurrection