

THE WORLD OF THE GOSPELS



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THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

The books known as the **Gospel according to Luke** and the **Acts of the Apostles** were first written for the benefit of a man called Theophilus ('loved by God'). He may have been worthy of high honour, with "most excellent" (Luke 1:3b) being an ancient form of 'your excellency'. And he probably lived in or near to Rome, since references in Acts 28:15 to "the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns", respectively 43 and 33 miles south of Rome, appear without any explanatory comment. What is certain is that Theophilus had been taught about Jesus prior to his receiving the gospel written for him (Luke 1:4b).

WHAT IS IN THE GOSPEL? WHY WAS IT WRITTEN?

The preface to Acts makes clear that the author's first book, the gospel, "dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God." (Acts 1:1-3)

The gospel is thus a record of the earthly life and ministry of Jesus, the incarnate Son of God. Born in Bethlehem, "the city of David" (Luke 2:1-7), and brought up in Nazareth in Galilee (Luke 4:16), Jesus began His public ministry when He was about thirty years of age (Luke 3:23). That very remarkable ministry, which lasted for about three years, was "attested ... by God with mighty works and wonders and signs" (Acts 2:22ff). It came to an end with the cruel death of Jesus on the cross, His triumphant resurrection from the grave – exactly as He had promised – and His ascension into heaven (Luke 22-24; Acts 1:1-11).

The preface to the gospel states that it was written to provide "an orderly account" of all that the "eyewitnesses and ministers of the word" taught about the life and work of Jesus, so would give certainty concerning the things which Theophilus had been taught. (Luke 1:1-4) In general terms, "The Third Gospel was written for the sake of correcting the erroneous views of enquirers and strengthening the faith of believers, perhaps especially of those recently brought to Christ." (Hendriksen, 16)

WHO WROTE THE GOSPEL?

Almost all of the letters in the New Testament, and the book of Revelation, include in their opening verses the names of their human authors (see, for example, Philippians 1:1, James 1:1 and Revelation 1:1). All of the gospels, by contrast, are anonymous – but are known invariably by the names given in their superscriptions.

Tradition, with "the weight of evidence in its favour" (Hendriksen, 3), has it that the third gospel was written by Luke. Paul called him "the beloved physician" and distinguished him from the "men of the circumcision among my fellow workers" (Colossians 4:10-14). It follows that Luke was a Gentile convert and, because of the elegance of his writing, was an educated man and quite probably Greek.

Luke is mentioned by name elsewhere only in 2 Timothy 4:11 and Philemon 24, but the extended “us” and “we” passages in the Acts of the Apostles (16:10–17, 20:5–21:18, 27:1–28:16) indicate that he was present during many of the incidents that he recounts. Luke was one of Paul’s loyal travel companions and was with the apostle in his first Roman imprisonment (when Paul wrote to the Colossians and to Philemon) and his second Roman imprisonment (when he wrote, to Timothy, his final letter). The gospel was probably written in Rome in about the year AD 62.

The early Church Fathers had no doubt that Luke wrote the third gospel. Eusebius (c.260–340), the ‘Father of Church history’, notes that “Luke, by race an Antiochian [that is, Antioch in Syria], and a physician by profession, had long been a companion of Paul, and had more than a casual acquaintance with the rest of the apostles. In two God-breathed books, namely, the Gospel and the Acts, he left us examples of the art of soul-healing which he had learned from them”.

HOW RELIABLE IS THE GOSPEL?

More often than the other gospel writers, Luke refers to contemporary events. We read, for example, that Zechariah received the promise of a son during the days of Herod the Great (Luke 1:5), that Jesus was born in Bethlehem because Joseph and Mary had to travel there to register for a census decreed by Caesar Augustus when Quirinius was governor of Syria (Luke 2:1–7), and that John the Baptist started his ministry “In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar” (Luke 3:1–3).

These and lots of other chronological and geographical statements have often been questioned. But “*wherever it has been possible to check Luke’s statements*, his impeccable reliability as a historian has come to light. In not a single case has it been established that he was wrong... What is true with respect to *geography* and *history* holds also for the *customs* prevailing in the days described in Luke’s Gospel. All of them correspond with information available from other sources, sacred and secular.” (Hendriksen, 40–41)

Ultimately, Luke’s gospel is wholly reliable because it is part of God’s word. The canon of Scripture was penned by a variety of human authors, and their individualities are evident in their very different writings. But behind this human authorship lies the solid fact that the whole of the Bible is ‘God-breathed’. As Paul explained, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:15–17) Luke was, therefore, one of those privileged men who, in their writings, “spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” (2 Peter 1:20,21)

“Luke’s Gospel is well suited to 21st-century readers because he has written in a narrative style that appeals to the imagination, deals with people’s lives, is easy to read and wholly enjoyable. Through his narratives/stories Luke has made Jesus alive and accessible for anyone who seriously reads him. This is narrative theology at its best.” (Milne, xiv)

AN OUTLINE OF THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

ex Milne

Prologue

Luke 1:1–4

Luke states his reasons for writing his Gospel and also explains his methods in doing so.

Introductory Events

Luke 1:5–2:52

Luke records events leading up to and surrounding the births of John the Baptist and Jesus. John and Jesus are God’s principal agents in the coming of his Kingdom into the world. There is also a story from Jesus’ later childhood.

Preparation for Ministry

Luke 3:1–4:13

This included three items – Jesus listening to the preaching of John the Baptist, his baptism at John’s hands, his private temptation in the desert. Only then was Jesus ready to take up his work as the Lord’s Christ to Israel and the Gentiles.

Ministry in Galilee

Luke 4:14–9:50

Jesus’ public ministry began with his preaching at Nazareth, but it led into an itinerant-style ministry that involved preaching, teaching and healing throughout most of the northern parts of Palestine.

Journey towards Jerusalem

Luke 9:51–19:27

Throughout this section Jesus is slowly making his way to Jerusalem for the last time. Luke includes several notable examples of Jesus’ parables and miracles.

The Jerusalem Ministry

Luke 19:28–21:38

Jesus enters Jerusalem triumphantly, debates repeatedly with the religious authorities, and finally predicts the future events of this age.

The Passion

Luke 22:1–23:56

Jesus shares his last meal with his disciples before visiting the garden of Gethsemane. There he is betrayed by one of his disciples, who hands him over to the Romans. Pilate the governor gives in to the Jewish authorities and agrees to condemn Jesus to death by crucifixion. After his execution, Jesus is buried in a privately-owned tomb.

The Resurrection and Ascension

Luke 24:1–53

Jesus appears to many of his disciples and teaches them further from the Scriptures. His final act is to ascend into heaven as Lord of all.

RECOMMENDED READING

Ryle, J.C. (1858); *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels – Luke*
(these two volumes are excellent, and many modern editions of them are available)

Milne, Douglas J.W. (2005, repr.2013); *Let’s Study Luke*; Edinburgh, Banner of Truth

Wilcock, Michael (1979, repr.2020); *The Message of Luke*; London, IVP

Hendriksen, William (1979); *The Gospel of Luke*; Edinburgh, Banner of Truth
(this book is very good, but is by far the most technical of the commentaries noted here)
