

# The background to the Gospel of Luke\*

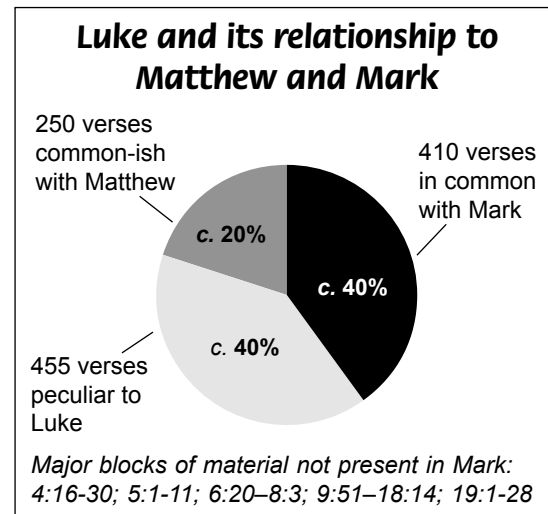
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LUKE'S GOSPEL, the longest book in the New Testament, has a number of unique features, not least the fact that it is only half complete, its sequel being the book of Acts. In considering what Luke is setting out to achieve vis-à-vis the other Gospel writers, therefore, we also have to consider the purpose of Acts. The two-part format suggests that Luke is particularly interested in the interface between the work of Jesus in his own ministry, and its continuation in the work of the apostles and the early church; how the preaching of Jesus and of the founders of the first-century ecclesia forms one seamless whole. In fact, Luke-Acts provides the only systematic New Testament account of the transition from Christ's ministry into the apostolic age.

## Transition

There are two points of transition within Luke-Acts. The first is the movement between the Jewish or Old Testament era and the time of Christ. In a seminal passage, Jesus declares that "The law and the prophets were until John" (16:16), and that the work of John ushers in a new era which is both the fulfilment of the old and the start of something better. Luke appears to be particularly interested in John the Baptist and his ministry, and the concept of transition at least partly explains this. We can also see why Luke begins his Gospel with lots of Old Testament allusions (see later), and with the appearance of classically Hebrew characters (Zacharias and Elizabeth, Anna, Simeon, the shepherds). Faithful people of the old covenant were waiting for the dawning of the momentous day of the long-promised saviour.

But the work of Jesus, fulfilling as it does the Old Testament Scriptures, also opens the way for the Gentiles, and for the creation of the church as a new Israel. Whilst the dawning of the era



of the church and the ministry of the apostles is primarily the topic of Acts, important seeds are sown already in the Gospel of Luke. In Jesus' first public appearance (as Luke has it) in the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus deliberately preaches on the future role of the Gentiles, and is driven out of the synagogue for his trouble. This presages many a similar scene in Acts. One writer expresses it well, as follows: "Jesus is the centrepiece binding together Israel and the church".<sup>1</sup>

As a Gentile, Luke is naturally concerned with his own kind. But his interest is wider than that, in both volumes of his work. He is interested in the interface of Jew and Gentile, the roles of each within the purpose of God, and the way in which they must live and work together in the embrace of God's plan and God's church. Whilst this is

\* Reprinted from the [Testimony, April 2006](#).

1. Raymond Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), p. 228.

abundantly obvious in Acts, it pays to be on the lookout for it in the Gospel also.

## The Prologue

Luke's is the only Gospel which opens with a formal prologue in typical Graeco-Roman style:

"Forasmuch as many<sup>2</sup> have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed [Gk. fulfilled] among us, even as they delivered them unto us, which [that is, they were] from the beginning were eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word; it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first,<sup>3</sup> to write unto thee in order, most excellent Theophilus, that thou mightest know the certainty of those things, wherein thou hast been instructed" (1:1-4).

Many people have written about Jesus' life before, Luke says, and frequently these were eyewitnesses of Jesus' ministry. But there was a need for another account which would:

- be explanatory or provide a schema for making sense of Jesus' ministry ("perfect understanding")
- tell the story from the beginning ("from the very first")
- be ordered, that is, structured, connected ("in order"; the term does not necessarily speak of chronological order; Luke brings structural shape, as we shall see)
- help Theophilus (see below)
- establish the certainty (historical veracity and faith-creating power) of Jesus' life for someone who has already had basic instruction ("that thou mightest know").

But what of "most excellent Theophilus"? Who was he, and why is he mentioned? The expression "most excellent" is an honorific title (rather like 'My Right Honourable Friend' or 'Your Majesty'). It is used to describe the Roman officials Felix and Festus in Acts 24:3 and 26:25, and its use suggests that Theophilus was a high-ranking official, or at the very least a person of considerable influence and wealth.

Why is Luke writing to him? The most likely suggestion is that he is the patron for Luke's two-

volume work. In order to get something published in the ancient world one had to have considerable resources, beyond the scope of all but aristocracy, landowners and officialdom. Writers themselves were not usually particularly wealthy people, so they needed a sponsor, a patron, so that their work could see the light of day. Rich and influential people liked sponsoring works of literature in this way. A patron was always referred to by the author in his prologue, just as is the case in Luke's Gospel. Perhaps, then, Theophilus was Luke's sponsor, either a convert like Luke, or someone extremely interested in Christianity.<sup>4</sup>

## Luke himself

That Luke, Paul's travelling companion, is the author, we may assume, not only from tradition, but also from the 'we' passages in the book of Acts where Luke joins and leaves Paul's missionary team. Luke, then, we know, both from the book of Acts and from passing references in Paul's epistles. He is "the beloved physician", and as such most likely the best educated of the four Gospel writers. It is no real surprise, then, to find that he has a concern, not only for exact

2. Although of the other three Gospels we can only say with some degree of certainty that Mark was already written, we should not forget that there were many other 'non-canonical' Gospels. The ones we have (like the Gospel of Thomas) are unlikely to be eyewitness accounts, but that does not mean that none existed. Some may have been merely lists of events; hence Luke's emphasis on the connection and shape he brings as a re-teller of the events of Jesus' life.
3. This most likely does not imply that he was an eyewitness; rather that because of his research and/or direct inspiration, his understanding of all the events in Jesus' life from the very first is complete.
4. Another suggestion is that Theophilus (literally, 'lover of God') is a representative of typical believers, rather than an actual person. This seems somewhat unlikely as Luke's initial intention, as it leaves the formality of Luke's prologue and his use of the title 'Most Excellent' unexplained. However, the meaning of his name does give a nice *double entendre* for other believers who read the Gospel. For the more unusual suggestion that he may have been a figure involved in Paul's trial before Caesar, see footnote 3 in "[Luke and his Gospel](#)" (p. 255).

## The shape of Luke's Gospel

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
Preparations (1:1-4:13)				The ministry in Galilee (4:14-9:50)						The travel narrative ('the road to Jerusalem') (9:51-19:27)								What happened in Jerusalem (death and resurrection) (19:28-24:53)					

### Some themes of Luke's Gospel

Although there isn't space to develop them here, the following list identifies some of the key topics which Luke seems particularly to emphasise in his presentation of the gospel:

- **Rich and poor**  
look at Luke's unique parables and see how many relate to this
- **Stewardship**  
connects with the preceding item
- **Prayer**  
how to pray, examples of Jesus in prayer, parables about prayer and the importance of persistency
- **Women**  
notice how many female characters appear, some of them only in Luke
- **Spirit**  
key to the book of Acts, but the seeds are here; note the text for Jesus' first 'sermon' in Luke 4
- **Salvation, save, saved**

medical terminology, but also for painstaking historical references, as well as political and military designations. He is keen to situate his Lord in a precise historical context and within a definite social and political milieu.

Luke is also most probably a Gentile. This, too, makes him likely unique amongst the Gospel writers. Although it may be overstating the case to say that a Gentile thematic is pervasive through the Gospel, a number of commentators have noted that a concern with Gentile interests does keep cropping up. In fact, Luke shows himself to be a master of both Gentile and Jewish worlds. He is familiar, for instance, with the Septuagint (Greek) version of the Old Testament (leading some to suggest he was a Jewish proselyte prior to accepting Christ). If his prologue is written in perfect Graeco-Roman literary form, then the rest of chapters 1 and 2, packed as they are with Old Testament allusions (particularly from the Psalms), are written in a style which appears to imitate Septuagint Greek. Luke is equally comfortable in both domains.

#### The Old Testament

It is worth exploring Luke's use of the Old Testament in a little more detail. Whereas Matthew's technique was the explicit use of quotation formulae—pointedly underlining for readers some

of the ways in which Jesus' life fulfilled the Law—Luke's technique is quite different, if no less powerful and deliberate. It just takes a bit more spotting.

Luke's technique might be to present a whole episode in such a way that the careful reader can discern the Old Testament prototype behind it. A classic example is the parable of the Good Samaritan (10:30-37). This is built in precise detail upon the incident recorded in 2 Chronicles 28:6-15, a connection well worth looking at.

But he goes beyond this. It is not merely a matter of drawing a link between a particular episode and an event or passage in the Old Testament. Luke sometimes connects a whole sequence of events into a chain which is based on an Old Testament prototype. There is a sequence, for instance, which appears to be based on the book of Deuteronomy and the wanderings in the wilderness. There is another which seems to pattern itself on the ministry of Elijah and Elisha in 2 Kings. How much more there is to be found along these lines is a fascinating question.

It is also interesting to compare the way in which Luke tends to build his material sequentially, so that one event leads thematically on to another. It is a very profitable study simply to go through the Gospel and examine the relationship of adjacent events, the reason why Luke has ordered them into chains as he has. Often there are worthwhile lessons to be learned from examining these connections. As he notes in his preface, he has put these events "in order".

#### Jerusalem, Jerusalem

We must move to the quest for a unifying theme which binds the Gospel together. Let us notice, first of all, where the Gospel begins and ends. The curtain rises in Jerusalem—in the temple, no less—with Zacharias' vision as he ministers, the people outside waiting to receive a blessing when he emerges. Yet he is unable to bestow the anticipated blessing because he has been struck dumb for unbelief of the angel's words.<sup>5</sup> Note also that in Luke 1 and 2 we read repeatedly of the sense of expectation of the saviour; holy and good people had been waiting all their lives for the Messiah to appear.

5. The appearance of angels as acting characters in the narrative (rather than beings who are simply referred to) is another feature that binds chapters 1 and 2 with the last chapters, in which angels are present at Gethsemane and the resurrection. These are the only parts of the Gospel where angels participate in the narrative.

At the end of Luke the disciples worship him, and are "continually in the temple, praising and blessing God" because he has appeared (24:52,53). And where are we, now that we have reached the end? In Jerusalem—in the temple, no less—observing pious believers (the disciples) at worship. Significantly, we read that Jesus "blessed them" (v. 51); that is to say, Jesus carries out exactly what Zacharias was unable to do at the beginning of the Gospel! This is a most clever feature of Luke's design, and it makes a telling comment on the old priesthood and its limitations, and the power of the new high priest, Jesus Christ.

Beginning and ending there, the whole of the Gospel of Luke is structured around *Jerusalem*. As can be seen from the diagram showing the Gospel's shape, the longest single part of the Gospel is the so-called 'travel narrative', which recounts Jesus' journey to *Jerusalem*. This runs from the end of chapter 9, in which the Lord 'sets his face' towards the capital, to his ultimate arrival there in chapter 19. The ten chapters are marked by a refrainlike reminder that, throughout this period, Jesus' was progressing inexorably towards his destination. His route may not have been direct, but it was deliberate and unfaltering. Here are the relevant passages:

"And it came to pass, when the time was come that he should be received up, he steadfastly *set his face to go to Jerusalem*" (9:51);  
"And he went through the cities and villages, teaching, and *journeying toward Jerusalem*" (13:22);

"And it came to pass, as he *went to Jerusalem*, that he passed through the midst of Samaria and Galilee" (17:11);

"Then he took unto him the twelve, and said unto them, Behold, *we go up to Jerusalem*, and all things that are written by the prophets concerning the Son of man shall be accomplished" (18:31);

"And when he had thus spoken, he went before, *ascending up to Jerusalem*" (19:28);

"And when he was come near, *he beheld the city, and wept over it*" (19:41).

Why, then, this Lukan emphasis on going to Jerusalem? Why this extended travel narrative, in which most of Luke's unique material appears (fifteen of the seventeen parables found in chapters 9-19 are unique, for instance)? The answer is obvious: because the history of the world and

its salvation would be held in the balance at that place. It was there that Jesus would be lifted up, and that salvation would be realised. There could be no more significant event in world history than this, and Luke is constantly drawing our attention to the fact that Jesus was on his way to that city to suffer and to die for the sins of the world, and to be raised again for our justification. The events in Jerusalem, therefore, are the climax to his Gospel, not to say the centre-point of world history.

It is no wonder that with such sufferings ahead of him Jesus should need to begin the journey and set his face in such determined fashion (9:51). The Greek here is most emphatic, piling up words to indicate the deliberate resolution of Jesus.<sup>6</sup> There is also a *double entendre*. In the Old Testament, 'to set one's face' is almost invariably used in connection with judgement. God sets his face against a man, or a nation, because He is displeased, and because there is retribution to be poured out. The expression is particularly characteristic of Ezekiel. "Son of man, set thy face against . . ." is an expression which recurs (6:2; 13:17; 14:8; for example).<sup>7</sup> A particular reference in 21:1-3 seems to be in mind in Luke 9:51, for there Ezekiel sets his face against Jerusalem to prophesy against it. Both the righteous (Jesus?) and the wicked would be cut off, and Ezekiel goes on to weep and wail over the city because of the judgements of God which will be poured out (vv. 6,7). This is exactly what Jesus does when he finally arrives at the outskirts of Jerusalem (19:41-44). He goes on to utter his own prophecy of the doom of Jerusalem, fulfilled in A.D. 70 because of its rejection of him, in the famed Olivet Prophecy.

This organisational shape to which Luke subsumes his material is profound, and speaks powerfully of the immensity of the work Jesus came to do. But it is a story that did not end in sacrificial death. That death gave birth to glorious new life, and Luke 24 is full of resurrection appearances in the Jerusalem area. From there the gospel would go forth to the ends of the earth. But that is another story, the story of Luke's brilliant sequel.

6. The turning-point is also marked by the use of two unique terms within chapter 9 to describe Jesus' work. "Received up" in verse 51 is unique in the New Testament (literally it means, 'time of ascension'—being lifted up on the cross, plus resurrection and ascension?), and "decease" in verse 31 is the Greek term *exodus* (note that Jerusalem is also mentioned in the same verse).  
7. Note that 'Son of man', straight out of Ezekiel, is Jesus' favourite term of self-reference.