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I. Gospel of Luke

In this lesson, we turn from Mark and Matthew to introduce the gospels of Luke and John. Again, we begin with distinctive theology.

A. Theology

In the case of the gospel of Luke, many readers have sensed that Jesus' humanity, indeed His compassion particularly for social outcasts, shines through as clearly as any other theme. There are numerous categories of outcasts whom Jesus pays special attention to in the gospel of Luke. These include Samaritans and Gentiles, outsiders to the people of Israel. It is only in the gospel of Luke where we read the famous parable of the good Samaritan. It is only in the gospel of Luke where we read the story of the ten lepers whom Jesus has healed, the only one of whom comes to return thanks being a Samaritan. "Tax collectors and sinners" is an interesting phrase that punctuates the gospel of Luke and reflects another category of social outcasts—this time not the "down and out," but we might say the "up and out," upon whom Jesus lavishes particular attention in Luke. It is only in Luke that we read the story of little Zacchaeus, a converted tax collector who climbed a sycamore tree to see our Lord.

Women form yet another category of social outcasts that receive special attention from Jesus. Luke's birth narrative focuses primarily on the perspectives of Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, and Mary, the mother of Jesus. Luke is known for pairing examples of men and women in parallel fashion throughout his gospel. Both Anna and Elizabeth, in those same birth narratives, sing hymns of praise and proclaim the arrival of the Messiah and the

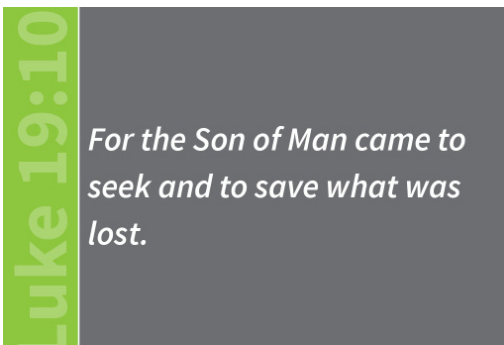
events surrounding Jesus' birth. It is only Luke who pairs the parable of the lost sheep with the parable of the lost coin, where in one case the main character is the male shepherd and in the other case a woman or householder. Perhaps the most famous story about women in Luke is the story of Mary and Martha, where Jesus takes on a counter-cultural perspective by commending, not Martha for her conventional hospitality and domestic role, but Mary who sits at his feet and wants to learn as a disciple would from a rabbi, a practice, for the most part, forbidden to women among other rabbis.

Yet another category of social outcasts and those in need of Jesus' special attention are the poor more generally. It is only in Luke that the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Plain focus attention on the poor per se rather than the poor in spirit, as in Matthew. It is only in Luke where we read Jesus' Nazareth manifesto in which he claims to be fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah 61:1 that the Spirit of the Lord is upon him to, among other things, preach good news to the poor. It is only Luke, who contains the famous parables of the rich fool and the rich man and Lazarus, who are condemned because they have selfishly focused on their riches in ways that not only ignored the poor but also meant that they had never repented; their hearts had never become right with God. A title that fits in very naturally with this emphasis on Jesus' humanity and compassion is a title that is quite distinctive to the gospel of Luke, and that is the title of "Savior."

Likewise, the terms in the Greek for "salvation" and the verb "to save" occur with much greater frequency in Luke's gospel than elsewhere. Several commentators have made a good case that salvation is, in fact, the single-word theme that best sums up the theology of the gospel of Luke. Luke 19:10 might be a single-verse summary of this theme, when Jesus says that He came to seek and to save that which was lost. Jesus also teaches in parables about twice as much in the gospel of Luke as in any other place. Indeed, we have already mentioned several of the parables as illustrations of themes that we have cited thus far.

B. Luke: The First Christian Historian

Luke has also been called the first Christian historian. Not





that Matthew and Mark, if indeed they preceded him, did not recount history, but that Luke may have been the first gospel writer to think self-consciously along the lines of a Greco-Roman historian. It is only Luke who, in the opening chapters of his gospel, approaches the events surrounding Jesus' birth and the beginning of his adult ministry in the context of the larger events of the Roman Empire: who was the emperor, who was governor in Syria, who were the various ruling Jewish high priests, and so forth.

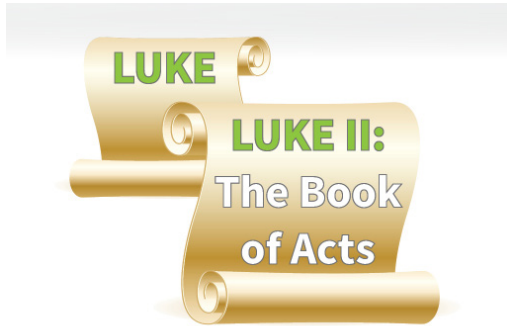
In his second volume, Acts, Luke is particularly concerned with such chronological and synchronic precision. It has often been said that Luke writes, in conjunction with this sense of being the first Christian historian, as the first person who seriously envisaged perhaps a considerably lengthy period of time for church history. Certainly he is the only evangelist that we know of who penned a second volume, a sequel to his gospel—in this case the Acts of the Apostles—and who writes with an ongoing sense that the church may be around for a while despite Jesus' statements that led some of His first followers to believe that He was coming back within their lifetimes, within one generation. Luke may have perceived more clearly than others that Jesus' words were not so precise and that there was an indeterminate amount of time until Christ returned.

C. Distinctive Themes in Luke

A simple glance at a concordance can point out several distinctive themes in Luke, including a preoccupation with the ministry of the Holy Spirit, Jesus and the disciples teaching and learning about prayer, and the theme of joy. Again after a survey of the theological emphases of a gospel, it is natural to ask what circumstances might have elicited such a document? There are those who have so emphasized the theme of the apparent delay in Christ's return that they have been convinced that this book could not be a first-century document. The details in Luke's account of Jesus' predictions about the destruction of the temple are also much more explicit than they are in either Matthew or Mark. Instead of the cryptic desolating sacrilege, we read in Luke 21:20 and following that Jerusalem will be surrounded by armies and that indeed it will be overrun until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled—apparently a clear allusion and, some would think, after the fact, to make more precise the

Luke 21:20

When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near.



way in which Jesus' prophecy about the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem was fulfilled. On the other hand, if we allow for the genuine supernatural predictive prophecy to be an element of Jesus' teaching, it is not impossible that he could have stated these words more explicitly, as well as his other more cryptic utterances.

D. Luke and Acts

The abrupt ending of the book of Acts may in fact be the single most significant telling point as to the context in which Luke wrote. If one reads the two books Luke and Acts sequentially, one discovers that almost a third of Luke's second volume, the book of Acts, is preoccupied with Paul's travel to Jerusalem: his arrest and imprisonment; various hearings and trials there and ultimately his appeal to the emperor in Rome; the ill-fated voyage which was shipwrecked, but later another ship took Paul and his fellow prisoners to Rome where he awaited the results of his appeal to the emperor. The book of Acts, chapter 28, closes with Luke writing that he remained in house arrest for a two-year period, preaching the gospel freely and unhindered—that is, unhindered except that he could not leave the premises and was constantly chained loosely to a Roman soldier. Nevertheless, one comes to the book of Acts and to its end wondering what finally happened with this appeal to the emperor. We are never told.

There are plausible reasons why Luke may have wanted to end this story where he did without going into further explanation. Rome was the capital, the largest city, the heart of the empire, and much of the sequence of the book of Acts is about the gospel and its progress outwardly from Jerusalem, finally arriving in Rome. Perhaps that is where Luke wanted to end, but it still does not entirely answer the question: If he knew more, why did he not tell us about the outcome of Paul's life? For many commentators, historically, therefore, the most significant feature of the end of the book of Acts is its pointer to the probability that Luke wrote almost immediately following the last events he narrated, and for this reason had nothing further to tell.

E. Date and Authorship of Luke

If we synchronize the information that we get from other

WRITING OF LUKE AND ACTS



Destruction of Jerusalem: A.D. 70

Colossians 4:14

Our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and Demas send greetings.

Acts 16:10

After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

non-Christian historians to a time with the information from the book of Acts, it is very difficult to date the end of the narrative of the book of Acts to any later than 62 A.D. And if this is so, then the gospel of Luke, as the first volume in his two-volume series, must have been written a little before, perhaps in 61 A.D. If all these presuppositions make sense, then we cannot date the gospel of Luke after 70 A.D., after the fall of Jerusalem, and the greater and more explicit detail concerning the fall of Jerusalem must be explained in some other way. Additional circumstances are somewhat speculative as well.

Luke clearly seems to have been a Gentile. The only place in which his name appears explicitly in the Scriptures is at the end of the epistle to the Colossians. In 4:10-14, Paul apparently distinguishes between his Jewish companions and those who are not, and includes Luke among the latter. Luke also appears implicitly in the book of Acts when, on five different occasions, the narrator stops writing in the third person but writes in the first person plural: “We did this and we did that.” And where we are first introduced to Luke and for the most part where we meet Luke is among Paul’s travels in Gentile territory. There is little from church history to supplement these inferences from the documents themselves. Irenaeus does give a detailed discussion of Luke’s activities, but the only time frame into which he places them is sometime after the writing of Matthew and Mark. It seems like a date sometime in the 60s is the best we can do, and, if a different explanation were given for the end of the book of Acts, perhaps even after A.D. 70.

F. Audience and Purpose of Luke

There is also speculation that Luke’s preoccupation with the theme of riches and poverty fits a trajectory that we can trace from Acts and the Epistles, mainly that the largely impoverished group of first followers of Jesus over time, as the church developed, gave way to a more urban clientele and to at least a significant minority of Christians who were at least what we would call middle-class, if not occasionally well-to-do. It may well be, therefore, that Luke’s audience is not only a more Gentile audience, but a more socio-economically mixed audience and that Luke is very concerned that more well-to-do Christians not forget

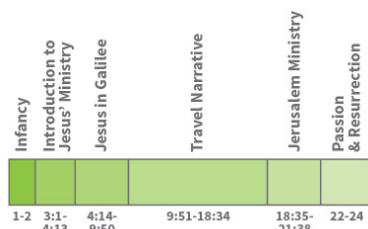
their responsibility to their poorer brothers and sisters.

If much of this is admittedly inferential, Luke does give us one piece of data that is stronger and different than anything we have seen in Matthew or Mark thus far; namely, he is the only one of the three Synoptic Gospel writers to give an explicit statement for the purpose of his gospel. And this purpose comprises his preface, the first four verses of Luke 1: “Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us,” Luke writes, “just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the Word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.”

This preface closely resembles the prefaces or prologues of various other Greco-Roman historians, and should inspire confidence in Luke’s historical purposes in writing the document. He was functioning as a faithful historian, he has interviewed eyewitnesses, he is aware of previous written accounts, he has consulted all of these sources including the traditions that have been passed down by word-of-mouth, and now he is compiling in a sequential and orderly fashion, thematically arranged, a gospel that is designed to convince readers of the certainty of the things that they have been taught.

It was customary for expensive projects such as the composition of a gospel in the ancient world to be funded by well-to-do patrons, to whom the books were then dedicated. Theophilus, therefore, whether or not he is a Christian, is almost certainly the patron, the one who had funded Luke’s historical research and helped him to write the book. Perhaps he is what we would call an inquirer, wanting to know more about the Christian faith, or perhaps he is a new convert. In any event, Luke wants to inspire in him the confidence of the truth of the events that he is about to record. Again, modern scholars have debated many of these conclusions, just as claims of Markan and Matthaean authorship have been doubted. There are those who wonder whether or not Luke, the “beloved physician,” using Paul’s description in Colossians, truly was the author of this work, but again the relative obscurity of the

Structure of Luke



character in question would favor the traditional view.

G. Structure of Luke

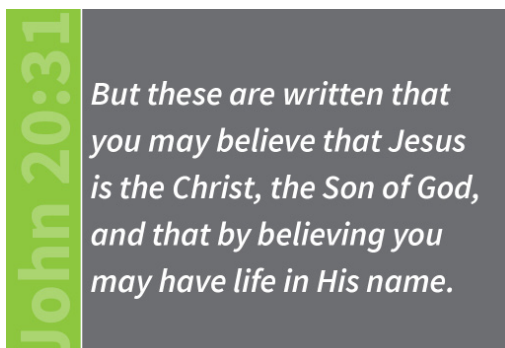
When one looks at Luke's gospel in terms of structure, one sees an interesting alternation between sections in which he follows Mark and those in which he does not, and also a geographic progression that is more unified in Luke than in the other accounts. Moving from the beginning, in which he sets the context of the birth of Jesus in the events of Roman history, the first part of Jesus' adult ministry is located almost exclusively in Galilee. Then, only Luke describes Jesus setting his face toward Jerusalem, setting off first of all to Samaria, finally nearing Jerusalem through Judea. And only Luke's gospel has the climax of Jesus' ministry exclusively in Jerusalem; no resurrection appearances anywhere else, as Matthew or John are narrated. It seems that Luke is creating a geographical sequence that is precisely the inversion of the sequence with which he will narrate the book of Acts. "Beginning in Jerusalem," in Acts 1:8, "you will be my witnesses first to Judea and Samaria, and then to the outermost parts of the earth." When we remember that Galilee was also known as "Galilee of the Gentiles" in the first century, we can see the progression through Galilee as part of moving out into the entire Roman Empire.

II. Gospel of John

That leaves only the gospel of John, then, for these brief introductory surveys. As we mentioned in an earlier lesson, John is much more unlike the Synoptics, and we could give a lengthy list of differences, but we will be brief and itemize just a few.

A. Theology of John

In terms of the theology and the views of Jesus, it is interesting that John also gives a purpose statement, much shorter than Luke's, in John 20:31—that he has written these things "that you may know that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that in believing you may have life in his name." Interestingly, those same two titles—"Son of God" and "Christ"—were the ones with which the gospel of Mark began, reminding us that there is considerable overlap among the Gospels even as we are focusing on



John 1:1-2

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.

Emphases in John:

1. Eternal Life
2. Miracles
3. Private Teachings for Disciples
4. Trinitarian Unity
5. Unity of Believers
6. Eternal Security

John 12:32

But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.

distinctives here.

But if we turn to emphases found only in the gospel of John concerning Jesus alone, we find only in John that he is called the Logos, the Word, the Word incarnate, the Lamb of God—that it is only in the gospel of John that some of the strongest and most explicit statements equating Jesus with God Himself, with deity, are found. Not only “was the Word God” (John 1:1), but Thomas confesses, “My Lord and my God!” after the resurrection, in 20:28. Jesus describes the unique oneness that He has with the Father in 10:30, and it is only John that has the famous “I am” sayings in which Jesus says, “I am the bread of life...the living water... the resurrection and the life...the way and the truth and the life ... the true vine.”

Other themes unique to John’s gospel include the emphasis on eternal life, beginning now in the present time, not just in the future; an emphasis on miracles as signs meant to point people to belief in Jesus; private teachings with the disciples in more intimate occasions, particularly the long “farewell discourse” of John 13-17 in the upper room on the last night of His life. Themes that emerge from that discourse particularly unique to John’s gospel include the unity between Son, Spirit, and Father, the beginnings of the doctrine of the Trinity, and the unity that the disciples should have with God and with one another. John’s gospel also has very strong declarations of what is often called the eternal security of the believer, in such passages as 6:39 and 10:29, but yet he balances that with commands to remain and to abide in Jesus.

John’s gospel speaks of the death of Christ as an exaltation. Jesus says in 12:32, “If I be lifted up, I will draw all people to myself.” And it is only John’s gospel that speaks of the ministry of the Holy Spirit as that of a “Paraclete,” one who is a helper, an interpreter or a witness, a prosecutor and a revealer. Interestingly, John says nothing about Jesus’ baptism or His institution of the Lord’s Supper, even while at the same time giving more description of the events immediately surrounding those sacraments or ordinances. Some have inferred from this that John, at the end of the first century, was combating what was already becoming an overly exalted view of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, perhaps among circles who believed that those rights in and of themselves conferred salvation. Other themes that

Baptism**The Lord's Supper**

appear uniquely or uniquely emphatically in the gospel of John include opposition between light and darkness, life and death, judgment and love; and words that recur frequently include “the world,” “testimony,” “truth and abiding.”

B. Uniqueness of John

Why is John so different? What circumstances produced this very different gospel? For many years it was believed that because early church tradition said John was the latest, his was also the last in a long line of development of Christian thought, well away from the genuine teaching of Jesus the Jew. With the discovery of the Qumran scrolls we have found out that some of the terms that have been thought in the past to be very Greek or Gnostic—a strong contrast between light and darkness, between the children of light and the children of darkness—in fact, they have cropped up as seen in very Jewish contexts as well.

What we do learn from early church tradition is that John wrote this gospel in and around Ephesus as a very old man, probably in his eighties or even nineties, perhaps under the reign of Domitian, the emperor in a time when Gnosticism was coming to the fore. And if John shares some language from very Greek philosophical or Gnostic circles, it may well be because he was using the language that the people understood but then trying to re-explain or re-contextualize it. Gnostics believed that Jesus was God; they had trouble with Jesus’ humanity because if you recall from our lesson on Gnosticism they believed the material world was inherently evil.

So John begins his gospel where they are: the Word was God, was with God and was God. But by the time we reach 1:14, he is stressing that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. There are other things going on, however, in Ephesus at the end of the first century, and one of those is great hostility with the local Jewish synagogues. We can read about that in Revelation 2:9. So there is another whole strand of Jesus’ teaching, distinctive to his gospel, involving conflicts with the Jews. Only John has Jesus going up to Jerusalem more than once in His life, and pointing out how He is the true fulfillment of all of the major Jewish festivals. This makes sense if, much like the gospel of Matthew, another dimension to the community to which John was

John 1:14

*The Word became flesh
and made His dwelling
among us.*

- **Structure**
 - **Genre**
 - **Setting**
 - **Intention**

writing was one of having to combat rather overt hostility among non-Christian Jews nearby. Why is John's gospel so different? There are numerous other answers that can be given as well. One is that he is probably the only one who is writing largely independently from Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Perhaps John would not have seemed so different if we actually had four independent witnesses.

C. Authorship of John

Who is John? Church history strongly favors the apostle by that name although one quotation from the early Christian writer Papias makes it uncertain as to whether or not there was a second man named John, who was an early Christian elder distinct from the apostle. If this second John were a disciple of the first John one could much more plausibly date all of the Johannine literature to the end of the first century without having to make John an extremely old man at the time that he was an author. But the weight of church history and traditional evidence is in favor of the apostolic authorship. Many modern scholars go further and believe they can discern stages of editing or redacting to the gospel of John, more so than in the Synoptic Gospels, but increasingly the tide seems to be shifting in favor of recognizing its stylistic unity throughout this particular gospel.

D. Structure of John

The structure of John, much like Mark, falls neatly into two halves—the first half focusing on seven miracles or signs, linked closely with seven long narratives, discourses or sermons. And again many of these are unique to John's gospel perhaps self-consciously not repeating what the early Christians had taught well in previous generations. The second half of the gospel then turns to the passion—the events of Christ's final week, and, as in Mark, narrates them in great detail; and here there is the greatest overlap with the Synoptic Gospels. However many differences there are, we are reminded at the end that miracles and suffering, glory and shame, triumph and the cross, together well-summarize Jesus' ministry, no matter which gospel we read it in.

STRUCTURE OF JOHN

