

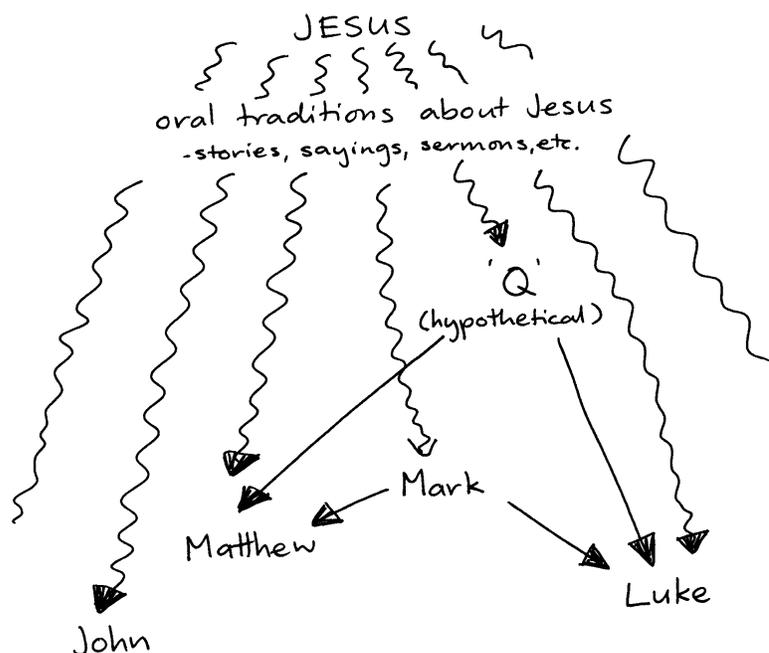
Themes in Luke's gospel: introduction to the Luke/Acts package

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This first session today is a basic broad-brush introduction to some key features of Luke's gospel. As you know, there are four accounts of Jesus in the New Testament. I come from the perspective that the many differences between the gospels aren't just problems to be explained; they're more like portraits of the same person by four different artists. If we notice what makes Luke's gospel unique, get a feel for Luke's artistic style, then I think our preaching and hearing of his message in the coming year will be enhanced.

The Synoptic Problem

First, some background information. Many of you will already be familiar with the synoptic problem. If you came to these sessions on Mark last year, we went over this too, so forgive me for the repetition, but it's worth keeping in mind, I think. From very early times, people reading the New Testament have recognised that the first three gospels have a lot of overlap, with some passages almost exactly the same. Hence Matthew, Mark and Luke are called the synoptic gospels (synoptic simply means 'seen together'). For example, about 90% of Mark appears in Matthew, and about 50% of Mark appears in Luke. John's gospel, on the other hand, is quite different. Over the years, scholars have worked out various theories to explain how the different gospels fit together.



The broad consensus at present goes something like this (very roughly). Mark's gospel was written first. Matthew and Luke used Mark, as well as another source called Q, and other special material of their own. John's gospel was probably written last, using material from an independent stream of tradition.

Around 40% of Luke is not found in the other synoptic gospels, including Luke's material about Jesus' birth, infancy, and childhood, and several parables and sayings. Some favourite gospel stories like the Good Samaritan (10:29-37) and the Prodigal Son (15:11-32) are found only in Luke, and they reveal something of Luke's particular emphasis on Jesus' concern for the poor, the outsider and Gentile.

Four Symbols

(Again, if you were at these seminars last year, you will have heard this before too.) The traditional symbols of the four evangelists – human, lion, ox, and eagle – provide a helpful visual aid for remembering some of the key characteristics of these four different portraits of Jesus.¹ Matthew’s symbol is a human being. Matthew’s portrait of Jesus is of the teacher of Israel, the new Moses, the rabbi, the human face of God. Mark’s symbol is the lion, king of the wild animals. Mark’s gospel is full of energy and conflict. Like Aslan in the Narnia books, in Mark’s gospel Jesus is “not a tame lion.” John’s symbol, the eagle, points to a portrait of Jesus that is high-flying and far-seeing. To John, Jesus is the one who existed from the beginning, who comes down like an eagle from heaven, the incarnate Word not of this world.

Luke’s symbol is the ox. While we might think an ox seems slow and plodding, in the ancient world the ox represented divine strength as well as being a valuable sacrificial animal. Luke’s portrait of Jesus is of the compassionate, gentle one who bears burdens, and gives himself willingly as a sacrifice.

Authorship, Background, Purpose

While the books are anonymous, early Christian tradition named the author of Luke and Acts as Luke the physician, Gentile convert and friend of Paul (Col 4:14; 2 Tim 4:11; Philem 24). The date is debated, but Luke-Acts was probably written in the late first century, sometime after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE.

It’s quite instructive to look at how Luke’s gospel begins:-

Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.

Luke 1:1-4 NRSV

Luke’s gospel is the longest of the four, and is the only one that comes with a sequel – the Acts of the Apostles. Just from looking at these first few sentences, we can deduce a number of characteristics of Luke’s account of Jesus. Luke’s is a careful and orderly account, using several sources and witnesses. Luke is quite explicit about the fact that he is constructing a narrative to convey the truth about Jesus to Theophilus. (By the way, no-one knows who Theophilus was, but from these verses it seems he was someone important who had recently converted to Christianity.)

Luke-Acts is beautifully written, with far more skill than Mark’s rough and ready Greek. Luke varies his style to suit different occasions (e.g. sometimes formal prose, sometimes Semitic idiom), and is a gifted writer. Although Luke was probably a Gentile, and Luke-Acts seems to have been written for a primarily Gentile audience, he had considerable knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures and Jewish religion.

¹ Richard A. Burridge, *Four Gospels, One Jesus? A Symbolic Reading* (Melbourne: HarperCollins, 1994). This is a useful and readable introduction to the gospels that uses these traditional symbols.

Structure

Luke is familiar with the conventions of ancient biography,² and structures his narrative of Jesus carefully.

Many scholars have noticed that the events of Luke and Acts are arranged geographically. The overarching movement in Luke's gospel is focussed on Jerusalem, centre of the Jewish world, and then in Acts, it moves outward towards Rome, centre of the Gentile world. This geographical movement is a handy way to get a feel for the overall structure.

Introduction to the two volumes 1:1-4

 The origin and Spirit-indwelling of Jesus 1:5-4:13

 The gathering of witnesses in Galilee 4:14-9:50

 The instructing of the witnesses on the journey to Jerusalem 9:51-19:27

 The witnessing of the events in Jerusalem 19:28-24:53

Introduction to the second volume 1:1-5

 The origin and Spirit-indwelling of the church 1:6-2:47

 The witness to Jesus in Jerusalem and beyond 3:1-12:25

 The journeys that carry the witness to the nations 13:1-19:20

 The progress of the witness to Rome 19:21-28:31³

Luke's careful geographical ordering is not primarily to teach about Palestinian geography (indeed there are some inconsistencies in the routes taken in the gospel). Luke's point is far more significant – he is using the journey to convey his understanding of God's overarching plan in history.

Key themes and features

God's plan

Of course, at the centre of all the gospels is the question, "Who is Jesus?" Luke, more than the other evangelists, relates this question to the big picture, both theologically and historically. Jesus is the fulfilment and centre of God's redemptive purpose for all humanity. Luke's central (and rather ambitious) goal in his masterpiece seems to be to describe the universal plan of God worked out in human history.

That the divine purpose will be unfolding inexorably is made clear in the birth and infancy narratives (which Peter will be exploring shortly). Contrast Luke's first chapters with Mark's rather abrupt introduction, where Jesus just immediately gets going. The early chapters of Luke's gospel look back to the Hebrew Scriptures and the time of prophecy, as well as locating Jesus in a particular historical time and place. The end of the gospel looks ahead into the future, moving on into the Acts of the Apostles and out into the Gentile world, and ultimately anticipating the return of the Lord.

² Like other Jewish and Graeco-Roman biographies, Luke's gospel includes a prologue confirming the author's reliability, remarkable events around the hero's birth, an event from the hero's childhood that foreshadows his work, records of mighty acts and wise teaching, a farewell discourse, and mysterious events around his death and following. R. Alan Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *New Interpreter's Bible*. (Ed. Leander E. Keck et.al.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 9:10.

³ David L. Barr, *New Testament Story: An Introduction*. (2nd ed. Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1995), 300.

Instead of Mark's *kai euthus* "and immediately", Luke is more fond of *egeneto* "and it came to pass". Luke's portrayal of God's plan unfolds steadily, calm and measured. He uses the word *dei* "it is necessary" as often as in the other gospels combined (e.g. 2:49; 9:22; 24:26). Even in suffering and death, there is sense of divine purpose at work. The Scriptures are being fulfilled, accomplishing the plan of God.

Salvation for all people

Radical inclusiveness shouldn't be overstated as peculiar to Luke, because all the gospels communicate Jesus' concern for all people, regardless of social standing. However, Luke is particularly emphatic about it. Luke shows that the good news of God's mercy is not just for Israel, but for the Gentile world, demonstrated in the stories of Acts as well as in his gospel.

There are many scenes in Luke's gospel of Jesus reaching out to sinners, Samaritans, tax collectors, women, and outcasts (and Jenny and Deborah will be exploring some of these aspects more fully this afternoon).

Poverty and wealth

Luke refers to poverty and wealth more than any other gospel, and his material includes such memorable passages as the Magnificat (1:46-55) and the parable of Lazarus and the rich man (16:19-31). While Luke is kinder to the disciples and the Pharisees than Mark is, he is hard on the rich and powerful.

Table fellowship

A commentator quipped that in Luke's gospel "Jesus is either going to a meal, at a meal, or coming from a meal."⁴ Meal scenes provide the setting for much of Jesus' ministry. They are places where Jesus crosses social boundaries (e.g. 5:29-32; 7:36-50). Several parables use the motif of a meal (e.g. 14:15-24).

Breaching boundaries at table is bound up with Jesus' death and resurrection. Breaking bread together is tied to Jesus' body broken for humanity, in the Last Supper (22:14-20). And the bread broken together is also the place where the risen Lord is present with the community, in the meal at Emmaus (24:13-35).

Prayer, joy, and the Holy Spirit

Luke emphasises true prayer, joyful praise, and the importance of empowerment by the Holy Spirit. Some of Luke's unique material is concerned with persistence and humility in prayer (e.g. the Friend at Midnight 11:5-8; the Pharisee and the Tax Collector 18:9-14). Prayer is connected to openness to God's Spirit. The Holy Spirit of God is the one who initiates and empowers the whole story as it unfolds. Luke refers to the Holy Spirit far more often than Mark or Matthew, and the Holy Spirit is central to the story of Acts. The responses of those who see God's power at work in history are characteristically joyful praise (e.g. 1:47; 10:21; 24:52-53), and a sense of joy runs throughout Luke-Acts.

Luke's gospel and the Acts of the Apostles

Luke's story of Jesus, like all good blockbusters, comes with a sequel. Luke and Acts are two volumes of the one great work of literature. Luke connects the life, death and resurrection of Jesus with the beginnings of the church. Luke's orderly account isn't just about some things

⁴ Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke," *NIB*, 9:26.

that happened because of a guy named Jesus some decades before. For Luke, the story of Jesus is the centre of the big story about God's plan for creation and for all humanity, both Jew and Gentile.

Luke calls us to respond to his story with both joy and serious commitment. He reminds the Christian community to embody Jesus' concern for all people, especially the poor, oppressed, and marginalised. And Luke invites us to be open to the work of the Holy Spirit as God's plan continues to unfold today.

For discussion/reflection

Of course, one of the best ways to get to grips with a gospel is to read it observantly. The following passages and questions will hopefully illustrate some of the key introductory points.⁵ Groups might like to choose one or two sections to discuss in depth, rather than try to get through all the questions.

Jesus' baptism

Compare Luke 3:20-23 with Mark 1:9-11. Then compare it with Acts 2:1-4.

- what do you notice?
- how does the literary context change?
- when does Jesus experience the divine voice?
- how does this connect with the story in Acts?
- what does all this say about Luke's perspective on Jesus?

The beatitudes

Compare Luke 6:20-26 with Matthew 5:3-12.

- what do you notice?
- where is the emphasis?
- what does all this say about Luke's perspective on Jesus?

The death of Jesus

Compare Luke 23:26-49 with Mark 15:21-41.

- what do you notice?
- what sayings are attributed to Jesus?
- who witnesses these things?
- what does all this say about Luke's perspective on Jesus?

⁵ Adapted from Barr, *New Testament Story*, 294-335.

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