

A LOOK AT A BOOK: LUKE

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There is something especially attractive about this gospel. It is full of superb stories and leaves the reader with a deep impression of the personality and teaching of Jesus. The following stories are only found in Luke: extended Christmas story, the widow of Nain, the prodigal son, the Pharisee and publican, ten cleansed lepers, the Good Samaritan, and Zacchaeus. It is perhaps for this reason that it is the favorite gospel for many. It has many characteristic features which distinguish it from the other gospels, as will become clear from the following survey.

I. Characteristics

Luke's comprehensive range

This gospel commences with the annunciations of John the Baptist and of Jesus and includes the fullest infancy narratives. It ends with a reference to the ascension (Luke 24:50), which is absent from both Matthew and Mark. Its record is longer than its synoptic counterparts and is especially detailed in its account of the last journey to Jerusalem. It is, in fact, the longest book in the New Testament.

Luke's inclusive nature

There are several occasions when Luke brings out the wider implications of the gospel of Christ. (1) The genealogy of Jesus goes back not just to Abraham (Luke 3:23ff. vs. Matthew 1:1-17), but to Adam; (2) The angel's goodwill message is directed to all men (2:14); (3) Simeon foretells that Jesus is to be a Light for the Gentiles (2:32); (4) when John the Baptist is described in the words of Isaiah as a voice crying in the wilderness, Luke continues the quotation to include the words "all mankind will see God's salvation" (Isaiah 40:3-5, cited in Luke 3:4-6); (5) the Samaritans are placed on a level with the Jews (9:54; 10:33; 17:16); (6) Luke records two illustrations which Jesus used from the Old Testament, centering on non-Israelites, the widow of Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian (4:25-27); and (7) Luke is not as interested as Matthew in fulfilled Messianic prophecy.

Luke's interest in people

There are various ways in which Luke's interest in people manifests itself.

Focus on individuals – Most of the parables peculiar to Luke center attention on people (Good Samaritan, Prodigal Son), whereas Matthew's focus upon the

kingdom. Such people as the priest Zachariah, the cousins Elizabeth and Mary, the sisters Mary and Martha, the extortionate tax collector Zacchaeus, the mournful Cleopas and his companion (on the road to Emmaus), and many others spring to life through his descriptive skill. There is no doubt that Jesus' estimate of the individual greatly impressed Luke, who is obviously attracted to people himself.

Interest in social outcasts – In a greater measure than the other synoptists, Luke portrays our Lord's deep concern for the socially ostracized. He mentions the immoral woman in 7:36ff., the transformation of Zacchaeus (19:8ff.), and the repentance of the robber (23:39ff.).

Portrayal of women – Luke mentions thirteen women not mentioned elsewhere in the gospels, including two who formed the subject of parables (lost coin, 15:8; widow and judge, 18:1ff.). Of particular interest is the inclusion of the story of the widow of Nain, the immoral woman, the women who supported Jesus with their gifts (8:1-3), and those who lamented over him on his way to the cross. Women figure prominently in both the birth and resurrection narratives (cf., 23:49 (at the cross); 23:55-24:11 (at the tomb)).

Poverty and wealth – Many of Luke's special parables relate to money matters, e.g. the two debtors, the rich fool, the tower builder, the lost coin, the unjust steward, the rich man and Lazarus and the pounds. Those who are "poor" and "humble" are often the objects of the Savior's mercy (6:20, 30; 14:11ff.). The Pharisees are called "lovers of money" (see 16:14). John the Baptist, in Luke's account of his ministry, warns tax collectors against extortion and soldiers against discontent with their pay (3:13ff.). At Nazareth, Jesus proclaims good tidings to the "poor" (4:17-21). In the Magnificat, the hungry and filled and the rich are sent away empty (1:53). In the Sermon on the Plain, the first woe is directed against the rich, who are said to have received their comfort (6:24), and the first beatitude is addressed to the poor, without the qualification "in spirit" as found in Matthew (cf., Luke 6:20; Matthew 5:3).

Special emphases

Prayer – Luke records nine prayers of Jesus, of which all but two are contained in no other gospel. These prayers are associated with important events at the baptism (3:21), after a day of miracles (5:15-16), before choosing the disciples (6:12), before the first prediction of the passion (9:18-22), at the transfiguration (9:29), on the return of the seventy (10:17-21), before teaching the disciples how to pray (11:1), in Gethsemane (22:39-46), on the cross (23:34, 46). Once he withdraws

into a desert (5:16) and once he spends a whole night in prayer (6:12). Two of Luke's special parables deal with prayer – the friend at midnight (11:5ff.) and the persistent widow (18:1-8).

The Holy Spirit – The Holy Spirit comes on Mary so that she can miraculously give birth to a son (1:35). At the temptation, Jesus is described as “full of the Holy Spirit” and is led by the Spirit into the wilderness (4:1). He begins his ministry in the power of the Spirit (4:14). The disciples are bidden to wait for the enduement of “power from on high” (24:49), a clear allusion to the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

Joyfulness – Luke uses words expressing joy or rejoicing many times (e.g. 1:14, 44, 47; 10:21), in addition to words expressing leaping for joy (6:23), laughter (6:21), and merriment (15:23, 32). In three of Luke's parables there is an element of rejoicing when the lost is found (15), and also in the story of Zacchaeus (19:6). The gospel begins and ends with rejoicing (cf. 1:47; 24:52-53). In Luke alone are the canticles recorded, Magnificat (1:46-55), Benedictus (1:68-79), Gloria in Excelsis (2:14) and Nunc Dimittis (2:29-32).

II. Purpose

Luke tells us he purposes “to write an orderly account,” and while he may not mean by this a narrative in strict chronological order in every detail, he is entitled to be taken seriously about his orderly intention. Luke meant to write a historical account – so that the truth of the Christian tradition might be established (1:4).

III. The Readers

Luke's preface also helps us in determining the readers. There is a dedication to one man, Theophilus, who is described as “most excellent,” an expression which looks like an indication of social rank. Some have supposed that Theophilus is a coined name to represent any “lover of God,” but in view of the formal character of the preface and the conventional practice of ascribing treatises to notable people, it is much more natural to regard Theophilus as a real person. He was clearly a Gentile and appears already to have had some catechetical instruction, if it is correct to interpret 1:4 in this manner. There is abundant evidence to suggest a Gentile destination, and this has already been indicated in discussing one of Luke's main characteristics, his inclusiveness.

IV. Structure

He uses the same general framework as Matthew and Mark, although he has many characteristic variations in his detailed structure. His infancy narratives are much fuller than Matthew's and are of particular significance in the emphasis placed upon the birth of John the Baptist. Also, Luke has what is commonly known as a travel narrative from 9:51 to 18:14, depicting the movement of Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem. This is Luke's special modification of the synoptic structure.

Outline

- A. The Prologue (1:1-4)
- B. The Infancy Narratives (1:5-2:52)
- C. The Preparation for the Ministry (3:1-4:13)
- D. The Galilean Ministry (4:14-9:50)
- E. From Galilee to Jerusalem (9:51-19:27)
- F. In Jerusalem (19:28-21:38)
- G. The Passion and Resurrection Narratives (22:1-24:53)

V. Authorship of the gospel (and Acts)

The gospel itself does not tell us anything specific about the identity of the author. The author was clearly not an eyewitness, for he states that he had received information from others who were "eyewitnesses and servants of the word." Moreover, he implies that he had access to earlier narratives which others had compiled, but which he seems to regard as unsatisfactory for his purpose. In addition, he has himself made a thorough investigation of the facts as a result of which he claims to be able to write an orderly account.

The testimony of tradition – The earliest witnesses to the authorship of the gospel belong to the latter part of the second century AD, but the subsequent testimony is so fully in agreement with this that it may fairly be surmised that this tradition had already had a considerable history before its earliest witnesses. The Muratorian Canon, the anti-Marcionite Prologue to Luke, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Tertullian all specifically state that Luke was the author, not only of the gospel, but also of the Acts of the Apostles. Moreover, at no time were any doubts raised regarding this attribution to Luke and certainly no alternatives were mooted. The tradition could hardly be stronger.

The unity of authorship of the third gospel and Acts – Since external testimony assumes common authorship of the gospel and Acts, and since it may with good

reason be maintained that the book of Acts was accepted into the New Testament canon without hesitation because of its close association with the gospel of Luke, it is of importance to investigate the grounds on which this association may be based. (1) Both books are dedicated to the same man, Theophilus; (2) Acts refers to the first treatise, which is most naturally understood as the gospel (Acts 1:1); (3) the books contain strong similarities of language and style; (4) both contain common interests; and (5) Acts naturally follows on from Luke's gospel.

Evidence that the author was a companion of Paul – That there are some passages in Acts where the first person plural is used instead of the third person (16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; 27:1-28:16) is strongly suggestive that the author of these sections was an eyewitness and therefore a traveling companion of the apostle Paul.

Beyond the fact that he was a doctor (frequently used medical terms) and a companion of Paul (cf. Colossians 4:14; 2 Timothy 4:11; Philemon 24), the New Testament tells us nothing more about him, although it implies that he was a Gentile, for in the list of greetings in Colossians 4, Luke is distinguished from the men of the circumcision. Also, Luke contains the most refined Greek style (along with Hebrews) in the New Testament. Certain traditions connect him with the church at Antioch, while the we-sections in Acts, which start at Philippi, might perhaps suggest that that was his home town.

VI. Date

External evidence

This evidence suggests that in the early part of the second century the gospel was fully recognized, and it would be a fair inference from this that it was widely known before the end of the first century. On the basis of the theory that Luke used Mark, it is naturally required that Luke should be later than Mark. This fixes the starting date at about AD 50, with a probable date around AD 67.

VII. Language

By his obvious familiarity with the Septuagint, which he often cites throughout the gospel, Luke's Greek has become strongly colored with Hebraisms. At the same time, Luke's vocabulary is unusually rich and varied for a New Testament writer, for he uses several hundred words which no other New Testament writer uses.

Some language and ideas taken from Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Intervarsity Press: 1961) as well as multiple sources and Dr. Batson's own insights.