

An Introduction to the Study of the Gospel of Luke

The Three Other Gospels

There are four gospels which tell the story of Jesus' life. Each has different characteristics. **The Gospel of Matthew** is the most Jewish. Matthew takes for granted that this audience will know Old Testament scripture. He shows Jesus fulfilling Old Testament prophecies, proving that he is the Messiah long awaited by the Jewish nation. Matthew includes many lengthy discourses of Jesus, such as the Sermon on the Mount, (Matt. 5-7) and a discourse criticizing the scribes and pharisees (Matt. 23). The Jesus of Matthew's gospel is the promised Messiah and rightful King of Israel. His teachings are powerful and delivered with great authority. It is possible that Matthew was the first to keep written records of Jesus' ministry¹ for he was a man who, by virtue of his profession as a tax collector for the Romans, was fluent in speaking and writing several languages.

The Gospel of Mark was written by a person referred to in a number of places in the New Testament as having been part of the Christian movement from its earliest days. In his own gospel, he is probably the young man who runs away naked from the soldiers in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:51-52). This lets us know he was an eyewitness of many of the events surrounding the crucifixion and resurrection. He was 1) the nephew or cousin of Barnabas (Col. 4:10). 2) He abandoned a mission with Paul, earning that man's ire for leaving the field early². 3) He was later associated with the apostle Peter on his missionary journeys and called a son by Peter. (1 Peter 5:13)

His gospel has an immediacy and vividness that argue for being written by an eyewitness, or, at least, from the eyewitness memories of someone. (*For example: "Jesus was asleep on a cushion in the stern of the boat."* Mark 4:37-38) This account emphasizes the miracles and power of Jesus and is action oriented and full of vivid details. It was held in the early church to be Mark's written record of the preaching of the apostle Peter. Though not a well-educated man, Peter was a powerful missionary for the gospel in the ancient world. As he was not fluent in written Greek, it makes sense he would use a trusted scribe to write down his version of the events of Christ's life. Mark's is the shortest gospel and most scholars consider it the first one written. The other gospel writers may have used it in some way, adding to it what they felt was needed to complete the picture.

The Gospel of John was written by John, the brother of James. Known in scripture as the sons of Zebedee, they were fishermen from Galilee. Both men became disciples of Jesus and eventually apostles. It is very different from the other three "synoptic" gospels--synoptic meaning similar to one another. John records no parables. His chronology of events is different and more exact, including three passovers where the others tell of only one. But the biggest difference is subject matter. John emphasizes the deity and eternal nature of God. "And in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." (John 1:1; see also D&C 93:7-10 for similar wording)³. In John, Jesus tells Mary and Martha, "I am the Resurrection and the Life." He says to His disciples, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one can come to the Father except through me." (John 14:7) These are two of seven "I am..." statements made by Jesus in John's record that echo Jehovah's revelation of Himself in Exodus 3:14, as the great "I Am."

Scholars *decided* (see 2 Tim 3:7 for a description of those "ever learning" but unable to discern Truth) that the theology expressed in John's gospel was too deep and sophisticated to have been written by a fisherman from Galilee. They regard it as a later work by

someone conversant in Greek philosophy! To Biblical scholars, “more complex” automatically means “later,” given the evolutionary paradigm through which they view history. The witness of the restoration is that Jesus did exist as God before his earthly ministry and was the creator of the earth and also the Jehovah of the Old Testament. Rather than being a “late development” that evolved from a more primitive version of Christianity, these truths are eternal and were revealed to earlier prophets. John didn’t need Greek philosophy to formulate the ideas expressed in his gospel. In fact, we know through modern revelation that he learned much of his theology from John the Baptist. His natural inclination seemed to be that of a seeker of truth. He had already left his fishing nets to become a disciple of John the Baptist⁴, and it was after hearing the Baptist’s witness of Christ that John the son of Zebedee accepted Jesus’ invitation to follow him. The deep ‘Greek sounding’ themes that supposedly disqualify him from being the author of this gospel, were very likely concepts he first heard from his teacher, John the Baptist.⁵

Background of Luke

The Gospel of Luke is different from the other three in a number of ways. Luke’s gospel is the longest, including many stories and parables unique to his record. It is written by someone whose mother-tongue was Greek. The quality of the written Greek in the Gospel of Luke and its companion volume, Acts, is the best in all of the New Testament. The book of Luke, taken together with Acts, makes up over half of the New Testament.

That is fortunate for us because more than any other gospel writer (John, Matthew or Mark), we feel that Luke is speaking to *us*. The Gospel of Luke has universal appeal because it is the only one written by a Gentile to Gentiles. The others had grown up believing in a Messiah who would be a “son of David,” i.e., someone like the powerful king who had saved the earlier Israelites from their enemies. They had lived their whole lives with a sense of the mission of God’s “chosen people.” Luke on the other hand, had no prior Jewish training to form his ideas of what a Savior should be. The Jesus he describes in his writings is one who meets universal human needs for love, validation and healing. Luke presents the fullest picture of Jesus as the compassionate God.

He tells the story of Jesus through a Greek lens. The Greeks had a habit of turning their great men into larger than life statues. They believed in presenting the stories of great men as exemplars, to be emulated by others as a way to improve one’s character. It is for this reason that Luke’s gospel sometimes gives the impression of having been “scrubbed” of messy human emotions. The Greek ideal, influenced by Stoicism, an important Greek philosophy, was balance and calm equanimity. Though Luke and Mark recount many of the same incidents, Luke leaves out the emotions present in Mark: there is no Jesus “moved to pity” (Mark 1:41), or “indignant” Jesus (Mark 10:14), no “cursing” by Jesus (Mark 11:21), no “sore amazement,” or “exceeding sorrow” in the garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:33-34). Luke’s Jesus does not despair and ask why his father has “forsaken him.” (Mark 15:34).

Luke *does* show Jesus praying to his Father for the cup of suffering to be removed from him, but not because he is showing human fear. Luke alone describes the truly infinite burden of sin that causes Jesus to “sweat great drops of blood” as if they were rain. A God would not have shrunk from the Roman torture of scourging or crucifixion. Rather, Luke’s Jesus is a cosmic figure, called upon to endure the combined suffering of all mankind, as if Hell had focused its malevolent fury like a lens upon this solitary figure praying in the garden. Luke presents Jesus as larger than life, a god-hero his Greek audience could admire.

And yet, unlike other emperors or “great men,” Luke overturns the expectations of his audience by presenting Jesus as a figure who relates to the “least of [men], his brethren.”

(Matthew 25:40) Luke's Jesus is revolutionary in the sense that he pays attention to society's "losers" in a way that kings, emperors and the mythical gods never did. In a conscious rejection of both Roman imperial pride and the prideful reliance on the "chosen people" status of the Jews, Luke shows Jesus' concern and respect for women, the poor, the despised Samaritans, the sick, children, etc. Luke's Jesus is a hero all right, but one who, remarkably, can be "touched with the feelings of our infirmities." (Heb. 4:15) To Luke, as well as to Jesus, there were no unimportant people.

Luke's gospel is the "warmest" of the four. With the compassion of a physician (Paul calls him the "beloved physician" in Colossians 4:14) Luke regards people with such empathy that we are touched and can relate to their plight. He tells their story with the sympathetic heart of one used to tuning into the troubles of people who were passed over by the power brokers of society. Luke shows us the love of the Savior.

Prologue and Purpose to the Gospel of Luke

The book begins with a prologue, or explanation of itself. (Luke 1:1-4) First Luke states that he has reviewed the other accounts and chosen with care the sources he used so that he can verify their accuracy. He tells us that he has interviewed eyewitnesses, something he was able to do as a missionary companion to Paul. He has an historian's keen determination to be thorough and accurate.

Luke addresses his gospel to a person he calls "most excellent Theophilus." This is a Greek name and may refer to a patron, someone who provided funds for Luke's research and writing. The Book of Acts is a continuation of the Book of Luke and was also addressed to this same Theophilus. This man was probably an actual person, especially given that he is addressed by the title "most excellent," though some have conjectured that since the word Theophilus means "Lover of God" in Greek, this is a stand-in designation for all Christian believers.

We find out from Acts that Luke was a missionary companion of Paul. The two men were very close and Paul undoubtedly had great influence on Luke's thinking. When Paul writes from prison in Rome before his execution, he says, "Only Luke is with me." (2 Tim 4:11) Though Paul came from a very different background, calling himself a "pharisee of the pharisees," he became disillusioned with doing missionary work to the Jews, finally turning all his efforts towards converting the gentiles. Thus Luke and Paul came to have the same life purpose--spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ to all the world.

Luke's non-Jewishness comes out. For example, he never refers to Jesus by the Jewish term Rabbi. He uses instead a Greek word that means Master. He does not use the Hebrew term "Golgotha" for the place we now call Calvary, but instead calls it "the place of the skull." He alone calls the Sea of Galilee a "lake," presumably because, having sailed on the Mediterranean Sea, he knew the difference between a lake and a real sea. Luke, along with Matthew, gives a genealogy of Jesus, but Luke traces the genealogical line of Christ all the way back to Adam, the ancestor of the whole human family. Matthew stops at Abraham, the progenitor of the Jews.

Luke's perspective as a physician comes through in his writings. When he writes of parents whose children need healing, he conveys their anguish with the eye of one who has seen and sympathized with this scene before. A distraught father cries, "She's my only child, and she's dying!" Or, "He's my only son and he convulses and foams at the mouth!" The word Luke uses for "convulses," by the way, is the proper Greek medical term. Both Mark and Matthew, in referring to the woman with the issue of blood, mention that she had spent all her living on physicians without success. Luke understandably omits this fact. ☺

The Flavor of Luke

What then do we find in the Lukan gospel? We find a Jesus who was calm and dignified (co-incidentally the Greek Stoic ideal) but who was also human, in that he identified with suffering humanity. He was one of us, not in our flawed nature, but in our suffering. Luke's Jesus is the one who comforts and heals. He turns normal stratified, class conscious society on its head, spending more time with sinners and publicans than with the important people. If Matthew, in his reporting of the story, found the most dangerous vice to be religious hypocrisy like that of the pharisees, because it lulled people into thinking they were better than others, Luke found the most dangerous thing to be wealth, and for the same reason. It separated men from their fellow men and from their suffering. He spends a lot of time warning against the lure of riches and worldliness.

His nature was to be (and to teach others to be) wholly committed to the Lord, never looking back. No wonder we find the oldest stories about him describing a man who never married, and who, like his friend Paul, wore out his life in service to the Master.

With his eye for detail, his excellent Hellenistic education and his sympathies for common people, he was the perfect one to do what he did--make the case for a truly universal Savior of mankind, one who completely transcended his Jewish roots, while at the same time honoring them. Luke was able to translate the message of the Gospel that had gone first to the house of Israel, into a message profoundly moving and affecting all the "house of Adam," i.e., all of us.

Look For:

1. Respect for women uncharacteristic of the society of the day.
2. Sensitivity to children, the sick, the poor and others marginalized by society.
3. Joy. More references to joy than other gospel writers.
4. Prayer. Luke shows Jesus praying often.
5. Compassion for sinners.
6. A universal, not just Jewish, Savior.
7. Teachings about the danger of wealth.
8. A call to whole hearted commitment to the cause of Christ.
9. Emphasis on the Holy Spirit, bringing power to Christ, and later to Christians.
10. Use of the term "gospel," or "good news" to signify preaching of Christ. Used 10 times in Luke's account, only once in the other three.

Endnotes:

¹ It is popular for Biblical textual scholars today to assume that all the later written records came out of an *oral tradition*, that is, memories of eyewitnesses passed on by word of mouth. The restored gospel rightly restores the prominence of written records, with it's understanding that written language was a gift from God himself and highly prized from earliest prophetic time. (see Moses 1:40; Moses 6:5-6; Abr. 1:31) Jesus, in His visit to the Americas, directed that records be kept accurately of all that was done that had spiritual significance. The only good reason for doubting that there were written records kept from the very beginning, outside of the pervasive scholarly paradigm that insists all history is an evolution from simple to complex, is that no copies exist today. That is not proof that they were not written, simply that they didn't survive. Modern revelation teaches us that "devolution" is the more likely paradigm in the religious history of the world.

² Paul refused to give John Mark another chance and so Barnabas, who *did* want to give his young relative a second chance, split from Paul and took John Mark with him on a separate journey. (Acts 15:36-40). Mark and Paul were reconciled later as evidenced by 2 Timothy 4:11 which shows Paul's softening and forgiveness of the earlier lapse as well as the confidence he later had in Mark.

³ It is interesting to note that the Section 93 "Word" passage identifies itself as being from "the record of John." (D&C 93:6-7,11) One might think this means John, the beloved disciple, writer of the fourth gospel, since the wording is almost identical to the famous John 1:1-3 passage that everyone is so familiar with, and which everyone attributes to the John who wrote the gospel in which the famous words are found; but in fact, the teaching in question comes from John *the Baptist*, as section 93: 15-16 makes clear. Without the further revelation of the restored gospel we wouldn't even know that John the Baptist *wrote a record*, which D&C 93:18 promises us we can read some day if we are faithful. (There's that theme again: God insists that his prophets write things down!) See also the intriguing passage, Alma 38:9, which exhibits some of this same language in 73 B.C.!

⁴ The reason these words are in the Gospel of John, and that we associate them with John the gospel writer (let's call him John the younger or J-2 for short), is that he, John the younger, was a disciple of John the Baptist (John-1) before he was a disciple of Jesus. This John (J-2) was greatly influenced in his thinking by John the Baptist, and he followed the Baptist as a disciple before he met Jesus and recorded what we have of John-1's words in his gospel. Notice John 1:35, a scene in which Jesus comes to John the Baptist after his baptism. Two disciples of John Baptist are described as standing there, and after hearing Jesus, leaving John the Baptist and following Jesus. One is identified as Andrew. The other is not named, though this was very likely John-2's way of identifying himself. John-2 did not ever identify himself by name in his own gospel, except by using the enigmatic phrase, "the disciple whom Jesus loved," which is found 5 times in John's gospel. In John 21:20-24, at the very end of his record, John "lets the cat out of the bag" and specifies that the one who wrote the record is, in fact, the same as the one identified as "the one whom Jesus loved." That is why he (John-2, the gospel writer) has become known as John the Beloved.

Forgive the long footnote but, for those who are interested, this may sort out the natural confusion that arises from two men with the same name, the same disposition for deep intellectual and spiritual inquiry, and who were associated in the same cause. Without some detective work it's a perfect setup for a case of mistaken identity!

⁵ Today, some scholars are willing to concede that themes similar to those in John are found in the writings of the Qumran Essene community, from which John the Baptist is sometimes thought to have come. There are many differences between John and the Essene community at Qumran, but it is possible that John spent some time among them, as he is said to have grown up "in the desert." Some have thought that perhaps the Qumran community took him in after the death of his aged parents.