

**A  
FRIENDLY  
GUIDE TO**

# LUKE'S GOSPEL

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# INTRODUCTION

SAN



The Gospel according to Luke tells a story about Jesus of Nazareth, the first century figure whose life, death and resurrection came to form the core of Christianity. Although there are other ancient stories about Jesus (in particular, the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and John), Luke's story is unique. Not only Christianity, but also Western culture generally, would be totally different had Luke's Gospel never been written. Without Luke, we would not have the Annunciation scenes that fill the galleries and churches of Europe. We would not have the cantatas and motets inspired by the texts of Mary's *Magnificat*, Zechariah's *Benedictus* and, of course, the angels' *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*. Newspapers would not refer to unexpected heroes as 'Good Samaritans' and we would not have the parable of the 'Prodigal Son'. We would not know about tree-climbing Zacchaeus or about the 'Good Thief' crucified alongside Jesus.

Most readers of this book have therefore already been exposed to Luke's Gospel in many different ways. Some of you, familiar with the bits of the Gospel that have made their way into Western culture generally, may want to understand something of their original context. For others, your interest in Luke will be related to a Christian faith commitment and you will also be familiar with the Gospel through participation in Christian worship. You may want to refresh your appreciation of Luke's Gospel and perhaps even be surprised by aspects of the Gospel that are a little less familiar.



We are all familiar with travel guidebooks that prepare us for a visit to a foreign country. I think of this *Friendly Guide* in a similar way. Despite our familiarity with Luke's Gospel, there are many aspects of

Luke's writing that are totally foreign to us. The Gospel was originally written in another language (a form of ancient Greek), comes to us from the distant past (the first century of the common era 'CE') and from the location and culture of the Roman Empire. We have all met examples of that strange variety of tourist who expects everything to be just the same as at home! But we will get much more out of our visit to the foreign country of Luke's Gospel if we open ourselves to the possibility of being

surprised and challenged by what he writes.

As with a travel guidebook, in this book we will get a general overview of the terrain to be covered and then focus on some of the distinctive features and 'must-sees' for our visit there. Of course, our focus will be on Luke's Gospel itself, but the Gospel can't be fully appreciated in isolation. Just as a visit to Italy is enhanced by some understanding of Italy's place in the broader context of European history and culture, so a reading of Luke is enriched by some understanding of the New Testament and the cultural world that produced it. Perhaps you've already read *A Friendly Guide to the New Testament* or something similar. That's a very good way to get a sense of the broader

landscape of the New Testament of which Luke's Gospel forms a part. Each and every one of the 27 books of the New Testament is ultimately concerned with Jesus, but each has its own perspective and way of speaking about him. Our exploration of Luke's Gospel will involve seeing what Luke shares in common with other books in the New Testament but also what makes his perspective on Jesus distinctive.

I hope that this book will be interesting and inspiring in its own way, but it's no substitute for actually experiencing Luke's story. If you haven't already done so, try reading the Gospel from beginning to end. For those who are used to hearing Luke in the form of short passages read in the context of church services, the idea of reading the whole Gospel might sound a little daunting. However, it only takes about two hours to read Luke's Gospel

— it's no longer than many movies and much shorter than any modern novel.

I also suggest that you try reading the Gospel aloud. The majority of people in Luke's society could not read and were dependent on hearing things read to them. This was also true among the early Christians for whom Luke wrote; he expected them to *hear* rather than read his gospel. Even those who could read in the ancient world tended to read aloud to themselves. Reading the Gospel aloud, either alone or with a group, enables us to appreciate the fact that Luke's words were intended to stimulate the ear as much as the eye. Reading aloud also slows us down slightly; it forces us to give every word and phrase its due and so to resist the temptation to skip over what we think we already know.



# LUKE'S GOSPEL: SOME BASICS – WHO, WHEN AND WHERE?

1 Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, 2 just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, 3 I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, 4 so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed. (Luke 1:1-4)

## WHO WAS LUKE?

It is a curious thing that while Luke's Gospel contains the name of the person for whom it was written (Theophilus – 1:3), it doesn't contain the name of its author. In this respect, it is similar to the other three Gospels in the New Testament: all of them are anonymous. The titles we're familiar with – 'the Gospel according to Matthew', 'Mark', 'Luke' or 'John' – are titles that were given to these four writings by early Christians during the second century. That isn't to say that the titles are wrong, but simply to say that they do not form part of the original writings themselves. While it would be interesting to know exactly who composed 'Luke's' Gospel, it adds relatively little to our understanding of the Gospel itself. Nevertheless, it's worth saying a word about the tradition that this Gospel was written by someone called 'Luke', especially since we ourselves know the Gospel by this name. Whatever the historical facts, we can continue to use the name 'Luke' for the author, whoever it actually was.

Later Christian authors thought that the evangelist was the Luke mentioned on a few occasions in the New Testament as a companion of Paul (Philemon 24; Col 4:14; 2 Tim 4:11). Both Luke's Gospel and the Acts of the Apos-

tles appear to have been written by the same person, a person who at various points in Acts also appears to have been travelling around with Paul (Acts 16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; 27:1-28:16).

Some things can be gleaned from the Gospel itself about its author. In the first place, he is clearly a cultivated and highly literate person; the style of Greek he uses is polished. Greek was the international language of the Roman Empire (much like English is for us today) and Luke was probably a native speaker of Greek. Luke's frequent allusions to the Old Testament suggest to some that he may have come from a Jewish background, but he is also particularly interested in the fact that the Good News of Jesus is not only for Jews but also for non-Jews ('Gentiles'). He also makes occasional mistakes about Jewish rituals that are difficult to explain if he had grown up as a Jew.

For these reasons, many experts think that Luke came from a non-Jewish background, but had been immersed in the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures (our 'Old Testament'), perhaps in preparation for conversion to Judaism. At some point, though, he was exposed to preaching about Jesus of Nazareth as the long-awaited Jewish Messiah and became a believer in Jesus. Given his reliance on 'eyewitnesses' (1:2), it is unlikely that he himself had known Jesus during his earthly life.

## WHERE AND WHEN WAS LUKE'S GOSPEL WRITTEN?

If identifying the author of the Gospel is difficult, it's even more challenging to pinpoint where and when the Gospel was written. Again, this is not of critical importance for our understanding of the Gospel.

GIVEN HIS RELIANCE ON 'EYEWITNESSES' (1:2), IT IS UNLIKELY THAT [LUKE] HIMSELF HAD KNOWN JESUS DURING HIS EARTHLY LIFE.

Experts estimate the date of the writing of Luke's Gospel and the Acts to the year 80CE or slightly later. We can well imagine that a young man in his twenties or thirties who was involved in Paul's missionary activity in the early 50s CE could still be writing, now with the benefit of many years of reflection, in the 80s. All we can be certain about is that the Gospel was written somewhere in the eastern part of the Roman Empire between Greece and Syria towards the end of the first century.

That may not sound like much, but even to say that much should remind us that the Gospel comes to us from a time and place which is almost unimaginably different from our own. And it's for that very reason that we need some kind of guide if we are not to distort Luke's work by imposing our own cultural assumptions on it.

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## WHAT EXACTLY IS LUKE'S GOSPEL?

**W**hat kind of writing is this book we call 'Luke's Gospel'? The answer might seem to be obvious: a gospel! But that answer only forces us to ask what a 'gospel' is. At its simplest, a gospel has come to be recognised as a story about Jesus of Nazareth which tells how his public ministry of preaching, miraculous works and teaching of disciples ended in his execution by the authorities in Jerusalem and his being raised from the dead on the third day. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and John are other examples of such stories about Jesus.

Most experts today think that Mark's Gospel is the oldest of the four gospels in the New Testament (the order of the books in our printed Bibles is not necessarily the order of their composition). In fact, we could say that Mark invented the idea of a gospel and provided a model or template for both Matthew and Luke to follow (John's Gospel is quite different from these three). Certainly, a very great deal of Mark's Gospel is repeated, either directly or with some modification, in Luke's Gospel. Of course, as we shall see, Luke himself adds a lot of material to Mark's basic story.

It's important to take seriously the fact that the Gospels, including Luke's, are in the form of a *story*. The New Testament and other early Christian literature provide many examples of other kinds of writing about Jesus: letters, hymns, prayers, visions, theological statements and prophecies, to name a few. In other words, of all the different kinds of writing that Luke could have chosen to write about Jesus, he chose the form of a story. Luke

seems to be particularly conscious of his choice since right at the outset he says that he is following in the footsteps of others who have written 'orderly accounts' or 'narratives' about Jesus (1:1).

The fact that Luke chose to write about Jesus in the form of a story is one of the reasons why it is important to read the entire gospel from beginning to end. A story is inherently dramatic – it is not just a list of events, but a carefully crafted ordering of events that builds and resolves tension. To put it simply: a story contains a plot. As we shall see, for Luke the plot of the story concerns God's visitation of his chosen people Israel through the person of his Son and Messiah. The drama revolves around the question of whether or not God's people will recognise and accept this visitation. There is a surprising twist in the story, as it begins to appear that Gentiles (non-Jews) will more readily accept Israel's Messiah than Israel itself.

Stories, of course, can be fictional or non-fictional. Luke tells his audience right at the beginning that he is not writing fiction, but 'an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us' (1:1). This sounds to us as though Luke is writing that particular kind of non-fiction that we call history, and it is fair to say that Luke was the Christian community's first 'historian'. We need to be a little careful here though, since Luke also tells his audience that he is writing with a particular aim in mind.



**I**n other words, Luke understands his job as not just to give facts but also to interpret them in a way that supports and strengthens faith in Jesus; and to do that not simply as an historical figure, but as the cruci-

fied and risen Messiah who is sent by God and through whose name alone human beings can be saved. Although it is certainly possible to gain information from the gospel about the man Jesus of Nazareth who lived in Galilee and Judea in the early first century, providing that information for its own sake is not Luke's intention.

I mentioned earlier that Luke's Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles appear to have the same author and in fact seem to be two volumes of a single story. Both books are addressed by name to Theophilus (Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1), and the beginning of Acts refers explicitly to 'the first book' with a description that clearly matches Luke's Gospel. The two books deal with two different periods of time: the Gospel deals with the earthly ministry of Jesus up to and including his death, resurrection and ascension, while the Acts deals with the ministry of the early Church in the name of the Risen Jesus up until the time Paul is imprisoned in Rome. That said, the two books were probably intended by Luke to be read together as a continuous story. Many of the questions that the Gospel sets up are never answered within the Gospel, but only in the Acts. In particular, the idea that Jesus will be a 'light for revelation to the Gentiles' (Luke 1:1) seems to remain unfulfilled until the early Christians (who of course were mainly of





Jewish background) begin to evangelise Gentiles, not only within the Holy Land but throughout the Empire – a story only told in Acts.

## WHY DID LUKE WRITE HIS GOSPEL?

**S**o why does Luke write his Gospel? Luke himself admits that he knows other people have written accounts about ‘the things that have been fulfilled amongst us’ (1:1). What made him think that the story of Jesus that he knew from Mark’s Gospel needed to be re-told? For one thing, Luke’s investigations have brought him into contact with stories and traditions about what Jesus said and did that Mark did not include in his Gospel. Luke has expanded Mark’s basic story with such things as an account of Jesus’ birth, with many parables, with longer sections of Jesus’ teaching and with a detailed account of what occurs around his death and resurrection. Luke also seems to sense that Mark’s story is unfinished in the sense that any story about the life of Jesus must include an account of how the Risen Jesus continues to work powerfully in the world through the Spirit-filled community of believers. This at least partly explains the need for the Acts of the Apostles as a second volume of Luke’s work.

Luke’s reasons for writing go beyond a need to ‘fill out’ Mark’s story. Fortunately for us, Luke himself explains why he is writing right at the beginning of his Gospel. Addressing Theophilus, Luke says he is writing so that ‘you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed’ (1:4). Theophilus has already been ‘instructed’ – perhaps he is a newly baptised Christian, or at least someone who is preparing for baptism. While Luke is certainly interested in conveying the truth for Theophilus’ benefit, he is not just reciting facts or adding information, but telling a story which links events together in a way that assures Theophilus (and his other readers, including us) that God is in control of what happens in this story at every step of the way. The words ‘know the truth’ can also be translated as ‘have certainty’ or ‘be assured’. But why does Theophilus need re-assurance?



**L**uke has a particular interest in the fact that the Good News about Jesus is for all people. We tend to take for granted that God ‘shows no partiality’, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is ac-

ceptable to him' (Acts 10:34). But this would have been a surprising statement for most people in the ancient world.

The God of Israel had shown himself in the scriptures of Israel to be particularly partial to one people that he himself had chosen to be his own. In fact, Luke's Gospel demonstrates God's special treatment of his Chosen People; from Luke's point of view, in Jesus, the God of Israel has visited his people *in person*.

However, as the story of the Gospel unfolds, it becomes clear that not everyone in Israel will recognise this. What may be causing problems for an intelligent Gentile like Theophilus is trying to understand why this happened. Did God's plans go wrong? Did God treat his own people fairly? Can God really be trusted?

In order to reassure Theophilus, Luke's Gospel tells a story of the God of Israel keeping faith with his Chosen People, while opening up the possibility of a relationship between God and the Gentiles. One of the problems that the early Christians faced was to explain why the vast majority of the Jewish people had rejected their own Messiah. At one level, the explanation for this was simple: the idea that God's Messiah could have been executed as a criminal by the Romans was outrageously unacceptable. No Jew expected the Messiah to be put to death.

Those who did come to accept that Jesus was the Messiah also came to the conclusion that he had both gone to his death and been raised from the dead in accordance with God's plan. But this raised another question: had God really acted fairly towards his own special people, Israel, in doing something so unexpected? And if God had not acted fairly with his own people, how could Gentiles possibly put their trust in him?

Luke tries to answer these questions in different ways. In his Gospel, he shows that the Messiah is a prophetic figure who shares in the suffering and rejection that so often

marked the people of Israel's treatment of the prophets sent to them by God. In the Acts of the Apostles, he recounts through the preaching of Peter that the scriptures of Israel did in fact prepare for a suffering Messiah, and that God had therefore acted justly. The theme of God's faithfulness towards his people is prominent right at the outset of the Gospel. The announcement of the birth of John – who will 'turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God' and 'make ready a people prepared for the Lord' – occurs in the very heart of the nation (the Jerusalem Temple) and involves a couple who are outstanding representatives of their people in terms of being 'righteous before God'.

This indicates clearly that the God of the Old Testament is the very same God who will in fact be the principal character in Luke's Gospel. The gospel will also end in the Jerusalem Temple (24:52), from where the 'forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed ... to all nations' – for the people of Israel are God's special, but not sole, concern. As the story of the Acts progresses we see the Good News being proclaimed in ever-widening circles. The second volume of Luke's story will end in Rome, the heart of the Empire, symbolising the universal reach of the Good News. Not only Theophilus, but also the vast majority of Christians today who are not of Jewish background, can see in Luke's two-volume work the beginnings of their own story.



### DID YOU KNOW?

- That in the New Testament non-Jews are often called 'Gentiles'?
- That the name Theophilus means 'Friend of God'?
- That Luke's Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles are two volumes of a single story?
- That Luke uses Mark's Gospel as a model?