

Introduction to the Gospel according to Luke

Where is it in the Bible?

Luke is the third book in the New Testament and the third of the four Gospels. It is found between Mark and John.

Who wrote it?

The author of Luke was also the author of Acts, in which he seems to identify himself as a companion of Paul. Although there are other possibilities, the early and unanimous tradition was that the author was the person referred to in Colossians 4:14 as "Luke, the beloved physician." He is also mentioned in 2 Timothy 4:11 and Philemon 24. This tradition was widespread in the Church, and most scholars feel there is no strong reason to challenge this.

From his works, we can tell that Luke was well-educated. He uses the richest vocabulary of any Biblical author and is familiar with both classical literature and the Hebrew Scriptures. Most feel that he was a Gentile Christian who had studied the Bible extensively, although he could also have been a Hellenistic Jew who had a classical education.

When was it written?

Luke admits (1:2) that he was not an eyewitness to the events he describes, so the Gospel was likely from the generation after Jesus' first disciples. Since it uses Mark and refers to the destruction of Jerusalem, it was probably written after 70. Most scholars date the writing of Luke around 80-90, about the same time as Matthew.

What is it about?

Based on what he says in chapter 1, Luke wants to establish a definitive version of the historical events surrounding the life of Jesus. This might have been necessary because accounts were diverging and getting muddled as Christianity spread from its origins in Palestine.¹ Luke also seems to be concerned with supporting Christians, strengthening their faith and laying the foundation for the mission to the Gentiles.

How is it structured?

- I. Preface (1:1-4)
- II. The Coming of Jesus (1:5-2:52)
- III. Preparation for Jesus' Public Ministry (3:1-4:13)
- IV. Jesus' Ministry In and Around Galilee (4:14-9:50)
- V. The Journey to Jerusalem (9:51-19:28)
- VI. Ministry in Jerusalem (19:29-21:38)
- VII. The Passion Narrative (22:1-23:56)
- VIII. The Resurrection Narrative (24:1-53)

¹ Tom (N. T.) Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p.3.

What are some of its themes?

- **Different images for Jesus:** Luke identifies Jesus in many different ways. He often refers to Jesus as “the Lord.” He also identifies Jesus as the deliverer sent by God to the people of Israel by giving him the title “Messiah” or “Christ”. He also speaks of Jesus as “Savior”; this designation is not used in Matthew or Mark and only rarely in John. Supernatural beings, including angels, demons, the devil, and God, call Jesus as “the Son of God.” Jesus refers to himself as “the Son of Man.”
- **The Holy Spirit:** Luke mentions the role of the Holy Spirit in connection with the births of John and Jesus and with Jesus’ ministry. At the end of the Gospel (24:49), Jesus promises the disciples that they will be “clothed with power from on high”, that is, the Holy Spirit. This theme continues with even greater emphasis in Acts.
- **Meals:** Luke’s Gospel is famous for scenes involving meals. They are often the setting in which Jesus teaches and tells parables. In Jesus’ day, meals were occasions for celebration as well as nourishment. They were important ways to form and strengthen social ties and obligations. In the early church, Christians met regularly to share meals, and Luke may be trying to establish a connection between this practice and the Gospel stories.
- **Ministry to the excluded or disadvantaged:** Luke’s Gospel shows special concern for those who are at a disadvantage in society, including those who are diseased or handicapped, Samaritans, tax collectors, Gentile, children, and women. Luke seems to be particularly concerned for the poor; this is paralleled by hostility for the rich.
- **Money:** This Gospel contains frequent warnings against the dangers of wealth and possessions and the possibility of being corrupted by them.
- **Salvation:** Luke portrays salvation as a present reality for all people. The coming of God’s kingdom enable people to have a better quality of life now by transforming human society and defeating other powers that attempt to control human lives and hearts.
- **Worship and prayer:** This Gospel begins and ends with scenes of people at worship in the temple in Jerusalem. There are far more references to people worshiping or giving thanks to God than in any of the other Gospels. Jesus also prays more frequently and encourages his disciples to do so, also.