

## UNDERSTANDING THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

The author's name does not appear in the book, but much unmistakable evidence points to Luke. This Gospel is a companion volume to the book of Acts, and the language and structure of these two books indicate that both were written by the same person. They are addressed to the same individual, Theophilus, and the second volume refers to the first ([Ac 1:1](#)). Certain sections in Acts use the pronoun "we" ([Ac 16:10-17](#); [20:5-15](#); [21:1-18](#); [27:1-28:16](#)), indicating that the author was with Paul when the events described in these passages took place. By process of elimination, Paul's "dear friend Luke, the doctor" ([Col 4:14](#)) and "fellow worker" ([Phm 24](#)), becomes the most likely candidate. His authorship is supported by the uniform testimony of early Christian writings (e.g., the Muratorian Canon, a.d. 170, and the works of Irenaeus, c. 180).

Luke was probably a Gentile by birth, well educated in Greek culture, a physician by profession, a companion of Paul at various times from his second missionary journey to his final imprisonment in Rome, and a loyal friend who remained with the apostle after others had deserted him ([2Ti 4:11](#)).

Antioch (of Syria) and Philippi are among the places suggested as his hometown.

### RECIPIENT AND PURPOSE

The Gospel is specifically directed to Theophilus ([1:3](#)), whose name means "one who loves God" and almost certainly refers to a particular person rather than to lovers of God in general. The use of "most excellent" with the name further indicates an individual, and supports the idea that he was a Roman official or at least of high position and wealth. He was possibly Luke's patron, responsible for seeing that the writings were copied and distributed. Such a dedication to the publisher was common at that time.

Theophilus, however, was more than a publisher. The message of this Gospel was intended for his own instruction ([1:4](#)) as well as the instruction of those among whom the book would be circulated. The fact that the Gospel was initially directed to Theophilus does not narrow or limit its purpose. It was written to strengthen the faith of all believers and to answer the attacks of unbelievers. It was presented to displace some disconnected and ill-founded reports about Jesus (see [1:1-4](#) and note). Luke wanted to show that the place of the Gentile Christian in God's kingdom is based on the teaching of Jesus. He wanted to commend the preaching of the gospel to the whole world.

### DATE AND PLACE OF WRITING

The two most commonly suggested periods for dating the Gospel of Luke are: (1) a.d. 59-63, and (2) the 70s or the 80s .

The place of writing was probably Rome, though Achaia, Ephesus and Caesarea have also been suggested. The place to which it was sent would, of course, depend on the residence of Theophilus. By its detailed designations of places in the Holy Land, the Gospel seems to be

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intended for readers who were unfamiliar with that land. Antioch, Achaia and Ephesus are possible destinations.

## STYLE

Luke had outstanding command of the Greek language. His vocabulary is extensive and rich, and his style at times approaches that of classical Greek (as in the preface, [1:1–4](#)), while at other times it is quite Semitic ([1:5–2:52](#))—often like the Septuagint (the pre-Christian Greek translation of the OT).

## CHARACTERISTICS

The third Gospel presents the works and teachings of Jesus that are especially important for understanding the way of salvation. Its scope is complete from the birth of Christ to his ascension, its arrangement is orderly, and it appeals to both Jews and Gentiles. The writing is characterized by literary excellence, historical detail and warm, sensitive understanding of Jesus and those around him.

Since the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) report many of the same episodes in Jesus' life, one would expect much similarity in their accounts. The dissimilarities reveal the distinctive emphases of the separate writers. Luke's characteristic themes include: (1) universality, recognition of Gentiles as well as Jews in God's plan (see, e.g., [2:30–32](#) and notes on [2:31](#); [3:6](#)); (2) emphasis on prayer, especially Jesus' praying before important occasions (see note on [3:21](#)); (3) joy at the announcement of the gospel or "good news" (see note on [1:14](#)); (4) special concern for the role of women (see, e.g., [8:1–3](#) and notes); (5) special interest in the poor (some of the rich were included among Jesus' followers, but he seemed closest to the poor; see note on [12:33](#)); (6) concern for sinners (Jesus was a friend to those deep in sin); (7) stress on the family circle (Jesus' activity included men, women and children, with the setting frequently in the home); (8) repeated use of the Messianic title "Son of Man" (used 25 times; see [19:10](#); Da [7:13](#) and notes); (9) emphasis on the Holy Spirit (see note on [4:1](#)); (10) inclusion of more parables than any other Gospel (see chart, p. 2130); (11) emphasis on praising God (see [1:64](#); [24:53](#) and notes).

## SOURCES

Although Luke acknowledges that many others had written of Jesus' life ([1:1](#)), he does not indicate that he relied solely on these reports for his own writing. He used personal investigation and arrangement, based on testimony from "eyewitnesses and servants of the word" ([1:2](#))—including the preaching and oral accounts of the apostles. His language differences from the other Synoptics and his blocks of distinctive material (e.g., [10:1–18:14](#); [19:1–28](#)) indicate independent work, though he obviously used some of the same sources (see essay, p. 1943).

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## PLAN

Luke's account of Jesus' ministry can be divided into three major parts:

- (1) the events that occurred in and around Galilee ([4:14–9:50](#)),
- (2) those that took place in Judea and Perea ([9:51–19:27](#)), and
- (3) those of the final week in Jerusalem ([19:28–24:53](#)).

Luke's uniqueness is especially seen in the amount of material devoted to Jesus' closing ministry in Judea and Perea. This material is predominantly made up of accounts of Jesus' discourses. Twenty-one of the 28 parables that occur in Luke are found in [10:30–19:27](#). Of the 20 miracles recorded in Luke, only 5 appear in [9:51–19:27](#). Already in the ninth chapter (see note on [9:51](#)), Jesus is seen anticipating his final appearance in Jerusalem and his crucifixion (see note on [13:22](#)).

## KEY VERSE

The key verse in Luke is Luke 19:10 – “The Son of Man has come to seek out and to save the lost”.

## THEME

We are beginning a series in the Book of Luke. Luke focuses on the Humanity of Christ and calls Him Son of Man more than any other Gospel. Luke, as a physician, is also more detailed than other Gospels and spotlights humanity in need of a Savior.

The main theme of the Gospel is the nature of Jesus' Messiahship and mission

## ENGAGE

- As you approach the text you may find these thoughts to be helpful?
  - Relating the information of authorship, date, purpose, and key verse will assist the congregation as we go into the Book of Luke.
  - I recommend that you share this information to your groups at the beginning of class.
  - Move into discussion about skepticism and people they have encountered that are always asking questions, but may not be seeking answers.
  - Today's message will be titled Skeptics Welcome. It is an invitation to people to look at the divinity and the humanity of Christ. It is also a message that will reveal the common connectors of all humanity and our need for a Savior.

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## EXAMINE

*Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed.*

The first four verses are one sentence in the original Greek. They are written in refined, academic, classical style. But then, for the rest of the gospel, Luke doesn't use the language of scholars but of the common man, the language of the village and the street. Luke is saying to us, "This account has all the proper academic and scholarly credentials. But it is written for the man on the street." Luke wrote so that people would understand Jesus, not so they would admire his brain and literary skill.

a. Many have taken in hand: Luke writes his gospel with the full knowledge that many have already written histories of the life of Jesus. This may be a reference to the works of Mark and Matthew (most people think John was written after Luke), and it may also refer to other biographies of Jesus not directly inspired by the Holy Spirit.

i. Many "scholars" have claimed that the writings about Jesus did not come about until two or perhaps three generations after His death on the cross. But recent (as of December, 1994) findings by German papyrus expert Carsten Thiede suggest that we may actually possess copies of Matthew that date close to the very time of Jesus. Thiede's findings are based on a careful analysis of the handwriting script used on the fragment.

b. Luke writes about those things which are most surely believed among us. He is writing about things already commonly known and believed among Christians. When Luke wrote, most Christians already knew all about the life of Jesus, both from the oral accounts passed on by the original disciples, and by the biographies that had already been written.

c. Just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us: Luke tells us that he received his material for this book as any reliable historian would, from eyewitnesses.

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i. Those who from the beginning are undoubtedly the apostles, who were with Jesus from the very start. But those who from the beginning would also include people such as Mary herself, whom Luke probably "interviewed" in his research for this history of the life of Jesus.

ii. Luke wrote to a first century world that was burnt out on "if it feels good, do it" living; yet it was offended by the crazy superstitions of most religions. The world then, as today, longs for what Christianity offers: faith founded on fact.

d. Most excellent Theophilus: Luke addresses his gospel to a man named Theophilus, but it was also written with a wider audience in mind.

i. By his title (most excellent), we gather that Theophilus was probably a Roman government official. It is entirely likely that the books of Luke and Acts make up Paul's defense brief for his trial before Caesar, since Acts leaves Paul waiting for that trial.

ii. Whoever Theophilus was, he had already had some instruction in the faith (in which you were instructed).

## QUESTIONS

- From these four verses, what do you learn about the Gospel of Luke?
- What do they tell us about its historical accuracy?
- To whom did Luke address the book – 1:1-4?
  - Where else is this name mentioned? (Acts 1 – same AUTHOR, SAME RECIPIENT)
- What reason did Luke give why he wrote the book?
  - (Think: Did the Holy Spirit always reveal to people things they did not already know – cf. John 14:26?)
- If Luke was inspired, of what value was his personal knowledge or the testimony of witnesses?)
- . Trace through these verses how the “events that were fulfilled among us” came to be written down into “orderly accounts.” What process did the writers go through?

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- Who do you think some of these “eyewitnesses” might be? What does Luke say about the others who have written accounts?
  
- In verse 3 Luke tells us he wrote to Theophilus. What can we learn about Theophilus from the text?
  
- Why did Luke write to him?
  
- How do you think Luke’s emphasis on talking to eyewitnesses and writing an orderly account will help you as you study his Gospel in the coming weeks?
- Suppose Luke just came in the door of your room and told you excitedly about his investigation. He’s been talking to eyewitnesses about Jesus and putting together an orderly account.
  - What would you like him to investigate, to find out about Jesus?
  - What should he find out from the eyewitnesses?
  - Share some of the questions you come up with, and keep them in mind in the coming weeks to see if Luke gives you any answers.

## IN CLOSING:

- What is it that you would most like to learn or experience about Jesus in the coming weeks?
- (You may want to spend some time in prayer as a group asking Jesus to reveal himself to you in deep and powerful ways.)

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