

Luke The Universal Gospel

The overall purpose of Luke writing his gospel was to present an accurate account of the life of Jesus Christ and to present Jesus Christ as the perfect human and Saviour.

After Jesus Christ ascended to heaven, the apostles vigorously continued to preach the gospel message.

These men had seen the miracles surrounding the life of Jesus Christ. They had heard Jesus Christ teaching the crowds, and Jesus Christ had taught them personally, they had witnessed the resurrection of Jesus Christ, had talked with Him and had even eaten with Him, after that resurrection.

Their personal experience with Jesus Christ gave them confidence to speak with authority, and their reliability as eyewitnesses made their preaching more effective.

As time passed, the number of converts rose and persecution increased.

The apostles grew older and some died.

Many Christians were not now able to hear about Jesus Christ from eyewitnesses.

There was a need to supplement the preaching of these eyewitnesses with written accounts of the life and teaching of Jesus Christ.

These written accounts would also preserve critical material for the Church in the years to come.

One such account is known as “*the gospel according to Luke.*”

According to tradition, the writer of this gospel was Luke the physician, a companion of the apostle Paul and perhaps a native of Antioch in Syria, a Greek and a gentile.

It was written about AD60, to Theophilus [meaning “*a friend of God*”], gentiles and people everywhere.

This is the most comprehensive gospel and the general vocabulary and diction show that the author was well educated.

Luke 1:1-4 [New King James] *“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.”*

This orderly account is the first of a two-volume work, the second part is the Book of Acts.

The trustworthiness of Luke as a historian has been attested even by many liberal scholars.

The gospel of Luke has more of a historical emphasis than the other gospels.

Historicity is a major theme of Luke.

As a doctor, Luke was a man of science, and as a Greek, he was a man of detail. It is not surprising then that he begins by outlining his extensive research and explaining that he is reporting the facts.

Luke was a close friend and travelling companion of Paul, so he could interview the other disciples, had access to other historical accounts, and was eyewitness to the birth and growth of the early Church.

Luke's gospel and the book of Acts are reliable historical documents.

Three themes in Luke's gospel

Historicity is a major theme of Luke as we have said and will see.

Luke also emphasises two other themes.

The second theme is the belief that God has made salvation available to all human beings, not simply the house of Israel.

This is shown in the gospel's emphasis on the poor, the Samaritans and the gentiles generally.

Related to Luke's emphasis on all humanity is his third theme, women. At the time of Jesus Christ, Jewish women were expected to give higher priority to domestic duties than to spiritual concerns.

Women were exempt from studying the Torah and from some ordinances.

Because women did not have to observe as many ordinances, they were considered less religious.

Luke, more than the other gospel writers, shows us that Jesus Christ viewed women differently.

Jesus Christ did not teach women to abandon domestic roles, but He did encourage them to have religious interest, [Luke 10:38-42].

The prologue

The first two chapters of Luke are the prologue, they provide us with the historical setting from which Jesus Christ emerges.

Only Luke mentions the circumcision of Jesus Christ, [Luke 2:21], and only he mentions that the 12 year old Jesus astounded scholars at Jerusalem, [Luke 2:41-47].

These examples, by their specificity, give evidence that Jesus Christ was an actual historical person.

The universality of Jesus Christ's message and actions is foreshadowed in the prologue, [Luke 2:11-14] and Jesus Christ's own words [Luke 2:49].

In Matthew's account, which tends to focus on the House of Israel, wise men pay homage to Jesus Christ as the King of the Jews.

Luke's account instead contains the story of an angel proclaiming to humble shepherds the good tidings of Jesus Christ's birth, [Luke 2:8-18].

Jesus Christ's birth is to change the course of events for all human families, not just one.

Luke also records the words of Simeon when he saw the long awaited Jesus Christ the Messiah.

Luke 2:25-35 [New King James] *“And behold, there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon, and this man was just and devout, waiting for the Consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. So he came by the Spirit into the temple. And when the parents brought in the Child Jesus, to do for Him according to the custom of the law, he took Him up in his arms and blessed God and said: ‘Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation which You have prepared before the face of all peoples, a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel.’ And Joseph and His mother marvelled at those things which were spoken of Him. Then Simeon blessed them, and said to Mary His mother, ‘Behold, this Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against (yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.’”*

Again we see the emphasis on the universal theme that Jesus Christ came with salvation for all human beings, through His sacrificial death.

Prominence of women

Another distinguishing feature of Luke’s prologue is the prominence it affords to women.

Two women described only in Luke, Anna [Luke 2:36-38] and Elizabeth, [Luke 1:13, 24-25, 36, 39-45, 57-58], who was first to praise the greatness of Jesus Christ, who recognised His presence as Lord, even while He was in Mary’s womb, [Luke 1:41-43].

In these accounts, women are in positive spiritual roles.

Elizabeth is described as *“righteous before God, walking blamelessly in the commandments and ordinances of the Lord,”* [Luke 1:6].

In Matthew’s prologue, Joseph is the dominant figure, but it is Mary who dominates Luke’s account.

It is Mary to whom Gabriel announces the coming birth of Jesus Christ, [Luke 1:26-31].

Mary praises the Lord in a long speech, [Luke 1:46-55] that has similarities with the song of Hannah, [1 Samuel 2:1-10].

The prologue clearly contains a foretaste of certain themes that Luke develops further as his gospel progresses.

The main gospel

There is an abrupt change of style at the beginning of the third chapter of Luke, which marks the end of the prologue and the start of the main account and message.

Luke 3:1-2 [New King James] *“Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, while Annas and Caiaphas were high priests, the word of God came to John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness.”*

In one sentence, Luke places the preaching of John the Baptist in the context of six historical facts.

By starting with so many historical references, Luke is claiming that his gospel account is historical.

Luke frequently uses technically accurate terms, as well as avoiding colloquialisms.

This has a two-fold effect of enhancing the book's credibility as a historical document and giving it a more universal appeal through the use of language.

By examining the way Luke uses language to promote certain theological themes, we are indulging in what is known as "*redaction criticism*."

In our second article on Luke's gospel, we will give a brief explanation of what "*redaction criticism*" is and some examples of how it can contribute to our understanding of Luke.

In a third article, we give an example of how Luke exploits a literary motif.

The main part of this first article, however, concentrates on how Luke emphasises some aspects of Jesus Christ's teachings through the material unique to Luke.

What makes Luke unique?

Much of the early part of Luke's gospel has parallels either in Matthew or Mark, but those sections that are unique to Luke deserve special attention for our full understanding of his account.

Luke 4:16-30 [New King James] *"So He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read. And He was handed the book of the prophet Isaiah. And when He had opened the book, He found the place where it was written: 'The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed; to proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD.' Then He closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all who were in the synagogue were fixed on Him. And He began to say to them, 'Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.' So all bore witness to Him, and marvelled at the gracious words which proceeded out of His mouth. And they said, 'Is this not Joseph's son?' He said to them, 'You will surely say this proverb to Me, "Physician, heal yourself! Whatever we have heard done in Capernaum, do also here in Your country."' Then He said, 'Assuredly, I say to you, no prophet is accepted in his own country. But I tell you truly, many widows were in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a great famine throughout all the land; but to none of them was Elijah sent except to Zarephath, in the region of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. And many lepers were in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.' So all those in the synagogue, when they heard these things, were filled with wrath, and rose up and thrust Him out of the city; and they led Him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built, that they might throw Him down over the cliff. Then passing through the midst of them, He went His way."*

This described Jesus Christ's rejection at Nazareth, and begins with more historical details about Jesus Christ's life.

It shows Jesus Christ to be a law-abiding Jew who went to the synagogue every Sabbath.

But then Luke shows the gospel being preached to the poor, the broken-hearted, the captives, the blind and the oppressed generally.

Jesus Christ emphasises that He is fulfilling the prophecies of sacred history to bring salvation to all people.

Luke is the only writer who records this.

This section ends by portraying Jesus Christ as a prophet in the tradition of Elijah and Elisha.

Elijah's commission had taken him outside Israel to a widow in the region of Sidon, and the one leper Elisha healed was **not** an Israelite but a Syrian, Naaman.

Similarly, Jesus Christ's gospel will be accepted outside Israel.

Once again the themes of the historical voracity of Jesus Christ and the universality of the gospel message is emphasised.

Luke 7:36 – 8:3 [New King James] *“Then one of the Pharisees asked Him to eat with him. And He went to the Pharisee's house, and sat down to eat. And behold, a woman in the city who was a sinner, when she knew that Jesus sat at the table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of fragrant oil, and stood at His feet behind Him weeping; and she began to wash His feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head; and she kissed His feet and anointed them with the fragrant oil. Now when the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he spoke to himself, saying, ‘This Man, if He were a prophet, would know who and what manner of woman this is who is touching Him, for she is a sinner.’ And Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Simon, I have something to say to you.’ So he said, ‘Teacher, say it.’ ‘There was a certain creditor who had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. And when they had nothing with which to repay, he freely forgave them both. Tell Me, therefore, which of them will love him more?’ Simon answered and said, ‘I suppose the one whom he forgave more.’ And He said to him, ‘You have rightly judged.’ Then He turned to the woman and said to Simon, ‘Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave Me no water for My feet, but she has washed My feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head. You gave Me no kiss, but this woman has not ceased to kiss My feet since the time I came in. You did not anoint My head with oil, but this woman has anointed My feet with fragrant oil. Therefore I say to you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little.’ Then He said to her, ‘Your sins are forgiven.’ And those who sat at the table with Him began to say to themselves, ‘Who is this who even forgives sins?’ Then He said to the woman, ‘Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.’ Now it came to pass, afterward, that He went through every city and village, preaching and bringing the glad tidings of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with Him, and certain women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities, Mary called Magdalene, out of whom had come seven demons, and Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others who provided for Him from their substance.”*

This is another section without a parallel account in the other gospels.

This section has two parts.

The first part is the story of a woman, a known sinner, anointing Jesus Christ's feet with tears and a costly oil she had brought for that purpose.

Jesus told Simon the Pharisee that the woman's actions showed great love, and were performed because she was forgiven much.

The story ends with Jesus commending the woman.

The blessings Jesus Christ brought, forgiveness and salvation by faith, were available not only for law-abiding Jewish males, but for all people, including sinful women.

In the second part of this section, Luke records the actions of other women.

Luke 8:1-3 [New King James] *“Now it came to pass, afterward, that He went through every city and village, preaching and bringing the glad tidings of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with Him, and certain women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities, Mary called Magdalene, out of whom had come seven demons, and Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others who provided for Him from their substance.”*

Luke mentions the twelve apostles first as being with Jesus Christ.

Luke records in the Book of Acts, that men remained the leaders within the Church.

But notice that Luke points out that Jesus Christ also attracted dedicated female followers, who had benefitted from His ministry and who responded by becoming part of His entourage.

There are various points of interest here.

First, there is Luke's use of "*it came to pass*" which gives the account a feeling of historical veracity.

Second, these women, like the woman who had many sins forgiven, had gone from a spiritually despised condition to a spiritual positive role as followers and supporters of Jesus Christ.

Mary Magdalene had seven demons cast out of her, so she certainly had been forgiven much.

Of Susanna, nothing is mentioned, but Joanna was the wife of Herod's steward, incidentally providing another historical underpinning to the story of Jesus Christ.

Herod is **not** mentioned favourably in the gospels, so we can presume that Joanna was also called from an environment that Jews would consider religiously undesirable.

The third point to notice is that these women provided for Jesus Christ from their substance. This is exactly what the woman did in the previous passage of scripture, she ministered to Jesus Christ from her own flask of fragrant oil.

Luke's message is that these women who were healed of evil spirits and infirmities, who had been forgiven much, gave of their substance, or loved much, and therefore also enjoyed Jesus Christ's commendation, "*your faith has saved you.*"

So Luke again emphasises women positively, while incidentally adding historical touches.

The central section

We have studied two small passages that are unique to Luke, but most of the material unique to Luke is found in one great section, **chapters 9-19**.

The emphasis in this section, which forms the core of Luke's gospel, is a great call for repentance.

We will not analyse this section in the same detail as previously.

For even a brief excursion through this section will illustrate how Luke further develops some of his favourite themes.

Luke 9:51-56 [New King James] "*Now it came to pass, when the time had come for Him to be received up, that He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem, and sent messengers before His face. And as they went, they entered a village of the Samaritans, to prepare for Him. But they did not receive Him, because His face was set for the journey to Jerusalem. And when His disciples James and John saw this, they said, 'Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, just as Elijah did?' But He turned and rebuked them, and said, 'You do not know what manner of spirit you are of. For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives but to save them.' And they went to another village.*"

Jesus Christ strongly rebukes two disciples that wanted to call down fire from heaven and destroy the village that had rejected them and their message.

Jesus Christ was more gracious towards the village than His disciples were.

The village was a Samaritan village, which contributes to one of the emphases of this gospel, a universal message.

Luke 10:25-37 [New King James] *“And behold, a certain lawyer stood up and tested Him, saying, ‘Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?’ He said to him, ‘What is written in the law? What is your reading of it?’ So he answered and said, “‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind,” and “your neighbour as yourself.”’ And He said to him, ‘You have answered rightly; do this and you will live.’ But he, wanting to justify himself, said to Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbour?’ Then Jesus answered and said: ‘A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, who stripped him of his clothing, wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a certain priest came down that road. And when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. Likewise a Levite, when he arrived at the place, came and looked, and passed by on the other side. **But a certain Samaritan**, as he journeyed, came where he was. And when he saw him, he had compassion. So he went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; and he set him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. On the next day, when he departed, he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said to him, “Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I come again, I will repay you.” So which of these three do you think was neighbour to him who fell among the thieves?’ And he said, ‘He who showed mercy on him.’ Then Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’”*

The parable of the good Samaritan strikes even harder at the Jewish idea that Samaritans were to be despised.

In the parable, the lawyer and the Levite, representing two of the most respected groups of people, fail to show compassion on the suffering of a fellow human being.

By contrast the Samaritan, representing a group of people despised by the Jews, shows his compassionate concern by his actions.

Helping a person who is in need is the important thing, not what race you are or what job you do.

The parable of the good Samaritan is directly followed by the account of Mary and Martha.

Luke 10:38-42 [New King James] *“Now it happened as they went that He entered a certain village; and a certain woman named Martha welcomed Him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who also sat at Jesus’ feet and heard His word. But Martha was distracted with much serving, and she approached Him and said, ‘Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Therefore tell her to help me.’ And Jesus answered and said to her, ‘Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her.’”*

Mary is praised because she puts the spiritual, listening to Jesus Christ first in her life.

Spiritual growth is more important than physical roles.

This is true also for men, but in Jewish society it needed to be clear that it applied also to women.

Luke 17:11-19 [New King James] *“Now it happened as He went to Jerusalem that He passed through the midst of Samaria and Galilee. Then as He entered a certain village, there met Him ten men who were lepers, who stood afar off. And they lifted up their voices and said, ‘Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!’ So when He saw them, He said to them, ‘Go, show yourselves to the priests.’ And so it was that as they went, they were cleansed. And one of them, when he saw that he was healed, returned, and with a loud voice glorified God, and fell down on his face at His feet, giving Him thanks. And he was a Samaritan. So Jesus answered and said, ‘Were there not ten cleansed? But where are the nine? Were there not any found who returned to give glory to God except this foreigner?’ And He said to him, ‘Arise, go your way. Your faith has made you well.’”*

In this account of the ten lepers being cleansed, Luke points out that the one who came back to give thanks, was a Samaritan.

Luke 19:1-10 [New King James] *“Then Jesus entered and passed through Jericho. Now behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus who was a chief tax collector, and he was rich. And he sought to see who Jesus was, but could not because of the crowd, for he was of short stature. So he ran ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see Him, for He was going to pass that way. And when Jesus came to the place, He looked up and saw him, and said to him, ‘Zacchaeus, make haste and come down, for today I must stay at your house.’ So he made haste and came down, and received Him joyfully. But when they saw it, they all complained, saying, ‘He has gone to be a guest with a man who is a sinner.’ Then Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, ‘Look, Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘Today salvation has come to this house, because he also is a son of Abraham; for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.’”*

In this account of Zacchaeus, a tax collector, who were a group of people despised by the Jews’ but Luke specifically describes Zacchaeus as a rich, chief tax collector.

As such, Zacchaeus would be particularly despised as a traitor working for Rome and to increase his own wealth at the cost of others.

Certainly Zacchaeus would be classified as a sinner.

Yet it was at Zacchaeus’ house that Jesus Christ stayed.

Note Jesus Christ’s comment, **verse 9**.

The Jews were proud of being children of Abraham, Jesus points out that this despised tax collector was also a son of Abraham.

Jesus’ speech to Zacchaeus is the second and last occasion recorded by Luke, of Jesus calling someone a child of Abraham.

The first occasion, also in this section of material unique to Luke, was when Jesus Christ healed a woman on the Sabbath, to the indignation of the ruler of the synagogue.

Luke 13:16 [New King James] *“So ought not this woman, being a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has bound, think of it, for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath?”*

Jesus in effect told the ruler of the synagogue that as the woman was a daughter of Abraham it was fitting that she was healed on the Sabbath.

The ruler of the synagogue did not view the woman as a daughter of Abraham, nor did the crowd view Zacchaeus as a son of Abraham.

Jesus Christ had a more positive view on both these occasions.

This central section of Luke represents the benefits of the gospel and salvation being made available to all men and women.

The post-resurrection account

In the account of what happens after the resurrection of Jesus Christ, Luke also emphasises the rule of women.

All four gospels relate how the first to know of the resurrection of Jesus Christ were women, who then told the male disciples.

However, only in Mark and Luke are we told that the disciples disbelieved this trustworthy report from the women.

Mark had a different reason to mention the unbelief, one of the themes of his gospel is the disciples' lack of understanding.

In Mark's account, the disciples not only disbelieve the women, they disbelieve two other disciples, **[Mark 16:1-13]**.

It was hard to believe no matter who reported this event.

Luke's emphasis is slightly different.

In Luke's account, the disciples regard the women's report as an "idle report," as if their report could be dismissed because of their gender, [Luke 24:1-11].

In contrast, Jesus Christ knew that the women's report was correct.

Luke 24:25-27 [New King James] *"Then He said to them, 'O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?' And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself."*

Jesus Christ told the disciples how His resurrection and other recent events fitted in with what Moses and the prophets had foretold.

Luke 24:44-48 [New King James] *"Then He said to them, 'These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me.' And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures. Then He said to them, 'Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And you are witnesses of these things.'"*

The historicity of Jesus Christ's life and work is further emphasised in this passage of scripture.

Once again Luke mentions remission of sins, though starting at Jerusalem, the gospel message is to be available to all nations.

So Luke concludes his gospel, one that speaks with respect, not only of men but also of women, a characteristic of Luke far before its time, and far removed from the male-dominated world of Jerusalem in that age.

Luke's gospel focuses on the truth that Jesus Christ is not only the redeemer of the Jews, but the Saviour of all humanity.