

# 4. The Gospel of Luke

Probably written around 85-90CE (around the same time as the gospel of Matthew, but for a very different audience), this gospel is the first of a two-part account, together with the Acts of the Apostles.

The author - almost certainly not Luke, the companion of Paul<sup>1</sup> - was an educated man who spoke Greek, who also understood the stylistic traditions of Greek authorship, yet his gospel is notable for the compassion it demonstrates towards the poor and marginalised, many of whom had become Christians in the first decades.

The earliest complete texts exist only from the 4<sup>th</sup> century. What exists prior to this date are fragments, many of which contradict each other, so that it is difficult to compile an authentic version of the gospel. What we have today is the best, most generally accepted form of the text, although it is clear that throughout the first and second centuries, in different places and in different hands, the original - which is lost - was revised and refined for the local community.<sup>2</sup>

Taking its structure from the gospel of Mark, the gospel also draws on a hypothesised source named 'Q', which would seem to have been a collection of Jesus' sayings.<sup>3</sup> The gospel also contains passages which appear original - they are likely to have come from a further source known to, and trusted by, the author.

Luke offers an infancy narrative notably different from that of Matthew and - whereas the latter quotes the prophecies of Jewish history to show that Jesus is the awaited Messiah, Son of God - here we are presented with 'present-day' prophets: prophetic words expressed in song on the lips of Mary (the *Magnificat*<sup>4</sup>), of Zechariah (the *Benedictus*<sup>5</sup>), of Simeon (the *Nunc Dimittis*<sup>6</sup>) and Anna<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The reasoning for this is the substantial contradictions between the account given by the author and that given in Paul's own letters. Also - although he clearly admired Paul - the author does not always agree with him on key points, nor does he represent Paul's views accurately

<sup>2</sup> This is true, similarly, of the other gospels: there are early fragments which, at times, do not match; the complete texts we have come from later centuries

<sup>3</sup> The author of Matthew seems also to have drawn on 'Q' for Jesus' sayings. The existence of 'Q' is predicated on the sayings of Jesus which are contained in both Matthew and Luke but are not found in Mark

<sup>4</sup> Luke 1:46-55

<sup>5</sup> Luke 1:68-79

<sup>6</sup> Luke 2:29-32

<sup>7</sup> Luke 2:36-38

And whereas in Matthew we learn about the Magi coming from the East to see the newborn child<sup>8</sup>, in Luke we encounter the shepherds - the poor and humble whom Jesus has come to redeem.<sup>9</sup>

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## Are you the one who is to come?

After his baptism by John, Luke's gospel leads us along a now familiar path: the beginning of Jesus' ministry, his calling of his first disciples, and their travelling together from town to town preaching and healing.

Unlike Mark and Matthew, the author of Luke does not summarise Jesus' message in a single phrase but, rather expounds as much as possible the teachings and actions of Jesus offered in his sources.

We notice how much more expansive is this account: we are offered details and conversations and a real sense of narrative. Indeed, the author describes his text not as a gospel (for proclamation) but an 'account' (for teaching).<sup>10</sup>

When Jesus had been preaching, teaching and healing for some time, Luke notes that word got back to John:

The disciples of John reported all these things to him. So John summoned two of his disciples and sent them to the Lord to ask, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' When the men had come to him, they said, 'John the Baptist has sent us to you to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"' Jesus had just then cured many people of diseases, plagues, and evil spirits, and had given sight to many who were blind. And he answered them, 'Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.'

When John's messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: 'What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who put on fine clothing and live in luxury are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written,

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<sup>8</sup> Matthew 2:1-12. These represent that the salvation offered to the Jewish people will be accepted by the whole world

<sup>9</sup> Luke 2:8-20

<sup>10</sup> Luke 1:3-4

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way before you.”

I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John; yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.’ (And all the people who heard this, including the tax-collectors, acknowledged the justice of God, because they had been baptised with John’s baptism. But by refusing to be baptised by him, the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God’s purpose for themselves.)

‘To what then will I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? They are like children sitting in the market-place and calling to one another,

“We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;  
we wailed, and you did not weep.”

For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, “He has a demon”; the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, “Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!” Nevertheless, wisdom is vindicated by all her children.’<sup>11</sup>

Notice the back-and-forth of the exchange between Jesus and the followers of John. The question John poses is one for all those who seek to follow Christ - ‘*Are you the one we have been waiting for?*’ We are drawn into the action of the gospel and told to recognise in Jesus’ actions and his words the coming salvation.

Jesus contrasts himself with John, pointing out John as the messenger foretold.<sup>12</sup> The two figures are strikingly different and there is a message here: you do not have to live like John to follow me for, so great a prophet as John is, the least in God’s Kingdom are greater than he. It is the passing of the old and the opening of the Way of Christ.

We can continue today with that question, asking who Jesus is for us, and interrogating our own words and actions in the light of the words and actions of Christ.

**Exercise: How should we live as Christians?** What can we learn from Jesus’ words and example in this text? Jesus was described as a ‘friend of tax-collectors and sinners’ - whom should we befriend?

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## Teaching in Parables

Christian memory recalls not just *what* Jesus taught but *how* he taught.

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<sup>11</sup> Luke 7:18-35

<sup>12</sup> That John was the messenger foretold follows Mark 1:2-8 (also Matthew 3:1-12) and echoes the prophet Amos

The oral and written sources on which the gospels are based were relatively scant - we know this because of the brevity and the sheer pace with which the gospel of Mark moves forward, and also the assumed nature of the 'Q' source as *sayings* of Jesus. The Christian memory, however, offers far more. This is why Tradition - the handing on from generation to generation by the Church not just in written form, but in liturgy<sup>13</sup> and catechesis<sup>14</sup> - stands alongside Scripture in authority in the Church.<sup>15</sup>

Jesus sat people down and told them stories - we call them *parables*<sup>16</sup> - and they were typical of Jesus. He did not just preach moral ideas, he sought to radically change people's understanding of themselves, of their world, and of God's saving Love. And yet not everyone was open to being taught:

Then his disciples asked him what this parable meant. He said, 'To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God; but to others I speak in parables, so that

"looking they may not perceive,  
and listening they may not understand."<sup>17</sup>

The parables are a way in which to enter into the mysteries of the kingdom of God: mysteries here does not mean 'something we don't understand' but rather *something we contemplate so as to gain deeper understanding*. The word **deeper** is important here: it is possible to have a shallow belief in Jesus or a shallow understanding. What we are called to, however, is an ongoing deepening of our faith, and this is offered and modelled in the parables which his followers remembered.<sup>18</sup>

The introduction to the Parable of the Ten Pounds offers an insight into how what Jesus taught was shaped by the circumstances and the needs of those listening to him:

As they were listening to this, he went on to tell a parable, because he was near Jerusalem, and because they supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Liturgy should not be ignored as a source of teaching

<sup>14</sup> We discover the witness of Christian catechesis, for example, in the writings of Polycarp 69-155CE

<sup>15</sup> See *Dei Verbum*, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, 10 (18 November 1965)

<sup>16</sup> From the Greek word *parabole* meaning a comparison, proverb or adage

<sup>17</sup> Luke 8:9-10

<sup>18</sup> We will explore this idea further in Session 7 when we look at *Lectio Divina*

<sup>19</sup> Luke 19:11

In the different gospels, parables appear in different settings and not all the parables are recounted by all the evangelists.<sup>20</sup>

Wherever the four evangelists place these texts, it is still possible to see how easily Jesus was able to combine a point of teaching together with a story.

**Exercise: Explore Luke chapters 12-21 for yourself.** Notice how parables, teachings and events are gathered together by themes - for example, 'lost and found',<sup>21</sup> 'justice' (right relationships),<sup>22</sup> or watching out for the signs.<sup>23</sup>

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## The Lord's Prayer: Asking God for what we need

He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.' He said to them, 'When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name.  
Your kingdom come.

Give us each day our daily bread.

And forgive us our sins,  
for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.  
And do not bring us to the time of trial.'

And he said to them, 'Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, "Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him." And he answers from within, "Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything." I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

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<sup>20</sup> For example, the Parable of the Mustard Seed which appears as Jesus was teaching 'beside the lake' in Mark 4 and Matthew 13, but when he was teaching 'in one of the synagogues on the sabbath' in Luke 13. It is interesting to explore how texts are placed in different settings by the different evangelists and to ask why this might be. Notice, also, how the 'Cleansing of the Temple by Jesus' is placed toward the end of the synoptic gospels where they are part of the account of Jesus' final entry into Jerusalem, whereas the author of John places the event early on in his account of Jesus' ministry where it acts as a template to show that Jesus has come to radically 'throw out' the ways of the old and to bring in the new. You can explore this further by examining the parallel texts using the *Synopsis of the Four Gospels*, by Kurt Aland (2010) or online at <http://www.bible-researcher.com/parallels.html>

<sup>21</sup> Luke 15

<sup>22</sup> Luke 18

<sup>23</sup> Luke 21

So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!<sup>24</sup>

Notice how elements of Jesus' teaching are brought together in this extract. Where we find parallels in the other gospels, these elements are placed differently:

- the 'Our Father'<sup>25</sup>
- the parable of the friend asking for three loaves<sup>26</sup>
- 'Ask, and it will be given to you'<sup>27</sup>

**Exercise: Compare Luke 11 with Matthew 6-7 and Mark 11.** Notice how the elements of Jesus' teaching have been brought together in different ways. What do the differences tell you about the intentions of the different evangelists?

Notice how simple the 'Our Father' is. Notice what we are asking of God:

- that God's name will be kept holy<sup>28</sup>
- that God's Kingdom will come
- for food each day
- for forgiveness of our sins
- that we be spared 'the time of trial'<sup>29</sup>

**Exercise: Reflect on the final paragraph of the extract.**<sup>30</sup> Think about how you pray and what you pray for. Do you believe that 'everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened'?<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Luke 11:1-13

<sup>25</sup> Luke 11:1-4; Mark 11:25; Matthew 6:7-15

<sup>26</sup> This does not have a parallel in the other gospels

<sup>27</sup> Luke 11:9-13; Matthew 7:7-10. The text does not have a parallel in Mark or John

<sup>28</sup> Remember that for the Jewish people the name of God was not to be spoken because it was holy. We will explore this further in Session 5: The Gospel of John in the 'I am...' sayings of Jesus

<sup>29</sup> This can be interpreted as a time when our faith is tested, a time of persecution, or of God's Judgment

<sup>30</sup> Luke 11:9-13

<sup>31</sup> Luke 11:10

## Celebration and Sorrow

As Jesus approaches the end, all of the gospels offer an account of his triumphal entry into the holy city of Jerusalem. As well as being part of the Christian recollection, this event surely also serves to underline the contrast between this 'high' point and the 'low' point of his crucifixion and death - they occur within days of one another:

After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.

When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, "Why are you untying it?" just say this: "The Lord needs it."' So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, 'Why are you untying the colt?' They said, 'The Lord needs it.' Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying,

'Blessed is the king  
who comes in the name of the Lord!  
Peace in heaven,  
and glory in the highest heaven!'

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, 'Teacher, order your disciples to stop.' He answered, 'I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.'

As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, 'If you, even you, had only recognised on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognise the time of your visitation from God.'

Then he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling things there; and he said, 'It is written,

"My house shall be a house of prayer";  
but you have made it a den of robbers.'

Every day he was teaching in the temple. The chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people kept looking for a way to kill

him; but they did not find anything they could do, for all the people were spellbound by what they heard.<sup>32</sup>

Only the author of Luke places Jesus' lament over Jerusalem immediately alongside the cleansing of the Temple:<sup>33</sup> it seems that he wants to create an intensity here - a sense of everything coming to a head.

Notice how brief is the author's account of the cleansing, and how he highlights the connection between it and the plotting of the leaders.

**Exercise: Read the above extract slowly.** Notice the contrast between 'private' (the disciples finding the colt and bringing it to Jesus) and the 'public' (the entry into Jerusalem). As you read Jesus' lament over Jerusalem,<sup>34</sup> what appears striking about it? Do you notice how the events Jesus describes appear very close to the actual events which took place in 70CE when Jerusalem was sacked by the Roman army and the Temple destroyed? Perhaps, if this text was written 15-20 years after the destruction of the Temple, it connects the memory of this event with something Jesus had foretold? Why, do you think, does the author recount the 'cleansing of the Temple' in less detail than, for example, the author of the gospel of John?<sup>35</sup>

**Think about Jesus' entry into Jerusalem.** Why, do you think, did Jesus ride into the city on a colt? What kind of symbolic action might this be?

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## Four gospels with four intentions

Each of the evangelists writes his gospel for a purpose: not only is it for a particular community in a particular place, but each gospel also seeks to show Jesus in a particular light:

- in Mark, as the promised Messiah heralded by the prophets
- in Matthew, as the fulfilment of the Torah, the Jewish Law
- in Luke, as the one awaited who has come bringing healing and salvation to the poor and marginalised
- and - as we shall see in John - as eternal God become man.

**Exercise: Explore for yourself the texts of Mark, Matthew and Luke.** Notice, for example, how elements (particular events, or parables, or sayings of Jesus) are put in

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<sup>32</sup> Luke 19:28-48

<sup>33</sup> The other gospel writers have some of these same elements but place them differently: Mark 11:15-18; Matthew 21:12-16 and 23:37-39, and John 2:13-22

<sup>34</sup> Luke 19:41-44

<sup>35</sup> John 2:13-22. You may find John 2:22 helpful



different settings by the different evangelists. Allow yourself to sit with these differences: what insights do they open up for you and what do you find troubling?<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Some 'annotated' editions of the New Testament offer footnotes which indicate where, in the other gospels, a text can be found. Alternatively you might be able to borrow a copy of the *Synopsis of the Four Gospels* by Kurt Aland which shows the contrasting texts alongside one another. An online tool is also available at [www.bible-researcher.com/parallels.html](http://www.bible-researcher.com/parallels.html)