

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO LUKE

A. ORIENTING DATA FOR LUKE

- **Content:** the story of Jesus as part 1 of Luke-Acts, which is the story of the salvation of “Israel,” which Christ and the Spirit have brought about; part 1 begins with the announcement of Jesus’ birth by the Spirit and carries through to his ascension
- **Author:** according to very early tradition, Luke the physician and sometime companion of the apostle Paul (see Col 4:14), the only Gentile author in the Bible
- **Date:** uncertain; scholars are divided between a date before the death of Paul (ca. A.D. 64; see Acts 28:30–31) and one after the fall of Jerusalem (A.D. 70, because of his use of Mark)
- **Recipient(s):** Theophilus is otherwise unknown; in keeping with such prefaces in Greco-Roman literature, he was probably the patron of Luke-Acts, thus underwriting its publication; the implied readers are Gentile Christians, whose place in God’s story is ensured through the work of Jesus Christ and the Spirit
- **Emphases:** God’s Messiah has come to his people, Israel, with the promised inclusion of Gentiles; Jesus came to save the lost, including every kind of marginalized person whom traditional religion would put outside the boundaries; Jesus’ ministry is carried out under the power of the Holy Spirit; the necessity of Jesus’ death and resurrection (which fulfilled Old Testament promises) for the forgiveness of sins

B. OVERVIEW OF LUKE

If Mark is one of those who cannot tell a story badly, Luke is the one who can tell it to perfection. His vision is all-embracing: The story of Jesus, now placed in the context of world history (Luke 2:1; 3:1–2), includes the Spirit’s ongoing ministry in the church as well. So you need to read part 1 in connection with part 2, as Luke himself intended, and not just in the context of the other three Gospels (thus we will guide you through Acts in the next chapter, out of canonical order). Luke’s story is thus in two major parts: (1) how the good news of God’s salvation for all people began, through the power of the Spirit, with Jesus in Galilee and in Jerusalem (Luke’s Gospel), and (2) how the good news of God’s salvation through Jesus was, by the power of the Spirit, carried by the apostles from Jerusalem to Rome (Acts).

ca. *circa*, about, approximately

Chapters 1 and 2 of Luke both introduce the story and anticipate all its major themes and concerns—the links with Old Testament promises; the Davidic kingly role of Jesus; the restoration of Israel; the inclusion of Gentiles; God’s concern for the poor; the role of the Holy Spirit; the anticipated opposition; the joy caused by the good news about Jesus.

In 3:1–4:13 the ministries of John and Jesus are linked, as anticipated in chapter 1. Jesus is presented to Israel through his baptism and testing; he is also linked to the Gentile mission by a genealogy that takes him back through Abraham to Adam.

The rest of the Gospel is in three parts, set off by geographical notations. In 4:14–9:50 Jesus teaches and heals in Galilee. The introductory narrative of a Sabbath in Nazareth (4:16–30) serves as a prototype for the rest of the story—fulfillment of Old Testament promises; the Spirit descending on the Messiah; good news to the poor; inclusion of Gentiles; rejection by some of Israel.

In 9:51 Jesus “resolutely set out for Jerusalem”; he does not arrive there until 19:45. Although regularly portrayed in this long section as on the way to Jerusalem (10:38; 13:22; 17:11; 18:31), Jesus still gathers disciples around him, challenges all with his teachings, rejects a pharisaic understanding of God, and in turn is finally rejected by the religious and political authorities.

Finally in Jerusalem (19:45–24:53), Jesus is rejected by the Jewish leaders and is crucified. But the crucifixion and resurrection were of divine necessity—evidence of God’s faithfulness to his people. So part 1 ends with the ascension and on a note of joy, as the disciples stay at the temple, awaiting part 2.

C. SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING LUKE

Luke’s primary concern (in both parts) is with the story of salvation—God’s salvation of “Israel,” with its promised inclusion of the Gentiles. Salvation for Luke means God’s acceptance and forgiveness of sinners, which, picking up an Old Testament theme, is especially expressed as “good news to the poor” (4:18; 7:22; cf. 1:51–53)—all those who have been marginalized by society at large and especially by the religious power brokers. They are the “lost” (19:10) and include wealthy tax collectors (19:1–9), “the [economically] poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind” (14:13; cf. 16:19–31), a Samaritan (17:11–19; cf. 10:25–37), and women (7:36–50; 8:2–3; 10:38–42; cf. the three women in chs. 1–2). Be looking for these as you read. It also includes the Gentiles, but that dimension of the story is reserved for Acts. Thus in part 1 the universalizing of salvation is vertical, covering every strata of society within Israel; in part 2 it is horizontal, focusing especially on the Gentiles and the march of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome.

Thus in Luke’s Gospel Jesus comes both as Israel’s kingly Messiah (the announcement to Mary [1:32–33] is full of the language of the Davidic covenant from 2 Sam 7:14, 16) and as the one who has come to help God’s “servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors” (Luke 1:54–55; cf. 1:68–75; 2:30–32). Luke begins part 2 with the disciples’ question, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6).

It is in this context that the temple (Zion) plays a significant role in Luke-Acts. Not only is the Messiah presented—and recognized—in the temple (Luke 2:21–38), but the only narrative of Jesus’ childhood in the Gospels (2:41–52) places him in the temple courts having discussions with the teachers. This anticipates his return to the temple to teach in 20:1–21:38, after he had “cleansed” it (19:45–48). Fittingly, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the first proclaiming of the gospel happen at the temple in Acts 2–6. But the God who has thus returned to his earthly temple has also announced its coming destruction (Luke 21:20–24); in this new era of salvation God no longer dwells in a temple made by hands (Acts 7:48–50). And that leads to the other side of the story—that many in Israel, especially the “religious” and their leaders, reject Jesus, thus fulfilling Simeon’s prophecy (Luke 2:34)—“This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against.” This begins in the programmatic narrative in 4:16–30 and continues throughout the Gospel, climaxing at the end with the rejection of Jesus by the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. It becomes a major theme in Acts.

In this regard, watch especially for the significant role the books of Isaiah and the Psalms play in Luke’s presentation. Isaiah’s concern for the nations in the context of Jewish rejection frames the whole of Luke-Acts, beginning with Simeon’s echo of Isaiah 49:6 (Luke 2:32), followed by Luke’s own citation of Isaiah 40:3–5 regarding John the Baptist (Luke 3:4–6, “and all people will see God’s salvation”), and finally with Jesus’ citation of Isaiah 61:1–2 as he begins his public ministry (Luke 4:18–19). At the very end (Acts 28:26–27), Diaspora Jewish rejection of Jesus in Rome is seen to fulfill Isaiah 6:9–10 (cf. the citation of Isa 49:6 in the significant speech by Paul in Acts 13:47). At the same time Isaiah’s suffering servant is the key to understanding Jesus’ earthly ministry (Luke 22:37; Acts 8:32–33; cf. Mark), while Jesus’ coming to the temple as Israel’s rightful King and his present exaltation as Lord are seen in light of Psalms 2, 118, and 110 (see Luke 20:17, 42–43; Acts 2:34–35; 4:11, 25–26; cf. 7:56; cf. Hebrews).

Although salvation comes through Jesus, Luke especially emphasizes the role the Holy Spirit plays in God’s salvation. You will notice how the Spirit predominates in the events in chapters 1–2 of Luke’s Gospel, as well as in the ministry of Jesus himself. Everything Jesus does by way of preparation (3:1–4:11) is guided by the Spirit. His ministry begins with the citation of Isaiah 61:1, “the Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me” (4:18). That Luke intends his readers mentally to insert “by the Spirit” throughout this narrative about his earthly ministry is made clear by Peter in Acts 10:38—“how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.” This theme is thoroughgoing in Acts.

You should also note the emphasis throughout the Gospel on prayer and joy. Jesus himself prays at every major point in the story, and Luke includes more *teaching* on prayer than all the other Gospels. And salvation as “good news for the poor” causes people regularly to glorify God with great joy. Here is one Gentile who is deeply grateful to be included in God’s salvation of his people Israel.¹

¹ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, [*How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 286–289.

