

An Introduction to the Gospel of Luke

The Book That Houses the Sermon on the Plain

Second Preface · Critical front matter, companion to the Introduction to Matthew

COMING DOWN TO THE LEVEL PLACE

If Matthew sends Jesus up the mountain like a new Moses, Luke brings him down. “He came down with them and stood on a level place,” Luke writes, and there — in the press of the crowd, among the sick and the troubled and the poor — Jesus begins to teach (6:17). The geography is theology again, and it is Luke’s theology: a Savior who descends to the level of human suffering and pronounces blessing on the very people the world has written off. To hear the Sermon on the Plain rightly, we must know the Gospel that frames it, just as we needed to know Matthew’s. And Luke, of all the evangelists, invites the inquiry: he opens his book by telling us he has investigated everything carefully and set it down in order. He is a historian who would welcome our questions. So let us ask them. Let’s search the Scriptures together — beginning, once more, with the book itself.

A Preface, Two Volumes, and the Sources

Alone among the evangelists, Luke begins with a formal literary preface in the polished Greek of Hellenistic historiography (1:1–4). He acknowledges that “many have undertaken” to compile accounts before him, claims to have investigated everything carefully from the first, and addresses his work to one Theophilus “so that you may know the truth” — the certainty, *asphaleia* — of what he has been taught. This preface tells us at the outset what kind of author we are reading: a careful, self-conscious writer who understands himself to be standing in a chain of tradition and producing an orderly account.¹

The single most important fact about the Third Gospel is that it is the first half of a two-volume work. Luke and Acts share an author, a dedicatee, a vocabulary, and a sweeping theological vision, joined at the hinge of Jesus’ ascension. We cannot finally interpret the Gospel without remembering that its author already had Acts in view — a story that would carry the gospel from Galilee to Jerusalem and on to Rome, from Israel to the ends of the earth. The shape of the whole governs the parts.

¹On the Lukan preface and its historiographical conventions, Loveday Alexander, *The Preface to Luke’s Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); on the unity of the two volumes, Henry J. Cadbury, *The Making of Luke-Acts* (New York: Macmillan, 1927).

On the question of sources, Luke fits the same two-source framework we met in Matthew. He drew on Mark, though he uses less of it than Matthew does — roughly a third — and handles it freely, setting aside a large block (the so-called great omission of Mark 6:45–8:26) and gathering much of his distinctive material into a long central “travel narrative” as Jesus journeys toward Jerusalem (9:51–19:27). With Matthew he shares the double tradition assigned to Q — and it is here that the Sermon on the Plain belongs, the near cousin of Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount. Luke also preserves a wealth of material found nowhere else, the special tradition called L: the parables of the good Samaritan, the prodigal son, and the rich man and Lazarus, among the treasures of the New Testament.²

Some scholars, following Streeter and Vincent Taylor, proposed that Luke first combined Q and his special material into a “Proto-Luke” and only later inserted blocks of Mark — an elegant theory that has lost ground but still illuminates how much of Luke is not Markan at all.³ For our purposes the lesson mirrors the one we drew from Matthew: the Sermon on the Plain, too, is a deliberate composition, Jesus’ teaching gathered and shaped by an evangelist with a coherent vision — in Luke’s case, a vision fixed on the poor and the reversal of the world’s order.

It is worth pausing on Luke’s craft, for it serves his theology. He writes the most polished Greek in the Gospels and changes registers with a master’s ease — from the classical periods of his preface to the deliberately Septuagintal cadences of the infancy narrative, where he sets the birth of Jesus within four great canticles the church has never stopped singing: Mary’s Magnificat, Zechariah’s Benedictus, the angels’ Gloria, and Simeon’s Nunc Dimittis. Luke is at once a careful historian and a consummate storyteller, and both gifts are bent toward a single end — to show the reader that the salvation of God has come, in Jesus, for all people.

Authorship: The Beloved Physician and the Critical Question

Like the others, the Gospel is anonymous; the name Luke comes from second-century tradition, not from the text. That tradition is early and consistent. Irenaeus names Luke, the companion of Paul, as the author; the Muratorian Fragment and the anti-Marcionite prologue agree, identifying him as a physician and a sometime traveler with the apostle.⁴ The tradition rests in part on the “we passages” of Acts — four stretches of narrative that abruptly shift into

²Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke*, Anchor Bible 28 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981), vol. 1, on sources, the great omission, and the travel narrative.

³Vincent Taylor, *Behind the Third Gospel: A Study of the Proto-Luke Hypothesis* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1926); B. H. Streeter, *The Four Gospels* (London: Macmillan, 1924).

⁴Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.1 and 3.14.1; cf. the Muratorian Fragment and the anti-Marcionite prologue to Luke.

the first-person plural (Acts 16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–28:16) — most naturally read as marking the author’s own presence alongside Paul. It draws further on Paul’s letters, which mention “Luke the beloved physician” (Colossians 4:14; cf. Philemon 24; 2 Timothy 4:11). Because Colossians appears to distinguish Luke from Paul’s fellow workers “of the circumcision,” he has long been thought a Gentile — on the traditional reckoning, the only Gentile author in the New Testament.

Critical scholarship treats the ascription with more caution. The medical vocabulary once thought to betray a physician’s hand was shown by Henry Cadbury to be no more technical than any educated Greek writer’s.⁵ More weighty is the difficulty that the Paul of Acts differs in important respects — in theology, in itinerary, in self-presentation — from the Paul of the undisputed letters, which many find hard to reconcile with authorship by a close companion. The “we passages” themselves admit of other explanations: a literary convention for sea voyages, an underlying source, or genuine but occasional participation remembered decades later.⁶ The cautious majority concludes that the author was an educated, Greek-speaking Christian of the second or third generation, probably a Gentile or a thoroughly Hellenized Jew, conceivably a sometime companion of Paul, writing well after the events. As with Matthew, we will use the name “Luke” as a convenience, conceding what cannot be known.

The Date of Composition

The outer limits are familiar in kind. The terminus a quo is set by Luke’s use of Mark: if Mark belongs to the late 60s or around 70, Luke must be later. The terminus ad quem is fixed by the Gospel’s reception in the second century. Between them the arguments pull in three directions.

An early date — before 64 — is defended chiefly from the ending of Acts, which breaks off with Paul still alive under house arrest in Rome, saying nothing of his death or of the fall of Jerusalem. Why omit such events, the argument runs, unless they had not yet happened?⁷ The objection is real but not decisive; Luke’s purposes may simply have been served by ending where he did. Against an early date stands Luke’s dependence on Mark and, above all, his version of Jesus’ prophecy over Jerusalem, where the vaguer Markan language becomes a city

⁵Henry J. Cadbury, *The Style and Literary Method of Luke* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1920), answering W. K. Hobart, *The Medical Language of St. Luke* (1882).

⁶On the Paul of Acts and the Paul of the letters, the classic statement is Philipp Vielhauer, “On the ‘Paulinism’ of Acts” (1950); see also Fitzmyer, *Luke* (AB 28), vol. 1, on authorship and the “we passages.”

⁷For the early-date case from the ending of Acts, see, e.g., I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), introduction.

“surrounded by armies” and trampled by the nations (21:20, 24) — widely taken to reflect knowledge of the events of 70.

On these grounds most scholars place Luke–Acts in the 80s, perhaps reaching into the early 90s.⁸ A growing minority argues for a substantially later date, into the early second century, on the grounds that the author may have known the writings of Josephus (published in 93) and may be responding to Marcion and to a collected Pauline corpus.⁹ The consensus remains the 80s, and this study adopts it, while noting that the question is genuinely open at both ends.

Provenance: The Question of Place

Where Luke wrote is even less certain than where Matthew did. The ancient traditions are divided: the anti-Marcionite prologue places the writing in Achaia, in Greece; other voices suggest Rome, Antioch in Syria, or somewhere in the cities of Asia Minor or the Aegean.¹⁰ None can be confirmed. What the Gospel itself makes plain is only the cultural location of its author and audience: a Greek-speaking, cosmopolitan, largely Gentile Christian world somewhere in the Roman Mediterranean, well removed from the soil of Palestine — Luke is noticeably hazier about Palestinian geography than the other evangelists. Beyond that, candor requires us to leave the map blank.

Audience and Aim

Theophilus and the Dedication

The Gospel is addressed to “most excellent Theophilus,” and Acts renews the dedication. The name means “lover of God” or “friend of God,” and scholars have long debated whether it designates a real individual — the honorific “most excellent” (*kratiste*) suggests a person of some rank, perhaps a patron underwriting the work — or stands for the ideal God-loving reader. Either way, the formal dedication signals a literary work intended for an educated audience and a wider readership beyond a single congregation.¹¹

A Gentile-Christian Readership

⁸Fitzmyer, Luke (AB 28), vol. 1; Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 273–75.

⁹Richard I. Pervo, *Dating Acts* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge, 2006); Joseph B. Tyson, *Marcion and Luke-Acts* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2006).

¹⁰On the divided traditions regarding provenance, Fitzmyer, Luke (AB 28), vol. 1; the anti-Marcionite prologue names Achaia.

¹¹Alexander, *Preface to Luke’s Gospel*, on the dedication and the figure of Theophilus; Fitzmyer, Luke (AB 28), vol. 1.

Everything about the Gospel suggests a predominantly Gentile-Christian audience. Luke explains Jewish customs that Matthew assumes, prefers Greek terms to Semitic ones, drops disputes about the Mosaic law that would not have engaged outsiders, and traces Jesus' genealogy not merely to Abraham but all the way back to Adam, "son of God" (3:38) — a lineage as wide as the human race. From the start the Gospel announces a universal horizon: aged Simeon hails the child as "a light for revelation to the Gentiles" (2:32), and Luke alone extends the Isaianic citation about John's ministry to its universal climax, "all flesh shall see the salvation of God" (3:6).¹²

Purpose: Why the Gospel Was Written

Assurance and an Orderly Account

Luke states his aim in the preface: to set down an orderly, reliable account so that Theophilus — and every reader — may know the certainty of what they have been taught (1:4). The Gospel is written, in the first place, to ground faith in a trustworthy narrative, to steady a community a generation or two removed from the events by showing that what they believe rests on careful testimony handed down from those who were there from the beginning.

Salvation History

Luke is the great theologian of salvation history — of God's saving plan unfolding through time. In a classic and much-debated study, Hans Conzelmann argued that Luke divides history into three epochs: the time of Israel, the time of Jesus as the "middle of time," and the time of the church, in which the Spirit carries the mission forward through a history that may yet be long.¹³ Conzelmann pressed his scheme too rigidly, and later narrative critics have shown a deeper unity running through Luke's two volumes.¹⁴ But his central insight endures: Luke writes to locate his readers within a story — to show that the church and its mission to the nations are no accident or afterthought, but the intended continuation of what God began in Israel and accomplished in Jesus.

Good News to the Poor: The Great Reversal

If a single thread runs through Luke from first to last, it is this: the gospel is good news to the poor, and the reign of God overturns the order of the world. The note is struck before Jesus is even born, in Mary's song — God "has brought down the powerful from their thrones and

¹²Brown, Introduction, 226–27; on Luke's universalism, Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

¹³Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke*, trans. Geoffrey Buswell (New York: Harper, 1960); German *Die Mitte der Zeit* (1954).

¹⁴Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986–90).

lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty” (1:52–53). It becomes Jesus’ own manifesto when he stands in the Nazareth synagogue, reads from Isaiah, and announces good news to the poor, release to the captives, and freedom for the oppressed (4:18–21). And it takes sharpest form precisely in the Sermon on the Plain, where Luke’s Jesus blesses not the “poor in spirit” but the poor, and the hungry, and the weeping — and adds four woes against the rich, the full, and the laughing (6:20–26).¹⁵ Luke’s Gospel is, throughout, a Gospel of reversal. The outsider is welcomed and drawn to the center: Samaritans (the grateful leper, the neighbor in Jesus’ most famous parable), tax collectors (Levi at his booth, Zacchaeus up his tree), notorious sinners, and — to a degree unmatched among the evangelists — women, who appear at every turn as disciples, patrons, and the first witnesses. Bound up with all of this is Luke’s relentless attention to wealth and possessions: the rich fool storing up barns, the rich man who stepped over Lazarus at his gate, the summons to sell and give alms, Zacchaeus making fourfold restitution. The lowly are lifted and the mighty cast down; the hungry are filled and the rich sent away empty. This is no sentimental sympathy for the unfortunate; it is the announcement that God’s reign reorders everything.

The Spirit, Prayer, and Joy — and the Empire

Other emphases color the whole. Luke is the Gospel of the Holy Spirit, who anoints Jesus and will fill the church; of prayer, to which Jesus constantly withdraws; and of joy and praise, breaking out at every turn of the story. Luke also writes with Rome in view. An older reading saw an apology assuring the empire that the movement was politically harmless. More recent scholarship has heard something far more subversive — a gospel that quietly turns the imperial world upside down, proclaiming another Lord and another kingdom over against Caesar’s.¹⁶ That counter-imperial edge, like the great reversal it serves, leads us straight to the question that governs our study.

Israel and the Nations

Finally, Luke writes to make theological sense of a wrenching development: a gospel born within Israel that was, in his own day, being embraced mostly by Gentiles. How could that be the fulfillment of God’s ancient promises to the Jewish people rather than their abandonment? Scholars have read Luke’s answer in sharply opposed ways. Some, following

¹⁵On the poor and the great reversal in Luke, Green, *Gospel of Luke* (NICNT); Justo L. González, *Luke, Belief* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010); on wealth, the classic study is Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Literary Function of Possessions in Luke-Acts*, SBLDS 39 (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977).

¹⁶C. Kavin Rowe, *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

Conzelmann and Jack Sanders, judged that Luke effectively writes off unbelieving Israel and transfers its inheritance to a church of the nations. Others, led by Jacob Jervell, argued nearly the reverse — that for Luke the church is the restored Israel, that the gospel went first and with real success to Jews, and that the Gentile mission proceeds only upon the foundation of a believing Jewish remnant.¹⁷ The debate is not for historians alone. How we read Luke on Israel shapes whether the church imagines itself as Israel’s replacement or as a people grafted, by sheer mercy, into a story that was never ours to seize — and that distinction has had life-and-death consequences down the centuries.

The Kingdom of God in Luke

Where Matthew prefers “the kingdom of heaven,” Luke speaks plainly of “the kingdom of God,” and he insists on its presence. “If it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons,” Jesus declares, “then the kingdom of God has come to you” (11:20) — already, in his own ministry. And when asked when the kingdom would come, he answers that it does not arrive with signs to be observed, “for, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you” (17:21) — a phrase whose Greek (*entos hymon*) can be rendered “among” or “within,” but which in either case locates the reign of God here, in the midst of the people, not on some far horizon.¹⁸ Luke holds the same already-and-not-yet we found in Matthew: God’s reign is genuinely present in Jesus, and yet its consummation is awaited as the mission runs its course through the book of Acts and beyond.

Read against this background, the Sermon on the Plain is the charter of the great reversal — the description of what God’s reign looks like for the poor and the hungry, now. Jesus does not climb a mountain to deliver it; he stands on the level place, at eye level with the suffering, and pronounces blessing on them and warning to the comfortable. Here the kingdom is not an idea but an upheaval: the world’s arrangements undone, the last becoming first. To read Luke’s sermon alongside Matthew’s is to hold the inward depth of the kingdom together with its outward, economic, world-overturning edge — and to lose neither.¹⁹

¹⁷On Luke and Israel, contrast Jacob Jervell, *Luke and the People of God: A New Look at Luke-Acts* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972), with Jack T. Sanders, *The Jews in Luke-Acts* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), and Conzelmann, *Theology of St. Luke*.

¹⁸On *entos hymon* (17:21) and the present kingdom, Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke, Sacra Pagina 3* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991); Fitzmyer, *Luke* (AB 28A), vol. 2.

¹⁹On the Sermon on the Plain within Luke’s theology of reversal, Green, *Gospel of Luke* (NICNT); cf. Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), on the Sermon as a portrait of life in the kingdom.

Mountain and Plain: From Introduction to Sermon

Now we have the whole map. Two evangelists, two communities, two settings — a mountain and a level place — and one Lord proclaiming one reign of God. Matthew gathers the teaching into a charter for a wounded Jewish-Christian community learning to be the true Israel; Luke sets it among the poor of a Gentile world being told that God has come down to lift them up. We will not choose between them, and we will not blur them into one. We will read them side by side, letting Matthew's depth and Luke's edge sharpen each other, and trusting that the fuller picture is truer than either alone. The introductions are finished; the country is mapped. It is time to climb the mountain and walk down to the plain. Let's search the Scriptures together — and let us begin.

Questions for the Class

1. Luke brings Jesus down to a “level place” rather than up a mountain. What does that single choice of setting tell you about how Luke understands the gospel — and about where we should expect to find Jesus today?
2. Luke blesses the poor and the hungry plainly, and pronounces woes on the rich and the full. How does it change the Beatitudes for you to hear them in Luke's blunt economic key rather than Matthew's spiritual one?
3. Luke writes to give Theophilus “the certainty” of what he has been taught. Where do you long for that kind of assurance — and what would it mean for it to rest on testimony rather than on feeling?
4. If “the kingdom of God is among you,” present and at work now, what in your community would you expect to see being turned upside down?

A Practice for the Week

Read three passages of Luke slowly and in this order: Mary's song (1:46–55), Jesus' manifesto in the Nazareth synagogue (4:16–21), and the blessings and woes of the Sermon on the Plain (6:20–26). Read them as a single, building announcement. Notice how the same theme deepens each time — the lowly lifted, the hungry filled, good news to the poor, blessing on the poor and woe to the rich. Ask yourself honestly where you stand in that reversal: among the lifted or among the cast down, the hungry or the full. Carry the discomfort, and the hope, of that question into our study. Where might the reign of God be asking something of those of us who are full?

For Further Study

A selection of the principal works behind this introduction. Full page-level citations are confirmed against each edition in final editing.

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