

Reading Guide to St. Luke, Week 1

Introductory and Background Readings:

1. What is a Gospel? 2. Introduction to the Gospel of St. Luke

These short essays provide some general background for the study of St. Luke.

1. What is a Gospel?

The four Gospels are the books of the New Testament with which we are most familiar since they are prominently featured at Mass. But what exactly is a Gospel?

As a literary form it comes from the opening words of the first written gospel, the Gospel of Mark: “The beginning of the *gospel* of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” (Mark 1:1) The old English word *gospel* translates the Greek word *euangelion*, both of which mean “good news.” In fact, in a modern translation (NRSV) Mark’s Gospel begins, “The beginning of the *good news* of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

Before the word Gospel was used by Mark to describe his written account of Jesus, *the Gospel* referred to the “good news” of Jesus Christ proclaimed *orally* by the Apostles, the earliest preaching of the Church (see Luke 9:6; Romans 1:3,15). This preaching, by those who knew Jesus, told about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. They taught about him through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that Jesus had given them. The Spirit enabled the Apostles and their followers to know Jesus Christ as the Son of God and the source of our salvation.

As the Church expanded and as the Apostles got older, it became desirable to capture in writing this authentic oral teaching by those who had personally known Jesus. That was what St. Mark was the first to do, around the year 70 A.D., based on the oral gospel tradition that was known to him and his community of believers. Traditionally Mark was associated with St. Peter, who was the authority behind his gospel account.

Shortly afterward, three other written gospels came from three other communities of believers. The Gospel of Matthew was based on the authority of the Apostle Matthew. The Gospel of Luke was written by a follower of St. Paul and associated with his authority. Finally, the Gospel of John was written based on the authority of the Apostle John, the Beloved Disciple. All four gospels were probably written by 100 A.D.

In reading the Gospels we must understand what they are not. They are not modern biographies of Jesus, concerned primarily with precise factual data. The Gospels help us understand the *significance* of Jesus. They “are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.” (John 20:31)

At the same time, what the Gospels teach is historical as well as true. The Catechism summarizes its teaching about the reliability of the Gospels by describing the three stages of their formation. (CCC #126)

Stage 1. The life and teaching of Jesus. The Church holds firmly that the four Gospels, "whose historicity she unhesitatingly affirms, faithfully hand on what Jesus, the Son of God, while he lived among men, really did and taught for their eternal salvation, until the day when he was taken up."

The first stage, which covered approximately the first third of the 1st Century, consists of what Jesus said and what he did during his earthly ministry. It should be noted that, even during his lifetime, the teaching of Jesus and stories about him circulated orally.

Stage 2. The oral tradition. "For, after the ascension of the Lord, the apostles handed on to their hearers what he had said and done, but with that fuller understanding which they, instructed by the glorious events of Christ and enlightened by the Spirit of truth, now enjoyed."

This second stage was the early preaching of the Apostles. This takes place during the middle third of the 1st Century. Having witnessed the Resurrection, the Apostles had a better understanding of what Jesus said and did in stage 1. As the preaching spread to communities further away, some sayings and stories about Jesus began to be collected and written down.

Stage 3. The written Gospels. "The sacred authors, in writing the four Gospels, selected certain of the many elements which had been handed on, either orally or already in written form; others they synthesized or explained with an eye to the situation of the churches, the while sustaining the form of preaching, but always in such a fashion that they have told us the honest truth about Jesus."

The third stage, the actual writing of the Gospels, occurred during the last third of the 1st Century (about 70 AD - 100AD). The Gospel writers had much to work with. As John tells us, "But there are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written." (John 21:25)

What the Church is telling us is that each Gospel writer was inspired to put the stories and sayings together in the way that explained the significance of Jesus most clearly to their community of believers. The timing and order of events and the exact wording of sayings may differ according to how the Holy Spirit helped the writers to recall and apply them. But in each case we have an honest picture of Jesus.

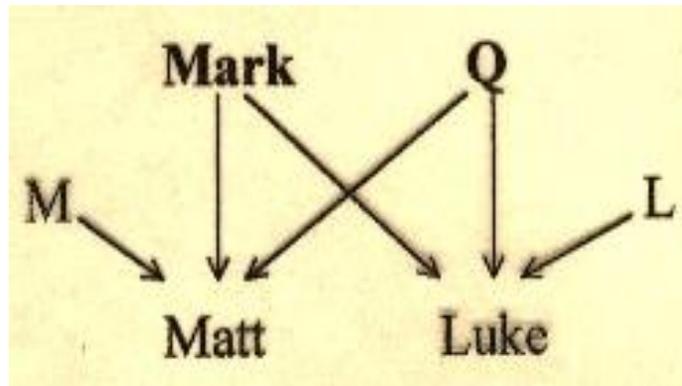
We are fortunate to have four "portraits" of the real Jesus. The different viewpoints give us a better understanding, not only of what he meant to the disciples who knew him, but also more importantly, who he is.

A Note on the “Synoptic” Gospels

Matthew, Mark and Luke are known as the *synoptic* gospels because they look at the ministry of Jesus from the same viewpoint. Mark is believed to be the earliest gospel (written about 70 AD) and provides the basic outline:

1. Jesus is baptized by John.
2. Jesus’s ministry in the region of Galilee.
3. Jesus and his disciples travel to Jerusalem.
4. Jesus’s ministry in Jerusalem.
5. Jesus is arrested, tried and crucified.

To this basic outline Matthew and Luke, both written about 85 AD, add Infancy Narratives, Resurrection Narratives and more of the sayings and parables of Jesus. Matthew and Luke both used Mark as a source of information as well as a source that captured the sayings of Jesus known as the “Q” source. They also each had their own source of information known as “M” and “L” respectively. The relationship looked something like this:



The Gospel of John does not follow the outline of Mark and has Jesus in different places at different times. John gives us less narrative, more dialogue and a more “spiritual” Jesus.

Still, as indicated above, the four gospels with all their similarities and differences enrich our understanding of Jesus.

S. Csontos, rev. 3, February 7, 2016.

(See Essay 2 below)

2. Introduction to the Gospel of St. Luke

None of the Gospels identify its *author* by name. The Evangelists were content to tell the story of Jesus and remain in the background. It was more important to the Church to establish the *authority* behind the material presented in the Gospel rather than the person who actually wrote it down (author and authority, of course, may be the same person). Tradition has associated this Gospel with Luke who was a companion of St. Paul (2 Tim 4:11) and a physician (Col 4:14). While we cannot be sure of the author's identity, there is very little reason to doubt the attribution since Luke was such a minor New Testament character and there are other candidates. So, following the Church, we will simply refer to the author of this Gospel as St. Luke.

Biblical scholars can tell us a little about Luke from the analysis of his gospel. He probably spoke Greek as his native language, was formally educated and was a skilled writer. In addition to writing the longest of the Gospels, Luke also wrote the Acts of the Apostles.

Luke can also speak to us directly, as when he describes his purpose in writing the Gospel (Luke 1:1-4):

Since many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as those who were eyewitnesses from the beginning and ministers of the word have handed them down to us, I too have decided, after investigating everything accurately anew, to write it down in an orderly sequence for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may realize the certainty of the teachings you have received.

He tells us directly that he is not the first to write a Gospel and that he will use the eyewitness testimony currently circulating. This suggests that Luke was not an eyewitness himself. At the same time Luke is confident that he can write an *orderly* account. In other words he can put together the material about Jesus in a way that will strengthen the faith of his community.

What sources did Luke use? Most scholars believe that Luke used Mark as his basic starting point (as did Matthew). To this Luke adds a significant number of sayings, both from a source also used by Matthew (the "Q" sayings source) and another source that is his own (the "L" or Lucan source). It is not unusual that different Gospels use common material. This is what you would expect, since they are all writing about the same person, Jesus.

But what bothers some readers is that the Gospels sometimes tell the same stories a little differently. That is because they are addressing different communities with different backgrounds. Matthew, for example, addressed a Jewish community and helped them see Jesus as the Messiah promised to the Jews in their Scriptures.

Luke, as a follower of St. Paul, addressed an audience of gentile Christians. These were gentiles who were sympathetic to the Jewish community and familiar with their scriptures in the Greek translation known as the Septuagint. Luke points out to his gentile audience that from the very beginning of Scripture, God's promise of salvation was extended to *all peoples*. That salvation is further demonstrated in the reconciliation and forgiveness that Jesus brings to those on the margins of society who were neglected by the existing religious institutions of the day.

In writing both a Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, Luke is able to connect the promises to Israel to the ministry of Christ and both of these to the preaching of the early Church. Luke is also writing shortly after a major Jewish rebellion in Palestine. This was put down by Roman forces and resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem. Since Christianity originated in the same area it is important for Luke to assure both gentile and Roman readers that the good news of Jesus Christ is a message of peace not a revolutionary threat. Luke Timothy Johnson, in his commentary on the Gospel summarizes Luke's approach as follows:

“To a possible outside Hellenistic reader, the Christian movement is presented as a philosophically enlightened, politically harmless, socially benevolent and philanthropic fellowship. But its more immediate purpose is to interpret the Gospel for insiders within the context of a pluralistic environment composed of both Jews and Gentiles.”

Prophets and prophesy also play a major role in the good news of and about Jesus. Jesus refers to the Prophets of the Old Testament (e.g., Lk 4:16-20), to John the Baptist as a prophet (Lk 7:24-28), and to himself as a prophet (Lk 4:23-30, Lk 13:33). Jesus is also seen as a prophet by others in the Gospel: Luke 1:76, 7:16 and 24:19. In the Acts of the Apostles, Peter and Stephen compare Jesus to Moses. While we may not think of Moses as a prophet, the Jewish Scriptures present Moses as *the Prophet and Religious Leader* above all others. Peter, in his speech to the Jews, reminds them: “Moses said: 'A prophet like me will the Lord, your God, raise up for you from among your own kinsmen; to him you shall listen in all that he may say to you.'” (Acts 3:22) Stephen reinforces the point: “It was this Moses who said to the Israelites, 'God will raise up for you, from among your own kinsfolk, a prophet like me.'” (Acts 7:37)

Prophets point to Jesus as the *prophet* whose words and actions are the fulfillment of God's promises. The Apostles, acting under the influence of the Holy Spirit given them by Jesus, function as *prophets* in continuing the work of Jesus.

Where was St. Luke's community located? Because of the instability caused by the Jewish War, it was outside of Palestine. Some think of Antioch in Syria because tradition suggested that Luke came from there. Most scholars believe that St. Luke addressed one or more of the communities founded or visited by St. Paul in Syria, Asia Minor (modern day Turkey) or Greece.

As for the time of composition, it is usually placed between 80 and 100 A.D, with the best guess at 85 A.D. This is based on the use of the Gospel of Mark (written around 70 A.D.) and the fact that St. Luke's Acts of the Apostles does not mention some persecutions and controversies that occur just after 100 A.D.

Outline of the Gospel:

The original gospel outline originated by Mark consisted of sections 3 through 7 below. Luke and Matthew both added sections 2 and 8 (the Infancy and Resurrection narratives, respectively). Luke's other distinctive additions include the Prologue (section 1), a major interpolation of teaching material during the journey to Jerusalem (section 5) and a minor interpolation in the Galilean ministry (section 4).

1. Luke 1:1-4: Luke's distinctive prologue in which he explains his purpose.
2. Luke 1:5-2:52: Luke's approach to the Infancy Narratives.
3. Luke 3:1-4:13: Baptism by John and the beginning of Jesus's ministry.
(These three sets of readings will be covered in week 2. See the reading schedule in the **Program Guide**.)
4. Luke 4:14-9:50: The Galilean ministry. (Week 3 reading)
5. Luke 9:51-19:27: Jesus and his disciples travel to Jerusalem. (Week 4 reading)
6. Luke 19:28-21:38: Ministry & controversy in the Temple. (Week 5 reading)

7. Luke 22:1-24:53: The Passion narrative.
8. Luke 23:56-24:53: Luke's Resurrection narrative.
(These two readings will be covered in week 6.)

Spiritual Exercise for the Week.

Imagine a future world that gave up its books for computers only to lose its computers in a global nuclear catastrophe. (This premise is like an episode of **The Twilight Zone** – just go with it.) You survive this disaster with a couple of hundred others in a commune like setting. When the group talks about its faith it finds that you have the most knowledge about Jesus. They ask you to write down what you know so that your knowledge will not be lost.

Take out a sheet of paper and, off the top of your head without reference to any other source of information, *list* the stories, sayings, parables and events in the life of Jesus that you can remember. (Just name them, you do not have to go into detail.)

Next, put them in an order that makes sense to you.

With this listing as a guide, could you talk about Jesus for an hour? (The shortest Gospel, Mark, takes about 90 minutes to read aloud.)

What you have done is similar to the process the evangelists went through. Most of what they had to deal with were random oral stories, sayings and parables. They had to “*write it down in an orderly sequence*” as Luke indicates and, it had to possess enough convincing detail to reinforce “*the certainty of the teachings you have received.*”

The irony of this exercise is that most Catholics today have encountered the Gospel by hearing small portions of it read at Mass which is similar to how early Christians, prior to written gospels, encountered it.

What the written gospels did for them, and what reading the gospels will do for us is to form the various stories about Jesus into a coherent message of salvation.

S. Csontos, rev. 5, April 8, 2016.