Introduction to the Gospel According to Luke

The Chart below shows the various stages leading to the written accounts of the Gospel. Note particularly the place of Luke.

Growth of the New Testament

JESUS

Birth c. 4 B.C.
Life & Teaching
Suffering & Death c. 30 A.D.

RESURRECTION
PENTECOST

Apostles teaching
Groups of Believers
- living
  - praying
    - breaking bread
  - serving
    - teaching

CHRISTIAN TRADITION

Oral Teaching

New Testament Writings
Paul's letters c. 51 - 67 A.D.
Mark c. 65 - 67 A.D.
Matthew c. 80 - 90 A.D.
Luke (Gospel & Acts) c. 80 - 90 A.D.
John c. 90 - 100 A.D.

Source: NCRS, Introducing the Scriptures, Auckland, 1992, Page 16
Dear Pete,

Well, you'll never guess what's happened to me! I'm over the moon. Last week I met two girls who are just back from the States, and they went to John Lennon's place! They've brought back photos and postcards and even managed to get some stories from the paul Lennon must have talked out! I'm meeting them again on Tuesday night to listen to some tapes they brought back, and I'm pretty sure they'll share some of the Lennon things with me. How about coming over?

Cheers,
Roy

Pete and Roy obviously belong to the new generation of fans of John Lennon — or it could be Elvis, or Marilyn, Charlie Chaplin or Nat King Cole or Jim Morrison. When you have never had the opportunity to meet someone you admire, little things from their life become extra precious. Times and circumstances change, but the admired person may remain large in your life and it's only natural to want to know all about him or her, even though they are part of the past.

Here is another letter written by a young man who lived and wrote about the year 60 AD in Asia Minor, possibly in Antioch.

My dear Thaddeus,

I am very sorry that I have taken such a long time to answer your last letter. The truth is, I have been very much taken up with collecting and writing all the stories about Jesus that are being told. I am lucky to have met a number of eyewitnesses to the events of his life, and I am friendly with quite a few followers of his Way. So even though I didn't know Jesus personally, I feel very much at home with his teaching. I've made a copy of what I've written for you and send it herewith.

With deepest respect, Luke

(adapted from Lk 1:1-4)

Luke was a new generation 'fan' of Jesus Christ, and he probably heard about Jesus from the great teacher, Paul, whom he accompanied on some of his missionary journeys. [Acts 16:11] Luke spoke and wrote Greek well; it was the ordinary language of his homeland. He was not a Jew, but a Gentile, not very familiar with Palestine, which was Jesus' homeland. He had, however, read the Gospel according to Mark and probably used the same sources as Matthew for much of his information. His community was not interested in the issues of Jewish religion and society which concerned the other Gospel writers. Luke had a profound knowledge of the Old Testament and of Jewish Institutions. He was familiar with the Septuagint which he frequently cites and whose particular Greek style he is even at times able to imitate. It is probable that his people were part of the Roman Empire, and many of them, like Luke himself who was a doctor, were well-educated, well-to-do urban citizens. Nevertheless, he had researched as widely as possible about the life and teachings of Jesus.

One issue which probably did concern many of them was that of their identity as Gentile Christians.

How could the life and teaching of Jesus the Jewish rabbi, apply to a modern Gentile Christian community? This was one of the chief issues which Luke set out to address in his account of the Gospel. He also wrote a sequel, The Acts of the Apostles, in which he brought together some of the events in the lives of Peter, Paul and Barnabas as they travelled around the Christian communities from Antioch to Rome. Luke appears to have accompanied Paul for part of the journey.

Luke was a very sensitive writer. He showed special understanding and gentleness towards the poor; to women; to all who were oppressed in society, and to all who were suffering. His Gospel gives us the most detailed account of Mary, the mother of Jesus. He stressed that people became Christian because of the gift of God's grace, not because they had once been Jews. He was keen to help everyone, of whatever race or culture, to come to know and love Jesus as he did, and to apply Jesus' teachings to their daily lives.
The Logia Source
(Logia — words, sentences: from Greek Logion)

The synoptic problem

A synopsis is a book which presents the Gospels in parallel columns, in such a way that you can read all similar texts at a single glance (Greek synopsis). The first three Gospels are similar enough for us to be able to put them in columns like this all the way through; that is why Matthew, Mark and Luke are called the synoptic Gospels (or just 'the synoptics', for short).

This similarity has raised the question whether these Gospels are not based on one or more written sources. For centuries scholars have produced one solution after another, sometimes extremely complicated and always hypothetical. To simplify things in the extreme (which inevitably means distorting them), one might say that it looks as though those who produced the Gospels as we now have them resorted to two quarries of material. Matthew, Mark and Luke had access to one of these, which is referred to as the triple tradition; only Matthew and Luke had access to the other, which is often called the Q source (from Quelle, German for source). This source is seen as a collection of logia (from a Greek word logion, plural logia, which means words, sentences). This might be summed up in a diagram: (See figure 1).

It is difficult to say whether Matthew and Luke had direct access to the first "quarry", or whether they knew of it only through Mark. At all events, it is accepted that Matthew and Luke knew Mark's work, but are independent of each other.

Mark seems to be the inventor of the literary genre of the Gospel; in this way he provided a geographical and chronological frame-work for the story of Jesus. Matthew and Luke followed him.

Matthew and Luke made different use of what they discovered in the second "quarry": Matthew ground it all up before incorporating it in his Gospel; Luke preferred to insert it into the framework he took over from Mark in two great blocks of material.

Both Matthew and Luke have texts which can be found only in their Gospels; Mark has very few of these.

from: How to Read the New Testament, Renee Clougher, p.15

The Arrangement of Luke's Account of the Gospel centres around the paschal mystery — from the Last Supper to the Resurrection on Easter Sunday. The sections of Luke can be divided as follows:

- Preface 1:1-4
- Infancy Narratives 1:5-4:13
- The Ministry in Galilee 4:1-9:50
- The Journey to Jerusalem 9:51-19:44
- Jesus' Suffering, Death and Resurrection 19:45-24:53

Three distinct stages of Salvation History can be seen in Luke's writings:

1. The Promise through Israel 1:5-4:21: John the Baptist has prepared the people for Jesus' coming and Jesus is himself baptised.

   a. Jesus proclaims the message of salvation 4:14-9:50
   b. Jesus goes to Jerusalem where he suffers, dies and rises again 19:29-24:53

3. The story of the early Church: Acts
   a. the disciples give witness to Jesus "even to the ends of the earth"
   b. starting from Jerusalem, the Church spreads to the Gentiles
   c. Paul becomes the founder of more Christian communities and is taken as a prisoner to Rome, where he continues to preach the Gospel.
There are several themes which can be traced in the Gospel of Luke:

- Prayer eg: [Lk 11:1]
- Salvation for all eg: [Lk 13:29-30]
- Mary, model disciple eg: [Lk 1:26-56]
- Mercy and forgiveness eg: [Lk 15]
- Joy eg: [Lk 24:52; 15:7-10]
- The Spirit of God active in Jesus eg: [Lk 4:18]
- Journey eg: [Lk 9:51-19:44]

Activities for Chapter 4

   After discussion with the teacher, reproduce the Chart in your workbook or refill.

2. Read the material on pp13-14 headed Letters to friends and The Logia Source. Work in pairs and complete the following activities. Keep a record of your findings.
   a. Identify at least 3 sources Luke used in writing his Gospel.
   c. The Gospel according to Luke begins with a preface addressed to Theophilus. Identify at least 3 of the next 4 sections.

3. Briefly describe the community for which Luke wrote. What, if any, similarities might it have with the 'Christian community' of Australia?

4. Working individually, choose two of the following passages from Luke's Gospel
   Lk 4:14-24; Lk 5:12-16; Lk 7:11-17; Lk 10:25-37
   Spend some time reading them reflectively. Then write a reflection of about 15 lines on each. Try to include the following points:
   i. how the passage relates to the themes already given
   ii. what the passage shows about Jesus
   iii. what the passage shows about the other people mentioned
   iv. how the passage could relate to a present day situation.

   Share your responses and discuss any differences and similarities in the passages and in your reflections on them, with the class.

5. Form small groups and read Lk 6:17-38. Spend some time reflecting on it.
   Draw up points for and against the following statement:
   "Only the poor and miserable can come to know God."
   Discuss your findings.

6. Homework
   Look for the ideas which have been explored in this Chapter.
   Record these, and where you found evidence of them, with the Scripture reference and the idea it relates to.
   Be prepared to share your responses and impressions with the class.

   Why could this material be called "A Tale of Two Cities"? (from Nazareth to Jerusalem, from Jerusalem to Rome; from Jewish capital to World Capital; how Christianity, a Jewish religion, became a World Religion).
Chapter 5


Theological Prologue
[Luke 1-2]

What we call the birth narratives or the infancy narratives are in fact a theological prologue to the whole work, both the Gospel and Acts. As with Matthew 1-2, this is a kind of background to the 'credits', as in a film, where Luke presents the most important themes in advance. Take some time to read Chapters 1 and 2 of Luke, and then see if you can identify the following themes:

i. Jerusalem and the Temple: Prayer [1:52]
ii. Jesus, Son of David, Son of God, welcomed in faith by Mary, the daughter of Zion. The role of the Spirit [1:6-38]
iii. The role of women, the Spirit, prayer, the humbling of the rich and the proud and the raising up of the lowly [1:39-56]
iv. The name John, which means 'God is gracious', and the visit of God to his people [1:67-80]
v. The good news to the poor (the shepherds); a saviour, Christ the Lord. The glory which shines out from this child on all people. And the result: joy for the world. This is the essential feature of the plan of Acts as suggested here, along with the role of the missionaries who go into the world: Peter, Paul and ourselves [2:1-21]
vi. Again the Temple and the Holy Spirit, prayer, light for the Gentiles. There is a dispute over the significance of Jesus, in the face of which a choice has to be made [2:22-39]

vii. The culmination of the childhood of Jesus: the Temple and the first of Jesus' sayings to mention the Father. The first ascent to Jerusalem which evokes thoughts of the last: a disappearance for three days, being sought by the women; the Father, 'I must be about my Father's business', that 'the Christ must suffer to enter his glory'.

Source: How to Read the New Testament, Eugene Gordon Peterson, p.39, SCM Press; UK; 1988 (Adapted)
When you look at Luke Chapters 1 and 2, note the way in which Luke has constructed parallel accounts.

Childhood of John the Baptist
- Birth of John the Baptist foretold to Zechariah
- Benedictus Prayer of Zechariah
- Birth of John the Baptist and Visit of the Neighbours
- Circumcision of John the Baptist
- Benedictus
- Hidden life of John the Baptist
- John in the Wilderness [3:3]

Childhood of Jesus
- The Annunciation to Mary
- The Magnificat Prayer of Mary
- The Birth of Jesus and Visit of the Shepherds
- Circumcision of Jesus
- Jesus is presented in the Temple
- The Nunc Dimittus Prayer of Simeon
- Prophecy of Simeon
- Prophecy of Anna
- Hidden life of Jesus of Nazareth
- Jesus among the doctors of the law
- The hidden life at Nazareth resumed

Activities for Chapter 5

1. Working in pairs, read and compare the following four Annunciation accounts.
   Use questions a - e (below) as a guide for your comparisons.
   Write out your points.
   **Annunciation Accounts**
   1. To Mary: Luke 1:26-38
   2. To Zechariah: Luke 1:5-25
   3. To Manoah's wife: Judges 13:1-25
   4. To Hannah: 1 Samuel 1:9-18

   **Questions:**
   a. Describe the greeting given to each of the persons named in the Annunciation accounts given above.
   b. Identify what is miraculous or unusual about the birth of the child promised in each case.
   c. Name the promise given, if any, to each of the named persons above.
   d. Note any similarities in the four accounts.
   e. Identify any differences in the accounts.

2. Study one of the following prayers in pairs or in small groups.

3. Identify and name:
   i. The person who prayed the prayer.
   ii. Any references to the Hebrew Testament.

4. Discuss in class: In what ways does the infancy account prepare us for the story of Jesus as an adult?
Chapter 6

Some Important Themes in the Gospel According to Luke (I)

Two important themes in Luke’s Gospel, namely The Holy Spirit and Prayer, are explored in this Chapter.

The Holy Spirit

The Gospel of Luke and The Acts of the Apostles (also written by Luke) refer frequently to the Holy Spirit actively working in human history. Important events in Israel’s history such as those already outlined in the Annunciation scenes (see Chapter 5) are attributed to the divine intervention of the Holy Spirit. It is the same Holy Spirit who converts and shapes people, empowers and directs them towards a destiny – a destiny seen by believers as recorded in the Old and New Testaments, to be the one which God intends for them.

Luke highlights the fact that what has been promised to Israel in the past, reaches its fulfillment in the words and deeds, the life and death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. It is through the influence of the Holy Spirit that Jesus is conceived and empowered for his ministry. This same Holy Spirit is the one promised by Jesus to his followers after the resurrection, to remain with them until the end of time.

Luke’s idea of the place of the Holy Spirit in salvation history may be outlined as follows. (see Figure 1).


In Luke 4:15-30, for example, we are told that Jesus, filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, leaves the desert to return to Galilee. He goes to the synagogue in Nazareth and reads from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah:

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, for he has anointed me to bring the good news to the afflicted. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives, sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim a year of favour from the Lord.”


Jesus then tells his audience:

“This text is being fulfilled today even while you are listening.” (Luke 4:21)

Later in Acts 13:32-33, we read that Paul and his companions, when preaching to the Jews, proclaim:

“We have come here to tell you the good news that the promise made to our ancestors, has come about.”

Age of promise through Israel

Jesus, the Christ, fulfillment of the promise

Age of the Church journeying towards the fulfillment of God’s plan, at the end of time

(It is the Holy Spirit whose power works in Jesus to “make” him the Christ, and who calls the Church into being through its missionary activity.)
The following are examples recorded in Luke's Gospel, which illustrate the way the Holy Spirit works in people's lives:

- Acts in the life of John the Baptist and his parents; Luke 1:11-16; 1:67
- Empowers Mary to conceive Jesus; Luke 1:26-38
- Enables Simeon to recognise Jesus in the Temple; Luke 2:25-32
- Reveals Jesus at his baptism by John; Luke 3:21-22
- Leads Jesus into the desert to be tested; Luke 4:1-2
- Empowers Jesus to begin his Galilean ministry; Luke 4:14-15
- Fills Jesus with joy (after the return of the disciples from their ministry); Luke 10:21-22
- Cannot be blasphemed against; such blasphemy is unforgivable; Luke 12:10
- Teaches the believer what to say under trial; Luke 12:11-12
- Is the one promised by the Father, and to be sent by Jesus at Pentecost; Luke 24:49

In The Acts of the Apostles, the theme of the Holy Spirit is continued. Like Jesus, the apostles are also empowered by the same Spirit to give witness to Jesus in Jerusalem, [Acts 1-7] Judaea, Galilee and Samaria, [see Acts 8:2-12:25].

The Spirit enables the apostles to proclaim the Gospel without fear [Acts 4:8-31], enables Stephen to be steadfast in faith despite persecution and martyrdom [Acts 7:55-60] and enables Peter to change his attitude towards gentiles:

"God has no favourites but that anybody of any nationality who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him." [Acts 10:18]

At the end of Acts, Paul goes from captivity in Caesarea to Rome from where the Good News of Jesus is proclaimed "to the ends of the earth".

**Prayer**

In Christian spirituality, there is always a close link between the Holy Spirit and prayer. It is the Holy Spirit who enables us to call God 'Abba, Father' [Galatians 4:7]. In fact, it is the Holy Spirit who enables us to pray at all.

The four Gospel writers all record that Jesus prayed. The synoptic writers (ie. Matthew, Mark, Luke) make specific reference to the fact that Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane [Matthew 26:37, Mark 14:22, Luke 22:39-43]. However, it is Luke who gives us many insights into Jesus' prayer which are not recorded in the other Gospels.


After witnessing Jesus at prayer one day, the disciples ask Jesus to teach them how to pray. He teaches them 'The Our Father' — one of the best-known prayers among Christians everywhere [Luke 11:1-4].


Luke's Gospel highlights the importance of prayer in the life of Jesus — and in the lives of those who choose to follow in Jesus' footsteps. Jesus' prayer of abandon in Gethsemane, despite his own personal fears, captures the essence of true Christian prayer:

"Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me. Nevertheless, let your will be done, not mine." [Luke 22:42]
Activities for Chapter 6

1. a. Read the material headed "The Holy Spirit" on pp18-19.
   b. Identify 3 ways in which the Spirit has been active in human history, according to the information given.

2. Work in pairs.

3. Working individually, select 2 or 3 of the references to the Holy Spirit given on p19.
   For each reference, briefly describe:
   a. what happened
   b. what the Holy Spirit does
   c. the effect of the encounter on the person or persons involved.

4. Select a few examples from the early Chapters of The Acts of the Apostles which show the activity of the Holy Spirit on the lives of people. Present your findings as an illustration, or a diagram or in short paragraphs.

5. Read the material headed "Prayer" on p19 in class and discuss. Then individually, check the following prayer references from Luke and see what they are about:

   b. List the 5 petitions Luke’s version presents.
   c. Identify the extra two petitions which Matthew’s version asks for and Luke’s doesn’t.

7. Role-play one of the parables about the need to be persistent in prayer:

8. Write a paragraph in your own words to explain the relevance of this comment:
   "Prayer and praying must have been important to Luke."
Chapter 7


Introduction

The Italian poet, Dante Alighieri (1265-1321 AD) once called Luke "the evangelist of God's tenderness".

Indeed among the important themes in Luke's Gospel are those which show Jesus' compassionate concern for the poor, the sinners, the outcasts and marginalised of Jewish society of his time, such as lepers, prostitutes, women, tax collectors, Gentiles and Samaritans. Luke presents a Jesus who is gentle and compassionate towards the poor but strong and uncompromising towards those who collaborate to maintain unjust structures and uphold binding laws which perpetuate misery for the powerless [see Luke 11:42-46].

In Chapter 6, we looked at two important themes in Luke's Gospel, namely the Holy Spirit and Prayer. Below are further examples of themes found in Luke:

Good News for All

Jesus shows by his care and concern for all people that the Good News is intended for all: not just for his fellow Jews and not just for one class of people.

In response to John the Baptist's enquiry about his identity, Jesus tells John's messengers:

"Go back and tell John what you have seen and heard: the lame walk, those suffering from virulent skin-diseases are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, the good news is proclaimed to the poor, and blessed is anyone who does not find me a cause of falling." [Luke 7:22-23]


An accusation made against Jesus is that "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." [Luke 11:2]

Samaritans, who were regarded as outcasts, were often referred to by Jesus as examples of people who are open to his Gospel, eg: the grateful Samaritan leper who shows faith and returns to give thanks to Jesus when he is cured [Luke 17:11-19]; the parable referring to the Good Samaritan [Luke 10:29-37] as the one who shows compassion to his neighbour. There is also the story of the gentile centurion whose servant Jesus cures because of the centurion's faith [Luke 7:1-10].

In all his words and actions, Jesus shows that God's good news of love, justice and forgiveness is intended for all humanity.

Women

Luke's Gospel emphasises the important role of women in the ministry of Jesus. In the context of Jesus' time and culture, his open and accepting attitude towards women, and towards all the poor and marginalised, was revolutionary.

In general, women in Jesus' time had little status. They were very restricted in different areas of life. For example, they could not take a leading role in public functions, they were restricted in public prayer and could not read the Torah — the Jewish Scriptures. Often they were openly despised.
There are many references to women in Luke's Gospel which are not found in the other Gospels, and in all of these references we see Jesus breaking social barriers, reaching out, healing and freeing women.

In the account of the Widow of Nain [Luke 7:11-17] which follows the account of the healing of the centurion's slave, we see Jesus performing a miracle out of compassion for a woman whose only son is dead.

The dead man is being carried out of the town on a bier. Jesus moves towards the woman, touches the bier, performs the miracle without any request on her side and without the precondition of faith. Jesus, in performing this action, shatters the usual attitudes towards women. He also breaks the custom regarding uncleanness by touching the bier of a dead man. We are told that "everyone was filled with awe and glorified God" [Luke 7:16] as a result of Jesus' action towards the widow and her son.

Jesus' response to the woman who washes his feet in the house of Simon, the Pharisee [Luke 7:36-50] also shows his acceptance of someone considered to be a sinner. In this account, Luke contrasts the woman's faith and love, to the pride of those who are sitting with Jesus.

The cure of the crippled woman [Luke 13:10-17] again shows Jesus putting love and compassion before laws. He cures the woman on a Sabbath day — something which was not permitted according to the custom of the time. Like the widow of Nain, Jesus heals the woman out of compassion without a request from her and without a predisposition of faith from her.

Women are shown to be among Jesus' main supporters. They accompany him on his journey from Galilee to Jerusalem and at his death on Calvary [Luke 23:49-55]. They are also the first witnesses to the resurrection [Luke 24:1-11]. Luke tells us that when the women proclaimed the news of the resurrection to the apostles "this story of theirs seemed pure nonsense and they [the apostles] did not believe them" [Luke 24:11].

Activities for Chapter 7

1 a Read the material on p21 headed Introduction.

b Identify at least 3 groups of people towards whom Jesus showed special concern.

c Identify at least 3 groups of people in Australia today whom you would regard as 'marginalised' or outcasts.

d If Jesus were living today, how do you think he might act towards them? Name some attitudes and actions he might display towards them.

2 Luke's Gospel highlights the fact that the Good News is intended for everyone. From your reading of the material headed Good News for All p21 and from looking through Luke's Gospel, explain in about half a page, what you understand the significance of this to be.

3 Form small groups.

a Discuss some reasons why Jesus was radical for his time in his approach to women.

b Look through Luke's Gospel for other references to women. Record these.

c Explain what lesson can be learnt here about appropriate Christian attitudes towards women today.

Together, write the explanation in a few sentences and share with the class.

4 Other themes in Luke cover such topics as: Poverty and wealth, joy, journey and discipleship.

Select one of the above themes and by reading through Luke's Gospel, (some references given opposite) write about half a page on your selected theme, explaining what Luke is saying about it.
References for Poverty and Wealth
- On Anxiety and Right-attitude to Possessions, Luke 12:22-34

References for Joy

References for Journey
Find the places mentioned, on a map.
- Mary Visits Elizabeth, Luke 1:39
- Jesus Teaches and Preaches, Luke 4:31-44
- The Journey to Jerusalem Continues, Luke 13:22-33
- The Ten Lepers, Luke 17:11-19
  (You may wish to continue this into Acts... The Journey Continues)

References for Discipleship
- The First Four Disciples, Luke 5:1-11
- Jesus’ True Family, Luke 8:19-21