

LUKE – THE GENTILE GOSPEL

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So we have a first gospel Mark, then a very Jewish gospel, Matthew. Now the focus is going to change again. Luke is the gospel as it moves out into the Gentile. Its author, Luke is quite probably a gentile himself, if not he's a Jew who moves naturally in the Gentile world. Take some little examples. Matthew is chock a bloc with Old Testament quotations. Luke only rarely quotes from the Old Testament and then usually because it's in his source. Unlikely Matthew he never uses the word rabbi of Jesus. Instead he prefers the word teacher. Mark and Matthew both talk about the Sea of Galilee. In Luke the Sea of Galilee becomes Lake of Gennesaret. Luke is the only person in the whole New Testament to call it a lake? He's moved in a wider world.

Luke sits down to write with Mark in front of him. About half of Mark is incorporated into Luke. But Mark is no longer adequate for the needs of the Church. We are 15 to 25 years later. The break with the synagogue has now happened. Christianity is becoming more and more a gentile movement. For this gentile world a gospel nuanced to their lives and concerns was increasingly needed. It was to meet that special and peculiar need that Luke felt called to take up the task of being a Gospel writing evangelist.

Helpfully alone of the Gospel writers Luke begins with an introduction which tells us something about how he did it.

“Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus”

This tells us quite a lot. Luke is not an eyewitness. Clearly he's writing a considerable time after the events in question. He's looking back on the old story to tell it again more powerfully. He certainly has Mark in front of him. Perhaps he has Matthew. Probably other sources we don't know about. But now he sets out to tell the story again in a new orderly way.

And he writes for Theophilus? Who was this? We don't know. The name means “beloved of God”. Is this perhaps a discrete pseudonym? Was he writing perhaps to a sympathetic official whose name needs to be kept secret of fear of embarrassing him? At any rate it's quite common in the classical world to dedicate a book you're publishing to a particular individual and that seems to be the case here.

And he's writing as a historian. He's one who has gone over the events in detail to present a connected narrative. Like Matthew Luke is basically presenting an edited and expanded version of Mark but he going to put things in context, try to bring out the history in way

which neither of the other two gospels has managed. He recasts Mark's stories so as to secure a better sequence; he puts them in context more.

Let me take an example. Both in Matthew and Mark it's clear that Jesus sees himself as having a political ministry to the nation of Israel. He calls 12 apostles, one for each tribe. He sees Israel facing a choice as a nation. But in both of them this ministry is rather blurred. Who's interested they might say in yesterday's politics? But Luke is the historian. He wants to make the political background clear.

In Luke as in no other gospel it's clear that the political context is a warning by Jesus that the nationalist mood, with its dream of a revolt against Rome, can only bring disaster. So when Jesus comes in sight of Jerusalem Luke alone tells how Jesus sees its destruction coming and weeps over it. "If only you had known, on this great day the way that leads to peace". Later in the city Jesus makes the link again when he compares his death to what the Romans will do later to the whole city. "If they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry"? In Mark 13 there is an obscure reference to "the abomination of desolation" and the warning that when this is up everyone must take to the hills. Now this text is the glory of a certain kind of fundamentalist who interprets it as a clear to the European Parliament in Brussels or the U.N. building in New York. Luke looks at it and says to himself "What are my gentle readers going to make of this". So Luke replaces the words "when you see the abomination of desolation" with "when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies". Ah so that's what it's about! It's the Roman army besieging the city. It's back in context.

So firstly Luke is a historian. He wants to give dates for when events happen. He wants to put everything in place in the national life. Here's he's done us a great service. By showing us how Jesus fits into the politics of his own day it makes it easier to see how he fits into ours. "Oh Jerusalem. Jerusalem. If only you had known the way that leads to peace". Oh Baghdad, Beirut, Jerusalem, London. This is a tremendous benefit.

Then secondly Luke tries to set out the ministry of Jesus in a way that will speak to the Gentile world. He sets out a humanitarian Jesus who sets out a ministry to the poor and the excluded. To make this unmistakably clear he alone tells how Jesus goes to the synagogue at Nazareth and declares what his ministry is going to be about.

4.18-19

"The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free".

This is a remarkably apt summary of Luke's Jesus: he is the spirit-filled anointed prophet, whose ministry is especially directed to the poor and the oppressed,

Time and time again Luke works out the meaning of that in his gospel. Take women as an example. In Palestine the position of women was low. In the Jewish morning prayer, a man thanks God that God has not made him "a Gentile, a slave or a woman". But Luke in

his gospel gives a very special place to women. It is Luke who makes vivid the picture of Martha and Mary, and the woman who anoints Jesus feet in the house of Simon the Pharisee. Luke gives us the Magnificat. Luke gives us the story of the widow of Nain. Women are more prominent in this gospel than in any other.

There is a greater stress in this Gospel on the commitment to the poor. Jim Wallis tells us in the New Testament as a whole 1 out of every 16 verses refers to money or to the poor. In 3 gospels it is in 1 verse in every ten. In Luke it is one in every seven

At the beginning of the Gospel is the Magnificat. "He has filled the hungry with the good things and sent the rich away empty". The question of the relation of rich and poor will be returned to again and again in this gospel. Luke alone tells the story of Dives and Lazarus He alone tells the story of the Rich Fool who builds barns and dies before he can enjoy them. It's only Luke who gives us the story of Zacchaeus the tax collector who gives half his possessions away.

Wealth is of such concern because it is tied to fundamental religious matters. The chasms that separate rich and poor, weak and powerful, insider and outsider, are not intended by God. If you have possessions you must use them to feed the hungry and help the poor. The story of the Good Samaritan illustrates this point. The real pious person is not the priest or the Levite but the one who helps his neighbour.

That same parable illustrates of Luke's great themes - the attack on exclusivity. The hero of the parable is not a strict Jew but a Samaritan, a half-Jew despised by Israelites. Luke highlights how Jesus goes out of his way to associate with "sinners and tax-collectors". He alone tells the story of the woman who anointed Jesus' feet and bathed them with her tears and wiped them with her hair in the house of Simon the Pharisee. He alone has the story of the Prodigal Son which is part of his answer to those who criticise him for mixing with the wrong kind of people.

Have you noticed how often I've used the phrase -'Luke alone'? All the evangelists have material peculiar to them. But Christianity without the stories that Luke alone gives us is almost unthinkable. Where would our understanding of the moral teaching of Christ be without the parable of Good Samaritan? Where do we understand the love of God more clearly than in the parable of the prodigal son? Then there is Christmas. With a little help from Matthew Luke is largely the author of Christmas as we now celebrate it. He alone gives us the shepherds in the fields; the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in the manger. Looking to the resurrection it's Luke alone who gives us the marvellous story of the disciples on the Emmaus Road.

I think this tells us something about Luke. Yes he is a historian. Most scholarly reconstructions of Jesus and his work have drawn heavily on Luke. But as well as being a historian he's also a marvellous story teller. There's a poet here as well as a historian. That's why it's not only the scholar but the ordinary reader who develops a love for Luke's gospel. None of the Gospel writers got closer to the heart of Jesus than Luke.

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