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LUKE

THE NIV
APPLICATION
COMMENTARY

From biblical text . . . to contemporary life

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Introduction to Luke

Overview: Why Read Luke?

MOST PEOPLE DO not realize that Luke is the longest Gospel—not in chapters, but in verses. In fact, Luke as an author is the largest contributor to the New Testament, if one counts verses (Luke, 2,157 verses [Luke + Acts], Paul, 2,032 verses; John, 1,416 verses; Matthew, 1,071 verses; Mark, 678 verses). The Gospel of Luke also is unique in that the story of Jesus has a sequel in the account of Acts. Thus, the work of Jesus and the church are related together through the eyes of the same human author. This means that the introductory concerns of the two volumes overlap; that is, evidence from Acts is also evidence about Luke.

Luke-Acts is about God's plan. The Gospel explains who Jesus was, what he did, why he came, and how he prepared the disciples for the role they would have in that plan. Basic questions are a part of the Gospel's story or are set up by the Gospel's story. A major concern in Acts, for example, is the relationship of Jews to Gentiles. In this context, the Gospel of Luke probes such issues as these: How did an originally Jewish movement become the basis for an offer of salvation to all? Do Gentiles really belong? If Jesus was originally the Messiah for Israel, how was it he met so much opposition that they crucified him? Even more, how could a crucified Messiah become the basis for hope for all humanity? How could an absent, slain figure be the center of God's hope? In sum, why should anyone respond to Jesus as the center of God's plan and what is it he calls us to do?

This commentary will show how virtually every unit in Luke's Gospel challenges us to respond to Jesus. Starting with categories of Jewish hope like Messiah, it reveals who Jesus is. But by allowing Jesus' ministry to reveal who he is, we come to see that he is more than a messianic figure. Luke reveals this Jesus to us gradually, a progression we tend to miss since we are nearly two thousand years on the other side of these events and are already thoroughly familiar with his message from start to finish.

Why did Jesus come? Luke tells us it was not only to die for our sin, but also to form a people of God who, renewed by his Spirit, are able to serve

1. The numbers for John include Revelation and the Johannine letters. These numbers may vary slightly, depending on how one assesses certain text critical problems.

him in righteousness and holiness all of their days (Luke 1:73–75). He came to declare the initial realization of God's promise, a promise made "in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms" (Luke 24:44).

What did Jesus do? Luke explains how he revealed that the way to God is through the sinner's recognition that one must turn to God for help. The author also makes clear that the way of God is through Jesus. To show his power, Jesus preached the kingdom of God and the time of fulfillment (Luke 4:16–30, 11:14–23). He overcame nature, exorcised demons, healed from disease, and raised one from death to show he could overcome every type of enemy that opposes humanity (8:22–56). All the while he prepared his disciples for the journey of salvation by showing them that glory was reached only after suffering (9:21–27).

What does Jesus want people to do? He calls sinners to repent (Luke 5:31–32), disciples to take up their cross daily as they follow him (9:23), and witnesses to take the message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins to all the nations (24:43–49). He promises the Spirit for the task, since many will reject their message. Still, they are called to love their enemies and pray for them (6:27–35).

At the center of every step of activity in God's plan stands Jesus. He is the one who is to be trusted with revealing God's way. He is the one who calls disciples. He is the one who sends the Spirit. He is the one who brings God's forgiveness (Luke 5:12–26, 7:36–50). The gospel is open to all, because Jesus is Lord of all. When Luke states that he wishes to reassure Theophilus (1:4), it is reassurance that Jesus is the source of divine blessing and that Theophilus has every right to embrace him as the bearer of God's grace and promise.

This Gospel also explains how Jesus came to be rejected by the Jewish leadership. It tells how the message of the gospel came to include all nations in its promise (Acts fills out this theme more completely). This Gospel tells the kind of people Jesus wants his followers to be and what kind of community he wants them to possess. It describes the role of many key women in that community, the ethical call of Jesus, the importance of prayer, the attitude of joy in the midst of rejection by the world, and the importance and prominence of the Spirit. At the center of everything is the activity of a gracious God who keeps his promises, vindicates his people, and accomplishes his word. Believers love this Gospel because it not only gives them Jesus' teaching, especially in the form of parables, but it also reveals his involvement with people—especially sinners, the poor, and the rejected of society. The God of compassion shows himself fully in this Gospel. The God of the Bible shows himself the God of the world.

We are accustomed to highlighting the diversity of people in our world. Ours is a multicultural and multidimensional world in the way it sees things. The Gospel of Luke explains how God can take those many ethnic backgrounds and dimensions and mold them into a new special community. In Jesus, though we have different roots, we can come to oneness. The more we closely examine first-century people, the more we see that they are just like us. Their problems and attitudes concerning sin, money, anxiety, hope, community, rejection, vengeance, pride, humility, and God's direction mirror questions we face. Luke gives insight into how Jesus addressed such topics, and he makes clear how we can come to know God.

This latter issue puts the other topics into perspective and explains why we should listen carefully to Luke. The plan of God is often a great theological abstraction until we can see just how we fit into it. Luke's goal is to make our place in that plan clear. He invites us to see how we can have a relationship with God that is a journey of faith and a tour through life as it was meant to be lived.

The Composition of Luke's Gospel²

Author

NEITHER LUKE NOR Acts gives the name of its author. We must therefore examine evidence in these books and church tradition to determine authorship. Luke-Acts indicates two key facts about its author. (1) He was not an eyewitness to most of the events described, especially those in the Gospel (Luke 1:1–4). Rather, his sources were previous works that summarized the life of Jesus. (2) The author was a companion of Paul, according to the "we sections" of Acts (Acts 16:10–17, 20: 5–15, 21:1–18, 27:1–28:16). This second fact narrows the possibilities of authorship, though it also is disputed.

Some have argued that the "we sections" are either a literary device or the itinerant notes that the author simply took over without change, not the experiences of the author of Luke-Acts himself.³ Associated with this

2. In this introduction, we confine ourselves to the basic features that introduce the historical setting of the third Gospel. For summaries of this work's structure and biblical theology, see D. L. Bock, "Luke, Gospel of," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. by J. B. Green, S. McKnight, and I. H. Marshall (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1992), 495–510. For a more complete treatment of the book's theology, see my "A Theology of Luke-Acts," in *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, ed. by R. Zuck and D. Bock (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 87–166.

3. For this position, see E. Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971), 85.

discussion is the debate over whether the Paul of the New Testament letters that bear his name is really like the Paul of Luke. Some argue the writer of Acts was not a companion of Paul, since there appears to be so much difference in Luke's portrait of Paul and Paul's own view of himself.⁴ If the author did not know Paul, then either he cannot be the person traditionally associated with the book, Luke, or Luke himself was not an associate of Paul.

Fitzmyer has fittingly responded to the claims about the "we sections" as a literary device by noting how arbitrarily they appear in the account. If they really were creative literary devices, why did they appear so sparsely and why are they not located in more texts? The "we sections" are more than mere inserts of notes from someone else, and their haphazard use reflects authenticity. On the matter of Paul, we must reckon with the reality of how one's self-assessment and an assessment by another person often differ. In addition, the fact that the writer of the "we sections" worked with Paul on some occasions does not mean he was a constant companion of Paul. Furthermore, on the theological portrait of Paul in Luke versus that of Paul himself, the case can be made that the two are compatible.⁵ None of these considerations, of course, proves the author is Luke. But what it shows is that in Luke-Acts, the evidence points to at least a second-generation Christian who knew and occasionally worked with Paul.

The possibilities arising from the evidence within Luke-Acts does limit the possible candidates, though if one were to construct a possible list of traveling companions to Paul on the basis of his letters, it would be a long one: Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Timothy, Titus, Silas, Epaphras, Luke, and Barnabas. It is significant that despite this plethora of such candidates, early church tradition was unanimous in identifying the author as Luke. By A.D. 200, this identification was a given. Justin Martyr (c. A.D. 160) in *Dialogus* 103.19 speaks of a memoir of Jesus written by a follower of Paul. The Muratorian Canon, written a decade or two later, names Luke the doctor. Around the same time, Irenaeus ties the Gospel to Luke and notes the "we sections." Tertullian and Eusebius also tie this book to an author with Pauline connections and note Luke's role. Given the options available, the tie to Luke is impressive evidence of the memory of the church about the third Gospel's author.

What we know about Luke suggests that he was not Jewish, though it is possible that he was a Semite, perhaps a Syrian from Antioch rather than a Greek (Col. 4:10–11). His knowledge of the Old Testament and his discus-

sion of God-fearers may suggest he had some previous connection to Judaism and may even have been a God-fearer. The connection of Luke to medicine comes from Colossians 4:14.

Genre

A GOSPEL IS a unique genre in the New Testament. It is the story of both a person and his ministry, though it is different from a biography in that it does not seek to tell us about a life from start to finish. Luke places great stock in the roots of the tradition he works with to present his account. Luke 1:1–4 details how the roots of the Jesus accounts rest in eyewitness testimony. Yet it would be a mistake to say Luke was a scissors-and-paste editor who just put these traditions together. A comparison of this Gospel with the other two Synoptics shows that the author arranged his presentation, sometimes on the basis of themes and sometimes through the influence of additional sources.⁶ Luke also highlights how Jesus came to be understood as the risen, exalted Lord and how the Jewish rejection of Jesus took place. He outlines Jesus' teaching in a way the other Gospels do not, since several of the parables are unique to him. Jesus' concern for discipleship and one's neighbor, especially the rejected of society, stand out in his account. A gospel is both theology and history. It is written not only to instruct but also to exhort. The combination makes Luke a historian, theologian, and pastor.

Date

MANY DATE THIS book after A.D. 70, usually in the mid-eighties, based on the fact that the texts on the judgment of the nation are so specific about Jerusalem's destruction (Luke 19:41–44, 21:20–24). But the author's descriptions of this destruction simply argue that God will judge the nation for covenant unfaithfulness, along the same lines as the judgment Assyria and Babylon brought to the nation of Israel.⁷ Given that prophetic background, there is no need to posit a writing after the fact.

A more likely date is some time in the sixties. The last event in Acts is dated A.D. 62, since Luke appears to be closely related to Acts, the release of the two volumes would have been fairly close to each other. This date is suggested because Paul's death is not noted in Acts, and time must be allowed for the other sources, which included either Mark or Matthew, to circulate.

4. This case is made most forcefully by P. Viehauer, "On the 'Paulinism' of Acts," in *Studies in Luke-Acts*, ed. by L. E. Keck and J. L. Martyn (London: S.P.C.K., 1966), 33–50.

5. F. F. Bruce, "Is the Paul of Acts the Real Paul?" *BJRL* 58 (1975/76): 282–305.

6. My two volumes on Luke, *Luke 1:1–9:50* and *Luke 9:51–24:53* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994 and forthcoming) make such detailed comparisons a verse at a time and a passage at a time. Given the detail there, I am not repeating such comparisons in the current commentary.

7. C. H. Dodd, "The Fall of Jerusalem and the Abomination of Desolation," *JRS* 37 (1947): 47–54.

