

INTRODUCTION

An Orderly Account

Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as those who were eyewitnesses from the beginning and servants of the word have handed them down to us, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed (Luke 1.1-4).

From his opening four verses Luke adds style, order, and eloquence to the telling of Jesus' good news. The third Christian to write a gospel, Luke begins with a formal introduction and the high purpose of authenticating **"the events that have been fulfilled among us"** (1.1). Twice in his introduction, he identifies his purpose as writing **"an orderly account"** of events he has investigated. By order Luke means more than chronological order although he supplies birth and boyhood stories to foreground the narrative of Jesus' public ministry, death, and resurrection.

More important to Luke is the order of fulfillment, events that reveal Jesus is Israel's long-awaited messiah who fulfills the preaching and promises of Israel's prophets. The events testify to God's faithfulness and put the Christian movement in continuity with God's saving actions in Israel's history as recorded in Israel's scriptures.

Of most importance, Luke has investigated and authenticated the apostolic tradition of the eyewitness disciples and earliest Christians—traditions that **“the eyewitnesses from the beginning and servants of the word handed on to us”** (1.2). The good news Luke hands on in writing has been handed on orally by the men and women disciples who followed Jesus and experienced his teaching. The two men in the empty tomb remind the women disciples who come to anoint Jesus' body, **“Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, be crucified, and on the third day rise again. Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest”** (24.6-9).

Luke writes for Theophilus. *Theo* in Greek means God and *philus* means *friend*. Luke writes for all of us friends of God, so that we **“may know the truth”** of the tradition. He writes his gospel about A.D. 85 by collecting and arranging the oral traditions that eyewitnesses initiate and Christians shape and hand on as they gather, share Jesus' teachings, and break bread together. By writing, Luke gives the gospel a fixed form that can instruct friends of God.

Luke describes the need for a written gospel in his sequel to the gospel, the Acts of the Apostles. He tells how

an eloquent young Jew named Apollos comes to preach in Ephesus. Priscilla and Aquila, who are Christians and coworkers of the apostle Paul, hear the young man preach **“with burning enthusiasm”** about Jesus, but they have to take him aside and **“explain to him the Way of God more accurately”** (Acts 18.24-28).

The third gospel and its sequel, the Acts of the Apostles, form 25% of the New Testament. Acts begins where Luke’s gospel ends with Jesus’ ascending to his Father. It tells the story of the early Christian mission from the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost to Paul’s imprisonment in Rome for two years before his martyrdom under the Emperor Nero in A.D. 64.

Luke is a Gentile, a schooled writer, a coworker with the Apostle Paul in the spread of the gospel to people around the Mediterranean Sea. He writes after accompanying Paul and founding Christian communities among the Gentiles in the A.D. 50s and 60s. Most of what we know about Luke comes from Paul’s letters in which Paul adds greetings from co-workers when he writes to Christian communities. To the Colossians Paul sends greetings from **“Luke, the beloved physician,”** who is with him (4.14).

To Philemon, Paul sends greetings from fellow workers, including Luke (1.24). In his second letter to Timothy, Paul reports, **“Only Luke is with me”** (4.11). In the Acts of the Apostles Luke sometimes writes in the first person, using “we.” Luke is with Paul in Philippi and writes, **“On the Sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered**

there” (16.13). They meet Lydia, a maker of purple dyes. They convert and baptize her and all the members of her household, then stay with them (Acts 16.11-15). As Paul returns from travels through Greece, Luke writes again in the first person “we” as they journey to Jerusalem (Acts 20-21). Luke is with Paul on his final trip to Rome to face charges against him (Acts 27-28). What Christians know about Luke we imply from these writings.

In writing the gospel, Luke draws on two sources—Mark and Q. Both Luke and Matthew know Mark’s gospel and incorporate two thirds of his narrative into theirs. Luke and Matthew also incorporate a great number of the same sayings and parables, which suggests to scholars an early collection of Jesus’ sayings and parables that has not survived. Scholars refer to this common source as Q, for the German word *Quelle*, which means *sayings*.

Sayings are a literary form that express a pithy thought in patterns and words plays that make them easy to remember, such as the turn arounds and repetition in this example, **“Do not judge, and you will not be judged.”** Sayings tend to generate parallel versions, **“Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven”** (6.37). Marketers today use sayings on billboards and ads to grab attention and create an impression that sticks in the mind. Jesus uses sayings as a teaching device for the same reasons. Gospel sayings also include parables, some of which are stories that challenge the hearer to make a self-revealing choice, such as who is my neighbor. The sayings appear in many parts of Luke’s gospel narrative, including his sermon on the plain, which parallels Matthew’s much longer collection of sayings, the sermon on the mount.

In addition to Mark's narrative and the hypothetical Q, Luke has stories that no other gospel writer tells, the L source. These sayings and parables hand on some of the most beloved of Jesus' teachings, such as the parables of the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan. The L source also reveals the themes most important to Luke: Jesus fulfills the promises of Israel's prophets; he is the messiah filled with the Spirit to bring good news to the poor and oppressed.

This book focuses on the themes and sayings unique to Luke's telling of the good news. In earlier centuries preachers and teachers worked to harmonize the gospels and make one continuous story out of the four. Today we value the rich diversity among the communities out of which and for which each evangelist writes. The Common Lectionary for the Catholic Church and other mainline Christian churches sets the table of the Word with three cycles of scripture readings, which draw on all four gospels. Luke's gospel dominates Cycle C.

Like our own time, the first century is a time of profound change and intermixing of cultures. Israel's ancient temple-centered worship with its animal sacrifices ends. Two religions flow from Israel's faith, Judaism and Christianity, both religions of the book.

Luke investigates and authenticates the eyewitness traditions handed on, **"everything from the very first,"** and enriches our written traditions with his additional sources.



- 1 What questions do you bring to studying a gospel?
- 2 What is the importance of oral tradition in creating the gospels?
- 3 What gospel teachings do you especially treasure?
- 4 What do you appreciate about the Luke's purpose for writing a gospel?
- 5 If you were to write a gospel today, how would you introduce your purpose?