

The Gospel According to Luke

In his book *The Prophets*, Abraham Heschel proclaims that the prophets of Israel:

Make much ado about paltry things, lavishing excessive language upon trifling subjects....The things that horrified the prophets are even now daily occurrences all over the world....Indeed, the sort of crimes and even the amount of delinquency that fill the prophets of Israel with dismay do not go beyond that which we regard as normal, as typical ingredients of social dynamics....Their breathless impatience with injustice may strike us as hysteria...but if such deep sensitivity to evil is to be called hysterical, what name should be given to the abysmal indifference to evil which the prophet bewails?¹

When one begins to read the Luke-Acts narrative,² Heschel's words reverberate throughout the text. If a prophet is one who bewails seemingly minor delinquency toward the marginalized; who sees abuse of the lowly as disaster; and who has a "breathless impatience with injustice which may strike us as hysteria," then Jesus was a prophet *par excellence*. For the writer of Luke, Jesus is the prophet, the Messiah, the God who is concerned for the lowly and less-fortunate, who raises up the humble and marginalized, who brings low the arrogant and mainstream, and who bears the burdens of all the world.³ This gospel—written about the same time as Matthew (c. AD 85)⁴ and attributed to Luke, the sometime traveling companion of Paul⁵—is volume one of a two-part drama often referred to as Luke-Acts, in which Jesus is revealed as the one who brings the kingdom of God, continuing the universal mission begun with

¹ Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets*, (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001 reprint), 3-4.

² "This is the longest of the four gospels. Yet it is only half of the great Lucan writing, for it was originally joined with Acts as part of a two-volume work that in length constitutes over one-quarter of the NT—a magnificent narrative that blends together the story of Jesus and that of the early church....At the very beginning of Luke's work he speaks of an orderly narrative, and all that he received or created has been woven into an epic that begins in the Jerusalem Temple and ends at the imperial court in Rome," Raymond Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 225, 267.

³ Richard Burrige notes that the gospel of Luke is symbolized by the ox, "the ancient world's most powerful engine, a symbol of divine strength...[and] the universal beast of burden, used by the ancient Israelites to bear the burden of sin as a sacrificial animal (Lev 4.3-21; Ps 69.31; 2 Sam 24.28015; 1 Kgs 8.63; 2 Chron 29.33)....Luke's portrait of Jesus is supremely the bearer of burdens, caring for all those who are burdened or suffering, and ultimately giving himself willingly as a sacrifice," *Four Gospels, One Jesus? A Symbolic Reading*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005, 2nd edition), 101-102.

⁴ Dating of biblical texts is always fluid, especially regarding the gospels. The majority of scholars today believe that Mark was the first gospel to be written (c. 60-75 AD, Brown, *An Introduction*, 127), and date Luke and Matthew in the mid-80s AD with a 5-10 year window on either side, Brown, *Introduction*, 172, 226.

⁵ "Ancient church tradition attributed the third gospel to the Luke who appears in Phlm 24 as Paul's 'fellow worker' and is called 'the beloved physician' in Col 4.14 (cf. 2 Tim 4.11)." However, due to differences in how Luke describes Paul and how Paul describes Paul, "many modern-day commentators are uncertain about the authorship of Luke-Acts," *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, "Luke" by Joseph A. Fitzmyer, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 470. Ultimately, a precise identification of the author, while interesting, is inconsequential. However, it does seem likely that "the evangelist was a Gentile who had become a proselyte or a God-fearer—i.e. was converted or attracted to Judaism some years before he was evangelized," and it should be noted that "the tradition that Luke was a companion of Paul raises a likelihood that Lk-Acts was addressed to churches descended from the Pauline mission," Brown, 268. This would explain the emphasis on the universal scope of the gospel, which, while rooted in the Old Testament promise to Abraham and his descendants (cf. Gen 12.1-3), is shown to be not a matter of physical descent but of *bearing fruits worthy of repentance* (cf. Lk 3.8ff; 6.43ff; 13.6ff; 14.34f).

Abraham (cf. Gen 12.1-3) and heralding the arrival of God's favor and salvation outward from Jerusalem into Judea and Samaria and all the ends of the earth (Acts 1.8).⁶

Luke begins his narrative with a prologue (1.1-4) in which he addresses Theophilus (*friend of God*) and notes his purpose, "that [the friend of God] may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed" (1.4).⁷ This "orderly account" (1.1) intertwines John the Baptist's (JBap) and Jesus' birth narratives in 1.5-2.52, where the continuity between the hopes of the Old Testament and their fulfillment in the life and ministry of Jesus is first revealed. JBap is born to Zechariah and Elizabeth—both of priestly lineage (1.5), though marginalized due to her barrenness (1.6)—while Jesus is also born into a marginal Jewish family who must offer the sacrifice of the poor at his dedication (1.24).⁸ Jesus' connection to Israel's messianic hope is further heightened through a series of proclamations.⁹ In 3.1-4.13 Luke again (cf. 1.8-17, 67-80) proclaims JBap as the forerunner of the Messiah who "prepares the way of the Lord" (1.4) by calling people to "bear fruits worthy of repentance"¹⁰ rather than simply claiming Abrahamic ancestry (3.8-9). This leads to an account of Jesus' baptism (3.21-22), his lineage (2.23-38), and his temptation in the wilderness (4.1-13).¹¹ In 4.14-9.50 Luke records the ministry of Jesus in Galilee, beginning with Jesus' proclamation in his hometown synagogue

⁶ As Brown put it: "Jesus is the centerpiece binding together Israel and the Church....Transitional from the OT to Jesus and from Jesus to the Church respectively are two bridges constructed by the evangelist," *An Introduction*, 228. Thus, in Luke 1-2 we find OT connections in the angel Gabriel (see Daniel 9.21, 10.8-12), Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph, shepherds, and Simeon and Anna; and in Acts 1 we have the ascended Jesus—whom Lk has portrayed as Israel's hoped-for Savior—imparting the mission and the Spirit to the 12 disciples. Thus, "the story is intrinsic to the theology...[as] the Gospel story of Jesus prepares for what happens in Acts....Lucan theology is dramatized in history and geography," as the narrative flow has Jesus moving from Galilee to Jerusalem in Luke and from Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria, and all the ends of the earth in Acts [viz. to Rome, the center of the known and civilized world], Brown, *An Introduction*, 225. Fitzmyer suggests that Luke "roots the Jesus story in a three-fold synchronization, connecting it with Roman history [cf. 2.1-2; 3.1; Acts 11.18; 18.2, 12], Palestinian history [cf. Lk 1.5; 3.1], and church history [volume two of the gospel and ministry of Jesus is revealed in Acts]," emphasizing the global reach of this gospel, *Oxford Companion*, 473.

⁷ As Brown notes, we cannot be sure if *Theophilus*, the "friend of God," refers to an actual person or is symbolic. He suggests that this was "a real and influential person (of whom we know nothing else) who believed in Jesus or was attracted to what was preached about him," but "Luke may have chosen Theophilus as the addressee because his name could apply to other desired readers," *An Introduction*, 227, NOTE 5.

⁸ *The New Interpreter's Bible*, NOTE 2.24, 1856 (cf. Lev 12.6-8).

⁹ Gabriel (1.8-17; 28-33); Mary (1.46-55); Zechariah (1.67-79); Angels (2.14-15); Simeon (2.29-32); and Anna (2.38).

¹⁰ μετανοιας: "repentance, a change of mind, remorse, or conversion." What John says here is significant, because it looks forward to the ministry and message of Jesus who will also emphasize exalting the lowly and taking care of the marginalized as central to what it means to follow him and to bear good fruit. John reveals that physical descent from Abraham matters little, what truly makes you a "child of Abraham" is the good fruit revealed in verses 10-15. In Luke 6.43-49 Jesus echoes the proclamation of JBap when he proclaims that "no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; for each tree is known by its fruit" (43-44a), followed by a rebuke of those who say "Lord, Lord" and do not act in accordance with God's commands. This recalls the prophet Jeremiah's warning to "not trust in these deceptive words—'this is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD'—and his exhortation to "amend your ways and your doings...act justly one with another... not oppress the alien, the orphan, the widow, or shed innocent blood" (7.4-6). This message places JBap and Jesus squarely within the prophetic tradition of Israel, again marking the continuity with the OT.

¹¹ The wilderness temptation emphasizes the OT connection by recalling Israel's time in the wilderness post-Exodus. It is significant that Luke places this at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, again confirming the continuity with Israel's hope by showing that Jesus will triumph where Israel failed (cf. Num; Deut 1, 6-8).

(Nazareth) where he reads the scroll of Isaiah (58.6; 61.1-2), revealing the scope and substance of his prophetic ministry (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,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

The final clause is significant, as it reveals the universal reach of Jesus' gospel (εὐαγγελίων—good news, glad tidings) that manifests the favor (δέκτον—acceptance, welcome) of God upon all creation. From here Jesus continues teaching and healing in the Galilean synagogues, homes, fields, and mountains—anywhere and everywhere proclaiming the arrival of the Kingdom of God (“the year of the Lord's favor”) and calling all to live by kingdom ethics (“fruit-bearing worthy of repentance”).¹² As in Mark, Peter's proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah of God (9.20) leads Jesus to reveal that this entails “great suffering” (9.22a) for both the Messiah and all who choose to be his disciples (9.23-27; 12.4-34, 49-53; 13.25-34).

At **9.51** we have a geographical shift, as Jesus leaves Galilee and “sets his face to go to Jerusalem.” In **9.52-19.44** Jesus will venture “through one town and village after another, teaching as he makes his way to Jerusalem,” the center of Jewish life (13.22); a journey on which Jesus will encounter much opposition from Jewish leadership as he clarifies his messianic identity and what this means for those who “leave everything and follow him” (5.11, 28). The journey ends with Jesus standing outside the city weeping over it, recalling prophetic laments over YHWH's people who refuse to repent and bear good fruit (see Isa 22; cf. Jer 4.19-21, 31; 14.17; Hos 6.4-5; 9.10; 11.1-9). From **19.45-23.56** we have Luke's account of Jesus' ministry in the city of Jerusalem, including his final meal, arrest, trials, death, and resurrection. In **19.45-21.38** we find Jesus' pre-trial ministry which begins by clearing the temple¹³ and closes with a litany of actions and teachings therein.¹⁴ In **22.1-23.56** we read Luke's account of Jesus' betrayal, arrest, trials, and subsequent execution—all within the setting of the Jewish Passover celebration. Finally, **24.1-53** recounts the resurrection appearances, including several events unique to this gospel.¹⁵ Volume one of this epic concludes with the disciples' commission (44-

¹² “*Kingdom of God*, [is] a reference both to the saving activity of God and to the community and practices of people who embody among themselves God's saving purposes,” *The New Interpreter's Bible*, NOTE 4.40-44, 1861.

¹³ Clearing the Temple reveals “the distance between the present functioning of the Temple as God's house and the function for which it was intended. It was to be a house of prayer—that is, given how prayer and divine revelation are interwoven in Luke [cf. 22.39-46]; the Temple should have been the arena for the unveiling and outworking of God's plan in human affairs. Instead...Jesus castigates the Temple as a ‘cave of bandits’ [cf. Jer 7.23-30],” *The New Interpreter's Bible*, NOTE 19.45-48, 1891. Thus, it is a denunciation of the mainstream and an exaltation of the marginalized once again.

¹⁴ Jesus ministry in the temple is framed with an *inclusio*—a literary device that sets off a unit of thought by repeating a phrase or concept at the beginning and ending of the section. Here the *inclusio* begins in 19.47 (“Every day [Jesus] was teaching the temple”) and ends in 21.37-38 (“Every day he was teaching in the temple...”).

¹⁵ Namely, the women's report of the resurrection being dismissed as “an idle tale” (24.1-11), the appearance of Jesus to two men on the road to Emmaus (24.13-35), and, most notably, Jesus' ascension into heaven from Bethany (24.50-52).

49), Jesus' ascension (50-51),¹⁶ and the disciples' return to the Jerusalem temple full of joy, praising God.¹⁷ The writer leaves the story unfinished and anticipatory, with the disciples in Jerusalem waiting to be "clothed with power from on high" so that "repentance and forgiveness of sins [may] be proclaimed in [Jesus'] name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (47).¹⁸

As one reads the Lukan narrative, several key themes emerge. Most notably, an emphasis on prayer,¹⁹ the work of the Holy Spirit,²⁰ the centrality of Jerusalem (and the gospel's continuity with God's working through Israel),²¹ the universal scope of the gospel,²² the danger possessions pose to discipleship,²³ the need to bear the fruit of repentance,²⁴ and the exaltation of the marginalized coupled with a critique and rebuke of the mainstream.²⁵

Throughout Luke's narrative, prayer and the Holy Spirit play vital roles in the proclamation of the good news. As William Barclay noted, "Luke's gospel is specially the gospel of prayer. At all the great moments of his life, Luke shows Jesus at prayer."²⁶ This can be seen in 3.21 where "Jesus also had been baptized and was praying" and the Spirit descends as God declares Jesus his beloved; in 5.16, 6.12, and 9.18 where Jesus goes away to pray in preparation for further ministry; and in 22.39ff where Jesus prays just prior to his arrest in the

¹⁶ "Jesus' ascension, reported at the close of Luke as well as in the opening of Acts, is not only the midpoint of Luke's narrative, but also the guarantee of the coming realization of salvation in all of its fullness to all people," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, 1849.

¹⁷ Thus, Luke's narrative has come "full circle." This story of Jesus begins with the "good news of great joy" (1.19, 25, 28, 42-56, 67-79; 2.8-14) being brought to the Jerusalem temple (2.21-38) and ends with the disciples returning there with joy (24.44-53)—an ending that looks forward to the gospel emanating forth from Jerusalem into all the nations of the world (24.36-53).

¹⁸ The Acts volume will detail the history of the gospel's movement from Jerusalem to Rome, the center of the known world, ending with Paul "proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance" (cf. Lk 24.47, Acts 1.1-11; 28.31).

¹⁹ Lk 3.21; 5.16; 6.12; 9.18, 28-29; 10.21; 11.1; 22.32; 22.41-46; 23.46

²⁰ Lk 1.41, 67, 80; 2.25f; 3.22; 4.14, 18; 8.29, 39; 10.19-21; 11.13-15; 12.10-12; 13.2; 15.28; 16.16; 20.22; 24.48-49, 52-53

²¹ Lk. 1.5-23; 2.22-38, 41-52; 4.9-12; 9.51-56ff; 13.22, 31-35; 17.11; 18.9-14; 18.31-34; 19.28-24.53; Acts 12.25; 15.2; 18.22; 19.21; 20.16; 21.13; 25.1

²² Lk emphasizes the universal reach of the good news through historical references to both Jewish (1.5; 2.25-38; 3.2; 8.41ff; 9.7-9; 19.1-10; 22.66; 23.50-51) and Roman (2.1-2; 3.1, 19-20; 7.1; 13.1-5, 32-33; 20.20-26; 23.1-15) leaders, and through language inclusive of all peoples (1.76-79; 2.10, 29-32; 3.3-6, 23-28; 4.16-30; 4.43-44; 5.31; 6.17, 20-26; 8.1, 4-20; 14.7-24; 19.45-46; 24.45-49).

²³ Lk 1.52-53; 6.24-26; 12.13-40; 14.26-33; 16.11-13, 19-31; 17.22-35; 18.18-30; 19.1-10

²⁴ 3.7-14 (JBap's Justice Sermon); 5.11, 28 (Paradigm of Discipleship); 6.27-49; 10.25-42; 11.39-44; 12.4-34; 13.7-35; 18.9-30 et al (Kingdom Ethics—viz. proper fruit bearing); 7.36-50; 8.30-41; 19.1-10 (Proper Repentance); 8.19-21 ("Hearing the Word of God and Doing It"); 9.21-27, 57-62 (Cost of Discipleship); 13.18-30; 19.11-27 (Parables of the Mustard Seed, Yeast, Narrow Door, and Talents).

²⁵ Lk 1.5-25 (Zechariah & Elizabeth); 1.26-38 (Mary & Joseph); 1.48-56 (Mary's Song); 2.8-20 (Shepherds); 3.7-14 (JBap's Justice Sermon); 4.16-30 (Jesus' Nazareth Sermon); 4.40-41, 5.12-26, 7.1-17, 8.26-39, 43-48; 9.37-43, 13.10-17, 14.1-6, 17.11-19 (Healings – Physical, Spiritual, & Societal Restoration); 5.1-11, 27-32 (Disciples); 6.20-26, 16.19-31 (Blessings upon Marginalized; Woes upon Mainstream); 7.38-50 (Sinful Woman); 8.1-3, 10.38-41, 23.55-24.11 (Women Disciples); 10.25-37 (Good Samaritan); 14.7-24 (Banquets for the Poor, Crippled, Lame, Blind); 18.15-17 (Blessings upon Children); 19.1-10 (Zacchaeus); 21.1-4 (Widow's Offering).

²⁶ *The Daily Study Bible Series: The Gospel of Luke*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), 4.

garden. The role of the Holy Spirit is just as prominent, as the Spirit empowers persons to proclaim the gospel (see 1.41-42, 67-79; 2.25-33; et al).²⁷

As should be evident from the summary above, Jerusalem is central to the Lk-Acts narrative. Luke begins and ends his story here, and in Acts the gospel radiates from this city.²⁸ Read as a whole, then, Lk-Acts sees the gospel of God's favor (arriving during the reign of Caesar Augustus)²⁹ moving deliberately from Galilee to Jerusalem through Jesus' ministry, and from Jerusalem to Rome ("the very ends of the earth," the center of the civilized world, and Caesar's capital city) in Acts through the disciples' ministry.

Directly connected to this theme is that of the universal scope of God's favor. The opening chapters are especially imbued with Hebrew faith, most notable in the hymnic texts (1.46-55, 67-79; 2.13-14, 29-32), all of which "echoes the OT so that the whole is a mosaic of scriptural themes reused for a new expression of praise."³⁰ Throughout his gospel Luke makes it clear that through Jesus the messianic hopes of Israel have been fulfilled, which means that the promise to Abraham in Genesis 12.1-3 is finally realized, namely, that the blessing of God will extend throughout all of creation.

The final three themes—the fruit of repentance, exaltation of the marginalized, and danger of wealth—are intertwined throughout the narrative and impinge upon one another. The one who bears fruit worthy of repentance is a person who both recognizes the dangers of wealth and seeks to care for those on the margins of society. One could say that this is Luke's principle theme—a God who is near to the lowly and whose followers are those willing to sell everything to help the poor and follow the Savior. While many passages could be cited, two in particular stand out by way of illustration. In 3.1-17 we have Luke's primary account of JBap's ministry, in which we find a call to "bear fruits worthy of repentance" (8). This means that the crowds are to share their clothes and food with those who have none (10-11), the tax collectors are to take only what is right (13), and the soldiers are to stop extorting money and be content with their pay (14). JBap's ethic closely aligns these three themes, demonstrating that the good fruit of repentance manifests itself by avoiding the love of possessions and by helping those on the

²⁷ "In a way that supresses that of the other evangelists, Lk portrays not only the ministry of Jesus but even the movement begun by him as especially Spirit-guided. In at least seventeen instances in the gospel and fifty-seven in Acts the influence of the Spirit is seen both on the activity of Jesus himself and on that of his followers," Fitzmyer, *The Oxford Companion*, 474.

²⁸ The centrality of Jerusalem in Lk-Acts continually emphasizes the connection between the OT and the ministry of Jesus. As Craig Evans has noted, the OT "provided Luke with information as to what happened in the life of Jesus, what it means, and how it should be told," noting that "large sections of Luke (chaps 7-10, 22-24) and Acts (chaps 1-9) draw in various ways upon the Elijah/Elisha narratives of 1 Kgs (chaps 17-21) and 2 Kgs (chaps 1-8)" and "another large section of Luke... (9.51-18.14), parallels Deuteronomy (chaps 1-26)," *The New International Biblical Commentary: Luke*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990), 5.

²⁹ Beginning the account of Jesus with "a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the [civilized] world should be registered" (2.1) is significant. Not only does it place Jesus' life onto the universal stage of history, it also subverts the proclamations put forth by the Roman Empire that proclaimed Caesar as "god manifest and common savior of human life" (Evans, *The New International Biblical Comemntary*, 37). Declaring instead that the Savior is actually the "child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger" in Bethlehem of Judea who brings God's favor to all the world (2.10-14)—a gospel that will ultimately be proclaimed unhindered in Augustus' capital city (Acts 28.31).

³⁰ Brown, *An Introduction*, 232.

margins. In 18.18-25 we find Jesus proclaiming much the same message. Having already declared that his ministry is one of exalting the lowly (cf. 4.18-19), Jesus now encounters a ruler who wants to inherit eternal life—that is, to enter into the kingdom of God, the domain over which God’s ethic holds sway. He has kept all of the commandments faithfully, but must do one thing more—“sell all that [he] owns and distribute the money to the poor” and then he can come and follow Jesus.³¹ Once more we find that the fruit of repentance is manifested in a detachment from possessions in order to follow the Savior, whose message and ministry is always one of carrying the good news to the poor, proclaiming release to those in captivity, recovering the sight of the blind, bringing release to the oppressed, and declaring the year of the Lord’s favor upon all peoples.

Outline of and Commentaries on the Gospel

Oxford Companion to the Bible³²

- I. Prologue (1.1-4)
- II. Infancy Narrative (1.5-2.52)
- III. Prelude to the Events Inaugurating Jesus’ Public Career (3.1-4.13)
- IV. Jesus’ Galilean Ministry (4.14-9.50)
- V. Travel Account [Journey to Jerusalem] (9.51-19.27)
- VI. Ministry and Teaching in the Temple (19.28-21.38)
- VII. Passion Narrative (22.1-23.56a)
- VIII. Resurrection Narrative (23.56b-24.53)

³¹ Finding this a hard and uncomfortable message, some have suggested that what Jesus means is that we are to cultivate an inner detachment from our goods: “it’s not that having possessions is bad, it’s being possessed by them that is to be avoided.” This is true so far as it goes; only, I do not think it goes far enough nor can it be defended using Luke’s gospel. “Lk seems to regard the very possession of wealth (unless distributed to the poor) as corrupting one’s relationship with God. Lk’s ideal is the Jerusalem community of those believers who give their possessions to the common fund as he describes in Acts 2.44-45; 4.32-37,” Brown, *An Introduction*, 239. In Luke we find a recurring proclamation that wealth and possessions are a danger and a hindrance to discipleship (see 1.52-53; 4.5-8; 5.11, 28; 6.20-26; 9.57-62; 19.1-10, 45-46; 20.9-19); that the paradigm for a Christ-follower is to “leave everything and follow” (5.11, 28); that for all Jesus cares we can give all Caesar’s money back to him so long as we give to God what is God’s (20.20-25)—namely, everything that bears his image (cf. Gen 1.26); that building bigger barns to hold all of our stuff is a fruitless and destructive endeavor (12.13-21); that life does not originate in a superabundance of possessions (12.15); that a disciple is one who provides for others out of their resources (8.1-4; 9.10-17; 10.25-37; 14.7-24); in sum, that the cost of discipleship is everything, for “none of [us] can become [Jesus’] disciple if [we] do not give up all [our] possessions” (14.33). This means holding them in such a manner that we do not hoard our goods, but it also means giving away more of our resources to those in need than we may be entirely comfortable in order to follow the One who came bringing good news to the poor, oppressed, manipulated, burdened, and marginalized.

³² Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “The Gospel According to Luke,” *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan, eds., (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 469-474.

For Further Study

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