

Luke's Gospel: Chapter 1 verses 1 to 38

John the Baptist and Jesus

Introduction to Luke's Gospel and dedication to Theophilus (Luke 1 v 1 to 4)

Luke was Paul's travelling companion and biographer (Acts 16 v 10 to 12; 2 Timothy 4 v 11; Philemon 1 v 24). Paul called him "the beloved physician" (Colossians 4 v 14) – since Luke was a doctor, he was a man of science and research, and this is reflected in his history of the life of Jesus.

Colossians 4 v 10, 11 indicates that Luke was not a Jew, because he was not included in the "men of the circumcision". This makes Luke unique in that he is the only New Testament writer who was a Gentile. Because he also wrote the book of Acts, Luke wrote more of the New Testament than any other human writer.

1. Luke's is the most comprehensive Gospel, covering the story of Jesus from the announcement of his birth to his ascension.
2. It is the most universal Gospel – Gentiles are often put in a favourable light.
3. Luke's Gospel is the one most interested in the roles of women, children, and social outcasts.
4. Luke's Gospel has the most emphasis on prayer, the Holy Spirit, joy, and preaching the good news.

Luke addresses his Gospel to a man named Theophilus (verse 3), but it was also written with a wider audience in mind. By his title ("most excellent"), we understand that Theophilus was probably a Roman government official. It is possible that together the books of Luke and Acts made up Paul's defence brief for his trial before Caesar.

- What do these first four verses tell us about (a) the sources of Luke's information; (b) the importance he attached to giving a truthful record; and (c) his purpose in writing this Gospel?

The "eyewitnesses" (verse 2) included the apostles who were with Jesus from the start, but may also have included Mary, whom Luke probably 'interviewed' in his research on the life of Jesus. These first four verses are one sentence in the original Greek, and are written in refined, academic, classical style. But then, for the rest of the Gospel, Luke does not use the language of scholars, but κοινή (*koine*) Greek, the language of the marketplace, for the common man...

Birth of John the Baptist foretold (Luke 1 v 5 to 25)

These events happened "in the days of Herod" (verse 5) – Herod the Great was famous for his building programmes, and infamous for his paranoid cruelty and murders. Zechariah and Elizabeth were "righteous" (verse 6), yet stigmatized because they had no children.

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Zechariah “was chosen by lot to... burn incense” (verse 9) – only descendants of Aaron could serve in the temple. As there may have been some 20,000 priests, lots were used to determine which priests would serve, and this lot might fall to a priest only once in his lifetime. According to the Law of Moses, incense was offered on the golden altar every morning and evening (Exodus 30 v 7, 8), and by this time, there was an established ritual for the practice. The burning of incense is a symbolic picture of prayer (see Psalm 141 v 2, Revelation 5 v 8).

- What was the mission assigned to John the Baptist? What kind of ‘greatness’ would he have (verse 15)?
- What was the reason for Zechariah’s punishment (verse 20)? What made him hesitate to believe the angel’s message? Why ought Zechariah to have believed? What about us?

John’s ministry would be to turn many children of Israel back to God (verse 16). Jesus later said that Elijah’s ministry was fulfilled in John (Matthew 11 v 11 to 14, 17 v 10 to 13). The quotation from Malachi 4 v 5, 6 is significant, because these were the last words in the Old Testament, and now God’s revelation resumes where it has left off...

Birth of Jesus foretold (Luke 1 v 26 to 38)

- What did Gabriel say about Jesus’ mission and destiny? Has this happened yet? What did he mean by the ‘throne of David’?
- How do you think Mary felt when she saw the angel? How did she respond?

When the angel said “you will conceive in your womb and bear a son” (verse 31), Mary realised he was quoting from Isaiah 7 v 14: “the virgin shall conceive and bear a son”.

The ‘throne of his father David’ (verse 32) – Jesus will be the Messiah prophesied to David (2 Samuel 7 v 12 to 16), who has the rightful authority to rule over Israel.

Gabriel said that the power of the Most High, in the person of the Holy Spirit, would overshadow Mary (verse 35). The word ‘overshadow’ translates ἐπισκιάζω (*episkiazō*), which means to ‘cover with a cloud’, like the cloud of Shekinah glory (e.g. Exodus 16 v 10) or the cloud of transfiguration (Luke 9 v 34).