

## LUKE'S SOCIAL GOSPEL

Like Matthew, the gospel of Luke presents a sweeping account of the life and message of Jesus. Both describe a virgin birth, both present a genealogy, both give accounts of great teachings such as the Sermon on the Mount.

However, Luke is written *for different reasons* than Matthew. In many respects, Luke's Jesus stands diametrically in opposition to the Jesus of Matthew.

As one example, Luke's view of the Pharisees contrasts with the picture presented by Matthew. Luke's gospel portrays Jesus as having standing among the Pharisees, while Matthew depicts the relationship as one of open conflict.

However, it is Luke's portrayal of the *social conscience* of Jesus that stands in sharpest contrast with his New Testament counterparts – from Matthew to Paul. Matthew's Jesus is concerned with poverty of the spiritual rather than material realm. Luke's Jesus is attuned to earthly economics; his Jesus is a social reformer.

Of the four New Testament gospels, Luke stands alone with a heightened concern for the poor and underprivileged in society. This sense of social conscience extends to others with lesser status in first century Jewish society – including women and non-Jews.

In this respect, Luke provides a linkage between Jesus as the radical first century reformer in an isolated land and Jesus as the hope of all peoples – including those struggling for recognition, social justice and equality at the dawn of this third millennium.

### BACKGROUND OF LUKE THE GOSPEL

Both the third gospel and the Acts of the Apostles are traditionally attributed to Luke. Taken together, these two books provide the most sweeping account of early Christianity from the genealogy and birth of Christ through to the arrest and confinement of the apostle Paul in Rome.

Two times are commonly suggested as dates for the writing of this gospel: the period from 59-63 AD versus later in the 70s or 80s. Support for earlier composition is provided by the oldest known partial fragmentary evidence of a Lukan manuscript – the Paris Papyrus (P4) dated not much later than about 66 AD.

Most (though not all) early and contemporary scholars believe that Luke was written subsequent to both Matthew and Mark. This position is buttressed by the introduction to the gospel itself, wherein the author writes:

“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 from the beginning 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...*

From these introductory remarks, it is clearly evident that: (a) there were multiple accounts available from which Luke could draw; and (b) there is apparent concern that some earlier accounts may not have been wholly reliable.

**Authorship:** Both Luke and Acts are addressed to the same person, the unknown Theophilus. The Acts of the Apostles also begins with a reference to “my former book.” Even today, most (though not all) scholars believe that the same author writes both books.

Neither volume explicitly identifies Luke as the author. However, certain sections in Acts use the pronoun “we”, suggesting that the author was with Paul for many of the events being described.

Luke’s authorship of the third gospel is supported by testimony of early Christian writings including the Muratorian Canon, circa 170 AD and the works of Irenaeus, c. 180. Irenaeus states that: “Luke, the follower of Paul, set down in a book the gospel preached by him.”

**The Tradition of Luke:** Luke is known by the title given by Paul as “the beloved physician”. To Philemon, Paul describes Luke along with Mark and two others as “my fellow workers.” So, Luke was a co-traveler with at least one other gospel author figure.

Luke may well have been a Gentile by birth, certainly well educated and versed in Greek culture. Luke accompanied Paul at various times beginning with Paul’s second missionary journey. As later indicated by Paul’s writing to Timothy, Luke was one of a handful who remained with Paul after others deserted.

By tradition, Luke is identified as a member of the church at Antioch. He is believed to have written his gospel in Greece – and for a Greek speaking audience. Third century theologian Origen would comment that Luke was composed after Matthew and Mark. Origen also noted that Luke “ ... wrote for Gentile converts the gospel praised by Paul.”

## **THE JESUS OF SOCIAL CONSCIENCE**

Matthew’s Jesus is concerned with poverty of the spiritual rather than material realm. Luke’s Jesus is attuned to earthly economics; Jesus becomes a social advocate and reformer.

At the Sermon on the Mount, it was Luke’s Jesus who proclaimed: “Blessed are you who are poor.” Matthew’s text suggests a far different meaning with Jesus saying: “Blessed are the poor *in spirit.*”

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Another comparison also comes from what are known as the Beatitudes:

*Luke's version* – “Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.”

*Matthew's version* – “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst *for righteousness*, for they will be filled.”

Luke's beatitudes are aimed at earthly material needs; Matthew's version is pointed toward the spiritual.

All together, Luke's version of the beatitudes consists of only four affirmative sayings, while Matthew comprises a total of 9 beatitudes. Then, following the positive affirmations, Luke issues four condemnations which have no counterpart in Matthew:

But woe to you who *are rich*, for you have received your consolation.

Woe to you who are *full now*, for you will be hungry.

Woe to you who are *laughing now*, for you will mourn and weep.

Woe to you when *all speak well of you*, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

Each of these denunciations appears directly aimed at the “haves” of first century Jewish society. Luke's Jesus condemns the rich, those who are well fed, those who laugh and the respected members of the community.

For Luke, Jesus' sympathies lie with the poor and the social outcast. If one has the misfortune of wealth, the apparent remedy is to sell what one has and distribute the proceeds to the have-nots.

***Always the Poor?*** Perhaps most telling are the contrasting accounts provided by all four gospel writers of a woman (or separate women?) who anoint Jesus. In the versions provided by Matthew, Mark and John, the anointing takes place at Bethany. Onlookers complain that the ointment could have been sold and the money given to the poor.

*All three* of the non-Lukan gospels record that Jesus dismissed these complaints with the comment that “you always have the poor with you.” Just to make sure no one misses the point, Jesus adds that you will “not always have me.”

Luke takes a different tack. An anointing takes place in a Pharisee's house (at an unspecified location) by “a woman in the city, who was a sinner”. The Pharisee says to himself: “If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him – that she is a sinner.”

In response, Luke's Jesus presents a story (or parable) about two debtors, then gets to the point: “Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have *been forgiven*; hence she has

shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, forgives little.” He then says to the woman: “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

In effect, three of the gospel writers (including John) have picked an incident where the punch line is that a luxury gift for a special occasion can be a more important priority than helping the poor. In contrast, Luke selects a seemingly similar account (albeit in a different setting), but the emphasis shifts from lack of priority for the poor to concern for forgiveness.

Only Luke avoids the statement (and the resulting admission) that the poor will always be with us. This is not surprising since Jesus’ seemingly cynical acceptance of poverty expressed in the other gospel accounts would contradict Luke’s consistent emphasis on Jesus as advocate for the poor and oppressed.

***The Economics of Luke’s Jesus:*** Of the four gospel writers, Luke is most clearly interested in Jesus’ views regarding not only the social but also economic order. The *Robin Hood* tone of Luke is set early on, with Mary the mother proclaiming in her *Magnificat* prior to Jesus’ birth: “...he has *filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.*”

Passages found only in Luke appear to advocate a fairly radical form of re-distributionist economics. For this gospel writer, wealth and spirituality are inherently incompatible. Only Luke’s gospel records Jesus as commanding:

- “Whoever has two coats *must share* with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.”
- “Give to *everyone who begs* from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again.”
- “If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, *what credit* is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again.”

The passion of Luke’s gospel extends well beyond sympathy for the less fortunate to a more activist role for economic redistribution. Only Luke tells us about tax collector Zacchaeus, who says to Jesus: “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back *four times as much.*” This passage implies a very active role for the economic oppressor to assure restitution *above and beyond* the bare minimum.

Luke is also the only gospel that recounts the powerful and well-known parable of the Good Samaritan. This parable is offered in answer to a lawyer’s question: “Who is my neighbor?” Again, the answer is that the reward goes not to those who have the means or the authority, but to those who go out of their way – to serve the outcasts of the world.

***Champion of Women:*** Of the three synoptics, Luke certainly provides the most coverage of activities by women. Consistent with his views on other forms of social reform, it is not surprising that Luke’s Jesus appears as the greatest advocate for addressing the social and economic inequities faced by the women of first century Palestine.

We can learn a fair amount about Luke's views by focusing on passages unique to this gospel:

- Luke's gospel provides details about the conception of Mary's cousin Elizabeth and chronicles the visit between the two prior to the birth of either son.
- Only Luke describes the role of the prophetess Anna and Mary's admonishment to Jesus at age 12. Luke records that Jesus speaks the need to be in his Father's house, but also returns home to Nazareth and "was obedient" to his parents.
- Luke notes that "some women" who travel with him care for Jesus and his followers.
- Luke's Jesus admires persistence and attentiveness in women; he is less charitable toward busy work and second-guessing.
- While sympathetic toward women with children, Luke's Jesus appears especially supportive of women who are single (e.g. widows).

While sympathetic, the Jesus of Luke remains somewhat aloof from the women with whom he interacts. There is a clear sense of social activism but little of the intimacy that one finds with Jesus and women as recorded by John's gospel.

**Acceptance of Luke:** While not explicitly mentioned by at least one early 2<sup>nd</sup> century patriarch (Papias), Luke's gospel appears to have won ready acceptance among Christian churches by at least the mid-second century. This was the only gospel accepted (albeit with significant edits) by the gnostic heretic Marcion – due largely to Luke's affiliation with the apostle Paul.

## LUKE IN SUMMARY

And so ends our quick tour of what has been called the *most beautiful book ever written* – the only gospel that definitely can be attributed to a non-Jew. A man of apparent professional training. Well learned but with a heart for those less fortunate.

Luke presents Jesus as the man of *social conscience* and action. This comes across in Jesus' views regarding the importance of charity toward the poor, economy of the kingdom, outreach to women, and arguably as borderline social revolutionary.

This is a very different Jesus than is portrayed by the other three New Testament gospels. To Matthew, Mark and John, Jesus offers a message of *personal* hope and redemption. With Luke, the emphasis is more *collective* than individual. His is the only gospel aimed toward redressing social evils – of poverty, redistribution of wealth, and improved status for women.

Not surprisingly, it is Luke who describes a merciful God. But Luke's God is also more distant, experienced more through intermediaries rather than personally. Ironically, while this gospel writer rails against class divisions on a material level, he upholds hierarchical distinctions on a spiritual level.

Luke's God is patrician, regal in character. As expressed by the Mary of Luke's gospel in her formal Magnificat, "holy is his name."

A Jesus' of social conscience was a new idea for the early Christian church – advanced by no other New Testament writer than Luke. This then was Luke's contribution to Christendom and his heresy.

Over two millennia, the benefit of Luke's heresy has been the recognition that the *good news* of Christianity is not only for the next world after this life, but for the here and now. The social activism of Luke's Jesus has animated Christian reformers from Augustine to the liberation theologians of the last century – from the communal post-resurrection church to mainline congregations in the wake of the "God is dead" theology of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

Luke provides a linkage between Jesus as the radical first century reformer in an isolated land and Jesus as the hope of all peoples – including those struggling for recognition, social justice and equality at the dawn of the third millennium.

The drawback of Lukan theology has been the de-emphasis of a personal relationship and individual accountability before the divine. The lost opportunity for realizing intimacy in this life with a crucified and risen Savior.

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This excerpt is adapted from the "The Heresy of Luke: Social Conscience," further detailed in the approximately 360 page book *12 Heresies of Christianity*. For more, , please click here to view our web site at [www.jesustheheresy.com](http://www.jesustheheresy.com).