

THE STRUCTURE OF LUKE'S GOSPEL

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A survey of the content of the third gospel reveals that Luke devoted the mid-section of his gospel to the so-called "travel narrative"¹ comprising nearly ten chapters. It is interesting to see that in this particular section (9:51-19:27) he has placed most of the parables of Jesus (only the parables of the wise and foolish builders, the two debtors, and the sower fall outside it). Parables peculiar to Luke's gospel, with the exception of the one on the two debtors (7:36-50), are all in the travel narrative. If we count a total of 23 parables in the third gospel we see that 16 of them are peculiar to Luke. In the travel narrative, one chapter consists only of parables: chap. 15 (lost sheep, lost coin and lost son). Two chapters that feature parables almost exclusively are chap. 14 (places of honor at table, great banquet, tower builder and warring king) and chap. 16 (shrewd manager, rich man and Lazarus). Besides the parables some of the material in the travel narrative is found only in Luke's gospel: the home of Mary and Martha (10:38-41), the tower of Siloam (13:1-5), the healing of a crippled woman on the Sabbath (13:10-17), the healing of ten lepers (17:11-19), and Zacchaeus the tax collector (19:1-10).

Chapters 1 and 2 without any break present material peculiar to Luke, and we find this to be true also partly in chaps. 3 and 4. Chapter 23 in part and almost all of chap. 24 contain accounts found only in Luke. Material that parallels Mark's gospel comprises a sizeable segment of chap. 5, the first seventeen verses of chap. 7, nearly everything of chaps. 8 and 9, a considerable portion of chaps. 18 and 19, all of chap. 20, virtually everything of chap. 21, and a number of verses in chaps. 22 and 23. On the other hand, material that Luke and Matthew have in common is confined to the first half of Luke's gospel.

By one calculation the synoptic gospels consist of 172 sections of material that is parallel in all three or in two gospels and of material that is unique to any writer. Of the 172 sections Luke has a total of 127 or 75%, and of this total 28% is peculiar to Luke's gospel. Matthew is next: Of the 172 Matthew has 114 sections or 66%, of which 12% is peculiar to Matthew's gospel. Last is Mark: Of the 172 sections Mark has 84 or 50%, and only 3% of the 84 sections is peculiar to Mark's gospel.²

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¹The designation "travel narrative" is disputed by some theologians because the references to place names are nonexistent except for Jerusalem (9:53; 10:30; 13:4, 33; 17:11; 18:31; 19:11). C. F. Evans calls it "the central section" in "The Central Section of St. Luke's Gospel," *Studies in the Gospels* (ed. D. E. Nineham; Oxford: Blackwell, 1967) 41. J. Drury, *Tradition and Design in Luke's Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1976) 138, doubts if even that title is appropriate. Besides, the length of the "travel narrative" is debatable because it is not clear whether the section that begins at 9:51 should end at 18:14 or 19:27.

²A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Luke* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1977) xxv.

Briefly summarized, it is evident that the first two chapters of Luke's gospel, a section of its center part comprising the parables, and its last two chapters contain material found only in the third gospel. Also large portions of Luke's gospel, chiefly chaps. 5, 6, 8, 9, 18, 20 and 21, have material paralleled in Mark's account. A relatively small part of Luke's gospel has material similar to that in Matthew's gospel, namely smaller segments in chaps. 4, 6, 7, 10-12.

I. COMPOSITION

That Luke composed his gospel with care, precision and design is evident already from the introduction (1:1-4). Luke writes that in his day "many writers [had] undertaken the task to draw up an account of the things that [had] been fulfilled." Luke states from whom he gained his information for the writing of a gospel: "those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word." These people, says Luke, handed down the accounts. Luke carefully investigates everything from the beginning and thus writes an orderly account, though not necessarily from a chronological point of view.

Luke went to eyewitnesses of the word to gain first-hand information. Who were the eyewitnesses? I would like to propose that we work with a hypothesis. After Paul's arrest in the city of Jerusalem at the end of his third missionary service, Luke may have spent time in Judea as Acts 21:17-18 seems to indicate: "When we arrived at Jerusalem, the brothers received us warmly. The next day Paul and the rest of us went to see James, and all the elders were present." It is not improbable to assume that Luke visited Mary, the mother of Jesus, to obtain from her the birth accounts of John the Baptist and of Jesus.³ This hypothesis is buttressed by two facts: (1) Whereas the Greek in the introduction (1:1-4) rivals classical Greek, the rest of chap. 1 and all of chap. 2 is told in an Aramaic type of Greek, related by someone whose native tongue was Aramaic; (2) twice in chap. 2 we are told that "Mary treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart" (2:19, 51). Luke may have received the birth narratives verbatim from the mother of Jesus, and thus the material is peculiar to his gospel presentation.

After the birth accounts Luke writes excellent Greek in the first two verses of chap. 3, pinpointing the time when John the Baptist began his ministry. Apart from a few verses on John's baptizing that are similar to Matthew and Mark's accounts, John's preaching is peculiar to Luke's gospel. Luke relates the dialogue John has with the crowd, the tax collector and the soldiers. The rest of chap. 3 is an elaborate genealogy of Jesus that begins with Joseph and ends with Adam, the son of God. This genealogy is entirely different from the one Matthew provides at the beginning of his gospel.

Chapter 4 commences with the temptations of Jesus, an account paralleled in Matt 4:1-11. Following the temptation of Jesus, however, Luke continues with an account of Jesus' rejection in his hometown synagogue of Nazareth. This incident is reported only by Luke and may have been given to him either by Mary, the mother of Jesus, or by James, the half-brother of Jesus. Obviously we cannot be certain, and therefore I use the names only as a hypothesis. The account is so vivid in detail—for example, the reference to the scroll of Isaiah and the exact

³Eyewitnesses were first of all the apostles, then others including Matthias and Barsabbas (Acts 1:23), the seventy-two disciples (Luke 10:1), and the mother and brothers of Jesus (Acts 1:14).

verse from that scroll—that it seems safe to assume that an eyewitness reported the narrative.

In chap. 5 the calling of the first disciples is recorded only by Luke in the story of the miraculous catch of fish. It is Peter who responds to the miracle by calling attention to his sinful state: "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man" (5:8). Because of the personal touch of Peter we may assume that it is Peter who related the effective calling of the four disciples (Peter, Andrew, James and John) to discipleship.

As a last point in this short survey of independent stories in the gospel of Luke I mention the incident of the raising of the widow's son at Nain.⁴ This rather brief report, found only in Luke, may have come from one of Jesus' disciples—an eyewitness and minister of the Word, as the context seems to indicate.

The rest of the material peculiar to Luke belongs to the parables placed chiefly in the mid-section of the third gospel. And the concluding chapters that feature narratives unique in Luke's presentation most likely came from the disciples who were eyewitnesses. In fact the story of the two men of Emmaus may have come from the men themselves.

The question of source material used by Luke in the construction of his gospel defies an answer. That other gospel accounts were in existence when Luke began to write his own is clear from the opening phrase: "Many have undertaken to draw up an account." Luke merely states a fact and does not leave the impression that these writers presented the gospel inadequately. He does not indicate anywhere that he slavishly copies a particular source, even though the parallels are striking. If we assume that the gospel of Mark was already in circulation when Luke wrote his, we certainly have difficulty in explaining why Luke omitted sections of Mark's gospel—for example, Mark 6:45-8:9. This section contains Jesus' journey to Tyre and Sidon and the healing of the Syrophenician woman's daughter. Certainly this information would have been of paramount importance to Luke's Gentile readers.

Moreover it is obvious from the account of the healing of the paralytic—recorded in Matt 9:1-8; Mark 2:1-12; Luke 5:17-26—that the Lucan account is the most comprehensive. If Luke had merely relied on Mark's gospel he would not have been in a position to expand his information. It appears that Luke has had access to additional sources to write a most comprehensive report on the healing of the paralytic.

With respect to the sermon on the mount discourse of Matthew's gospel and Luke's sermon on the plain, the differences are profound and perplexing. Though the beatitudes as recorded by Matthew may have been known to Luke, it seems more probable that the writer of the third gospel had access to other sources either oral or written. On the basis of order and the wording of parallel passages of Luke in the gospel of Matthew, we simply cannot hold that Luke copied the first gospel. A detailed study of parallel passages common to Matthew's gospel and Luke's demonstrates that it is highly unlikely that Matthew and Luke were following a common document.⁵ It is better to conclude that in writing his gospel

⁴The wording "he gave him back to his mother" coincides verbatim in the Greek with that of 1 Kgs 17:23 LXX, where Elijah returns the son alive and well to the widow of Zarephath.

⁵R. P. Martin in *New Testament Foundations: A Guide for Christian Students* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 1. 145-146, provides six arguments to show that the existence of Q is uncertain. He concludes

Luke was somewhat independent of written sources and with respect to other evangelists was interdependent. That is, if we are guided by Paul's epistles in which Luke and Mark are mentioned as Paul's coworkers in the proclamation of the gospel (see Col 4:10, 14; 2 Tim 4:11; Phlm 24), it is much better to introduce the theory of interdependence and to maintain that Luke and Mark (and perhaps Matthew) shared information in the writing of their respective gospels.

II. CHARACTERISTICS

The gospel of Luke is characterized by a balance and precision that reveals the hand of a literary artist. Frequently men and women are mentioned in juxtaposition in order to achieve balance. In the first chapter Zechariah is introduced, followed by Elizabeth his wife; Mary has a song, and so does Zechariah. In the next chapter Joseph and Mary are mentioned, as are Simeon and Anna. The only son of the widow of Nain is raised from the dead (7:11-17), and so is the only daughter of Jairus (8:40-56). The parable of the mustard seed, which features a man planting his garden, is followed by the parable of the yeast, which portrays a woman baking bread (13:18-21). The parable of the lost sheep, which focuses attention on the shepherd (15:3-7), is succeeded by the parable of the woman who lost a coin in her home (15:8-10). And the parable of the friend who knocks at his neighbor's door in the middle of the night to ask for bread (11:5-8) is balanced by the parable of the widow who keeps coming to a judge with her request for justice (18:1-8). More examples of balance could be mentioned, but these will suffice to show that Luke's composition is beautifully structured and arranged.

If we discover the objective Luke had in mind for writing the third gospel, we see how in the construction of his gospel he arranges the material to serve that end. In the introduction Luke says that he writes an orderly account in order that Theophilus "may know the certainty of the things" he has been taught (1:4). Who was Theophilus, and what were the things he had been taught? We simply do not know. Perhaps we may assume that he was a Roman governor—and that on the basis of the adjective "most excellent."⁶ He most likely had been instructed in the elementary tenets of the Christian faith. It is Luke who intends to present Jesus to him as the Son of God. The theme Luke depicts in his account of the gospel is that Jesus, the Son of God, is divine.

Obviously the message of Gabriel is that Mary's son will be called the Son of God (1:32, 35). The angel tells the shepherds in Bethlehem's field that "in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord" (2:11). The twelve-year-old Jesus asks his astonished parents: "Did you not know I had to be in my Father's house?" (2:49). The baptism scene culminates in the voice from

that "many scholars today speak less confidently of Q as a document, preferring to call it a 'layer of tradition' or 'stratum,' or even a cipher for oral material found in Matthew and Luke." See also J. W. Wenham, "Synoptic Independence and the Origin of Luke's Travel Narrative," *NTS* 27/4 (1981) 507-515.

⁶Theories concerning the identity of Theophilus range from an influential Gentile to a recent convert to Christianity. N. Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951) 53, holds that Theophilus most likely "was a procurator or governor in some province or other of the Roman Empire." I. H. Marshall, however, in *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 43, though expressing caution, writes that the title "most excellent" may point to Theophilus' "superior social position."

heaven saying, "You are my Son whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (3:22). Luke follows this up with a genealogy that begins with Jesus and ends with Adam, the son of God. In the temptation account Satan challenges Jesus by saying, "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread" (4:3) and "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here" (4:9).

Jesus preaches in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth, using Isa 61:1-2 as his text and implying that he is the Messiah (Luke 4:18-19). It is at this point that Luke purposely and deliberately departs from the historical sequence—that is, the evangelist makes it known that Jesus had performed miracles in Capernaum before coming to Nazareth (4:23). Luke wants to portray Jesus as the Messiah coming to his own people in Nazareth, how Jesus read the messianic prophecy of Isaiah and applied it to himself,⁷ and how after the application of his message the audience rejected him—he came to his own and his own did not receive him (John 1:11). Characteristically to show balance, the writer follows this up with an account of Jesus' teaching ministry in the synagogue at Capernaum. Whereas the people of Nazareth refuse to acknowledge him—"Is not this Joseph's son?" (4:22)—the demon-possessed man in the Capernaum synagogue cries out at the top of his voice: "I know who you are—the Holy One of God!" (4:34). That same day in the evening, while healing many demon-possessed people, Jesus hears them shout, "You are the Son of God" (4:41).

The calling of the first disciples placed within the setting of the miraculous catch of fish recorded in chap. 5 is matchless and purposeful. First, though the passage relates that Jesus was teaching the crowd, not one word is recorded of the content of Jesus' teaching. The teaching ministry is not important but the effect it had on one disciple—Simon Peter. Second, while the other gospel writers put the calling of the disciples at the beginning of Jesus' ministry immediately after the temptation of Jesus (Matt 4:18-22; Mark 1:16-20; John 1:35-51), Luke uses the account of the fishing miracle to picture Peter, who as the spokesman of the other disciples recognizes and acknowledges the divinity of Jesus. Third, although the evangelist relates the healing of Peter's mother-in-law in the preceding chapter (Luke 4:38-39), in chap. 5 he places Peter in the foreground to indicate Peter's profound sense of awe when he exclaimed, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" (5:8). Peter realized his own sinfulness in the presence of Jesus Christ, the divine Son of God.

In the two succeeding incidents, juxtaposed as healing events—perhaps to show balance—the writer once again relates that Jesus was teaching, though not a single word of its content is recorded (5:17). Luke draws attention to the reaction of the man who was healed and the crowd that witnessed the event: They praised God (5:25-26). They recognized Jesus' divinity when the Pharisees and teachers of the law had intimated that God alone could forgive sins. When the religious leaders remained silent to Jesus' question concerning whether it was easier to forgive sin or to heal a paralytic, and when the people saw the healing power of Jesus at work, the crowd realized that Jesus was not an ordinary human being. They knew he was divine because "the power of the Lord was present for him to heal the sick" (5:17).

⁷Plummer, *St. Luke* 121, calls attention to the baptism of Jesus at which time the Spirit descended upon him. Therefore Jesus is more than a prophet. He is the Son of God.

III. DESIGN

Luke writes his gospel most artistically, arranging his material so that the light falls on Jesus, the Son of God. Before the evangelist makes the transition from the works of Jesus to the words of Jesus (his discourses), he first records three parabolic sayings of Jesus, concerning (1) a new patch sewn on an old garment, (2) new wine poured into old wine skins, and (3) old wine that is better than new wine. It is true that the sequence of the material is the same as that of Mark's gospel, yet Luke's purpose is different. He uses it as an introduction to the discourse on the plain recorded in chap. 6. It is in this chapter that the teaching of Jesus is presented with many parallels to the sermon on the mount in the gospel of Matthew. Luke displays artistry in listing four beatitudes followed by four woes. By contrast Matthew lists nine beatitudes and makes no mention of woes at all. Because of a profound difference in the composition of the beatitudes and the absence of the woes in Matthew's gospel, it would be improbable to suppose that Luke borrowed his material from Matthew at this point.⁸

The four Lucan beatitudes are skillfully balanced by the four woes that follow. That Luke adapted his material from a sermon preached by Jesus and thus reconstructed the design to create the symmetry of four beatitudes followed by four woes is most probable. We certainly cannot hold that Luke on his own accord added four woes to the four beatitudes. Luke uses balance and symmetry in this section, but the fact remains that he presents the teaching of Jesus though reported in summary form.

The next part of chap. 6 is material that shows affinity to the sermon on the mount. Luke introduces the topics of love for one's enemies, judging others, a tree and its fruit, and the parable of the wise and foolish builders. It cannot be said, however, that Luke copies the Matthean account or follows its sequence.

Luke undoubtedly had an additional source of information and from it developed a design in artistic format. For example, the section that follows the four woes and that may be labeled "love for one's enemies" (6:27-36) portrays the hand of a literary artist. Luke 6:27 states the position in the imperative. It is balanced by a rhetorical question that demands a negative answer (6:32): "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you" versus "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you?" Luke 6:28—"Bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you"—finds its rejoinder in 6:33: "And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you?" Again one statement is positive, the other expects a negative answer. Also 6:29—"If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic"—has its counterpart in a rhetorical question: "If you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you?" (6:34). It is interesting to note that Luke provides a sequence of four beatitudes and four woes followed by three illustrations and three rhetorical questions.

IV. CONCLUSION

Luke, the evangelist and coworker with Paul in the proclamation of the oral

⁸Marshall, *Luke* 246, opines that behind the gospels of Matthew and Luke lies a "common core." It is W. Grundmann, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1978) 141, who wants to see the Q source used by Luke in the formation of beatitudes. This does not mean, however, that his view is generally accepted.

gospel, apparently was thoroughly familiar with a somewhat stereotyped gospel the apostles preached. He must also have known what John expresses in a hyperbole at the end of the fourth gospel: "Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written" (John 21:25).

Out of the material available, Luke had to select certain words and deeds of Jesus and arrange them "in an orderly account." The sequence in which Luke records these words and deeds of Jesus many times is not that of the other two synoptic writers. Luke's sequence seems to be dictated not by strict chronology but by emphases, themes, literary balance and design.

Though the sequence of Luke's gospel differs from the other accounts, the gospel itself can be divided into three main sections with introductory chapters and concluding chapters. Chapters 1 and 2 comprise the birth narratives of John the Baptist and Jesus (introduction), and chaps. 22-24 constitute the conclusion in the form of the passion and resurrection narratives. In between the introduction and conclusion are three segments describing the ministry of Jesus: 3:1-9:50 is the account of Jesus' Galilean ministry, 9:51-19:27 may be called Jesus' ministry outside of Galilee or the travel narrative, and 19:28-21:38 constitutes Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem. Luke guides the reader of his gospel in respect to Jesus' ministry from Galilee to Jerusalem. In the same way, incidentally, Luke guides the reader of the book of Acts from Jerusalem to Rome. Of the four gospels it is Luke's account that is most comprehensive, and his gospel beginning with the birth announcement and ending with the ascension presents the most complete view of the life and ministry of Jesus.