

# *Luke*

## *Lesson #2*

### *Lukan Voices*

*(1: 1-4)*

# Review

In Lesson #1 we began our study of the *Gospel according to Luke* by understanding that a “gospel” is a unique literary genre that reflects the understanding of who Jesus Christ is and what he did, *in light of a living faith tradition, guided by the Holy Spirit, 30-60 years after the events it portrays.*

We also learned how the gospels came to be written, and we placed *Luke* squarely within the synoptic tradition as the third gospel to emerge in written form.

# Preview

The synoptic gospels—Matthew, Mark and Luke—all draw from the same body of oral teaching and preaching; yet, each gospel writer addresses his own audience, and each designs his gospel, employing structural, rhetorical and stylistic devices appropriate for his purpose, making each gospel unique.

Matthew begins his gospel with Jesus' genealogy, portraying Jesus as the fulfillment of the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants: Matthew addresses primarily 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish-Christians in Palestine.

Mark begins his gospel with a dramatic proclamation, in his first sentence asserting that Jesus is the “Son of God”: Mark addresses primarily gentile Christians in Rome, perhaps during the persecution of the Church under the Emperor Nero, A.D. 64-68.

# Preview, cont.

Luke writes both his gospel and the *Acts of the Apostles*. The two volumes make up a single, 2-part work. Luke begins his gospel with one carefully structured sentence consisting of 42 words in Greek, arranged in a very symmetrical, balanced fashion, with a *protasis* (verses 1 & 2) and an *apodosis* (verses 3 & 4), each containing three parallel phrases, all written in the first person, telling his audience—a man named Theophilus—that he has carefully research all of the events he is about to recount, and that he is presenting them in an orderly fashion so that Theophilus may be certain of the things he has been taught.

Luke's Greek in this opening sentence is superb—some of the best in the New Testament. It is certainly the work of a writer trained in classical Greek rhetoric, who chooses to introduce his story in a clearly defined, classical style.

# Preview, cont.

Then beginning with verse 5, Luke's prose style shifts dramatically as he creates an entire cast of characters—including a narrator—who have individual, distinct voices. Rather than telling his story as Matthew and Mark do, Luke's narrator allows his *characters* to tell the story through their interaction. This is very sophisticated narrative technique.

In Lesson #2 we explore Luke's technique, examining his audience, how he tells his story and how Luke's story differs from Matthew's and Mark's.

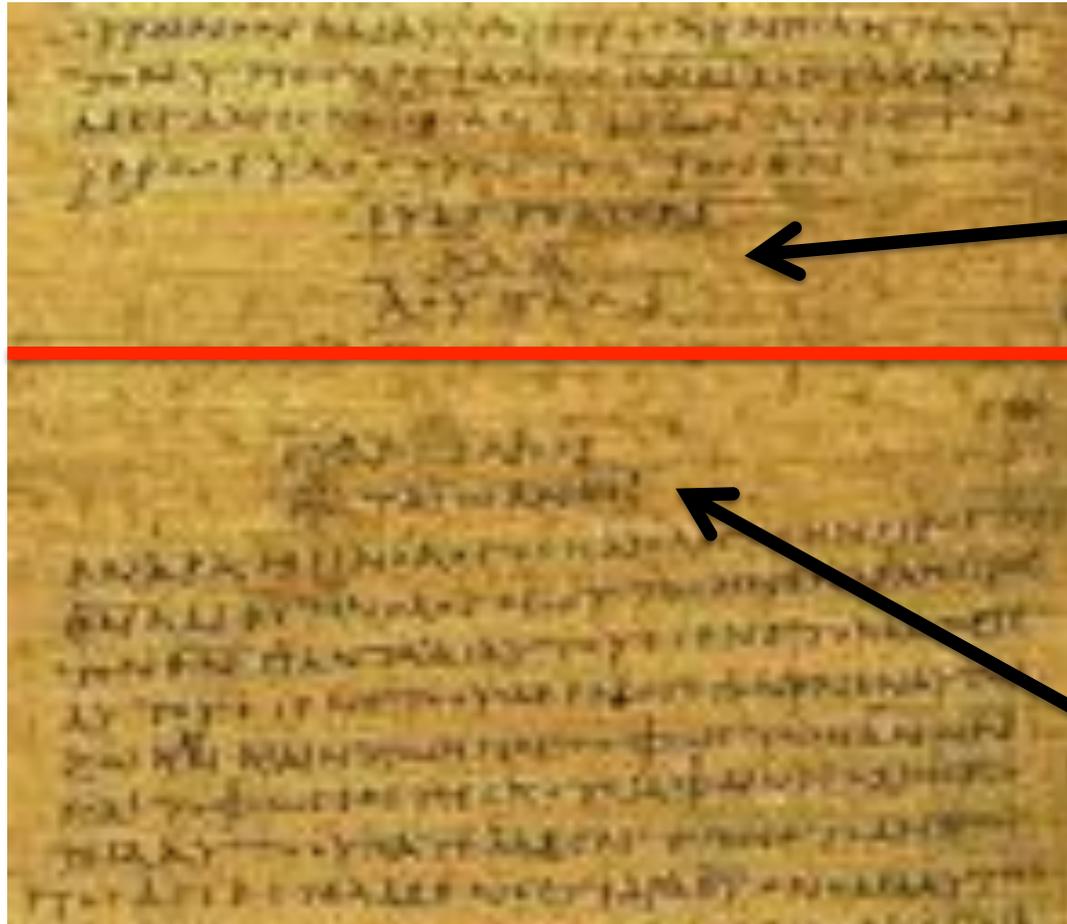
St. Luke is not mentioned as the author of *the Gospel According to Luke* or *the Acts of the Apostles* in the text of either work.





Nevertheless, the early Church unanimously ascribed both works to him. The oldest extant copy of the gospel, P<sup>75</sup>, which is dated A.D. 175-225, is titled “Gospel according to Luke”; the Muratorian Canon, dated A.D. 170-180, attributes the gospel to Luke and also identifies him as a physician and Paul’s companion; Tertullian, writing in the first decade of the third century, notes Luke as the author of the gospels; and a steady stream of later tradition supports these earlier ascriptions.

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**Luke  
ends**

**John  
begins**

Papyrus Bodmer (P<sup>75</sup>) is the oldest surviving manuscript of the *Gospel according to Luke*, dating c. 175-225. It consists of 102 leaves, in whole or in part, and about half the text of Luke (3: 18 – 24: 53, with missing fragments) and John. In the above illustration we see where Luke ends and John begins. The manuscript resides at the Vatican Library.

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**St. Luke is mentioned on three occasions in scripture itself. In Philemon 24 he is included among Paul’s “fellow workers.” In Colossians 4: 14, St. Paul refers to him as “our dear friend Luke, the doctor,” where he also includes him among his gentile helpers. And in 2 Timothy 4: 11 he appears as Paul’s sole companion while Paul awaits death in Rome.**

**In addition, our author of *Luke-Acts* includes his narrator among the travelers on Paul’s second missionary journey, joining them in Troas. As he tells his story, his pronouns shift from “they” to “we”:**

*“Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.”*

**(Acts 16: 6-10)**



**From this point on, the pronouns include our narrator who places himself with St. Paul for eighteen years, from the 2<sup>nd</sup> missionary journey (A.D. 50-52) through St. Paul's death in Rome (A.D. 68).**



Notice that we have drawn a distinction between the author of *Luke-Acts* and the narrator.

**Every story has at least four basic perspectives:**

1. the author who fashions the story,
2. the narrator who tells the story,
3. the characters who populate the story, and
4. the reader who experiences the story.



In *Luke-Acts*, our author does not identify himself, although tradition views him as Luke, the “beloved physician” and traveling companion of Paul.

The narrator, however, is a distinct creation of our author.



***In The Gospel According to Luke, our author tells us the purpose and method of his work, and he also tells us to whom it is addressed:***

*“In as much as many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, it seemed good to me also, having carefully investigated everything from the beginning, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.”*

*(Luke 1:1-4, my translation)*



## Notice several things about this prologue:

1. First, our author knows that others have written works on the same subject, based upon “eyewitness” accounts and those provided by “servants of the word.” A careful, word-by-word comparison of *Luke* with *Matthew* and *Mark* suggests that our author used *The Gospel According to Mark* as one of his primary sources, and he also used *The Gospel According to Matthew*—or a source common to both—for additional material. Moreover, *Luke* includes considerable material not mentioned in either *Mark* or *Matthew*, suggesting that our author drew on other sources, perhaps both written and oral.



2. Second, our author tells us that, using these sources, he *“carefully investigated everything from the beginning”* and that he wishes to arrange them in an *“orderly account”*;
3. Third, we learn that he writes for a very specific audience, a man named *“Theophilus,”* who apparently is a recent believer; and
4. Finally, we learn that our author writes in order that Theophilus may know *“the certainty of the things he has been taught,”* suggesting that his work is a factually accurate one, designed to provide a solid foundation for Theophilus’s new faith.



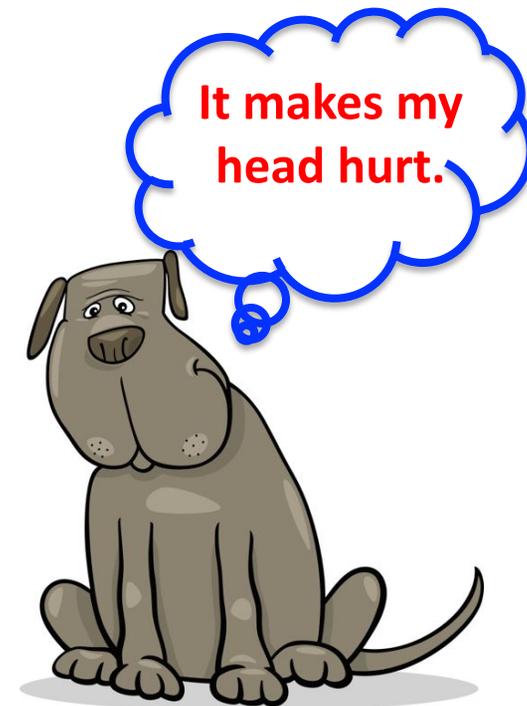
**We should note, too, the prose style of this preface: it is a single, carefully structured sentence consisting of 42 words in Greek, arranged in a very symmetrical, balanced fashion, with a *protasis* (verses 1 & 2) and an *apodosis* (verses 3 & 4), each containing three parallel phrases, all written in the first person. Look at a schematic diagram of the sentence:**

1. *In as much as many have undertaken*
  - a. *to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us,*
  - b. *just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word,*
  
2. *it seemed good to me also,*  
*having carefully investigated everything from the beginning,*
  - a. *to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus,*
  - b. *so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.*



Notice the formal contrast between “many” and “me also,” between “draw up an account” and “write an orderly account” and the secondary subordinate clauses in both the *protasis* and *apodosis*, “just as” / “so that.”

This is superb Greek—some of the best in the New Testament. It is certainly the work of a writer trained in classical Greek rhetoric, who chooses to introduce his story in a clearly defined, classical style.



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***But, after the  
Prologue, Luke will  
never do it again!***



**This is the last time we will encounter this first person, classical voice in *Luke-Acts*. Beginning with verse five, the narrative becomes colloquial, with Semitic idioms and strings of coordinate clauses taking the place of the balanced and highly structured opening sentence.**



In addition, once we leave the prologue, the narrative voice abruptly shifts from first person to third person. Shifting the narrative voice in such a fashion draws attention to what follows and it emphasizes *the deliberate creation of a third person narrator*, distinct from the voice in the opening lines.

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**As the story continues, our author carefully develops distinct, identifiable voices for his narrator and his characters. Like Mark Twain in *Huckleberry Finn* or William Faulkner in his Yoknapatawpha County stories, our *Luke-Acts* author creates voices for his narrator and characters that position them in time, distinguish them from one another and define who they are.**

**James M. Dawsey provides an excellent and comprehensive analysis of the voices in *The Lukan Voice, Confusion and Irony in the Gospel of Luke* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1986).**

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Consider our narrator first. After he is introduced in 1: 5, we find that his voice throughout is best characterized as an *oral* voice; that is, the voice of one who is telling his story aloud, rather than writing it. Unlike the formal voice in the prologue, the narrator's voice speaks words of few syllables in relatively short sentences consisting of clauses strung together by "and" and "but." Of the roughly 1,260 particles in the narrator's speech, 1,064—nearly half—are one or the other.

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Moreover, the narrator's voice is distinctly "Christian," that is, he uses formulaic constructions that hardly ever appear in the direct speech of the story's characters and are unusual outside of a Christian context, for example:

- "and it happened"
- "answering, he said "
- "and behold"
- "when," with an infinitive
- "praising God," and
- "in that hour."

Such formulaic constructions identify the narrator as part of a believing community, much as the use of "Christian jargon" identifies one as a believer today.



**In writing his story our author seems to have constructed a recognizably “Christian” narrator, one who speaks in a colloquial, oral voice, one who observes the characters in his story, who moves them from place to place, and who comments upon their actions and attitudes from a believer’s perspective.**



**When we turn to Jesus we find a very different voice from that of the narrator.**

**Creating a distinctive voice for Jesus is a difficult challenge, for any author runs the risk of turning him into a caricature, as John nearly does in his gospel when he places such unnatural phrases in Jesus' mouth as "Verily, verily I say unto you." Rather than speaking in the unnatural or formulaic phrases of a believing community, Jesus speaks the language of ordinary people in *Luke*.**

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**Although Jesus speaks the language of common people, the *style* of his speech is far from common.**

**Notice how often in *Luke* Jesus' speech takes the form of a pronouncement or a question. Consider, for example, the story of the crippled woman Jesus heals on the Sabbath:**

*“On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, “Woman, you are set free from your infirmity.” Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God.*

*Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue ruler said to the people, “There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath.”*

*The Lord answered him, "You hypocrites! Doesn't each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?"*

*When he said this, all his opponents were humiliated, but the people were delighted with all the wonderful things he was doing."*

**(13: 10-17)**



After the narrator introduces the setting, characters and problem in the story, Jesus speaks, resolving the issue definitively with a pronouncement: *“Woman, you are set free from your infirmity.”* Placing his hands on her, she immediately stands up and praises God. The synagogue ruler then intrudes with a pronouncement of his own, directed not toward Jesus, but toward the woman, the weaker of the two: *“There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath.”*

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Jesus instantly moves to the woman's rescue, defending her and his own actions, by countering with two questions, the first prefaced by a stinging rebuke: ***"You hypocrites! Doesn't each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?"*** Jesus' opponents are humiliated and silenced by his words, while the people are delighted.

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Notice that Jesus' speaks his pronouncement in plain words and that those words have power over the "spirit" — later identified as "Satan" — that had crippled the woman for eighteen years. It is a pronouncement that establishes Jesus' authority, an authority so great that Satan himself bows to it.

When the synagogue ruler responds, Jesus uses this authority to silence and humiliate his opponents. Notice, too, that "opponents" is *plural*. Apparently, Jesus targets the synagogue ruler *and* his supporters, that is, *all* those who wield influence in the synagogue, thus exercising his authority over them also.

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Consistent with his exercise of authority, Jesus' two questions are rhetorical: *they are not meant to be answered*, for the clear answer to each is "yes," and Jesus provides no time for a response. The questions are posed and phrased in such a way that they put the synagogue rulers in their place, which is clearly beneath that of Jesus. Our narrator confirms the fact by telling us "*all his opponents were humiliated.*" At the same time he reinforces Jesus as a man of the people, for they were "delighted" with what he had done.

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Of the eighty-some questions in Jesus' speech in *Luke*, nearly all are posed rhetorically. Their answers do not depend upon Jesus' ability to construct logical, rational or clever arguments; *they rely solely upon his authority as the speaker.* In this sense, we might say that in *Luke* Jesus speaks prophetically, wielding the authority of God himself through his words.



To this point we have seen how our author uses a distinct first person classical style to introduce his story and then how he abruptly shifts that style to a third person colloquial one to distinguish himself from the narrator he creates.

We have also seen how he develops a distinct voice for Jesus, distinguishing him from his narrator and defining who he is.



**Next, we should notice how our author develops his characters and moves his narrative forward.**

**Consider the following chart:**

# Narrative Analysis

(Words spoken by each character)

<u>Gospel</u>	<u>Total Words</u>	<u>Narrator</u>	<u>Jesus</u>	<u>Others</u>
Mark	11,022	53%	36%	11%
Luke	19,165	40%	47%	13%



In Mark, the narrator drives the story; in Luke, the characters drive the story, reflecting a fundamentally different narrative strategy.

Compare, for example, how *Mark* and *Luke* present John the Baptist and his baptism of Jesus.

**First read Mark 1: 1-13, and then read the parallel verses in Luke 3: 1-22.**



**Mark begins his account with a dramatic proclamation:**

***“Beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, Son of God, as it has been written in Isaiah the prophet . . .”***

**In a brief 14 words in the Greek, Mark announces the start of the gospel with a proclamation that echoes Genesis 1: 1, positioning the unfolding events at the beginning of creation itself.**



**In sharp contrast, Luke carefully paves the way for his story in 73 Greek words by positioning events in recent history:**

*“In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Tracónitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene—during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As is written in the book of Isaiah the prophet . . .”*

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Our author of *Luke* tells us in his prologue that he “*investigated everything from the beginning*” and that he intends to “*write an orderly account*” so that Theophilus “*may know the certainty of the things [he has] been taught,*” and indeed he does.

Like a good historian, he carefully provides context for his narrative, creating a strong sense of verisimilitude and authorial credibility. Like Mark, our author then links his story to Isaiah 40: 3-5, identifying John’s arrival as the fulfillment of a seven-hundred year old prophecy.

Both authors then introduce John the Baptist himself.

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In *Mark*, the narrator does so by describing in his own voice who John is, what he does, how his audience responds to him, and what he looks like.

In *Luke* the narrator allows John to speak for himself and to interact with the other characters in the story, while the narrator only briefly comments upon the action.



**Do you see the difference in how the narrator presents his story? In *Mark* he *tells* us about his characters; in *Luke*, he *shows* us by allowing us to observe his characters in action.**

**This is a consistent narrative strategy throughout *Luke-Acts*.**



**Although the synoptic gospels—Matthew, Mark and Luke—all draw from the same body of oral teaching and preaching, and although all three have strikingly similar content, each gospel is unique, each crafted meticulously for a particular audience and purpose.**

**In our liturgical experience of the gospels during Mass, they tend to blur together: variations on a theme, as it were.**

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**But nothing could be further from the truth. Indeed, each of the synoptic gospels—Matthew, Mark and Luke—present bold statements, each representing a unique vision of who Christ is and what he did.**

**Combined, they offer a 3-dimensional portrait, dazzling in its subtleties and nuances, and striking in its detail.**



# Questions for discussion and thought

1. Who is St. Luke, the person to whom the Gospel according to Luke is attributed?
2. What is the relationship between the Gospel according to Luke and the relationship to Matthew and Mark?
3. How would you characterize Luke's narrative strategy?
4. Which is the more effective narrative strategy, Mark's or Luke's?
5. How does Luke distinguish his narrator, Jesus and his other characters from one another?

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