

# Introduction

This book got its start in a classroom at Saint Joseph’s University. I was teaching Luke’s Gospel for the first time. Since my graduate career had focused mainly on Paul, Mark, and John, this meant that I was seriously analyzing Luke’s Gospel for the first time as well. I wanted to make sense of it, not only for my students but also for myself. What motivated the author? Who was his audience, and what was he trying to tell them?

Because writers emphasize what they want most to convey, I started with Luke’s major themes—themes that continue into the Gospel’s sequel, the book of Acts. These were easy enough to discern. Our textbook even provided a partial list.

- The work of the Holy Spirit
- Prayer
- Prominent female characters
- Concern for sinners, the disabled, and the poor
- Christianity as a legal religion
- God’s plan of salvation—a plan that includes Gentiles as well as Jews
- Jesus as the Savior.<sup>1</sup>

In the interest of thoroughness, I thought I should complete the list for my students. I added a few more, mostly drawn from other textbooks.

- The frequent intervention of angels
- The fulfillment of the Scriptures<sup>2</sup>
- The centrality of Jerusalem<sup>3</sup>
- The salvation of Samaritans
- Jesus as the Messiah<sup>4</sup>

1. Stephen L. Harris, *The New Testament: A Student’s Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1999), 164–66. For an earlier statement of the same ideas, see Henry J. Cadbury, *The Making of Luke-Acts*, 3rd ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 254–69, 308–13. Cadbury’s book was first published in 1927.

2. Mitchell G. Reddish, *An Introduction to the Gospels* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 151.

3. Harris, *New Testament*, 159. Harris adds “Importance of Jerusalem and the Temple” to his list of themes in the fifth edition of his book (*The New Testament: A Student’s Introduction*, 5th ed. [Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2006], 197).

4. Reddish, *Introduction to the Gospels*, 152.

- Characters who prophesy<sup>5</sup>
- Jesus and his apostles as prophets—like Elijah and Elisha, empowered by the same Spirit and ministering to Gentiles; like Moses, rejected twice by Jews<sup>6</sup>

I now had a list of fourteen themes. The list alone did not satisfy my curiosity, however. I was looking not only for Luke's themes but also for the reasons behind the themes, a likely backstory that might explain Luke's choices. Indeed, Luke does offer a kind of backstory. He wants his audience to "know the certainty of the things [they] have been taught" (Luke 1:4).<sup>7</sup> But to what "things" does he refer? Why would the Christians of his day need to "know the certainty of" them?

In order to answer these questions, I had to make sense of the fourteen themes. I began by consolidating them. Most of them seemed to be closely related. For example, the Holy Spirit, angels, the Scriptures, and characters who prophesy all have to do with God's plan of salvation. Through them, God speaks and acts to affirm that events like the Messiah's birth to a young woman from Nazareth and the conversion of the Roman centurion Cornelius are part of God's plan. Because Jesus is the agent of that plan, Luke calls him "Savior."

Other themes—the prominence of female characters; concern for sinners, the disabled, and the poor; inclusion of Gentiles; salvation of Samaritans; references to Elijah and Elisha; the centrality of Jerusalem—stress the universal scope of God's salvation. Early on, Luke affirms that Jesus rescues Abraham's descendants and saves sinners (Luke 1:68-79). He then cites prophecies that target other social groups. God anoints Jesus "to bring good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18; cf. Isa. 61:1). "The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised" (Luke 7:22; cf. Isa. 35:5-6; 26:19). God pours out his Spirit "upon all flesh," "both men and women" (Acts 2:17-18; cf. Joel 2:28-29). God has set the apostles "to be a light for the Gentiles," to "bring salvation to the ends of the earth" (Acts 13:47; cf. Isa. 49:6). For Luke, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Acts 2:21; cf. Joel 2:32). Just as God sent Elijah to a Sidonian widow and Elisha to a

5. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 205-8, 214.

6. *Ibid.*, 208-11, 215-17, 222.

7. Unless otherwise indicated, all English New Testament quotations are taken from the NRSV. Since I agree with Donald Juell that "certainty" is a more accurate than "truth" as a rendering of *asphaleian*, this and other quotations of Luke 1:3-4 are from the NIV. See Juell, *Luke-Acts: The Promise of History* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1983), 15-16.

Syrian leper, God now sends Jesus and his witnesses to everyone from Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria, Asia Minor, Macedonia, Greece, and Rome.

Finally, the rejection of Jesus and his apostles—prophets like Moses—touches on the role of prayer, the presentation of Christianity as a legal religion, and (again) the centrality of Jerusalem. Jerusalem’s leaders reject Jesus and his followers (e.g., Luke 13:33–34; 23:13–25; Acts 8:1; 21:10–14). Therefore, Jerusalem will suffer the consequence: the destruction of the temple (Luke 19:41–44). Meanwhile, Jesus and the apostles endure persecution. When they encounter opposition, they pray (Luke 22:39–46; Acts 4:31; 12:12; 16:25). When they are arrested, Roman officials pronounce them innocent (Luke 23:4–22; Acts 19:35–41; 26:31). Even if they are executed, they are never convicted of breaking Roman law.

Connecting these related themes yields a concise reconstruction of Luke’s agenda:

- Jesus is the prophesied Messiah who, with his apostles, carries out God’s plan of salvation through the forgiveness of sins. God confirms this by the intervention of angels, the prophecies of various characters, and the work of the Holy Spirit.
- Many Jews reject Jesus and the apostles as their ancestors rejected Moses. This is why the temple is destroyed.
- God’s plan extends salvation to everyone: men and women; the poor and disabled; Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles. It was already at work in the days of Elijah and Elisha; it now starts in Jerusalem and reaches to the ends of the earth.
- Christianity does not violate Roman law. If Christians are unjustly persecuted, they should pray.

The more I studied Luke–Acts, the better I liked this reconstruction. I especially liked the proposed parallels with the ministries of Elijah and Elisha and the rejection of Moses. I quickly noticed, however, that these are not the only potential prophetic models for Jesus and his apostles. There are several others. Samuel seems to set a pattern for Jesus’ birth. Like Hosea, Zephaniah, Zechariah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, Jesus condemns the temple; like Jeremiah, he is falsely accused. Peter and Paul raise the dead as do Elijah and Elisha; John the Baptist is compared to Elijah and Samuel.

Now I had another long list: this time, a list of prophets who seem to shape Luke’s story from beginning to end. I wanted to fit them into my consolidated outline of Luke’s major themes. Some of them had already found a niche. Elijah and Elisha extend universal salvation; Moses suffers rejection by Jews. Still, why does Luke have Jesus pass the Holy Spirit to the apostles just as Elijah passed

his spirit to Elisha? Why does he have Jesus condemn the temple in the words of Hosea, Zephaniah, Zechariah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel? What about the parallels with Samuel's infancy narrative? Where does John the Baptist fit in? And how do Luke's themes and prophet parallels address the concerns of his original audience? I was eager to find out.

This book presents the results of my research. In chapter 1, I explain my thesis: that Luke portrays Jesus and his witnesses as prophets because Israel's prophets set a precedent for Gentile inclusion, Jewish rejection, and condemnation of the temple. In chapter 2, I present Luke's Jesus as the Messiah who saves sinners. In chapter 3, I show how parallels with Samuel establish Jesus and John as trustworthy prophets.

In chapters 4, 5, and 6, I focus on Luke's portrayal of Jesus. Like Elijah, Jesus resuscitates stricken children and appoints followers who will receive his spirit. Like Moses and Jeremiah, Jesus is rejected, arrested, and interrogated. Like Hosea, Zephaniah, Zechariah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, Jesus prophesies destruction for the holy city.

In chapters 7, 8, and 9, I turn the discussion to Acts. In scenes reminiscent of Elijah/Elisha stories, Peter and the apostles receive Jesus' spirit and perform Jesus' miracles. The Jerusalem council rejects them, however, just as they rejected Jesus—and just as Israel rejected Moses. Finally, starting with Philip and Peter and culminating with Paul, Spirit-filled prophets extend God's offer of salvation to Samaritans and Gentiles. In a brief conclusion, I examine some implications of my research for contemporary scholarship.

My investigation is based on five important assumptions. First, I concede that nobody knows for sure who wrote Luke-Acts. A second-century tradition asserts that Luke-Acts was the work of "Luke, the beloved physician" (Col. 4:14), but there is not enough first-century evidence to support this claim.<sup>8</sup> The author himself gives very little away. Although he describes himself with a masculine participle (Luke 1:3) and writes as if he were a traveling companion of Paul, he does not reveal his name.<sup>9</sup> He also neglects to specify his audience apart from dedications to his patron, Theophilus (Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1-2). If the anonymous author wrote for a particular Christian community, we have no idea who they were or where they lived. I call them "Luke" and "Luke's audience," but only because these designations are conventional and convenient.

8. For a summary of the evidence, see Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *The Acts of the Apostles*, ANTC (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 50.

9. *Ibid.*

Second, I agree with the scholarly consensus that Luke and Acts were written sometime during the 80s or 90s CE. This consensus is based partly on Luke's obvious concern for the fate of Jerusalem, expressed most clearly in Jesus' laments and prophecies (e.g., Luke 19:41-44; 21:20-24). They suggest a date soon after the Jewish War of 66-74 CE—a war that reached its climax in 70 CE with the Roman siege of Jerusalem and destruction of God's temple. Therefore, I am especially interested in how Luke's use of prophetic precedents addresses the concerns of Christians struggling to reinterpret their faith in the wake of that disaster.

Third, I subscribe to the Two-Source Theory, which postulates that Luke used two written sources when compiling his Gospel. One was a narrative composed around the time the temple was destroyed—a narrative now canonized as Mark's Gospel. The other was a collection of sayings attributed to Jesus and John the Baptist, compiled perhaps as early as the 50s and known to scholars as *Quelle* (Q). Although Q is now lost, its previous existence is attested by the large number of sayings that appear both in Luke and in Matthew.

That Luke probably copied from Mark and Q has important implications for interpreting his Gospel. In particular, we get some idea of how Luke addressed his audience's concerns by examining how he edited his sources. How did he adapt Mark and Q to his purposes? What did he convey by including episodes not found in Mark or Matthew? How does Luke convey his interpretation of Mark and Q by reiterating certain episodes and expressions in Luke as well as in Acts? I rely heavily on redaction criticism in order to answer these questions.<sup>10</sup>

Fourth, since many of my observations involve Luke's allusions to Israel's Scriptures, I use a strict method to justify detecting them. Although the allusions are by nature indirect, we can still identify them with some confidence. I use these five criteria to determine whether to give credence to a proposed allusion:

1. If neither author nor audience has access to the supposed referent, then the author does not allude to it.
2. The proposed allusion must correspond to its referent.
3. An author is much more likely to allude to a familiar text than to an obscure one.
4. An author often calls attention to allusions by emphasizing them in some way. Strategic placement of a proposed allusion thus adds to the evidence for its existence. The same holds for the repetition of important allusive words or congruent situations.

10. If I had identified Luke's source as Matthew, most of my conclusions would still stand.

5. An author will sometimes cite an important text more than once. Therefore, if a proposed allusion cites the referent of another confirmed citation, it was probably intended.

Two of these criteria are easily applied to Luke–Acts. For one, first-century Greek-speaking Christians had access to Greek Scriptures, usually in oral form. Luke, who claims to have been sponsored by a patron, might have referred to written copies.<sup>11</sup> For another, most (if not all) of those Scriptures were highly familiar to all but the newest Gentile converts. Israel’s Scriptures shaped their imaginations. Many in Luke’s audience had probably memorized large portions. It is the other three criteria—correspondence with a referent, rhetorical emphasis, and frequency of citation—that warrant careful consideration.

Once I have considered these criteria and identified Luke’s allusions, four more criteria help me evaluate my interpretations:

1. The proposed allusion’s interpretation must cohere with the author’s established agenda.
2. The author’s original audience must have been able to interpret the proposed allusion.
3. Other members of the author’s extended audience—modern or premodern—should also recognize the proposed allusion and its interpretation.
4. The proposed allusion and its interpretation should be aesthetically pleasing and intellectually satisfying.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, I need to say a word about Luke’s agenda. Issues like Jesus’ messianic identity, Gentile inclusion, Jewish rejection, and the destruction of the temple,

11. It is impossible to tell which Greek version (or versions) Luke knew. The Greek text reproduced in this book is taken from Alfred Rahlfs, ed., *Septuaginta* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1979), checked against the variants noted in *Septuaginta: Vetus Testamentum graecum auctoritate Academiae Scientiarum Gottingensis editum* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1931–). None of the variants suggests that Luke relied on a significantly different text. Unless otherwise indicated, all English quotations from Israel’s Scriptures are my translation of that text. Septuagint vocabulary often differs significantly from the vocabulary of the Hebrew text translated in modern English versions. Chapter and verse numbers can differ as well. I follow the chapter and verse reckoning in the NRSV.

12. I have adapted these nine criteria from Richard B. Hays, who developed them for identifying Paul’s allusions (*Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989], 29–32). Robert L. Brawley and Dennis R. MacDonald suggest similar criteria for identifying allusions in Luke–Acts (see Brawley, *Text to Text Pours Forth Speech: Voices of Scripture in Luke–Acts*, Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature 18 [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995], 13–14; MacDonald, *Does the New Testament Imitate Homer? Four Cases from the Acts of the Apostles* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003], 2–7).

while critical for Luke's audience, seem somewhat obsolete and even offensive today. Luke's statements about Jewish rejection leading to the destruction of the temple make us uncomfortable—and rightly so. On the basis of such statements, Christians have accused Jews of Christ-killing; Christians have persecuted Jews in countless pogroms; Christians have stood by and even collaborated when Nazis imprisoned, tortured, and murdered millions of Jews during World War II.

For Luke's audience, the situation was quite different. They were not looking for occasions to persecute a Jewish minority. As a religious movement within Judaism, they themselves were a minority. Moreover, they were looking for answers. They believed that Jesus was the Messiah—the expected Davidic king—but their times did not seem like the expected messianic age. Why was the Messiah crucified? Why did his followers include so many Gentiles and so few Jews? Why was the temple destroyed? In this context, Luke's statements about Jewish rejection leading to the destruction of the temple probably seemed like a reasonable explanation.

I am indebted to many people for their inspiration and assistance in the making of this book. Thanks go first to my teachers. Donald Juel (whose wit and wisdom I have sorely missed these past ten years) trained me to recognize the concerns and biblical mind-set of the first Christians. Beverly Gaventa encouraged me to pursue this project when it was just a tantalizing idea. I am grateful to my students for thinking with me about Luke-Acts; to Albion College for the sabbatical leave in which I wrote the manuscript; to my colleagues Charlene McAfee Moss, Ellen Muehlberger, Jim Papandrea, Taylor Petrey, and Greg Smith for providing valuable feedback during the book's production.

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