

Reading the Gospels as Literature: Luke  
May 3, 2010

1. Luke is a great chronicler. His gospel and Acts comprise almost a third of the New Testament as he sets out a long and detailed story of the origins of Christianity, from Jesus' birth to the spreading of the church after his death.
  - a. He writes in a lively style, in excellent Koine Greek.
  - b. He draws on Mark, on Q and other sources.
  - c. Either he composes or adapts a great deal of material himself, or he is the only one who had access to the relevant sources.
  - d. Some of our most vivid, well-known and cherished stories come from Luke, alone.
    - i. The birth of John the Baptizer (ch. 1)
    - ii. The birth of Jesus in a stable in Bethlehem, and everything that leads up to it and comes after it (ch 1-2)
    - iii. The healing of the centurion's servant (ch. 7)
    - iv. The good Samaritan (ch. 10)
    - v. The friend at midnight (ch. 11)
    - vi. The rich fool (ch. 12)
    - vii. The fig tree without figs (ch. 13)
    - viii. Places of honour at a wedding banquet (ch. 14)
    - ix. Who to invite to a dinner party (ch. 14)
    - x. Building a tower (ch. 14)
    - xi. The lost coin (ch. 15)
    - xii. The prodigal son (ch. 15)
    - xiii. The dishonest manager (ch. 16)
    - xiv. The rich man and Lazarus (ch. 16)
    - xv. The widow and the unjust judge (ch. 18)
    - xvi. The Pharisee and the toll collector (ch. 18)
2. Luke is not a historian
  - a. Many of his historical details are confused.
    - i. Herod died in 4 BCE.
    - ii. Quirinius was not made legate of Syria until 6 CE.
    - iii. There are no records of a world-wide census ordered by a Roman emperor.
    - iv. There was no census that required participants to return to their ancestral homes.
    - v. Wives wouldn't have participated in a census and they didn't pay taxes.
    - vi. Quirinius did hold a census in 6-7 CE, but in Galilee.
      - (1) Judas the Galilean, the founder of the Zealots, led a rebellion against the census.
      - (2) The rabbi Gamaliel (who was Paul's teacher) noted this uprising as a messianic event that came to nothing.
  - b. Luke draws on memories, such as that of the census, and shapes them for his own purposes.
  - c. Like Matthew and other early Christians, Luke searches the Hebrew Scriptures for pointers, images and stories that help to understand and explain their experience of Jesus.
    - i. The first Christians were Jews and claimed the Hebrew Scriptures as their own

- interpretive source of authority.
- ii. Particularly important were:
    - (1) The servant songs in Isaiah 40-55.
    - (2) Psalm 22, which came to be read only in terms of the crucifixion.
    - (3) Zechariah, which lay behind the Palm Sunday celebration.
    - (4) The reference, in Micah, to Bethlehem as the future birthplace for the Messiah.
3. Some of Luke's themes
- a. In Mark's gospel, everything happens “immediately” because the end is near: God is coming and we must make haste to repent and be ready.
  - b. Luke is much more relaxed. He doesn't anticipate the end of time arriving so soon.
  - c. Luke also takes pains to show little direct hostility to the Roman occupiers.
    - i. His Jesus was born during Quirinius' census, but his parents are portrayed as law-abiding, not rebels like Judas of Galilee.
    - ii. Luke's Jesus has nothing to do with the destruction of the temple in 70.
    - iii. Jesus heals a centurion's slave at the behest of others who say that the centurion had built their synagogue.
    - iv. In Mark, John the Baptizer opposes Herod. In Luke, the opposition is mentioned, but what happened to John is not, other than that Herod beheaded him.
  - d. Luke is concerned about the poor and downtrodden people, from the Magnificat on throughout the gospel.
    - i. The wealthy are portrayed as foolish or ignorant.
    - ii. Jesus shows particular compassion for the poor, the sick and the possessed. He affirms that they are included in God's imperial rule.
    - iii. He raises the widow's son and tells the story of the widow and the unjust judge.
    - iv. Luke includes the parables of the lost sheep and lost coin—stories of recovery and inclusion.
  - e. Jesus doesn't argue with his disciples. He seems calm and relaxed.
4. Jesus' virgin birth
- a. What do we do with this story? How are we to understand it?
  - b. Nothing about Luke's story of Jesus, apart from the birth narrative, assumes a miraculous birth. If the gospel were to begin at chapter 3, it would be just as powerful.
  - c. The Roman Catholic biblical scholar Raymond Brown has speculated that Jesus' conception by the Holy Spirit was a necessary “step up” in the gospels' need to distinguish Jesus from John the Baptizer.
    - i. Luke portrays John as the son of elderly, barren parents.
    - ii. A virgin conception is a greater miracle.
    - iii. The gospels are always intent on showing Jesus as greater than John.
    - iv. Brown wants his scholarship to be endorsed by the Roman Catholic Church, and that leads him to over-estimate the value of some evidence and disregard others.
  - d. There is evidence that there was critical speculation over Jesus' origins, raised by the enemies of the early Christians, including leaders of the Jerusalem Jewish hierarchy.

- i. Faced with the potential that their faith and tradition might be threatened to extinction by the rise of Christianity, these enemies persecuted the Christians.
- ii. As developing Christianity shifted their sense of the critical moment of divine revelation for the Christian story from the resurrection to the baptism to the conception of Jesus, the attacks on Christianity also shifted.
- iii. A defence of Jesus' origins became an important part of the early Christian community's apologetic task.
- iv. The birth narratives in Matthew and Luke attempted to interpret the data. They didn't create the data nor did they attempt to dismiss it.
- e. Mary was believed to have been pregnant in the time between betrothal and home-taking—the two stages of Jewish marriage.
  - i. Commitment was achieved on betrothal. The woman would have been the possession of her husband from that point on, even though they did not actually live together for some time.
  - ii. To be pregnant by one's husband during this time would have been a violation of custom, but not a serious moral scandal.
- f. Both birth narratives take care to deny Joseph's paternity. It may have been so well known among early Christians that Joseph was not Jesus' father that there was no point in claiming otherwise.
- g. Is it possible that Jesus' origins were so scandalous that it could only be countered by a supernatural birth tradition?
  - i. Perhaps Mary had been seduced by someone. She may have been only 13-14 years old.
  - ii. Perhaps she was raped by a Roman soldier.
  - iii. “Could the Holy Spirit be perceived as validating a child conceived in either rape or seduction as a life chosen by God for the accomplishment of God's will? Given the status of women and the moral climate of the first century, would not that kind of birth and that kind of affirmation be perceived as a miracle far more stunning than the conception beyond menopause in a woman assumed to be barren?”<sup>1</sup>
  - iv. Is it possible that Mary was a violated person and that people referred to her as the virgin who had been raped, so that the “Virgin Mary” became the way that people thought of her and the name by which they referred to her?<sup>2</sup>
  - v. The women in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus were all without husbands, without men to protect them, until something happened.
    - (1) The angel tells Mary that the child to be born would be called the son of the Most High God.
    - (2) In effect, in Luke, God is doing for Mary what Matthew had Joseph do for her. God makes Jesus legitimate.

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<sup>1</sup>John Spong, *Born of a Woman*, p. 126.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 127.

- h. The Magnificat (review the text: Luke 1:46-55)
  - i. Why does Mary say that she is of lowly status. In Greek, the word is “humiliated.”
  - ii. Virginitly is not humiliating.
  - iii. It is not humiliating to be pregnant if the father is the man to whom the woman is betrothed.
  - iv. Luke sees Mary in the context of a community of poor and downtrodden people. Why?
  - v. “Only an illegitimate pregnancy could make sense out of that designation, and only an illegitimate child and its mother who were fully incorporated into Israel could sing of future generations who would call a humiliated woman blessed, who would acknowledge the great things God had done for her, who would know what it was to be exalted when one was of low degree.”<sup>3</sup>
- 5. General discussion of the birth narratives.
- 6. Parables—choose one or two and discuss.

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<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 129 citing Jane Schaberg.