

# **The Puzzle of the GOSPELS: MATTHEW \* MARK \* LUKE**

## *The Gospel Story of Luke*

For the last several weeks, we've been exploring the Synoptic Problem. However, we've discovered that the Synoptic Problem is not really a "problem" in the normal sense of the term. It is simply a way to refer to questions and possible explanations about the literary relationships between the first three New Testament Gospels. The word "synoptic" means "with the same eye" or "seeing together." Matthew, Mark, and Luke present the basic story of Jesus in similar ways, including the order of the material, the stories told, the sayings of Jesus, even using many of the same words in parallel accounts. For this reason, they are called the Synoptic Gospels.

Despite its similarities to the other Synoptic Gospels, however, Luke's narrative contains much that is unique. It gives details of Jesus' infancy found in no other Gospel: the census of Caesar Augustus, the journey to Bethlehem, Jesus' birth, the adoration of the shepherds, Jesus' circumcision, the words of Simeon, and Jesus at age 12 in the temple talking with the doctors of the law. It also is the only Gospel to give an account of the Ascension. Among the notable parables found only in Luke's Gospel are those of the good Samaritan and the prodigal son.

Now, Luke was almost certainly a Greek and was writing for a community centered in the Greco-Roman culture of his time. Thus, Luke was probably writing in the latter decades of the first century, probably in a thoroughly Hellenistic environment. (Hellenistic simply means Greek culture.) Now, tradition reports that Luke was a companion of Paul and a physician. (Please note that Paul tells us that Luke was a physician [**Colossians 4:14**], but we find no medical jargon in his writing.

Luke is credited with two works: the gospel and the Book of Acts. A new dimension was added to Luke's presentation of Jesus once it was recognized that the gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles are two volumes by the same hand. The author of Luke/Acts is telling us a bigger story, a grander story, a story that starts with Jesus and is concerned with how his life played out, but then sees the story continuing with the founding of the church and with its spread and with the eventual travels of Paul that take him to Rome itself.

Just as a side note: since Luke and Paul are friends, it's always interesting to see how Luke portrays Paul in Acts opposed to how Paul portrays himself in his letters. (**Galatians 1:15-18**). This is an important issue for him because he wants to prove to the Galatians that his gospel message did not come from Jesus' followers in Jerusalem (the original disciples and the church around them) but from Jesus himself. However, Paul does exactly what he claims not to have done in Galatians: after leaving Damascus some days after his conversion, he goes directly to Jerusalem and meets with the apostles (**Acts 9:10-27**).

Now, one of the things we've been intentional about is exploring why the various gospels were written, what issue was being addressed. You will remember, Matthew wrote to a Jewish Christian audience and his primary focus or main concern was to present Jesus as a teacher

greater than Moses. For Mark, his writings were the first attempt at telling the gospel story. For Luke, the audience was Gentile, and the major issue was whether or not Christians could be good citizens of the Roman Empire. The question they faced was this: can Christians who believe in the Kingdom of God also be loyal subjects of the Roman Empire? Luke's unequivocal answer was "Yes."

Luke wants to assure his Christian community -- and their neighbors -- that there is no conflict between faith in Jesus and loyalty to the Emperor. The kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Caesar can peacefully co-exist side by side; Christians can be good citizens of both the earthly and heavenly realms.

Luke's hopes for acceptance are reflected in the way he portrays the death of Jesus. **Luke 23:34** — His last words are "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." The Jesus of Luke dies with calm resolution: he knows that his death will be followed by the birth of the church.

Luke/Acts is a very interesting example of evolved early Christian literature because the author now is undertaking this work... commissioned by a benefactor. **Luke 1:1-3**. So, it's written to Theophilus. He would have been Luke's patron (person who may have paid for the paper and the time to write.)

**Luke 1:5-7** — Zachariah and Elizabeth are considered. Honorable, but they're barren. Barrenness is seen as a curse, so how can this be? The name *Zacharias* means "Yahweh has remembered again" and *Elizabeth* means either "my God is the one by whom I swear". Luke records all of this to show that Zacharias and Elizabeth were doing everything to the laws and traditions of the Jews, and their position was one of privilege and prestige. Luke reveals that Zacharias and Elizabeth were devout Jews, obedient to the entire Jewish law. As obedient and faithful Jews, and with their priestly pedigree, there were many promises of God that they could expect to be fulfilled to them. One of them was that if the Israelites obeyed God and remained faithful to Him (as Zacharias and Elizabeth had done), God would bless them with children. However, Luke records that Zacharias and Elizabeth have no children. What is this all about? As the narrative unfolds, Luke shows that by removing shame and reproach from Elizabeth, God also begins to remove the shame and reproach upon Israel.

**Luke 2:1** — Luke describes how Joseph and Mary journeyed from Nazareth, in the region of Galilee into Judea, to Bethlehem. Why does Luke tell the story this way?

Luke's vision is of a unified humanity in the church that brings all of God's children back together. As we think about Luke's picture of the church, Jews and Gentiles in the household of God, please note **Luke 2:14-20**. -- Luke is showing that God has sent His Son not just to 'insiders' but to 'outsiders' as well.

When we look at Luke and Acts collectively, Jesus is set in a new time frame that moves from the old Israel to the 'new Israel' represented by the Christian Church. Jesus is the cross point between these two worlds, God's work in the past with Israel and in the future with the church. All has led up to Him and now all ways lead from Him. For Luke, in Jesus, we see God's plans across the whole of time, past and future.