Lessons on Luke

1:1-4 - introduction

Luke (or whoever the author may have been; it is not absolutely certain that it was Luke) introduces the work as a formal, researched historical work. The Gospel is presented as a biography and Acts (see Acts 1:1-2, which introduces Acts as a second work that builds on the 1st) as a history. The sources for these works are “what was passed on to us by those who were eye witnesses and servants of the word.” So, Luke’s sources include second-hand reports. He does not say that the eye witnesses were his source, but that the things they passed on were his source. For the Gospel, they functioned as eye witnesses; for Acts, they functioned as actors, “servants of the word.”

1:5-25 – the announcement of the birth of John

Zechariah was a priest, married to a descendant of Aaron, and so was qualified to serve in the temple. On this occasion he was the one chose by lot to enter the temple (not the innermost holy of holies) to burn incense before the Lord. Both Zechariah and Elizabeth were blameless both in righteousness/justice and in obedience to the Levitical regulations of ritual cleanness and holiness. But they were childless and now Elizabeth was too old to have children anyway.

An angel appeared, which frightened Zechariah, but the angel told him not to be afraid but that his prayers had been heard and that his wife would give birth to a son that they were to name John (Hebrew Yo = “The Lord”; Hanan = “is gracious”). The name reflects his calling which is to prepare the way for the one who brings grace. John was to

* Be great before the Lord
* Abstain from liquor (like Nazirites who took a vow not to drink)
* Be full of the Holy Spirit (a true prophet)
* Turn many Israelites to the Lord
* Go forth in the spirit and power of Elijah (not only a prophet but a powerful one)
* Turn the hearts of parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just
  + See Malachi 4:5-6, then very last words of the Hebrew scriptures.
  + The coming of Elijah to turn parents & children’s hearts to each other is necessary to avoid total destruction.
  + Luke mentions disobedient turning to just wisdom instead of children to parents. This is consistent with the emphasis in Luke 1-2 on God’s justice.
* Prepare a people for the Lord (does this imply that the prepared people will not be simply Israel?)

Zechariah challenges the angel for proof (“How can I know?”), and Gabriel gets a little huffy. “I am Gabriel, who stands before the Lord, and I was sent to you…” So Zechariah is given a sign which doubles as a punishment for his unbelief, to be unable to speak until the prediction is fulfilled. Afterwards, Zechariah comes out of the temple and signals the reason for his delay.

1:26-38 – The announcement of the birth of Jesus to Mary (actually Mariam)

After 6 months, Gabriel was sent to a young virgin named Mary who lived in Nazareth and was engaged to be married to Joseph. (Engagement was a legal, binding contract, usually involving gifts, which obligated both Mary and Joseph to be married and to refrain from sex with each other or anyone else, which would have been the equivalent of adultery.) Gabriel greeted her as “favored one”, which startled her and made her wonder what kind of greeting that could be. Given the situation, it clearly is an odd greeting, since there was no indication in Mary’s life that she was favored in any way. After all, she was a poor girl (betrothal to a construction worker may indicate that her status was somewhat above that of peasant, but not exactly what we might think of as middle class) who had no particular status or rights, growing up as a faithful Israelite under the shadow of Rome. Nazareth was a small town near Sepphoris, Herod Antipater’s Roman capital of Galilee. Joseph and Jesus may have worked in the reconstruction of Sepphoris as a Roman city under Herod.

Gabriel gives Mary the typical angelic advice not to fear and assures her that she has found favor with God, thus explaining the greeting. The favor, however, consists in her giving birth to a baby named Jesus (In Hebrew = Yeshua, a variant of Yehoshua = Joshua; “The Lord delivers”). Jesus was to

* Be great (same as John)
* Be called “son of the Most High” (Caesar Augustus had claimed the title “son of a god (Julius)”
* Inherit the throne of his father David from God (in competition with both Herod and Caesar)
* Rule over the house of Jacob (Israel) forever

Whereas the announcement concerning John focused on his prophetic role in returning people to God, each other, and justice, the announcement concerning Jesus focuses almost exclusively on his political, royal role as king and Son of the Most High God.

Mary, like Zechariah, expressed reservations. But instead of challenging Gabriel, she asked how it could happen, since she was not having sex. Gabriel gives three answers:

1. The Holy Spirit will come upon you so that the child will be the holy Son of God.
2. As a sign, Elizabeth who cannot become pregnant, has become pregnant.
3. Nothing is impossible for God

Mary accepts the explanation and humbly accepts her calling as “the Lord’s slave-girl.” Mary’s demonstration of humility, consistent with both her humble status and her humble heart, foreshadows the declaration in her song that “he has exalted the humble.” The contrast between the humble and the mighty is highlighted in many ways in this account of Jesus’ birth.

1:39-45 – Mary visits Elizabeth

Elizabeth’s child “jumps for joy” in the womb. As was predicted to Zachariah he was filled with the Holy Spirit from the womb. And Elizabeth (like many others) in these chapters becomes a prophet – filled with the Holy Spirit. Prophecy was a major institution in ancient Israel and Judah, centered in the royal court. But since the loss of the Jewish/Israelite monarchy, prophecy had declined. With the birth of Jesus, we have a return to the pre-monarchical prophetic tradition.

Elizabeth’s greeting, like so much else in Luke, illustrates the reversal of social order in the Kingdom of God. The elder cousin greets the younger and expresses her unworthiness to be visited by the royal mother. She also prophetically confirms the blessing upon Mary for believing the angel’s announcement.

1:46-56 – Mary’s song (Magnificat)

Mary’s song consists of two parts: an initial recital of God’s condescension and mercy to her, his slave-girl, followed by a recital of God’s powerful help and mercy for the humble and poor of his people and His judgment of the powerful. What Mary had experienced personally she proclaims will be the performed for all. The meek will be exalted and the powerful will be brought low. There is a clear opposition of “powerful” vs. “humble” (vs. 52) and “the hungry” vs. “the rich” (vs. 53). Israel, like Mary, is God’s servant/slave. God’s mercy is for the lowly.

1:57-66 – Birth of John (the Baptist to be)

All of Elizabeth’s neighbors and relatives rejoiced with her. Notice that this is told from Elizabeth’s point of view, not Zechariah’s, which would be more normal. Zechariah had apparently communicated to Elizabeth that the baby would be named John even though he couldn’t speak. Yohanan = The Lord has compassion. This is not mentioned in Luke, but it clearly is part of the received narrative since Luke makes a big deal of the name. As soon Zechariah confirmed the name (fulfilling the angel’s prediction) he was able to speak again.

1:67-80 – Zechariah’s prophecy

Zechariah is the next to be filled with the Holy Spirit and to prophesy. The birth of John, who fulfils the prophecy of Malachi 4, is evidence that God has visited His people to bring redemption. Zechariah’s prophecy reflects the mission of John, to prepare the way for Jesus to deliver His people through the Davidic king from their enemies. He also references the covenant with Abraham and says that God will fulfill his oath to Abraham by granting his people the freedom to serve him in holiness and righteousness. This was the vision of all the prophets – that God’s people would no longer worship God in hypocrisy, but in personal holiness and interpersonal righteousness (justice). John’s role was to be the prophet foretold by Malachi (note the sunrise from on high which alludes to Malachi 4:2, “the sun of righteousness shall rise) who would prepare the Lord’s way (vs 76) and to keep His people’s feet walking straight on the way of peace (vs. 79). Deliverance or salvation would come in the form of the forgiveness of sins (vs. 77), not political victory over foreign armies.

Luke chapter 1 introduces the story of Jesus with a combination of angelic visitations, prophecy, and royal pronouncements of deliverance, mercy, and the upending of the social order. Luke 2 tells of the birth of the royal deliverer.

2:1-7 – the birth of Jesus

The birth itself is told without much elaboration. There is more time spent setting the historical dating and journey to Bethlehem than to the birth itself. The census is historically problematic. Augustus did not decree a single world-wide census, but he did require that the provinces under his rule should be individually counted for tax purposes. Luke is not wrong here, but he makes it sound like a single event, which it was not. The timing and relation of the census to Quirinius, the “governor” of Syria is also difficult. The reason for the mention of Syria is that Judah was a district of Roman Syria. Quirinius is known to have become governor of Syria and to have presided over a census, but that was in 6 AD, not before the death of Herod the Great in 4 BC. It is also difficult to understand why Joseph would have traveled to Bethlehem for the census if he were a native of Nazareth. Luke tells us that Mary lived in Nazareth (1:26), but it is not clearly stated that Joseph also lived there, although it would have been very unusual for a poor girl in Galilee to have been betrothed to a poor carpenter from southern Judah. So it is extremely likely that Joseph was also from Nazareth.

There is no good answer to these difficulties. In other cases, Luke has been a good historian with a good grasp of dates and imperial events. There are explanations that have been put forth, but none is particularly convincing. Perhaps there is something about the history of the time which has left no record except for this one. Luke implies that he knew about the later census in 6 AD because he specifically distinguishes the one at the time of Jesus’ birth from the one in 6 AD.

Regardless of the historical difficulties the birth in Bethlehem connects Jesus to David and reinforces the message that Jesus is being born as the Davidic king. We know only 4 things about the birth of Jesus.

1. It was in Bethlehem.
2. They were staying in a stable or animal pen because the “guest room” was full, presumably with other guests. Why no one offered their place to a young pregnant girl is a mystery to me, except that it confirms the order of this world that the lowly are not treated well.
3. He was wrapped up in “swaddling cloths” (not sure what the significance of this could be).
4. He was laid in a feeding trough.

All of these details point to Jesus’ calling to be king for God’s people, that his kingdom would show mercy to the poor and humble and would overturn the social order. The circumstances of God’s chosen king were about as humble as you can get.

2:8-20 – the angelic appearance to the shepherds

The choice of shepherds as the first recipients of the angelic announcement of the birth of the announcements is again a reinforcement of the constant message of Luke that God shows mercy to the poor but that He deposes the powerful from their thrones. The shepherds who work the night shift would have been pretty low in social status. They are the ones that had to spend the night out with the smelly, dirty sheep keeping them safe from wolves and other predators and keeping them from wandering off. Some commentators make a big deal of the supposition that these shepherds may have been raising sheep that would have been used in temple sacrifices. Since Luke is uninterested in that detail, so am I.

As is usual with angelic visitations, his appearance strikes fear into those who see the angel, and the angel says “Do not be afraid.” God’s glory is a scary thing, but He offers reassurance and peace to those upon whom He has mercy. The announcement is of “great joy.” This is another recurring theme of the birth narrative. Every announcement and everything that happens brings joy. It is also for “all the people.” Jesus has come to be the savior, messiah, and king for all of Israel. The “sign” that the shepherds are to look for is a baby, wrapped up, and lying in a manger instead of a normal human habitation. Again the juxtaposition of royal announcement and humble birth is astounding. At once the lone angel is joined by a whole army of angels who sing “Glory in the highest (places) to God, and peace on earth among the people of His pleasure.” The parallelism is meant to draw attention to what Jesus brings: glory in heaven and peace on earth. But although his announcement was to “all the people,” we now see that the benefit of his kingdom is less broad – it is for the people of God’s good pleasure – those whom He is pleased to grant it to. In the Dead Sea Scrolls the expression “Sons of his good will” (*bene rasono*) occurs a couple of times meaning the people that God has chosen.

The shepherds’ response is the prototype for all who hear from God.

* They chose to respond in faith and see what the Lord had made known to them.
* They ***hurried*** to do so.
* When they had found Mary, Joseph, and the baby they told them what they had heard.
* The result was that those who heard were amazed.
* They glorified and praised God.