

## The Gospel of Luke

Luke's gospel, the longest book in the New Testament, has a number of unique features, not least its non-Jewish dimension and the fact that it is only half complete, its sequel being the book of Acts which tells of the work of the apostles in establishing the First Century church. In considering what Luke is setting out to achieve vis a vis the other gospel writers, therefore, we also have to consider the purpose of Acts.

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The two-part format of Luke-Acts suggests that Luke is particularly interested in the interface between the work of Jesus in his own ministry (Luke), and its continuation in the work of the apostles and the early church (Acts) – how the preaching of Jesus and the founders of the first century ecclesia forms one seamless whole. In fact Luke-Acts provides the only systematic New Testament account of the transition from Christ's ministry into the apostolic age.

### Transition

There are two points of transition within Luke-Acts. The first is the transition between the Jewish or Old Testament era and the time of Christ. In a seminal passage, Jesus declares that “the Law and the Prophets were until John” (Luke 16v16), and that the work of John ushers in a new era which is both the fulfilment of the old and the start of something better. In comparison to the other gospels, Luke appears to be particularly interested in the ministry of John the Baptist, and the concept of transition at least partly explains this. Even though he is a New Testament figure, John the Baptist has strong parallels with the Old Testa-

### In this document...

- The relationship between Luke and the Acts of the Apostles
- Transition between the old and the new: Jesus as the centre of history
- Luke: who, when, and where?
- Key themes
- Shared and unique material vis a vis the other gospels; Q
- The prologue
- Who was Theophilus?
- Jerusalem – the beginning and end of the gospel
- The journey to Jerusalem
- Use of the Old Testament
- The gentiles in God's purpose

### Some Themes of Luke's Gospel

The following list identifies some of the key topics which Luke seems to particularly emphasise in his presentation of the gospel. Sidesbars later on in the document will develop some of these in more detail.

- Rich and poor (many of the parables which only occur in Luke relate to this)
- Stewardship (this has obvious connections with the rich/poor theme)
- Prayer (how to pray, examples of Jesus in prayer, parables about prayer and the importance of persistency)
- Women (Luke has more female characters than the other gospels)
- Spirit (the work of the Spirit is key to the book of Acts, but the seeds are here; the text for Jesus' first 'sermon' in Luke 4 began with the work of the Spirit)
- Salvation, save, saved

ment prophet Elijah. John the Baptist is the last of the prophets in the classic Old Testament prophetic mould. As such it is appropriate that he should both introduce, prepare the way, and give way to the Lord Jesus. In that sense he is a transitional figure.

The transition from old to new is also flagged very clearly by Luke in his opening two chapters, even before we get to the ministry of John the Baptist. Luke begins the gospel with lots of Old Testament allusions (to be discussed shortly) and by introducing his readers to a number of classically Hebrew characters such as Zecharias and Elizabeth, Anna, Simeon, and the shepherds. These faithful people of the Old Covenant were waiting for the dawning of the momentous day of the long-promised saviour, and, when he appears, are only too happy to lend their voices in praise to their God and in tribute to their saviour. Like John the Baptist, these characters likewise mark the transition from the Old Testament world to the New.

But the work of Jesus, fulfilling as it does the Old Testament Scriptures, also opens the way for the Gentiles, and for the creation of the church as a new Israel.<sup>1</sup> This marks the second point of transition with which Luke is concerned – the expansion of the preaching of the gospel message to the whole world. This second transition from Jew to Gentile is primarily the topic of the book of Acts. It describes the dawning of the era of the church and the ministry of the apostles. But it is interesting that important seeds for this second transition are sown already in the gospel of Luke. In Jesus' first public appearance in the synagogue in Nazareth (as Luke has it), Jesus deliberately preaches on the future role of the Gentiles, and is driven out of the synagogue for his trouble. This prefigures many a similar scene in Acts.

In a sense, then, Jesus binds together what went before in the Old Testament (when God's purpose was primarily focussed

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<sup>1</sup> This is not to imply that God's purpose with the Jews is now over. The book of Romans (amongst other passages) makes it abundantly clear that God still has a purpose with 'natural' Israel. God has a purpose both with natural Israel, and with a wider 'spiritual' Israel.

upon the Jews in the first instance) and what will come after in the New Testament and beyond (the ‘times of the Gentiles’ in which God’s purpose is concerned with all men). The gospel of Luke opens with the transition between the Old Testament and

### Jesus as the centrepiece in Luke-Acts

“Jesus is the centrepiece binding together Israel and the church; and his time may be calculated from the baptism to the ascension (Acts 1v22). Transitional from the OT to Jesus and from Jesus to the church respectively, are two bridges constructed by (Luke). In Luke 1-2 OT characters representing Israel come across the bridge to meet gospel characters (Mary, Jesus); in Acts 1 the Jesus of the gospel comes across the bridge to instruct the twelve and prepare them for the coming Spirit, (which) will establish the church through their preaching and miracles.” – Raymond Brown

the work of Jesus. The Acts of the Apostles opens with the transition between the work of Jesus and its aftermath in the work of the apostles and the age of Gentile preaching. The scholar Raymond Brown summarised this parallel effectively, as the sidebar shows.<sup>1</sup>

As a Gentile, Luke is naturally concerned with God’s purpose for the Gentiles. But his interest really encompasses all men in both volumes of his work. He is interested in the interface of Jew and Gentile, the roles of each within the purpose of God, and the way in which they must live and work together in the embrace of God’s plan and God’s church. While this is abundantly obvious in Acts, it pays to be on the lookout for it in the gospel also.

### The Prologue

Luke’s is the only gospel which opens with a formal prologue in typical Graeco-Roman style. It reads as follows:

*“Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed (Gk = fulfilled) among us, even as they delivered them unto us, which (i.e. they were) from the beginning were eyewitnesses, and ministers of the Word; it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first,<sup>2</sup> to write unto thee in order, most excellent Theophilus, that thou mightest know the certainty of those things, wherein thou hast*

1 Raymond Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), p228.

2 This most likely does not imply that he was an eyewitness, rather that because of his research and/or inspiration, his understanding of all the events in Jesus’ life from the very first is complete.

*been instructed.” (Luke 1v1-4)*

Many people have written about Jesus’ life before, Luke says, and frequently these were eyewitnesses of Jesus’ ministry.<sup>1</sup> Luke sees a need for another account which would:

- Be explanatory or provide a schema for making sense of Jesus’ ministry [‘perfect understanding’]
- Tell the story from the beginning [‘from the very first’]
- Be ordered (structured, connected) [‘in order’ – the term does not necessarily speak of chronological order; Luke brings structural shape, as we shall see]
- Help Theophilus (see below)
- Establish the certainty (historical veracity and faith-creating power) of Jesus’ life for someone who has already had basic instruction [‘that thou mightest know...’]

But what of ‘Most Excellent Theophilus’ – who was he, and why is he mentioned? A helpful clue comes in the expression ‘most excellent’ which is used to refer to Theophilus. It is an honorific title (rather like ‘My Right Honourable Friend’ or ‘Your Majesty’ would be in the UK). It is used to describe the Roman officials Felix and Festus in Acts 24:3 and 26:25, and its use suggests that Theophilus was either a high ranking official or a person of considerable influence and wealth.

Why is Luke writing to him? The most likely suggestion is that he is the patron for Luke’s two volume work. In order to get something published in the ancient world one had to have considerable resources beyond the scope of all but aristocracy,

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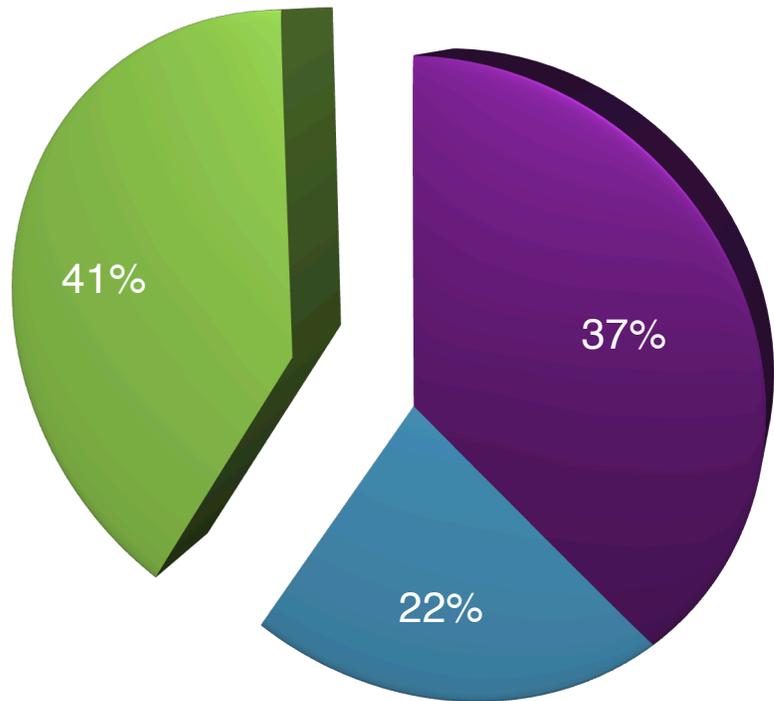
<sup>1</sup> Although of the Biblical gospels we can only say with some degree of certainty that Mark was already written at this point, it is worth noting that there were many other works about Jesus’ life, emanating both before and after Luke wrote. Some of these so-called ‘non-canonical’ gospels have been preserved (mostly later ones), but most have not, and we can only speculate about whether or not any of them were inspired. (The non-canonical gospels we possess today like the Gospel of Thomas are not eyewitness accounts, and are quite different from the inspired NT gospels – there is no evidence that they are inspired or are to be considered part of Scripture. This is not to say that there were not other accounts, no longer preserved, which were inspired – we simply don’t have evidence either way). Some of the earlier accounts to which Luke refers may have been merely lists of events – hence Luke’s emphasis on the connection and shape he brings as an inspired re-teller of the events of Jesus’ life.

### Shared Material

The pie chart gives a rough illustration of the points of similarity and difference between Luke's gospel and the other two synoptic gospels, Matthew and Mark.

- 455 verses (41%) are peculiar to Luke
- 410 verses (37%) are shared with Mark (and often, but not necessarily always, with Matthew as well)
- 250 verses (22%) represent material common-ish with Matthew (but not Mark)

Major blocks of Luke material not present in Mark include: 4v16-30; 5v1-11; 6v20-8v3; 9v51-18v14; 19v1-28



landowners and officialdom. Writers themselves were not usually particularly wealthy people, so they needed a sponsor or patron so that their work could see the light of day. For the rich and influential sponsoring works of literature in this way was a way of giving back to society or building a legacy. A patron was always referred to by the author in his prologue just as is the case in Luke's gospel. Perhaps, then, Theophilus was Luke's sponsor, either a convert like Luke, or someone extremely interested in Christianity.<sup>1</sup>

### Luke Himself

That Luke Paul's traveling companion is the author we may assume not only from tradition, but also from the 'we' passages in the book of Acts where Luke joins and leaves Paul's missionary

<sup>1</sup> Another suggestion is that Theophilus (literally, 'lover of God') is a representative of typical believers, rather than an actual person. This seems somewhat unlikely as Luke's initial intention, as it leaves the formality of Luke's prologue and his use of the title 'Most Excellent' unexplained. However, the meaning of his name does give a nice double entendre for other believers who read the gospel. For the more unusual suggestion that he may have been a figure involved in Paul's trial before Caesar, see the Bible Toolshed pdf on Acts.

## Unique miracles and parables

The following miracles are only recorded in Luke:

- Catch of fish (5:1-11)
- Raising of widow's son (7:11-15)
- Mary Magdalene exorcism (8:2)
- Crippled woman (13:11-13)
- Man with dropsy (14:1-4)
- Ten lepers (17:11-19)
- High Priest's servant (22:50-51)

The following parables are only recorded in Luke:

- Two debtors (7:41-50)
- Good Samaritan (10:25-37)
- Friend at midnight (11:5-8)
- Rich fool (12:13-21)
- Barren fig tree (13:6-9)
- Builder of tower (14:28-30)
- King going to battle (14:31-33)
- Lost sheep (15:1-7)
- Lost coin (15:8-10)
- Prodigal son (15:11-32)
- Unjust steward (16:1-8)
- Rich man and Lazarus (16:19-31)
- Humble servant (11:7-10)
- Unjust judge (18:1-8)
- Pharisee and tax collector (18:9-14)

These lists are not absolute, as there can be disagreement about whether a certain episode is or isn't the same as something recorded in another gospel. At the very least they serve as a starting point for further exploration.

team (see the Acts installment). Luke, then, we know both from the book of Acts and from passing references in Paul's epistles. He is 'the beloved physician', and as such most likely the best educated of the four gospel writers. It's no real surprise, then, to find that he has a concern not only for exact medical terminology, but also for painstaking historical references, as well as political and military designations.<sup>1</sup> He is keen to situate his Lord in a precise historical context and within a definite social and political milieu.

Luke is also most probably a Gentile. This, too, makes him likely unique amongst the gospel writers. While it may be overstating the case to say that a Gentile thematic is pervasive through the gospel, a number of commentators have noted that a concern with Gentile interests does keep cropping up. In fact, Luke shows himself to be a master of both Gentile and Jewish worlds. He is very familiar, for instance, with the Septuagint (Greek) version of the Old Testament (leading some to suggest he was a Jewish proselyte prior to accepting Christ). If his prologue is written in perfect Graeco-Roman literary form, then the rest of chapters 1 and 2, packed as they are with Old Testament allusions (particularly from the Psalms), are written in a style which some have argued deliberately mimics Septuagint Greek! Luke is equally comfortable in both domains.

## The Old Testament

It is worth exploring Luke's use of the Old Testament in a little more detail. Whereas Matthew's technique was the explicit use of quotation formulae – pointedly underlining for readers some of the ways in which Jesus' life fulfilled the Law and the Prophets – Luke's technique is quite different, if no less powerful and deliberate. It is just a little more subtle and 'behind-the-scenes'.

On some occasions Luke presents an episode in such a way that the careful reader can discern an Old Testament prototype lying behind it. A classic example is the parable of the Good Samari-

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the famous early work on this topic was done by William Ramsay – although it has not gone without dispute (for instance by Cadbury).

tan. It turns out that this well-known parable is built in precise detail upon a much less well-known historical incident recorded in 2 Chronicles 28:6-15. When the Chronicles events are unpacked it turns out they cast fascinating additional light upon Jesus' parable.

### Luke the organiser

It's interesting to compare the way in which Luke tends to organise his material with the other gospels. Matthew gathers Jesus' teaching into five major discourses which each have a thematic core. Mark tends to group together incidents of a particular type (for example a set of confrontations between Jesus and the rulers in chapter 3, a set of parables in chapter 4). Both of these techniques involve collecting material with a related theme into one place. Luke, by contrast, tends to build his material in a more sequential fashion, so that one event leads thematically on to another. It is a very profitable study simply to go through the gospel and examine the relationship of adjacent events – the reason why Luke has ordered them into chains as he has. It often transpires that there are worthwhile lessons to be learned just from examining these connections. Perhaps this is what he was hinting at when he spoke in his preface of putting these events 'in order'.

But Luke goes beyond this. It is not merely a matter of drawing a link between a particular episode and an event or passage in the OT. Luke sometimes connects a whole sequence of events into a chain which is based on an Old Testament prototype! There is a sequence, for instance, which appears to be based on the book of Deuteronomy and the wanderings of Israel in the wilder-

ness. There is another which seems to pattern itself on the ministry of Elijah and Elisha from 2 Kings. How much more there is to be found along these lines is a fascinating question and one which remains open for further research. More work could also be done on the point Luke is driving at when he develops these connections.<sup>1</sup>

### Jerusalem, Jerusalem

Let's turn now to the quest for a unifying theme which might bind Luke's gospel together. At the outset, it's worth noting where the gospel begins and where it ends. The curtain rises in Jerusalem – in the temple, no less – as Zechariah (the future father of John the baptist) stands to minister in the temple courts. The gospel ends in the very same place – in the temple

<sup>1</sup> For more information see, for instance, W.M. Swartley, *Israel's Scripture Traditions and the Synoptic Gospels: Story Shaping Story* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), pp. 151-153; essays in C.A. Evans and J.A. Sanders (eds.) *Luke and Scripture: The Function of Sacred Tradition in Luke-Acts* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993); C F Evans, "The Central Section of St. Luke's Gospel," in D.E. Nineham (ed.), *Studies in the Gospels* (R.H. Lightfoot Festschrift; Oxford: Blackwell, 1955), pp. 37-53. T.L. Brodie, *Luke the Literary Interpreter: Luke-Acts as a Systematic Rewriting and Updating of the Elijah-Elisha Narrative in 1 and 2 Kings* (Rome: Pontifical University of St. Thomas Press, 1987).

at Jerusalem – as the disciples stand ‘continually in the temple, praising and blessing God’ (24v52,53).

The scenes appear similar, yet there are crucial differences. True, they both involve people in the Jerusalem temple blessing God, but there the similarities end. At the opening it is one man – a priest – offering incense in the temple. At the end it is a group of men with no formal or hereditary qualifications (other than their Jewishness – and that is soon about to change) who are offering praise and blessing to God. Now there is no incense, just the prayers and praises of believers calling directly upon their Lord.

The most powerful contrast, however, relates to the notion of blessing. After Zechariah has conducted his ministrations with the incense he is meant to come out of the inner sanctuary and bless the common people who are waiting outside. But after the appearance of the angel promising John’s birth and Zechariah’s unbelief, he is struck dumb. This means that when he comes outside he is unable to bestow the proper priestly blessing upon the people. How exquisite, then, when Jesus appears to the worshipping believers at the end of the gospel and ‘blesses them’ (24:51)! Jesus carries out exactly what Zachariah was unable to do at the beginning of the gospel! The whole thing may be a subtle parable about the limitations of what the old priesthood and ritual (represented by Zechariah) could and could not accomplish in comparison to the once-for-all priesthood of the Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup>

So the gospel begins and ends in Jerusalem, but is that the end of the Jerusalem theme? Far from it; it turns out that the whole of the gospel of Luke is structured around Jerusalem. As can be seen from the diagram showing the gospel’s shape, the longest single part of the gospel is the so-called ‘Travel Narrative’

### The Shape of Luke’s Gospel

- Preparations (1v1-4v13)
- Ministry in Galilee (4v14-9v50)
- The Travel Narrative (‘the journey to Jerusalem’) (9v51-19v27)
- What Happened in Jerusalem (death and resurrection) (19v28-24v53)

<sup>1</sup> Another feature which binds the beginning and end of Luke together is the appearance of angels as acting characters in the narrative (rather than beings who are simply referred to). In addition to the birth narratives in chapters 1 and 2, the only other place in the gospel where angels participate in the narrative is at the crucifixion and resurrection.

which recounts Jesus' journey to Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup> This runs from the end of chapter 9 in which the Lord 'sets his face' (9:51) towards the capital, to the point where he ultimately arrives there in chapter 19. These ten chapters 9-19 are marked by a refrain-like reminder that throughout this period, Jesus' is progressing inexorably towards his destination. His route may not be direct,

## The Journey to Jerusalem

The following passages highlight Jesus' journey to Jerusalem which begins in Luke 9. and culminates in his arrival in chapter 19. While the other gospels refer to this journey, it is an insistent motif only in Luke.

- 'And it came to pass, when the time was come that he should be received up he stedfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem.'(9v51)
- 'And he went through the cities and villages, teaching, and journeying toward Jerusalem.'(13v22)
- 'And it came to pass, as he went to Jerusalem, that he passed through the midst of Samaria and Galilee.'(17v11)
- 'Then he took unto him the twelve, and said unto them, Behold, we go up to Jerusalem, and all things that are written by the prophets concerning the Son of man shall be accomplished.'(18v31)
- 'And when he had thus spoken, he went before, ascending up to Jerusalem.' (19v28)
- 'And when he was come near, he beheld the city, and wept over it.'(19v41)

but it is deliberate and unflinching. The relevant passages are shown in the sidebar on the next page.

Why, then, this Lukan emphasis on going to Jerusalem? Why this extended travel narrative in which most of Luke's unique material appears (fifteen out of the seventeen parables found in chapters 9-19, for instance, are unique to Luke)? The answer is obvious – because the history of the world and its salvation would be held in the balance at that place. It was there, at Jerusalem, that Jesus would be lifted up, and that salvation would be realised. There was no more significant event in the entire span of world history than this, and Luke is constantly drawing attention to the fact that Jesus is on his way to that city to suffer and to die for the sins of the world, and to realise the wonderful hope of resurrection. It is no hyperbole to say that the events in Jerusalem are not only the climax to Luke's gospel; they are also the centre-point of world history.<sup>2</sup>

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With such sufferings ahead of him it is small wonder that Jesus should need to begin the journey by 'setting his face' in such determined fashion towards Jerusalem (9v51).<sup>3</sup> The Greek here

<sup>1</sup> It is true that Matthew and Mark also mention the journey, and that they to some extent distinguish between a 'northern-ministry' and a Jerusalem-bound itinerary. But it is Luke that really foregrounds the theme and utilises it as a major structural device.

<sup>3</sup> The turning-point is also marked by the use of two unique terms to

is most emphatic – it deliberately piles up words to indicate the deliberate resolution of Jesus. There is also a double entendre. In the Old Testament ‘to set one’s face’ is almost invariably an expression used in connection with judgement. God sets his face

### Shared miracles, parables, and Q

Luke shares 12 miracles with Mark (11 of these are also shared with Matthew, and one of the 11 is also shared with John). He shares two parables with Matthew which are not found in Mark or John (the Roman centurion’s servant in 7:1-10 and the blind, mute and possessed man in 11:14). He records 7 unique miracles, listed in a previous sidebar.

Luke shares 10 parables with Mark (of which 8 are also shared with Matthew). He shares 9 parables with Matthew which are not found in either Mark or John. He records 15 unique parables, listed in a previous sidebar.

There are a number of places where Matthew and Luke contain very similar passages not found in Mark. Often the order of events and sayings is very similar also. For instance, Matthew 4:1-11 can be compared with Luke 4:1-13. This had led scholars to postulate that in addition to having Mark’s gospel as a source, Luke and Matthew also had another source from which they drew which has been labelled ‘Q’ (from the German ‘Quelle’, which means ‘source’). While some have advocated that Matthew used Luke or vice versa and explained the similarities that way, the consensus view is that there was an independent source.

It’s important to realise that no copy of the presumed Q has ever been found. It is a scholarly construct or hypothesis which may or may not be correct. While most of the shared material does appear very similar, there are occasions where Matthew and Luke report the same event with greater variation (for instance Luke 6:46-49 and the parallel in Mt 7:21,24-27 – the wording differs materially).

While it may be interesting to speculate on gospel origins, the question of the existence or non-existence of prior sources pales into insignificance in comparison to the question of what the gospels in the form we currently have them mean and have meant over the last 2000 years. The question of origins is also of much less consequence and is in no way determining of the question of the gospels’ status as the inspired Word of God. Far better to spend time studying the actual documents that we do have in front of us in the only form that history has preserved them (the gospels of Matthew and Luke in their present form, in other words) than to spend time analysing ‘documents’ which are mere scholarly constructs and may never have existed at all.

wail over the city because of the judgements of God which will be poured out (v6-7). This is exactly what Jesus does when he

against a man or a nation because He is displeased and because there is a retribution to be poured out. The expression is particularly characteristic of Ezekiel: ‘Son of man, set thy face against...’ is a phrase which recurs many times (14v8; 6v2; 13v17 are just a few typical instances in a long catalogue).<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps one particular reference from Ezekiel 21v1-3 is in mind in Luke 9v51, for there Ezekiel sets his face against Jerusalem (just as Jesus sets his face ‘towards’ it) to prophesy against it. In that particular prophecy Ezekiel points out that both the righteous and the wicked would be cut off, and he goes on to weep and

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describe Jesus’ work within the narrative of chapter 9. The Greek term translated as ‘received up’ in v51 (‘when the time was come that he should be received up’) is unique in the NT (the whole phrase literally means ‘time of ascension’). It may refer to Jesus’ being ‘lifted up’ on the cross, or it may refer to his resurrection and ascension. The second unusual term is the word ‘decease’ in v31 (a verse in which, incidentally, Jerusalem is also referred to). The Greek term here is the word ‘exodus’, so a link may be being set up between Jesus’ work and the deliverance of God’s people from Egypt.

<sup>1</sup> Note that ‘Son of Man’ – straight out of Ezekiel – is also Jesus’ favourite term of self-reference, occurring quite frequently in Luke.

finally arrives at the outskirts of Jerusalem to be cut off as the wicked, even though he is righteous: he weeps over Jerusalem just as Ezekiel had done all those centuries before (19:41-44). Jesus later goes on to utter his own prophecy of judgment against Jerusalem and his people as he foretells the AD70 doom of Jerusalem in the famed Olivet prophecy.

This organisational shape to which Luke subsumes his material is profound and speaks powerfully of the enormous significance of the work Jesus came to do. But it is a story that does not end in sacrificial death. That death gave birth to glorious new life, and Luke 24, the final chapter, is full of resurrection appearances in the Jerusalem area. From there the gospel will go forth – beginning at Jerusalem, but reaching to the ends of the earth. But that is another story, the story of Luke’s brilliant sequel.