

Introduction to Seminars on the *Gospel of Luke*
South Moreton Presbytery

**PREACHING AND STUDYING LUKE FOR
ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS**

Malcolm Coombes
November, 2018

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INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES ON *LUKE*

Our Presbytery Minister, David Busch, and I have been discussing the presentation of a few seminars on *Luke* as we enter the “Year of Luke” in our lectionary readings. My hope is that by doing this we may be able to provide some resources and background to the *Third Gospel* which may be particularly helpful for those who preach. I have added a section “For the Preacher” at the end of each background section. I also want to provide material for any people who are interested in studying this Gospel at greater depth.

It is anticipated that I will hold 3 sessions in 2019: One before Lent/Easter, one before Pentecost and another a few weeks after Pentecost. While it would have been ideal for me to kick off this series this year before we approach Advent and Christmas, unfortunately I have been incapacitated (broken wrist!) and I am unable to drive. However, I have provided the following notes in the hope that they may be helpful for those who are preaching over this period leading up to Christmas.

I have also included some general comments by way of introduction to our study of this exciting and unusual Gospel. This Gospel is full of life, full of hope, full of joy. I hope this can be reflected in our worship for the coming year.

My desire is that these notes may provide some background material and hopefully jog some thoughts for sermons. What can we say that's different this Christmas? I certainly am not intending to provide material that can be used word-for-word in sermons! Our congregations would quickly go to sleep! This material is for our own grounding in a firm foundation in the Scriptures, but the preacher needs to be creative in their use of background material to bring their own inspired message for the needs of the people to whom they preach.

What is so Special about *Luke*?

Luke is the longest of the Synoptic Gospels (= *Matthew*, *Mark*, *Luke*) in physical length and topics covered. It is a joyful gospel. Along with the *Book of Acts*, which seems to be the second volume of Luke's work, he describes the powerful movement of the good news message from Galilee to Jerusalem and then to the ends of the earth. A broad scope indeed! Luke repeatedly highlights the power of the Holy Spirit to drive this good news message and outlines the many exciting ways God's Spirit has worked in the life of Jesus, and his followers later on, as his joyful gospel is spread.¹ Worship in the "Year of Luke" can express this joy, anticipation, hope, and good news!

Luke is seen as less harsh than *Mark* however it, like *Matthew*, is quite severe in relation to the Pharisees. This may reflect a period where the followers of Jesus are moving away from the Jewish movement, strongly influenced by the Pharisees.

Marsh and Moyise summarise *Luke*:²

...as a whole, Luke presents Jesus as God's anointed, an Israelite prophet with a message of judgment for oppressors and compassion for the downtrodden. It is what many people imagine a biography of Jesus should be like – and what many people imagine Christians should be like. If Matthew produced a Gospel for the church, Luke produced a Gospel for the world.

¹ I am naming the writer of *Luke* and *Acts* "Luke" by way of convenience. If the reader wishes to pursue the many questions about the real identity of the author, whether it is Luke or not, they can refer to the introduction of commentaries.

² Clive Marsh and Steve Moyise, *Jesus and the Gospels*. 2nd ed. (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 48.

Luke 1:1-4 gives an outline of the purpose of Luke's writing: To provide an orderly account to Theophilus so that he may "know the truth" concerning the things about which he had been instructed (1:4).

As this prologue is similar to other ancient writings (for example that of the historian Josephus) it appears as though Luke is locating his work in the context of ancient Greco-Roman literature. And yet Theophilus is otherwise unknown to us (although see also Acts 1:1 for a similar opening). He could be a patron. "Most excellent" denotes someone of nobility, perhaps well-off. It may be that Luke hopes/expects this person to pass copies of the gospel account around. The name "Theophilus" means "lover of God" and this address could be interpreted to mean that anyone who loves God is the intended recipient of this Gospel.

The accounts of Jesus have been passed on through eyewitnesses and "servants of the word." Luke seems to be seen as the transmitter of these accounts and seemingly not an eyewitness himself. He indicates that he wishes to convey the truth about what Theophilus has been taught. He has studied the other accounts and so wants to present an orderly account.

This is all part of God's plan for the whole of history (1:14–17, 31–35, 46–55, 68–79; 2:9–14, 30–35; 4:16–30; 13:31–35; 24:44–49 and in many other places). For Luke, Jesus was the fulfilment of all God's promises. With the coming of Christ believers do not need to become Jews and Jesus was for Gentiles as well as for Jews (2:32):

*a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.*

For a well-written fictional account of how the Gospel *may* have been written and in what context see:

Bruce W. Longenecker, *The Lost Letters of Pergamum: A Story from the New Testament World*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016).

(While writing this book as fiction, the author, an esteemed biblical scholar, still provides a great insight into the life of the early church at the end of the first century, and particularly under the Roman Emperor Domitian. Thus it is a helpful resource, not just for those who wish to study *Luke*, but also potentially for those who wish to study the *Book of Revelation*.)

What is Jesus Like in *Luke*?

Charpentier summarises Jesus in *Luke* well:

Luke is the only evangelist to call Jesus '**Lord**' when he is talking about him. **The glory of Easter is reflected back on his earthly life.** This glory surrounds Jesus from his birth onwards (2.9, 32). The transfiguration is less an anticipation of the future glory of Easter (Matthew - Mark) than an emergence of the glory which he possesses from his conception, because he is **born of the Spirit** (9.32). The glory which he is to show as Son of Man is his own (9.26, compare Matt. 16.27; Mark 8.26). All men glorify him (4.15), though God is the only one who should be glorified. **Jesus is king** (that is perhaps clearer to Greek readers); Luke is the

only evangelist to say so, and he does it six times (1.32-33; 19.12f, 28f.; 22.28L, 67f.; 23.40L). Luke knows that Jesus acted as Lord and Christ only as a result of his resurrection (Acts 2.36); however, that is possible because he is **Lord and Christ in his very being**, as the infancy narratives affirm. The title Son of God is not a simple recognition of his role (equivalent to Son of David), but an affirmation of his nature (1.35; 22.70).³ [bold mine].

The coming of Jesus is God's visit. In Luke, the proclamation of judgment as by a prophet becomes the **good news of salvation, a year of grace** (4.19; cf. 1.68, 78; 7.16; 19.44). By his attitude **Jesus makes this love of the Father visible: he is the friend of publicans and sinners** (7.34). **He is the saviour**, the deliverer from Satan who holds men's [*sic.*] hearts in thrall, and from evil which tortures their bodies. Jesus is the friend of sinners, because they need God in the same way as the sick person needs the physician (5.31), but even more because God needs them to show his forgiveness (15). **Luke has a great attachment to women**, often scorned at that time (Mary, Elizabeth, Anne, Mary Magdalene, Martha and Mary, the women who accompany him); some go on to play an important role in the church (Acts 1.14; 12.12; 16.14; 21.9).⁴ [bold mine].

Each of these pithy statements is a sermon in its own right (or indeed several sermons)! The preacher may wish to explore the implications of these deep statements for our world today at different times throughout the church year. What does it mean, for example, to see Jesus as king/ruler in our current world? What sort of reign of God is envisaged in Luke? How does God's visit of grace impact us today? What do we think of salvation today? What does it mean to consider how God saves us now? What do we need saving from? How can we communicate this using understandable language for people not familiar with religious terms?

We shall discuss Luke's portrayal of Christ further through the series of seminars.

Structure of *Luke*

Basically *Luke* follows *Mark's* structure, including pieces from other sources. Thus Vinson structures:⁵

- 1:1-4 – Prologue
- 1:5-2:52 – Birth Narratives
- 3:1-22 – John's Preaching, Baptism
- 3:23-38 – Genealogy
- 4:1-13 – Temptation
- 4:14-9:50 – Ministry in Galilee
- 9:51-19:28 – Journey
- 19:29-21:38 – Entry, Teaching in Jerusalem
- 22:1-23:56 – Passion Narrative
- 24:1-11 – Empty Tomb
- 24:12-52 – Resurrection Narratives

³ E. Charpentier, *How to Read the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1982), 88.

⁴ Charpentier, *How to Read the New Testament*, 88.

⁵ Vinson, *Luke*, 7.

LUKE READINGS FOR ADVENT 2018

Advent 1 – Sunday, 2nd Dec. – Luke 21:25-36 – The Son of Man coming in the cloud
Advent 2 – Sunday, 9th Dec. – Luke 3:1-6 – Prepare the way of the Lord
Advent 3 – Sunday, 16th Dec. – Luke 3:7-18 – Bear fruits worthy of repentance
Advent 4 – Sunday, 23rd Dec. – Luke 1:39-45 (46-55) – Mary visits Elizabeth

Two of the readings in Advent mention the stormy character, John the Baptist. Luke includes material about John which is not mentioned in the other gospels. Firstly it is interesting to compare the arrival of John and the arrival of Jesus.

- Both are born in miraculous circumstances following the announcement from an angel (1:8-23 and 1:28-38);
- Both have the mother's response (1:24-25 and 1:39-56);
- both stories have songs of praise to God;
- both are filled with the Spirit (1:15, 35; cf. 4:1);
- both are circumcised and named (1:59-66 and 2:21-24);
- there is a prophetic response (1:67-79 and 2:25-39);
- and their growth is portrayed similarly (1:80; 2:40-52).

The two children belong to the one good news story of salvation.⁶ They are stories which reach back into the Old Testament.

Luke will later clarify that John makes the way for Jesus and underlines the work of the Spirit in this advent.

ADVENT 1 – LUKE 21:25-36

As we lead into Advent when we consider (and prepare for) the coming of Christ past, present and future, we encounter the time when Jesus outlines what is to happen. He has just been speaking of the coming destruction of Jerusalem (21:20-24), something which was to occur at the end of the Jewish wars with the Romans culminating with the destruction of the Temple in 70CE.

Now in this passage for the First Sunday in Advent, the style becomes **apocalyptic**. These days this word tends to mean “widespread destruction”, however originally the term meant “revelatory”. It is used to describe a type of writing not uncommon amongst Jewish and early Christian writers. We see this style in the Book of Revelation but in other places in the New Testament, in the Old Testament, and in other ancient Jewish writings (such as *1 Enoch*) where the visions of God's faithful people are recorded. And so it is visionary material, often describing heavenly or spiritual features. Thus, it uses picture language to describe indescribable concepts. There is much of this in the *Book of Daniel*.

⁶ Paul J. Achtemeier, Joel B. Green, Marianne Meye Thompson, *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 160.

Apocalyptic style incorporates strange symbolic visions, accompanied by symbolic numbers. It often portrays end-times scenarios, judgment and the ultimate victory of God. **To attempt to read this type of literature as literal, or as a calendar of events leading up to the End, is to miss the point.** History is littered with well-meaning people who try to calculate when the end times and the coming of Christ will be. So far they have been incorrect! Biblical passages are written in this apocalyptic style largely to portray that despite current persecution and oppression by foreign powers, God would save the people to bring them once again to a place of wholeness and well-being. Despite what seemed to be the contrary, God was in charge of history and desired to encourage the people to endure the tough times and remain faithful to the call of God on their lives.

Unfortunately we don't have time here to explore further this important topic, but it is important that we consider it as we come to this passage. In Luke 21:25-28, Luke is using Mark's apocalyptic language in Mark 13 to describe the apocalyptic imagery of the shaking of the earth and heavenly bodies to usher God's move in history, the Day of the Lord. (See also Isa 24:19-23 for similar imagery).

What are we to make of this vision of the "Son of Man" coming in the cloud (v. 27)? Again it is apocalyptic language and we need to read it symbolically. We can refer to another apocalyptic passage, Daniel 7, especially vv. 9-14. Here Daniel sees a vision of one "like a human being" or "like a son of man" receiving a "dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed." (v. 14). (See Isa 19:1 for a similar picture of God on a cloud.) And so in *Luke* we have an image of the exalted Christ returning to receive the eternal reign.

And so to take the passage as a whole, we see Jesus outlining the fall of Jerusalem and then the coming of the Son of Man as separate events. (See also verse 9 indicating that the end will not follow immediately.)

While others may be disturbed with the events leading up to the end, Jesus assures his followers by looking upwards for their coming redemption and approach of the reigning Christ. Like in Daniel, this reign of Christ will be forever and will be universally acknowledged.

Joel Green writes of this passage:

"This generation" [v. 32] refers in Luke's narrative not to a set number of decades or to people living at such-and-such a time, but to people who stubbornly turn their backs on the divine purpose. Jesus' followers can expect hostility and calamity until the very End, Jesus teaches, for the old world, "this generation," does not easily give way to the new. Again, then, Jesus underscores how humiliation and suffering need not be taken as incongruous with his teaching regarding the inbreaking reign of God, but may be taken as signs of the realization of God's kingdom (see Acts 14:22). Nor should the tribulations Jesus has enumerated detract from confidence in his word; in language that recalls OT assurances of the certainty and permanence of Yahweh's word, Jesus affirms the .certainty and permanence of his own prophetic instruction...

As in previous uses of the admonition “be on guard,” so in this one we must assume that Jesus summons his followers to watchfulness in the very areas where their inclinations place them most at risk. Implicated in practices reminiscent of those of the Pharisees and scribes, they had to be warned repeatedly about avoiding such influence and behavior. Now, Jesus perceives that the delay in the advent of the End may bring its own temptations to faithlessness and a business-as-usual orientation to life (cf., e.g., 8:13–14; 12:45–46; 17:24).⁷

For the Preacher

This surely needs to be our encouragement in this season of Advent: As we are expectant and ready and open for the coming Christ (past, present and here future), that we are prepared and hopeful, despite the circumstances in which we may find ourselves. Throughout times of difficulty, the call is constantly to endure, to be faithful and to be expectant and prayerfully (v. 36) prepared for Christ to rule in our lives forever and in glory. The world is directed towards a mighty end, but in the meantime we can always be ready for the coming of Christ into our own lives day by day. So as the first Sunday in Advent the church can explore themes of hope. This can be contrasted with how else in our society we may look to other (false or unreliable) places for hope.

The preacher can explore ways that the coming of Christ to us today can be anticipated and how we can be always prepared, prayerful and watchful.

ADVENT 2 – LUKE 3:1-6

Craddock writes:

All who have come under the spell of Mark’s Gospel know the impact of a sudden beginning ... But this is not Luke’s style. ... Luke takes 134 [verses] to prepare us for the ministries of John and Jesus. For Luke, significant events have antecedents, causes, and preparations. The church has learned from Luke in this regard and holds its two central celebrations, Easter and Christmas, only after weeks of preparation. If one does not walk the road, the destination is reduced to half its meaning; withdraw from any occasion the anticipation of it and even an event of great importance is much impoverished.⁸

I have already offered some background to John the Baptist above. God has already been working in history to bring to us the message of John. It is interesting that the Jewish historian Josephus, who wrote for the Romans, mentions this fascinating character. Josephus writes (*Antiquities* 18.5.2 116-119):

Now some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod's army came from God, and was a very just punishment for what he did against John called the baptist [the dipper]. For Herod had him killed, although he was a good man and had urged the Jews to exert themselves to virtue, both as to justice toward one another and reverence towards God, and having done so join together in washing. For immersion

⁷ Joel B. Green, [The Gospel of Luke](#), The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 739–743.

⁸ Fred B. Craddock, *Luke* (Interpretation Series; Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 45

in water, it was clear to him, could not be used for the forgiveness of sins, but as a sanctification of the body, and only if the soul was already thoroughly purified by right actions. And when others massed about him, for they were very greatly moved by his words, Herod, who feared that such strong influence over the people might carry to a revolt -- for they seemed ready to do any thing he should advise -- believed it much better to move now than later have it raise a rebellion and engage him in actions he would regret.

And so John, out of Herod's suspiciousness, was sent in chains to Machaerus, the fort previously mentioned, and there put to death; but it was the opinion of the Jews that out of retribution for John God willed the destruction of the army so as to afflict Herod.

Josephus thus describes John as a good man, calling people to justice and reverence towards God.

Our reading for the Second Sunday in Advent calls us not so much to focus on John the Baptist himself, but on his role as the voice of the prophet calling people to prepare the way of the Lord. The passage quoted from Isaiah 40 is the famous proclamation to the people in exile in Babylon announcing the good news of God calling those people home again. All who were in captivity would see the saving work of God to bring them back.

And so now John moves with this good news, in calling people to repentance, as they prepare their hearts to return to God. Repentance (v. 3) means a change in direction, a change in thinking, an about face in how we live our lives. It calls for us to hit the "reset" button. Next Sunday the next Lukan passage will spell out further John's message of repentance.

For the Preacher

As John's predecessor, the prophet from of old, called the people with the good news to return to their own land through the desert, so too does John the Baptist announce the coming of the One who will also call the people back to their home through turning once again to God and following the paths to which God calls us.

Christ is coming and John calls the people to be ready for this new advent. The preacher can call people today to turn (once again, or for the first time) to God. We all need to hear this message. The call through the desert is being opened up and levelled.

The preacher can explore what repentance may mean for us today. What needs to happen in our hearts and in our actions as we prepare for Christ to come into our hearts?

Luke is careful to place events in the Gospel (and in Acts), against the reigns of the Caesars and local governors (see e.g. v. 1 but also 1:5; 2:1, 2.) and yet as indicated above, Luke especially desires to name Christ as ruler. What does it mean for Christ to be lord and ruler today? Perhaps the preacher could use an analogy of road construction to describe stages of preparing the way of the Lord.

ADVENT 3 – LUKE 3:7-18

This week we continue on from the passage for the Second Sunday in Advent. Now we hear of John addressing particular groups in the crowd. For those who saw themselves as children of Abraham (v. 8) he urges that they produce fruit worthy of repentance. No-one can hide behind their spiritual ancestry or easily spoken words. Real fruit is produced from hearts and lives truly turned to God. In *Luke* alone, John then continues to encourage generosity as they share food and belongings amongst themselves. Those who are needy and hungry are always to be within our sights as we share what has been given to us. The tax-collectors were similarly exhorted to charge no more than they should, and the soldiers were called to avoid extortion, or abuse their power.

Craddock writes:

John is not simply screaming rebukes, trying to reduce a crowd to a pool of guilt and fear; he has a message of social responsibility. A religious void of ethical and moral earnestness is exactly that, void. ‘What then shall we do?’ the seekers ask. Luke will tell us later that the first preaching of the church prompted many to ask, ‘What shall we do?’ (Acts 2:37). John’s answers, which have to do with the injustices and inequities of that society, are continuous with Luke’s convictions about the social implications of the gospel, the first glimpse of which we saw in the Magnificat. [Luke 1:46-55] These social and economic concerns will be built into the agenda of the common life of the early church (Acts 2:43-47; 4:32-35).⁹

And so the repentance of which John spoke was not just a verbal issue, but was to be reflected in the everyday lives and work of the people coming to hear his message. God’s scheme of social justice involves every aspect of our lives and is a reflection of God’s words spoken many times through the prophets, leaders and indeed the Law of old. It is a reflection of what God envisages for the Reign of God which the coming Christ will proclaim.

For the Preacher

While John the Baptist’s message may seem a fiery one, it is good reminder to pay attention to the words which immediately follow the threat of “unquenchable fire” (v. 17). Verse 18 continues: “So with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the **good news** to the people” (NRSV). John’s message is good news! To quote Craddock again: “The preacher should not, however, use John’s message as the permission to launch attacks on listeners, without redemptive content. When repentance and forgiveness are available, judgment is good news (v. 18). The primary aim is to save the wheat, not to burn the chaff.”¹⁰ Each of us is called to repent of the chaff in our lives, both our own personal lives, as well as our corporate lives, including the repentance of the Church.

We have recently seen, as the results of the Royal Commission show, how much still needs to be done to prevent abuse of power. John the Baptist’s call to turn around and to see the needs of those with less power, wealth and resources, is still a vital

⁹ Craddock, *Luke*, 48.

¹⁰ Craddock, *Luke*, 49.

message for our world. The world is full of refugees who are seeking a restoration of the imbalances of power, food, health, and wealth.

Luke's good news, has always been to proclaim restoration and wholesomeness to the poor, oppressed, and hungry. It is these who see their need who can truly repent and can live in God's Reign where any form of oppression will be no more. Such calls for repentance also need to be directed to ourselves as well.

ADVENT 4 – LUKE 1:39-45 (46-55)

And so finally in Advent we turn to Mary's visit to her relative Elizabeth. Luke, more than the other Synoptics, highlights the place of female characters. Here in the first chapter is no exception.

This won't be the only time in *Luke* and *Acts* that we see the place of the Holy Spirit working within the characters in these two books. Here Elizabeth is filled with the Spirit as she prophesies about the soon to be born child. She describes Mary as "the mother of my Lord" (v. 43), an exalted title indeed for both mother and child. Similarly in response to the presence of Mary and her unborn child, even John the Baptist jumps for joy in the womb. The scene is certainly one of joy, gladness, and the power of the Spirit. Everybody's jumping! These themes will continue in the next chapter as Jesus is born and is presented in the Temple, and indeed will continue throughout the Gospel and the *Book of Acts*.

The coming of the Christ is prefaced with the strong move of the Holy Spirit in people's lives. It is then so appropriate that Mary responds in vv. 46-55 with the "Magnificat", the great song of praise. In this song Mary is seen as a lowly servant (v. 48) and she continues to praise God for his work in scattering the proud and mighty and raising up the lowly, and the hungry. This shows similarities with John the Baptist's message from Week 3 in Advent. It will also be a theme which continues throughout the remainder of *Luke* and on into *Acts*. The Holy Spirit brings the message of God's desire, and God's working, towards raising up the lowly and oppressed. (See also Jesus' use of Isaiah about his own mission to proclaim liberty in Luke 4:18-19.)

Mary speaks of God's mercy, (*eleos* in 1:54 also 1:58, 72, 78; 10:37). This word usually expresses compassion and mercy to the unfortunate. It can also take on the idea of a mutual relationship, as 'faithfulness' or even 'gracious faithfulness'. It is shown by God as being faithful to the covenant (1:72) to those who fear and worship him (Exod 20:6).¹¹

Nolland writes:

Echoes of 2 Sam 6:2–19 are to be found in vv 41, 43, 44, and possibly v 56. Except for the last, what we have is a taking up of language that expresses a

¹¹ I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1978), 83.

paradigmatic response to that which marks the presence and activity of God. If the last be granted (v 56; cf. 2 Sam 6:11), then we must go further and say that this taking up of paradigmatic responses has been artistically carried through by treating the presence of Mary (or the unborn Jesus) as equivalent to the presence of the ark of the covenant.¹²

For the Preacher

The move of God is at the forefront of this story of Mary's encounter with the pregnant Elizabeth. The coming of the Christ is through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, as now more is revealed about what God is doing through Christ. Christ's very presence prompts joy and praise as Mary considers God's faithful love for people, in keeping with God's faithful promises to the people of ancient Israel.

God's reign through Christ is such that it considers those who are lowly, humble, disadvantaged, disempowered, or hungry. Such is the way of God and we look forward to hearing more of what Jesus, and then the Holy Spirit, have to say about these issues in *Luke* and *Acts*.

The preacher may also choose to summarise the four Sundays in Advent and how we can be prepared for the coming of our mighty Ruler.

LUKE READINGS FOR CHRISTMAS DAY

Christmas Day – Tuesday, 25th December

Luke 2:1-14 (15-20) or Luke 2:(1-7), 8-20 – The birth of the Saviour
or John 1:1-14 – The coming of the Word

Some Background to the Lukan Birth Narrative (1:5-2:52)

Luke prepares us for the birth of Jesus like no other Gospel. More so than the other gospels, Luke grounds the narrative in the political history of the times. He seems keen to provide a historically based account with various time-markers. For example, Luke 2:1–2 (NRSV):

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.

(See also 3:1; 3:23; 23:7). This pattern continues on in *Acts*: 5:37; 12:20; 18:12; 23:26 etc.

Questions have often been raised about the reliability of the history of *Luke* and *Acts*. For example, in the passage we just read Quirinius is governor of Syria at the same time Herod is king. Yet he is recorded in other historical records as being governor

¹² John Nolland, *Luke 1:1–9:20*, vol. 35A, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 74.

after the death of Herod. It is possible that he was governor for an earlier term in the time-frame which Luke outlines. There have been other suggestions to seek to overcome the historical problems.

There is of course benefit in exploring this further, however we should not miss why Luke seeks to embed the story of Jesus in the story of history. One possible reason could be to compare and contrast the reign of Jesus with the reign of empire in which his readers lived.

Luke is the only gospel writer to mention 3 Caesars: Augustus (2:1), Tiberius (3:1), and Claudius is mentioned in Acts (11:28; 18:2). The contrast is made between the august Caesar, Octavian (= Augustus), supposedly worthy of divine favour and human adulation, and the reign of the Jesus the Christ, the Messiah. Jesus' story is presented and contrasted against the backdrop of empire.

Various promises have been made and fulfilled with a corresponding response of praise as Achtemeier et al's table indicates:¹³

Character	Promise	Evidence of Fulfilment	Response of Praise
Zechariah	His wife will bear a child	John is born	Song of Zechariah
Mary	She will conceive a son	Unborn John bears witness to Jesus in the womb.	“ “ Mary
Simeon	He will see the Messiah	He meets Jesus in the Temple	“ “ Simeon

The entire birth narrative in Luke is one of wonder, fulfilment and the work of the Spirit. This is against the background of empire and the foreground of Jewish piety and Mary's sense of quiet awe is in keeping with the marvellous event which is now announced.

Luke's birth narrative differs from Matthew's account. Emphasis here is given to the miraculous conception of Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit. Mary's song emphasises her humble state (1:46-55). This is also a theme in Elizabeth's and Zechariah's speeches (1:25; 1:67-71), but also in the speeches of Simeon and Anna (2:28-32; 2:36-38). These speeches reach deeply into Israel's history with the promise of salvation. Mary's speech is reminiscent of Hannah's about the birth of Samuel.

How would the speeches of Mary, Zechariah and Simeon sound to a Jewish revolutionary frustrated with the oppression of Rome? How would they sound to Theophilus, possibly a Roman official?¹⁴

¹³ Paul J. Achtemeier, Joel B. Green, Marianne Meye Thompson, *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 160.

¹⁴ David Wenham and Steve Walton, *Exploring the New Testament. Vol 1: The Gospels and Acts*, 2nd ed. (London: SPCK, 2011), 241.

Jesus' family are pious, law-observing Jews as are those who prophesy over him in the Temple. They are obedient to what has been asked of them and their having Jesus circumcised along with the offerings given, are portrayed as in keeping with Jewish law.

For Luke there is only one history of salvation, and that came through Israel into Judaism and thence into Jesus and the new community that bears his name... The bond Luke seeks to make between the new Jesus-movement and historic Judaism and Israel is further seen in the presence of the twelve-year-old Jesus in the Temple talking to the leaders there. He and they are at one with each other.¹⁵

Luke's issues with rich and poor may suggest that the community receiving this gospel were a mixed socio-economic group.

The shepherds in the birth narrative certainly indicate the lowliness of the situation again, how the good news is announced to shepherds. (Is it also an indication that the Good Shepherd is with the people?).

There are other allusions present here. The Greco-Roman reader could perhaps remember the writings of Virgil the poet who wrote of the ideal ruler, born among shepherds (*Aeneid* 6.791ff). The Jew may reflect on the shepherd background of King David as recorded in Psalm 78:70–71 (NRSV):

⁷⁰ *He chose his servant David,
and took him from the sheepfolds;
⁷¹ from tending the nursing ewes he brought him
to be the shepherd of his people Jacob,
of Israel, his inheritance.*

Luke's genealogy differs from Matthew's. Luke traces the genealogy back to Adam, son of God, indicating that it goes back to the source of all humanity and that Jesus is "Son of God".

The titles of "lord" and "saviour" ring out against the titles given to the previous oppressors of Israel. Jesus is also proclaimed as Messiah and "Son of the Most High" (1:32).

The consolation of Israel and the restoration of Israel for which Simeon and Anna had been awaiting is now announced. It is the time of fulfilment and again Luke reaches deep into Israel's longing history to announce the coming of the Messiah, the saviour. Now Jesus is also the light for the Gentiles, again in fulfilment of the prophecies of the post-exilic prophets of Israel.

The birth accounts reveal how Luke sees the coming of Jesus and John in the context of a new outbreak of prophecy through the Holy Spirit in the life of Israel.

¹⁵ V. George Shillington, *The New Testament in Context: A Literary and Theological Textbook* (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 91.

In the story of Jesus found in the Temple when he was twelve (2:41-52 – only in *Luke*) emphasis is given of God being Jesus' father, although he will be obedient to his earthly parents. We see here the strong connection with the Temple which will feature on several occasions in *Luke* (and *Acts*). There are several scenes in the Temple in chapters 1 and 2, and *Luke* finishes with the disciples returning to the Temple, praising God for what they had witnessed (24:52).

Related to the Temple theme, worship features strongly in the birth narratives. Zechariah has been serving as priest, Mary responds in praise with the Magnificat, when Zechariah is able to speak again (1:64) he immediately praises God (see also 1:67-79), the angels praise God before the shepherds, the shepherds return to their flocks praising God (2:20), and finally Simeon and Anna praise God upon seeing the child in the Temple (2:28, 38).

For the Preacher

The preacher could pick up the themes of joy and praise which surround the birth accounts. Similarly they could reflect on the work of the Spirit or explore what it means for us for a saviour to be born. We often use the term "salvation" in religious circles, but how much do people who may be only worshipping this day understand what salvation can mean in their lives? What can Jesus save us from? Is Jesus being placed in an animal food trough, a symbol of lowliness, or is there also the possibility of interpreting an image of Jesus providing for the world? In what way might this be?

Another thought on which the preacher could focus is how God's great news has come to those who are "lowly"? (For example: the shepherds or Mary). What does this attitude mean for us, on which we could model our own lives? What might our Shepherd King teach us?

What is our attitude to worship? Why was it that the birth of Jesus was announced amongst worshippers, those who praise God?

JOHN 1:1-14 – THE COMING OF THE WORD – SOME BACKGROUND

While this series concentrates on the *Gospel of Luke* I couldn't resist making some comments about the alternate reading for Christmas Day from *John*.

The opening of *John* is exquisitely dense as we experience the Word becoming flesh and living among us (John 1:14). The whole passage is so rich, and I am not pretending to do it justice in just the few words that follow.

Firstly let's compare *John's* beginning with the other Gospels

Matt - genealogy, birth account, magi etc.

Mark - "the gospel" of Jesus Christ son of God and prophecy fulfilment

Luke - literary intro plus birth account, scenes in the Temple, shepherds etc.

John instead goes way back to prehistory - Jesus came from above with divine origins, "in the beginning". The passage appears to follow a movement in time,

beginning with pre-existence (vv. 1-2), to creation (vv. 3-4), then the story of humanity and then incarnation and the reception of the Logos.

The connection of “light” and “life” connects the themes of creation and redemption. The word for “light” overcoming can mean “overcoming” or “being subdued”. It can also mean “comprehend”. The darkness of the world can’t understand the light, the Word.

What is the meaning and background of this word *logos* or “the Word”?

Philosophical Background

One way to start to answer this is to look at Greek Philosophy. *Logos* was central to Greek philosophy in the previous centuries - it is divine self-revelation. Note the following quote from Cleanthes, *Hymn to Zeus*, in Stobaeus, *Fragments* I.1.12:

- 1) Most glorious of immortals, Zeus
the many-named, almighty evermore,
Nature’s great Sovereign, ruling all by law...
Thee will I ever chant, thy power praise!
- 27) For unto thee the unloved still is lovely –
and thus in one all things are harmonized,
the evil with the good, that so **one Word**
should be in all things everlastingly.

The Stoics picked up the idea of the *logos*. The whole universe came into being from the “rational principle”. The “word” was the mind of God, but here God was a pantheistic idea which pervaded all things. However Smith warns that “The Stoic understanding of *logos* as the world principle is not to be translated into the Word which is Jesus Christ”.¹⁶

Gnosticism

Another suggested background to the notion of *logos* is that of Gnosticism. There is a much debated question of when Gnosticism started. It was certainly present after the 1st century CE and yet it appeared to have roots in thinking much earlier than this.

It is difficult to define Gnosticism, partly because there have been different varieties of Gnostic belief. Basically Gnosticism places emphasis on knowledge. It relates to being saved by knowing God. Knowledge releases the soul to return to their spiritual origins. God communicates by the “*logos*”.

There developed many streams of Gnosticism. One work which appears to be of Christian origin, showing Gnostic tendencies is the Odes of Solomon. This was written possibly around the same time as the Gospel, possibly in Syria, and shows several similarities with *John*. For example consider Odes of Solomon 41:11-14:

And his **Word** is with us in all our way,
the Saviour who gives life and does not reject ourselves.
The Man who humbled himself,
but was raised because of his own righteousness.

¹⁶ D. Moody Smith, *John*, Proclamation Commentaries (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976).

The Son of the Most High appeared in the perfection of his Father,
and light dawned from **the Word** that was before time in him.

Hebrew/Greek Background, and the Greek Translation of the Hebrew Bible (Septuagint)

Philo (the Jewish philosopher in Egypt early in the 1st century CE) wrote an interpretation of Genesis 1 using “logos” terminology. He saw the Logos, created by God as the intermediary between God and creation. The Logos is what gave meaning to the universe. Like some of Philo’s writings, John 1 may be reflection of the Genesis story. Notice how many times God “said” in the creation account in Genesis 1.

Also, the word of the Lord was associated with prophecy in Old Testament times. “Thus says the Lord” is often what precedes the prophecy. In other words, the prophetic oracles are the word of God.

Targums are interpretive writings based on the Jewish Scriptures. The “word of the Lord” is repetitive in these Targums and is used to talk about God indirectly. Thus, for example the fragmentary Targum on Genesis 1: 1 – 5 says “and the **word of the Lord** said, ‘Let there be Light’ ... and **the word of the Lord** divided the light from the darkness ...”

The concept of Logos was used in late Jewish and pagan religious texts to designate God’s agent in creation and in world government.

It is clear enough that the Logos of *John* is God’s speech, God’s self-disclosure to the world, and, as the text makes plain, the means through which God creates.

There is literature written before the NT in which the concept of “wisdom” (*sophia*) is important:

Prov 8:22-31 wisdom speaks of her role in creation, the beginning of God’s work, the first of God’s acts of long ago

Prov 2:6 wisdom comes from the mouth of God

Prov 3:19 wisdom is God’s agent in the creation of the world

Sirach 24:9 (speaking of Wisdom): “Before the ages, in the beginning, he created me, and for all the ages I shall not cease to be”

Sirach 15:3 to all who receive wisdom she gives “the bread of learning” and “the water of wisdom”

and W. of Solomon 7:22-8:1; 8:5 (7:27 “In every generation she passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God” - NB Jesus’ reference to “friends” in John 15:13-15) (7:22 wisdom is “unique” (*monogenēs* - cf. John 1:14)

Baruch 3:37 “Wisdom appeared on earth and lived with humankind”

Thus the Logos in John 1 appears to take on the idea of *Sophia*, the wisdom which the ancients sought as to how best to live their lives so that they may prosper.

The most obvious and immediate background of the concept of the Word is the Genesis creation story, which also opens with ‘in the beginning’.

John, like *Genesis*, intends to speak of the creation. Each stage of creation is portrayed as resulting from God's speaking. As well as this similarity, in *Genesis* God first creates light. The motifs of darkness and light appear over against one another in both. In John's prologue, the contrast between light and darkness is developed in the direction of a sharply defined dualism, which is characteristic of the Gospel as a whole. "This range of meaning is quite intelligible against the background of contemporary usage."¹⁷

Jesus Christ is not simply the historical person Jesus of Nazareth, although he is inseparable from him. Jesus is the Son of God, the Word of God, the Christ, the Son of Man. In Jesus Christ, God is revealed to humanity and God acts on behalf of us in a decisive way. The terms and categories that we find appropriate to describe historical persons and events can no longer quite comprehend him.

In this Prologue we see the connection of God entering the world. Here, as van der Watt says: "We are introduced to a world where a loving God meets people in a unique way – through the Son of God, Jesus, who became human".¹⁸ It is God wishing to communicate with us in a unique word

There is a high Christology and theology expressed in this Prologue. We have seen this as Christ is the Logos as divine and human (1:1, 14).

This Logos is light (1:5) and life (1:4) and unique (*monogenēs* - 1:14, 18). *Monogenēs* is a little tricky to translate. It can be "only", "one of a kind", "unique". It does not relate etymologically with the idea of "begetting". It is used of the "only" son of the widow of Nain (Luke 7:12 cf. Luke 9:38) and of Jairus' "only" daughter (Luke 8:42)¹⁹.

In v. 14 John says the "Word dwelt among us" (*skēnoō*) reminds the reader of the dwelling of Wisdom in Israel (e.g. Sir 24: 8 "my creator chose the place for my tent. He said make your dwelling (*kataskēnōson*) in Jacob, and in Israel receive your inheritance). It also may be linked to a Hebrew word to describe God's "abiding" in Israel (Exod 25: 8; 29: 46; Zech 2: 14). It is the root of a Rabbinic word describing the resting of the glory of Yahweh over the tabernacle (Exod 25: 8; 40: 35). And so like the presence of the Lord in the tabernacle of OT times, now the Word comes and "tabernacles" in glory with us today. The "author can claim that to gaze on the incarnation of the Word was to see the revelation of the divine in the human story."²⁰

John's statement that the Word became flesh is unique in the NT, and yet it is in keeping with the Christology of the NT.

Concluding Remarks

In this passage we encounter some rich metaphors which will lead into the remainder of the Gospel. Christ as light, life, the negation of darkness, there is life vs

¹⁷ Smith, *John*, 22 – 23.

¹⁸ Jan van der Watt, *An Introduction to the Johannine Gospel and Letters* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 7.

¹⁹ See also Dale Moody "God's Only Son," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 72 (1953): 213-219.

²⁰ Moloney, *John*, 39.

death, there is the metaphor of “word”. All these images encourage us to explore the depths in our own readings of this gospel.

For Moloney the Prologue

expresses the major christological beliefs of Christianity: The Word pre-existed creation with God; creation was through the Word; divine filiation is possible for believers; Jesus Christ is the incarnation of God, the Word become flesh; he shares in the divinity of God, yet he has taken on the human condition totally; Jesus is the unique, once-and-for-all revelation of God in the human story; the perfection of God’s earlier gift of the Law to Moses takes place in and through Jesus Christ. Despite this intense focus on christology that has marked the use of the Prologue over the Christian centuries, at the heart of this passage lies a theology. What the Prologue says about Jesus depends entirely upon what the author wants to say about God’s having been made known in and through Jesus Christ. (*John*, 41)

The narration of the divine origin of Christ now throws light on his unique significance for salvation which is later revealed in the words and works of the person Jesus.

For the Preacher

The preacher might like to explore the differences of the birth accounts in *Luke* and *John* (without going into too much detail!). If they wish to preach from the John passage they may wish to consider John’s account of the pre-existent Word, how God has always been willing to communicate with humanity, through creation, through the prophets, through the Law and now through Jesus Christ in person “full of grace and truth”. How might we translate the “Word” to our cultural setting today?

The preacher may choose to consider Christ as the blueprint of life (the Greek philosophical concept of the Logos), or the concept of true Wisdom. (Although we don’t talk of wisdom today in the same way that the ancient Greeks and Hebrews did, we still consider in different ways how best to live our lives.)

The preacher may also consider how Jesus can be “light” and “life”. Are there any other modern-day metaphors which could be used? What does it mean for us to have God “living with us”? And what does it mean for God to be “in the flesh” (which is what “incarnation” means)?

I am not suggesting that our Christmas sermons should be an extensive outlining of ancient Greek philosophy, or Hebrew Wisdom. That would be totally boring to most in our congregations whose minds are likely to be distracted easily by what they are having for lunch, or whether the house is ready for the visitors to arrive! I believe that “short and pithy” is usually ideal for a Christmas morning sermon!