

# The Gospel of Luke 1. The Cultural Context of Luke. The World of the New Testament

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## Topics

(These topics and the main source of the material for these notes is **The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation**. Luke T. Johnson. Fortress, 1986)

1. Introductory Matters
2. Symbolic World of the New Testament
3. Judaism in Palestine
4. Diaspora Judaism

## 1. Introductory Matters

1.1. Attempt to answer how the canon came to take the shape that it has

1.2. Understands Bible as human creation that expresses man's search for meaning

1.3. Bible a product of 1st century Mediterranean world

1.4. Gives precedence to the text in its current canonical form

1.5. Uses historical-critical methods, but rejects historical model

- 1.5.1. Does not recognize unique place of canonical texts
- 1.5.2. Views canonical texts solely as historical sources, not as literary material
- 1.5.3. Fails to deal with canonical texts as religious documents per se

1.6. Johnson's model: Experience - Interpretation Model

- 1.6.1. Recognizes canonical texts as expression of a religious community
- 1.6.2. Takes into account anthropological,

historical, and literary aspects of texts

- 1.6.3. Would recognize distinctive characteristics of each work within canonical harmony
- 1.6.4. Takes into account religious experience found within its social setting

1.7. Sociological analysis recognizes that people are part of social systems

- 1.7.1. Aids in analysis of conflict between 2 symbolic worlds
  - 1.7.1.1. Close up
  - 1.7.1.2. Communicate
  - 1.7.1.3. Convert
- 1.7.2. Deviants may be either skeptics or prophetic voices

## 2. Symbolic World of the New Testament

2.1. Roman Rule and Hellenistic Culture

- 2.1.1. Consisted of the territories surrounding the Mediterranean Sea
- 2.1.2. Temporally lasted from 356 BCE to the mid-second century AD
- 2.1.3. Despite Roman rule, the culture was Greek with the addition of the pax Romana
- 2.1.4. Hellenization (of Alexander the Great) not only military conquest, but a cultural transformation
  - 2.1.4.1. Imported poets, philosophers & historians
  - 2.1.4.2. Encouraged intermarriage of soldiers with native population
  - 2.1.4.3. Established Greek city-states
  - 2.1.4.4. Made Greek the world language
  - 2.1.4.5. Merged local gods with the Greek gods
- 2.1.5. Impact on Jewish culture seen in the **Septuagint** (LXX), translated in Alexandria in the 2nd century BCE
- 2.1.6. Syncretism led to suggestion that gods might be universal and not tied to specific locale
  - 2.1.6.1. Began to think of world as governed by fate in place of gods
  - 2.1.6.2. Paved way for consideration of monotheism
- 2.1.7. Hellenization led to consideration of the individual

## 2.2. Roman Rule

- 2.2.1. Used force when required to maintain the peace, but also extended the benefits of Roman citizenship to an increasing circle
- 2.2.2. Growth of Empire
  - 2.2.2.1. Led to dramatic increase in slaves and immigrants displaced by war
  - 2.2.2.2. Increased dependence on Egypt to feed Rome
  - 2.2.2.3. Increased taxation - up to ¼ of the harvest
- 2.2.3. Network of Roman roads meant more efficient transportation, increased commerce, and a reliable postal service
- 2.2.4. Life for most though was a constant struggle

## 2.3. The Pagan World

- 2.3.1. Our view of pagan depravity derived from ancient moralists as well as Christian scripture
- 2.3.2. Public standards of morality actually quite high
- 2.3.3. Popular religion found expression in magic, astrology, protective amulets

## 2.4. Hellenistic Religion

- 2.4.1. Yearned for a transformative religious experience
- 2.4.2. Fascinated by prophecy
  - 2.4.2.1. Classical
  - 2.4.2.2. Mantic
- 2.4.3. Sought healing from wandering charismatics as well as Serapis and Asklepios
- 2.4.4. Mystery cults grew in popularity as they provided divine revelation, transformation, and community
- 2.4.5. Life viewed as alienated from god through its corporeal existence
  - 2.4.5.1. Remedy to acquire special knowledge - *gnosis*

## 2.5. Hellenistic Philosophy

- 2.5.1. Emphasis had shifted from acquisition of knowledge to living well
- 2.5.2. **Stoicism**
  - 2.5.2.1. Can't control fate, chance, state power
  - 2.5.2.2. So focus on controlling one's mind and desires

## ■ 2.5.3. Cynicism

- 2.5.3.1. Characterized perfection as freedom and free speech
- 2.5.3.2. Attracted philosophers who were less ambitious
- 2.5.4. Living well connected to virtue - drew up tables of household ethics
- 2.5.5. Philosophy was the cure for a spiritual illness
- 2.5.6. Religious terminology such as salvation and conversion were a part of the philosophical vocabulary
- 2.5.7. **Pythagoreans and Epicureans**
  - 2.5.7.1. Organized as communities of spiritual friends
  - 2.5.7.2. Founders were divine
  - 2.5.7.3. Encouraged fellow communities through letters
- 2.5.8. Most associations tolerated by Rome unless they seemed likely to rebel

## 2.6. Reinterpretation of Symbols

- 2.6.1. Time of religious & philosophical ferment
- 2.6.2. Led to reinterpretation of old symbols rather than invention of new ones
- 2.6.3. Antiquity was the gold standard
- 2.6.4. Culture and virtue intertwined and best expressed in the poetry of **Homer**
  - 2.6.4.1. Actions of the gods now viewed as immoral
  - 2.6.4.2. Even **Plato** mistrusted the tales and found no place for poetry in the ideal world
  - 2.6.4.3. Stoics turned to allegory as means to preserve the usefulness of Homer
- 2.6.5. Hellenistic Judaism relied heavily on allegory for scriptural interpretation
- 2.6.6. "Greek culture was built on the imitation of models from the past"
- 2.6.7. Imitation was also the way to a virtuous life
- 2.6.8. Allegorical reinterpretation provided a means for the heroes of the past (Heracles) to continue as role models (as a philosopher who could find happiness even apart from his family)
- 2.6.9. Philosophers such as **Socrates & Diogenes** also functioned as models of virtue

## 3. Judaism in Palestine

3.1. Turning point for Judaism was destruction of temple in 70 AD when Pharisees came to define Judaism in contrast to its previous diversity

3.2. Torah (instruction, mitzvah or commandment) provided identity to Jews as people and a cult

3.3. A faithful God who acted with *hesed* (loving kindness) required a people of similar qualities (Ex 34:6)

3.4. Jews shared the symbols of the Torah and with it their status as chosen

3.5. Hellenistic Jews combined these shared symbols with apocalyptic thought, rabbinic teaching, legalism, mysticism, messianism, liturgy to create a dazzling array of Judaisms

### 3.6. Political Context

- 3.6.1. Characteristics Ever-present Hellenistic culture
  - 3.6.1.1. Subjects of Greek followed by Roman rule
  - 3.6.1.2. Religious realities
    - 3.6.1.2.1.1. God's promise to Abraham equated with possession of land (Gen 50:24)
    - 3.6.1.2.1.2. God's rule active in Davidic line (2 Sam 7:11-16)
    - 3.6.1.2.1.3. God's presence realized in the temple (1 Kings 8:22-53)
- 3.6.2. Hellenistic Jews were not only a small, but brave people battling tyrants, but also a deeply divided people
- 3.6.3. Historical landmarks
  - 3.6.3.1. Babylonian exile (586 BCE)
  - 3.6.3.2. Return from exile (538 BCE)
  - 3.6.3.3. Priesthood purchased during Seleucid and Ptolemaic division
  - 3.6.3.4. Imposed idolatry of **Antiochus IV Epiphanes** with statue of Zeus in temple
  - 3.6.3.5. Successful rebellion of **Mattathias** with Rome's help
  - 3.6.3.6. Restoration of kingdom (**Hasmonean dynasty**) and priesthood (143-37BCE)

- 3.6.3.6. Restoration of kingdom (**Hasmonean dynasty**) and priesthood (143-37BCE)
- 3.6.3.7. Restoration of order in Judea by **Pompey** (63 BCE)
- 3.6.3.8. Jewish War (**Masada**) culminating in destruction of Jerusalem (66-70 AD)
- 3.6.4. Impact of Hellenism
  - 3.6.4.1. 16 Hellenistic cities
  - 3.6.4.2. Jewish upper classes demand gymnasium in Jerusalem
  - 3.6.4.3. **Aristotle's** encounter with a Jew who "had the soul of a Greek"
  - 3.6.4.4. Stoicism's **Zeno** born in Palestine
  - 3.6.4.5. **Hillel's** 7 rules of midrash based on Greek logic
- 3.6.5. Jewish identity meant worship of only 1 God and following the way of Torah'
- 3.6.6. Jews divided over whether to accept the limited Hasmonean rule
- 3.6.7. Theological differences implied political differences
  - 3.6.7.1. **Sadducees** represented the wealthy who cooperated with Rome
  - 3.6.7.2. **Pharisees** were the urbane, apolitical middle class
  - 3.6.7.3. **Essenes** demanded total separation for purity
- 3.6.8. Period characterized by lively internal theological debate
  - 3.6.8.1. **Messianism** as answer to Jewish instability
  - 3.6.8.2. Link between martyrdom for "sanctification of the Name" and resurrection of the righteous
  - 3.6.8.3. Concept of resurrection calls into question the nature of God's people and emphasizes individual responsibility (Ez 18:1-32)
  - 3.6.8.4. Role of temple as physical reality vs symbol embodied in the people themselves

### 3.7. Apocalyptic Literature

- 3.7.1. Best exemplified by Daniel, written to counter the persecution of **Antiochus IV Epiphanes** (165 BCE)
- 3.7.2. Affirms that God controls history despite appearances to the contrary
- 3.7.3. Utilizes code shared by writer and readers based in symbols of Torah
- 3.7.4. Counters divisive elements within the faith community as well as external persecution
- 3.7.5. Response to the confrontation between Torah (Deut 30:1-20) and reality of persecution

- 3.7.5.1. All this I have spoken before thee, O Lord, because thou hast said that for our sakes thou hast created this world. But as for the other nations, which are descended from Adam, thou hast said that they are nothing, and that they are like unto spittle; and thou hast likened the abundance of them to a drop in a bucket. And now, O Lord, behold these nations which are reputed as nothing, lord it over us and crush us. But we, they people, whom thou hast called thy first-born, thy only begotten, thy beloved, are given up into their hands. If the world has indeed been created for our sakes, why do we not enter into possession of our world? How long shall this endure? 4 Ezra 6:55-59
- 3.7.6. Sees an end to the current evil age when God intervenes and vindicates the righteous (saves both monotheism and the beneficence of God)
- 3.7.7. Reimagined the symbols of Torah and served in turn as the symbolic base for followers of Jesus

### 3.8. Rabbinic Tradition

- 3.8.1. Pharisees only Jewish sect to survive after 70 AD
- 3.8.2. Tradition was the core of the movement
- 3.8.3. Oral origins culminated in 2 written traditions
  - 3.8.3.1. Palestinian Talmud (350 CE)
  - 3.8.3.2. Babylonian Talmud (450 CE)
- 3.8.4. **Josephus** describes the Pharisees as Jewish cousins of the Stoics
- 3.8.5. Pharisees began with assumption that Torah was the way of life and proceeded to interpret its application for Jews of their day and time
- 3.8.6. **Midrash** allowed Jews to walk (*halakah*) in the way of Torah
- 3.8.7. Midrash on non-legal texts yielded *hagadah* (narrative)
- 3.8.8. God's Presence no longer dwelt in the temple but among his people when they study Torah
  - 3.8.8.1. If two sit together and words of Torah are between them, the Shekinah rests between them...and even if one sits and occupies himself with Torah, the Holy One, blessed be He, fixes for him a reward. Pirke Aboth 3.3
- 3.8.9. "Torah ... Is God's eternal blueprint for creation and for righteous human behavior." (cf
- 3.8.10. Humans will naturally fall short of the Torah way - the appropriate response is repentance not despair
  - 3.8.10.1. Repent one day before your death...let him repent today lest he die on the morrow; let him repent on the morrow lest he die the day after; and thus all his days will be spent in repentance. Rabbi Eliezer, Aboth de Rabbi Nathan 15

### 3.9. Jewish Worship

- 3.9.1. Occurred in temple, synagogue and home
- 3.9.2. Synagogues found in small villages as well as Jerusalem, including the temple precincts
- 3.9.3. Torah the focal point of worship in synagogue
- 3.9.4. Liturgy of synagogue included scripture readings, midrashic homily, prayers
- 3.9.5. Jewish prayers based on blessing formula exhibited in Psalm 117
- 3.9.6. Torah reading done in Hebrew and translated into Aramaic with a heavy dose of **midrash** for the benefit of the hearers
  - 3.9.6.1. **Targums** were those remembered and recorded
  - 3.9.6.2. Compare Gen 49:
    - 3.9.6.2.1. And Jacob called his sons and said to them: "Purify yourself from uncleanness, and I will show you the mysteries which are hidden, the appointed times which are concealed, what the recompense of reward for the just, the retribution in store for the wicked, and the joys of Eden are." The twelve tribes gathered together around the bed of gold on which he lay. And after the shekinah of the Lord was revealed, the determined time in which the King Messiah is to come was hidden from him. Aramaic Targum Pseudo-Jonathan
  - 3.9.6.3. Targums were heard as scripture by Jews of Jesus' time
- 3.9.7. Earliest description of synagogue service: Luke 4:16-30
- 3.9.8. Jewish meals were framed by blessings before and after
  - 3.9.8.1. Passover seder the central sacred meal
  - 3.9.8.2. Passover meal serves to both remember and to participate in the Exodus
- 3.9.9. **Qumran**
  - 3.9.9.1. **Dead Sea Scrolls** found at **Qumran**

- 3.9.9.2. Possible that **John the Baptist** may have had ties to Qumran, but no evidence links Jesus or early Christians with this community
- 3.9.9.3. Qumran library contains:
  - 3.9.9.3.1. Apocalyptic works
  - 3.9.9.3.2. Commentaries
  - 3.9.9.3.3. Liturgical documents
  - 3.9.9.3.4. Fragments of Merkabah mysticism
- 3.9.9.4. Dating of Dead Sea Scrolls containing dualistic thought forced scholars to revise the date and impact of outside thought on Christian texts such as John
- 3.9.9.5. Combination of eschatological outlook with high degree of organization in Qumran calls into question previous scholarship theorizing that Christian organizational structure replaced waning hopes for an early return of Jesus
- 3.9.9.6. Shares some characteristics with early church
  - 3.9.9.6.1. Understood themselves to be separate from mainstream Judaism
  - 3.9.9.6.2. Found their identity in a unique interpretation of Hebrew scripture
- 3.9.9.7. Used their experience to interpret scripture and nourish their identity as the true Israel

- 4.4.3. Egyptian Jewish community numbered a million according to Philo
- 4.4.4. Diaspora Jews such as Philo were prominent members of their community and happy to live outside the crowded, impoverished conditions of Palestine
- 4.4.5. Synagogues formed the foundation of Jewish identity in the Diaspora and later were the springboard for Christian mission
  - 4.4.5.1. Prepared the Gentile world for later encounters with monotheism, high moral standards of Torah, and concept of a chosen people
- 4.4.6. Diaspora Jews were freer to adopt certain aspects of Hellenistic culture without sacrificing their Jewish identity
- 4.4.7. Rights and privileges
  - 4.4.7.1. Autonomy within the city-state to live within their own customs
  - 4.4.7.2. Some were Roman citizens
  - 4.4.7.3. Some were aliens with special status allowing them to adhere to their own customs and worship
  - 4.4.7.4. Exempt from certain idol worship implied from protests when suspended
  - 4.4.7.5. Granted freedom to associate in synagogues
  - 4.4.7.6. Given Sabbath off work for worship
  - 4.4.7.7. Exempt from military duty
  - 4.4.7.8. Temple tax collected and transported to Jerusalem by Roman authorities

## 4. Diaspora Judaism

### 4.1. Most Jews lived outside Palestine ( 5 million out of a total of 7 million Jews)

### 4.2. Most info on diaspora Jews comes from Alexandria

### 4.3. Diaspora Jews forced to deal with cultural conflicts in unique ways

### 4.4. Extent and Importance of Diaspora Judaism

- 4.4.1. Need to maintain Jewish identity in foreign land pre-dates **Babylonian exile** (2 Sam 8:6, I Kings 5:14)
- 4.4.2. Mesopotamian Jews came to be a center

### 4.5. Religious and Cultural Tensions of Diaspora Life

- 4.5.1. Continued to feel the pull of assimilation
- 4.5.2. Lost the ability to communicate in Hebrew
- 4.5.3. Had used **LXX (Septuagint)** as scripture for 200 years in time of **Philo**
- 4.5.4. Religious language and symbols underwent subtle transformation
  - 4.5.4.1. Glory in Hebrew carries association of weight & presence; in Greek is associated with appearance and radiance
  - 4.5.4.2. Torah in Hebrew translated as nomos or law in Greek
- 4.5.5. Greek education would be regarded as normal
- 4.5.6. Biblical heroes would be transformed into philosophers and allegorical methods would be applied to Torah study

- 4.5.7. Would still remain separated from their Greek neighbors
  - 4.5.7.1. Pilgrimages to Jerusalem
  - 4.5.7.2. Adherence to Torah
- 4.5.8. Gentile view of Jews was mixed
  - 4.5.8.1. Well-educated saw Judaism as an ancient and praiseworthy tradition
  - 4.5.8.2. Special privileges of the Jews also led to resentment and charge of hatred of mankind
- 4.5.9. Anti-Semitism identifiable in Alexandria of Ptolemy II
  - 4.5.9.1. Egyptian priest circulated charges that Jews were atheists and captured Gentiles to kill and eat

#### Caligula

- 4.7.6. Interpreted Judaism to the Hellenistic world
- 4.7.7. Despite his careful study of Torah, Philo demonstrates a unique view of Torah as compared to Palestinian Jews
  - 4.7.7.1. No apocalyptic
  - 4.7.7.2. No expectation of messiah
  - 4.7.7.3. No martyrdom
  - 4.7.7.4. No resurrection, instead have immortality

### 4.6. Response of Jewish Apologetic

- 4.6.1. 3 possible responses to assimilation pressures
  - 4.6.1.1. Assimilate
  - 4.6.1.2. Separate
  - 4.6.1.3. Defend and explain - apologetic
- 4.6.2. Apologetic assumes a certain openness to outsiders and a willingness to communicate in a rational manner
- 4.6.3. Requires the use of the symbols of the dominant group in order to communicate ( in Alexandria, this meant the use of Greek wisdom)
- 4.6.4. Themes of Jewish Apologetic
  - 4.6.4.1. Antiquity (Moses as the founder of Greek culture)
  - 4.6.4.2. Beauty and purity of synagogue worship
  - 4.6.4.3. Philanthropic bent of Torah counters charge of misanthropy
- 4.6.5. Casting biblical heroes as wise men reflects not so much a deliberate distortion of the truth in order to communicate so much as the immersion of the Diaspora Jew in the Hellenistic culture

### 4.7. Philo of Alexandria (died in 50 CE)

- 4.7.1. Most prominent Diaspora Jew next to Paul
- 4.7.2. Example a single individual who was able to maintain contradictory views just as Paul appears to do
- 4.7.3. Used allegory to interpret Torah
- 4.7.4. Makes mystical connections with Torah that share some similarities to mystery religions
- 4.7.5. Represented the Jewish community before