

# A General Introduction to the New Testament and the Gospels

These notes offer an overview of the New Testament, the gospels and specifically of Luke's gospel. They summarise podcasts 1, 2 and 3.



Luke Paints the Icon of the Mother of God Hodegetria.

*Attribution:* By Unknown Icon Painter, Russian (early 15th century)

(Web Gallery of Art: [Image](#) [Info about artwork](#)) [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

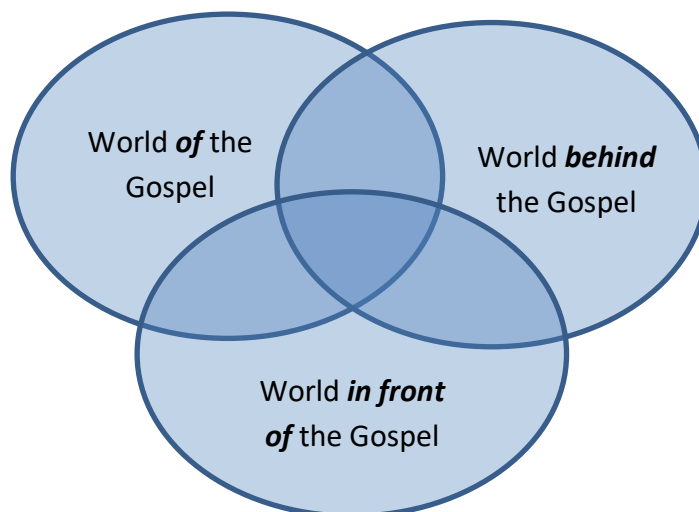
## 1. 'Engagement': The Three Worlds

Study is important. To understand what the gospel writer is doing it is important to study the gospel. This means that we must read the gospel, understand the world out of which it comes, recognise some of the ways the evangelist communicates the meaning of the gospel to the addressees, then try to see what the gospel is saying to us today.

In other words there are *three worlds*:

- **The world *behind* the text:** This is the cultural, social and historical context in which the evangelist writes. This is the world of those addressed by the gospel. Historians and social thinkers help us to get an idea of what this world is like.
- **The world *of* the text:** This is the actual gospel text, with its stories and teachings and the way it presents Jesus and characters that fill the pages of the gospel. Much of this world is disclosed through literary and linguistic study.
- **The world *in front* of the text:** Attention given to the previous two 'worlds' helps us to gain an appreciation of the possible contemporary relevance of the gospel. In this 'world' we ask the question: 'So what?' What is the meaning of this gospel today?

The gospel interpreter seeks to understand these three 'worlds' which interact with each other:



As we seek to understand the gospel and its three worlds, especially the relevance of the gospel for our own day ('The World in front of the Gospel'), we move from an academic-cognitive study to one that affects us and our lives. We begin to change. This is when we recognise the 'encounter'.

- We shall keep coming back to these *three worlds* frequently throughout the course.

The 1993 Vatican document from the Pontifical Biblical Commission described this 'encounter' in terms of 'actualisation', of 'actualising' and 'enculturating' the meaning of the bible in our world:

Exegetes [those who interpret the bible] may have a distinctive role in the interpretation of the Bible but they do not exercise a monopoly. This activity within the church has aspects which go beyond the academic analysis of texts. The church, indeed, does not regard the Bible simply as a collection of historical documents dealing with its own origins; it receives the Bible as word of God, addressed both to itself and to the entire world at the present time. This conviction, stemming from the faith, leads in turn to the work of actualizing and enculturating the biblical message, as well as to various uses of the inspired text in liturgy, in "*lectio divina*," in pastoral ministry and in the ecumenical movement...Already within the Bible itself...one can point to instances of actualization: very early texts have been reread in the light of new circumstances and applied to the contemporary situation of the people of God. The same basic conviction necessarily stimulates believing communities of today to continue the process of actualization.'

## 2. Chronology of the New Testament

Look at the New Testament and its *Table of Contents*.

When I first started reading the New (or 'Second') Testament I always thought the order in which the writings were placed in the Bible was the order in which they were written. According to this initial view, this meant that Matthew's gospel was written first and the Book of Revelation last. Only later I came to realise that the gospels were some of the latter writings of the Second Testament.

When we look at the Bible, the order of the collection of Second Testament writings as we have it now is the order of story.

- Writings dealing with the story of Jesus come first. These are the four gospels.
- Then comes the story of the growth of the first Christian communities (the Acts of the Apostles).
- Next are the collection of writings which are attributed to Paul. Of the fourteen letters attributed to Paul, most scholars now think that he probably only wrote seven. The rest were written by disciples of Paul a generation later.
- Then comes the collection entitled the Catholic Epistles -- letters addressed to the Church universal (= 'Catholic');
- Next the letters from John's community.
- Finally the Book of Revelation which deals with the end or final times completes the collection.



Patmos, the island where the Book of Revelation was written by the Seer John, late first century CE. *Photo: Michael Trainor, used with permission.*

The order of the New Testament collection, then, is according to narrative logic.

Jesus → early church → pastoral problems in Paul's communities  
→ writings to the catholic Church → Writing about the end time

Matthew's Gospel was not the first writing that emerged from the community of Jesus followers. The first came from the quill of Paul. Paul was the first contributor to the Second Testament. The first gospel, Mark's, was written about 20 years after Paul; a generation later, the gospels of Matthew and Luke, written around the mid 80s of the first century CE.

The following is a rough guide for the chronology of the New Testament. As you look at this chart, note the many question marks and the approximate dating of the Second Testament writings. We simply can never be certain about their exact dating.

*Paul's Letters: 1 Thes, Philemon, Philippians, 1 & 2 Cor, Gal, Rom (50sCE)*

*The Gospels: Mark (70s CE)*

*Luke & Acts of the Apostles (85 CE)*

*Matthew (85 CE)*

*John (90-110 CE)*

*Letters written after Paul: 2 Thes, 1 & 2 Tim, Tit, Col, Eph. (90s CE)?*

*Catholic Epistles: 1 & 2 Peter, James, Jude, 1-III John (80-90s CE)?*

*Hebrews 60s-80s CE*

*Book of Revelation 90s CE (?)*

From this chart it is clear that the Gospels come from a second or third generation of Jesus followers.

### 3. What is a 'Gospel'?

We know that the Gospels are stories about Jesus. In terms of literature they are unique in the ancient world. There is nothing quite like them, though many scholars have sought to compare them to other forms of ancient Greek-Roman literature, like histories or biographies.

'Gospel' means literally 'good news' (*evangelion* — Gk) and refers to the 'good news' of salvation (eg 1 Thes 3:2; 1 Cor 4:15; 2Cor2:12; Rom1:16). The 'Gospels' echo the theme of 'good tidings' as found in Isaiah: 52:7:

*How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good tidings, who publishes peace, who brings good tidings of good, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns"*

The focus for the 'Gospel' is Jesus. He IS the Gospel, the bringer of the 'good news'. His good news is about the in-breaking of the God's presence into the human community.

The Greek word which expresses this 'in-breaking' is *basileia*. and is sometimes translated as 'reign', 'kingdom' or 'kindom'. These translations do not adequately express the depth contained in the Greek expression.

- *Basileia* signifies the power of God active and communicative among human beings. It is the active presence of God which brings about human community, peace and justice. Disciples know that the means of this in-breaking is through the words and deeds in Jesus. The community that gathers around him is the concrete manifestation of this 'Gospel'. Here the *basileia* of God is tangibly experienced and expressed.



Antakya (Ancient Antioch) in south-east Turkey, from the acropolis, a possible location for Luke's gospel.  
*Photo: Michael Trainor, used with permission.*

## 4. The Formation of the Written Gospels

The 'Gospel' — the experience and encounter of the *basileia* through the ministry of Jesus — was first experienced in the disciples who were attracted to Jesus' deeds and teaching. They in turn proclaimed their experience of the *basileia* expressed in the ministry of Jesus. Their experience was communicated to others, who also became disciples of Jesus.

As the message about Jesus spread, this first generation of disciples formed communities of followers outside of Israel in the Greek-Roman world. I call the places of gathering 'households'. This was an important and unique moment in the development of the Good News about Jesus. This movement into the Greek-Roman world meant that the Gospel message about Jesus, originally expressed in Jewish terms and originally addressed to a Jewish audience, had to be adapted to a new non-Jewish, Greco-Roman audience. Through the preaching of these first disciples, households of believers in Jesus formed.

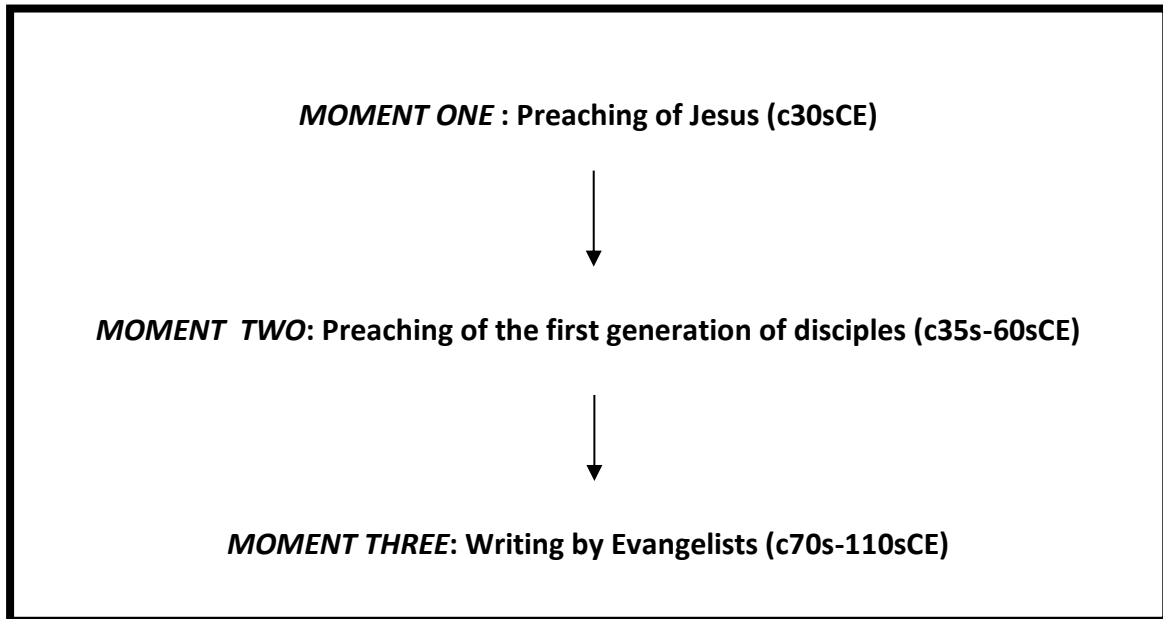


Nazareth today, looking past shops towards the Basilica of the Annunciation.  
 Photo: Michael Trainor, used with permission.

On the death of their founding preacher or disciple who witnessed to Jesus' words and deeds, these communities realised their need to encapsulate in writing what they had been told about Jesus. The Gospel, the experience of the *basileia* from Jesus and continued through the community of disciples, is now expressed in written form. The experience of the Gospel, Jesus, is externalised in concrete written form by the earliest households of Jesus followers. These writings express the meaning and relevance of the Gospel, Jesus, for a later community of disciples chronologically and geographically removed from the original story. These writings about the Gospel, Jesus, become known by later disciples of Jesus as 'the gospels' -- stories of Jesus for new times and places.

These written Gospel have thus gone through *three moments* in their formation:

1. *The deeds and words of Jesus of Nazareth:* The gospels are founded on the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus adapted his message according to the circumstances of his audience.
2. *The Preaching about Jesus by the first generation of disciples:* The first preachers adapted and shaped their message about Jesus according to the Jewish, Greek-Roman context of their respective audiences.
3. *The writing of the Story of Jesus that has been proclaimed:* The evangelists of the communities, faithful to the story that they had heard about Jesus, adapted and shaped the story of Jesus in such a way that it would address the relevant pastoral issues of their respective communities.



Understanding these three moments in the formation of the written gospels is fundamental for engaging the gospel. Most Christians today remain simply at *moment one* and regard the stories of the gospels as CCTV or twitter feeds of the life of the Jesus, historically accurate snippets of what was said and done. The gospels are, of course, founded in the words and deeds of the Galilean Jesus. They are not fairy tales. But these words and deeds have been preached (and in their preaching have been reshaped for a non-Jewish audience) and finally written down, several years after the events being reflected on.

This valuing of the three moments of Gospel formation has been part of Catholic teaching with the publication of the 1964 'Instruction Concerning the Historical Truth of the Gospels' by the Vatican's Pontifical Biblical Commission.

(The statement can be found at:

[https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/research\\_sites/cjl/texts/cjrelations/resources/documents/catholic/pbcgospels.htm](https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/research_sites/cjl/texts/cjrelations/resources/documents/catholic/pbcgospels.htm). Note especially sections 6-10.)



It is clear from this Instruction that:

- The written Gospels went through three stages of formation
- *In Stage One*: Jesus adapted his message to the needs of audience
- *In Stage Two*: The preachers of Jesus were selective and synthetic in their preaching. They kept in mind the needs of the 'churches'. These needs shaped the way the story and message of Jesus was told.
- *In Stage Three*: The Gospel writers were also selective as they too reduced and synthesised the message of Jesus. The message needed to be shaped by the cultural context in which it was being addressed.
- The message of Jesus was need seen as a memory test, but as the basis for the faith life of the Christian communities.
- The four Gospels encapsulate the meaning of the Gospel, Jesus, for latter communities of believers in differing cultural and historical settings.
- Central to the dynamic of the written Gospels is the role of the community of disciples. The community's reflections on the story of Jesus communicated through the founding preacher lies at the heart of the Gospel story.

## 5. Fundamentalism: A barrier to Authentic Gospel Interpretation

Recognition of the three moments of gospel formation and the role played by the preachers and evangelist moves us away from a fundamentalist approach in interpreting the gospels. A fundamentalist viewpoint sees the stories in the gospels as literal, CCTV-like events.

The publication of a second major document from the 1993 Pontifical Biblical Commission document, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, mentioned earlier, it is clear that fundamentalism is incompatible with Catholic teaching.

A summary of the document can be found at:

[http://www.piercedhearts.org/scriptures/interpretation\\_bible\\_church\\_summary\\_presentation.pdf](http://www.piercedhearts.org/scriptures/interpretation_bible_church_summary_presentation.pdf).

The full document can be found at:

<http://www.ewtn.com/library/CURIA/PBCINTER.HTM>

- Section F deals with Fundamentalism.

The main points of this section in the document consider that a fundamentalist interpretation of the bible:

- Is unable to accept the historical character of the bible expressed in human language 'by human authors possessed of limited capacities and resources';
- Regards the biblical text as the product of divine dictation;
- Considers everything as historically (and scientifically) accurate;
- Adopts a narrow point of view and considers everything in the bible as literally true;
- Dangerous, deceptive and 'actually invites people to a kind of intellectual suicide';
- Offers false certitude to life's questions.

## 6. Introducing Luke's Writings

### Background

- Luke writes in the mid-80s CE to an urban based household socially and economically diverse. It is a community existing in a cosmopolitan, multicultural, Greco-Roman city. Antioch of Syria is one probable location. It consists of rich and poor, men and women, Gentiles and Jews, elites and daily workers, city dwellers and those from the country. The gospel addresses primarily, though not exclusively, the wealthy elite of the Jesus household.
- Luke addresses Jesus followers feeling separated from the stories of its origins —the story of Jesus and the earliest community of disciples. They lack confidence in their present and are concerned about how they are going to deal with their future. The key reason for this lack of confidence: Jesus did not leave a set of instructions. All the gospel household has is a tradition founded on the apostles and the insights and stories give to it from the founding preachers.
- Luke wrote two volumes. The gospel presents the story of Jesus and the first disciples foundational and influential to Luke's household. The *Book of Acts* presents the story of the expansion of the early Jesus movement beyond Judaism into the Greco-Roman world of Asia Minor, Greece and Italy.

## Luke's 'Orthopraxis'

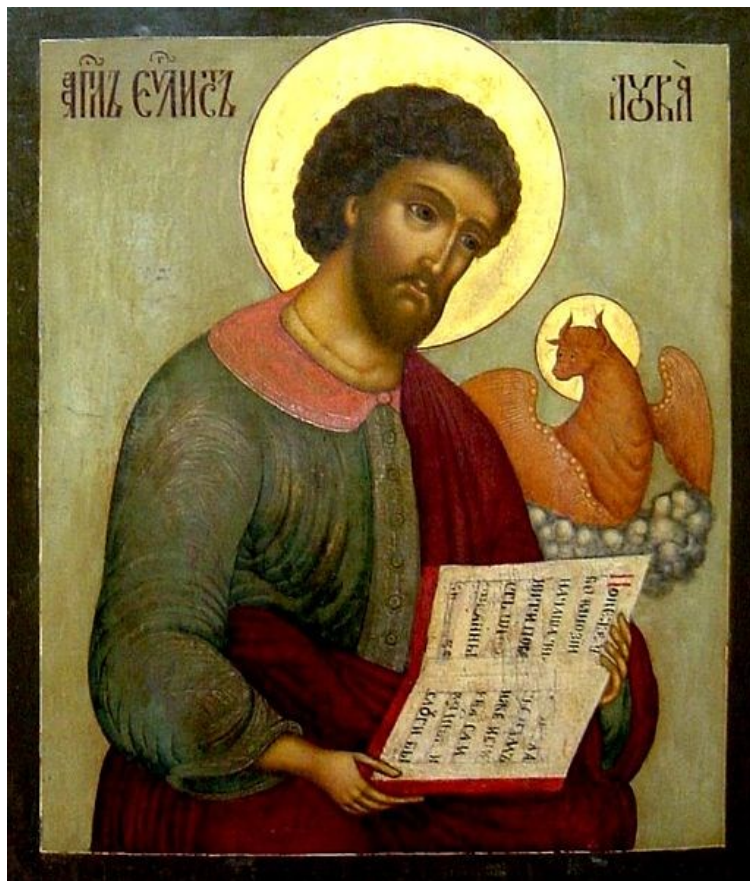
- According to the first four verses of the gospel, called the 'Prologue'(Lk 1:1-4), we learn much about the evangelist's method, intention and process. Luke writes as a result of reflection on the tradition about Jesus and God's fidelity to Israel which had been passed on to the writer by those who 'were eyewitnesses from the beginning and became ministers of the word'.
- The Prologue also presents Luke's method and aim: Drawing on the faith-filled tradition about Jesus and Israel, the writer reshapes these in the light of the present pastoral situation (influenced by culture and economics). The evangelist reassures the 'Theophiluses' of the community that the catechesis or teaching ('catechesis') that they have inherited can be trusted (Greek, *asphaleia*) or relied upon as this new community of disciples seeks to move forward in addressing issues in a time and culture never envisaged by the historical Jesus or his first community of disciples.
- The prologue outlines the pastoral method which will be explored throughout *Luke* and into the *Acts of the Apostles*. This method will enable Luke's household of disciples to live faithfully to Jesus. Luke is concerned about 'orthopraxis'.
- This method is concerned about: acknowledging and affirming the present reality, respecting the inherited wisdom of the community of disciples, placing this tradition into dialogue with the reality, discerning a new step in pastoral action.

## Key Themes

- The key themes in Luke concern christology and discipleship—who is Jesus and what does it mean to follow him? Jesus ministry to the social outcasts and those regarded as civil pariahs reflect these two themes.
- Luke also presents Jesus as the source of wisdom. This is symbolised in the way Jesus is also the focus of feasting. His meal ministry and prophetic stance show how God rejoices over humanity and creation. Jesus is God's enacted parable of joy. An eco-theological-gospel undercurrent flows through the whole of Luke's narrative.
- Jesus' view of God in the gospel also has implications for the kind of household life in which Luke's parishioners are encouraged. Several had lost their way, were seeking reconciliation and return to the Jesus household. Importantly, social rejects and people considered unworthy of

joining a 'holy community' were looking for a welcome. Luke's Jesus challenges the Luke's leaders to look for ways to provide an easy access for such people.

- What are other practical implications of Luke's presentation of Jesus' God? Our images of God are varied. They are formed in us from the experiences of our family, education and relationships. A common image that people have is that God is angry, or waiting to 'get even.' God is seen sometimes as the 'police officer,' or judge.'
- In Lk 15, Jesus presents God as a God of joy and happiness. God's liberality and overwhelming desire to celebrate with humanity and creation is an important reminder to a Greco-Roman audience who saw life controlled by the gods. They regarded their lives at the whim of the fates. Luke's radical restatement of a joyful God is one that we need to reclaim in our world today. This is Luke's wisdom for us now.



18<sup>th</sup> century Icon of St Luke the Evangelist, Russian.

*Attribution:* By Unknown Russian Orthodox painter (Private art collection, the Netherlands) [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

## About Acts

- Central to Acts is the key role played initially by Peter (as the leading disciple who must authorize new moments in the growth of the Christian community) and later by Paul. Luke presents Paul as the great culture figure who engages and challenges the important social and philosophical movements of the Greco-Roman world. His presence in the principle cities of the ancient world (Jerusalem, Ephesus, Antioch, Thessalonika, Philippi, Corinth, Athens and Rome) echo the cultural appreciation which the writer of Acts has and seeks to present a Gospel which is in dialogue with this world.

## Summary

- Overarching both volumes is the meta-theme of *journey*. This illustrates the central feature of discipleship and presents the main challenge for the ongoing life of Jesus followers.
- Luke is keen to show the present world as the ground for engagement of the Good News, that the cultural aspirations of the Greco-Roman world can be dovetailed with the values espoused by Jesus' community of disciples. Luke is also passionate about showing how this community can survive and grow as it encounters new challenges never anticipated in the story of the Galilean Jesus and the life of the first generation of disciples.



Mosaic detail in the floor of the 6<sup>th</sup> Century Basilica of the Nativity, Bethlehem.

*Photo: Michael Trainor, used with permission*

## A Few Helpful or Common Terms and Expressions

- **First and Second Testament.**

I have always wrestled with the designation 'New Testament'. The more I think about it the less I find it helpful. The term tends to distinguish the New from the 'Old' and relegate the 'Old Testament' to an inferior role in Christian life. Some still think that the 'Old Testament' has been surpassed by the 'New'. However, both the New and the Old are part of the Bible used by Christians. Therefore I prefer to use the language 'Second Testament' which distinguishes the 'First Testament'. The First Testament (the Old Testament) is the first testament or witness to God's loving deeds of salvation to the people of Israel. The Second Testament (the New Testament) is a second, important witness of God's saving action reflected in the stories of Jesus, his teaching and ministry, and in the ongoing life of the first Christian communities. Throughout this course the term 'Second Testament' will be used.

- **BCE and CE.**

There's another point about designating time. We are used to BC and AD

as ways of referring to history 'before Christ' and since Christ's coming (AD = 'Anno Domini' – 'In the year of the Lord'). In this designation, Jesus is the centre of human history. For Christians, of course, this is true. But what of those who do not hold the same faith in Jesus, especially Jews today? Much more respectful designations that have emerged out of contemporary Christian-Jewish discussions are 'BCE' (before the Common Era) and 'CE' (the Common Era -- that period of history that is common to Christians and Jews.)

- **Basileia.**

An expression I use often and which I've mentioned above: the term comes from the Greek word *Basileia* which is sometimes translated as 'kingdom,' 'reign' or (my preference) 'kinship'.

- **Gospel and gospel.**

Gospel usually refers to the Good News of Jesus. The 'gospel' is a particular expression of this Good News (eg, Luke's gospel)

- **Mark, Matthew, Luke and John:**

'Mark,' 'Matthew,' 'Luke' and 'John' refer to the authors of the gospel writings, as well as their writings. The context should clarify whether I mean the evangelists or their writings.

## **Terms concerned with the Art of Gospel Interpretation**

You will come across these common expressions from scholars seeking to understand the meaning of a gospel passage:

### **Exegesis**

This term simply means 'interpreting'. Exegesis is the act of biblical interpretation. The word comes from the Greek word *exago* meaning 'to lead or carry out of or away from.' The interpreter seeks to 'draw out' the meaning of the biblical text using tried and tested tools.

## **Criticism:**

Various standard methods have been developed to help us interpret the texts. They help us make a judgement about the text. In Greek, the word 'to judge' is *krino*. The methods used to make a judgement about the meaning of the text are called 'criticisms.' Criticism, in this sense, is not about being negative. It is about using critical ('judging') tools to help the reader come to a sense of the text's meaning. Scholars use various criticisms to understand the 'world *of* the gospel and the 'world *behind* the gospel'.

## **Hermeneutics:**

Once the meaning of a passage is established using exegetical methods, then the understanding of the text is applied to the present situation. This is the 'world *in front of* the gospel.' The meaning of the text for a first century audience, for example, would be different for a twenty-first century one. The act of applying the text's meaning gained from exegesis to a contemporary situation is called 'hermeneutics.'

*Hermes* was the messenger of the gods. His act of interpreting the divine message for the Greek world is the basis for our understanding of hermeneutics.



## 8. An Outline of Luke's Gospel

The series of podcasts follows the outline of Luke's Gospel as set out below:



*Saint Luke Drawing the Virgin*, Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

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### Luke's Gospel

#### I. The Beginnings:

Prologue and Overview of the Gospel	(1:1-4)
Introducing Jesus: Birth and infancy	(1:5-2:52)
Annunciation of the births of JBar & Jesus	(1:5-45; 1:56)
• Canticles	(1:46-55)
• Events surrounding the births of JBar & Jesus	(1:57-2:40)

- Child Jesus teaches the teachers in the Temple (2:41-52)
2. Jesus Mission Announced (3:1-4:30)
- Preaching of JBap (3.1-20)
  - Baptism of Jesus, genealogy, temptations, transition (3.21-4.15)
  - Jesus' mission proclaimed (4.16-30)
3. Jesus' Mission Enacted (4:16-9:50)
- Exorcisms, healings and call of Simon & other disciples (4:16-6:16)
  - Opposition grows, reactions to Jesus (6:17-7:23)
  - Jesus' miracles and parables—their effect (7:24-8:48)
  - Jesus' identity emerges: Herod, feeding 5000, Peter's confession, 1st & 2nd passion anticipation, transfiguration (9:7-50)
4. Jesus Journeys to Jerusalem with his Disciples (9:51-19:27)
- First part of journey to second mention of Jerusalem (9:51-13:22)
  - Second part of the journey to third mention of Jerusalem (13.23-17:10)
  - Third part of the of journey (13:23-19:27)
5. Jesus Teaches in Jerusalem (19:28-21:38)
- Entry into Jerusalem & temple activities (19:28-21:4)
  - Eschatological ('End time') discourse (21:5-38)
6. Jesus suffers, dies and is resurrected (22:1-24.35)
- Conspiracy against Jesus, Last Supper (22:1-38)
  - Prayer & arrest on Mount of Olives; Jewish & Roman trial (22:39-23:25)
  - Way of the cross, crucifixion, burial (23:26-56)
  - Resurrection, appearances, final teaching and ascension (24.1-53)