

Luke and his Gospel

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IT IS GENERALLY accepted that the one described by Paul in Colossians 4:14 as “Luke, the beloved physician” was the author of both the Gospel that bears his name and the Acts of the Apostles. From at least the second century and onwards, historical records show religious leaders in Christianity and leading scholars ascribing the Gospel of Luke to Luke the physician, the companion of the Apostle Paul.¹ This appears to be a fairly reliable tradition, but it is, of course, possible that ancient scholars did what modern ones have done; that is, working from the ‘we’ and ‘us’ sections in Acts and the companions mentioned in the epistles, Luke is arrived at by eliminating all other possibilities.

Proceeding on the basis that it is Luke the physician, we note that he is also spoken of as one of Paul’s “fellowlabourers” in Philemon verse 24. From 2 Timothy 4:11 we know he was with Paul in his last imprisonment. Acts clearly indicates in the personal pronoun sections that Luke spent a considerable time in the company of Paul, either travelling with him or keeping him company in certain locations.² Luke was a doctor, and this has perhaps a bearing on his companionship with Paul. Paul endured considerable suffering and physical hardship through persecution, the rigours of travel and the harshness of prison. God in His mercy and grace provided a ‘fellow-labourer’ who could by his knowledge confirm the power and purpose of Christ’s life, as demonstrated in the Gospel he would be preparing, and also alleviate in some way Paul’s physical problems.

Luke the physician and disciple

Luke was a Gentile, possibly from Antioch in Syria. As a physician he would have had an excellent education, and would have been well versed in the culture and language of his time. Medical centres existed in Alexandria, Athens and Tarsus, and Luke would probably have attended one of these to receive his classical and medical training. It is, of course, conjecture, but one wonders whether Luke attended university in Tarsus where Paul was brought up (Acts 9:11; 11:25), and whether they ever met before the gospel brought them together as brethren in Christ.

It is possible that Luke was the brother of Titus, who was a valuable servant of Christ for the Apostle Paul, particularly in sorting out problems in the Corinth ecclesia. If this is so, he may well have been brought to the faith by Titus. It is believed that Titus was converted by Paul, for he describes him in Titus 1:4 as “mine own son after the common faith”. The evidence for Luke and Titus being brothers is found in 2 Corinthians 8:18, where we read, “we have sent with him [that is, Titus] the brother, whose praise is in the gospel throughout all the churches”. Commentators suggest that the expression “the brother” is an idiomatic expression for “his brother”. Following on, in verse 19 we are told that this unnamed brother was also chosen to travel with the group of brethren to Jerusalem with the collection for the saints. The journey to Jerusalem is described in Acts 20 and 21, where ‘we’ and ‘us’ passages occur. From this we could infer that Luke was travelling to Jerusalem with the other brethren to administer the collection for the saints, and that he is also the brother referred to in 2 Corinthians 8:18.

The Gospel of Luke

The first century was indeed the right time for the gospel to be “preached in all the world” (Mt. 24:14). Roman communications and transport networks made travel over great distances possible. There were Jewish communities and synagogues in many parts of the Roman Empire, and a common language, Greek. Whilst the legal language of the day may have been Latin, Greek was very widespread and used by many of the ordinary people throughout the empire. Alongside this was the existence of the Greek Septuagint translation of the Old Testament Scriptures, a ready foundation to support the preaching of the gospel and the writing of the New Testament.

By His Spirit God has caused a record to be prepared by Luke for Gentiles in general and Greeks in particular. This is seen in the fact that Luke gives explanations of Jewish customs and localities that a Jewish readership would not

1. Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement, Jerome, etc.

2. Acts 16:10-17; 20:4-15; 21:1-18; 27:1-28:16.



Left: Augustus, the Roman emperor when Jesus was born.



Right: Tiberius, the Roman emperor during the ministry of Jesus.

have needed, for example when he refers to “Capernaum, a city of Galilee” (4:31), and “the feast of unleavened bread . . . which is called the Passover” (22:1). The use of ‘Master’ or ‘Teacher’ for ‘Rabbi’, and ‘lawyer’ for ‘scribe’, and the fact that Greek words and names are used instead of Hebrew ones, for example “Zelotes” instead of “Canaanite” (6:15; cf. Mt. 10:4), are among the reasons for believing that Luke wrote for a Gentile audience. (For other reasons see [“Behold the Man!”](#), p. 249.)

Luke addresses his Gospel to one called “most excellent Theophilus”, who was probably a Greek person of some social prominence. In the first century the expression ‘most excellent’ was often used of government officials (Acts 23:26; 24:3; 26:25), but was not necessarily restricted to such. The name ‘Theophilus’ means ‘lover or friend of God’, and this original recipient of the Gospel of Luke may well have been one who was being instructed in the gospel or had been recently converted and baptized. Luke may well have used such a name as a means of designating his Gospel record as being for all who could be called ‘the friend of God’.³

When did Luke write the Gospel?

The first four verses set out clearly the purpose of the Gospel and give us an insight into the sort of person Luke was. As a doctor he would need to be thorough in his examination of a patient, establishing those things he could be sure of. Whilst not an eyewitness necessarily of the events he is describing, he has investigated them minutely to establish their veracity. The words “perfect understanding” in verse 3 carry the meaning ‘trace out exactly’. In the way a good doctor searches out the cause and root of a problem

before presenting his diagnosis to the patient, so Luke had made the most thorough examination of those things the Spirit had led him to record. When Sir William Ramsay over a century ago set out to study the historical background to the Acts of the Apostles, he was forced to abandon his higher-critical views, concluding that Luke was both accurate and reliable in the information he had set forth.

When did Luke compile all the information that was to make up the Gospel record? Taking the opinions expressed by various scholars and commentators gives one a range of years running from A.D. 58 to A.D. 135. Since the Gospel of Luke was written before the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 1:1), and the record in Acts does not take us past approximately A.D. 63, when Paul became a prisoner in Rome, we have to settle for an earlier date rather than a later one. The Olivet Prophecy in Luke 21 has the Roman siege of A.D. 70 as a future event, not a fulfilled prophecy.

The ‘we’ passages in Acts show that Luke was with Paul during the Caesarea imprisonment of 58–60, then with him in Rome 61–63. The prison periods seem a likely period for Luke to have done this work, for, being in one place, keeping Paul company, he would have had opportunity to work on the Gospel. We know that Paul wrote many of his epistles while a prisoner. We now have several possibilities. Luke could have written the Gospel while at Caesarea and issued it

3. In *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles* (p. 2) Brother Harry Whittaker puts forward the idea of Ironside Still in *St Paul on Trial* that Theophilus was a Roman administrator concerned with Paul’s appeal to Caesar, and that Acts (and therefore Luke) were written originally to brief him.—T.B.

then. He could have started it then and finished it when in Rome. It could have been written and issued from Rome.

Conclusion

We have looked briefly at the man Luke and the background to his Gospel. He wrote to Theophilus "that thou mightest know the certainty of those

things, wherein thou hast been instructed" (1:4). The word "certainty" in the Greek is *asphaleia*, which carries the meaning of 'security' or 'safety'. As we read this Gospel message, may we also find our faith is strengthened and our hope made secure in the knowledge of the truth it contains concerning the life, death and resurrection of our Lord.

Jesus: The Son of man

John Nicholls

An important theme in Luke is that of Jesus as the Son of man. This article goes back to the Old Testament roots of this phrase in Ezekiel and Daniel and then shows how its use by Jesus of himself in Luke sometimes indicates his humanity and his work as saviour, and sometimes indicates his future work as king and judge.

SOME BIBLE READERS believe that the faces of the cherubim, which display the glory of our God, show us distinct aspects of the work of Christ. These four faces are the lion, the ox, the man and the eagle, and their characteristics are thought to reflect the particular slant given to the life of Christ by each Gospel writer, as follows:

Matthew, corresponding to the *lion*, gives the kingly work of Christ, emphasising how the Lord came to fulfil the promises to Israel's fathers and sit on David's throne. His Gospel has many references to the Old Testament.

Mark shows us Jesus as a servant, like the *ox* used in the service of man. His Gospel gives no genealogy, for a slave has no rights or privileges such as come with birth into a family. Mark's Gospel is characterised by the words 'immediately' and 'straightway', the hallmarks of good and faithful service.

John shows the Divine origin of the Lord, speaking of the "Word" that was with God in the beginning, and was made flesh when the Lord was begotten by the Holy Spirit in the womb of Mary. He includes many longer discourses of Jesus and his arguments and discussions with the Jewish leaders. His Gospel is symbolised by the *eagle*, which soars in the heavens and can see minute details from a great distance, both functions of the Spirit of God. John therefore depicts Jesus as manifesting God.

Luke shows us the humanity of Christ, as the *man*. His genealogy takes us right back to Adam, and his account of Mary's pregnancy and the birth of Christ emphasises that he was of our nature. Luke's Gospel contains miracles, parables and prayers not found in the other Gospels that remind us

that our Saviour was in all respects like us, but without sin.

The phrase "Son of man" occurs twenty-six times in Luke, but it also occurs in Matthew thirty-two times, in Mark fourteen times and in John twelve times. So the theme of the Son of man in Luke rests not on the greatest number of occurrences, but rather on the *content* of the Gospel. It is in the particular parables and miracles that Luke records, and the way prayers and incidents are recorded, that the human aspect of Jesus is demonstrated. Many of the articles in this issue will show this.

A table giving the full list of references to the Son of man in Luke is given opposite as a basis for further study. But before examining the passages in Luke where Jesus calls himself "the Son of man", it is necessary and instructive to look at the Old Testament occurrences of the phrase.

The Son of man in the Old Testament

In the prophecy of Ezekiel the phrase "son of man" occurs more than ninety times, from 2:1 onwards. Why was Ezekiel called by God "son of man" when, for example, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Daniel are not so addressed? The introductory vision in Ezekiel 1 was of the appearance of a man on a throne, described as having "the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD" (v. 28). So this links Ezekiel with the glory of God,