

The beloved Luke

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Gospel writer and chronicler of the apostles' work, physician and faithful companion of Paul, Luke is a shadowy figure in the New Testament. Using the Scriptures and contemporary sources, this article puts together a picture of Luke as physician, evangelist and inspired writer of Scripture.

BEFORE THE Apostle Paul was put to death by the wicked Emperor Nero, the last friendly face he looked upon may have been that of his faithful brother in Christ, Luke the beloved physician; and what a wonderful comfort he had been!

God, in His wisdom, had given to Paul a very special companion to be with him on some of his travels, and to help him with the work. In Colossians 4 Paul refers to him as "the beloved physician" (v. 14). We know that Paul suffered from what he called "a thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor. 12:7). This was evidently a recurring ailment, possibly malaria, which made him feel very ill, helpless and weak. How comforting, then, for him to have a physician to hand, Luke! And how apt is his name, for Luke or Lucas means 'Light giver'!

Little is known of Luke's background. We know he was a Gentile, and historians think he may have been a citizen of Antioch in Syria, or that he was a native of Philippi. We are in no doubt, however, that Luke was an educated man, for both his Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles are written in excellent Greek. It is an interesting fact that Luke is the only Gentile writer in the New Testament.

Medicine in New Testament times

There were in Luke's time established medical schools at the universities of Alexandria, Athens and Tarsus, and it would be at one of these, possibly Tarsus, that Luke would learn the theory and practice of medicine. Some scholars suggest that Paul, Apollos and Luke may have studied together in the schools of Tarsus.

Although Rome ruled the then-known world, and a doctor was regarded as a slave, the cultured and intellectual Greeks held them in high esteem.

Doctors in those days had to do far more than they do today. They had to be dentists, opticians, surgeons and chemists. In quick succession they might examine one patient, operate on another and mix up medicine for a third. Even today doctors take the Hippocratic Oath from the teachings of Hippocrates, known as the Father of Medicine, who died in 370 B.C. In those days treatment was adjusted to the individual, and involved diet, rest, massage and water therapy as well as plant remedies. Hippocrates listed some 300 treatments, including many still in use today, with herbs such as bryony, chamomile, centaury, cassia, garlic, cinnamon and rosemary. 455 medicinal plants were later listed by Theophrastus (372–287 B.C.), probably the first listed 'herbal', many of which are still valued today.

A library was built in Ephesus by the son of Celsus, a Roman, in A.D. 117, to house a wonderful collection of books, including a guide to medical practice, wherein we find that minerals were used by the Egyptians. Discorides produced a herbal of 600 plants described and illustrated in colour. Among these are descriptions of how to choose and store herbs, and he gives a detailed account of how to apply White Willow (*salix*), an early source of aspirin (salicylic acid), for pain. Complicated mixtures containing up to 100 ingredients known as *theriacs* (the Greek word for antidote) were common during this time and for many centuries.

A shallow wooden box has been found, rather like an attaché case, about three inches deep, dating from Roman times, and this was used for carrying medicines, which could be stored individually in lidded compartments. There is no doubt that Luke knew about healing and herbs, and may even have carried with him a similar box on his travels with the Apostle Paul.

Just as nurses revere Florence Nightingale as their founder, so physicians regard Asclepius, the Greek god of healing, for in ancient Epidaurus on the Peloponnese, famous for its wonderful theatre, was the Aesclepiion, a centre of healing. Here were baths, a gymnasium and a hostel where the sick could stay.

As far back as 460 B.C. this poem was written:

And all who came Asclepius cured
 Those who some taint of nature had laid
 low
 And those whose limbs were wounded by
 a blow
 Of far flung stone or bronzed gleaming
 sword
 Whom summer suns too fiercely smite
 And whom the freezing winters bite
 Relieving each peculiar pain
 And cleansing all from scar and blane
 And one he healed with skills benign
 And one with soothing anodyne
 With simples too their flesh he bound
 Or with the keen-edged knife restored
 The festering wound.

In addition to the plants and herbs which were used as medicine, archaeologists have found such things as forceps, scalpels, probes, tweezers, dentists' instruments, spatulas, knives, bowls, and even needles and bodkins for stitching. So we see that, in God's providence, Paul had a capable person to look after him.



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Asclepius, the Greek god of healing.

Luke in the New Testament

So much for the healing side; now what do we know of Luke? We first meet him in Acts 16:9 when Paul was at Troas and had the vision of a man eagerly entreating him to "come over into Macedonia, and help us". He immediately made every effort to get to Macedonia, and then we see in verse 10 that Luke discloses his presence in the word 'we', so we may assume that Luke joined the party of Paul there for the first time.

Thus Luke, with Silas and Timothy, voyaged with Paul, setting sail from Troas to arrive at the port of Neapolis, where they would cross the surrounding hills, following the Via Egnatia to Philippi. This Roman road stretched 500 miles from Dyrrhachium, the port opposite the heel of Italy, to Thrace. Thessalonica was about halfway between these remote points, Philippi being the last important town in the province of Macedonia, and a Roman colony.

Some scholars suggest from Luke's knowledge of where the Jews met for prayer by the river Gangites (there evidently being no synagogue) that he was familiar with Philippi. He would have witnessed the joyful occasion when Lydia and her household embraced the Truth and were baptized, and he joined the others in accepting her gracious invitation to stay in her home (vv. 14,15). She was obviously a lady of some standing, with her own trade as a seller of purple cloth or dye.

Some time later Luke was—no doubt in company with Timothy—anxiously waiting for Paul and Silas to return, after being beaten and thrust into prison, and very probably ministered to them when they arrived with their clothes in tatters and their backs bruised and cut from the beating they had received. J. B. Phillips has a lovely translation of verse 40, which ends this chapter: "But on leaving the prison Paul and Silas went to Lydia's house, and when they had seen the brothers [including Luke and Timothy] and given them fresh courage, they took their leave".

When Paul had established an ecclesia he invariably left someone in charge to guide and to help in the initial stages. In this case we think Luke may have stayed behind at Philippi to help the new ecclesia, the nucleus of which was Lydia and her household, the jailer and his household, perhaps the young woman who had been healed by Paul (v. 18), and others. (We later read of Epaphroditus.)

Reading between the lines, we feel that Luke was a kind and compassionate brother. In later

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The River Gangites at Philippi.

years, when recording the life of Jesus, in the story of the widow of Nain (Lk. 7) he points out that the dead young man was “the only son of his mother”, and adds, “and she was a widow” (v. 12), emphasising the fact that she had lost not only a son but a breadwinner, for there was little assistance for widows in those days.

We see also that Luke appreciated courtesy and good manners, and no doubt practised them. He comments in Acts 27:3, when recording the voyage to Rome, that “Julius courteously entertained Paul”, and in 28:2 that “the barbarous people [of Malta] shewed us no little kindness: for they kindled a fire” so that they could warm themselves after the shipwreck. He puts in a little

comment about the incident of the viper coming out of the wood and fastening onto Paul’s hand, when he shook off the beast into the fire and felt no harm. We see his training coming to the fore as he remembers the symptoms of a snakebite and comments in verse 6, “Howbeit they looked when he should have swollen, or fallen down dead suddenly”.

Earlier, in the grain ship, on the terrible voyage going to Rome, Paul, with Luke and probably Aristarchus, helped to lighten the ship with their own hands. Those hands of healing manhandled sacks of grain, jettisoning them into the water as quickly as possible to prevent them from swelling and forcing the wooden boards of the ship to

The remains of the Forum at Philippi.



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open, which would have put the ship in danger of sinking (27:38).

It is very understandable to feel that Paul may not have achieved the tremendous work he did without the beloved Luke at his side. One of the projects so near Paul's heart was the collection for the needy Jews, and in a most tactful way he drums up support for this. The ecclesias in Macedonia were forward in sending aid, and Paul holds them up as an example to the Corinthian church. In 2 Corinthians 8:16-19 we see that he is sending Titus to them at his own request. The AV then has: "And we have sent with him [Titus] the brother, whose praise is in the gospel throughout all the churches; and not that only, but who was also chosen of the churches to travel with us with this grace [or gift]". The J. B. Phillips version reads: "We are sending with him that brother whose services to the gospel are universally praised in the churches. He has been unanimously chosen to travel with us in this work of administering the gifts of others".

This brother is thought to be Luke, who, since he wrote the Acts, did not wish to disclose his name. It is also mooted that this is an idiomatic expression for 'his brother', so Luke and Titus may have been blood brothers; and what wonderful brethren they were!

The writings of Luke

Luke, then, worked and helped, but he also wrote. He faithfully records the narrative of facts as told to him through the Holy Spirit and from his own experience, but he never pens his own feelings or expresses an opinion, remaining completely unbiased and accurate.

Scholars like Dr Barclay, Professor of Greek, write that the preface of Luke's Gospel is written on the model of the Greek classical writers, and is in the best Greek in the New Testament. Barclay says: "His is the work of a true craftsman which he wrote for a Gentile world".

How depleted our Bibles would be without the portraits of the Prodigal Son, the Good Samaritan, Lazarus the beggar, Zacchaeus the publican and the penitent thief on the cross! But for Luke, we should know nothing of the intimate domestic scenes of the infancy of John the Baptist and Jesus, and he displays the touch of the physician in giving such precise details of the months of waiting of Elizabeth and Mary.

Luke's Gospel presents an exalted view of women, faithfully recording the songs of thanksgiving of both Elisabeth and Mary. He tells

also of Anna the prophetess, Mary of Magdala, Joanna the wife of Herod's chamberlain, Mary and Martha of Bethany, Susanna, Dorcas the needlewoman, Rhoda the maidservant, and Lydia the seller of purple. Paul in his letter to Philippi appeals to Euodia and Syntyche to settle their differences and agree together, and to his "true yolkfellow" to assist these women of influence and honour in the Philippian church (4:2,3). Professor Ramsay is of the opinion that the "true yolkfellow" is Luke.

Some scholars suggest that Luke may once have been a ship's doctor, for the account of the long voyage to Rome would not have been written in the way it is, except by a man familiar with a ship and the methods of a sailor. He reports nautical details with great accuracy and a trained eye, with a true Greek interest for the sea.

Luke is extremely accurate in his writings. His Gospel was probably written about A.D. 55-56, and Acts about A.D. 80-90, but these dates are only approximate. It is possible that he lived through the reigns of no less than ten Roman emperors, and, because of his giving the correct title to persons in authority, scholars have been able to pinpoint dates with accuracy. In Acts 13:7, for instance, he informs us that the "deputy of the country" was Sergius Paulus, and records show that this man was the then proconsul from Rome; indeed, an inscription bearing his name has been found in Cyprus.

Luke's accuracy in dating events can be seen in chapter 2 of his Gospel: "there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.)" (vv. 1,2). In chapter 3, concerning the beginning of the ministry of John the Baptist, he writes, "Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judæa, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of Ituræa and of the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias the tetrarch of Abilene [a tetrarch was a ruler of a quarter of a Roman territory], Annas and Caiaphas being the high priests . . ." (vv. 1,2).

Regarding his account of the birth of Jesus, about which he writes so beautifully, we wonder, did he meet the elderly Mary? She would have been able to tell of the wonderful visit of the angel and subsequent events. The narrative says that Mary kept these sayings and pondered them in her heart, where perhaps they stayed until the gentle Luke visited her, and with kindness and

understanding she was able to unfold to him very many of the incidents that had occurred in the life of Jesus.

We are told in the preface of his Gospel that "many . . . from the beginning were eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word", and perhaps Luke took the opportunity when Paul was prisoner in Caesarea for two years to visit the apostles and Mary in Jerusalem and get them to relate all the happenings and teaching that had occurred in the ministry of Jesus, the Holy Spirit giving them accurate power of recall. Mary would be able to tell Luke of the first miracle, for she was present at the wedding in Cana of Galilee.

With Paul in prison

What we do know is that Luke stayed with the Apostle Paul in his prison cell in Rome, probably writing for him his last letter, 2 Timothy, where we read the poignant and sad fact in chapter 4, "Only Luke is with me" (v. 11). Possibly Paul then had his second trial in Rome—or worse, was condemned to death with no trial under Nero's fierce persecution. Whether Luke was with Paul when he died we do not know, but it is doubtful.

So, from the dark, dank cell where he had truly been a 'light giver' to Paul, Luke was now free to leave. Paul had asked Timothy to bring the books and manuscripts with his cloak, but did he find he was too late when he arrived? He may have been accompanied by Mark, as Paul had requested. Did Luke then accompany Timothy, and maybe Mark, back to Ephesus, where Timothy was the elder of the church? Perhaps Luke spent the remainder of his days there, we do not know. We can, however, picture Luke quietly writing, setting out all his notes "in order" as he pens words to his friend, or patron, Theophilus (Lk. 1:3; Acts 1:1).

There is a suggestion that Luke, as a young Greek, was taken into slavery in Rome, and Theophilus may have been his patron, paying money to free him. But, whatever the circumstances, Luke

intended that he would receive an accurate and true version of the wonderful work of Jesus. He set to work very diligently to achieve this, and through the Holy Spirit he certainly did. It is thought that his friend or patron was a high official, from the salutation he uses, 'Your Excellency Theophilus'. Another interesting thought is that maybe this name was a pseudonym Christians used when under persecution, for Theophilus literally means 'A lover of God'. We do not know. We do know that this job was done and done well; sifting and putting everything into date order, and writing of events in the life of Jesus, and in the Acts of the Apostles, with great accuracy.

There was in Ephesus a hospital, as well as the ecclesia, and we like to think that Luke, who had worked so hard for other churches, helping to distribute money to the needy and healing sick people, would now perhaps be able to live in peace. Today this wonderful city lies in ruins; but across a field of dry grass and wild sage is a walled structure which bears a notice, 'Tomb of Luke'.

How wonderful when Luke, the 'Light giver', is in the Kingdom, and he will know that his writings to one person have been read by thousands of faithful brethren and sisters, who have in their lives indeed been 'lovers of God'.

Sources

C. H. Rieu, *St. Luke: the Acts of the Apostles*.

R. B. Rackham, *The Acts of the Apostles*.

W. Barclay, *The New Testament*. Vol. 1, *The Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles*, "Introduction to Luke".

W. Ramsey, *St Paul the Traveller and Roman Citizen*.

Polunin and Robbins, *Natural Pharmacy*.

BBC TV Archaeology.

Pythian Ode, from a Swan Hellenic cruise lecture.

Epidaurus Museum.

PowerPoint presentations on DVD

Regarding the recently published series of articles, "The sixth vial and the world today", Brother Andy Walton has written to offer a PowerPoint presentation entitled, "Pharaoh, Frogs and Freedom", which covers the same ground. See his Website www.weeklyworldwatch.co.uk for details. Also available, "Russia and the Gathering of the Nations to Armageddon".

Testimony Book Exchange

We regret that due to the illness of Brother Gerry Cox there is no Testimony Book Exchange this month. It will resume as soon as possible, and in the meantime we hope and pray for his early recovery.