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Luke

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LUKE (GK. Λουκᾶς [LOUKAS]) (first century CE). Nationality unknown. The only occurrences of the name Luke in the New Testament come in Paul's letters, where Luke is the apostle's traveling companion and a physician (Col 4:14; 2 Tim 4:11; Phlm 24; cf. also 2 Cor 8:18). Some see the same person in Lucius (Rom 16:21) and Lucius of Cyrene (Acts 13:1). The New Testament's third gospel and the book of Acts are anonymous but are traditionally ascribed to the Luke of Paul's letters; this traditional Luke is the subject of this article.

Apart from competing early church traditions, little is known about him. The two-volume work, referred to as Luke-Acts, suggests an author with a good mastery of Greek language, rhetoric, and culture. If a physician, he probably "belonged to the middle or higher plane of contemporary culture" (Harnack, *Luke the Physician*, 13). Most consider him a Gentile, though Jewish origin also finds supporters (cf. Paul's "kinsman" Lucius, Rom 16:21). By at least the sixth century Luke was viewed as a painter, and in Roman Catholic tradition he is the patron saint of painters.

Publications

The Gospel according to Luke, dated by many to somewhere between 70 and 90 CE, is the longest of the four canonical gospels and probably drew from Mark's gospel

and other sources. Lukan authorship of the third gospel (and of the book of Acts) is still the subject of considerable debate among New Testament scholars but will be assumed in this article. The third gospel's word choice and sentence style give it a more literary ring than most other New Testament documents, and its first four verses sound like the prefaces of other Hellenistic histories.

Luke 1:1–4 NRSV

Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.

Josephus, *Against Apion*, Book I.1

In my history of our *Antiquities*, most excellent Epaphroditus, I have, I think, made sufficiently clear to any who may peruse that work the extreme antiquity of our Jewish race. . . . Since, however, I observe that a considerable number of persons . . . discredit the statements in my history . . . , I consider it my duty to devote a brief treatise to all these points; in order at once to . . . instruct all who desire to know the truth concerning the antiquity of our race.

Among the unique elements of this gospel are the infancy narratives and hymns, the story of the twelve-year-old Jesus in the temple, a large journey narrative (9:51–18:14), and numerous parables and other stories (e.g., prodigal son, Emmaus road disciples), especially stories about persons marginalized in first-century Jewish society (a tax collector Zacchaeus, women, Gentiles).

The book of Acts (or the Acts of the Apostles), dated also by many to the last quarter of the first century CE, gives a selective history of the early Jesus movement from the postresurrection appearances (ca. 30 CE) to the imprisonment of the apostle Paul in Rome (61–63 CE?). The work appears to incorporate journal entries, perhaps those of Luke himself (see the “we” sections, such as 16:10–16; 20:6–15; 21:1–17, *passim*). Among other things, it testifies both to the unity and to the tensions within the earliest Jesus movement (see especially the contentious Jerusalem meeting in Acts 15). It is also our earliest account of the leadership and geographical spread of the early Christian movement.

In addition, Hebrews, the pastoral epistles (1–2 Timothy, Titus), and the story of the “woman caught in adultery” (John 7:53–8:11; found after Luke 21:38 in several Greek manuscripts) have been attributed by a few scholars

to Luke. Some have also theorized that Luke planned a third volume to follow Acts.

Influence on Christian Literature

Luke-Acts together constitute 28 percent of the New Testament, making Luke the author of more of the New Testament than either Paul or John. Both the gospel and Acts root early Christianity in secular history (“In the fifteenth year of the Emperor Tiberius,” Luke 3:1 NRSV) and helped to prepare the movement for a longer-term stay on earth (presenting Jesus “as inaugurating a new era in human existence”) (Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke*, 1.145). The first known Christian history, the book of Acts, spawned a number of later “acts,” such as the Acts of Peter or Acts of Paul (late second century). Luke's emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit in the church and individual Christian lives has been taken up by numerous Christian traditions, as has his special notice of marginalized peoples. Luke's parable of the prodigal son has been highly influential in Western culture (an errant child who returns to her senses can be termed a “prodigal” without further explanation) as well as in art (Rembrandt's *The Prodigal*), literature, and preaching. Nevertheless, Luke's gospel never rivaled Matthew's in popularity (except in Marcion's canon).

Bibliography

A reconstructed Greek text of the gospel and Acts can be found in *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 27th ed. (Stuttgart: 1993). Among the many good introductions to the issues of Luke's identity and authorship of gospel and Acts, see *An Introduction to the New Testament* by Raymond E. Brown (Doubleday, 1997) or the classic presentation of the traditional view in Adolf von Harnack, *Luke the Physician* (G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1907). For imaginative reconstructions of Luke as a person and author, one could read Graham C. Hunter, *Luke, First Century Christian* (Harper, 1937) or A. H. N. Green-Armytage, *A Portrait of St. Luke* (Chicago: 1955).

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